cardiothoracic surgery residents.⁷ A major source of training program information regarding the amount of trainee autonomy, operative experience, culture, and quality of life come from informal interactions with current residents. These candid encounters between the current cardiothoracic residents and applicants are probably the most important components of the interview process; therefore, cardiothoracic programs will have to preserve these current trainee–applicant interactions in the virtual interview process. In the foreseeable future, the challenge for cardiothoracic residency programs is to figure out what factors are important to applicants when ranking programs and determine how to best showcase the most beneficial program characteristics in a virtual interview platform.

See Article page e475.

Commentary: Virtual interviews in cardiothoracic surgery: A match made in heaven or gone catfishing?

Salman Zaheer, MD, and Ahmet Kilic, MD

*Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone.
For the times they are a-changin'...*¹

Salman Zaheer, MD (left), and Ahmet Kilic, MD (right)

CENTRAL MESSAGE

COVID-19 has changed both applicants and training programs. It is time to take the best of virtual and in-person formats for a matching process that is cost- and time-efficient, fair, and informative.

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Cardiothoracic surgery training is steeped in traditions, and COVID-19—much like everything else in society—has rocked it to its foundation. The COVID-19 pandemic caught everyone off guard in the middle of 2019-2020 interview season. It is no wonder that a majority of respondents in Taylor and colleagues' initial survey over this time period responded negatively to the virtual interview process, with 96% of respondents favoring in-person interviews.² The follow-up to this report and the present article on applicant

perception of virtual interviews during the 2020-2021 cycle displays a full 180° turn compared with the prior year's results, with 87% of respondents favoring virtual interviews.³ The authors should be commended for continuing to ask this question: Are virtual interviews the new reality? The answer isn't exactly clear and there are certainly shortcomings that come from this type of survey data. Namely, only a 43% response rate and a far higher likelihood of a response from successfully matched candidates.

Nevertheless, this article brings forth central issues with the current program-trainee interview process. The things that one would think are important for trainees, like institutional reputation, culture of learning, case volume/complexity, and lifestyle during training were hard to assess by the interviewees. In fact, only 50% stated that they felt successful in appropriately evaluating a program. Is this the fault of the interviewee for not asking the appropriate questions? Is it the fault of the program for not anticipating and filling in the gaps of what interviewees should know about the program? It is extremely difficult to pinpoint the exact reason because each applicant, just like each program, is looking for the right fit for themselves. An important aspect for 1 applicant may not be applicable to the next and same is true for programs. What should be easy to assess, however, are the objective measures of a program. Specifically, the number of total trainees, the number of graduating chiefs per year, tracking within the program, the length of program, percent pass rate of board exams, case volume per graduating chief, case distribution per chief, expected call schedule, rotations, electives, where graduating chiefs have gone the following year, the faculty on staff, the makeup of the training program, and the key personnel involved in their training.

The temptation to making oneself more attractive online by both the applicant and the program is undeniable. Akin to using filters on Snapchat, boasting about vacations on Instagram, tweeting about your personal success on Twitter, or creating a fake online account, it is very easy to intentionally or unintentionally present a program in a more favorable light. Indeed, most programs have taken on professional help to create a stronger online presence, make hype videos about their program, and maintain Twitter accounts and Facebook pages to celebrate the successes of faculty and trainees. This should not be seen as something negative; however, it does not always add to the ability of the trainee to learn more about a program. Perhaps the biggest negative of the virtual interviews for the applicant is the inability to truly identify the culture of a program. Everyone can put on a good show for interviews, but it is harder to put on a show during a socially fluid/

interactive environment like the night-before-interview dinners, where an applicant can truly assess the culture and interactions between trainees, faculty, and everyone all together. The positive for the program is that it has complete control in how the program is portrayed and simply excludes the parts it does not want displayed. An important component of this could be an accurate depiction of the lifestyle that a trainee can expect in a certain city.

Despite these shortcomings, there are a lot of positives from virtual interviews. The relative ease of scheduling with less disruption of clinical and personal commitments and one's home is an undeniable positive. The ease of the financial burden of arranging travel, hotels, and meals at a time when most applicants aren't financially thriving is a huge plus. The ability to cross off a lukewarm program that isn't the right fit after an initial feeling allows for both the trainee and the program to concentrate on more suitable matches.

It is no wonder that 63% of respondents want a hybrid interview process between the positive aspects of virtual interviews and the positive aspects of an in-person interview. How do we operationalize this while maintaining equity in the interview process? A screening virtual interview followed by in-person interview for those interested will place those who are less financially sound in a difficult predicament. Those who live on opposite ends of the United States will give up more of their personal time, more money for travel, and more extended time away from clinical duties. So, what is the right medium? Should we go back to completely in-person interviews or is there a middle road?

We believe that virtual interviews are going to be a valuable part of the interview process going forward. Based on the survey, applicants and programs perceived no difference in 1-on-1 faculty-applicant interviews whether done virtually or in-person. We recommend that programs continue to improve on the current virtual interview format by making the process smoother, with easily translatable objective data, improving websites and social media presence, and perhaps most importantly giving applicants valuable time to spend with the current trainees and faculty members integral to their education.

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