



## **Episode 25 - How to Rock Your Nonclinical Interviews**

**With Michelle Schmidt**

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MS: “A good strategy is to make sure that you've researched the company and the job and that you have a couple of questions ready to go. Always with you ready to go on the interview because you never, ever, ever, ever, ever want to say “No, I don't have any questions.”.

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello, hello. Welcome back to the Doctor’s Crossing Carpe Diem podcast episode number 25. Do you remember when you interviewed to get a clinical job? Either that first one out of residency or subsequent positions? No sweat, right? You knew what your skills were, and so did those hiring you. Maybe you were a little nervous but no biggy, you did fine. You got the job.

Well, what about if you're interviewing for a nonclinical position? How do you answer those pesky questions? So, tell me about yourself. Why do you want to leave clinical

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medicine? What are your salary expectations? Oh, that's a goodie. Or how about those behavioral type questions? Tell me about a time when you made a mistake or went into conflict with your boss or had to make a big apology. Well, don't worry. I have a wonderful guest today who is going to help us out with preparing for nonclinical interviews.

I have to admit interview prep is one of my favorite things I do with my clients. I love it because I see how with some focus prep, they learn very quickly how to rock their interviews and are highly successful in getting offers. Our guest is just as passionate as I am about interview prep, you'll see. Her name is Michelle Schmidt and she's a recruiter who's worked for almost three decades at a major pharma company during which she had a very interesting career change and all you'll hear about it, that led to her becoming a high-level position recruiter.

The recruiting Michelle does at her current agency falls into the category of retained searches, where a company asked her to find a physician in a certain specialty, usually with a very specific area of expertise.

Even though she's from the world of pharma, the advice she's going to give us today will apply to interviewing for nonclinical jobs in general. And as a special bonus for you, there will be a link at the end to download a free guide to interview prep. Yay. It will also be on my website under free resources. It is my distinct honor to give a very warm welcome to Michelle Schmidt. Hi Michelle. I am so excited to have you here on the podcast. Welcome.

MS: Hi Heather. Thank you for having me. I'm excited as well.

HF: As you and I discussed, we both love interview preps, so it's fun to be able to talk to someone else who feels as passionate as I do about how important this is.



MS: Absolutely. I am a total interview nerd. I love to help people interview and get ready and just show their best side and their best self and be excited about the role. And it's probably my very favorite thing to do in all of the career prep that I do. It's awesome.

HF: I have to agree with you and it makes such a difference. I thought it would be fun if we start off this interview, so to speak, with a question that so many of us dread, which is "Tell me about yourself". So, Michelle, would you love to tell us about yourself?

MS: Absolutely. I love that question. Yes, that is a tried-and-true question that I remember back in the day, getting ready for interviews, even when I interviewed for my first job and it's really stood the test of time because I ask it every single time of someone when I'm prepping them for their calls with whomever they're interviewing for. It's my first question out of the gate. So, I love it.

And for me to tell you about me, actually I have a kind of a funny background to get to where I am today. I started out about 30 years ago. I have a BS in chemistry. So, I'm an analytical chemist. I started out in the lab in big pharma. I worked in the chemistry and science related jobs for probably 10 to 12 years. So, I was in the lab, I was in quality control. I released lots of insulin for years working with the operators, really learned a lot and loved those roles.

And then I had this great HR representative that was just really insightful and a great mentor and coach to me. And my personality was such that I really enjoy talking to people and the grind of the lab was something that I just didn't want to do anymore. It didn't bring me joy at all. And so, I thought I could do what she does. And so, I switched gears completely and went to human resources, without really any background in human resources. But what was helpful is, the company that I was at, I worked as a human resource person for, the roles that I had done.



So, I knew the business and I picked up the HR side. So, I was in HR for the quality control folks and the operators and that type of thing and manufacturing. And that was really fun. And that led me to be really more deep in HR. And I was then the HR persons for all of the physicians, globally at my company. And I worked a lot on their career development plans and just being able to meet physicians globally and help them with the kind of their next steps and what did they want to do. Whether they wanted to be technical or whether they wanted to lead other people. I really enjoyed that piece of it.

