Perceptions of Truthfulness and Communication Anxiety in Online Employment Interviews

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Abstract

In organizations, 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: truthfulness and communication anxiety. Our results showed that interviewers in an academic setting perceived candidates to be less honest via Skype than they do face-to-face, even when candidates seemed equally competent. Our results also showed that interviewers perceived equal communication anxiety through both mediums, though prior research suggests interviewee communication anxiety would be higher over Skype.

Introduction and Literature review

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 is similar to hiring processes for knowledge workers in many settings, and it contains two interview phases (Vick & Furlong, 2008). The second phase, where final hiring decisions are made, is almost always conducted in a face-to-face setting. However, the first phase is also a critical part of the overall interview process. Traditionally, interviews at this stage are done face-to-face, if possible, but they are also often conducted over the telephone. From the information that interviewees convey in this phase, interviewers make critical judgment calls and select the best candidates to move forward. The complexity and criticality of this task cannot be underestimated. In selecting the best candidates, interviewers must make decisions based on limited information and early impressions. If an interviewer moves a candidate forward to the second phase, the organization will waste significant resources if the candidate is unsuitable for the job.

Today, as in most industries, significant changes to the hiring process in academic organizations are occurring. First, international hiring is becoming increasingly popular (Johnson, 2006; Lowell, 2001; Watts, 2001); the number of full-time foreign-born faculty has

quadrupled in the past 40 years (Marvasti, 2005; Open Doors, 2008; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006), and international hires have come to make up 35-40% of engineering and computer science faculty (National Science Board, 2003; Open Doors, 2008). Additionally, hiring budgets have begun to decrease; 85 percent of public universities have experienced decreases in state funding, 80 percent have cut positions, and 55 percent have experienced changes in hiring (Keller, 2009). The increase in international hiring and decrease in hiring budgets has forced efficiency—primarily through an increase in the use of new communication technologies.

Skype is the dominant service that has emerged in this area. Free and easy to access, Skype is currently the world's most popular video chat service (Unuth, 2013). Many users feel that Skype is "just like" face-to-face (Backes, 2012), and that it is therefore a suitable substitute for face-to-face interviews. In reality, Skype is actually changing the interview process. Benefits include greater efficiency, reduced costs, and the ability to access international candidates at convenience. Challenges include differences from face-to-face that may not be noticed by users.

Much of this change comes from subtle differences attributed to media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986). If two people are interacting across a medium, media richness is determined by their ability to handle multiple information cues simultaneously, facilitate rapid feedback, establish a personal focus, and utilize natural language (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Skype communication is considered less rich than face-to-face. In 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. Further, this phenomenon will only be compounded when interviewees are anxious (due to the challenges from a new technology settings), as anxiety causes people to release fewer and more negative cues (Allen & Bourhis, 1996; Neer, 1990; Burgoon, Pfau, Birk, & Manusov, 1987; Daly, Vangelisti, & Weber, 1995; Clevenger, 1959; Freimuth, 1976).

Whether beneficial or misleading, Skype and other video chat tools have been gaining popularity in organizations, including academic organizations. An estimated 12 to 18 percent of academic interviews are conducted via online tools, according to experts (Winzenburg, 2011). Even so, the impact of Skype on the 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 that are affected by the communication medium: 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 - one third of all job seekers lie on applications (J. E. Challenger in McShulkis, 1997), and 40% lie on resumes (McShulkis, 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). As Vice

President of Educational Management Network Jean Dowdall wrote, academic interviewees often have difficulty resisting the temptation to "put a positive 'spin' on a less-than-positive situation," "mislead others through distortions or omissions," and even "tell outright lies" (Dowdall, 2003).

While judging truthfulness has always been an underlying part of the interview process, the move towards online interviews can change this part of the process. First, individuals sometimes have a different truth bias with online communication than they do with traditional communication methods. A truth bias is a tendency to believe the communication from others by default (McCornack & Parks, 1986). Individuals' truth biases are different for online communication - studies show that more people lie online than in face-to-face settings (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011). Because of this, individuals may have a different (higher) baseline expectation for the likelihood of deceptive information in online communication, unless they are communicating with someone that they know well (Giordano, 2013).

The use of Skype is particularly interesting because, as previously mentioned, it 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 can understand Skype communication at a high level. However, Skype still differs from face-to-face communication in media richness, which influences individuals' ability to understand communication.

The important difference with Skype and face-to-face communication is in the transmittal of behavioral cues. As mentioned, body language and subtle behavioral cues in Skype communication can be 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 have already been recognized (June, 2010; Winzenburg, 2011).

