

Optimizing the Virtual Interview

Experience for Hand Surgery Fellowships

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Similar to many other medical training programs, fellowship interviews for hand surgery will be conducted virtually for a second consecutive year. We provide strategies for applicants to ideally portray themselves and to learn about fellowship programs. We include approaches for fellowship programs to identify candidates that match their values as a program, as well as ways to provide useful information to applicants about the program's culture. Given that components of virtual interviewing and recruitment will likely be an ongoing part of fellowship applications, we hope this article provides a framework to guide both applicants and program faculty for the 2021 to 2022 cycle and beyond. (*J Hand Surg Am.* 2022;47(4):379–383. Copyright © 2022 by the American Society for Surgery of the Hand. All rights reserved.)

Key words Fellowship interviews, hand surgery, virtual interviews.

UNCERTAINTY REGARDING travel during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a second consecutive year of virtual interviews for hand surgery fellowships. We describe best practices for virtual interviews from the perspectives of applicants and fellowship programs.

APPLICANT PERSPECTIVES

You decide how to present yourself as a candidate

An empowering aspect of an interview is that candidates choose how they portray themselves for their interviewers. One would think this depiction would hold even greater value in a virtual era. However, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many

candidates questioned whether a virtual interview would be valued similarly to an in-person interview. Although orthopedic residency applicants in the 2020 to 2021 cycle believed that a virtual interview would carry less weight than an in-person interview, program directors valued the virtual interview highly.¹ Applicants in other specialties thought they could effectively portray themselves well over a virtual platform, with a majority of applicants for urologic oncology fellowships preferring the virtual format.^{2,3}

When considering the content of the interview, showcasing an applicant's personality is imperative. In a virtual format with no social events and spontaneous interactions, there is less time to shine light on who the applicant truly is and why they would be an excellent fit for a given program. Applicants should have a solid understanding of their strengths, notable personality traits, and memorable interests, and how their personal goals align with the program's goals. Outlining this information beforehand provides the interviewee with the tools they need to ensure they provide interviewers with the most important information about themselves. For additional tips, a general surgery fellowship program that has employed the use of virtual interviews since 2017 offers generalizable recommendations for applicants.⁴

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Ascertaining useful information to determine the best fit

Gaining a genuine understanding of what daily life is like through a camera lens (rather than your own eyes) is arguably the most difficult part of the virtual interview process. Without walking through a program's doors, how can you, as an interviewee, feel confident that you will be happy with your choice to spend your fellowship there? We believe a helpful tip is to first, before interviews begin, write down a list of values and priorities for fellowship training. As the interviewee proceeds with interviews, they should be intentional about searching for these attributes in each program. The interviewee should note how many of their personal nonnegotiables the program offers; this will often help narrow down choices. To better understand interpersonal relationships and program culture, interviewees may brainstorm specific questions to elucidate the presence or absence of collegiality and friendship, such as inquiring about examples of when colleagues helped one another in times of need. If programs do not offer social hours, reaching out to current fellows or residents can assist with establishing rapport, understanding the general culture of the program, and determining the level of resident/fellow satisfaction with training experiences.⁵ With this in mind, much of the responsibility of showing what life is truly like at a given program lies with the program itself. Programs that provide video/live streaming of hospitals, work rooms, clinics, and amenities are often viewed favorably by applicants, as these videos provide insight on what day-to-day life is like at a given program.² Virtual reality may play a role in this in the future and has been piloted.⁶ Anecdotally, applicants feel more comfortable ranking programs highly when they know what they will be getting. Website structure is also helpful and informational for applicants; a survey of all program directors and applicants to US infectious disease fellowship programs found that applicants placed high value on online program structure information, program director overview videos, listed curriculum content, and fellow testimonials/profiles.⁷