And I got to work with them so closely that I really got a firsthand look of what made physicians successful in pharma and biotech. And so, I wanted to be on the front end of that process and bring them in with the attributes that I knew to look for. So, I went recruiting. I recruited physicians. That's been probably the last 10 years. So, I recruit physicians, some PhDs, but mostly MD PhDs. Absolutely love it. I learn something new every single time I talk to a physician and I really love to help them get to where they'd like to go for their next step in their next career. And that's kind of me. I interview physicians and help them get to their next role. And I recruit for pharma and biotech exclusively now.

HF: I love your story and it really fits with our audience because you completely change your career trajectory.

MS: I did. I mean completely. People tease me because I went to the “dark” side, I went to HR. So, I can really relate to people who “go” to the dark side of pharma rather than seeing patients all the time. And maybe that's not something that you say out loud, but let's face it. Everybody says it out loud. So, I really can relate to just knowing that I was in a place where it didn't bring me joy. It's not where I want it to be. I wasn't living to my full potential. I was just kind of existing and not living. And then when I moved to my next job and that just blossomed from there everything in my life was just so much better when you're doing what you love every day.

HF: Well, then you really understand the audience here. And I would like to have you help us think about how to answer this question “Tell me about yourself” and what is the interviewer really trying to get out here? And let's set the stage that this is usually a physician who is transitioning out of clinical and doing something different. So, can you help us unpack this?

MS: Yeah, of course. So, like I said, it's the very first question that I ask. When I get someone on the phone, I say, “Tell me about yourself”. And in the interview process, they asked that question like me. I guess I would say the first thing that I'm looking for is a very succinct summary of where you've been and where you're going and who you are.

I like to hear your story. So, I like to hear, I went to medical school because I really wanted to help patients or I had a personal connection. I had a father with diabetes. Whatever it is. And then I went into residency and I went the academic route. I did that for a few years. My specialty is rheumatology. And “why”. And now I'm looking for whatever that may be and talking about why it is you're looking for your next step.

What I frankly don't want to hear is how tired you are of where you are and how burned out you are. I know that's the case. And for talking to me as a recruiter, for me personally, that's a safe space. So, I'm okay with it, but I really need to know, and they need to know what it is you want to do. So not what you're running from, but what you're running to. So, you really need to answer that question in terms of cures. Here's where I've been, here's where I'm going. Here's what I enjoy. Really, I like it. I like the strategy. I like being at a high level or I like being more operational. I like doing the tactical. I like execution because those two things are very different. At least in the pharma world, those are very different jobs.

So, I would say, make sure that you kind of know what it is you want, and you don't have to know it down to a specific job. But you do need to know yourself well enough to know “I don't want to sit all day and look at regulatory documents at a desk”. So, if

you're an ER physician that might not make sense to go to that type of role. But you may want to be fast paced. I need to be fast paced. I want to do more execution. I want to bring the therapies to people on a very big scale, rather than one-on-one. I'm kind of past that now and I'd like to do more large scale things. So be succinct, don't ramble on forever and talk about definitely where you want to go and not where you're running from.

HF: I think that's a really good description of answering that question, especially to not just focus on what's not working and that they're miserable. A lot of physicians will ask me, "Well, is it okay for me to mention burnout? Is it okay for me to say I've done patient care for 10 years or whatever it was? And I don't want to do that anymore, but I want to use my skills and experience in a new way to help people and have an impact on a population or a larger group of individuals".

MS: Yeah, that's exactly how I would talk about that. More on a positive spin of "I've gained these insights. I've practiced for 10 years. These are the things that I've learned about myself. And while I enjoy patient care, the one-on-one piece, I really want to expand that". So, make it positive. I can tell you I always remember the negative ones. Those ones stick out to me when someone is more complaining about the whole, "I can't get my grants. I can't get my money. I don't get NIH funding. I see people all the time. The medical review records process is all on fighting with insurance".

