



AMERICAN CONFERENCE *of* CANTORS

**LEVERAGING REMOTE INTERVIEWING
FOR CANTORIAL PLACEMENT**

Processes, Guidelines and Recommendations

Congregations

The original form of this document was to be used as a tool for a completely remote interviewing process. The feedback from cantors and congregations that used this document as a resource guide was overwhelmingly positive. The 2020-2021 cantorial placement year proceeded smoothly, many congregations came into placement, and cantors were very successfully placed. The Remote Interviewing Task Force (RITF) members worked hard to create “best practices” when none were yet extant; the positive outcomes of the 2020-2021 cantorial placement season would indicate success toward reaching that Task Force goal.

As the members of the RITF engaged in their work together, however, it became apparent that the recommendations and guidelines that were generated would have longer lasting usefulness than during the time of the pandemic alone. Given the costs of travel and of hosting candidates, it seemed to the Task Force members that effective leveraging of remote interviewing could help both congregations and cantors to have a better understanding of each other, before any on-site visits are made. In fact, effective remote interviewing may help to narrow a candidate field, as well as offer cantors more in-depth opportunities to teach and share their expertise as they get to know congregations in placement. In other words: *a combination of remote interviewing and in-person, on-site, interviewing may be the best way to find the right cantorial “fit.”*

A Short History of the Task Force Process

Overall Objective: To create effective guidelines and recommendations for a thorough, complete, and meaningful interview process for both cantors and congregations in placement. Using these guidelines, congregations and cantors should be able to make good choices about fit, character and community.

Task Force Members (in alphabetical order):

- Dr. Tom Abelson – Otolaryngologist; past Temple President and Board member at Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple in Beachwood, OH; current URJ Board member
- Cantor Harriet Dunkerly – Sole Spiritual Leader and Education Director of Congregation B’nai Chaim in Georgetown, CT
- Dr. Michael Freidman – Therapist; clergy coach; congregational consultant; consultant to the ACC Board; current URJ Board member
- Cantor David Frommer – Jewish Chaplain at West Point; current ACC Board member
- Cantor Kay Greenwald, Chair – Director of Placement, ACC
- Marc Katz – Attorney; past Cantorial Search Chair; Immediate Past President at Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, Indianapolis, IN
- Rabbi Jan Offel – Director, Consulting and Transition Management, URJ
- Eric Schlezinger – Attorney; HR professional; current Temple Board member at Peninsula Temple Sholom in Burlingame, CA

Process

Starting in August of 2020, the RITF met to begin outlining effective remote interviewing processes. Each task force member had been asked to participate on the RITF due to their expertise, as well as congregational experience. While in most cases a task force of this nature would take the time to investigate best practices, it was clear from the outset that those best practices were still being developed. The pandemic situation was too new for real “best practices” to have been created and tried over time. Therefore, each RITF meeting had a specific agenda and/or specific questions to be discussed. Question answers were developed over the course of group discussion, and the expertise of the RITF members was brought to bear on each meeting agenda/topic.

The broad agenda/questions for each RITF meeting are outlined below.

8/20

What do synagogues want/need to know about their cantorial applicants?
What do cantors need to learn about congregations?

8/27

When we meet someone new, what helps us to gauge that person’s warmth and sincerity?
When we meet someone new, what helps us to understand that person’s level of comfort/discomfort around others?
When we meet someone new, what helps us begin to get a sense of that person’s character?

9/3

From the congregational perspective, a congregation wants to know:

- Is this candidate a team player?
- Will this candidate round out a team well?
- Does this person seem comfortable and authentic to who they are?
- How does this person confront challenges?
- Is this person warm and engaging/easy to talk to?
- Has this person’s training and experience prepared them for our particular culture?

Hearing from the HR professional – how has his company onboarded people in a COVID world, and what have they learned?

9/10

Looking at the ACC website and the guidelines for a sample visit, what needs to be tweaked and can/how do we tweak? In other words, what are the parts of an in-person visit that can work remotely, and what must be changed or modified?

9/17

What are those things that might come up when we are face to face with someone that could get lost in remote interviewing, and can we offer an effective approximation?
How do we help congregations build buy-in with various congregational constituencies?

