practicewise℠ M.D.

Winning Interview

GUIDELINES

RECRUITING AND CONSULTING

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Why You Should Read This

It's simple. Physicians with superior interviewing skills are more successful in securing the best positions. As the physician marketplace becomes increasingly more competitive, it is no longer sufficient to have a great CV demonstrating superior academic credentials. Even the most highly qualified physician candidates will experience stiff competition for the better positions—particularly those in prime locations. A prospective employer will want to establish that you are able to assist them in maintaining and expanding their practice. You must demonstrate that you will interact appropriately with patients, referring physicians and your potential "partners." The only opportunity to demonstrate this capability is in the interview process.

The question then becomes, how do you effectively establish your personal desirability during an interview? The interviewing process is similar to any other process in life. Closely studied, it reveals patterns of success and failure. PracticewiseMD's experience indicates that following a few simple rules and observing the proper flow of the interviewing process will dramatically increase your chances for success. Therefore, take time to read the following materials. Read them now, and review them while in transit to the interview. While we cannot ensure success, we can assure that your chances for a successful interview will improve dramatically.

Strategies for a Successful Interview

The Primary Objective of the Interview

The interviewing process plays a critical role in determining the quality of your professional and personal life. Despite the importance of this process, the typical physician generally schedules interviews in the midst of a very hectic schedule, and often fails to take the time necessary to reflect upon the *purpose* and *process* of the interview itself. If you fail to take time for reflection, human nature is such that you will generally enter an interview thinking only about what *you* want to discover about the opportunity and its environment. Our clients advise us that many physicians arrive at an interview as if they were tourists visiting a resort, thinking only about what interests them. Others act as if interviews are no more than opportunities to exchange medical information with their peers. Naturally, this casual attitude tends to upset the interviewing personnel, who often have devoted considerable time, effort and money to schedule the visit.

Anyone interviewing for a position must keep one basic premise in mind. Whether you are a CEO or a physician, the primary objective of *any* interview is to generate an *offer*. An interview is not an opportunity to spend time speculating whether you would take a position if offered. This is premature thinking at best, and a sure way not to make a positive first impression. Until you actually *secure an offer*, you have no decision to make.

To accomplish this primary objective, you must consider the hiring entity's point of view. *In essence, it is your task to "**sell**" the potential employer on the fact that your background, training, experience, goals and objectives meet their needs.* Convince them that your personality and ability to work with others fits their "model" for a prospective associate. When you have appropriately positioned yourself as a desirable candidate, the practice will be much more open to discussing details and negotiating an *attractive* offer. Then you proceed to answer The Big Question, i.e., to establish enough information to intelligently decide whether or not this is the position you want. In our experience, your chances of securing an offer are substantially diminished if you fail to observe the order of priorities established above. You can successfully establish yourself as the appropriate candidate for the position by following the interviewing strategies outlined within, while keeping the primary objective of the interview firmly in mind.

Interviewing Strategies—The Basics

Establish a positive first impression

Keep in mind that you may be competing with other equally qualified candidates for the same position. You must endeavor or make yourself stand out as *the* appropriate candidate for the position. The single most important principle of interviewing is: ***Create a Positive First Impression.*** All it takes is common sense and adherence to a few simple rules which are mentioned below.

Present a good appearance. Dress conservatively. High fashion rarely impresses an interviewer. Treat each interview as if you were applying for the CEO position at IBM. Dark suits for men, conventional business attire for women. Refrain from excessive jewelry or accessories. If you bring a portfolio or attache to take notes, be sure that what you need is easily accessible to avoid fumbling at critical moments.

Be prompt. Being on time is extremely important.

Smile. Make eye contact. Shake hands firmly when greeting someone. Try to remember the interviewing person's name and repeat it during the conversation. Everyone likes to hear his or her name spoken.

Be an active listener. Active listening is attentive listening that gives the person speaking subtle indications that you understand the importance of what he or she is saying. A good way to accomplish this is to integrate the interviewer's name and ideas into your replies.

Be courteous and attentive. Stand or sit straight. Be as enthusiastic and confident as the situation demands. Even if you are uncertain about the position or your ability to handle it, project a firm and confident image. Once you have received an offer, you can make your decision.

Be positive in all replies to questions. Elaborate on your responses; avoid "yes" and "no" answers.

Dine with caution. Order food that is easy to consume gracefully. Stay away from lobster, most pasta dishes, "finger foods," etc. Cut whatever you order into easily manageable pieces. It is difficult to appear professional while struggling with your food. Always observe the basic rules of etiquette.