I could go on all day about what I hear, but for a physician, they really need to talk about it more in a positive light, which means you need to work with someone like yourself, Heather, to really understand what it is you want, what it is you're looking for and what you want so that you're able to articulate clearly the positives. And here's what I hear about pharma or whatever it is. And I think that would suit my background and where I'm going much better than where I am today.

HF: And one point that I heard being said about saying what's not working for you, or what's no longer working for you in a positive light is that it helps the recruiter understand that you just didn't have a terrible week on call and all of a sudden you want to leave, but that you've been thinking about this for a while and you really no longer want to practice the medicine and maybe some of the reasons, but not in a whining way, but just to show that you're not someone who's going to transition and then bounce back because you really miss patients.

MS: Right. And those are two things that I always ask physicians when I do my interview with them about making the transition. And one is for sure, I always ask, "How long have you been thinking about transitioning out of patient care?" I always ask that question. And any answer, frankly, is okay, because it's a process. I just kind of want to know where you are in the process. Whether you're at the very beginning and totally you can talk to me about "I'm just now starting to think about this and I'm the very beginning of the process. I have friends who have made the transition so I'd like to learn a little bit more". And some people I work with for a couple of years before they're ready and that's perfectly okay because it is a process. So, I want to make sure that the person understands that there's a lot to think about.

The second thing I always ask is, "Think about your life, not seeing patients. Are you okay with that? Can you see yourself not doing that anymore?" And you really need to take a hard look at that question because you're stepping away from what it is you are trained to do. So, I always ask that question as well. And again, it's a process.

HF: That's a really good point because I recently was talking to a physician in pharma who does a fair amount of interviewing of physicians. And she said that a lot of them come to her and they're still in the grieving process, that they are not ready and they're in transition, but it's too early on. I like what you said about it's okay to be transparent, that you just started thinking about this and letting the recruiter know where you're at.

MS: It just makes things so much easier in the process if you're transparent, because I really like to know, and frankly, I'm going to be transparent with the client. I'm always transparent with them about, "Okay, here's where this person is right now. So, from a physician's perspective you have talents and skills and knowledge that other people are really wanting in their businesses. So, it's also on the clients who are wanting these physicians to kind of sell the job. So, I'm always upfront with them about, "Okay, here's where they are in the process". And typically, I'm talking to such a physician in the company that came from academia. And so, they're really able to relate to the physicians about, "Okay, I know exactly where you are. I went through the same thing. The transition was hard and I would do it again".

But I'm always transparent as well as here's where they are. They're early in the process. They're just on that arc. So, you may have to sell the role a little bit and explain it a little bit to them. Or this person has been looking for three to four years. It's just the timing wasn't right. I think stars are ready to align. They are truly ready to make the move, but that's on the recruiter as well to be able to assess that and ask the right questions to understand, "Is this person really ready?"

HF: Right. We may not know exactly, we may think something, but until we get closer to that question, we're not sure. So that's why interviewing is helpful. I believe it's in a way like dating, you're not sure about this person. You're not sure you're ready to get married. You go on dates and that's how you figure it out. You don't mentally just think about it, hypothetically.

And you mentioned transparency, which brings us to this question that often gives people trouble, which is about salary and compensation. Sometimes the recruiter will tell you in that first meeting exactly what the compensation is. Other times they say, "What are your salary expectations?" And then they can also string you along in the whole interview process and you have no idea. What should a physician do in this area? Is it okay to ask during that first interview, if it could be a deal breaker for you?





MS: This is really good. We could do a whole podcast probably on this. This is such the question.

HF: Money, show me the money. Right?

