Chalk talks

Notes from a talk by Daniel St. Johnston, 2015

Most important things panels look for

1. Track record
2. Good project
3. Can the interviewee demonstrate they are ready to be a PI (many candidates fail here)
4. Will the candidate be a good colleague (e.g. scope for collaborations, good fit into the department)
5. Demonstrate long term vision

Getting on shortlist

1. Submit “enhanced” CV – don’t just state achievements but say why they are important; e.g. for each publication say what’s in it & how it’s moved the field forward
2. The Peter Goodfellow question: why are you doing this?
3. If you know who’s on the panel, try networking with them in advance
4. Remember the panel may be diverse – experience of panel members different – keep application non-specialist
5. If you get high-impact publication(s), make it clear it is because of you & not the group you did the work in

The Chalk Talk

1. Project – is it fundable?
2. Don’t be afraid to flatter panel members (e.g. demonstrate you have read their latest papers)
3. Long term vision – what will your lab be famous for in future? What big question are you going to answer? Bring new technique or demonstrate that you will “own the question”
4. You will likely get interrupted constantly (e.g. in Gurdon interviews every 30 seconds!) Prepare for this, e.g. for 1 hour interview, prepare 30 min or be prepared to ditch less important parts of the talk if you think you will not be able to get to the most important bits towards the end
5. Explain “killer” experiments – not too detailed, but enough to understand generally
6. Practice!
7. Structure
   a. What is the question/problem & why is it important; tailor to department/funding body, e.g. for CRUK include a cancer link
b. Describe key projects in grant proposal; need ideas to keep multiple people busy for years

c. Practice drawing!

d. Show you will occupy a unique niche

e. Balance projects – some high risk, some low risk? Ideally demonstrate low risk high gain!

8. Tough questions
a. What are you going to do if some parts of your proposal don’t work? Need back-up plans
b. Who are your competitors? Your old lab? Have a discussion with your PI beforehand... What gives you the edge? Why are you better qualified? Key methods only you know?
c. Why the the host institute/department?

9. Panel make up mind in first 3 min... Act like a PI in demeanor

10. Be able to think on your feet; you know more than anyone else in the room about your proposal & most likely your field

11. Common mistakes
a. Too much time spent writing/drawing on the board
b. Keep to minimum, is it actually helping – diagrams more effective than words; write structure of plan; can use headings to give yourself a break
c. Make sure you leave enough time to say everything important
d. Writing is not the point – but include pointers for members who may be distracted by phone, emails etc. to allow them to catch up

12. Don’t wear a tie!