

Interview Skills

A few tips on how to improve your chances

Have you ever wondered why some people seem to succeed almost effortlessly whenever they go for an interview? Perhaps they are just lucky. I think not! Their performance, and ultimately their success, is a result of thorough preparation.

Any individual can improve their ability and success through a combination of thought, training and practice.

On receiving an invitation to attend an interview you are elated. You imagine yourself in the role; it's exciting, an ideal job for you. As the reality of the interview becomes your focus you are bombarded with less positive feelings, such as; I hate interviews, I can't remember the last time I was interviewed, I really want this job – I hope I don't let myself down. It is not uncommon to feel trepidation. The trick is not to let it weigh you down.

Most doctors have had previous experience of interviews. This experience is not always reflected in their performance on the day. If you look back on previous interviews and answer the following question truthfully: *Did I present myself in the best possible light?* While I hope the answer would be yes, it is more likely to be “no” or “not quite”.

You are no doubt aware that interviews often follow a tried and tested pattern. I wish to help you focus on the known rather than the unpredictable factors. Remember that interviews are not a new experience for you. Learn from the past to prepare yourself.

In the medical world being short listed and hence interviewed is normally a sign that the organization involved feels that you could be the person they are looking for. Most departments will only shortlist those candidates they would be happy to see appointed. Therefore the interview process begins with your very first visit to the hospital to which you are applying. Treat every meeting with any member of that department as an interview; you will be surprised whom wealds influence.

You might have your own agenda. The formal interview should **not** be the chance for you to find out more about the organization. You should have done this well beforehand.

Therefore, we should consider how you could improve your performance in any situation where you encounter prospective colleagues as well as the Appointments Advisory Committee (AAC).

The interview is a two way process, treat it as such. Know your objectives and have some understanding of the interviewers objectives.

The interview process

- Interview Objectives
- Types of questions
- Interviewers

What are your objectives?

- To gain the initiative
- To present yourself in the best possible light
- To make known your talents and expertise

What are the interviewers objectives?

- Find the most suitable person
- Encourage you to express yourself fully
- Look for specific skills and achievements
- Sell the job and the organization
- Assess your initial impact and social fit
- Appoint the right person

Interview Structure

The whole recruitment process requires careful planning. From drawing up a job description and person specification to compiling the short-list. The interview is no exception.

The make-up of an Appointments Advisory Committee is laid down in a Statutory Instrument (The National Health Service – Regulations 1996 No 701) The core membership of the committee is as follows:

A lay member (non-executive director)
College assessor
Chief executive
Medical Director
At least one consultant from the employing trust

If the job includes a substantial research or teaching commitment a further representative of the local university is required.

Be aware that interviewers will have clarified their objectives in general and decided on a format and a set of questions for each interviewee. No two interviews are the same. Your

personality, application, CV and experience will be different from other applicants, as will the areas that require further exploration because they are of particular interest or concern.

Whilst interviews are not the same there is a process that is common and accepted. The process can be likened to a sandwich. It is built on some warm up questions to help you both settle down and feel as comfortable as you can. The middle and main section of the interview will constitute the filling in the sandwich, where you will be asked a variety of questions, checking and clarifying match and suitability. In the final stage you will be given the opportunity to ask questions (don't) and the Chair will inform you of how the result will be conveyed to you.

Assessment may fall into the following categories

- Interest in the post (not necessarily self-evident)
- Potential to fit into the team
- Intelligence
- Ability to sustain an argument
- Common sense
- Communication skills
- Interests – both professional and personal
- Technical knowledge
- Motivation
- Career hopes
- Appearance

During the interview you will encounter a number of different types of questions. If you can recognize these and the reasons they are being asked, you can concentrate on your replies. The better the question, the better the interview. Questions can be categorized in the following ways:

- Open
- Probing
- Closed
- Hypothetical
- Leading
- Difficult
- Negative
- Discriminatory



As well as recognizing the different types of questions, it is worth considering the order in which the questions are asked. The use of supplementary and probing questions will often suggest what is in the interviewer's mind; you should notice this and react accordingly. Good interviewers will be watching your reactions and body language: posture, gestures and facial expressions. You should do the same; some interviewers

deliberately present an unresponsive, wooden mask. This can be because they are inexperienced or uncomfortable with the role. With practice you should be able to read and assess intentions and reactions reasonably well. You will undoubtedly also meet some ineffective interviewers.

