

Below is a summation of pointers / thoughts on virtual interviews that have been collected from trainees and programs (transplant surgery, MIS / bariatric surgery, vascular surgery, pediatric surgery, hepatobiliary surgery, cardiothoracic surgery, general surgery prelim, etc.) that have already participated in the process. All in all the responses have been positive and favorable. Virtual interviews have provided meaningful and effective selection processes for both applicants and programs.

In short, conduct your interviews the way you always have. Give a program overview talk, provide time for the applicants to meet with your current resident(s), ask questions during the interview and schedule your interview times (20 minutes, 30 minutes, etc.) as you always have, stay on time, etc. Try to replicate virtually as much as possible what you offer during in-person interviews.

Reasons to conduct virtual interviews this year include:

- The AAMC, ACGME, NBME, and NRMP, among others, have all recommended virtual interviews.
- Some candidates will not be allowed to travel.
- To decrease the pressure candidates may feel to travel if in-person interviews are offered.
- Some programs will not be allowed to offer face to face interviews.
- Candidates who travel are putting themselves at risk.
- Candidates who travel could bring COVID with them to institutions, or take it home with them.
- For a large percentage of our trainees, surgical and index case volumes have been negatively affected. Decreasing time spent traveling will increase the time they have to prepare for future practice.
- To provide a more level and equitable playing field for both applicants and programs (standardized universal system).
- Up to 30% who apply for CRS Residency training do not match. This will drastically decrease the burden of time and money for these applicants.

Virtual Platform

Regardless of the real time platform you utilize (Zoom, Level 3 Communications, Skype, Face time, Google Hangouts, ezTalks Cloud Meeting, Century Link, WebEx, etc.) make sure all faculty participating in interviews know how to use it well before the day of the interview (rehearse). Programs that do not test the platform and rehearse have been uniformly perceived negatively by interviewing candidates. It is extremely important that program coordinators and directors are well versed in the platform to help troubleshoot if needed.

Most utilized Zoom and it was uniformly well received.

An email sent to the applicant with the link to the meeting / phone numbers has worked well for nearly all program interviews.

Few candidates had technical issues, and for those who did it was mostly the result of not being familiar with the platform the program was utilizing. Make sure candidates are notified in advance of the virtual platform you will plan to utilize so they can test their system before the day of the interview.

There are various nuances that can differ between institution and personal virtual meeting accounts. For example, one program learned that their institutional Zoom account did not have a “waiting room” feature where they could have their interviewing candidates wait between interviews. That resulted in candidates joining active interviews of other applicants. The interviewee had an email stating their interview was at 0930. The interview before them (0900) was running over and they joined at 0930 as instructed. To circumvent this nuance, the program took the mobile phone number of each applicant and the program coordinator called the interviewees to notify them when it was time to join.

Other things to consider for those who will be using Zoom for virtual meetings:

Personal Zoom accounts have less security measures than institutionally purchased accounts. Without warning others can join your meeting and post offensive language (hateful, racist, sexist, etc.), images (pornographic), etc. Based on the feedback we have received from PDs, APDs, trainees, and program coordinators no one has experienced this issue during their virtual interviews. Zoom is aware of this issue and has released [supportive documents](#) you can use to help secure meetings to keep this from happening.

Some found it safer to have one invite for the applicant that the faculty join rather than the other way around – that way there is no risk of an applicant inadvertently joining someone else’s interview if they run late. After the faculty conclude the interview, they can check with each other (group text, call, etc.) and then join the applicant in their unique zoom room. That way the applicant stays on their own unique zoom call the entire time with faculty joining and then leaving.

Others described the successful use of breakout and waiting rooms. All candidates would enter a waiting room, which provided them the opportunity to interact with current trainees. When it was time for a candidate to interview the program coordinator would move the candidate into a separate private breakout room. The program coordinators were set up as administrators of the Zoom account. Various programs set up their breakout rooms in different formats including individual, small (2 to 3 faculty), and group (all faculty) interviews. Once the interview was over the program coordinator would move the candidate back to the waiting room. Some also used a timer feature

whereby a time limit can be set for the breakout rooms and once time expires the candidate will automatically be moved back to the waiting room.