Avoid controversy and excessive criticism. Do not criticize your present situation or your peers. Refrain from anything but passing commentary on politics or religion. Do not use the interview as a forum to present your theories on the future of healthcare reform in America, or the manner in which the practice might function more effectively.

We have witnessed many tragic tales of otherwise well qualified candidates who failed to observe these rules, resulting in failure to generate the offer they so desired. Our experience reveals that a negative first impression is fatal 99% of the time, despite Herculean efforts at resuscitation.

Prepare

As in any worthwhile endeavor in life, adequate preparation is essential. It is important to know as much about the position as reasonably possible before your interview. Your recruiter should provide you with basic information about both the position and the community. If the hospital or practice takes the time to transmit information before the interview, take the time to read it!

We have witnessed many painful moments in which a physician or CEO makes reference to facts contained in a brochure sent to the candidate, only to realize by the expression on the candidate's face that he or she never bothered reading it. The information provided will assist you in preparing relevant questions for the interview. Determine what factors will be critical to making a fully informed decision about the position.

Prepare a concise outline of these factors in a format that will be easily readable and accessible. This information may provide the assistance you need to get through an uncomfortable "dead spot" in the interview, and will ensure you have your important questions answered before you leave.

It is a good practice to bring a professional quality portfolio with you. It is less cumbersome to deal with than an attache. It also conveys the message that you are serious about the interview and will be taking some notes.

Interviewing Strategies-The First Interview

The Preliminaries

The interview begins. Introductions are made. You make a Positive First Impression, observing all the guidelines mentioned above. Where do you go from here? Generally, pleasantries will be exchanged, people will inquire about your flight, your recent work schedule, etc. Be brief in your answers to these questions. No matter how hectic your schedule, or how bad the flight, do not complain unless these circumstances affected your arrival and you need to explain your tardiness. A lengthy negative response this early in the interview casts you as a "complainer."

Next, the interviewer will either take control of the interview, or will cede control of the interview to you. In the first case, there will be a general discussion of the day's agenda, or specific questions for you to answer. When the interviewer cedes control, you will be asked if you have questions, or the interviewer will meander aimlessly searching for direction.

In either situation, gently assume "control" over the interview when it is reasonably comfortable to do so. The "control" of which we speak is not dominance of the conversation, but the control of the *direction* of a conversation in which there is dynamic interplay—the type of conversation most people enjoy and remember. You want to assume "control" to ensure that you possess the factual foundation necessary to empower you to give appropriate answers throughout the interview. Once the interview reaches a "stall," or the conversation turns to you for your questions, proceed immediately to the initial questions referred to below.

Initial Questions—Establish an Appropriate Foundation.

You can ask appropriate questions and give appropriate answers at an interview *only* if you understand the general nature of the practice and discover the "model candidate" the practice wishes to hire. In establishing this information, consider the perspective of the interviewing entity. Most are probably quite proud of a practice they have developed through years of hard work, and are eager to share this with you. Ask broad, open-ended questions that allow the interviewer to elaborate on the history of the practice, the people involved in building it, the medical "focus" of the practice and its direction for the future. Ask the interviewer to describe the skills and attributes sought in a potential associate or partner. If you are in an unfamiliar community, inquire about the community and the advantages/disadvantages of living there.

With this information, you will better understand the perspective of the interviewing entity and you will be able to *intelligently* proceed to the more specific professional and practice-related questions you have previously prepared. You will also be able to match your education, background, experience and training to that of the "model candidate" previously described above. Where appropriate, be sure to let the interviewer know you are impressed with what the practice has accomplished. Giving and receiving positive feedback is extremely important. It is the interviewer's only measure of whether or not you might be interested in the practice.

Answering "The Big Question"

You have discovered the basic information necessary to establish yourself as an appropriate "model candidate" for the position. Keeping the objective of the interview, ***to generate an offer***, firmly in mind, you need to proceed gradually to answer The Big Question: *"If this practice were to make me an offer that meets my specific needs regarding compensation and benefits, am I prepared to commit to join them?"*

The answer to this question is generally arrived at over a period of time, with more general information provided initially, and more detailed information granted as the discussions proceed. Practices generally want to establish whether there is a sufficient level of interest by both parties before divulging detailed "proprietary" financial and practice information. In most situations, two interviews will be required to arrive at a point where both parties are sufficiently comfortable to discuss a formal offer. Where time is of the essence, however, there may be only one interview. The following outline assumes the more common two-interview format.