Virtual platform troubleshooting tips

Virtual interviewing traded known stressors of in-person interviews for novel, technology-related issues that can just as easily make or break an interview. Tips include use of a ring/front-facing light to minimize facial shadowing, use of an ethernet cable rather than Wi-Fi, day-before microphone troubleshooting, elevating the camera/laptop to eye level,

minimizing background noise and distraction, and use of a blank, nondistracting background. This is important, as 1 study found that audiovisual issues during a virtual interview can affect an applicant's ranking and the avoidance of technical difficulties can make the experience more favorable for the applicant.^{8,9} Interviewees should remember that good posture, smiling, and periodically looking at the camera rather than the screen presents oneself positively. Other tips have been described and include choosing a space that minimizes interactions with family, pets, and so forth, and setting the computer on "Do Not Disturb."^{4,10} Additionally, mock interviews are helpful.² In fact, Harvard Business Review research on remote interviewing showed that around 90% of the study's participants that did receive job offers stood out because they mastered these and other virtual interviewing tips.¹¹

PROGRAM/FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

As businesses are transitioning into a remote work environment, medicine is evolving in parallel. Seventy percent of business talent professionals claim that virtual recruiting will become the new standard, according to LinkedIn Insights.¹² While there is substantial overlap in principles of successful in-person and virtual interviews, there are strategies that fellowship programs can use to optimize their interviewing and recruitment process in the COVID-19 era.

For faculty: distill the fellowship's mission, vision, and values

A crystallized understanding of the fellowship's mission, vision, and values enables interviewers to determine which candidates are best suited for the program. While this principle applies to interviewing and recruitment in general, it is an even greater priority since candidates do not have the opportunity to learn more about the program's culture during a virtual interview. The framework described by Borman-Shoap et al¹³ is a useful guide for the program faculty to reflect upon as a group. Explicitly determining the fellowship's mission (who we think we are), vision (who we want to become), and values (what informs who we are) enables the faculty to work toward their educational goals, but also is a critical step in shaping the fellowship's brand (how others perceive the fellowship).¹³ Defining the fellowship's brand and taking steps to intentionally maintain the brand is increasingly important in an interviewing era where candidates have little first-hand exposure to the program's culture.¹³

Implement effective and innovative ways to showcase the fellowship's culture

It is harder for applicants to get a sense of a program's culture from virtual interviews. Prior to COVID-19, nearly one-fifth of applicants stated that they were not comfortable ranking a 1-year adult reconstruction fellowship after a virtual interview.¹⁴ This may be driven by the inability to get a "feel" for the program and its faculty, as well as being unable to physically visit the facilities and city. Given that the majority of job candidates learn about a company's culture through an office visit, providing background information on the program or interviewers can help put a candidate at ease.¹⁵ Prior to COVID-19, many applicants to training programs relied on the program website for information, with some stating that the website was the most important source of information and was a key influence in their decision-making for training programs.^{16,17} Analyses of websites for other orthopedic and plastic surgery fellowships demonstrated a broad range of website functionality, comprehensiveness, and accuracy.^{18–22} For hand surgery, Trehan et al²³ reviewed the content of 78 hand fellowship websites in 2014 and found that nearly two-thirds of the programs provided minimal online information. While website content is likely improved since that assessment in 2014, their analysis underscores the need for programs to include accurate and comprehensive information about the fellowship. In the era of virtual interviewing, it is likely that candidates will expect information about social aspects of the fellowship and "livability" aspects of the city, such as cost, neighborhoods, and recreational activities. Given that candidates may be unlikely to visit the city prior to making a rank list, programs should provide their own content or link to reliable and recent content from their medical center or other local resources.

