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Writing a Winning Cover Letter

The cover letter is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of the application process. Some people disregard cover letters completely, and others put way too much emphasis on them. If you take a random sampling of cover letters submitted for jobs, you'll find letters ranging from one sentence to three pages and containing vastly different types of information.

When it comes to a resume and cover letter packet, it is important to note that the resume is the more important document of the two. That said, there are several essential functions of a cover letter.

One might compare the relationship between a resume and cover letter to that of a novel and the blurb on a novel's back cover. Here's why:

- A novel doesn't *need* a back cover to be considered good, and if the novel is strong enough, people will want to read it based on its reputation alone (this could equate to the reputation of your school or residency program).
- If someone is trying to decide between several similar novels, however, he might read the back cover in order to find something that draws him in. Similarly, a well-written cover letter could help set you apart from other applicants at your level.
- Sometimes during the reading of the novel, the reader will reference the back cover in order to clarify a relationship or to see what a major plot point is going to be. In this same vein, someone may turn to your cover letter while perusing your resume to look for further clarification of some of your experiences.

While the cover letter serves a valuable role, you want your resume to be able to stand on its own without a cover letter if need be. Resumes are often



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passed along from person to person and, should the cover letter get lost along the way, you want all of the most relevant information about your candidacy to be on your resume.

At the same time, there are certain things that just cannot be communicated through the resume alone. These might include:

- reasons for relocation;
- reasons for choosing a certain specialty area or type of practice;
- reasons for entering medicine from a prior career;
- information about gaps or potentially misunderstood information on your resume;
- a further explanation of particularly unique or impressive qualifications; and/or
- a summary of your most relevant experience.

A cover letter should not simply offer a condensed version of what is already on your resume. If your resume is very straightforward and speaks for itself you should stick with a brief cover letter. You'd rather have someone focus the bulk of their attention on your resume than discard it because he/she was turned off by a lengthy and pointless letter. Likewise, if you feel that your resume is lacking in certain areas, you will want to try and compensate for that with a well thought out and well written cover letter.

To figure out what your cover letter should say, first write down any things you feel you need to communicate to the employer—things that he will not realize from simply perusing your resume. Then jot down the four most impressive aspects of your background with regard to the type of position you are seeking.

Once you have this information assembled, it boils down to writing. The Doctor Job employs professional writers who specialize in drafting concise and compelling cover letters that say exactly what you need to say in a manner that conveys intelligence and insight. Trust us to help you put your best foot forward.

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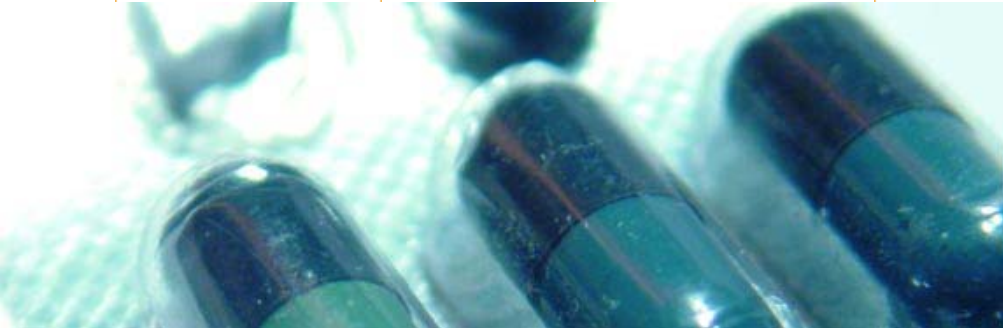

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5 Quick Fixes for Physician CVs

If you are a licensed and board certified physician, you are in the enviable position of having credentials that mostly speak for themselves. But that doesn't mean you can afford to have a sloppy or thrown together physician curriculum vitae (CV). As with many things in life, CVs are often judged by their appearance first. That is why it is important that, as a resident or physician, your CV be visually appealing, easy to scan, and logically assembled.

Below are five quick fixes for your CV that will ensure that it gets and keeps the interest of prospective physician employers.

1) Are dates the first things you see? They shouldn't be!

While dates are important, you don't want them to be the main focus point on your CV. A layout that puts dates before or on top of titles and degrees is not only visually unappealing, but it forces the reader to dig for the most pertinent information.

