Interview Strategies for the Mid-career Professional

For neurology professionals at mid-career (or later), job interviews can be a mixed bag. On the one hand, they’re an opportunity, as always, to present your strengths and learn where you’d fit in an organization, whether that’s a hospital, practice group, or somewhere in private industry. The conversation also provides a chance to ask deeper questions about a department’s plans and to position yourself as someone who can help solve anticipated problems. That’s all good, but what about the other side of interviewing at mid-career? Consider this short list of possible pitfalls for experienced job candidates:

- Perceptions of age issues that can cloud the interviewer’s judgment
- Candidate difficulty compressing decades of experience into sound bites
- “Starting over” syndrome, as in: can this candidate learn new systems?
- Questions of “fit” and teamwork for candidates with strong personalities

Complicating these issues are factors related to career cycles: What if this candidate plans to retire in a few years? For the most part, candidates at mid-career will have resolved these concerns for themselves long before they land in an interview. The trick is finding ways to convey the answers to questions the interviewer may not directly ask. Indeed, some interviewers give such a wide berth to issues pertaining to age (to avoid perceptions of discrimination), entire topics go untouched in the conversation. That’s not necessarily a good thing, particularly if the candidate loses an opportunity to set someone’s mind at ease, or to highlight an age-related advantage.

Luckily, there are no restrictions on the candidates themselves regarding what information can be volunteered. The key is to be strategic and intentional as you guide interviewers to a better understanding of your strengths and away from perceived weaknesses for the position. Follow the tips below to give yourself a head start on developing a strategy for your next round of interviews.

1. Develop a key message platform. Do you know which of your many strengths will be most important for the next position? The answer will vary according to setting and the tasks they need you to perform, so this analysis is best done before every interview. The goal is to boil your extensive experience down to three or four talking points that best illustrate your key strengths. For more information on this very effective interview strategy, check out the AAN’s Neurology Career Center article.

2. Create an interview document to support your key messages. If you’re scheduled for an interview, your CV or resume has likely been viewed already. Now that you know you’ll be having the conversation, you can create a short, one- or two-page document presenting just the highlights of your experience as related to the current opening. If you use your key messages as a guide, you’ll be able to create a page that subtly directs the interviewer’s questions while ensuring you’re able to discuss your best points.

3. Practice answers to the most anticipated questions. As an experienced worker, you’ll do better if you present clear but short answers that connect directly to the work being discussed. This will help you avoid the common pitfalls of “in-my-day” answers that give too much detail or inadvertently define you as being over-qualified.

4. Visualize. The longer you’ve worked in one place or capacity, the more acute the danger that you’ll answer questions from a single frame of reference—which is one of the ways experienced workers signal that they’re stuck in a rut. To remedy this problem, visualize everything you can about the position, from the organization or department to the patients or the workload, to, most especially, the person or people who will make the hiring decision. What would be their concerns? What are their pain points? Having done this exercise, it will be easier to craft messages focused on how you can help them reach their goals.

5. Update your appearance. It’s fine—good, in fact—to look your age. You just don’t want to look like you belong to a different era. If this isn’t your strong suit, employ the assistance of an image professional to provide guidance on your choices of hairstyle, eyewear, and clothing so you can project a professional, dignified, but up-to-date, image.
SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

If you follow each of these tips, you’re likely to find that you’re better prepared for the interview than most of the people you’ll encounter on the other side of the desk. Take comfort in that knowledge, but don’t take it for granted. Job interviews are less frequently won by the person who knows the most than by the person who is best liked or whose potential to help the organization seems greatest. For seasoned professionals, that means a message of “I know more than the other (younger) candidates” will not be as effective as “I can use my experience to help your department.”

Which brings us to the last and possibly most important tip of all for mid-career neurology professionals: Emphasize how your strengths will help the organization reach its goals. To set the right tone, you’ll want to be specific but not overly “instructive,” as demonstrated in the following answers to the same interview question.

**Question:** We see you’ve had experience developing staffing solutions in your last practice. Tell us more.

**Answer 1:** Basically, the best way to handle a situation like that is to...(detail here). Once I brought these solutions to the practice management team, I was able to make the point that...(detail here). We implemented my plan by following these steps (list steps) and the results were (name results). So yes, I’m proud of that and I know I could make a similar impact for you.

**Critique:** Although this might seem like a good answer because it’s rich in detail, the tone is all wrong. The listener is being lectured and overwhelmed but not actually engaged. Worse, if there’s an age difference between the interviewer and the candidate, this kind of answer will play into stereotypes about the older worker dominating work teams.

**Answer 2:** As we were discussing earlier, I was part of a three-physician practice that had grown very quickly—similar to the situation you’ve been describing here. The long wait times for appointments were affecting the patients and it wasn’t a sustainable model, given the changes we were absorbing at the same time from the insurance payment processes. I can give you more detail on the actual steps we took but the core of the solution was for me to gather enough data to analyze the patterns so we could adjust the calendar accordingly. Once that was initiated, I was able to explore options for the staffing itself. Part of the solution included bringing on a new team member at part-time. This was a new parent who wanted to balance work and home life, so it was a good solution all around. I’ve noticed from your physician list that your practice includes a variety of people at different stages in their careers. It would be exciting to look at opportunities to adjust the staffing and schedules to meet the different needs on the team, if that was something you wanted me to take on.

**Critique.** Although this answer is also long, it’s much more compelling, primarily because it’s engaging and conversational in tone. To achieve that effect, the candidate sacrifices detail and process in favor of storytelling. Interspersing comments that relate the information directly back to the current employer is also a good technique.

As you can see, mastering interview techniques as a mid-career candidate does not need to be a complicated undertaking. Once you develop a strategy and take some time to practice, you’ll be ready for these conversations.