

# How We Did It: Creating Virtual Interviews for Postgraduate Medical Trainee Recruitment and Keeping it Personal

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Virtual interviews are novel in postgraduate medical training recruitment. Advantages include efficiency, cutting carbon costs, and reduced time away from work and costs for candidates.<sup>1,2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic forced expedient *ad hoc* virtual interviews with some experiences are recently described.<sup>3–6</sup> Maintaining personal interactions is at greatest risk with the virtual platform.<sup>6,7</sup> Here, we describe our experience converting to virtual interviews for a surgical fellowship from the program perspective and promoting personal connections with each candidate. Importantly, we share templates of our interview materials that can easily be adapted by other programs.

## PLANNING COMMITTEE AND TECHNOLOGY

The interview planning committee aimed to retain all previous interview elements: social reception; presentations by the Program Director, HPB-stream lead and chief fellows; casual fellow-candidate interactions; multiple semistructured and structured interviews; synchronous scoring with independent scores from multiple interviewers; and debrief session. The planning committee aimed to retain a personal approach to the interview experience. We considered several technology systems including Skype for Business, WebEx, GoToMeeting, Zoom and Google Hangouts. We selected Zoom for several features: large participant numbers, no user account needed for candidates, and the Breakout Rooms feature which was integral to our reception and interview day as detailed below.

## PREPARING INTERVIEW TEAMS

We undertook serial pilot-tests of the virtual interview process. We produced finalized schedules, procedures, and instructions described below. To mitigate unresolvable technological failures, we had back-up contact phone numbers for all candidates; this occurred once with <1 minute of interview time lost.

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## Moderator Role

The Moderator is a unique role developed for the virtual interview process. The Moderator controlled meeting flow, assisted participants, and moved participants between Breakout Rooms. To support the moderator, an instruction manual and master schedule were created, and several test sessions were conducted (Supplement 1 & 2, <http://links.lww.com/SLA/C311>).

## Interviewers

An information package with roles, timing, and virtual interview details and etiquette was provided (Supplement 3, <http://links.lww.com/SLA/C311>). Electronic candidate files were provided for review in advance to interviewers conducting semistructured interviews. Zoom training and implicit bias training were provided.<sup>8</sup> On interview day, interview questions with scoring guides and links for online scoring were provided.

## PREPARING CANDIDATES

Candidates were given a detailed information package and individualized schedules several weeks in advance, and encouraged to contact the program with queries (Supplement 4 & 5, <http://links.lww.com/SLA/C311>).

## VIRTUAL RECEPTION

The evening before interview day we held a 2-hour virtual reception (Table 1).<sup>7</sup> We provided welcome and program information presentations; encouraged informal conversation among candidates and between candidates, faculty, and current trainees; allowed technology troubleshooting; and promoted ease within the virtual platform.<sup>7</sup> We strongly emphasized maximizing candidate comfort. Food and beverages were encouraged. Small group breakout rooms with 2 to 3 faculty, 1 to 2 current trainees, and 5 to 6 candidates shuffling every 15 minutes facilitated conversation between different participants. To enable more peer-to-peer conversation, we finished the evening without faculty presence as a large group open discussion forum. This generated a lot of discussion including mentorship and camaraderie, liveability of the city, and information for those with families.

## INTERVIEW DAY

The interview day agenda included a premeeting, interviews in parallel with a *Virtual Hangout Room*, and a debrief for interviewers and selection committee members (Table 1). Interviews were 2-way live virtual interviews conducted in real-time. Interviews were not recorded. Zoom Breakout Rooms functioned as virtual interview rooms allowing all interviewers and candidates to be in different locations. Each interview room included 3 interviewers chosen from faculty and current trainees; 3 interviewers balanced the need for multiple independent assessors without overwhelming candidates with a large interview panel. We used predetermined questions to minimize bias.