Interviewers are trained, not born! Be prepared for an interviewer who:

- Has not read your CV
- Gets aggressive to see how you react under stress
- Is constantly disturbed
- Makes remarks about your previous bosses
- Asks questions but doesn't listen to the answers

Even the best training can fall on deaf ears and even the best interviewers can have a bad day. If you happen to be on the receiving end of poor interviewing, you can sometimes turn it your advantage. You may meet interviewers who fall into the following categories.

The disorganized interviewer

Allow them to settle down and find the notes or papers they require. Establish your preparedness early on, and if necessary, in a subtle manner lead the interview.

The unprepared interviewer

Sometimes very experienced interviewers think they can sail in on the day and don't need to prepare. You have to keep calm and patient. Do not try to catch them out or show them up.

The nervous interviewer

They would rather be anywhere else than in the interview room. This happens when specialists are taken out of their familiar work surroundings and are expected to be more at ease in a more social setting. They will be grateful if you offer information and loosely control the interview. Be careful not to patronize.

The aggressive interviewer

Do not let them provoke you. Do not apologise for weaknesses, failings or gaps in your CV. They will take great delight in pointing them out to you. Give positive views of these proposed errors.

Being familiar with the process of an interview will enable you to understand the direction it is taking.

The Campaign - Do your research

Gather as much information as you can at the earliest opportunity. Use every source available to you. This has two major benefits. Firstly, it demonstrates to the interviewer your interest in the job. Secondly, you will feel more confident knowing you are prepared. Three areas should be researched, the **interview**, the **job**, the **organization** and **know yourself**. By researching, you lessen the risk of feeling that you could have made a better impression or that you haven't done yourself justice.

The interview

How to get there? – location, plan journey and day

Who will interview you?

The formation of an appointments advisory committee (AAC) is a statutory requirement as has been previously stated. Panel interviews take many different forms. Commonly, AACs take a formal structured approach where the interviewers take it in turns to ask questions reflecting their particular interests. You may find this form of interview more threatening, but tends to be fairer and more equitable. Panel interviews are preferred in an equal opportunities framework. Being formal, exploratory questions are not always forthcoming because of a limitation of time. It can be difficult to establish the same feeling of rapport as in a one-to-one interview.

Presentations

It is increasingly common for interviews to include a formal presentation as part of the process. You will normally get advanced warning together with the particular subject you are required to present. Be sure to check what equipment will be available on the day. Your presentation needs to achieve the following:

- Convince the panel you are qualified and experienced
- Outline your possible contributions on a strategic and detailed level.
- Establish good relationships with the panel

Be sure to inject:

- Professionalism
- A degree of formality
- Controlled enthusiasm
- Pace and drive

A presentation is an ideal opportunity for you, but only if you can control your nerves and are clear about the messages you want to communicate. It is likely that the

presentation will be related to the job in question. It is a perfect way of starting the interview on your terms. Examples of presentation topics are:

Discuss the role of the consultant anaesthetist over the next ten years.

How can you reconcile the need to implement Calman training, reduce junior doctor's hours and provide a service.

The Job

The essential starting point for success is to know as much as you can about the job for which you have applied. Firstly the job description and specification lay down essential and desired criteria for the successful candidate. During your preliminary visits you will have learnt much about the realities of the job. If you remain unsure about any particular aspects of the job or the organization, you can save everyone's time by research. You may achieve this by talking to insiders. Remember that you will be hearing a subjective perception. Their views may be affected by personal circumstances or prejudices. So concentrate on facts rather than opinions.