MS: Show me the money. Yeah. So, for me, I always ask the question, “What is your compensation expectation?” So, I do ask that and I ask it pretty early up front because of exactly what you mentioned. I'm not going to string people along. Everybody loses credibility in that scenario. If you're putting someone into a big interview process with very high-level folks at a company, and then you find out at the end of the day, we're not even close that's not good for anyone. So, I do ask that. I ask it upfront. Some physicians will ask me right out of the gate, the very first question “What's compensation?”

HF: Oh, really?

MS: Yeah. So even in emails, like I try to send emails to folks about the role, and my response sometimes back is “What's the compensation?” Number one, I'm not going to write it down for you, and send it across email about what the compensation is. And number two, I can't disclose that anyway. So, I have to be very careful about my confidentiality with companies. I know the range and I will help the physician kind of think about and here's how I put it. If you were going to step away and you're going to walk away from patient care, change your career, change your life, possibly pick up and move your family to a different place, what would you be expecting? What are you looking for?

And we kind of have a conversation around that rather than, okay, let's get down to the brass tacks. So, if someone asks me right away, I know they're not interested in the job, otherwise they would be asking about job content, what's it like. We have a rich discussion around those types of things rather than salary and title. That's quite a turnoff to me immediately. So, I do ask, and I really want people to be as transparent as

possible. If I were a physician, I would give a range, "I'm looking for". And you need to really think about this. What are you losing in terms of your base? If you do any speaking engagements, if you have any research, if you're getting any grants. Those types of things, you really need to think about what it is you have today, what it is you would like to get to. And the tradeoffs associated with that. Okay, I might not make as much, but I'm not going to be on call all weekend. Those types of things.

So, I do have a good discussion, but it goes so much deeper than a number. And I really try to kind of hit home with them about what it is they're looking for, why they really want to move. And then compensation is, "Okay, let's talk about a range. And if this is acceptable to you, you know the trade-offs that you're going to get".

HF: If the recruiter doesn't mention it, obviously you don't want to be rude and ask this as the first question, but when is it appropriate to ask that question and what's a good way to bring it up?

MS: If you're talking to a recruiter, I would absolutely talk about all the content and all of those things first. And then if the recruiter doesn't bring it up, when it comes across to something to me as, okay, that was very thoughtful and acceptable and appropriate way to ask that question is towards the end when they say something like I hate to bring this up now, but I want to save time on everybody's part and I don't want to be rude and go through the process. So, can we kind of talk about, at least are we in the ballpark? Can you tell me a little bit about the compensation? I know that you may not be able to tell me everything, but can you give me an idea so that I can take all things into consideration?

HF: That is really, really good advice because it's showing consideration for you and it's not just about them. And it's more engaging than just saying "What's the money? Show me the money" right out of the gate, because already there you've damaged the relationship.

MS: Yeah. Because I do, when people ask that right off the bat, or it's not a part of a thoughtful discussion around the role and the career trajectory and where you can go from there. I'm always like, "Oh, okay. I see what their values are". And there's nothing wrong with that. It's not for me to judge. If your salary is the most important thing, then maybe you should stay where you are. You are not ready to make the move. What do I care about? I mean that's fine, at least you know. I don't judge if you're asking questions about titles or salary, whatever, but I do think that if you are serious and ready to move on, it helps me if you're transparent, it helps me. And it helps me to position you with the client.

HF: Exactly. And since we're on this topic of asking questions, at the end of the interview, the interviewer often asks, so do you have any questions for me? And often candidates are sort of taken by surprise because they haven't prepared and they say, "No, I'm fine" which is really not a great response. They just say, "No, I don't think so". Could you give us a strategy for answering that question?

MS: There are a few things to unpack there. The first thing that you mentioned that I would say that you need to do before you ever talk to anyone in an interview situation is do your research. And I always tell people that - Do your research. Make sure that you understand the company, the position that you're interviewing for. It's nice to have a job description. The job description would give you several ideas about things to ask. If you had a job description, then you could go through that and say, "Okay, I really don't quite understand this". So, that would be a good strategy is to make sure that you've researched the company and the job and that you have a couple of questions ready to go, always with you ready to go on the interview because you never, ever, ever, ever, ever want to say, "No, I don't have any questions". I don't care if you even know the answer to your question that you're asking, you ask it anyway.

