Tips for navigating virtual residency interviews

AMA's Moving Medicine video series amplifies physician voices and highlights developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s episode of Moving Medicine, AMA CXO Todd Unger talks with John Andrews, MD, the AMA’s vice president of graduate medical education innovations and Candise Johnson, a transition-year resident at West Virginia University, about one of the biggest changes in the residency application process that came out of the pandemic—virtual interviews—and what medical students need to know to ace them.

The AMA has resources for medical students going through this process, including FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship database, with more than 12,000 ACGME-accredited programs. Learn more about FREIDA™ and AMA member-exclusive tools, such as a residency calculator to help you calculate your application and match fees.

Speaker

- John Andrews, MD, vice president, graduate medical education innovations, AMA
- Candise Johnson, MD, transition year resident, West Virginia University

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Today we're discussing one of the biggest changes in the residency application process that came out of the pandemic, virtual interviews and what medical students need to know to ace them. I'm joined today by Dr. John Andrews, the AMA's vice president of graduate medical education innovations in Chicago and Dr. Candise Johnson, a transition-year resident at West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia. She'll be doing her diagnostic radiology residency at Ohio State. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Dr. Andrews, Dr. Johnson, welcome back. You both have been on the
program before but Dr. Johnson, a lot's changed for you. First of all, congratulations on your match. When you joined us last year, you were a fourth-year medical student going through this process yourself. Now you're a few months into your residency. Let's talk a little bit for starters about your overall application experience. How did it go? Was it more difficult than you thought it would be?

**Dr. Johnson:** Actually, it seemed like in hindsight, at least a little bit easier. I feel like as a type-A personality, I like to have a little bit more control over the situation. And so with virtual interviewing, I had more control over my environment. I had a little bit of cues around me that I could feel more comfortable with when doing an interview.

**Unger:** So you have sticky notes all around your laptop up there.

**Dr. Johnson:** Yeah, just to tell on myself, I totally had sticky notes around my laptop of little talking points that I would want people to know about me, that maybe I would forget to talk about if I didn't have a little cue. I also had my CV off to the side, just in case I blanked on anything in particular.

**Unger:** Well, sticky notes aside, is there anything that you did to prepare for these interviews that was different than what you might've done if it were going to be in person and in hindsight, you feel like you were well-prepared enough, would you have changed anything?

**Dr. Johnson:** So I think one of the biggest preparation things that I did was I would get on the different type of like Zoom or Thalamus or whatever and practice a little bit, just because everything works a little bit differently. One of the things I found super helpful was when I am like on a Zoom call or something like that, I've got you guys super-duper tiny, up really close to the camera. That way I'm always looking kind of directly at you when I'm looking at the camera as well. So I have a little bit better eye contact. I got told I had really good eye contact on a few of my interviews. So I felt like that was pretty helpful.

**Unger:** That's a new thing here in Zoom world. Good eye contact. That's amazing. Dr. Andrews on the program side, we learned a lot in this first year of virtual interviewing, what would you say the highlights were?

**Dr. Andrews:** Yeah. Thanks, Todd. It's worth noting that none of this would have happened without the pandemic. No one was going to put a toe in the water to offer virtual interviews to their candidates unless everybody did it and the pandemic forced everyone to do it. And for a lot of the reasons that Dr. Johnson cites, the consistency of the experience was something, I think the programs really welcomed. They got a very consistent view of their applicants from all different regions of the country. I think on the program side, it was somewhat easier to organize. There's a lot of manpower that goes into interviewing and to corral faculty members physically to meet with people in a location on the campus is a little more difficult than providing them with a Zoom link.
And once again, thanks to the pandemic, people know how to use Zoom. The technical requirements and the education that needed to go into that was pretty limited. And so I actually think it went pretty well. On the downside, I think programs really missed the opportunity to display the learning environment to their interviewees. And I'd be interested in Candise's reactions to that because you don't get to arrive at the institution, get a feel of the place, the geography, actually meet a large number of people. And that's a big difference. And I think a lot of programs felt that was a loss.

