

How to ace a consultant interview

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A few weeks ago, I was idly scrolling through Twitter, when a post by a friend popped up. *'Sitting mentally preparing for a job interview'*, it read. *'It's a good anxiety. A challenge to perform. Any coaching from the Twittersphere?'*

She had captured my attention. As a female medical manager with formal recruitment training, I suspect I have spent more time on interview panels than on meal breaks during my consultant career. I have interviewed junior and senior doctors across most specialties, although predominantly in my own discipline, Emergency Medicine. The truly good candidates really stand out – because they are well-prepared and understand that a job interview is a performance.

In a tight labour market, with scarce specialist fraction, job-seekers need to learn how to put themselves on show, using performance tricks that transform an interview from okay to excellent. Because, when you apply for a consultant role, you need to do more than pass – you need to win the medal! Strive to be the memorable candidate, for all the right reasons.

Here are some tips and tricks for acing a consultant interview. I hope you find them useful.

- 1. A job interview is an exam all about you** – prepare by reviewing your CV and writing a list of skills, experience, training and achievements that are relevant to the position – the types of things you really want the panel to know about you (and don't assume they will read or remember your full CV prior to the interview). Summarise the list and memorise it – just like you would cram a list of drugs, levels and antidotes for the fellowship exam. Write short scripts about key topics – prepare and practise a sentence or two about your clinical experience, your quality improvement or research record, or courses you have done. Make sure that relevant information is loaded into your brain to the point that you can easily recall it and rattle it off when asked the right question, even when you are nervous.
- 2. Develop a marketing strategy featuring your 'point of differentiation'** – in a crowded market, you need to show that you are better than other candidates. What makes you special? It might be a skill set (eg ultrasound, toxicology, geriatrics or medical education), experience (eg a fellowship in retrieval, trauma, medical administration or simulation), or even your personal attributes (eg leadership, collegiality, work ethic) – or a combination of all of these things. Once you have decided what your point (or points) of differentiation is (are), write three to five sentences which you can use to market yourself to a potential employer. You should summarise who you are, what you stand for, and what you have to offer the workplace – and make sure your point of differentiation is front and centre. Put this promotional summary on the front page of your CV under the heading 'Personal statement' – it should come just after your name, contact details and qualifications, so a potential employer can not miss it. Memorise the statement and use it as the basis for your answer to the opening question of a job interview, which is usually fairly generic (eg 'What skills will you bring to the department?'). This serves a similar purpose to scripts you will have rehearsed for common scenarios in clinical exams (eg your resus spiel – which I imagine goes something along the lines of 'assemble a resus team, attach to cardiorespiratory monitoring, establish IV access' etc). The statement gives you something clever and confident to say while your brain is busy thinking up what to say next, sets the scene for

your interview by giving the panel a strong introduction to your professional persona and contextualises your subsequent responses. It also ensures that you deliberately state your point of differentiation early, rather than hoping a relevant question arises later in the interview.

- 3. Do some detective work** – hop online and get sleuthing about the place you hope to work. Look at the My Hospitals page – which outlines the case-mix, specialist services available on-site and patient flow measures. Have a look at health policy or statistics sites to find hospital-specific information about quality metrics. Find the department’s own web page to read news about recent achievements, research or quality projects. While you’re online, do a quick Google search of your own name to see what is easily discoverable about you. Edit your social media profiles to make sure they stand up to professional scrutiny, because the panel members are likely to go looking.
- 4. Meet the boss** – discuss your career plans, ask about the job, find out whether specific skills are required, and take a tour. This is particularly important when you already work in the department, as the Director might need a nudge to see you as suitable for a new role. This is the right time to ask questions and work out if you are a good fit. Ask about the department’s strengths, weak spots and future plans. Ask about research and quality projects. Ask how rosters and leave work. You can even ask about potential interview questions and panellists. Introduce yourself to any staff you happen upon – you never know who might turn up on the panel. Approach this meeting as a pre-interview – make an appointment, dress well and act professionally. If there is a place you really want to work, then arrange to meet the Director even if there is no job currently available – you will be front-of-mind if any locum positions arise, and are more likely to be offered an interview when a position is advertised. Signal that you are a contender.
- 5. Explore the big picture** – do some reading around general topics that might come up at interview. Know relevant clinical performance indicators and strategies to meet them. Think about recent research or practice updates and be ready to outline them. Consider the broad context and what might lie ahead, for example, new technologies, workforce developments or demographic changes – think about potential opportunities and challenges. Be future-facing and creative in your interview responses, but avoid being overly critical of current departmental management strategies.
- 6. Shine through your stories** – medical interviews usually include questions about attributes such as communication, decision-making, leadership, conflict resolution, time management, scholarship, teamwork and supervision. These can be difficult to answer – resulting in self-conscious ‘I’ statements, which might come across as superficial or arrogant. A good approach is to tell stories from your real-life work history. Think of times you have performed really well at work – and chances are that you were demonstrating the attributes the panel is interested in. Jot your stories down, memorise them, and have them ready to tell during an interview – in comfortable narrative form. Be careful not to over-use this technique, as more than one or two stories will feel like kids’ bedtime. Keep your anecdotes work-related, professional and relevant to the question being asked. I once heard an interviewee, asked about his decision-making skills, present the reasons why he dumped his girlfriend. He didn’t get the job.