In order for you to intelligently answer The Big Question, you should, at a minimum, establish sufficient information about the following factors that contribute to this determination:

- Current and potential clinical duties and responsibilities of the practice.
- The structure of the call rotation and specifics about what that call entails.

  N. B. Remember that what "call" means to a practicing physician and what call means to a resident or fellow are two different matters altogether. Call also varies markedly from practice to practice and locale to locale. Therefore, get a feel for what call in this particular practice and locale is *actually* like on a daily or weekly basis, not just whether it is "1 in 4."
- A description of a typical practice day.
- The general corporate/legal structure of the practice.
- The general structure of the compensation package including salary, bonus, incentives, benefits, etc.

  N.B. At the first interview, you absolutely do *not* want to inquire into specific salary amounts, benefit details, partnership buy-ins, CME, etc., unless the interviewer opens the door.
- Competitive climate of the locality, region and state regarding your particular practice/specialty.
- The practice climate of the state/locale for physicians in general: malpractice rates, reimbursement rates, regulatory climate, penetration of HMOs, managed care, etc.
- General description of requirements for partnership/membership in corporation, etc.
- The immediate and long-term goals for expansion and growth of the practice, and your potential place in that process.
- Community assets: the specific cultural, educational, recreational, religious, social and other opportunities your family requires for their happiness.
- Any specific problems of the practice, hospital or community.

The Bottom Line

Your specific compensation, long-term earning potential, benefits, the four weeks of vacation you've dreamed of...all these "bottom line" questions are going to be on your mind from the minute you arrive at the interview. But *when* do you bring them up? The answer is...you **don't**. At the first interview, the questions referenced in this section should establish the practice's general mode of compensation, incentives and benefits. If the practice reveals specifics in the process, great. Remember, at the first interview, you are establishing *your* value as a candidate in the hope of generating an offer. Negotiations of any specific salary figure is *premature*, and indeed may result in a *lower* offer. Negotiation is inappropriate until there is indication from the practice that an offer will be made, and you are able to answer The Big Question. See Sections IV and V for further details.

Exiting the First Interview

You have garnered all the basic information you need, time is running short, and you have to catch a plane. While obviously that is necessary, do not forget that one of the most critical stages of the interview process is management of the "exit" process. In the vast majority of situations you are going to have significant questions and concerns about whether this is the right position for you. However, *only* if you are 100 percent positive that there are *no* circumstances under which you could accept the position would you want to indicate this to an interviewer at this time. Generally, a letter subsequent to the interview most appropriately addresses this.

If there is *any* possibility that the position is appropriate for further consideration, position yourself to be a candidate for such consideration. Even if you have significant doubts about the position, you may discover additional factors in your follow-up that increase the position's attractiveness and resolve your uncertainties. Before you leave the premises, you ***must*** indicate your appreciation for the time and effort that went into the interview process to the exit interviewer. You must indicate that the practice is clearly an excellent one, and one that you are interested in pursuing further. You must define a timeframe, preferably no more than one week, in which you will reflect upon the interview and indicate your future intentions to the practice. All three steps are essential to proceeding smoothly to the next stage. You will have also demonstrated appropriate respect for other professionals who might have an impact upon your future career.

If you are working with a recruiter, tell your exit interviewer that you will be in touch with the recruiter within a few days. If you are not working with a recruiter, be sure to establish the identity of the person at the practice with whom you should continue contact. This will usually be the practice manager or his/her designee.

Post-Interview Follow Through

Take a day or two to catch your breath and allow your thoughts and impressions to filter through. Never make a final decision immediately after an interview; exhaustion and fatigue may be speaking more loudly than reason. However, convey your thoughts and follow-up questions when you have had an opportunity to reflect rationally. This should preferably occur within a few days, and in any event, no more than one week subsequent to the interview.

If you are working with a qualified recruiter, this is one of the times that he or she can be of greatest assistance. The recruiter should be the first person you call to discuss your observations. Frankly discuss *both* your favorable and unfavorable impressions. Convey any questions that require resolution before you can make an informed decision. Do not assume that the parameters discussed at the interview are written in stone. Practices will naturally describe what they consider to be their optimal candidate qualifications, salary, responsibilities, vacation, etc., from ***their*** point of view. This does not mean they are unable to negotiate the parameters that are most important to you, *especially* if you have established yourself as a desirable candidate. Therefore, indicate to the recruiter as precisely as possible the general conditions under which you would be interested in proceeding. Your recruiter then will be able to "test the waters" for you to discover the practice's level of interest and degree of flexibility in meeting your needs. The recruiter, acting as an intermediary, can accomplish this task without seeming to be unduly greedy, arrogant, or self-serving, an onus that the candidate unfortunately may suffer. The recruiter may also be able to get a more realistic appraisal of the interest and flexibility of the practice than the candidate, and be able to answer any concerns or doubts the practice may have about you. At this stage, your recruiter also should attempt to establish a compensation range. If you have done a good job of "selling yourself," you may discover that the range discussed now is slightly higher than that previously mentioned.