HF: Good point. Yeah.

MS: Because I have had that come up more than once. Just in the last month, I've had folks who said it really shows when someone has done their research and they ask thoughtful questions, they can tell they're engaged and very interested in the role as opposed to I couldn't even tell if they knew our company and they had no questions for me. Oh, I hear it all the time. And so, always have your questions, maybe the job description, like I said, and I think some good questions. For example, "You're making a big transition here. I would think you would want one thing you'd want to know, how am I going to be trained? What does success look like?" Those types of things, thinking ahead, trying to understand what this transition is and how they're going to help you make it.

HF: Those are really good things to ask. And I like to think of this too, as several buckets of questions. And you mentioned this in terms of understanding the company, researching the company. So, there are questions that show that you're thinking about the company and even what their challenges are or where they're heading. So that's about them in some ways. And then also are the questions that are more about you. Like, what is the onboarding? What's the training? What does success look like?

So, they're not just tactical, which I hear physicians asking, which is fine. Well, what's the schedule like? What's the compensation or what would I be doing in the first 90 days? Those are fine, those are tactical, but I like that you also broaden it to showing your interest in the company and that you're thinking of your partnership with them.

MS: Yeah, absolutely. And I think your questions should be kind of tied to the type of person that they're looking for. And you alluded to this, if the type of role is a strategic role, and that is a very big attribute, then I hope you're asking strategic questions and not tactical ones. That's how I would guide someone is make sure when you are interviewing you know what they're looking for and that you're always talking about your brand and how what you are good at matches what they are looking for.

And I always tell people, this is a two-way conversation. This shouldn't be they're asking you tons of questions and you're just firing off answers. You should be invested in terms of, "I want to learn as much as I can. Is this the right culture for me? Is this the right supervisor? The supervisor's leadership skills, leadership demeanor, what would it be like to work for this person, this team? Can I see myself with this team every day? How do you reward folks? How do you give feedback? How do you improve folks? How do you develop?" There are many things that you could ask in terms of there's a lot that goes on in company cultures that you don't see. So, the more pointed questions you can ask around "How do I get an insight into that culture? What kinds of things can I ask?" are helpful for you as the interviewee.

HF: I appreciate that you made that point, that it's a two-way street. And when you think about the questions you want to ask, think about what you need to know to determine if you want the job and what are the questions you can ask to help answer that. That's beautiful.

MS: Exactly. And you can get that just by job descriptions and what they are really looking for and the recruiter you're talking to. I always try to understand what the person is looking for because I want to match them to the right role. I want them to be successful. I'm not going to force fit folks into a role that doesn't match their personality or their skills and attributes and past experience.

HF: Yeah. Oh my gosh. I feel like we could go on for hours here. Like you said, it's our favorite topic. I'd love to dive in more, but we're getting close to time. So, before we wrap up, let's talk a little bit about preparing those short vignettes, the little stories that you tell to answer those behavioral questions where they say, "Tell me about a time when".

MS: Yes, those are the ones that if you prepare for them and you're ready for them, you're going to knock it out of the park. If you haven't done your preparation, you're going to look like a deer in the headlights on Zoom. Never a place where you want to be. So, I use

that method. I use the behavioral interview method, many companies do. Whether they do or not, I just think it's a good way to answer a question, which if the question is, "Tell me about a time where you disagreed scientifically with a colleague. How did you handle it?" A classic scientific/collaboration question. So, you always want to talk about it in terms of CARS, Challenge, Action, and Result. What was the challenge or the situation? What was the action and what was the result?