Dr. Johnson: Yeah. I definitely feel like that was one of the things missing. I did appreciate all the videos and where they tried to give you an idea of what their campus and everything was like. But having that in-person experience is something that you can't really beat. So when I was trying to do my rank list, kind of in January, I would go visit maybe a couple of places just to make sure that it was kind of a good fit. If I had family in the area that always made it a plus because they could always tell me about Columbus or Morgantown and see kind of what the town is like. That way I would have a good idea from that standpoint but you are missing kind of that in-person just influence. I'm a very visual person. It's nice to see how things are connected. I was actually pretty astonished with WVU, how huge it was compared to the hospital I was at in medical school. So it was nice seeing it in person before starting.

Unger: Dr. Andrews, we've got a year under our belt of virtual interviewing and we're in the second round of this right now, are we seeing programs making changes to capture what they learned? What would those changes look like?

Dr. Andrews: Yeah. Well, to Dr. Johnson's point, I do think that programs are really looking carefully at what resources they can provide to applicants to help them understand what it might be like to train there for the next three to five to seven years. And so the quality of videos and other resources that programs are producing is increasing. I think that we've all learned how to effectively use Zoom and other online tools. And so the consistent experience that they're able to offer to applicants in terms of the way that their faculty and other interviewers interact with the applicant virtually, those standards are being raised as well. And then the other thing that's happening is the scheduling of interviews is becoming much cleaner I think. Dr. Johnson mentioned the use of tools like Thalamus to schedule interviews. And in the virtual space where really all you're doing is exchanging a link and a calendar invitation, that's becoming much more seamless as well. So I think there've been some positive things to take away from it moving forward.

Unger: When you look into the future, Dr. Andrews, what portions of this do you see continuing on, despite what we hope would be the end of the pandemic?

Dr. Andrews: Well, for both reasons of the economic burden it places on applicants to travel and concerns about inequities that may result from that, there's been an interest in virtual interviews for a long time. And as I said earlier, no one was going to take the first step because there would be a relative, I think, competitive disadvantage to being the only place that did virtual interviews while...
everyone else was offering them in person. I think there's going to be a strong interest in programs when the pressures of the pandemic ease to return to in-person interviews for a lot of the reasons we've already discussed. They think that meeting people in person is a better way to understand how they might fit into the environment at their program. I hope those pressures don't lead us away from virtual interviews. I think we've gained a lot in terms of efficiency, in terms of reduced burden on the applicants. And frankly, in terms of the attention applicants are able to pay to their ongoing clinical education during the fourth year, rather than traveling all over the country that are a strong argument for continuing virtual interviews.

**Unger:** Dr. Johnson, I'm curious, you've gone through this process a year ago in the first year of the virtual interviewing. Do you have any particular advice for medical students that are about to embark on this particular process themselves?

**Dr. Johnson:** So I think that honestly when I was mentioning earlier, I had a couple of sticky notes around my computer. It was kind of things that I wanted programs to know about me. And I wanted to be able to slide them in there every now and then because if you aren't able to let them know who you are or you're not being true to yourself in this scenario, you're not going to be able to find a perfect match for you. And they're not going to be able to put you in where you're supposed to be, if that makes sense.

**Unger:** When you think about your interviews all of last year, is there one particular story you told, set of experiences, any answer that sticks out in your mind as like that was a home run?

**Dr. Johnson:** So I actually made my personal statement kind of like a storyline, kind of like intertwined how I'm very big into road trips, my family's been doing them my entire life and it kind of gave really big talking points during my interview season. A lot of people are very interested in road trips. We all kind of talked back and forth about what was our farthest road trip, where we went, kind of, I don't have the word for it. I'm blanking, tit for tat. Just having fun. And it just makes it a lighter environment.

**Unger:** So more personal and use the real estate around your screen to keep those stories top of mind. Dr. Andrews, from the program perspective, are there any dos and don'ts from your end about succeeding in this environment?

