Tips for succeeding at pharmacy residency phone interviews

Several times in recent years, the annual number of pharmacy residency applicants increased faster than the number of available positions, making the task of securing a residency position highly competitive. With the increase in pharmacy residency applications, residency programs must decide which candidates should be invited for an onsite interview. Onsite interviews can be costly (economically and timewise) for residency programs as well as for students applying to multiple programs. Therefore, the use of phone interviews (and, in some instances, Web-based teleconferencing) as a screening tool for determining which applicants should be offered an onsite interview appears to be growing in popularity. Phone interviews allow programs to evaluate an applicant’s interpersonal skills and the level of “fit” with the residency position and, conversely, allow applicants to evaluate the fit between their residency and career goals and a program’s expectations.

Applicants should not be discouraged if offered a phone interview, since a successful phone interview may lead to an invitation for an onsite interview. Due to the growing importance of phone interviews, it is vital for applicants to prepare for a phone interview just as they would for an onsite interview. However, candidates may be unacquainted with the skills needed for a successful phone interview. While there are applicant resources on preparing for a phone interview such as the New Practitioners Forum column, a contact phone number if technical questions or connection difficulties occur, and other specific instructions. Creating a document that contains these details will be an asset for the interview day.

1. Review pertinent call-in information. As soon as you are offered a phone interview, record the vital details such as the interview date and time, phone interview type (e.g., phone call versus Web-based teleconferencing), call-in logistics (is the program calling you or vice versa?), call-in instructions (a contact phone number if technical questions or connection difficulties occur), and other specific instructions. Creating a document that contains these details will be an asset for the interview day.

2. Research the program. Begin preparing for the phone interview by researching the residency program in the same way you would for an onsite interview. Residency programs expect applicants to have a good foundation of knowledge about their program prior to the interview. Once you have researched the program, you can then begin contemplating possible questions. Being well informed about the program will allow you to ask more personal questions that cannot simply be found on the Internet. Asking unique questions will help to distinguish you from other applicants. Once you have determined important facts about the program and possible questions, add this information to the document with specific details of the phone interview. You can also include in this document any personal details that highlight why you may be a good fit for the program, such as career goals and personal practice philosophy. The final document should be approximately one page and should be printed or available electronically so that it can be used as a reference during the phone interview.

3. Allot an accurate amount of time. Applicants will be either instructed to call at a certain time or provided with a call time frame. Most phone interviews last 15–30 minutes; however, it is advisable to schedule at least one hour on your calendar for the interview. It is possible that a previous interview may have exceeded the program’s time allotment, postponing your interview start time. Setting aside adequate time will prepare you for possible scheduling modifications.

The New Practitioners Forum column features articles that address the special professional needs of pharmacists early in their careers as they transition from students to practitioners. Authors include new practitioners or others with expertise in a topic of interest to new practitioners. AJHP readers are invited to submit topics or articles for this column to the New Practitioners Forum, c/o Jill Haug, 7272 Wisconsin Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814 (301-664-8821 or newpractitioners@ashp.org).
4. Choose an appropriate environment. Unlike an onsite interview, a phone interview is not conducted at a prearranged site, leaving the decision about a location up to you. There are some considerations when choosing the location and environment for the call. First, select a location that is quiet, comfortable, organized, and distraction free. Options include the following: at home in a quiet room, in office space at your college or school of pharmacy, and (if you are out of town) in your hotel room. Second, confirm that there is adequate phone reception in the area so that the call will be clear and well connected. Third, find out if the program prefers that you use a landline phone for the interview. If you do not have a landline at your home, evaluate your other landline phone options, such as office space at your college or school of pharmacy. Fourth, ascertain whether or not the program requires the use of a phone versus a Web-based teleconferencing application such as FaceTime (Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA) that will enable interviewers to see you and the room you are in. If the program prefers FaceTime, make sure the room is clean in order to decrease any potential distractions and display a predilection for organization. A clean room will also likely allow you to feel more structured in your thoughts.