If you do your preparation and you think about what it is they're looking for, you can kind of guess what they're going to ask you. So, if it's a leadership role, you better have about four CARs in leadership ready to go, that you've practiced and that just roll off your tongue. If it's a collaboration, a strategic role, you want to think about those types of things you've done in the past, and be able to articulate those. It really helps one to keep focused and not go on tangents and be succinct and give specific examples, which is exactly the point of behavioral interviewing, looking for specifics and things you've done in the past so that they know that you will be successful in the future.

HF: That is a good technique to use. Do you want to just repeat what CAR stands for?

MS: Challenge. What was the challenge you were given? Action. What was the action that you took? And the Result.

HF: Okay. So, one of the reasons why I really like vignettes, and you're so right, that we need to prepare them in advance is that we all remember stories, like you said, and they make an emotional connection too. If you're interviewing a bunch of people, you're not going to remember wop, wop, wop, wop, but you will remember if an interviewer tells you a really memorable story. We can remember those very easily.

MS: Yeah, absolutely. And I do think that people are not going to remember generalities. I'm good at this. I've been told I'm good at that. Whatever. Everybody says that, you want to



be the one that stands out and be very specific in your answers. And those do stand out for sure.

HF: That's how our mind works. We connect emotionally to stories and people will remember you if you made them feel something that was good, or it was a great arc of a story. So, for wrapping up, is there any bit of advice that you'd like to give? Just a couple of nutshells, maybe some "do's" and "don'ts" for the listeners?

MS: Sure. One thing that I always tell people, and I know this sounds pretty elementary, but some people don't do it or don't think about it, but one just tip is make sure you have your CV in front of you. Whether you're talking on the phone to a recruiter or someone who is a representative from the company or on Zoom on the interview process, I can guarantee you, they will have your CV in front of them. So, you need to too, and the reason is because they're going to be looking at it and referring to it and asking very specific questions about a document that maybe you wrote last year, and haven't looked at it in a while. So, you want to be able to quickly get to it, and not be fumbling around.

So that's the first thing I'd say. Print out your CV and have it in front of you so you can get to things quickly and know exactly what it is about the resume that they're asking a particular bullet point that they want to dive into.

The second. Don't do this stuff in your car. even take the time to get in a quiet place, and show that you're invested and interested. I know how hard that is sometimes, but make sure that your schedule allows for the time and that you're not in your car and I'm not hearing the ding, ding, ding, your seatbelts not on or whatever. It's so annoying. And I would not do it.

HF: And wherever you are, whether you're at home make sure the dog isn't going to bark or kids aren't going to come in and they will be mindful because those things happen, the UPS guy comes.



MS: I guess I would add with that in COVID it's so different and people are dealing with the kids and the dogs and everything else. So, if it happens, listen, if the company is going to be like, "That was a big travesty", this is a really good reflection moment for you to decide, "Okay. Is that what I want?" Or if the supervisor's like, "Oh God, I got kids too. It's okay. We value work-family". That's a really good way to get that inner culture as well.

HF: Yeah. Take it as information, one way or the other.

MS: Absolutely.

HF: Yeah, I like that. Well, Michelle, this has been so much fun. You provided an incredible amount of insider value and advice. Physicians are going to be really, really appreciative of this. So, thank you so much.

MS: Absolutely. It was fun. Thanks for inviting me. I had a great time.

HF: Me too. And I'm sure we'll have you back again because there is so much we can talk about in this whole process. I'd like to let you know everybody that if you want to dive more into the interview process, I have a freebie that you can download by just going to my website at [doctorscrossing.com](http://doctorscrossing.com) and hit the "Free Resource" tab at the top. And there'll be an interview prep guide. **You can also get it at [doctorscrossing.com/interviewprep](http://doctorscrossing.com/interviewprep).**

All right, well, you have the marching orders now. So, if you're in the interview process or even thinking about it, it's a great time to prepare in advance because you'll feel more comfortable, confident, and rock those interviews. All right, guys, don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.





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