

A new practitioner's guide to a successful interview

To a prospective graduate in the final stretch of pharmacy training, getting the ideal job or residency can be a daunting task. Employers receive hundreds of resumé for positions in today's competitive market. Because many applicants' qualifications appear similar on paper, the face-to-face interview is the time to differentiate your candidacy by highlighting career achievements and attributes. Not only is the interview the chance to prove your qualifications for the job, it is also the forum for determining how well a position matches your vision of the job.

It is the employer's responsibility to assess if a candidate is a match, but it is up to you to determine whether a position is aligned with your goals, skills, and standards. A position may be in a great location, be at a reputable facility, offer a great salary, and have an appealing title but could quickly become less than ideal if the work environment is volatile and understaffed with limited resources. To that extent, all candidates need to become interviewers of the program or job for which they are applying. Careful examination of the interview process from both perspectives (as the candidate being interviewed and as the candidate interviewing your prospective employer) can offer great insight into selecting the right program or job.

Before the interview. Once the interview is scheduled. The first chal-

lenge you may encounter is traveling to another city for the interview. Travel plans can be volatile, so ensure you have enough time to arrive early and immediately inform the interviewer about any unforeseen change in plans. Determine in which facility the interview will take place. If time allows, visit the facility before the interview to locate the meeting place and become familiar with the area.

Spend time researching the geographic area in which you would be living. Utilize Internet resources to compare the cost of living with estimated stipends or salaries offered by employers. Remember to include differences in insurance, medical coverage, utilities, food, and recreation. Consider spending a day exploring the area before or after the interview. Finally, contact a realtor to view apartments or houses in your potential price range.

Materials to bring to the interview. Spend time reviewing your curriculum

vitae (CV) before the interview and reflect on experiences that highlight particular skills or work experiences. Plan to bring several copies of your CV and a list of references. It may be worthwhile to ask the interviewer ahead of time if it would be appropriate to bring a small portfolio of materials such as newsletters, collaborative practice agreements, patient education materials, or other items that demonstrate talents and strengths.

Etiquette. Review basic etiquette and table manners if the interview includes a meal. Many organizations provide dinner lessons that focus on etiquette. It may be helpful to attend such a lesson to understand the finer points of proper manners. While poor manners may not preclude a candidate from securing a position, a first impression happens only once.

Plan to dress comfortably and professionally. Appropriate attire can go a long way in making you feel confident and relaxed during the interview. Men should wear business suits with a pressed shirt and tie. For women, business suits or professional skirts are appropriate. A suit carrier is a sound investment to maintain a wrinkle-free suit during travel. This also affords the option to carry your interview outfit onto an airplane, thus making sure it arrives with you. Formal shoes that are comfortable are recommended as you will likely go on a walking tour of the facility. Finally, it is always better to overdress than to be underdressed.¹

Preparation for the interview. Interview questions and discussions. Employers have many different interview styles. You may be the only one interviewing that day or one of many potential candidates interviewing as a group. In each session, there may be a single interviewer or a panel. Regardless of the format, a fresh, positive attitude is essential throughout the day. An itinerary is generally provided ahead of time outlining the names and titles of people



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involved in the interview process. Take the time to research interviewers beforehand as it is considered a sign of respect and demonstrates preparation.

The reason most candidates do not succeed in interviews is lack of preparation. Answering questions in an interview does not have to be stressful. There are several references available with sample questions to practice.^{2,3} Be aware that there are many different types of interview questions (appendix).⁴ You should be prepared for both professional and behavioral questions. Interviews are designed to learn about your personality, attributes, skills, and expertise.² Be ready to describe how the employment opportunity will help you reach specific career goals. Take time beforehand to set up mock interviews with faculty or peers.

Behavioral questions allow employers to gauge a candidate's response to certain situations. These questions can include describing a clinical intervention made or explaining how disagreements with providers were handled. Conduct a personal SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to determine what may provide a competitive edge or areas in which there is opportunity to improve.⁵

Questions about race, color, religion, sex, national origin, marital status, age, or disability are illegal. In addition, advertising political or religious affiliations is not appropriate during interviews. Employers typically respect this, but if a question is asked that creates discomfort, it is appropriate to question how that information is relevant to the position or reply "I prefer not to answer that question at this time."

Presentations. Some interviews require a presentation. Determine in advance the requirements for the presentation such as duration, intended audience, type of equipment available, and whether a handout is expected. Practicing ensures the presentation lies within the time limit. Lastly, be prepared for questions, as they will be used to determine how you handle pressure.

Personal considerations. Before embarking on this new chapter, develop a personal mission statement.⁶ Before your interview, become familiar with the health system and pharmacy department

and the people who will be interviewing you. Know the mission and vision statements of the organization. These simple statements often guide an institution's philosophy of practice. Evaluate how your personal mission and vision statements fit with the institution offering the position.

Outline your short- and long-term professional and financial goals to ensure that you make the right choice. Rank the factors that you deem most important (e.g., scholarship, academic setting, salary, paid leave, autonomy, established pharmacy presence) before your employer has the opportunity to show you fringe benefits that could skew your decision.

During the interview. The interview process can be draining, but it is important to remain engaged throughout the day. Most interview questions are open-ended. They are meant to evaluate the candidate based on the employer's criteria and determine if there is a good fit with the mission and objective of the program or company. Think outside the box when answering questions; typically, there is no wrong answer. Describing lessons learned from one's personal life may be appropriate and can enrich the interviewer's understanding of the candidate. When citing nonprofessional experiences, it is critical to relate them back to the initial question.

