



## Interviewing 101 for Healthcare Executives

### Jason Petros and Tanja Oquendo, J.D.

In our careers, we've spent countless hours in interviews with demonstrably successful healthcare leaders. These opportunities have allowed us to identify key practices that strong candidates always seem to follow to ensure they interview well.

#### Preparation

Do your research so your preparation is wholly evident to your interviewer(s). Visit the potential employer's website, and get a feel for their competitive environment and potential issues. Referencing news items or web sections during your interview shows that you have taken the time to familiarize yourself with the organization. Other information available in public forums includes bios of key leaders, non-profit income tax returns, quality data, survey results, etc.

Rely heavily upon your search consultant if one is involved in the recruitment. The consultant will share any relevant information with you regarding the people with whom you will interview, their questioning techniques and major concerns of the organization. These insights are invaluable and will help you feel more prepared and confident.

Take time to go over your strengths and opportunities for improvement. You'll likely be asked about them and they

should come naturally to you – rehearse them (while not seeming rehearsed!).

#### A Successful Opening

You may be asked to tell the interviewer or committee a little about yourself and your career. This should be no more than five minutes and the goal of this statement is to capture your audience. The best opening statement weaves personal attributes with professional accomplishments that are specific to the role you are exploring. Hit the high points and why those experiences made you who you are today.

#### Expression of Interest

Be ready with a clearly articulated statement about your interest in a particular role. The question invariably arises, "So, why are you interested in this opportunity?"

A-list candidates will take an approach which is less about themselves and more about the prospective organization. This includes information shared by the executive search team as well as the candidate's own research on a particular hospital, system and/or community.

Your interest in the role needs to be genuine and, when asked, you will most often describe the challenges or

opportunities of the organization rather than espousing your own credentials. It is not differentiating for you to describe the role as the next logical step in your career. In short, the best answer is more about them (your next prospective employer) and less about you (the candidate).

### “Tell Us About Us”

Prospective employers will often query your knowledge of their organization and market by asking for your future vision. It's expected that you will have done your homework on the institution and the community and this question is your opportunity to express that knowledge. You'll want to show humility and confidence at the same time – one candidate in a recent CEO search, in response to this question, began by saying, “While I don't pretend to know all of the nuances about this market, from my research I think you have a clear strategic advantage against your competition.” He proceeded to dazzle the interviewers with his knowledge of the institution he was vying for, the competition in the market, and opportunities for potential growth. Be open to sharing any potential concerns you may have encountered in your research (e.g., publicly known challenges the organization is facing) and listen carefully to the responses. If you have experience with these situations, it is appropriate to share how you have tackled them.

### Ability to Negotiate Complex Issues

Typically there are some straightforward questions during an interview – do you have experience with x or experience with y? More often, the search firm and client are interested in your ability to negotiate complex issues: *the problem, the solution, the execution, and the outcome*. The most successful way to delineate this information is in a three-part answer, reflecting upon a complex challenge in your recent professional past:

1. Here is the problem, and importantly, the context of the issues we identified or faced – sometimes as a team and sometimes me as an individual.
2. Here was my thought process initially on how to solve a specific issue (solution) and here's how I went about presenting my thoughts to my team or leader.

3. Execution and outcomes – here's how we staffed the problem and kept track of the process. Eventually, we found that it worked, or it didn't and here were the results and my takeaways from the situation. It's important to attach numbers to your results – dollars, survey stats, top box scores, etc.

While it may seem didactic, candidates who can articulate this approach utilizing context, thought process and data tend to leap to the top of the hiring authority's list.

You may be probed about examples of situations that did not go the way you had anticipated. Candidates tend to fumble with this answer, so have at least one good example prepared. If this question arises, the response should be focused more around what you've learned than what you've done.

### A Successful Close

Most interviewers or committees will reserve the last 10 to 15 minutes for your questions. Have two to four key questions prepared, while also leaving room for a question or two that may have come up during the interview. Psychologically, it feels as if you are uninterested or disengaged if you do not ask closing questions.

Have a closing statement. “After today's discussion, it's become clear that the organization is in need of x; and I hope that I have demonstrated my capabilities. I would be delighted to have the opportunity to serve or take the next step.”

As you finish, thank them for the opportunity and their time. Tell them you hope you'll be hearing good news from them sometime soon, even if you come away feeling that your interest has declined. Your goal is to be the person making the decision as to whether or not to proceed in the selection process.

### The Video Interview: A Few Tips

The video interview is a bit of a different animal than an in-person one. Casually approaching a video interview is a common mistake. You should put as much planning and effort into it as you would an in-person interview. Dress for success, meaning a more conservative and formal

dress code is appropriate. Do your homework and prepare; this includes going to painstaking lengths to make sure your technology is ready (especially a secure internet connection!), that your background and room environment are professional (no pets allowed), and that you've done your reading about who you're interviewing with and what their role with the employer is.

During the interview, speak clearly and confidently. Resist the temptation to do all the talking and, as you would in person, try to create a conversation between you and the person (or people) on the other side of the screen. Ask questions to facilitate this, such as: "Would you like me to elaborate on anything I've said?" It can be difficult to "read the room" during a video conference, and so ensuring that you are especially articulate in your responses is critical. Body language still translates over video and so be sure that the camera is at eye contact and you are sitting upright with square shoulders. If you are leaning back, it feels like you are leaning out! If you have the opportunity to stand, by all means, do what is most comfortable, but be aware that fidgeting or rocking back and forth will focus your audience on everything BUT your responses to the questions.

Finally, just as you might for any interview, it never hurts to practice via video. Hold a practice Zoom session with a trusted friend or mentor and get their feedback. You might be surprised at what they notice that you can improve upon.

### **About the Authors**

Jason Petros is deputy managing partner of WittKieffer's Healthcare Practice. Tanja Oquendo, J.D. is senior vice president, transformation integration, for CommonSpirit Health.

### **About WittKieffer**

WittKieffer is a global executive search firm dedicated exclusively to organizations that improve quality of life in healthcare, education, the life sciences and the not-for-profit sector. Its industry-specialized consultants deliver solutions across the leadership continuum – experienced, emerging and interim – that build long-term partnerships and successful outcomes. The firm understands leadership, people who lead and the impact they have on organizations and society. Visit [WittKieffer.com](https://www.wittkieffer.com) to learn more.

### **About NAHSE**

The National Association of Health Services Executives (NAHSE) is a non-profit association of Black health care executives founded in 1968 for the purpose of promoting the advancement and development of Black health care leaders, and elevating the quality of health care services rendered to minority and underserved communities. NAHSE's purpose is to ensure greater participation of minority groups in the health field. Visit [NAHSE.org](https://www.nahse.org) to learn more.