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Preparing for the real thing with practice interviews: a graduate paramedic perspective

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Research

Preparing for the real thing with practice interviews: a graduate paramedic perspective

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Abstract

Introduction

Behavioural interviews are a critical component of the job application process for ambulance services in Australia. They involve role specific open-ended questions that are designed to test an applicant's skills, eligibility and experience. It is a process that is standardised and can be practised to increase familiarity and performance. Existing literature supports the benefits of practice interviews ahead of real interviews to improve applicant performance and subsequent employment success. The objective of this study was therefore to examine paramedic graduates' perceptions on the value of participating in practice interviews before seeking employment with an ambulance service.

Methods

Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Emergency Health (Paramedic) at Monash University in Victoria took part in a cross-sectional pilot study. Three paper-based surveys were created to assess the value of practice interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used.

Results

Fourteen (n=14) students participated. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that practice interviews would help them gain employment. All participants perceived that practice interview helped improve their confidence and preparation for their actual interview.

Conclusion

Practice interviews were found to be a positive and worthwhile undertaking. They increased confidence and improved preparation through practise and feedback. Participants agreed that they were valuable and perceived that they led to improved performance in their real interviews and subsequent employment success.

Keywords:

practice interviews; mock interviews; paramedics; paramedic students; behavioural interview; employment success

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Introduction

Students attend universities and colleges worldwide in the pursuit of knowledge and skills which will ultimately lead them to greater employment prospects and higher salaries (1). Gaining employment for university graduates in Australia is highly competitive (2). Employers of paramedic graduates, which include national, international and private providers of emergency and non-emergency services, have individual recruitment procedures and application processes. These can include assessment of student grades, clinical placement reports, work and volunteer experience, psychometric testing and group interviews (3-5). Many employers also require applicants to attend an individual behavioural interview.

Behavioural interviews are designed to measure an applicant's eligibility and skills for a particular role based on the systematic use of job specific and open ended questions (6). The interviewer is able to draw on all information provided when undertaking their assessment, including what an applicant has done, or how they have behaved in a real situation, rather than answering a hypothetical question (6). These questions are also based on the principle that past behaviour is a strong predictor of future behaviour, enabling the tone and quality of the response to indicate the individuals expected behaviour should they be employed (7). Through focussing on past oriented questions; such as 'provide an example when you have demonstrated ...' the interviewer is able to learn about a particular skill or competency (7). At the same time the applicant is also able to demonstrate their communication abilities and provide insight into their own background and experiences (8).

The identification and evaluation of pre-defined skills is an important element of this interviewing technique. It serves to both guide the line of questioning for the interviewer, whereby questions posed correlate strongly to the relevant skill, and also provides some degree of uniformity of the applicants responses so they can later be compared (6). This ensures a standard of measurement where the interviewer remains objective in their decisions while also documenting the justification for an applicant to be selected above other candidates (6). Therefore, the demonstrated benefits of behavioural interviews include a better quality of information gathered from candidates, greater consistency of interviewing, an opportunity for applicants to better communicate and receive feedback, thereby leading to overall improved selection decisions for employers (9).

A study of paramedic students concerns about gaining employment revealed that the behavioural interview process was a major impediment for gaining employment within an ambulance service (10). Students provided testimonies stating that behavioural interviews are subjective and limited, and they believed that the selection process was flawed (10). Other

interview apprehensions that students held were concerns about gaining employment within an ambulance service at all after graduation due to the number of applicants far exceeding prospective job numbers (10). This impacts on confidence, interview performance and anxiety levels. Given these perceived difficulties from the students, while understanding that interviews are commonly utilised within ambulance service recruitment processes, the best way to overcome this is through thorough preparation and practise. One such strategy is engaging in practice interviews.