There are four key elements to any listing in the Education, Postgraduate Training, or Work Experience sections of a resident or physician CV: 1) Position or degree, 2) name of organization, 3) location of organization, and 4) the dates of your tenure. Of these four, the position and name of the organization are the most important. Therefore, of the two examples below, B is a much better format than A.

Example A:

1999-2003, St. Francis Hospital, Queens, NY, Internal Medicine Resident



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Example B:

Internal Medicine Resident, 1993–2003
St. Francis Hospital, Queens, NY

Bolding your position or degree makes that information stand out even more, which a busy employer will appreciate.

The rule about dates also applies to categories such as Memberships, Honors/Awards, or Volunteer Activities. Take the example below:

1993–2005, Member, American Medical Association
 1994–2005, Member, American Academy of Pediatrics
 1992–2003, Member, Wisconsin Medical Association

Having so many dates on the left is distracting. Here is a much better approach:

American Medical Association, 1993–2005
American Academy of Pediatrics, 1994–2005
Wisconsin Medical Association, 1992–2003

As a general rule, the most substantive information should be the most prominent.

2) Is your timeline easy to follow?

A physician employer reviewing your CV for the first time should be able to determine the progression of everything you've done from your undergraduate training to medical school to residency to the present in 30 seconds or less. The best way to ensure this is to list everything in reverse chronological order—this applies to the categories as well as the items within each category. If you have been practicing medicine for a while, then your Work Experience should be at the top, followed by your Residency/Fellowship Training, followed by your Education.

If you are at an early point in your career as a physician and feel that you'd benefit from highlighting your education/training above your current work experience, it is OK to put that category first, as long as your work experience doesn't follow far behind.

The main thing to avoid is categorizing your experience in a way that makes it difficult to follow chronologically. For example, if you spent a few years after your residency pursuing research before joining a medical practice, don't bury that information on the second page. It is fine to put it in its own "Research" category, but it should be placed accordingly within the timeline on your CV.

3) Is your CV two pages or less?

Traditionally, resident and physician CVs are lengthy and include all types of information beyond education, training, and employment. Physician CVs also list publications, presentations, CME activities, volunteer work, community lectures, and other relevant professional activities. While it's a good idea to keep an updated, comprehensive CV on hand, for the purpose of your job search, you want an abbreviated version that is two pages or less (unless you are looking for an academic position).

If you have a lengthy CV, the best way to condense it is to create a separate

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addendum containing detailed information about your research projects, publications, abstracts, etc. This addendum can be provided upon request to interested employers.

You still should mention these things on your abbreviated CV, but summarize them in a few bullet points or a brief paragraph. For example, you might consider the following:

Publications/Presentations/Research*

Authored 15 articles in published in medical journals including The New England Journal of Medicine and the Internal Medicine Journal. Also published over 25 abstracts. Participated in several important research projects focusing primarily on diabetes treatment and prevention.

**Full listing of publications and research projects available upon request.*

4) Is the overall appearance easy on the eyes?

A CV that's appealing to the eye is not necessarily the same thing as a CV that's eye-catching. Of course you want to get noticed, but many people take the notion of eye-catching too far. Unusual fonts, strange symbols, or tricky formats will only aggravate the busy person who is trying to quickly assess your qualifications.

Make sure to use a traditional font such as Times New Roman or Garamond. Since these fonts are what most people are accustomed to reading on a daily basis, they won't have trouble adjusting to a new one. Text should be either 11 or 12 point font, not bigger or smaller (excluding category headings).

Also make sure you use white space to adequately separate each item in your CV. This will make it easy to scan and pick out information. A laundry list is hard on the eyes, and it also can obscure important information.

Finally, your headings should be clear and stand out from the other text in your resume, so that it's easy to pick out each category.

5) Is your formatting consistent?

Before you send off your CV to a physician employer, do a quick check to make sure that your formatting is consistent. If you bold your job titles, then you should also bold your degrees. If you put a colon after some of your headings, it should be after all of them. If you use a dash between some dates, make sure you don't write the word "to" between others.

Although these details may seem minor, inconsistent formatting makes your CV seem sloppy. That is not the first impression you want to give to a prospective physician employer.