Applicants traditionally emphasize collegiality and trainee/faculty interactions as important factors in their program selection. While video interviews limit the ability of programs to demonstrate these characteristics, virtual tours, Q&A sessions with current fellows and faculty, alumni video testimonials, and active social media accounts were effective in the 2020 interview cycle.²⁴ Faculty and current fellows should be aware of these efforts and be prepared to discuss them during the interviews. Unscripted and unstaged interactions are valuable for candidates to get a better sense of the program's "personality." Given that in-person visits are the preferred way to learn about organizational culture, fellowship programs should provide new ways (such as those listed above) for applicants to learn about their culture.¹⁵

Prioritize the characteristics to evaluate in interviews

In the 2020 virtual interview process for orthopedic residencies, program faculty weighted objective markers of past accomplishments (such as research) over actual interview performance.¹ Applicants had a similar expectation that programs would place less emphasis on the interview.¹ These findings may stem from actual and/or perceived uncertainty from programs in judging candidates (and vice versa) based on virtual interviews, as in-person conversations and informal interactions are critically important to understanding the "noncognitive" aspects of a candidate.²⁵ Once the fellowship program has defined its mission, vision, and values, it is useful to design a series of standard questions to specifically target the domains of interest. How these questions are asked can be left at the discretion of the interviewer, but the questions should be distributed and used to allow methodical assessments of candidates.

Conduct interviews with a systematic process

Setting a standard process for how virtual interviews will be conducted and evaluated can help streamline the review process for each candidate. In addition to the standard questions described above, the process guidelines should (1) clearly state the criteria that the program is seeking; and (2) incorporate a rating system. This will help ensure that each interview can be as balanced, fair, and as effective as possible. Encourage faculty to take notes during the process to facilitate later discussion. Incorporation of an interview scorecard, based on the rating system, can be used to help maintain objectivity, improve consistency, and mitigate biases.²⁶

Insights from the 2020 to 2021 virtual Hand Fellowship interview cycle

After completion of interviews (and prior to announcement of match results) for the 2020 to 2021 cycle, the American Society for Surgery of the Hand administered an electronic survey to all hand fellowship applicants and program directors.²⁷ The response rate was 38% for applicants and 51% for program directors, which met threshold requirement for a survey sample to be deemed valid.²⁸

Eighty-one percent of applicants were satisfied or very satisfied with the virtual process and only 20% preferred going back to an all in-person interview process in the future.²⁷ One big advantage for applicants was a dramatic decrease in interview conflicts. All 80 applicants who answered the survey indicated that they were able to attend every interview they received.²⁷ This may be a particularly

	In Person	Virtual	Hybrid
PROS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows applicants and programs to assess intangibles and “cultural fit” Face-to-face interaction is more natural for many 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost effective/more equitable Less time away from clinical duties (applicants) Easier to interview more applicants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for maximum flexibility for applicants and programs May allow programs to attract a wider selection of applicants
CONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More expensive and time consuming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harder for applicants and programs to assess subjective qualities of the program/applicant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will applicants feel that choosing the virtual option signals less interest to the program? Will programs subconsciously bias their assessments in favor of applicants who choose the in-person option?

FIGURE 1: Advantages and disadvantages of the 3 types of interview options.

important advantage for financially disadvantaged applicants, who in the past may have declined to interview at programs due to the considerable costs of air travel and hotel accommodations.

From the program perspective, more interview offers were extended to applicants. Fifty-one percent of programs indicated that they interviewed more applicants during the 2020 to 2021 cycle than in previous years.²⁷ This may have been a reason why 43% of programs indicated that the quality of the virtual interaction was slightly worse than in-person interactions of previous years.²⁷ However, 53% believed that the virtual interaction was as good as or better than an in-person interaction. Moreover, 83% of program directors indicated that moving forward, fellowship interviews should be virtual or a hybrid of virtual and in-person interviews.²⁷ Although a hybrid approach offers several advantages (Fig. 1), a potential unintended consequence could be the creation of a 2-tiered system in which applicants who choose to interview virtually (rather than in person, if both options are offered) may be seen as less interested. Issues related to unconscious bias (perceived and/or real) in favor of applicants who interview in person must be addressed to ensure that a hybrid system, if implemented, proves to be of benefit to applicants and programs alike.

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