Surviving the Daylong Interview

Congratulations! You’re scheduled for an interview. It’s all day long, with about a zillion people, and almost no breaks. If “extreme interviewing” is on the agenda, here are some tips to help you make the best of it. With a little practice and strategy, you might even grow to like this style of interviewing. As stressful as it can be, it’s a good way to see and be seen by a substantial number of your future colleagues at one time. It’s also a common process in the world of medicine, so if you’re building a career as a medical professional, now is a good time to develop your skills at the daylong interview process.

As with any overwhelming project, the key to success is to break the situation into smaller parts. If your day will be spent in several interviews, it makes sense to prepare for each meeting—or cluster of meetings—independently. For example, you might have a series of short interviews in the morning, followed by a luncheon, and ending with an afternoon panel interview. The day could even include a presentation to a group that includes your future subordinates and colleagues.

Let’s assume you have a few days to prepare. Your first step is to get a coach, mentor, or friend to give you a hand. You’ll appreciate having a second set of eyes to help with the details, as well as a listening ear to help you refine your interview answers.

Next, you need a war room (or dinner table) where you can spread out your materials and notes. Even if you’re a computer-and-cloud type person, you’ll find it helpful to see everything in front of you. If your coach is able to meet in person, so much the better. The two of you will be able to present a to a group that includes your future subordinates and colleagues.

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Using the day’s agenda as a guide (if you do not have an agenda, ask for one from the interview coordinator) identify how many distinct meetings you will be in and create a separate folder or notebook for each one. You may want to color-code these materials to make them easier to access during the interview day.

Speaking of toting around color-coded folders—you’ll need a shoulder bag or briefcase that is both professional and easy to use (no clunky buckles and flaps). If you don’t own one, find one to borrow or buy now. And be sure it has a zippered pocket for your wallet, phone, or other personal items, to relieve you of the purse-plus-bag or bulging-back-pocket hassles. If you have time, practice using the bag to be sure it doesn’t do anything awkward, such as hitching up your shirt while you’re walking or biting into your hand with uncomfortable handles. Seemingly minor equipment issues are magnified when you have to struggle with them for an entire day, so it’s worth the trouble to get this right.

Each interview will have its own agenda and interviewers, as well as its own distinct structure. Does your schedule include a series of short, one-on-one meetings? For these you can probably anticipate a standard Q&A situation. Panel interviews take a different rhythm and tone, as there are several interviewers and only one candidate. For these you need to think about group dynamics and how to answer questions in a group setting. And luncheons, as you know, are semi-social landmines, ripe with opportunity to win favor or spill soup or both. Start your preparation with Internet research or a good interviewing book to learn some strategies for each style of interview. This background will help you prepare for both the logistics and the dynamics you will likely encounter.

As you look over the different meetings and interviewers (ask the interview coordinator for a list of the interviewers if you do not have one) try to identify the decision makers or key influencers for the hiring decision. This may require help from your network, but it will be worth the trouble. Knowing who carries the most weight helps you know where to apply extra effort in your preparation. For example, with so many people on the agenda, it’s not realistic to research everyone’s background. But knowing the background of key players and reading their published works will give you perspective and help you frame your answers. (This is a good time to point out that research on the overall program and organization is a critical step that you cannot bypass. It’s essential that you know what this hospital or practice does, how they’re funded, who their patients are, and all other details you can absorb before the big day.)

Now that you have folders and research started for each interview, it’s time to think about your overall message, or “branding” as it’s called these days. In a pinch, you can fall back to simply answering questions as they come at you. But if you have the time to prepare, you’ll turn in a stronger, more consistent and more memorable performance by identifying a few key points to emphasize throughout the day. Perhaps you have been pursuing...
a particular specialty in your patient care or a line of research that provides you with deep knowledge in key areas. Or maybe your hallmark is your ability to get along with anyone and to work well in a crisis. You may think that this latter example is a “weak sister” compared to clinical specialties, but remember that people hire people they like. Your interviewers are recruiting a team member as well as a medical professional, so speaking to their self-interest in that regard can be a winning strategy.

Whatever “brand” or message you settle on, your task is to incorporate it into conversations throughout the day. When the interviewers compare notes, you want to stand out from the parade of new faces they’ve just encountered. If someone can refer to you as “that one with the (fill in the blank) background” or the “patient advocate” or whatever else, and everyone nods their head in recognition, then you’ve achieved the goal.

When you return home after a day of smiling and explaining your skill set, your instinct will be to drop that shoulder bag in a corner and put the day behind you. Before you do, take some time to organize your impressions from the day and your next steps. Perhaps you have follow-up questions for one of the people you met, or need to send a digital link to one of the interviewers for a paper you wrote. These are details you should handle now, while they’re fresh in your mind.

At the very least, you’ll need to write some thank-you notes and those are always best when done within a day or two of the interview. Handwritten notes are still well-regarded, but emailed letters will also work. The gold standard would be a personalized thank-you and warm comment sent to each interviewer. If that isn’t possible, however, a single note sent to the decision-maker, or a more generalized note to the interview coordinator will do.

Once you’ve sent the last note, congratulate yourself. You’ve just completed one of the most difficult of all the job search processes. Whatever the outcome of today’s interviews, you will know that you are on the path to perfecting a skill you will use for the rest of your medical career. •