It's always a good idea to get a second pair of eyes on your CV before sending it off. If you've been working on it a while, or you've had the same format for ages, you might be missing something that is glaringly obvious to someone else. The best person to look at your CV is someone who is unfamiliar with your career history. Ask this person if anything is unclear or if they have any questions about what is on the page.

Putting in a few extra minutes to make sure your CV looks impressive will save you a lot of time down the road because you will find a great job that much sooner. By following the five tips above, you can feel confident that you are submitting a polished and appealing document to prospective employers.

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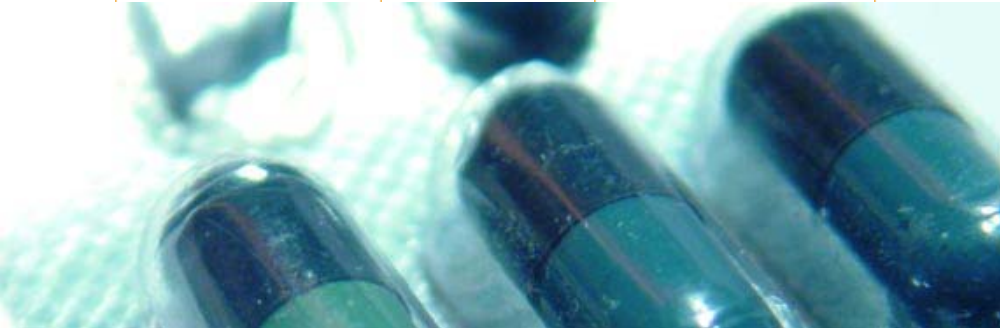



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How to Interview Successfully

Most physicians agree that medical schools, while supportive in many areas, are often lacking when it comes to career counseling. As an unfortunate result, most employers consider the interview to be many residents' and physicians' biggest weakness; yet, it is one of the most crucial elements of the hiring process.

If you followed the traditional path to medical school, chances are your interviewing experience is nonexistent or minimal at best. Therefore, the interviewing process may seem much more daunting to you than to your peers in other professions, who have already held a plethora of positions.

The first thing to realize is that an interview is a two-way street. While the employer has the upper hand in many respects, you are both trying to make a positive impression on each other in the hopes of finding a good fit. Therefore, you shouldn't go into an interview feeling as though you are being put under a microscope.

It is important, however, that you understand proper protocol. Preparation is key, and if you internalize the information below, you will be able to present yourself as an articulate and capable candidate for any position.

First Impressions

When an employer contacts you to schedule an interview, you need to make sure that you come across as enthusiastic and accommodating. Many physicians have a tendency to be abrupt on the telephone. While this is normally the result of a busy schedule, it can come across as rude and presumptuous. You should never give the impression that your time is more important than the person you're speaking to.



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Also, avoid asking questions such as "What hospital is this again?" or "I'm sorry, can you remind me of where this practice is?" You may have applied to numerous positions, but it is important to keep information about these positions handy so that you can immediately reference the caller/organization. Otherwise, the employer will assume that you simply cast a wide net and don't have a genuine interest in his particular practice.

When it comes to scheduling the time for your interview, there are several factors to consider. If you are a morning person, see if you can schedule your interview early in the day. Likewise, if you can't put together a coherent thought until you've had at least three cups of coffee, don't schedule your interview first thing in the morning. You also don't want to meet after a 14 hour day or at the end of a grueling week.

Make sure you clear adequate time for the interview, and that you consider the schedule of the employer. Even if the early morning or the late evening may be more convenient for you, it is more appropriate and professional to schedule your interview during normal business hours (unless the employer specifically requests otherwise). Additionally, if you are experiencing an unusually tight schedule on the day of your interview, don't let the time crunch keep you from doing what's important. Consider the interview an investment in your future, and make adequate time for it.

Do's and don'ts

Do arrive on time. Plan your schedule so that you anticipate arriving at least 15-20 minutes early in case traffic is bad, you get lost, or something unknown occurs.

Don't arrive too early. While it's good to allow an extra cushion of time, you don't want to throw off the interviewer by arriving at the office more than five minutes ahead of schedule. If you're early, walk around the block and grab a cup of coffee, or read the newspaper for a few minutes at a café before making your presence known.