The Organisation

You will be expected to have some knowledge of the organisation. The sort of things you should know are:

Activity	Culture	Strengths	Future
Size	Staff turnover	Weaknesses	developments
History	Annual reports		

Most hospitals have annual reports. Many departments have departmental portfolios. Hospital web sites and the CHI website might be good sources of information.

Research will prepare you for success. No preparation will be wasted, so invest time and energy into gathering as much information as you can. Completing the research serves two purposes. It helps you prepare yourself for the interview so that you present yourself in the best possible light. It also helps you become clearer about your suitability.

Know yourself

Self-knowledge is an essential ingredient of your preparation for the interview. You must feel comfortable in presenting yourself to the interview panel. This idea may seem a little strange: after all, if you don't know yourself, who does? When people are asked to describe themselves they tend to talk about what they do rather than who they are. You will need to communicate what makes you successful and different. You will not be the only person who looks good on paper. The interview is your chance to stand out and be noticed. You want to convince the panel that you will bring enhanced benefits to the organisation. The panel will see several candidates in the course of the day, so the ones they will remember are the ones who are distinctive, who have something interesting to

say and can make a unique contribution. In order to know yourself, you should therefore consider the following:

- You the person
 - What have you got that makes you special and what makes you fit?
- Your skills
- Your limitations
 - Exercise ingenuity in finding positive ways to re-frame them
 - What has held you back
 - Under what circumstances have you felt frustrated at work
- Your strengths
- Understand your achievements
- The essence of you

As well as giving concrete illustrations, you also need to think about your language. Be confident and assertive using phrases like the following to illustrate you point positively:

...which resulted in
...so that
...the benefit was
...the advantage was

Dismiss all you tentative language such as:

...I probably could
...I think I can
...I have been told
...some people think I'm



You might like to reinforce your other statements by developing a summary career statement about yourself. This has the advantage of creating the right impression in the mind of the interviewer. Produce a powerful statement about the type of person you are and the contribution you can make to the organization. You are then able to create value in the eyes of potential employers and increase the idea of the benefits you bring. Consider yourself to be a new product; your challenge is to convince the other parties to invest in you. To make that decision they need to know why and what the benefits to them will be.

Preparing yourself for success

Some candidates see interviews as threatening situations. They worry about their own deficiencies, about how nervous they get, about what the interviewers will think of them and about failing to do the job if they are appointed.

For these people, what stands in the way of conveying self respect is their overriding fear of failing themselves and their expectations. To some, this fear can have a paralyzing

effect and can completely ruin the interview. You can prepare to succeed by thinking positively, making a good impression and looking prepared.

Thinking positively

World-class athletes, amongst others, will confirm the importance of mental attitude to achieving the best performance. Aim to direct your energy away from worrying about the interview and towards effectively preparing for it. However, try to monitor whether you may be seen as overconfident and not taking things as seriously as you should. This is a common mistake made by interviewers who confuse confidence with arrogance. To be just a little anxious, a little keyed up about interviews is good; it is generally facilitative rather than inhibitive. Only when you become very anxious do you begin to harm your prospects.

Making a good impression

People make up their minds about us in minutes, some say 90 seconds. Never ignore this fact, particularly at an interview when you have a relatively limited time to make an impression.

Your initial impact is vital. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression

Start well

Whenever two people meet for the first time, they automatically start by evaluating each other on the basis of the non-verbal cues they receive. Wherever this is it is a subconscious "weighing up" time.

The interviewer will often base their judgment on this initial impression and spend the rest of the interview looking to reinforce their view. You may be judged on nothing more than how you walk across the room, the strength of your handshake, or when and how you sit.

