Shifting Perceptions of Truth in Online Academic Employment Interviews

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Shifting perceptions of truth in online academic employment interviews

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ABSTRACT

In academia, the past decade has seen an increase in the popularity of Skype as a first-round employment interview tool. Due to Skype’s speed, quality, and transmittal of sound and video, it is sometimes thought of as a substitute for face-to-face. However, is this a fair substitution? In a survey-based study, we investigated the difference between Skype and face-to-face interviews by examining two critical assessment traits: honesty and communication anxiety. Our results showed that academic interviewers perceive candidates to be less honest via Skype than they do face-to-face, even when candidates seem equally competent. Our results also show that interviewers perceive equal communication anxiety through both mediums, though prior research suggests interviewee communication anxiety would be higher over Skype.

Keywords

Academic employment interviews, Skype, truth, communication anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Hiring in Academia

The employment interview is one of the most popular and important selection devices in organizations (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion 2002), including academic organizations. Interviews are critical to assessing candidates, and they are often the key determinant of who will be hired (Eder & Ferris, 1989).

Generally speaking, the academic interview process has two interview phases (Vick & Furlong, 2008). Final decisions are often made in a multi-step, face-to-face process during the second phase, however the first phase is also a critical part of the overall interview process. Traditionally, interviews at this stage are also done face-to-face, but they are also conducted over the telephone (if face-to-face is not possible). From the information that interviewees convey in this phase, interviewers make critical judgment calls and select the best candidates to move forward.

Due to an increase in international hiring (Marvasti, 2005), decreases in hiring budgets (Keller 2009), and new technology capabilities, this process is changing, and technology is becoming increasingly used in interviews. Particularly in the first interview phase, video chat is gaining popularity.

In this area, Skype has emerged as the dominant service. In addition to its low cost, many users feel that Skype is “just like” face-to-face (Backes, 2012) and therefore a suitable substitute for initial face-to-face interviews. However, the use of tools like Skype is actually changing the interview process.

Much of this change comes from subtle differences attributed to media richness (Daft and Lengel, 1986). On Skype, users are often only shown from the shoulders up, and they are subject to the quality of the technology, the speed of the connection, the lighting in the room, and the size and positioning of the screen. Also, behavioral cues--such as eye contact, facial expression, and body posture--are transmitted less effectively than face-to-face. Because Skype and face-to-face seem similar on the surface, average users may miss or misinterpret cues without realizing they are doing so.

Whether beneficial or misleading, Skype and other video chat tools have been gaining popularity all over academia; an estimated 12 to 18 percent of academic interviews are conducted via online tools, according to experts (Winzenburg, 2011). Even with this popularity, the impact of Skype on the academic hiring process remains largely unexplored.

Truth and Anxiety in Online Interviews

Studies show that the most common traits assessed across all interviews include personality, applied social skills, mental capability, job interests, background credentials, and person-organization fit (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Stone, 2001). While
these traits are important, their assessment is highly affected by two factors: truthfulness of information and communication style with which it is presented.

Assessing truthfulness of candidate information is important because interviewees often alter background and personal information to appear more qualified than their competition (Becker, Colquitt 1992); one third of all job seekers lie on applications (Challenger, 1997), and 40% lie on resumes (McShulks 1997). Academia is not immune to this; a handful of prominent incidents have recently occurred. In 2007, the admissions dean from MIT was dismissed for a resume lie about attending college (Winstein, 2007). Three years later, a Duke Cancer researcher was fired for a false resume claim that she was a Rhodes Scholar (onlinecolleges.net, 2012).

While judging truthfulness has always been an underlying part of the interview process, the move towards online interviews changes this process. The use of Skype is particularly interesting because, as previously mentioned, Skype is perceived by many individuals to be similar to face-to-face in many ways (i.e. rapid feedback, personal focus, the use of natural language). This can lead individuals to believe that they understand Skype communication at a high level. However, Skype still differs from face-to-face communication in media richness (the ability to handle multiple information cues simultaneously, facilitate rapid feedback, establish a personal focus, and utilize natural language, Daft and Lengel, 1986), which influences individuals’ ability to understand communication.

The important difference with Skype and face-to-face communication is in the transmittal of behavioral cues. Body language and subtle behavioral cues in Skype communication are often skewed or only partially transmitted, and they are often affected by technical issues (Backes, 2012). Unfortunately, this can lead to the misinterpretation of cues. Problems such as off-screen distractions being interpreted as disrespect, and glances at a resume or vita interpreted as a break of eye contact (due to distraction) have already been recognized (June, 2010; Winzenburg, 2011). A lack of clear behavioral cues also lowers the social presence felt by individuals, further lowering their truth bias (George, Marett, & Tilley, 2004).

In settings where understanding truthfulness is key, a lower truth bias will cause individuals to more actively judge the information that they receive from others. This, in addition to a likelihood of misinterpreting cues in a Skype setting, will likely lead individuals to perceive information as less truthful.

We therefore hypothesize that in academic interviews:

H1: Interviewers will perceive less truthfulness in candidates via Skype than face-to-face.

As mentioned, another other key to proper trait assessment is the style with which a candidate communicates. In interviews, candidates sometimes become nervous and are unable to express themselves as clearly as they normally would. This is called communication anxiety (McCarthy 2004), and it is closely related to communication apprehension. In employment interviews, people with high communication apprehension have been found to talk less (Allen & Bourhis, 1996), be less expressive (Burgoon, Pfau, Birk, & Manusov, 1987), and appear more rigid (Burgoon et al., 1987). These behaviors can affect interviewers’ perceptions of candidates; for instance, an anxious and apprehensive candidate may seem less interested or less confident in his or her abilities for a position.