9/24

What are good conversation starters for smaller group interviews/meetings and how can those meetings be most effective?

What might a cantorial candidate want to know about a specific community, and how do we bring those understandings to a candidate and that candidate's spouse via remote technology?

10/1

Working draft recommendations submitted to the RITF for review

10/7

Additional suggestions/Missing pieces/Final report review

10/15

Final report completed for presentation to the ACC, the Placement Advisory Group, and the Joint Cantorial Placement Commission

Task Force Findings and Understandings

From the outset, it became clear that many of a congregation's questions about a candidate can be handled effectively through careful interviewing and good reference checking. The questions that can be handled this way include those relating to teamwork and work ethic, as well as a candidate's ability to deal with challenges and conflict. The ACC website already has a number of interview questions listed that can be helpful to congregational search chairs in discovering a great deal about a candidate's work performance history. Please be sure to visit accantors.org and read through the resources already available to you there.

In order to begin the cantorial search process, a temple search committee and board need to ask themselves, and thoroughly consider:

- What kind of person are we looking for? What are the qualities of the individual who will best complement our existing team, and help take us to the next level?
- What do we need to know about any given candidate in order to make a good decision for our congregation?
- What does it take to build a strong clergy/professional team so that when the new cantor comes onto the team she/he/they will "have the wind at her/his/their back?"

Similarly, a cantor should be thinking ahead about what she/he/they need to know in order to make a good decision for her/him/themselves. Cantors need to be thoughtful about the questions that they will need to ask and of whom they will want to ask them. For example – does it make sense to ask the senior rabbi what are the things that matter most to her/him/them in their new clergy partner? What does the rabbi want you to know most about her/him/themselves? How do you, the cantor, imagine yourself fitting in with the existing synagogue professional team?

Effective interviewing techniques are very important to this process. A good interviewer will want to learn about a candidate's core competencies and a good way to do this is by using Behavioral Competency based interview questions. These questions often have more to do with how a candidate approaches a given situation, or how that candidate thinks about a specific problem, than the actual answers to the problem. There are several good websites and companies that offer effective behavioral competency interview questions.

Assuming multiple interviewers and multiple group interviews, it is important that the same basic questions not be asked over and over. Good interviewing means thoughtfully outlining the questions that need to be asked and then assigning different questions to different groups. Question answers and candidates' reactions should then be shared with everyone as the interview process moves along.

With proper sound equipment and lighting, a candidate can present a realistic sound profile and a good self-presentation. Thus, if a candidate has access to good sound and lighting equipment, that candidate should feel comfortable about how her/his/their talent

set comes across remotely, and a search committee should feel comfortable trusting what they are seeing and hearing. (NB: The search committee should have good audio equipment for listening to sound files; for example: external compact speakers with the proper inputs.)

It is clear, however, that the positioning of the camera, the lighting and the microphone will make a difference, as will the interviewing space. A candidate will need to be thoughtful about the privacy her/his/their interview space offers (Will the cat walk across the desk? Is there someone to deal with children? How obtrusive will traffic noise be?). Bandwidth could also be an issue, for both cantors and congregations. When several people in a household are trying to work from home, for example, it is likely that at least some of them will experience bandwidth issues. Thoughtful scheduling of interview times and place are therefore extremely important.

What if we are considering the possibility that we might conduct the entire interview process remotely? If we don't bring candidates to visit us, how do we really get to know them?

The most difficult part of a completely remote interviewing process for congregations will be ascertaining the level of warmth of a given candidate. Survey after survey of congregational search chairs have shown that the primary quality a congregation wants in their cantor is that a cantor be “warm and engaging.” Similarly, a cantor will want to get a good feel for a congregational community and its environs. This is the part of the interview process on which the Task Force spent the most time.

A “pretend Shabbat” or “model Shabbat” service will be a better use of remote (and in-person!) interview time than a “stand and sing” type audition. Streaming Shabbat services has become ubiquitous, and cantors should overall be familiar with conducting services in this way. Moreover, a service has a more informal and friendly feel than a “stand and sing” audition. Congregations with more limited finances that may not have the resources to bring a number of candidates on-site, can feel confident that a candidate who is warm and engaging will encourage meaningful, participatory worship experiences.