Evidence supporting the value of practice or 'mock' interviews towards gaining employment has been reported in many fields. A study reviewing the best practices for preparing business students ahead of job interviews demonstrated that interview practice boosts students confidence and strengthens their interview performance (11). This correlates with many other sources who have equally provided commentary towards the benefits of practice interviews and their value towards successful interview outcomes (12-14). Within the field of health care, a study evaluating the introduction of an interview preparation day to third year nursing students reported positive and favourable results about its implementation and relevance (15). Of the 88 participants 69 (78%) were successful in their first employment interview following a day of practice interviews and preparation (15). Similarly, a study of final year Australian medical students found that 98% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their practice interview session was helpful for their upcoming internship interviews (16). With 92% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt more confident about their real interviews after having practised the format and questions in a simulated environment (16). These findings were echoed by senior medical students who were uncomfortable and lacked confidence before the introduction of practice interviews (17). On completion of practice residency interviews, students reported that their stress had been reduced while confidence in skill sets, ability to receive feedback and familiarity with the interview process, had all increased (17).

The objective of this study was therefore to examine paramedic graduates' perceptions of the value of participating in practice interviews before seeking employment with an ambulance service.

Method

Design

A cross-sectional pilot study utilising paper-based questionnaires.

Participants

Third year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Emergency Health (Paramedic) degree at Monash University, Victoria (Australia) were eligible to take part in this study.

Instrumentation

Three questionnaires were devised by the research team to assess the value of practice interviews for graduating paramedic students. The first pre-practice interview questionnaire involved standard demographic questions and seven Likert scale based questions with five choices (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The second post-practice interview questionnaire closely mirrored the first with two additional questions and a numerical scale for the student to rate their own interview performance (1=lowest to 10=highest). The third questionnaire consisted of three free text questions.

Procedures

The interview questions and procedures were designed by the research team in consultation with the university careers consultant. The interview panel consisted of three trained and experienced interviewers. Students were invited to complete three surveys: the first before a practice interview; the second after a practice interview; and the third 10 months after the practice interview as graduates. The research purpose and procedures were explained and it was made clear that participation was voluntary. Completed surveys were collected by an independent member of staff.

Data analysis

The SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 23.0, IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York, U.S.A.) was used for all statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to describe demographic details. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to compare the non-parametric results. A thematic analysis based on a six step approach: data familiarisation, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, was conducted by the two authors (Ross and Moffatt) (18). Consensus on the final themes and definitions was reached by discussion.

Ethics

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC).

Results

Demographics

Of the 45 students eligible for this study 14 participated (n=14). The participants were predominately aged less than 23 years (M=22.2, SD=1.67) and female (n=8).

Participants agreed that this practice interview would help them gain employment before the interview (Md=4; IQR=3-5) and after the interview (Md=5; IQR=4-5; p=0.02). Full pre- and post-

interview response results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre- and post-interview responses

Question	Pre-interview median (IQR)	Post-interview median (IQR)
1. Practice interview preparedness	3 (2–3)	2.5 (2–3.25)
2. Confidence	3 (2–3.25)	3 (2–4)
3. Real interview preparedness	5 (4–5)	5 (5–5)
4. Helpfulness towards employment	4 (3–5)	5 (4–5)
5. Question expectations	4 (3.75–4)	4 (3–4)
6. Understanding of interview structure	4 (4–4)	4 (4–4)
7. Advantageous to practice interviewing	5 (4–5)	5 (4.75–5)

Participants also reported strong agreement that the practice interview feedback was valuable (Md= 4.93) and the feedback would help them prepare better responses in preparation for their real interview (Md=4.93). Following the practice interview participants rated their own performances on a scale of 1 to 10 (M=6.21, SD=1.47, min=4, max=9).

The third survey, conducted 10 months after the practice interviews, had a response rate of 85.7% (12/14). Of these, 100% had undertaken an employment interview with an ambulance service. Eleven of these 12 (91.6%) had been successful in their interview and had received offers of employment; all commencing work in 2016. All 12 respondents affirmed the value of the practice interview and perceived that it had helped them prepare for their actual interview. In response to the free-text questions about how participants felt the practice interviews helped them prepare for their real interview, the following themes were prominent:

- Forewarning/exposure to a realistic situation/environment led to feelings of being prepared
- Practice interviews increased their confidence ahead of real interviews
- Practise provided beneficial insight into the behavioural questions that may be asked in the real interview
- Practise provided insight into structure and format of a panel interview
- Constructive feedback from the practice interviews guided and focused areas to improve and work on.