Another important result of limited media richness is a difference in social presence, or the degree to which people can feel "warmth" or "personalness" from the people they interact with (Zmud, Lind, & Young, 1990). Social presence is affected by the number of behavioral cues that are received and recognized by individuals in communication (Rice, 1992), and a low level of social presence is likely to further lower individuals' truth biases (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 lead individuals in these settings to perceive information as less truthful.

We therefore hypothesize that:

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

Another 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 & Goffin, 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 their 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 easily result from using a new tool for an important and taxing process like this (Giordano et al., 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 reactions of interviewers), they are likely to experience anxiety. Although they may not understand where it is coming from, interviewers are likely to detect this type of anxiety in interviewees.

We therefore hypothesize that:

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

Methodology

Data Collection

To test our hypotheses, we created a survey for individuals that had been interviewers in recent interviews at an academic institution. 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 (see Appendix A for scale items). For truthfulness, we measured perceived interview lying (often used as a measure of lack of truthfulness), using the Extensive Image Creation - Inventing dimension of Levashina and Campion's Interview Faking Behavior Scale (Levashina & Campion, 2007). We used lying as a measure of lack of truthfulness in this study because of the alignment of the scale with the interview setting (the scale was closely aligned with a knowledge worker interviewing setting – see Appendix A for scale items).

To administer the survey, we targeted a medium-sized US university. After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board at that institution, we sought departmental approval and then contacted professors from a number of academic units 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 (we contacted 42 individuals, and approximately 50% had used Skype for recent 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. The participants with Skype experience represented 10 different departments (from 5 colleges), and the participants without Skype experience represented 9 different departments (from 5 colleges), minimizing the chance that department specific factors would be an influence in our study.

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.

Findings

Statistical Analysis

Once all of the data was collected, we ran independent samples t-tests to compare perceived interviewee lying 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.

	Skype Interviews	**Face-to-face Interviews**
Perceived lying	3.67 (SD .79)	2.98 (SD .55)
Perceived communication anxiety	3.47 (SD .51)	3.32 (SD .56)

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 lying, 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, interviewers realized differences in reading behavioral cues, maintaining eye contact, and naturally interacting via Skype. However, in general, interviewers failed to recognize a specific outcome from these difficulties in the interviews (i.e. judgments of truthfulness).

Discussion

Findings from this Study

As aforementioned, 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, interviewers 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.

Implications for Practitioners

These results also suggest that 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, 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.

Interviewers should also be educated on behavioral cues and communication anxiety. Because cues are already difficult to interpret--and can become even more difficult to interpret online-- interviewers should learn how to properly interpret verbal behaviors, physical behaviors, gestures, expressions, and body movements. Additionally, interviewers should be trained in recognizing the official cues of communication anxiety. Though research suggests that candidates become especially anxious online, our results show that interviewers do not perceive this to be so.

Directions for Future Research

While our study revealed some interesting tendencies in Skype interviews, it also raised many questions that need to be answered. For further research, researchers should investigate the difference between interviewers' perceptions and reality. For instance, our study found that academic Skype interviewees are perceived to be less honest. Is this truly the case? Or is it simply the perception? The same question arises with communication anxiety. While research suggests interviewees will be more anxious via Skype, interviewers to not perceive this to be so. Are interviewers misperceiving anxiety? Or are candidates simply not as anxious as prior research suggests? Further, while we feel that the academic interview setting looked at in this study is similar to other knowledge worker interview settings, other settings need to be investigated to confirm the generalizability of our findings.

Overall Conclusions

In organizations, the changing perception of truthfulness 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 interviewers, candidates, and organizations 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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Appendix A – Scale Items

The following items were used to measure interviewees' Communication Anxiety and Lying (on a 5-point Likert scale):

Anxiety in Selection Interviews Scale (McCarthy, 2004).
- Found it easy to communicate their accomplishments during the job interview.
- Often couldn't think of a thing to say.
- Got so anxious during job interviews that they had trouble asking questions that they knew.
- Found it hard to understand what I was saying to them.
- Became so apprehensive that they were unable to express their thoughts clearly.
- Had strong verbal communication skills.

Interview Faking, Extensive Image Creation - Inventing Dimension (Levashina and Campion, 2007).
- Claimed that they had skills that they did not have.
- Made up measurable outcomes of their performed tasks.
- Claimed work experiences that they did not actually have.
- Promised that they could meet all of the job requirements even though they probably could not.
- Misrepresented the description of an event.
- Stretched the truth to give a good answer.
- Told some "little white lies" in the interview.
- Invented some situations or accomplishments that did not really occur.