It's been a life-changing journey through medical school and graduate medical education. Now in your final year of residency or fellowship, you can see the light of full-time practice around the corner. Here is some expert advice on how to approach the physician job search process.

Eileen Curl—vice president of search services for Cross Country Search, a physician recruiting firm that is part of Florida-based Cross Country Healthcare—offered insight on what residents and fellows entering the physician job market for the first time should expect. Although the timing of a job search is going to vary by medical specialty and other factors, the actual process essentially breaks down to four steps.

**Information gathering**

You should be doing this throughout your training. Curl said she is working with residents and fellows who are reaching out to practices years before they enter the job market to determine the setting—private practice, academic, etc.—that might best suit their professional interests.

You’re going to want to do some of your own research. The AMA offers a number of tools and resources that can help you map your future as a physician, including offering insight on employment contracts and a list of positions from employers around the United States and beyond. Your peers and attending physicians can also provide some insight as you begin to plan your career path.

**Outreach**
When you know the specifics of your career plan, Curl recommends exploring networking opportunities within your specialty for possible job leads.

“Most specialty societies and associations run their own career center or job board. That is the best place to start your search, as most organizations will also start by posting their opening with the specialty society,” she said. “You will also find excellent networking opportunities at the society and association conventions, and many of them host career fairs where prospective employers are available to meet with you.”

One less formal step is to submit an employment application, usually online. This is more common for academic institutions where a formal application is often required in order to be considered. Not all organizations require it.

**Interviews**

Once you’ve identified an opportunity of interest, you’ll likely go through a number of phone interviews. Typically, you will first speak with a representative of the hiring organization. After that, if there’s mutual interest, a phone call with a lead physician or primary decision-maker will often be arranged. These conversations precede the in-person interview.

The number of organizations you may choose to visit for on-site meetings will vary based on how specific you are with respect to your geographic preference and practice setting.

“On-site interviews typically span multiple days,” Curl said. “We try to schedule them over a long weekend to allow for travel time, time spent seeing the facility and clinic in operation, meeting prospective colleagues, talking with administration, and exploring the community. We strongly recommend bringing your significant other, as they play an important role in your final decision and will impact your decision to accept an offer or return for another visit.”

**The offer**

You will want to have your professional references lined up in advance, so that the process is not delayed in any way when you find that “right fit” and the organization of choice is considering extending an offer.

Offers can come while you’re still interviewing, and they may have a deadline. For that reason, it makes sense to know what is most important to you in terms of practice setting and lifestyle, so the focus of any potential negotiations can revolve around compensation package and benefits.
As far as the actual format of an offer, it can come in many forms. Some employers send offer letters or term sheets, while others send the full contract. Today, Curl said, most contracts are standard contracts signed by all physicians within the group or organization, so they are rarely amenable to significant edits or revisions.

“If you wish to have an attorney review the document to help you better understand the terms, I’d recommend you choose a health care attorney who is familiar with physician contracts,” Curl said. “Also make sure to give that attorney a deadline. Nothing makes an employer more frustrated than waiting on attorneys.”