Ultimately, the RITF members decided that there can be effective ways to learn about a candidate's warmth and appeal using remote interviewing techniques (see the RITF recommendations, below). Please be aware, however, that this part of the interview process will require thoughtful creativity.

One of the most interesting findings of the RITF, was how similar remote interviewing is to in-person interviewing. When interviews are conducted with intentionality and attention to detail, the differences between “remote” and “live” are almost eliminated. Moreover, when congregational budgets are tight, congregational leadership can trust that remote interviewing will be effective and useful.

A word of Torah –

When Abraham wanted to find a wife for Isaac, he sent his trusted servant to find the right woman from among his kinsmen. The servant thought carefully about how he was going to find the right person to become Isaac's wife. In Genesis 24:12-14 we read:

And he said, "O, Lord, God of my master, Abraham, grant me good fortune this day and deal graciously with my master, Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the town come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels' – let her be the one that You have decreed for Your servant, Isaac. Thereby shall I know that you have dealt graciously with my master."

As we read on, we learn that Rebecca comes to the well, along with the other young women of the town. When the servant asks for water, Rebecca not only says, "*Drink, my lord,*" but she also goes on to say, "*I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking.*" (Genesis 24:18-19)

This story is so important to the narrative of Abraham and his family, that the servant's story of how he chooses Rebecca as the right mate for Isaac is repeated three times over the course of 35 verses of Torah. What can we learn about our own processes from this story?

Abraham's nameless servant has been entrusted with a very serious undertaking: to find the right wife for his master's son is a very important and significant errand. The servant thus endeavors to come up with a plan that will help him know who the right woman will be. He approaches his task with intention, an understanding of the kind of person for whom he is looking – in this case someone who demonstrates compassion toward a stranger and animals – and faith that intentionality and an understanding of the kind of person he seeks will result in a successful outcome.

As you embark on your very serious undertaking – whether that be finding the right cantor match for your particular congregation, or finding the right congregational match for you, the cantor – you too can have faith that conducting your search with intention, with a thorough understanding of who you are, and with good search procedures and processes, will also bring you to a happy and successful outcome.

Genesis, chapter 24 concludes:

The servant told Isaac all of the things that he had done. Isaac then brought her [Rebecca] into the tent of his mother, Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.

May each of your searches be successful and may this next step on your congregational or cantorial journey bring you fulfillment, meaning and joy.

Recommendations/Guidelines

- Be very planful as you put your committee together: Who is a skilled interviewer? You will need a few of those on your committee – but every committee member does not need to be a skilled interviewer
 - You should have at least one good HR professional on your search committee
 - Figure out which committee members are more skilled at various tasks and roles – then enumerate those tasks and roles
 - Vary your committee by skill, areas of expertise, and age
 - Ensure that you have a good representation of your congregation’s demographics and engagement on your committee
 - Include people who are poised to lead your congregation into the future, as well as those with institutional memory
 - Please keep in mind the importance of discretion and confidentiality
- Think about your goals carefully – what do you want to learn about any particular candidate? How do these goals guide your interview processes and questions? The best way to find answers to many of the questions bulleted below is through **Behavioral Competency Questions**. Many HR professionals will have good resources available to them that will help you design questions that are meaningful for your synagogue and community. If you are uncertain about what kinds of questions are considered to be Behavioral Competency Questions, check out this website <https://www.betterteam.com/behavioral-interview-questions> or google, “Behavioral Competency Questions.”
You will want to consider these points:
 - How will you ascertain if someone is a team player?
 - What questions will help you understand how this person deals with conflict and/or a challenge?
 - What types of questions can help you understand how this person approaches a problem?
 - Does this person seem comfortable and authentic to who they are?
 - Is this person warm and engaging?
 - Does this person have the right balance between confidence and humility?
 - Does this person exhibit empathy and curiosity?
 - Does this person have the right technical skill set?
- Do some deep soul-searching with your senior rabbi and/or professional team members. What kind of person will complement her/him/them? What kind of person will work best with her/him/them?