Do be courteous to everyone you meet. A receptionist who finds you rude could have a great impact on your ability to get a position, regardless of how smooth you come across in the actual interview.

Don't neglect to prepare. Ask colleagues and family members for help with mock interviewing and practice questions. Finally, make sure to stay current in your field so that you can discuss any news in the field.

Do try on your interview clothes before you leave for your destination if you are traveling long distance. There is nothing worse than finding out that something doesn't fit right 10 minutes before your interview when you are 300 miles from your closet.

Don't forget that interviews are an artificial situation in which the interviewer has power. This can cause you to feel overly pressured to act a certain way, which in turn will seem false and forced. Anxiety will interfere with your ability to answer questions intelligently. The more relaxed and natural you can be, the more likely it is that the interviewer will get a realistic impression of you.

Do have a firm, solid handshake. A limp, weak handshake never makes a good impression.

Don't be disrespectful during the interview. Never talk down to the interviewer. Be polite, listen carefully, and do not argue under any circumstances.

Do stay calm and maintain eye contact. You don't have to stare,

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but keep consistent visual contact with the interviewer's general facial area. Looking at their eyes, forehead, lips or chin is important, so that the interviewer knows you are paying attention.

Don't forget that interviewers are not always trained in interviewing. You may find an interviewer rambling on about the position and the practice without asking you any questions about yourself. In this situation, it is okay to exert a little control over the process by discussing your strengths and explaining some key points that you want to get across.

Do ask questions. Asking questions shows that you were listening to and digesting the information the employer presented. It also conveys your genuine interest in learning more about the organization. Research the employer (and interviewer, if possible) extensively so that you can ask thoughtful, intelligent questions.

Don't discuss politics and religion. These topics should be avoided at all cost.

Do remember that there are two major questions that every interviewer wants answered. Are you able to do the job and do it well? Will you be manageable as an employee or part of a partnership? If you can answer these questions to the employer's satisfaction, you will get the job.

Don't lie or be negative. Honesty is the best policy, but if someone asks you about a former employer with whom you had a hostile relationship, be tactful. It's better to focus on strengths and positives than to give the interviewer the impression that you are not an easy person to work with.

Do establish rapport. Remember the interviewer's name, and use it a few times throughout the interview. Show interest in the conversation. Ask questions, smile when appropriate, and laugh when jokes are told (regardless of how bad).

Don't ask about salary unless the interviewer brings it up first. Even if the interview does bring it up, you shouldn't discuss specifics. Focus instead on a salary range and don't reveal exactly what you made in your last position. Detailed salary discussions should occur *after* an offer has been extended.

Do send a thank you note after your interview. It is proper etiquette, and employers appreciate the gesture.

Don't forget that bias still exists. For example, it is generally regarded that an overweight applicant will have a more difficult time in an interview than a thin applicant. If you are overweight, you can avoid this bias by dressing well and making sure that your clothes fit well. During the interview, be as positive and high energy as you can. Focus on your strong work ethic and you should be able to overcome any stereotype of overweight people as lazy and lacking in energy.

What is your biggest weakness?

This question has plagued jobseekers since the beginning of time. The point of this question is to determine how self-aware and realistic you are. Truthfully speaking, there is no "right" answer, but we can offer some guidance for a better answer.

Saying "I'm a perfectionist" or "I work too much" is overused and clichéd, and employers will see through it. Rather than trying to sell a strength as a weakness, you should discuss the steps you have taken in overcoming your weakness.

For example, you can say that you have traditionally been a shy person, but you have been actively challenging yourself by speaking in public and that you have made considerable progress towards alleviating it. Another example would be to discuss your own impatience when others fail to uphold responsibilities. You've had to resist stepping in to solve the problems of your employees, and now you're trying to use these situations as teaching opportunities.

The second most difficult question is: "What is your biggest strength?" While this gives you the opportunity to tout yourself, you want to avoid sounding presumptuous. Try to present your answer in terms of what your colleagues and supervisors have said about you. This will allow you to avoid looking too egotistical.

