



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CLINICAL NURSE SPECIALISTS

Clinical Nurse Specialist Toolkit

*A Guide for the New
Clinical Nurse Specialist*

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Clinical Nurse Specialist Toolkit

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SPRINGER  PUBLISHING COMPANY

New York

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Springer Publishing Company, LLC
11 West 42nd Street
New York, NY 10036
www.springerpub.com

Acquisitions Editor: Margaret Zuccarini

Project Manager: Julia Rosen

Cover Designer: Steve Pisano

Composition: Apex CoVantage, LLC

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-8261-1836-3

09 10 11 12 13/ 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clinical nurse specialist toolkit : a guide for the new clinical nurse specialist / editors, Melanie Duffy, Susan Dresser, Janet S. Fulton.

p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8261-1835-6 (alk. paper)

1. Nurse practitioners. I. Duffy, Melanie. II. Dresser, Susan.
III. Fulton, Janet S.

[DNLM: 1. Nurse Clinicians. 2. Nurse's Role. 3. Nursing Care.
WY 128 C6407 2009]

RT82.8.C576 2009

610.73092—dc22

2008050931

Printed in the United States of America by Hamilton Printing Company.

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This book is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Kathryn Ann "Katie" Brush, clinical nurse specialist, humanitarian, and scholar whose deep devotion to those she served was marked with courage, compassion, and joy. She is loved, missed, and celebrated!

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Preface

The idea for this book grew from a National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists (NACNS) Board of Directors discussion on strategies to support the clinical nurse specialist (CNS) graduate transitioning into a first job as a CNS. Board members began sharing stories from their own transition periods, and it became evident that common themes ran through individual experiences. All board members present agreed that the wisdom about successful transition to the CNS role could be found in the narratives of those who made the journey. Hence, this book was conceived as a collection of practical tips and helpful information on selected topics written by experienced CNSs as advice to new CNSs.

This book is designed for a new CNS; however, it should be helpful for CNS students and all practicing CNSs looking for some new ideas. It is titled a *toolkit* because the focus is practical guidance for success around common challenges a CNS encounters. The authors shared lessons learned, personal insights, and proven strategies for succeeding in the CNS role from the perspective of experience. Chapter 1 begins with tips for negotiating a job, the final chapter contains some thoughts for a joyful career as a CNS, and in between readers will find advice on such topics as developing a job description, working with the boss, and obtaining certification. The chapters are concise, conversational, and practical by design.

As editors, we are indebted to the NACNS Board of Directors for their ideas and guidance. We thank our author contributors for sharing their expertise and personal stories. We are also indebted to the NACNS staff, especially Aleta Lazur, for their support, and to Margaret Zuccarini at Springer Publishing, for her guidance. Last, we say thank you to Christine Carson Filipovich, Chief Executive Officer, NACNS, for her help in making this book a reality and in making NACNS a beacon for CNSs everywhere.

Along the way, we lost a dear member of the board, Katie Brush. We are grateful to have Katie's chapter on prioritizing included in the book. In recognition of her service to NACNS as a board member and contributor to this project, the book is lovingly dedicated to Katie—gone too soon.

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Getting Started

Negotiating a Job

Christine Schulman

The dream job for any clinical nurse specialist (CNS) is one that will be satisfying and challenging over time. Negotiating the fine details to make that happen is an ongoing process that starts at the time of hire and extends throughout the time you have the position. First things first, however: you must successfully navigate several phases of the job search process before you will negotiate the details of an exciting offer. Being clear on what you enjoy about your work, about the job you are being offered, and about what you personally need to be successful are essential for making an educated decision about your work. This chapter will first focus on reflecting about what you enjoy about being a CNS and then preparing for the job search. Next, it will provide suggestions for a powerful and insightful interview with a prospective employer, colleagues, and clients. Finally, key points to negotiate before accepting the job offer, along with specific items to address, will be discussed. A successful journey along these steps will help you identify and get the job that will create and sustain your professional enthusiasm over the long haul.

Preparing for the Job Search

Preparatory work for the interview is critical to making a good impression with your prospective employer as well as making sure you get the information you need to make an informed decision about the position. This includes thinking about your role as a CNS, developing your professional portfolio, identifying life issues that influence your ability to meet the job requirements, and researching the institution where you seek employment.

Reflect on Your Role as a CNS

Spend time preparing for the interview process by reflecting on your vision of the CNS role, your interests and talents, and your personal life issues that must be considered when applying for a position. Thinking about these things is important to ensure a good match between what you want and the actual job. Once you've identified these issues, be watchful for how they are addressed throughout the entire application process, beginning with the first interview until the time when you are offered the position.