If caught off-guard, a brief pause before answering the question is acceptable. Too many pauses may lead the interviewer to question your preparedness. Ask the interviewer if there is something specific he or she may want to know to lead the conversation to an area that is more consistent with your strengths.⁷

The astute candidate will prepare questions in advance to ask during the interview process. Most interview sessions end with an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions. Not having questions makes you appear unprepared and disinterested.

Questions should be directed to program directors, pharmacy management, and current residents or pharmacists. Topics to address include educational, research, and teaching opportunities; work-life balance; and yearly evaluations (appendix). New practitioners applying for a residency should examine staffing

responsibilities, support networks for research projects, and additional training opportunities. Asking the right questions will help you assess your future responsibilities and aids in determining whether the organization is a good fit.⁸

While going from interview to interview, be sure to consider the community that surrounds the hospital, drug information support and technology, patient population dynamics, and average hospital census. The pharmacy model and potential opportunities for career growth offer insight into how the institution views the role of the pharmacist (i.e., primarily dispensing, clinical, or a hybrid of the two). Contrasting the way pharmacy is practiced at the prospective site to a familiar practice setting will highlight any major differences between institutions. Make sure to ask to speak with nonmanagement personnel and individuals holding a similar position to the one you are seeking. They are a great resource for determining normal work hours, the level of training you can expect, the typical stress level, and overall job satisfaction. Asking prospective colleagues about an interaction they had with the house staff or a private physician will shed light on the type of pharmacy environment in which you will be working.

After the interview. Once the interview is complete, it is appropriate to shake hands and let the employer know your intended timeline. Within a week, be sure to send thank-you cards to the individuals who were a part of the interview. These should be handwritten notes expressing appreciation to the interviewers for their time and identifying specific attributes of the program that impressed you. The note is an opportunity to reaffirm your interest in the program, why you are a good candidate, and your interest in further communication.⁹

Traveling home from the interview provides an opportunity to reflect on the experience. Promptly write down your general impressions and specific information from the interview and make a table listing the pros and cons of the position. If interviewing at multiple institutions, the line between differences can quickly become blurry. Consider assigning a weight to the factors you deemed important before the interview and then

rate each site on a scale of 1–10 and calculate a score for each.

Was the interview organized? Were the interviewers well prepared? Was there encouragement to ask questions and were the replies courteous? Do people seem to be relaxed and professionally satisfied or do they appear stressed and anxious? Are pharmacists leaving positions because they are advancing in the company or because they are dissatisfied with their jobs?

If the location, the culture of the company, and the workload are compatible with your personal career goals, explore the salary and benefits. The interview is not the time to ask about salary. However, if asked about salary, it is important to have a figure in mind that does not undervalue the work and yet is not inflated. Reviewing surveys of pharmacist's salaries in the area and discussing salary ranges with colleagues in the market will help determine that figure.

Most residencies offer stipends but vary in other aspects of their compensation package. Do not overlook the importance of licensure reimbursement, professional development support, annual leave, sick days, and relocation stipends.

In the case of a first job, be sure to consider all of the benefits included in the package and not just the salary.¹⁰ Consider the value of a flexible work schedule, paid leave, tuition reimbursement, health insurance, retirement benefits, health club membership, and parking. Each company offers different compensation that, when quantified, can add substantial value to the bottom line. It is a good idea to invest in the services of a financial consultant for advice on the small print and details of an offer. Do not shy away from negotiating a job offer or from drawing on the advice of a mentor for guidance.

Interviews can be taxing for all involved; however, proper preparation can minimize stress. Evaluating the experience from the perspective of a candidate interviewing for a position as well as a candidate interviewing a prospective employer can help in assessing a potential opportunity. This approach provides a thorough assessment that can help ensure that you select the best program and position for you.

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Appendix—Questions to consider when preparing for an interview

Possible questions posed to a candidate during the interview⁴

1. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
2. What attracts you to this organization/setting/position?
3. Where do you see yourself in 5–10 years?
4. What do you think makes you best qualified for the position?
5. What do you think you can contribute to this position/organization/department/staff?
6. Tell me about a project that you handled well and one in which you were not successful. What did you learn from each one?
7. What do you want to get out of a residency?
8. Would you describe a clinical intervention that you have made?
9. How much hospital experience have you had?
10. What is one of the major issues facing pharmacy today?
11. What were your least favorite rotations and why?
12. What qualities do you expect in a preceptor?
13. How do you handle stress?
14. Have you ever had a major conflict with a preceptor/physician? If so, how did you handle it?
15. How would you deal with an unmotivated student?
16. What makes you better for this position than other candidates?

Questions candidates should pose to potential employers^a

1. How long is the orientation period, and what is included in the core training?
2. What are you looking for in a candidate?
3. What programs exist for resident education (i.e., journal clubs, lectures, and case presentations), or what support exists for continuing professional development?
4. What is the time allotted for clinical practice? Research? On call? Staffing?
5. Are there opportunities to serve as a preceptor for pharmacy students?
6. How often are residents/employees evaluated, and what is the structure of the evaluation?
7. Does the organization support professional advancement, certifications, or the pursuit of higher education?
8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the residency program or pharmacy department?
9. What opportunities are there for advancement within the organization?
10. How would you describe the physician–pharmacy relationship? Nursing–pharmacy relationship?
11. How would you describe the pharmacist–resident relationship? Specialist–staff pharmacist relationship?
12. What major changes has the program or department recently gone through?
13. What are the clinical opportunities for elective rotations?
14. What have other residents who have completed the program gone on to do professionally?
15. How are topics for resident research projects chosen? What support network exists for resident research training?

^aQuestions 13–15 are specific to residency candidates.

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