Tips for the panel interview:

- It's okay to feel overwhelmed. Everybody is a little nervous or anxious, so don't worry if you feel butterflies—it's normal.
- When introduced, acknowledge each person. Try to remember their names.
- Listen carefully. Don't let your mind wander. Focus on answering each question as thoroughly as possible.
- Address your answer directly to the person who asked the question.

Tips for the lunch interview:

- While this may be a more relaxed environment, you have to be completely "on" no matter what.
- Follow the ordering cues of your host regarding which courses you should order and price ranges. Obviously, don't order a dish that you can't eat neatly, like spaghetti or soup.
- Only order a drink if you are pressed by the host to do so. Even if you do order a drink, drink very limited amounts, and match each sip with a sip of water.
- Make sure your etiquette is excellent at all times. Table manners are of the utmost importance.
- Even if the food is fantastic, don't become consumed with eating. Focus on the interview, and on answering and asking questions.

Tips for international applicants:

- Unfortunately, a thick accent or poor English speaking ability can affect your chances of success. However, more than 20% of positions in medicine are held by people who attended medical school outside of the U.S., so don't despair. Stay relaxed and speak slowly. Don't be afraid to ask for something to be repeated, and sometimes a little bit of humor can help.
- If your name is mispronounced, do not correct the interviewer unless they ask for help.
- Remember that eye contact is okay in the US and is expected in an interview.
- If it is a lunch interview, you need to be extremely cautious of your table manners. Customs are different everywhere, and you need to make sure that something acceptable in your culture isn't a breach of etiquette here.
- Do not dwell upon your place of origin. This doesn't mean you should hide where you are from, but you want to focus on working in the US.
- Do not attack or criticize US culture, even in agreement with the interviewer or as a joke.
- Try to get letters of recommendation from previous American employers or professors; they carry much more weight.
- If asked about your weakness, you should name your accent or English skills as your most prominent weakness, and you should outline the steps that you intend to take to enhance your English.

- Discuss your adaptability and your ability to fit in.
- Your motivations for entering medicine should be personal. Saying that you became a doctor because your family has always comprised doctors is not an appropriate response.
- Make sure you understand your visa status and that everything is in order.

Conclusion

You may be a smart, hardworking candidate, but you are competing against equally intelligent, motivated candidates. Relying solely on your credentials is not sufficient; you need to understand the interviewing process in order to present yourself in the best light possible.

When it comes to interviews, practice makes perfect. For this reason, you should accept every interview you are offered, even if you don't feel that the position presents the ideal fit. The more interviews you go on, the more comfortable you will feel, and the more exposure you will have to the types of questions asked.

Keep in mind that interviewers are as eager to find a good fit as you are. Before you sit down to an interview, take a deep breath and focus your attention on all of those things that make you a good candidate. When you are feeling confident internally, you will portray yourself as someone worth getting to know.

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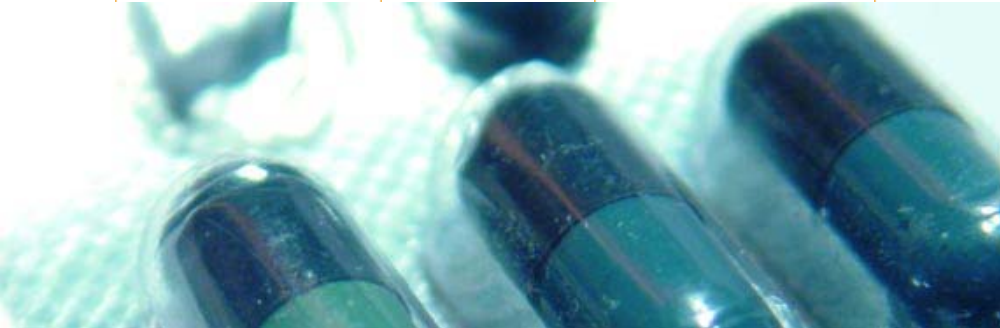

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“I’m not sure what makes me stand out. I guess you’d need to ask my colleagues.”

“I just finished my residency, so I haven’t really accomplished anything yet.”

“I haven’t won any awards.”

These are examples of some fairly common responses we receive from physicians when asking them about their achievements in the workplace. This isn’t because the physicians haven’t actually done anything worthy of mention, it’s because they are unable to properly assess and express their strengths and skills, which affects their ability to successfully find a new job as a practicing physician.

