INTERVIEWS!

By Simon Boxall

Interviews—bêtes noires for most of us—must nevertheless be endured at various stages in our careers. Interviewees may stress about being accepted at a particular university or getting the job: Was my CV good enough? Will the panel ask difficult questions? What if I am not on form the day or hour of my interview? Interviewers can also find the situation taxing: How do I choose from this array of candidates based on their CVs? How honest are the references? How can I assess them in just an hour?

My own first interview was perhaps the most intense when, at 17, I considered becoming an officer in the Royal Navy. The grueling *interview* consisted of three days of intense activity and scrutiny—for example, coming from an assault course in the rain and mud to dress for a board interview in less than 15 minutes (my socks were still wet). When it became clear that my inquiring mind (the commissioning board thought I would ask too many questions about pushing the big red button) was better suited to ocean research than to ocean domination, I moved on. After this "naval gazing," university interviews were a breeze. In the UK, students apply for five courses of study. I was asked for an interview for four of the five, and the irony is that the university that rejected me without an interview was the one I have worked for over the past few decades. I now realize that the decisions were not made on the specific answers but rather on the way I approached the answers.

Since then, I have interviewed hundreds of potential undergraduates and come to realize that while it is a filtering process, it is also a chance to engage with candidates and convince them that my course is the one that they have always wanted to study. When we started our undergraduate degrees in oceanography and marine biology in the 1980s, the number of applicants was relatively small, so we could interview all candidates who had the right subjects and predicted grades from high school. Their *personal statements* provided good points of reference for their interviews. Reading all of them involved a lot of staff time, and students needed to travel from across the UK for the interviews. Although a few candidates were rejected—the one who claimed to have followed Jacques Cousteau's career closely but in discussion didn't even know he was French, and the one who turned out to be aquaphobic and somehow didn't realize oceanography generally involved going to sea—most were given offers. The interview did two things. It meant that the candidates had to visit the university and engage with a human being who would be involved in their education, initiating a sense belonging. It also meant that, come high school results day, we could sift through those who narrowly missed their required grades and fill our courses with students who showed the best potential at the interview.

Over my career, this engagement with potential candidates has proven to be most valuable. My own university has pushed toward dropping interviews for all subjects except those whose UK governing bodies require them (primarily the medical fields). Initially, the excuse was that it took up too much of our valuable academic time. I fought against this with the argument that the interview resulted in enrolling more good candidates. As a result, the university commissioned a study involving past and present students to see if the interview helped them decide which university and course to choose. The conclusion was that it made a big difference. At a time when most other universities in the UK had already dropped formal interviews, the candidates felt it gave them a direct contact with an academic, that someone had read the personal statement they had spent weeks worrying over, and most importantly they had earned their offers of a place. In spite of this, members of the university hierarchy decided that what students really wanted was a quick decision rather than having to wait weeks for an interview, and they forced the abandonment of interviews. In oceanography, as I predicted, we went from an offer-to-acceptance rate of between 70% and 80% to 35%. After two years of falling numbers, I was allowed to reintroduce interviews for oceanography, and we immediately went back to the higher rate of student acceptances. Though interviews were done online using conferencing software as a compromise to minimize staff disruption and the need for students to travel, it still resulted in one of the highest conversion rates in our university and is one of only a handful of courses that returned to interviews.

Six years on, the system has again pushed for scrapping interviews—instead, getting an administrative person to make most of the decisions with no academic engagement. The argument now is that some students will not turn up to interviews, even online, because they are nervous and do not like the stress of an interview. Out of 50 candidates in a year, that reasoning would account for one—and to be honest, if a student can't cope with an interview, then I would fear for how they would cope in the degree course with its associated stresses and strains.

The interview process can't be put off forever, and it does live on for graduates. Our career service office does a good job of preparing students for interviews, with practice sessions and guidance on how they work. However, the pressure of a real-world interview scenario and the diverse ways in which different career pathways approach them is more challenging. Last month, a student asked me to arrange a waiver for the interview involved in applying for a position outside the university because of being nervous under interview conditions. I declined, pointing out that the company was likely of the opinion that the student could qualify for the job but would not make an offer without an interview.

I have interviewed candidates for various staff positions over the years, chair two charities that employ staff, and have chaired a school board that takes on a wide range of staff, from teachers to caretakers. Whereas once interviews tended to be a bit haphazard and informal, in the present day they are far more structured and designed to be equal for all candidates (a welcome development). Questions are agreed in advance for all interviewees so each candidate is treated equally, and only in exceptional circumstances might candidate-specific questions be included—*so Dr. Brown, when would you be free to start given your desire to first complete your work teaching dolphins to fly?*

The process starts with the application forms and references (though for some jobs, the references come after the initial offer). In addition to conducting dozens of job interviews, I have written hundreds of references for students and staff alike, knowing that a sterling reference from me might be the difference between getting an interview or being passed over. The biggest hurdle for the interviewee is convincing an appointments board to choose you for interview out of tens or even hundreds of other candidates—it is rare that panels will interview more than five or six candidates. The CV, the cover letter, and, indeed, the references, are all important in getting you recognized.

As with student interviews, a job or postgraduate interview is designed not only to sort out the best candidate but also to encourage that candidate to take the position when offered. The interview is the first filter for rejection and needs to be searching. The number of candidates I have interviewed who look great on paper but have done no research into the post or the organization is frightening. And there is that brief hour for the interview, which may be the candidate's first formal interview (other than the quick interview for a student job in the local bar for which the only key qualification was a pulse).

Having made an offer, there is then the nail-biting period: Will the candidate accept the offer? Did we, the interview panel, get it right? There is an equal nail-biting period for the candidate. It used to be that, in spite of being told "we will let you know in one week," the new employer would be on the phone or email that evening, so no call implied bad news. More recently, it really can be a week before the large cogs of the HR department whirl into motion, so don't panic. It is also well worth sending a positive response and thanks even if you are rejected. I know of several cases where the "perfect" candidate either decided not to take the job or started, and it did not work out, so there is hope for the candidate who was a close second or even third at interview.

Though interviews may be the bête noire for many, at the end of the day, they are the best method for matchmaking in the oceanographic world.

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