Another year of virtual residency interviews: What M4s should know

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Virtual residency interviews have eliminated days of cross-country travel and uncomfortable, unfamiliar environments. The COVID-19 pandemic forced residency programs to change their approach to interviewing, switching from traditional in-person meetings to virtual conversations via computer video.

If you are going to make a strong impression in an interview in this technology-driven environment, you need to prepare to tell your personal story on a computer screen with your notes and other resources at hand, according to AMA experts.

John Andrews, MD, is the AMA’s vice president for graduate medical education innovations. He joined Candise Johnson, MD, a transitional-year resident at West Virginia University to detail their tips for virtual residency interviews during a recent episode of “AMA Moving Medicine.”

Virtual interviews have pluses

“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,” Dr. Johnson said. “I 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.”

Dr. Johnson also used the video technology to enhance her own focus on the interviewer, by making the videoconferencing window “super-duper tiny” and putting it “up really close to the camera” on the monitor.
By doing that, she explained, “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,” Dr. Johnson said.

Learn about the three residency interview questions M4s should be ready to answer.

The drawbacks of not being there

While virtual interviews have some advantages for both residency applicants and residency programs, it is far from a flawless experience.

“Programs really missed the opportunity to display the learning environment to their interviewees,” the AMA’s Dr. Andrews said. “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.”

As a result, “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,” Dr. Andrews said.

Dr. Johnson agreed that virtual interviews hurt the personal touch of visiting the locale.

“Having that in-person experience is something that you can't really beat,” she said. “So, when I was trying to do my rank list in January, I would go visit maybe a couple of places just to make sure that it was kind of a good fit.”

Though the COVID-19 pandemic made virtual interviews a necessity, the technique is not likely to disappear when the virus is beaten, Dr. Andrews said. It is probably here to stay as programs realize the advantages of scheduling and convenience.

“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,” he said. “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,” Dr. Andrews added. “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.”

Check out this helpful list of the things you should know before residency interviews.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.