Ask yourself the following questions: Why did I become a CNS? Which of the main components of the role (education and mentoring, quality improvement, protocol development, research) give me the most satisfaction? How do my skills align with the components of the role? Are my passions in alignment with the job requirements? What does the "perfect CNS day" look like? Answers to these questions provide structure for discussion during your interviews. Alignment of these important issues with what you've discovered about the job during the application process will influence your decision to accept or decline the job offer.

Prepare a Portfolio

You will be asked to describe your work experience. While a curriculum vitae (CV) or resume presents an excellent overview of your accomplishments, it doesn't reveal how you think, communicate, and accomplish work. A portfolio will help you show interviewers not just what you have accomplished but how you work. The "oral" portfolio consists of stories illustrating your experiences with communication, conflict management, prioritization, outcomes management, financial issues, and involvement with professional organizations. If you recently completed your graduate program, you will need to emphasize group and individual school projects. Have these examples fresh in your memory and well rehearsed so that they are concise and clearly illustrate your point. The "written" portfolio includes the hard copy evidence of your work. Depending on the position you're applying for, it should include some, if not all, of the following items:

- Published journal articles or book chapters, ideally regarding your area of expertise
- Printouts of research or quality improvement (QI) posters presented at professional conferences

- A handout from one of your best presentations
- A descriptive summary of a project you led, with outcome data (if not confidential)
- A protocol, policy, or procedure that you wrote
- An evaluation summary of a class you taught or course you coordinated

Identify Important Life Issues

Life issues are as important as your education and your experience in identifying whether you are able to meet the requirements of the job. These questions often address scheduling challenges (e.g., Do you need to arrive at work after 8:00 A.M.? Are you able to work the occasional evening and night shift? Do you need flexibility in your start and stop times due to child care or other transportation issues?). Think about how much time you can give the position; the reality of the CNS role is that there are always periods when you need to put in extra time to get work done. You need to know if your home responsibilities or personal energies are such that they cannot accommodate frequent overtime so that you don't accept a position where a usual workweek exceeds 50 hours.

Research the Prospective Employer

Resources in effective interviewing consistently state the importance of researching your potential workplace (Byham & Pickett, 1999; Pohly, n.d.; U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). How big is the institution? Is it an academic or a community facility? Is it a profit, nonprofit, or government-run entity? How many of its patients are Medicare patients? What are the Centers of Emphasis (in order to determine if its priorities are consistent with your areas of interest)? Is it a Magnet institution, or has it received other recognitions for excellence? What is its reputation in the nursing community? Is it unionized? Does it have a relationship with a university to support ongoing education of its employees? These questions identify the type of facility that will support your professional needs and interests over time. They will also help you develop questions you should ask during your interview to explore areas of interest or concern.

Preparing for the Interview

A full discussion of how to have an effective job interview is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, there are numerous excellent resources available to help you prepare for this event (Block & Petrus, 2004; Byham & Pickett, 1999; Fitzwater, 2001; Kessler, 2006; Powers, 2000; Welton, Morton, & Amig, 1998). The following discussion will focus on the elements that will help you identify key issues that usually surface during the final negotiations of a CNS position.

Develop responses to questions that are likely to be asked. Some questions will be simple and direct, such as: What is appealing to you about being a CNS? Are you able to work the night shift? What training do you have in data analysis? How do you communicate to others that you are stressed? Many employers

use “behavioral interviews,” which ask open-ended questions that allow you to describe real events and your role in them. The interviewer is looking for you to describe in detail your role in a particular event, project, or experience and what the outcome was (Fitzwater, 2001; Pohly, n.d.; Quintessential Careers, n.d.). Hearing about your past performance can help prospective employers predict your future performance in similar circumstances. Their objective is to identify your communication skills, how you prioritize work demands, your ability to resolve conflict, your clinical expertise, and your ability to navigate change. Use examples from school, internships, previous jobs, and volunteer work. Highlight special professional and personal accomplishments such as the money raised from a professional conference that you coordinated or the marathon that you finished within your expected time frame. Behavioral questions may also try to identify your response to negative situations and how you learn from them (Quintessential Careers, n.d.).

To prepare for behavior-based interviews, think about several examples where you demonstrated excellent performance in areas that the employer will be interested in: Clinical issues, team building, change management, and conflict resolution are commonly explored during interviews. You should also be prepared to describe situations that started out negatively but ended positively because you either made the best of the outcome or learned from that experience to behave differently the next time a similar situation arose. Make sure that your examples illustrate a variety of experiences from your work and professional life. Rehearse telling these stories so that you quickly get to the point and don’t wander off topic; every story should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Examples of questions likely to surface during your interview can be found in Table 1.1.

Use the STAR format to structure concise answers to behavioral questions (Quintessential Careers, n.d.).

