Interviewing for new a job is stressful enough—without the possibility that a quick handshake and finger to face can result in contracting a novel virus. So now, in the age of coronavirus (a.k.a. COVID-19), it’s understandable that job seekers’ stress levels are on the rise.

On the bright side, many companies have altered their recruiting efforts to take into account the spread of coronavirus, significantly minimizing those stress levels. LinkedIn, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, PwC, Intel, and others are now relying on video and phone interviews in lieu of face-to-face interviewing.

However, scores of other companies haven’t (yet) altered their hiring and recruiting practices. So what do you do if you have an in-person interview and coronavirus is spreading in your city? Here are some tips on how to handle this touchy situation.

1. How to handle the handshake

Across the world, to help stop the spread of the virus, in place of handshakes people are starting to greet each other with fist bumps, elbow bumps, even foot bumps. But should you really hold out your wingtip or heel if your interviewer goes in for the handshake and you don’t feel comfortable going palm-to-palm?

Maybe the best practice is to follow the lead of the University of Rochester’s career center. It recently advised students to avoid handshaking, suggesting that students “politely decline with an explanation rather than an informal fist bump.” Said “explanation” could look something like this (but put it into your own words): I’m just worried about coronavirus spreading and want to do my part to help minimize its spread.

The advice was meant to lessen the stress of Rochester students, who might feel pressured to shake hands. Hopefully it will minimize your stress, too. Sure, it could be a bit awkward to hold back your hand if one’s extended toward you, but that awkwardness far outweighs the possible negative outcomes of a firm shake.

2. When and where to wash up

Given that a vigorous 20-second handwash is one of the best (and easiest) ways to minimize the spread of coronavirus, make it a point to wash your hands at least twice when interviewing in person. Once before your interview. A second time right after your interview. This means you need to arrive early enough to your interview to have time to visit the restroom and wash up. It also means don’t be afraid to ask the receptionist (and/or your interviewer) if you could use the restroom before and after your interview. Note that since interviews can be stressful and nerve-wracking, your hands tend to go to places—like your face—when you get nervous, making clean hands before an interview highly important.

Also, remember to follow protocols you’re likely following elsewhere: using a knuckle or elbow (instead of fingertips) on digital buttons found in elevators and other parts of offices, using a wrist or elbow (instead of palms) to open doors, and refraining from touching surfaces (like desks, tables, and kitchen counters) if you don’t have to.

3. What to bring, in addition to your resume

You know to always arrive to interviews with a few extra copies of your resume. Now, ideally, you should also arrive with two other things: a travel hand sanitizer (with more than 60 percent alcohol content) and a pack of travel tissues.
The sanitizer will come in handy if soap and water aren’t easily accessible, and the tissues will come in handy if you need to cough, sneeze, or scratch an itch (on your face or near it). Tissues can also come in handy if you need to open a door (say, to a restroom) that seems to be a high risk area and there’s really no way around not touching it with your hand.

4. When and how to schedule and reschedule

Typically, when it comes to scheduling interviews, hiring managers will give you a few different day and time options to choose from. So, if you live in a busy city and rely on public transportation, choose a time during off-peak commuting hours—late morning or midday instead of early morning or end of day—to minimize your exposure to large groups of people. This avoidance of large groups is part of a practice called “social distancing,” which has been recommended by this epidemiologist and other public healthcare experts to minimize coronavirus spread.

Also, it’s worth noting that if you have any symptoms of coronavirus, by all means reach out to your contact at the company you’re interviewing with to reschedule your interview. And depending on the severity of those symptoms (if they’re mild), in place of an in-person interview, you could ask your contact if a phone or video interview (more on those below) would be possible.

5. How to prepare if things get worse

If coronavirus continues to spread in the U.S., it’s likely that, among other things, video interviewing will become the norm nationwide (even before the arrival of the virus, video interviewing was on the rise). This means that, if you haven’t already, it’s a good time to brush up on your video/Skype interviewing skills.

To that end, we have you covered. Here, here, and here you can find all the tips, advice, and best practices you’ll need for succeeding in your virtual interviews. Then you can read this post to refresh yourself on best practices for phone interviews, which could become more common as well.

A final note

Given that the situation with respect to the spread of coronavirus is constantly changing, it’s a good idea, before your interview, to check the CDC website and your local government website (like this one in New York City) for any important updates that could affect your commute or interview itself.

It’s also a good idea, before your interview, to ask your contact person at the company you’re interviewing with if there’s anything you should know regarding coronavirus spread: Are there any specific protocols you should know about before arriving? Is there anything you should do or not do while you’re at the company’s office?

A good way to think about it is this: when it comes to interviews—especially now—it’s always best to over-prepare and to be safe than sorry.

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