Discussion

This research indicates that paramedic graduates have a positive perception of the value of practice interviews before seeking employment with an ambulance service. While a pilot study with a small self-selected sample size the majority of participants received employment offers. They indicate that participation in practice interviews improved their preparation and confidence, and potentially contributed to their ultimate success in securing a job.

Participants strongly agreed before the practice interview that it would help them gain employment. Students' perception of the helpfulness of this practise increased upon completing their interview. Qualitative results also show that conducting practice interviews were perceived to have a beneficial impact by graduates as discussed under the following themes.

Confidence

In many societies self-confidence is widely regarded as a valuable personal asset, and a strong belief in oneself is critical to achieving personal success (19). When asked how the practice interviews helped prepare participants for their real interview, graduates stated that their confidence levels were increased significantly. This aligns closely with other research that found confidence to be a main outcome from conducting practice interviews with medical students (16,17). Increased confidence was viewed as a positive and advantageous personal characteristic ahead of real interviews and was related to improved performance (16,17). Other literature states that confidence in one's own abilities can enhance motivation towards a goal; this then leads to improved performance and self-esteem and therefore a greater likelihood of achieving success (19). It can then be said that raised confidence, without extending into over-confidence (19), ought to have an advantageous effect upon job applicants and their probability of receiving a job offer. Therefore, strengthening self-confidence and self-esteem through practice interviews should place the applicant in a better position to be successful.

Preparation

In many fields it is understood that good preparation is the key to interview success (20). Participants reported that taking part in interview practise led them to feeling more prepared for their actual interviews. This sense of preparation was articulated in many ways but commonly in areas of the interview that they had no prior exposure to or experience in. These included: the initial introduction/greeting with the interviewers, the two/three person panel format, the STAR (situation, task, action, result) method of responding to behavioural questions, and emotional states such as nervousness, pressure or confidence. This forewarning to key elements of the interview was largely appreciated and only possible through taking part in the practice interviews. Participants also stated that the practice interviews afforded them the opportunity to prepare responses and situational examples to potential questions that would be asked. This was valuable as they were able to refine or

pre-script examples in preparation for the real interview. Other research similarly supports the benefits of preparation, academic or otherwise, as an effective method for students to be more successful at whatever they do after graduation, including gaining employment (15,21).

Feedback

An ability to properly receive and make necessary adjustments to feedback is an example of continuous learning and improvement (22). These are important skillsets and are specifically sought by ambulance services when recruiting graduate paramedics (3), and therefore of direct concern to students. Feedback given to participants following practice interviews was found to be highly valued, helpful and enabled them to prepare better responses for their interviews. This is supported in the literature which suggests feedback helps reduce student stress and increase their feelings of being prepared (17). One study found that 90% of medical students who participated in mock interviews before their residency interviews found the feedback helpful, realistic and helped them identify areas that needed to be worked on (23). Feedback is an important diagnostic tool and helps identify areas of strength or weakness so that they may be improved on for the future and as such increase overall performance (22). Participants provided free text commentary attesting to their appreciation for personalised feedback, regarding it as positive and beneficial. It allowed the individual to experience the assessment and appraisal that comes with a real interview without the consequences. This indicates that students perceive feedback on their performance in the practice interview as important in their preparation for the real thing.

Limitations

The small sample size may not have been representative of the overall cohort. While these participants reported increased confidence, this is not generalisable to all paramedic graduates. The students who volunteered may have been high achieving students who would have gained employment regardless. Students who did not participate in the study were not surveyed; therefore the success rate of students who did not attend practice interviews, but gained employment, is unknown. Past and further interview experience of students beyond that experienced during the practice was also not known and may have affected the results.

Conclusion

Practice interviews were perceived as a positive and worthwhile undertaking by paramedic students. Student confidence improved and preparation was enhanced through practise and feedback. Most of those who participated successfully gained employment and regarded the practice interviews as a contributing factor. The results of this pilot study support the use of practice interviews in the preparation of students before attending real interviews in the future.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests. Each author of this paper has completed the ICMJE conflict of interest statement.

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