Some found it easier to have faculty set up individual Zoom accounts and from their accounts invitations would be sent for candidates to join. From their own account a waiting and breakout room was created. The breakout room was used for interviews, and the waiting room was used for the next applicant to wait in if the interview before them was running late. The candidates in the waiting room could not join the meeting until they were invited in from the waiting room. Program coordinators also set up a separate waiting room where candidates could meet with current trainees in-between interviews.

Program Overview Talk

A group program overview talk (history of the program, ACGME accreditation status, index case volumes, graduate job placements, board pass rates, etc.) by the program director was uniformly positively received by interviewees. The inverse was noted for applicants who did not get an overview talk. Some noted the talk (PowerPoint, PDF etc.) was provided in an email, and that was not well received. Other recommendations were to provide time for questions and answers and give a polished talk about the program, institution, and city. Provide tips about the city (need to buy a car, walkability, parks and recreation, population, places to live, arts and culture, etc.).

Meet and Greet

Setting up a time for interviewees to casually meet the current resident(s) / ancillary staff was uniformly positively received. The inverse was noted when that did not occur. Being able to meet current trainees in a casual private virtual environment without faculty present was perceived as very important.

Some programs set up a separate virtual meeting room where the interviewees would stay in-between their interviews. The current resident(s) were also present in the room to answer questions about the program. The room was only allowed to be accessed by the interviewees and current residents(s). Some interviewees noted that separate rooms were set up for them, but with coordinators and faculty on mute in the background. They noted that no one asked any frank questions in those rooms.

Interviews

Interviewees uniformly responded negatively to group interviews. Group interviews were noted to have faculty coming and going and talking out of turn. They were perceived as chaotic and

made interviewees feel as if their time was not important. Some recommended at most a 3:1 faculty to interviewee ratio.

Some interviewees waited hours in-between interviews. This was not well received. Interviewees appreciated when the interviews were offered in quick succession.

Interviewees felt they got a good impression of the faculty, and visa-versa.

Interviewees felt the faculty interview did not offer them a good impression of the institution, program, or city.

It was recommended not to change the schedules on the day of the interview and to stay on time. Moving around schedules on the day of the interviews was noted to not work well by both faculty and applicants. Since interviews are electronic, it is more difficult to make changes at the last minute.

There were noted to be fewer issues with interviews conducted on a desk or laptop, compared to a phone or tablet. There were some connectivity and app issues with phones and tablets.

There were noted to be fewer issues when interviews were conducted through a landline connection rather than Wi-Fi.

Do not stare at your computer screen when talking to applicants, but rather look directly at the camera (direct eye contact).

Remember to smile.

Dress

Applicants noted some faculty were casually dressed (t-shirts) for interviews, when they were dressed in business attire. This was perceived as unprofessional by some.

Post Interview Wrap-up

At the conclusion of the interviews the majority of interviewees found it helpful to have a quick wrap up with the program director (thank you for coming, contact information for any future questions, opportunity for parting questions, etc.).

Time and Money

Time and money saved by not traveling was uniformly positively perceived by applicants.

Site Unseen

Applicants uniformly stated not being able to attend a casual social (dinner, etc.) the night before an interview was less than favorable, but understandable. Most felt the social was as important, and possibly more important, to them than the actual interview. They uniformly felt they acquired the best feel for the program, people, and city during the social. Many interviewees responded that a hospital is a hospital, but the inability to see the facility, get a sense of the resources and its capabilities, and assess collegiality was the biggest issue.

Showing a virtual tour of the facilities (ORs, clinic space, wards, endoscopy suites, etc.) has been utilized by some programs. Some had their current residents shoot the videos and then show them during the meet and greet.

Sending applicants' information (PDFs, videos, etc.) about the institution (health insurance, benefits, salary, etc.), program, and city was uniformly positively received. The more information a program provided, the better applicants felt about making decisions regarding applying to and training at that institution.

Interview Coordination for all Programs

This is a topic we have not accomplished before in a non-COVID environment. There are multiple moving parts to take into consideration for interview coordination for all programs. One is different time zones and regions. Various regional programs have tried this in the past, and unfortunately failed, with the main issue revolving around agreeing on dates. Another is interview dates. Multiple programs have already set their interview dates for the year and division/departmental leadership will not allow them to be changed.