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Virtual Interviews in the Era of COVID-19: A Primer for Applicants



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PROBLEM: The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving crisis with widespread impact upon our medical system, including senior trainee travel for fellowship interviews. Numerous institutions have conscientiously deferred in-person interviews or virtual formats. Given the competitive nature of fellowship interviews, candidates may express concern that they are at a disadvantage in engaging in online meetings versus live, on-site interviews, and similarly may feel ill prepared to perform optimally during online interviews.

APPROACH: We draw upon our experience with online interview platforms in this guide for fellowship candidates who are rapidly adapting to new technology and styles associated with videoconference interviews so that they can best promote themselves for competitive positions. (J Surg Ed 77:733–734. © 2020 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

KEY WORDS: interview, virtual, online, fellowship, COVID

COMPETENCIES: Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Systems Based Practice

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is an evolving crisis with widespread impact upon our medical system. One area of current concern has been senior trainee travel for fellowship interviews. For example, applicants to pediatric surgery fellowship interview at upwards of 25 programs as part of a highly competitive match process.¹ With the emergence of COVID-19 and its aggressive spread, numerous institutions made a conscientious decision to defer in-person interviews in favor of virtual formats in early March, 2020. Organizational recommendations soon followed asking their participating fellowship programs to fully comply with those recommendations nationwide.

Fellowship and residency programs have at times relied upon online meetings as part of the interview

process, but this is historically rare.² Residents may lack experience and skill with virtual interviews given that this is not a widely used method of assessing prospective trainees. Given the competitive nature of fellowship interviews, candidates may express concern that they are at a disadvantage in engaging in online meetings versus live, on-site interviews, and similarly may feel ill-prepared to perform optimally during online interviews. At our institution, we have offered online interviews for a variety of positions since 2017, and wanted to share our experience in how a trainee can best show their interpersonal skills during this process. **Figure 1** provides anecdotal examples of the concerns both candidates and programs have expressed regarding virtual rather than in-person interviews. This guide provides recommendations for fellowship candidates who are rapidly adapting to new technology and styles associated with videoconference interviews so that they can best promote themselves for competitive positions.^{3,4}

PREPARE TECHNOLOGICAL PLATFORMS

Technical failures are cumbersome and detract from valuable interview time. To minimize these, set up and test technical platforms in advance, leaving enough time to obtain alternate equipment if necessary.

- Read instructions from interviewers and download the proper program to a reliable computer. Not all interviewers are using the same application at this time. If the program includes specific contact information for the virtual interview platform, save it into the application.
- Fill out your profile within the application, including a professional name, title and photograph.
- Check the privacy settings to ensure you can receive messages from parties not in your contacts.
- Test your audiovisual equipment. Most virtual meeting platforms include features to test and adjust webcam or microphone settings as needed. Consider investing in external cameras or microphones if your equipment is not optimal (reverberation, poor resolution, etc.).

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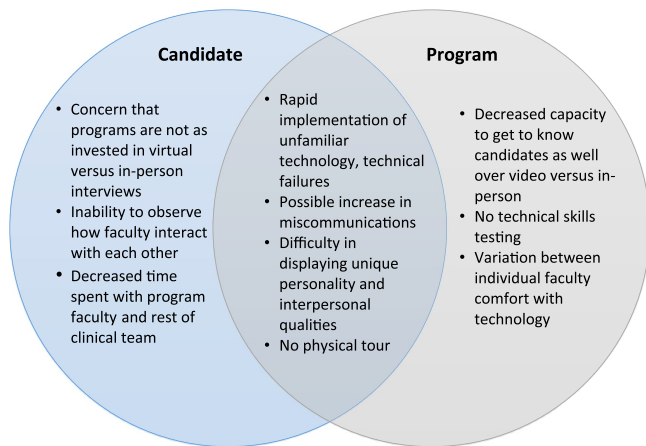


FIGURE 1. Concerns and negative perceptions regarding virtual fellowship interviews.

- Close the computer programs that you are not using during your interview to improve bandwidth during the meeting, which will improve video quality.
- Consider switching your status within the videoconference application to “Do Not Disturb” to prevent interruptions by instant messaging or calls during interviews.
- Ensure a reliable internet connection. Plan for a backup such as a wired connection or cellular hotspot.

OPTIMIZE PHYSICAL SPACE

Your surroundings should provide a blank canvas that do not distract from the interview.

- Choose a quiet location where you will not be disturbed. Close your door and place a “Do Not Disturb” sign if needed.
- Use a light-colored background for best video quality. Avoid backgrounds with windows or bright lights. Test your lighting and evaluate if you appear washed-out or if your features are shadowed.
- Keep the background bland so that interviewers are not distracted by items or movement within your space.

PERFORM A MOCK VIRTUAL INTERVIEW

A “dry run” will alert you to behaviors, which may be more problematic on the screen versus in-person.

- Hold a mock interview with a mentor who can critically evaluate your mannerisms and speech. Table 1 provides anecdotal examples of behaviors that are distracting on-screen.
- Videotape yourself speaking about a topic for 20 minutes. Watch it to detect any behaviors or speech

TABLE 1. Examples of Virtual Interview Distractions

Adjusting glasses, tie or hair
 Glare from glasses (opt for contacts)
 Staring at the screen rather than the camera
 Swiveling or fidgeting in chair
 Touching or itching face
 Interruptions or noise from pets or other people
 “Loud” background art or photos

that may distract from showcasing your interview skills and accomplishments.

- Practice looking into the webcam as opposed to the interviewer’s face on the screen. This may feel unnatural but is received as good eye contact.
- Examine how your professional clothing appears on screen. Wear the same formal attire you would wear for an in-person interview.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted surgical fellowship application processes by eliminating many in-person interviews. We feature important steps to guide applicants to optimal performance on virtual interviews, a format which may not be familiar to many prospective trainees and programs alike. These videoconferencing adaptations may outlive the global infectious threat by playing a more prominent role in upcoming application cycles. In the future, we may see streamlining of this process by use of a centralized virtual interview platform for all fellowship programs or increased use of virtual meetings as a screening tool for in-person interviews. As these changes unfold, an evaluation of how implementation of videoconferencing technology in surgical fellowship matches may affect the selection process should be undertaken from both a programmatic and candidate standpoint.

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