Winning Over the Screener—First Interview Strategies

Are you ready for your screening interviews? This first-level conversation with an employer is the source of much anxiety for candidates, and for good reason: The purpose of the conversation is to decide which candidates can be moved forward in the process, and which ones are not a good fit. In other words, you can be as easily screened out as in—so of course, that can be nerve-wracking.

Not to worry. Like everything else in job search, there’s a strategy for winning over the screener and advancing in the hiring process.

The role of screening interviews
To start, it helps to understand the role screening interviews play in the hiring process. When a job is advertised at the AAN Neurology Career Center or elsewhere, employers generally ask for the candidate’s CV and perhaps completion of an online application.

At this stage, someone behind the scenes will review the responses to identify which candidates to run through screening interviews before investing in the expense of in-person meetings.

The structure of screening interviews
The more organized and professional the interviewer, the more likely the screening process also will be highly organized. For example, professional recruiters may create a grid to track the top candidates and their answers to key questions, while less experienced screeners (including department heads) are more likely to conduct a less formal conversation with candidates. Both are good methods, but they can feel quite different to the job seeker.

The interviews themselves are most commonly conducted over the telephone, and may be scheduled for 20 or 30 minutes (although longer sessions also occur). Video conferencing tools such as Skype or Facetime may also be employed and, occasionally, a candidate may encounter a one-way video interview—in which the questions have been pre-taped and the candidate is simply recording his or her answers for the recruiter to review later.

Questions to expect
As a rule, interviews at this stage are more focused on discovering which candidates are a fit for the organization, and on eliminating any whose goals create a conflict for hiring. It may seem obvious, but you could expect a candidate who answers “To be a solo practitioner” when asked for a career goal to be less appealing to a hospital recruiter than the candidate who answers “To work in a hospital setting where I can participate on committees and provide care on an inpatient and outpatient basis.” Neither is an untoward goal, but only one of those answers is going to make the recruiter want to move the candidate forward.

Here are some of the more typical questions you might expect during a screening interview:

- Why are you interested in this position?
- What are your career plans?
- Why did you choose your specialty?
- Are you able to relocate?
- What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
- Describe your experience with (something specific from the job description)?
- What are your salary expectations?

Strategies for answering screening questions
In all cases, your goal is to be clear and honest, while not giving too much away. That’s because some points, such as your actual weakness for the position, will be better discussed later, with the interviewer/physicians who would be working with you.
Here’s an example. For the screening interview, the answer to “What is your weakness” should be somewhat general: “I’m anticipating that I’ll need help initially with the hospital’s electronic record system. I have some EPIC background, but I know everyone uses the system a little differently.” Whereas, when interviewing later in person with the department head, you might go more in-depth: “I’ve discovered that I do best in a new position when I get a good foundation of training in the first few weeks. That’s not a weakness so much but an antidote to developing a weakness. I’m a solid learner but I’m very process-oriented. I’d say my biggest concern for this position is getting up to speed with the electronic records system you’re using. Can you tell me more about how you train the doctors in that process?”

As you can see, the answer for the in-person interviewer is not only more detailed, but it also turns the answer into a request for more information. That’s a good technique for in-person interviews, but not as much with screening interviews. Screeners not only have less time, but likely have less detailed knowledge of the actual functioning of the position.

Winning over the screener

To move from simply answering the screener’s questions to winning his or her favor is not as difficult as you might think. Follow these 10 tips and you’ll be surprised how quickly you advance to “favored candidate” status.

1. **Reply promptly.** Screeners might be coordinating dozens of candidates at a time for multiple openings. Your quick and professional response will be noted.

2. **Schedule quickly.** If you can accept the first offer of a conversation by simply shifting your schedule a little, that accommodation will make the screener’s life much easier than having to go back and forth with you on multiple options.

3. **Forward another copy of your CV.** Of course, they already have it. Or do they?

4. **Greet the screener as a person.** You can’t be too familiar, of course (never say something personal, like “You sound tired today”) but you can certainly be warm (“I’m so glad you were able to fit me into the schedule this week; thank you for making this arrangement for us to talk”).

5. **Answer questions clearly and succinctly.** If the screener asks why you chose your specialty, a short anecdote about your motivations is more appropriate than a long-winded story about an uncle’s medical crisis.

6. **Express interest in the position.** The screener wants to move people forward who want the job, so save your hesitation for later conversations.

7. **Don’t ask detailed questions.** Screeners generally do know the schedule and next steps in the process. They’re less likely to know the call rotation or about opportunities for additional training on the job. Save the in-depth questions for later in the interview process.

8. **Follow up with a brief correspondence.** A short email thanking the screener for the conversation and confirming your desire to move forward helps remove all doubt about your interest in the job.

9. **Show your gratitude.** You can’t see the work the screener is doing behind the scenes but you should know that it can be quite extensive at times. Scheduling and interviewing physicians is one of those “herding cats” roles that doesn’t get enough appreciation.

10. **Win or lose, be graceful.** It’s easy to say thank you when the screener tells you you’ve been advanced to the next level. More difficult, but probably more important, is the graceful treatment of the screener who explains you’ve been eliminated from consideration.

In sum, it’s good to remember how small the world really is. Depending on who the screener works for, you may run into him or her again in this or a later search. Take a moment to say thanks once more for the effort on your behalf and you may find your etiquette pays off sometime down the road.