- **Situation or Task:** Specifically describe the situation you were in or the task you needed to accomplish. Give enough detail for the interviewer to understand, but not so much that you wander off track or lose the attention of the interviewer.
- **Action:** Describe the action you took. Keep the focus of the story on your role and activities, even if describing a team project. Tell what you actually did do, not what you should have done.
- **Results:** Describe the outcome of the event. Were goals accomplished? What were the lessons learned?

An interview is a two-way street, so you must also plan to ask questions. Asking good questions will provide you with the information you need, and it will also demonstrate to your interviewer your critical thinking abilities and priorities (Block & Petrus, 2004; Career Consulting Corner, n.d.). This is not the time to ask about salary or work hours; this is the time to ask about relationships, priorities, and work processes at the institution in which you seek employment. Use the principles of behavioral interviews described above to encourage the interviewer to answer your questions with clear examples. Failure to take advantage of this opportunity could result in unpleasant surprises later and suggest to the interviewer that your level of interest and commitment to the job may be limited.

1.1

Behavioral Interview Questions for the CNS Candidate

- Describe how you implemented new research findings into practice at your institution.
- Tell about an incident where you formed and developed a team.
- Describe how you resolved a conflict with a supervisor, colleague, or client.
- Describe how you identified and managed a need within your institution.
- Give an example of when you had to share difficult feedback.
- Describe a quality or process improvement project that you coordinated.
- Tell about how you set and achieved a personal or professional goal.
- What is the most difficult project you have ever tackled and why? What was the outcome, and what did you learn from this experience?
- Tell about a time when you had to partner with someone whose work style was very different from yours.
- Give an example of a good (or bad) decision that you made and what you learned from that decision.
- Tell about a situation when you had to build consensus within a group of diverse people.
- Give an example of how you prioritized multiple demands. How did you manage your stress during this time?
- Describe a time when you had to communicate information or a practice change that was unpopular. How did you approach it, did you achieve buy-in, and what was the result?
- Describe a situation in which you had to support an administrative decision that you personally did not agree with. How did you do this? How did you reconcile this to yourself?
- Describe a project in which you had to maintain tight fiscal control. Did you accomplish your financial goals?
- How would you describe your management style? Give examples of when this has been helpful and when it has been a handicap.

All interviewers and interview panels should be asked to share their vision of the CNS role at the institution. They should also be asked to describe how past key projects have been prioritized, to identify initial needs that must be addressed, to describe the orientation plan and evaluation criteria, to clarify the reporting structure, to address the working style of the team, and to address a typical workday or workweek. Get clarification on who you will report to: Will this person be a nursing administrator, a hospital administrator, or a unit nurse manager? Ask to see the organizational structure of the facility and the nursing division so you can assess the power of nursing within that institution and the “political” climate. It is important to inquire about support for professional development opportunities (e.g., participation in professional organizations, writing for publication, presentations at national conferences, affiliations with industry).

Ask your prospective employer to clarify the scope of the job. Will you be responsible for a geographical clinical area or a specific patient population throughout the hospital (e.g., the sixth floor telemetry unit or all cardiology patients in the facility from Emergency Department admission to Cardiac Rehab)? Will you have responsibilities on several campuses within that hospital system? Will you be required to do direct patient care? Under what circumstances might this happen? Will you have responsibilities outside of your immediate clinical area (e.g., chair of the hospital-wide Pain committee, tracking and reporting central line and surgical site infection data within the system and nationally)? CNS and educator colleagues should be asked how they distribute the workload and communicate with one another. Ask for examples of how the supervisor advocated for them when there were multiple demands for CNS time. Similarities or differences in answers suggest the degree to which the team communicates and perceives the work environment.

Preparing to have an effective interview is of paramount importance. It provides the opportunity for a potential employer to learn about you and how you will contribute to the organization. No less important, however, the interview allows you to learn about that institution and determine whether it is a place in which you wish to work.

Negotiating the Job Offer

Once you have received a job offer, you are given another opportunity to fine-tune the position to sustain your professional interests without sacrificing important lifestyle issues. This is the time to negotiate the details to foster your professional success. You are in the driver's seat. You must clarify questions from your earlier interviews, further explore areas of concern or interest, and work out the details of financial compensation, benefits, and scheduling. Advocate for yourself, but show willingness to compromise to meet the needs of the organization while not sacrificing what is important to your long-term satisfaction and performance.