The ability to sell yourself is perhaps the most important skill any physician can master in terms of your career (medical skills notwithstanding, of course). “Selling yourself” doesn’t refer to a hard sell; it simply means communicating your abilities to others. You can be the most hardworking, passionate, and talented physician in the world, but if you aren’t able to make your strengths visible to those who don’t already know you well, you will miss out on many great physician jobs.

Think about it—you probably know of several doctors who consistently get the fantastic job, the academic appointment, the most important cases, etc., yet aren’t necessarily the most competent or skilled physician. The people who are left behind on the career ladder are not always the ones who perform poorly. Often, they are the equally talented physicians who unfortunately allowed themselves to be overshadowed by others who were more outspoken.



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So how do you go about selling yourself?

The first step is to develop an awareness of what makes you a great physician. An achievement doesn't have to be in the form of a list of publications or a national award. An achievement is anything you've done well in your career.

Coming up with a list of achievements is essential to putting your best foot forward. And all it requires is a bit of brainstorming. The steps below will help you to begin the brainstorming process.

1) What do others (physicians, patients, friends, colleagues) compliment you on?

Try to remember and record any compliments you've received. Do patients consistently thank you for your clear communication or your follow-up? Do your colleagues appreciate your willingness to take on extra shifts when needed? Paying attention to positive feedback will help you to figure out where your strengths lie.

2) What do you do that's "above and beyond?"

Have you served in mentorship roles? Have you taken advantage of opportunities to participate in physician conferences or research projects? Do you participate in committees or serve in leadership roles within your practice? Anything you've done outside the boundaries of your physician job description is worth mentioning.

3) Take stock of your experience.

Have you worked with one specific type of patient, or have you worked with a whole gamut of patients, from newborns to the elderly? Have you gained additional expertise within your specialty? Perhaps you've practiced in diverse environments and have the ability to quickly adapt to new situations. Looking back over your career and the jobs you have had as a physician to date (regardless of length), evaluate how your experience as a whole has prepared you for your next physician job.

4) What makes you unique?

Now we're speaking in a professional context here: employers won't want to know that you can tie a cherry stem with your tongue or recite the entire alphabet backwards in 10 seconds. But everyone brings their own unique strengths to a position. Maybe you have a great sense of humor and have a different joke at the tip of your tongue at all times to put patients at ease. Maybe you're a great educator. Maybe you've made it a point to become an expert in a specific disease or technology and spent lots of time outside of work reading up on it. Whatever it is that sets you apart, let it be known.

5) What will you bring to your next employer?

You know the quote "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Well, replace the word "country" with "employer" and you will have the right mantra for your search for the perfect physician job.

The best way to get the attention of employers is to tell them what you have to offer. Saying that you're looking for great pay, reasonable hours, and bonus incentives won't win you any favor. It doesn't mean you don't deserve or won't receive those things. But when approaching a potential employer, you want to show that person how you will make his/her practice better.

Perhaps you have a knack for streamlining procedures that has made your previous offices run more smoothly. Maybe you're a fantastic networker or rainmaker who brings in a lot of referrals through your community involvement. Or you may have experience in billing procedures. If you can convince an employer that his/her practice will be better off with you as a part of it, you are guaranteed a position.

The most important step to getting the residency or fellowship you want.

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You've done the brainstorming...now what?

Spending time thinking about what you've achieved is invaluable: not only will it help you to catch the attention of physician employers, but it will make you more prepared in interview or networking situations.

For the purpose of a large-scale job search, this information will be useful in creating a stellar resume and cover letter. These two documents are extremely important, as they make the "first impression" on potential employers. Most physicians who find good jobs do so as a result of a good first impression. Even though most physicians aren't expected to be stellar writers, that doesn't mean that employers won't be put off by poorly written materials. Conversely, a well-written letter and resume can open doors for you that might have been closed otherwise.

If you can make the effort to properly and successfully sell yourself to an employer, the next step is finding the employers to whom you want to sell yourself! Once you can do that, using a service like The Doctor Job, your search for the perfect physician job will be quick and painless and over before you even realize it's started.

Relevant Articles:

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