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Videoconferencing during COVID-19: strategies for a successful fellowship interview

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Videoconferencing during COVID-19: strategies for a successful fellowship interview

Abstract

Background:

COVID-19 has impacted graduate medical education in many ways, including the interview process for fellowships. The Coalition for Physician Accountability, of which the accreditation council for graduate education (ACGME) is a member, recommended conducting online interviews and virtual visits for all applicants in 2020-2021. Limited evidence and guidelines exist regarding successful videoconference interview strategies for the fellowship application process.

Methods:

We review the literature on videoconferencing for fellowship positions to describe utilizing strategies that can lead to a successful interview. Databases searched include pubmed and google scholar, from the year 1999 to March of 2020 using the following key words: interview, videoconferencing, fellowships, COVID-19. In addition, a personal perspective from a virtual fellowship interview is included as original data.

Results:

Based upon a review of current literature and a new report from a fellowship applicant that are supportive of current evidence, strategies that can lead to a successful interview include: bright lighting, a neutral background, professional attire, and looking at the camera to simulate eye contact. Tactics that have lead to a less successful interview based on a review of current literature and personal perspectives include: looking at the screen which appears that the individual is looking down rather than making eye contact, the camera positioned too low rather than at eye level or higher, and inappropriate lighting.

Conclusion:

Fellowship virtual interviews may be enhanced by utilizing various videoconference strategies, which may improve the chance of a successful match outcome.

Keywords

Interviews, videoconferencing, fellowships, COVID-19

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Authors declare no conflict of interest related to this work. Dr. Abd-Elsayed is a consultant of Medtronic and Avanos

Videoconferencing During COVID-19: Strategies for a Successful Fellowship Interview

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant and fundamental changes in the world, including the role of remote and digital interactions, with videoconferencing at the core of this virtual movement. Videoconferencing is holding a conference among people at a remote location using transmitted audio and video signals. Videoconferencing has not only become crucial for public health measures but may become the norm in many other facets of life. Whether it is a telehealth visit, virtual trainee education or meetings, or video chat with friends, innovative technology has been transformative in decreasing the need for in-person gatherings. The current pandemic presents an opportunity for the growth of videoconferencing for the fellowship interview process in 2020.

There are positive aspects of using videoconferencing compared to in-person interviewing, and studies suggest a virtual interview is not inferior to an in-person interview.¹ Use of a videoconference interview for residency and fellowship programs has been associated with positive feedback from candidates^{2,3} and alleviation of a financial burden for candidates.⁴⁻⁶ Some fellowship programs have offered solely virtual interviews; some programs have left open the possibility of in-person interviews at a later time, depending on the state of public health. In a study by Vadi et al. in 2016 involving the comparison of videoconference with in-person interviews among 211 anesthesiology residency candidates, interview type does not affect the rate of applicant admission to the residency program.¹

Although videoconference interviewing shares many communication properties of in-person interviewing, the challenges are manifested in technical problems, interview setting issues, and difficulties in interpreting verbal and non-verbal communications. However, these challenges can be alleviated by employing various strategies, as evidenced by literature and personal perspectives.

Methods

A literature review on videoconferencing was performed, including personal perspectives from a fellowship applicant for the interview cycle in 2020.

Results

A summary of recommended strategies found in the current literature and personal perspectives from a current fellowship applicant are summarized in Table. Based upon a review of current literature and personal perspectives from a fellowship applicant, strategies that can lead to a successful interview include: bright lighting, a neutral background, professional attire, and looking at the camera to simulate eye contact. Based upon feedback from a program director, from virtual fellowship interviews, overhead lighting alone was inferior to a bright light positioned centrally aiming down towards the face. However, with the highly variable overhead lighting systems, a bright light positioned centrally aiming towards the face may not be needed depending on the lighting system available. The difference between a candidate looking at the camera compared to looking at the screen, from an interviewer's perspective, is depicted in Figure.

Table. Strategies for Improving the Videoconference Interview	
	Tips
Set-up	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Background</i>-ideally a neutral, blank wall to simulate an office space 2. <i>Camera</i>-positioned away from any windows or doors and at eye level 3. <i>Lighting</i>-natural light or bright lighting in a room with the use of a lamp positioned centrally aiming down towards the face 4. Reduction of any background noise or distractions
During the Interview	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Attire</i>-professional suit, as if you are dressing for an in-person interview 2. <i>Eye contact</i>-look at the camera rather than at the screen to simulate eye contact with the interviewer 3. <i>Camera</i>-keep video mode on as much as possible in group videoconference rooms to appear engaged

Figure. Examples of Images From The Perspective of An Interviewer



1a. Image of candidate looking at the camera

1b. Image of candidate looking at the screen

Discussion

Limited research is available regarding guidelines for a successful residency or fellowship videoconference interview. Program directors from the Department of Internal Medicine at Mayo Clinic in Arizona did a study in 2014 regarding successful interviews among eight residency candidates. They found that during more successful interviews, candidates were dressed in attire similar to what would be worn for an in-person interview, the camera was positioned at eye-level, and the candidate appeared to make eye contact. Other strategies such as dressing professionally, keeping hands still, leaning forward, and ensuring there were no technical issues with computer connectivity and power source were deemed important. In a less successful interview, the candidate positioned the camera such that it appeared the candidate was looking downward, due to the candidate looking at the screen rather than up at the camera..⁷ Research regarding recruitment through videoconference also remains scant in other fields. In a human resources research article published by Mccoll in 2019, several professional human resource recruitment interviewers were asked about observations from 30 interviews. In 86% of interviews, camera angle was either too low or off to one side rather than at eye level or higher, which gave a condescending impression to recruiters. A lack of effective eye contact was observed in 80% of interviews, which recruiters said negatively affected their perceptions of a candidate's sincerity and naturalness. In addition, setting problems occurred in almost every interview. These included inappropriate lighting (too bright or dark, flaring, halo effects) in 60% of interviews. Recruiters noted that this made it difficult to accurately assess candidate's facial expressions..⁸

There are also strategies that can be used after the virtual interview that can lead to a positive outcome. The study by Williams suggests that if technical connections arise, to inform the interviewer or interviewee early in the conversation, or to ask whether there is a protocol for a repeat interview if difficulties persist throughout the interview. ⁷ Fellowship interviews have moved to videoconferencing in this current time of social distancing. Due to concerns about the equivalency of virtual interviews to live recruitment, the recommendations above seek to increase the likelihood of a successful interview outcome. However, additional research regarding specific strategies for an effective interview is needed, as there remains a paucity in the current literature.

Conclusion

As the impact of the COVID-19 public health crisis continues to be studied, the necessity for videoconference interviews presents at an opportune time to develop strategies that maximize interview outcomes for future fellowship recruitment cycles.

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