

Successfully Navigating the Physician Job Interview

Kendall E. Bradley, MD
Rance McClain, DO, FACFP, FAOASM (@ECNARM)

Jeffrey S. Berger, MD, MBA (@jberbermd)
Kathryn M. Andolsek, MD, MPH, FAFAP (@GME_doc)

The Challenge

The physician job interview seeks to match the applicant's clinical skills, career goals, and cultural fit with the health care team and organization. This Rip Out presents a systematic strategic approach to the interview to help candidates and employers.

What Is Known

Successful interviews involve 3 stages: before, during, and after the actual interview. Build on prior successful experiences (medical school, residency, fellowship, non-medical jobs), recognizing differences.¹

How You Can Start TODAY—Before the Interview²⁻⁵

Understand Your Goals and Prioritize

Define your “ideal job.” Consider a list of needs and desires for yourself and your family. Prioritize these to facilitate inevitable trade-offs (eg, compensation versus call, school reputations versus cost of living).

Do Your Homework

- Ask for a detailed interview-day schedule (interviewers' names and roles) in advance.
- Use the Internet and your professional channels (mentors, peers, your program's alumni) to glean information about the organization (history, recent changes, major projects, leadership priorities, culture, fiscal security), the interviewers (values, preferences, styles), and the interview format.
- Identify whether there is a special talent you can bring or a niche you can fill.
- A telephone call or e-mail to confirm the interview day and meeting time/location is prudent; however, do not overcommunicate as this risks annoying the interviewer.

Review Your Digital Footprint

“Search yourself.” Eliminate or rehabilitate, if possible, anything that is potentially problematic. Anticipate what the interviewer(s) may ask based on a likely find during

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-19-00527.1>

Editor's Note: The online version of this articles contains the resources cited in the article and a day-of-interview checklist.

Rip Out Action Items

Interviewees should:

1. Understand and prioritize your current goals for the job and professional role.
2. Develop brief stories that illustrate your competencies and specific questions for the interviewer(s).
3. Practice your performance and prepare for the logistics of the interview day and follow-up.

their online search. Be ready to address any negative parts of your past in an open and nondefensive manner.⁶

Update Your Curriculum Vitae

Be prepared to discuss anything on your curriculum vitae, including gaps (time, experience). Reread your prior published work.⁷

Volunteer to Be Part of a Faculty Search at Your Residency

Some programs train faculty interviewers,⁸ and you can obtain valuable tips by being on the other side, through participating in interviews and discussions of candidates. Ask faculty to conduct mock interviews for senior trainees.

What You Can Do LONG TERM—During and After the Interview

Develop Brief Stories (30–60 Seconds)

Write responses to predictable questions: Tell us about yourself. Why should we choose you? What are your strengths and weaknesses? How do you approach conflict? What is your biggest failure? Focus responses on what you have learned from the past and how those experiences have shaped your readiness for this position.

Practice Your Performance

Rehearse with a colleague, friend, or family member. Review audio recording or video recording of your responses for distracting or off-target verbal and nonverbal cues.

Anticipate Challenging Questions

Hypothetical and behavioral questions that require reflection on the past are common. On occasion, interviewers may ask illegal questions. Prepare how to address these questions, such as current salary, political or religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or family planning.⁹

TABLE
Common Interview Formats and Question Types

Format	Description
Traditional	One-on-one, usually unscripted. Anticipate likely topics and prepare 2 to 4 talking points/stories.
Panel	Several interviewers with 1 candidate. Make eye contact with all, particularly the questioner.
Group	One or more interviewers with several candidates. Be respectful of the other candidates; do not dominate the entire time. Find novel ways to add to the conversation.
Multiple mini-interviews	A series of brief, 8- to 10-min conversations with different interviewers using specific prompts; often behavior based; for all candidates. ¹⁰
Telephone/online interview ^{11,12}	Screening interview to select candidates for on-site interview. Ensure a quiet location. If online, dress professionally. Ensure the total background captured by the camera is professional. ¹³
Behavioral based ^{14,15}	Focused questions probing actual past performance. <i>Tell me about a time you managed conflict on a team.</i>
Situational, hypothetical	Hypothetical questions, often ethical. <i>You witnessed a close colleague reviewing a hospitalized friend's medical record that was not his/her patient. What would you do?</i>
Activity	You are given a problem or task to perform/solve, which may or may not be explicitly clinical. May address teamwork, adaptability, or technical skills.
Mixed format	May blend several of these formats

Plan Interview-Day(s) Logistics by Approaching It Tactically

Avoid “last flight out.” Travel the day before the interview to mitigate the impact of flight delays, cancellations, and reduced sleep. Minimize travel time between hotel and interview. Clarify expected attire. If in doubt choose business formal. Wear new clothes ahead of time to ensure comfort. Bring an extra set of clothes. If traveling by air, “carry on” your bag. Commute between lodging and interview site in advance to anticipate potential delays. Arrive 30 to 60 minutes early. Have the contact’s cell phone. Sleep! Be well groomed. Avoid strong fragrances.

Be Truthful and Attend to Nonverbal Cues

Your department is as important as your words. Be yourself. Never lie, inflate, or embellish your skills or accomplishments. Assume that your interviewer is knowledgeable. Practice postures shown to improve interview success.¹⁶ Note nonverbal cues in your interviewers to anticipate when you should say more or move on.

Relax

Use methods that work for you (exercise, mindfulness, a good cup of coffee).

Assume Everyone You Meet Is Interviewing You, and Maintain a Sense of Humor

Be professional to all, especially administrative staff. Turn off electronics. Pause to greet people, make eye contact, and offer a firm handshake. Immerse yourself in the interview to demonstrate enthusiasm for the job. Be gracious and unflappable as snafus are common, despite planning. Calm responses make you memorable.

Interview the Interviewer

The interview should be a conversation—not a monologue. Probe characteristics important to you while being careful not to reflect a lack of work ethic. Ask questions

that reflect preparation: What makes your organizational (departmental) culture distinctive? What are your organization’s biggest challenges? Defer questions about compensation. If you have deal-breaker questions (call, part-time work), consider asking. Complete the “Interview Job Aid” resource.¹⁷

Identify Next Steps and Follow-up

Confirm the next expected communication. With whom should you follow up? Is there anyone not at the interview you should contact? Address any follow-up requests from the interviewer. Send brief thank you e-mails, but not the same e-mail to everyone.

Reset

Reflect on strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the next interview. Remain positive even if this job does not work out. Your professional life will be long so never “burn a bridge.”¹⁸

Solicit Feedback

Ask for feedback from interviewers, the organization, and the search firm after the decision. Explore other opportunities. Amend your prioritized list of needs and desires, as indicated.



Kendall E. Bradley, MD, is Chief Resident, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, Duke University Hospital; **Rance McClain, DO, FACP, FAOASM**, is Dean, Arkansas College of Osteopathic Medicine, and Associate Editor, *Journal of Graduate Medical Education (JGME)*; **Jeffrey S. Berger, MD, MBA**, is Professor, Department of Anesthesiology, George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences, and Associate Editor, *JGME*; and **Kathryn M. Andolsek, MD, MPH, FAAFP**, is Professor, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, Duke University School of Medicine, and Associate Editor, *JGME*.

Corresponding author: Kathryn M. Andolsek, MD, MPH, FAAFP, Duke University School of Medicine, 0159 Orange Zone DS, 201, Trent Drive, Durham, NC 27710, 919.668.3883, kathryn.andolsek@duke.edu