**Dr. Andrews:** Yeah, I think one thing to remember is to be flexible and adaptable. In the interview process, in addition to getting to know you better, programs are looking to how you react to certain situations, how you might react under stress. So when your audio drops, your video freezes or your cat jumps on your head, I think you have to take that in stride. You have to accept that as a part of the virtual interview experience and react to it with some flexibility and a sense of humor about it. And I think that will impress programs.
Unger: Dr. Andrews, and actually both of you have mentioned Thalamus, and I want to just dig in a little bit more because the AMA has been working in this arena of medical education and residency for quite a while. And I'm curious about some of the initiatives that are underway right now to improve the residency research and application process. Dr. Andrews.

Dr. Andrews: Yeah. Thanks Todd. We support a number of initiatives that are related to this transition from UME to GME. One of those projects that I think a lot of people have heard about is through the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics, where they're really working within an entire specialty to improve the residency selection process. One of the things that they've done over the last two cycles is to raise standards for how interview invitations are issued, for ensuring that there aren't more interview invitations issued than slots available and also raising standards around the way those interviews will be conducted. And with the use of a tool like Thalamus that compiles data about the interview experience, we're actually learning about how programs and applicants behave in this environment.

And so we know for example, that the OB programs that issued those standard showed a very high level of compliance with those standards going forward which was heartening to see. We also hope to answer some questions about whether concerns about things like interview hoarding are actually valid. By interview hoarding, I mean, the idea that a small number of very talented applicants will be invited to interview at many, many programs, we'll accept all of those invitations and then create an environment that excludes other applicants from interviewing. And some of the data that we gather through tools like the scheduling software that Thalamus uses may help us to answer some of those questions.

Unger: I love that because in so many arenas where data plays such a key role, it's good to move beyond the anecdotal and kind of individual experiences of different programs to be able to look at that data in the aggregate and learn from it, especially now. Dr. Johnson, is there anything you'd like programs to know in terms of how they can better support medical students going through this process?

Dr. Johnson: Well, so I think during a couple of my interviews, I did have some residents who gave a kind of presentation on what it's like to be a resident in the area, like family wise, like good school districts, what they like to do for fun, where to eat, all those kinds of things. And it's something that I've kind of incorporated at the TUI program I'm at now. I proposed it and a few of us put together PowerPoint that we now give to our applicants who've come through and we've had really good feedback on it. It's like it made my decision a lot easier. It gave me a lot of information about the area. It gave me a lot of information about your experience during this past few months of intern year. So I feel like that's definitely very powerful and something that the applicants very much appreciate.

Unger: Dr. Andrews, before we finish, is there anything else in terms of advice to medical students now or guidance for programs?
Dr. Andrews: Well I might just go a little bit of a different direction and suggest that I'm going to be really interested looking forward in what the long-term impact of the virtual interviewing experience is. If you look at last year's match, on paper, the match was similar to previous years in terms of the success rate that applicants had and the success rate the programs had filling their programs. But as virtual interviews become more prevalent, I wonder what the long-term effect is going to be on trainees as they essentially choose their training environment over television, right? Like for the reasons that Dr. Johnson mentioned, she talked about people explaining what it might be like to move there, perhaps to bring their families with them. And I think the impact of selecting programs perhaps without ever having visited before you arrive to train is going to be really interesting.

Unger: I'm looking in my crystal ball and I see more digital marketing as part of this. But I'm biased.

Dr. Andrews: It's an opportunity.

Unger: That's right. Dr. Andrews, Dr. Johnson, thanks so much for being here today and sharing your perspectives. Just so you know, the AMA has resources for medical students going through this process, including FREIDA, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database with more than 12,000 ACGME accredited programs. Visit fried.a.ama-assn.org for more information and AMA member exclusive tools like the residency calculator to help you calculate your application and match fees. FREIDA also offers program overviews. It allows you to take notes and rank programs on a dashboard and has a series of videos to help you through each stage of the application process. My team has been working very hard on that, along with the folks in our medical education group. And I can tell you, it's a really, really valuable resource. We'll be back soon with another Moving Medicine video and podcast soon. Be sure to click subscribe on AMA's YouTube channel, Apple, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. Find all of our videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us.

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