If you are not working with a recruiter, contact the individual identified at the exit interview. Address your questions and concerns to the contact person as indicated above.

Most people appreciate an "attitude of gratitude." We therefore highly recommend that you transmit an appropriate thank you note to the individuals most directly involved with your interview. Generally, this would be the practice administrator and the senior or "hiring" partner of the practice. However, if other physicians made a special effort to make you feel welcome, don't hesitate to transmit a note to them as well. A simple expression of appreciation is all that is necessary. The perception of the practice as to your ability to interact congenially with other members of the group is often a major factor in the decision to extend an offer, and in determining the content of the offer.

This is not the time to engage in full blown contract negotiations, unless a one-interview format is contemplated. However, it *is* the time to establish whether there is sufficient "meeting of the minds" between your needs and those of the practice to proceed. Once you decide to proceed, a second interview should be scheduled as soon as feasible. If you desire to complete your first round of interviews prior to committing to a second at any particular practice, this is perfectly acceptable. However, you should set a reasonable timetable for completion of the first round, set a specific date on which you will notify practices of your desire to schedule the second interview, and *stick* with the schedule. If you are sincerely interested in a particular practice, maintain periodic communication with your recruiter and/or the practice. An unusually lengthy delay in scheduling may encourage the practice to interview other candidates, potentially resulting in the loss of an opportunity that otherwise might have been yours.

Interviewing Strategies—The Second Interview

General Considerations

Keep in mind that the rules regarding first impressions and preparation apply just as forcibly here as in the first interview. The second interview establishes all the information necessary to make a fully informed decision as to whether the practice is appropriate for you and your family. Bring your spouse or significant other with you to view the practice and the community. Establish whether it has the requisite assets for you and your family to be happy there. Get a general overview of the housing situation. Meet as many of the partners and associates of the practice as you can. Ask any "hard" questions that may have been lingering in your mind. Most of all, determine whether this is a practice and an environment where you can feel *comfortable*.

This is the appropriate time to start asking yourself The Big Question: "if this practice were to make me an offer that meets my specific needs regarding compensation and benefits, am I prepared to commit to join them?" You might not have the complete answer to this question before finishing the second interview; however, you should have *all* the information *necessary* to answer the question *prior* to your departure. Also be certain that the practice has all the information *it* needs to make a decision about making you an offer. Practices are rarely enthusiastic about bringing someone back for a third visit unless an Agreement has been reached.

Exiting the Second Interview

The second interview is not the time to begin final negotiations of an Agreement unless you are able to answer The Big Question affirmatively. Even then, it is generally to your benefit to conduct negotiations after the interview has terminated, with the assistance of your recruiter or qualified consultant, and after receiving a definite offer from the practice. However, it is not unusual, if things have proceeded well, for the practice to try to get a feel for what your requirements might be. Remember that it is important at this point not to paint yourself into a corner. In most negotiations, the person who puts the numbers on the table first is generally at a disadvantage. If, for instance, the interviewing entity should ask you what salary figure you are seeking, you might wish to indicate that you are very interested in the possibilities presented by the practice, and that you certainly wish to be compensated fairly and competitively. Then you might inquire as to what the practice generally offers someone with similar qualifications and experience. If the interviewer is forthcoming, find out as much as you can about the details of the compensation and benefit package. Indicate that it sounds like a reasonable starting point for negotiations, and that you will need time to consider it and discuss it with your advisors. Ask for a copy of a standard Agreement, and then follow the same guidelines as for exiting the first interview.

Negotiating the Agreement

The first rule of negotiating the Agreement is simple: Do not begin serious negotiations until you have answered The Big Question. It is a waste of everyone's time. See all the practices you reasonably need to see. Following the above guidelines, discover as much information about the various practices as is necessary to make an informed decision, including the general salary "ranges" offered. Decide which practice, *all things considered*, offers the best opportunity and environment for your specific needs, assuming it will be able to meet your financial needs. *Then* negotiate the details. The most powerful bargaining position you can put yourself or your recruiter in is to be able to say, "I'm coming if we can fairly negotiate the following details."