During the Interviews:

- What are you communicating to a candidate with your style of dress, your visual background, etc.?
- Hold your first interview before you listen to a candidate sing.
- Green screens with photos are often problematic backgrounds – it is best not to use them.

- If you are planning on relying heavily on remote interviewing, set aside 2-3 **contiguous** days of interviewing for each finalist candidate; *you will not use every hour of these days – frequent computer breaks are necessary for all parties involved. Additionally, time zones will make a difference.*
 - Be sensitive to scheduling matters
 - Is there a time of day when a candidate’s internet bandwidth may be in greater use and therefore more likely to break up? (e.g. – a spouse who has switched to Work-From-Home several days a week)
 - Are other people interviewing in the same space needing to use the same equipment? (e.g. – ordination candidates at HUC)
 - Lots of talking leads to vocal exhaustion – schedule a model service earlier in the day, if at all possible.
 - Be respectful of a candidate’s time and energy: *remember that every candidate is interviewing you as well.*

The Remote “In Person” Interview

- Do NOT ask the same questions over and over; have different groups of search committee members interview the candidate using different questions, and then report back to each other. (But do not forget the importance of confidentiality!)
- Schedule time before the remote “visit” for the senior rabbi/senior rabbinic team and the cantorial candidate to prepare all, or part, of a “pretend Shabbat” or “model Shabbat” service together
 - Do not be overly concerned about whether or not you will sing with this candidate once you are all together in the sanctuary. If the candidate and the rabbi lead a service that is compelling, and the candidate is warm and engaging, you will sing with her/him/them during communal worship
- If you are not planning on bringing candidates on-site at all, have a couple of people who know the community well give a drive by virtual tour of the community on their iPad. This could be divided up between a few people and different areas could be covered on different days of the interview process.
 - Be sure to include some good stories about the community in the tour; try to elicit some stories/dialogue from the candidate; listen well
 - Check in with your town’s Convention and Visitors Bureau to get up to the date information about tourist highlights, schools, parks, etc.
- Pair an older person and a younger person to give a virtual tour of the synagogue and “tell the story” of the building, and their relationship to the congregation. Alternatively, hand off the iPad to a different pair for different synagogue spaces: what makes each of these people feel connected to the temple community? Have them tell their stories.
 - Try to elicit stories/dialogue from the candidate; listen well
- Watch some services led by the candidate (from the candidate’s current pulpit) – then ask the candidate to share something about how those services were planned and put together, and what that candidate liked most about them.

- Give the candidate ample time with the senior rabbi and other professional team members. This is very important for helping to determine a “team fit,” and to give candidates a sense of the community’s working culture.
- Arrange for some well-planned large group interview time, and some small group “get togethers”/interviews/conversations; one on one time can also be useful
- Be sure to listen! As you tell your “story,” ask for the candidate’s story as well. Think about good conversation starters for your particular community’s story.
- What is important to you? Does it match what is important to the candidate?
- Prepare a Zoom “itinerary” for the spouse/partner, if there is one – this should be about the community in general – no interviews!

When a new cantor will be recommended to the Board:

- Record an “introduction” of the candidate, with a brief bio and a short Q and A session; play this for the Board before the Board hears the candidate sing; do the same for the entire congregation when announcing the appointment of your new cantor.

***NB:** If you are planning on relying heavily on remote interviewing, it is in everyone’s best interest if each candidate is treated in the same way. Thus, even if someone is local to your congregation, if other candidates will be interviewed remotely, the local candidate should also be interviewed remotely. Interviewing one candidate in person may give that candidate an advantage – it is easier to connect in-person than online – but that candidate may not actually be the right cantor for your congregation. In other words, an in-person meeting might highlight one candidate’s qualities, or create a sense of warmth, that will be more difficult to ascertain in your other candidates whom you are only meeting remotely. Your search committee members could thereby come to a false understanding of differences in other candidates’ warmth and ability to engage others. The local candidate might be a terrific cantor, but **your** terrific cantor might – at the moment - be living in a state far away from your congregation.*