The day of the interview. 1. Minimize distractions. On the day of the interview, in addition to minimizing distractions in your environment, it is best to eliminate outside distractions as much as possible. One way to do this is to let your family and friends know the time of your interview so that they can avoid calling or visiting during that time. If you have small children, enlist the help of a babysitter. If you have pets and if weather permits, put them outside or in an area outside of earshot to eliminate any noise they may produce. Turn off televisions and any other electronic devices that may be noisy.

2. Dress professionally. Although the interviewers will not be able to see you during a phone interview, dress professionally for the occasion in order to put yourself in a professional mindset. If your interviewer is to be conducted via teleconferencing, it is imperative to dress as if you were at an onsite interview: in a conservative suit (black or navy). Vibrant colors should be absent or minimal so your clothing is not distracting to interviewers.

3. Call at the correct time. While arriving 10 minutes early to an onsite interview may be optimal, with phone interviews it is best to wait until the appointed time to call. Calling early may disrupt another candidate’s interview. If you want to call early to ensure that there are no technical difficulties with the call, ask the program in advance for permission to do so. Prior to making the call, retrieve the aforementioned one-page information sheet (which should include the phone number to call regarding technical difficulties) to minimize apprehension and increase information accessibility.

During the interview. 1. Use proper etiquette. Once you are on the phone, use the same etiquette you would use if you were being interviewed in person. Try not to interrupt others when speaking. Pause briefly before answering a question to make sure the interviewer has completed the question. Be courteous and use polite expressions (e.g., please, thank you). Consider smiling during your interview to emit an inviting tone. Since interviewers cannot see you (in a phone interview), other cues such as the tone of your voice will be evaluated.

2. Be aware of time. It is important to understand the goal of the phone interview so that you can plan to use your time wisely during the call. Program representatives may use the initial interview as a screening tool to determine if an onsite interview will be given at a later date, or they may use it as the primary interview to evaluate you for the residency. If the interview is for screening purposes, it is best to reserve more specific questions for the onsite interview. Residency interviewers are likely on a strict time schedule, and using an excessive amount of time asking questions could potentially interfere with their schedule. Respecting interviewers’ time obligations will be appreciated. Therefore, as a guide, consider asking five questions or less in a phone interview lasting 15–30 minutes.

3. Take and use notes. While on the phone call, it is helpful to take handwritten or electronic notes. Handwriting notes may take more time, but typing notes may create noise and be distracting to the interviewers. Taking notes during the phone interview can help you prepare for the onsite interview (if you are offered one) because you can look back at topics discussed previously and avoid repeating the same questions. By focusing more on topics that have not yet been discussed, you will gain more insight from the second interview. The notes will also help you as you write thank-you notes to your interviewers. When taking notes, be sure to write down interviewer names. There may be several people on your phone interview, so ask each individual his or her name. This will provide you information necessary to write thank-you cards and also help you remember who you previously interviewed with if an onsite interview is subsequently offered. One additional consideration is to write interview notes directly onto the one-page document you have created. This strategy can help you keep all notes related to a program in one document.

After the interview. 1. Reflect. When the interview is finished, reflect on what went well and what could be improved so that you can prepare for future phone interviews. If you feel the interview went poorly, seek mentorship from a faculty member so that you can improve for future phone or onsite interviews. Also, consider writing down your impressions of the program and any follow-up questions you may have.

2. Write thank-you notes. A phone interview should be taken just as seriously as an onsite interview. Therefore, after the interview, write thank-you cards. While an e-mail may be acceptable, it is recommended that you handwritten your thank-you card and mail it within 24–48 hours of the phone interview. Once you have completed the thank-you cards, your only task is to patiently wait for the decision.

Closing notes. As student interest in pharmacy residency programs continues to grow, programs’ use of phone interviews to manage the growing demand is expected to increase. Programs may use phone interviews to screen applicants for onsite interviews and should be viewed by applicants as a positive step in the
process. Applicants are encouraged to thoroughly prepare before, on the day of, during, and after the interview in order to successfully complete the interview, learn more about program features and requirements, and demonstrate why they are a good fit for the program.


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