Prior to beginning final negotiations, however, you have some additional "homework" to do. You must first come to the conclusion that you can trust your future associates because the fundamental basis for any Agreement is the good faith of the parties. Do your best to get a feel for the integrity and character of the people with whom you will be associating. Take the time to speak with the most recently hired associate, and the physician who most recently became a partner. Ask them questions that will establish how the practice actually treats its young associates. Discover what the practice's "track record" is in terms of payment of bonuses or incentives, retention of associates, extension of partnership, etc.

Next, establish with your recruiter or other qualified consultant exactly what the parameters of competitive offers are in your specialty and the location of the practice. An excellent resource is the PracticewiseMD Physician Compensation Survey, which is updated annually. However, these are broad national parameters; the size, location and type of practice must all be considered in arriving at a reasonable compensation formula. Now that you have answered The Big Question, established that the practice is deserving of your trust, and established basic financial parameters, you are ready to negotiate the Agreement. Remember that you may be spending the majority of your waking hours working with the people with whom you are negotiating the Agreement; your attorney or other advisor will probably never interact with the practice again once negotiations have concluded. Employment Agreements are relationship-building documents and negotiations should be conducted with a view toward preserving and enhancing that relationship. Consider the Agreement in its entirety. Duties, compensation, benefits, vacation, partnership term—all are interrelated. Thus, do not attempt to negotiate the Agreement in piecemeal fashion; address all your major concerns at once. An exception to this rule is that truly minor language changes may be addressed once the major issues have been negotiated.

PracticewiseMD is able to provide you with complete, free legal consultation by attorneys with literally decades of experience in contracts and healthcare law. We have been tremendously successful over the years in negotiating Agreements that effectively serve the needs of the physician, while preserving an amicable relationship with the hiring practice. This often saves the physician considerable time and expense. If consultation with an independent attorney is deemed necessary, be sure to consult an attorney with significant recent experience and expertise in Physician Employment Agreements.

During this final negotiation process, you will want to maintain contact with the opportunities that constitute the closest "runners up" in order to preserve your options. You will also want to conclude negotiations in a reasonably prompt manner; this will allow both yourself and the hiring entity time to find alternatives should the negotiations eventually prove to be unsuccessful.

As mentioned previously, each Agreement is different and every offer must be negotiated in its own unique way. There are a few general principles, however, that are universally applicable. First: Get it in writing. If you have reached oral understandings regarding financial or other matters that are critical to your acceptance of the position, make sure that these are stipulated in the Agreement or an Addendum thereto. If the parties fully intend to abide by their agreements, there should be no problem in reducing them to writing. Be aware that there may be some "delicate" matters that are either inappropriate or too minor to include in an Agreement. However, even these understandings, if important, may be included in a letter of understanding signed by an authorized representative of the practice.

A second general principle, which counterbalances the first, is that no Agreement can or should attempt to address every possible contingency in minute detail. The Agreement should set forth the *general* understanding of the parties regarding every substantive detail of the relationship. It should provide for acceptable terms in case the relationship between the parties breaks down or proves to be unworkable. However, remember that the fundamental basis for any Agreement is the ***good faith*** of both parties. Negotiating minutiae, such as specifying the number of laundered, embroidered lab coats one might receive (an actual case history), may have a chilling effect on negotiations.

A third general principle to remember is that the larger the entity, the less latitude it will generally have in altering the standard provisions of its Agreement. This particularly applies to such clauses as restrictive covenants, years to partnership, etc. If a number of physicians in a practice have already executed an Agreement with certain clauses, they are unlikely to change it for you. This, however, does not affect the ability of a larger practice to negotiate in order to be competitive in terms of salary and other benefits.

The basic principles discussed herein are applicable to every Agreement. Of course, the format of these Interviewing Guidelines does not permit the discussion of every potential issue you may encounter in your negotiations. However, the consultants at PracticewiseMD stand ready to assist you with any questions you might have, regardless of extent or complexity.

Smart Medicine.

We wish you success in interviewing, culminating with the generation of an offer for the best possible position for you and your family! Please feel free to take advantage of practicewiseMD's years of expertise in the identification of optimal practice opportunities, facilitation of the interviewing process and drafting and negotiation of Physician Agreements. We hope this information is helpful to you. We will be happy to assist you with any specific questions you might have. Don't hesitate to call!

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