An Interview Guide for First-time Candidates

If you’ve never interviewed for a job, or if it’s been quite awhile, you’re probably feeling a little nervous about the prospect of facing a potential employer or panel of future colleagues. That’s a good sign—not feeling nervous means you’re not paying attention.

Now that we’ve established that interviews are worthy of at least a low level of anxiety, the question is how to convert those feelings into strategy? The answer is simple: One step at a time. Following is a guide to help you prepare for each interview as if it were your first—as indeed, it might be.

1. Gather all the details possible. When a recruiter contacts you out of the blue to schedule an interview, it’s common to “go blank.” The recruiter is going to be very business-like and confident and say things like, “We’re hoping you can fly out on Wednesday next week. You can? Oh, good. We’ll email you the travel information. See you then.” Wait, what just happened? Here are a few of the questions you want to ask, whether you get them out in that initial call or in a follow-up email:
   - Who will I be interviewing with; what are their positions?
   - What is the schedule of interviews; how long will each meeting be?
   - Are you meeting with other candidates, or am I the only person being considered at this point?
   - Will a decision be made from this set of interviews, or are there more steps to the process?
   - What materials do you need from me?
   - What other information can you share? For instance, what can you tell me about the practice (or department or research program, etc.).

2. Conduct pre-interview research. Now that you know who you’ll be interviewing with, you can look up each person on the internet, while also asking your colleagues or mentors what they know about them. Your goal is to use what you learn to guide your interview answers, as well as your later decision making. For example, if you discover that the department chair has been vocal about legislation governing research programs, you can surmise that he or she feels strongly about those issues—wouldn’t you like to know that before answering a question on the subject during your interview?
   - Besides the general research you conduct on the people you’ll be meeting, here are some other things you should look for:
     - Size and reputation of the organization, as well as any specialty they practice
     - Articles about or written by the principles in the organization
     - Competing organizations, particularly if it’s a private practice, so you can understand their pressures better
     - Community information, to help you understand their practice environment

3. Identify your key strengths for the position. While it’s true that your strengths are your strengths regardless of the context, the context still pertains to how you frame your answers. For example, if you’re talking with the partners of a small practice, your creative and innovative approach will be important for streamlining processes and attracting new patients. But if it’s an academic position you’re after, the same strength will be better described in terms of your ability to present the curriculum from a variety of teaching methodologies or your ability to frame research questions from a fresh perspective.
   - To help you describe your strengths in ways that are relevant to the position, ask yourself these questions:
     - What are the primary tasks of the position, and which of these am I especially good at?
• What examples can I give to demonstrate those strengths?
• Do I have any metrics that will help me “prove” the strength?

4. **Anticipate and practice questions.** There are numerous articles and webinars available to help you with this step, including several on the American Academy of Neurology’s Neurology Career Center web site. Here are a few tips to guide you:

  • Wherever possible, relate your answers to the employer’s needs and interests
  • Use examples or metrics to help your answers come alive
  • Don’t be afraid to ask questions of your own

5. **Find a way to relax.** Here’s a cardinal rule of interviewing: People hire people they like. Since it’s much easier to be likable when you’re relaxed and well-rested, your task is to protect your time and mental well-being in the days before your meeting so you can present your best self to your future employer.

Now that you know the steps needed to prepare for your interview, the following overview information will help you keep things in perspective.

Interviews count for most of the hiring decision. Your academic and work records are important guides for employers, but they’ll base their decision to hire on less measurable points, including your personality, your approach, your fit with the patients and the rest of the team, and their perception of your potential to succeed. None of these elements can be derived from documentation, but only from in-person impressions—which is what makes interviews so critical to the overall hiring process.

Interviews come in different shapes. As you may have already discovered when interviewing for medical school or a residency, you could find yourself meeting one-on-one with the decision-maker, or in a series of consecutive one-on-ones with potential colleagues, or in a panel setting with a half dozen interviewers around a board table. You could also be interviewed by phone or Skype, or even asked to video-record answers for interviewers to review later. While each of these situations differs in format, your actual approach will not vary much at all: Find out from the recruiter what type of interview to expect, follow the steps noted above to prepare, then find a way to relax so you can be at your best in the meeting.

Interviews are progressive in nature. In a competitive scenario where more than one candidate is being considered for a position, interviews will be used to narrow the field. That means that the winning candidate may have experienced multiple rounds of interviews before being selected. Even when you’re the only candidate for the position, you can expect multiple meetings as the conversation deepens between you and your future employer. With this in mind, don’t worry about getting everything done in one meeting. Instead, follow the flow and pace set by the interviewer while you concentrate on using every question as an opportunity to present another of your strengths.

**A Final Word**

Now you know the basics for succeeding at your first interview. All that’s left is to cover the logistics so that you’re really ready to roll. Here’s a quick checklist to keep you organized:

• Inspect your interview outfit to be sure it’s clean and fits well
• Get a haircut, manicure, or any other personal grooming assists needed
• Print CV copies for the meeting
• Notify references that they may be called
• If it’s an out-of-town interview, pack and double-check your bags; confirm travel details
• For a local interview, take a dry run the day before to ensure you don’t get lost
• Purchase thank-you notes to send after the interview

Still nervous? Breath deep and enjoy the edge. You’re well-prepared, so the nerves are a good thing—they remind you that you’re taking an important step in your career. Good luck. You’re going to do great!