The first types of questions address the basic structure of your job. When do you start, relocation reimbursement, what your work schedule will be, and most importantly, salary and benefits. The last two items may be addressed by someone in human resources. Regardless of whom you speak with about salary, it is critical that you are familiar with the range of CNS salaries in your community. You need to know if the proposed compensation is comparable to what is available elsewhere in your region. Consider whether the salary, health care and vacation benefits, and support for professional advancement add up to a reasonable package compared with other options in your geographical area. For example, the salary might be slightly lower than the community standard, but this might be favorably balanced against something else that is particularly attractive to you, such as a tuition break if you wish to go back to school, flexible hours if you have children who have school transportation needs, or an option for a 4-day workweek rather than the traditional 5-day week. It all boils down to what is important to your professional and personal needs. CNSs are "jacks of all trades" who are invaluable to an institution and, therefore, should be compensated with time, money, and professional benefits to reflect this. If the sum of these benefits is substandard, then continue to negotiate or consider declining the offer.

It is important to clarify how your work will be assigned and prioritized. Work assignments coming from more than one person can result in conflict and unreasonable demands on your time. The ultimate result of this disorganization is that you will become frustrated, miss deadlines, and produce work that is not the quality that you prefer.

If you have not yet met with your immediate peer group, ask to do so now. Here you want to ask questions to help you ascertain the collegiality of the group. In other words, do they work and play well together? How do they distribute workload? How do they partner on projects? How do they cover for one another for illness, vacations, and holidays? Will you be part of a specific CNS group, and does participating in that group add to your responsibilities? Watch body language closely during this meeting. Is there laughter and a sense of cohesiveness in the group? Does anyone stand out as being different from the group or different from you, such that he or she might be difficult to work with? Much of the work of the CNS is relationship based, so it is important that your cohort be people you enjoy, you can work with, and you can learn from.

The next set of questions has to do with getting started in the role and ensuring that you will receive the technical support you need to do your work. They are listed in Table 1.2. Be leery of any promise to find you an office after you have started or situations where you are expected to share a computer. Hospitals frequently have limited office space. It could be months before you find a place to call “home,” which could adversely impact your productivity. It may be necessary to negotiate your start date based on when your office is expected to be available. There is no need to be unrealistic regarding this issue, such as demanding a private office with a window! The ideal space for a CNS is one that places you either with your peer group or with the unit where you will be doing most of your work so that you are immediately accessible to the nursing staff, physicians, and your colleagues. Ask if it is permissible to work from home, especially when projects that require quiet time (e.g., writing an article) are under tight deadlines.

1.2

Negotiating the Fine Points of the Job Offer

- Will there be an office space established on the day that you start?
- Will there be a pager, phone, computer set up, and paperwork for computer and other passwords on the start date or reasonably soon thereafter?
- Is there clerical/administrative support when you need it?
- Will there be a parking space available? Will you have to pay for parking?
- How often will there be times when you are expected to leave the hospital mid-day such that having a car will be essential? Are there other transportation alternatives?
- Who will be your preceptor during orientation?
- How often should you meet with your supervisor during orientation?
- Who will give feedback during orientation and the first year?
- What are the priorities for the first 6 months? First year?

Another “red flag” is if there is no clerical or administrative support to help you with paperwork and routine office activities (e.g., processing course registrations, tallying course evaluations, data entry). While a CNS is certainly able to do these activities, your time and expertise is more appropriately spent on the clinical issues you were hired to work on. The institution you want to work for should have people in place so that you don’t have to spend time doing secretarial work. Most CNSs will say it is oftentimes easier and quicker to do something themselves because they’re thinking and creating while they type the document. That being said, there needs to be support for clerical tasks so that your energies can be focused on nursing concerns. Speaking with your potential peer group about the amount of administrative support will help you identify if this is an issue you need to consider before making your decision.

Thinking It Over

You have spent a lot of time and energy preparing for the interview that will lead to a job offer. In response to that offer, more issues have been explored, negotiated, and agreed upon. Finally, you have all of the information you need to make a smart decision about this professional opportunity. Your friends and colleagues will offer solicited and unsolicited advice, warnings, and encouragement. There is value in listening to their input, certainly, but it is more important that you listen to yourself and your internal dialogue. Is this a job that you want to do? Do you think it will be interesting? Will you like the patients, your colleagues, and the work you will be asked to do? Has there been good dialogue with the people you’ve met? Do you have a sense of how the job might evolve over time? Does it meet your professional goals? Does it put you in a good position to pursue your future professional development? Will the demands of the job work in concert with your responsibilities to your home and family? Does it feel like a “good fit”? Remember that every CNS job is unique and shaped by the facility’s expectations of the role. Nonetheless, you still have major input into how the role plays out over time. Always look to the potential for how the role can be shaped and reshaped into what you want it to be.

While you are unable to read the future, you must make the decision with your head, your gut, and your heart about accepting this offer. Consider how this position meets your vision of the optimal CNS role and why you became a CNS. Review your experiences to date. Think about how those experiences, along with your passions and talents, align with the expectations of the job. Reflect upon the questions you were asked and ponder the answers to your questions during the interviews. Finally, consider how this job complements your personal life. Then, listen to your internal voice about what feels right . . . and decide!

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