Do:

- Close the door behind you
- Walk forward confidently
- Respond to offered handshakes firmly
- Wait until you are asked to sit
- Remain quiet but alert for the opening question

Don't:

- Shuffle in head down, hands in pocket
- Carry papers
- Crash into the room
- Attempt to dominate

Appearance

It is essential that you dress the part. Your appearance reveals a great deal about your self-image, your values and your attitudes towards other people and situations. More favourable qualities are often attributed to smartly dressed people. Those who are perceived to be well groomed are often treated better than those considered unattractive or inappropriately dressed. Ask the question what is the corporate image of the culture you are trying to enter. A good benchmark is to decide how the holder of the job would be expected to dress, and just go one stage better. Be conscious of colour, comfort and the finer points of life (finger nails, hair and perfume).

Body Language

Having the best CV and all the right answers to testing interview questions won't get you anywhere if your body language gives an entirely different message.

Research has shown that tone of voice and body language accounts for 65% of what's communicated, words 35%. Body language can give away our feelings, regardless of whether we keep our mouths shut or not.

Obvious body language signs include:

- Fidgeting shows boredom and restlessness
- Crossing arms indicates an unwillingness to listen
- Tapping feet is distracting and a sign of boredom
- Doodling on paper shows you're not paying attention
- Touching you face or playing with your hair can be a sign that you are hiding something
- Looking away or hesitating before you answer indicates that you are unsure of something
- A fixed, unfocused stare shows your attention is elsewhere

Some people are more responsive to body language than others, but as a candidate striving to make a good impression, it is important to be aware at all times of the body language that may give out a negative impression.

Positive body language

- Responsive/eager – Leaning forward, open arms, nodding
- Listening – Head tilted, constant eye contact, nodding
- Attentive – smiling

Negative body language

- Bored – slumped posture, foot tapping
- Rejection – arms folded, head down
- Aggression Leaning too far forward, finger pointing
- Lying – Touching face, hands over mouth, eyes averted, shifting position, glancing

Voice

It is important to project yourself confidently in a clear, controlled and steady voice that can be easily understood. Practice and try to be aware of the following.

- Use a range of tones, avoid monotone
- Pause before speaking
- Speak slightly slower than normal
- Don't mumble or gabble excitedly
- Keep your hands away from your mouth as you speak
- Watch your pitch and dynamics (high-pitched voices are tough on the ears)
- Let your voice show your enthusiasm and keenness

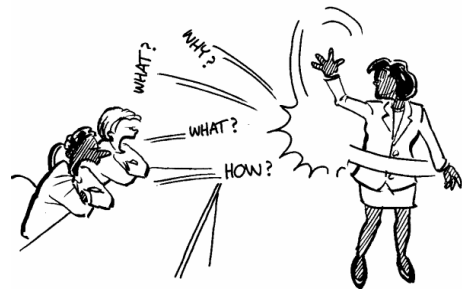
Who do you address?

- Always look at the person questioning you
- Direct your answer to the questioner
- Glance around to engage the whole panel

It is of vital importance to listen to and understand what the interviewer is asking or saying to you. Too often, interviewees are in such a hurry to speak, usually out of nervousness, sometimes out of overconfidence, that they do not fully hear what has been said. There is also the danger that you hear what you want to hear rather than what is actually being said. Avoid preconceptions; give the other person your full attention. Wait for them to finish what they are saying, be open-minded, not prejudiced. If you're not sure what the interviewer means, ask for clarification; it doesn't mean you are stupid! In fact just the opposite.

You want to present yourself in the best possible light throughout the interview process. This will involve effective answering of the questions asked, but also grasping any other opportunities to make your case.

- Keep to the point
- Be clear
- Know the appropriate jargon
- Speak with confidence
- Keep your answers positive
- Be honest and open with replies



- Give plenty of work related examples
- Be enthusiastic

At the end of the interview take your leave as smoothly and politely as possible. Do not add any afterthoughts and thank the panel for their time through the Chairman.

Don't let the success of your future depend on trying to find out how you interview on the day. Take time to practice. Practice develops performance in all things; interviews are no exception.

Good luck.

“... chance favours only the mind that is prepared...” Pasteur

Dr A.P.L.Goodwin

(Email aplg@gooders.co.uk)