- 7. Structure your approach to scenarios** – many interviews include scenario-type questions, which start with a clinical stem. Watch out! This is not the fellowship exam. The panel don't want to hear about clinical details, they want you to demonstrate deeper level problem solving. When presented with a scenario, quickly cover patient care, then work through more complex contextual issues – such as adverse events, complaints, interpersonal conflict, difficult colleagues, or system re-design. Revise administration topics from your fellowship exam, including structures used to approach common problems – especially the quality improvement cycle, principles of open disclosure, incident management, and poorly-performing colleagues. Remember to mention that you would make a report and notify your Director or on-call hospital executive about an adverse event – just as you would do in real-life.
- 8. Channel your role-model** – a fantastic trick for 'how would you..?'-type situational questions. We all have a colleague we really look up to. The sort of doctor we hope to become when we 'grow up'. When faced with a question that asks 'how' or 'what' you would do, then answer as if you were your role model. This works for two reasons – you will give a great answer, and you will feel less self-conscious than you might do describing yourself. I'm sure you have watched your role model closely and have seen them handle the exact situation you are being asked to describe. For example 'How will you run the department to ensure that patients are receiving effective care?' – it is much, much easier to describe how a high-performing colleague manages a shift than it is to analyse and present your own style, on the spot. Of course, you can't inhabit your role model to a fraudulent extent. You can't present their CV or work history, but you can describe the behaviours you are actively trying to emulate in your own practice.
- 9. Mind your etiquette** – be well-dressed, and well-groomed, in neat, clean, professional attire. If you can't decide what to wear, think about what the panellists are likely to wear and match their level of formality. Don't wear scrubs, even if you are about to roll on to a clinical shift. Don't wear jeans and a t-shirt. Be polite to office staff when you check-in, because the panel will ask for their feedback. When you walk into the interview room, look each panellist in the eye, shake their hand, and introduce yourself – with your first name and surname. It is polite and it will help the panel remember you. A good trick for remembering panellists' names is to say 'Nice to meet you...' and repeat their name. At a consultant level interview, first names are fair game, but if you feel more comfortable with titles and surnames, that is okay too. If the panel is large, shake hands with the person that shows you into the room and the Director (who you will know from your pre-interview meeting). A quick warning about implicit gender bias – make sure you shake hands with both male and female panel members, and remember to make eye contact with panellists of all genders during the interview too. If you forget or mishear a question, then stop and ask for clarification. It is much better for an interviewee to re-set, rather than ramble on with an irrelevant answer. It is also okay to blow your nose, have a drink, and look at your notes – although preface breaks with 'Excuse me'. Be mindful of your body language – try to match the posture and gestures of the panellists. If the panel asks you something inappropriate, then a non-confrontational response is 'I'm not able to answer that, could we please move on?'. You should never be asked questions about your race, religion, sexuality, age or parenting status at interview – that is discrimination. If you are asked an inappropriate question, then please make a formal complaint once the interview is finished.

- 10. Be your authentic self** – seriously, it is okay to be you. You don't want to work somewhere where you have to pretend to be someone or something you are not. Wear clothes and a hair-do that suit you. There is no need for make up or heels if they are not your thing. Use your own vocabulary. Don't get tangled up in long words or jargon, but leave the swear jar at home. Get comfortable in your seat and try to relax. Smile, gesture and be personable. Show the panel that you are a good human and make them want to work with you – treat them as your future colleagues. No matter how wonderful your knowledge and experience, the panel will not hire someone they would avoid in the tea room.
- 11. Don't forget the important bits** – think about the big things you really want to say and rehearse scripts – one or two sentences per point. Make these so easy to remember that you can casually drop them into a response when the opportunity arises. Consider taking a folder into the interview with you, containing a list of key points and copies of certificates, research papers etc. The folder can serve as an aide-de-memoire, its mere presence will feel reassuring, plus it gives you something to hold on to if your hands are trembling.
- 12. Convert your question into a closing statement** – every interview concludes with the interviewee being invited to ask questions of the panel. I have a strong opinion that questions should have been asked during the pre-interview. Asking a new question at this stage is high risk – because it will either leave you looking under-prepared or will end the interview with an awkward silence. The best response is to say 'I don't have any questions', and then move into a closing statement, along the lines of 'Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview today. I believe I have a lot to offer the department...' and re-state your point-of-differentiation, then close with 'I really look forward to hearing from you.' If you haven't had the chance to make one of your key points yet, this is your opportunity to squeeze it in. Then shake hands, say your good-byes and leave the interview on a strong and memorable note.
- 13. Practice makes perfect** – ask a senior colleague who has sat on interview panels for help. Look over your CV together and work out your marketing strategy. Rehearse scripts about key points and structures for responses to predictable attribute and scenario-type questions. Get feedback on your body-language – or even better, watch yourself on video. Try on your interview outfit. Most important of all, do a dummy interview, or three, or five. You would always do this for the fellowship exam, so do it for your interview too – rehearsal makes a massive difference.
- 14. Feedback is gold** – don't discount it because you don't like it. Some advisers will be off the mark, but almost all feedback contains a grain of truth. If someone is good enough to take time to critique your performance, then listen to what they say. If you're not sure what they are getting at, question them further – take notes, reflect and go back for more advice. If you are not successful at a job interview, ask for feedback and coaching from the Director – because it will improve your performance at future interviews, and it will also build your relationship with the department in case another position opens up.
- 15. Blow your own trumpet** – really truly! This is your time to shine. Emergency doctors are unassuming types. We keep our heads down, see lots of patients, and get on with the job. We're not comfortable with self-promotion. But – so often, from the other side of the table, it can seem that the candidate bought a trumpet, had years of lessons, joined the orchestra,

rehearsed their part, put on their tuxedo and drove to the concert hall – but left their trumpet in the car. Please! This is your time to play a big glorious solo, but in a way that shows you are a great ensemble player too. It's possible to do this and not be a knob – just read these notes, do your preparation, and get some help. You've got this superstar!

PS – my friend got the job - hooray!!!