CAREERS

Tips for succeeding at consultant interview

A consultant post can represent the pinnacle that doctors have been striving for throughout their training. But they must attend a challenging interview to achieve that goal

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London

Be prepared

Read up on the details of the major strategic documents for your specialty and any specific documents on the trust and service, such as Care Quality Commission reports, advises Adrian James, registrar at the Royal College of Psychiatrists and former medical director of Devon Partnership NHS Trust. You can also keep up to speed with interview skills and wider health service matters by reading professional titles such as *The BMJ* and the *Health Service Journal*.

Consider what you can offer

Doctors in training will be used to interviews that focus on technical issues, skills, and knowledge. But in a consultant interview it's almost assumed that you have those skills and knowledge already, says Daniel Redfern, consultant in trauma and orthopaedics at Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust and regional director of the Royal College of Surgeons for the north west. "It's what else you offer that's the focus of the interview," he says, adding that your interpersonal skills, ability to work in a team, and understanding of the NHS may also be tested.

Sell yourself

Understanding your strengths, weaknesses, and skills is an important part of preparing for a consultant interview, says Martin Edwards, a consultant paediatrician based at the Children's Hospital for Wales in Cardiff. "If you don't, you can't sell yourself at an interview, and then you're on a losing streak," he says. To help hone your interview skills you may consider attending a course. Options include courses provided by health boards, postgraduate departments, hospital careers departments, and private companies. On the day of the interview, dress smartly and appropriately.

Rehearse

Rehearsing your interview can help you feel better prepared when facing the interview panel. Panels for consultant posts can have as many as nine people, including clinical and

non-clinical staff and, typically, the trust's chief executive and the department's consultant lead. Take your time when answering questions—thinking before you speak is vital. Explain scenarios about your work that a non-clinical person will understand: avoid using clinical acronyms and abbreviations, as not everyone on the panel will have a clinical background. Joanne Borbone, a consultant paediatrician based at Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth, suggests practising answers to interview questions with colleagues or friends or even in front of a mirror. "Don't be shy, practise—it's invaluable experience," she says. Knowing your CV inside out is also invaluable, she adds: "That's the information the interview panel will have in front of them, and there shouldn't be anything in your CV you can't give a comprehensive answer to."

Visit the department

Make an appointment to visit the department you could be working in. Talk to key staff members and find out as much as you can about what they do, how things work there, and what doesn't work. "You've really got to do your groundwork," Redfern emphasises. "Visit the place where you're applying for a consultant post and talk to people about how the department is set up, current problems, aspirations they have, why the post was advertised, and what they hope that appointing someone in that post will achieve," he says. "Phone up the trust to arrange to speak to business managers for the unit and the medical director if possible, to get the 'big picture' about overall service development." However, if you know someone on the panel, you should avoid being overly familiar, as it compromises the objectivity of the interview.

Consider typical questions

Before the interview the panel will set questions common to all candidates. Although you can predict and prepare for these standard questions, it's important not to sound too rehearsed, says Edwards. You'll probably be asked about what skills and qualities you can bring to the unit. Questions will usually also cover clinical, management, audit, and communication issues, says Borbone: when responding to these questions you should

“give examples from your work and tell a story—something that resonates with the interview panel,” she says.

Think about ethics and values

A typical question asked by clinical directors is about an ethical dilemma, such as how to deal with a trainee who isn't coping with a role. You may also be asked about issues related to the trust's values. You're likely to get a question about teaching, such as “Do you think that all consultants should be teachers?” You should also expect a self reflection question, such as what you do when something goes wrong.

Be ready for the unexpected

What you can't predict are other questions “that always come out of the blue,” says Edwards. “These ‘outside the box’ questions are designed to challenge candidates, to see if they are calm headed and can give coherent responses,” he says. If you're potentially joining a service that's in difficulty—such as a trust in special measures—you should be able to discuss possible improvements and how you'd meet the challenges. If you're moving between consultant posts you need to have a convincing reason, as “people can be suspicious about why you're doing so,” says James. Don't criticise the department you're coming from or the one you're potentially joining: be honest without being critical.

Don't necessarily ask questions

You may feel obliged to ask questions at interview, but there's no need to ask them for the sake of it. If you've done your preparation and met members of the trust department before interview the key questions should already have been covered, doctors advise. “But asking when a decision will be made about the post is legitimate,” says Redfern.

Ask for feedback

Not every rejection is a negative, says Borbone, and “you can ask for feedback, as it's always valuable—both positive and negative.” She adds, “I had one consultant interview when I didn't get the post, but the feedback I got following the interview was invaluable, and it ensured that my next interview was successful.”

Reflect after the interview

Sometimes in your heart of hearts, says James, you think, “Did I really want the job?” and “Do I need to reconsider and work for a different organisation?” He explains, “There's always somebody on top of their game, on a day where you couldn't have beaten them. But try not to be downhearted, and keep moving on.” And, as Edwards says, “Remember: if you didn't get the job it might be because you weren't suited to the role. Recognise that you're not going to please everyone—find the place that fits you best.”