With the move to technology-supported interviews, communication anxiety may become more of a problem than ever before (because the strain of learning new tasks increases anxiety). Interviewing is already a cognitively taxing process (Salvucci & Taatgen, 2008), and anxiety and stress can result from having to learn to use a new tool for such an important and taxing process (Giordano & Stoner, 2010).

Interview and new task anxiety are heightened by anxiety from media process misfit. When a task being performed does not properly fit the communication tool supporting it, stress results (Giordano et al., 2010). We suggest that this may happen in online academic interviews because they require a high level of mutual understanding and an interpretation of visual and verbal cues, such as pitch variability, speech rate, pauses, and amplitude variability, smiling, gaze, hand movement, and body orientation. If interviewees are frustrated with their ability to fully communicate over a Skype (or read the reaction of interviewers), they are likely to experience anxiety. Although they may not understand where it is coming from, we believe that interviewers are likely to detect this type of anxiety in interviewees.

We therefore hypothesize that in academic interviews:

H2: Interviewers will perceive more interviewee communication anxiety over Skype than face-to-face.

**METHODS**

**Data Collection**
To test our hypotheses, we created a survey for individuals that had been interviewers in recent academic interviews. To measure the variables of interest, we used two well-established scales. For communication anxiety, we used the communication anxiety dimension of McCarthy’s Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI) Scale (McCarthy, 2004). The dimension had six (five point likert) items. To measure perceived interview faking, we used the Extensive Image Creation dimension of Levashina and Campion’s Interview Faking Behavior Scale (Levashina & Campion 2007). The scale had 19 (five point likert) items.

To administer the survey, we targeted a medium-sized US university. We first sought departmental approval and then contacted professors who had multiple recent experiences conducting initial faculty job interviews. After this, we segmented the field down to professors that had conducted multiple Skype interviews, and those that had only recently conducted traditional face-to-face interviews. Each group completed the survey about the individuals they had interviewed face-to-face (for the traditional group) or with Skype (for the other group). These professors accessed our survey online via Qualtrics and completed the questions in about fifteen minutes. We received 35 responses, 21 were for people that answered about Skype interviewees, and 14 were for people that answered about traditional interviewees.

We also conducted follow-up interviews with five respondents who had experience with Skype interviews. Broadly speaking, we asked interviewers to explain their Skype interview experiences. Open-ended questions were asked about interview success, failure, and functionality. Each follow-up interview was conducted in person for up to a half hour.

RESULTS
Statistical Analysis

Once all of the data was in, we ran an independent samples t-tests to compare perceived interviewee faking and communication anxiety for the two groups: interviewers who had conducted recent interviews using Skype and interviewers who had conducted recent interviews face-to-face.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Skype Interviews</th>
<th>Face-to-face Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived faking</td>
<td>3.67 (SD .79)</td>
<td>2.98 (SD .55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived communication anxiety</td>
<td>3.47 (SD .51)</td>
<td>3.32 (SD .56)</td>
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Table 1. Outcome Variable Means and Standard Deviations

Our statistical tests showed that perceived communication anxiety in interviewees did not differ significantly between Skype and face-to-face interviewers (t=−.79, p<.22). Perceived interview faking, however, differed significantly between Skype and face-to-face interviewers (t=2.81, p<.01).

Follow-up qualitative interviews revealed that academic interviewers perceived the candidates over both mediums to be generally equally qualified. Interviewers also mentioned that they believed Skype is very similar to face-to-face. After deeper consideration and follow-up questions, however, interviewers realized differences in reading behavioral cues, maintaining eye contact, and naturally interacting via Skype.
DISCUSSION

As aforementioned, academic interviewers using Skype found their candidates to be less truthful than interviewers using face-to-face methods. This held true even when interviewers found candidates to be equally comfortable communicating. When reflecting on Skype and face-to-face experiences, professors believe that candidates over both mediums have similar qualifications. While limited to a single sample, these results suggest that candidates being interviewed via Skype may be at a disadvantage compared to their face-to-face counterparts. Because Skype interviewees are more likely to be considered deceptive, they have less of a chance of progressing than face-to-face interviewees, all else being equal. Interviewees may be unaware of this disadvantage, and that makes this phenomenon all the more important. Especially for a critical position, it would be unfortunate to eliminate a well-qualified candidate simply because of differences due to the communication medium.

Our results on communication anxiety were particularly interesting, in that interviewers do not perceive candidates to be more anxious on Skype. This result implies that interviewers do not perceive video communication technology as having a significant affect on interviewees. However, it is also important to recognize that interviewers may simply fail to recognize anxiety. Communication anxiety may be misread as a lack of truthfulness, due to the difficulty of interpreting cues over Skype.

These results also suggest that academic interviewers should become aware of potential biases and misperceptions when using Skype for interviewing. If interviewers are aware of potential mistakes, they can work to mitigate them. This will lead to more fair and accurate assessments. On the other side of the camera, academic interviewees should learn about challenges they will face on Skype, such as differences in how interviewers naturally judge candidates over this type of medium. If interviewers are aware of a decreased truth bias, for instance, they can work harder to establish trust, which in turn will improve their chances of moving forward.

CONCLUSION

In academia, the changing perception of honesty is one important difference between Skype and face-to-face interviews. This difference is important because unlike the telephone, Skype is not typically recognized as a limited medium; rather, it is sometimes viewed as a substitute for face-to-face. In the future, it is likely that the use of Skype will continue to increase, as interviewers do not seem to perceive interviewees as having communication difficulties over the medium. As professors, candidates, and institutions increase their use of Skype, they must be made aware that it differs from face-to-face—especially in candidate perception, and perception of truth.

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