**TABLE 1.** Virtual Reception and Interview Day Agenda

Virtual reception			
Time	Activity	Details	Meeting type
18:00–18:10	Welcome	Welcome by program director and chief fellows and troubleshooting	Full group
18:10–18:25	Program director Presentation	Welcome and program information	Full group
18:25–18:40	Chief fellows Presentation	Welcome and program information	Full group
18:40–18:55	HPB director presentation	Welcome and information about HPB training stream	HPB stream applicants
19:00–19:45	Breakout rooms with Faculty	Smaller discussion rooms with faculty	Breakout Rooms
19:45–20:30	Fellows only	Informal discussions with the fellows present only	Full group
Interview day agenda			
Time	Activity	Details	Meeting Type
7:15–7:45 Parallel Sessions	Pre-meeting	Login to meeting and troubleshooting	Full group
7:45–12:15	Interviews	Separate schedule with candidate timeslots were circulated.	Breakout rooms Paired by moderator
7:45–12:15	Virtual Hang Out Room	(**optional) Casual conversation with current fellows.	Fellows and candidates not actively interviewing
12:15–12:35 Parallel sessions	Lunch	Break for interviewers	Mute sound and camera
12:40–15:50	Interviews	Separate schedule with candidate timeslots will be circulated.	Breakout rooms Paired by Moderator
12:40–15:50	Virtual Hang Out Room	(**optional) Casual conversation with current fellows.	Fellows and candidates not actively interviewing
16:00	Debrief	Discussion of interview process and ranking list	Interviewers and other faculty and fellows

### Pre-Meeting

All interviewers and candidates were invited to a pre-meeting for login tests, technology troubleshooting, and clarification of instructions. This was optional. Participants were asked to login at least 15 minutes before their interview time.

### Virtual Hangout Room

Before and after interviews, candidates were welcomed to join the *Virtual Hangout Room*. Current trainees who were not interviewing were in this meeting space and available for informal discussions. These trainees welcomed candidates as they logged in, and allowed for ongoing conversations about the program.

### Moderator

The moderator initiated the meeting, created, and labeled a Breakout Room for each interview room, and assigned interviewers. Interviewers remained in 1 Breakout Room, whereas candidates were rotated between rooms by the moderator. This way all interviewers and candidates had a single Zoom meeting link to minimize error. As candidates logged in 15 minutes before their interview block, the moderator sequestered them into a Breakout Room labeled “interview prep room.” Here, the moderator clarified instructions and offered encouragement. Interview slots were 15 minutes. After interviews had commenced, the moderator broadcasted a “One Minute Warning” at 13 minutes, moved candidates to the “interview prep room” at 14 minutes, allowing 1 minute for interviewers to enter scores, and then moved candidates to the next interview room. Interviewers were instructed not to initiate further questioning after the 13-minute warning. Additionally, candidates were told that there would be no penalty for technologic failure, nor for being removed from the room in the middle of a conversation. The “Ask for Help” feature of Zoom prompted moderator assistance as needed.

If follow-up conversation was requested, the moderator could contact candidates by email and create additional interview time with the appropriate faculty. This feature mimicked being introduced to a faculty member who might share a common interest and it allowed candidates to personalize their experience and maximize exposure to faculty.

### Scoring

Google Sheets was used for scoring. Each interviewer was provided a unique scoresheet and scoring guide adapted from validated scoring guides used in scientific grant panels. Multiple error-checking routines were built-in. Each interviewer input scores without consultation with other interviewers. The online platform reduced potential data entry errors, allowed real-time summary scores for immediate display, and enabled flexibility for modifications to interview tracks if needed.

### Debrief

A separate Zoom meeting was created to ensure confidentiality. All interviewers, faculty, and current trainees were invited. The debrief allowed discussion to finalize the rank list.

### UNIQUE FEATURES

Several elements of our virtual interview process were unique. The Virtual Reception and *Virtual Hangout Room* were specifically designed to promote a personal interview process. The optional Virtual Reception was very well attended by all candidates, current trainees, and program faculty. Most candidates spent 20 to 30 minutes in the *Virtual Hangout Room* to gain comfort immediately before interviews, and to ask follow-up questions of current trainees. Candidate spent only 1 to 2 hours in the interview process; this was a perceived advantage as many candidates returned to work. The Breakout Rooms allowed multiple individual semi-structured and structured interviews.

The synchronous online scoresheets allowed streamlined and accurate collation of scores available for immediate display.

### AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

On review, some areas of our virtual interview process can be improved. Shorter Breakout Rooms with fewer people in each room during the Virtual Reception would better simulate “mingling” at an in-person reception. Other recommendations include an adapted webpage or social media present, prerecorded virtual tours, and posting of frequently asked questions.<sup>9,10</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

Here we detail a usable and personal approach to virtual interviews for postgraduate medical trainee recruitment. Virtual interviews have advantages including costs, efficiency, and carbon cost; however, there are barriers including loss of personal interactions. Our approach focused on retaining previous interview elements, and promoting a personal approach. We have provided templates and guidance on our virtual interview process; these can be readily used and adapted by other programs. Sharing experiences is important to establishing best practices and flexibility to different program needs.

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