

Skills Testing for Employment: How to Do Your Best

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Let me start by telling you a bit about me and my experience. I am a Certified Medical Transcriptionist with more than 25 years in the industry, most of this time as an acute-care medical transcriptionist in the hospital and MT service environment. I have taught transcription in a distance education program, given multiple presentations at regional and national meetings on medical transcription education and technology topics, and in the recent past worked as a recruiter for a national service where I had the opportunity to evaluate more than 10,000 resumés and administer 2000 medical transcription pre-employment skills tests. I administered a survey on training and hiring practices to hospital-based medical transcription supervisors at a past AAMT Annual Meeting and co-presented on “Transitioning New MTs to the Workplace” at the Medical Transcription Industry Alliance annual meeting attended by managers and owners representing some 44 MT service companies nationwide.

What Employers Really Want and Why

Let’s begin by looking at how an MT department works and why some MTs have difficulty getting started. Understanding these concepts is important to your successful entrance to the profession. We will then work our way to specific test preparation strategies. Whether transcription is taking place in a hospital transcription department or in a medical transcription service company that contracts with hospital departments, the goal of transcription management is the same—to *obtain the greatest possible production from the smallest possible investment in equipment and human resources*.

I don’t mean to make this sound like a bad thing. You want your employer to remain profitable if you want to keep your job. Of course, companies that are successful over the long term are mindful of the needs of their “human resources” and recognize that high levels of production go hand in hand with employee satisfaction. But new MT grads seeking to enter the workforce need to keep in mind the needs of employers, understand how the industry works, and then position themselves so they are in the right place at the right time to obtain the right opportunity for them.

So how is maximum production per workstation achieved? The obvious answer is to fill each workstation (on site or remote) with an experienced MT. We all know that MTs continue to learn over time. The greater the number of dictating voices, patient cases, and work environments they are exposed to, the more productive they become over time. An MT with a broad

experience over 20 years will accommodate more quickly to new accounts than one with just two years' experience.

Likewise, new MT graduates, even from the very best possible training environment, will be less productive than their counterparts who have already begun to accumulate hours on the job in addition to training. New MT grads quite naturally require more QA (quality assurance, i.e., proofreading) attention than their more experienced peers, more feedback, and 1:1 supervision. In addition to requiring costly supervision (even when you can't see the supervision, it is happening), new MT grads are less productive. It takes time for the novice to build competence on a new account, become familiar with new dictators, and learn formats, equipment, and idiosyncrasies of the job. Experienced MTs make this transition much more quickly and often achieve maximum production in a matter of days. The new MT may take many weeks or many months to achieve the minimum production standard for an employer or department.

The new MT will, of course, continue to improve with time on the job, but when the success of a business is dependent upon meeting turnaround time contracts and keeping costs in check for a strong bottom line, it should be a no brainer for all of us to see why it would not be a sensible strategy to fill every workstation with a novice MT. I hope you can see the perspective of the employers and feel at least some empathy for their predicament.

There is virtually no competition among experienced MTs. If you can demonstrate the skills of an experienced MT, you can have a job anywhere any day—you can quit the same afternoon and be welcomed to a new company the next morning. The number of workstations available to new MT grads is much more limited, and there is lots of competition for these workstations. Your goal is to find these workstations and to prepare yourself to compete successfully for the opportunity that is right for you.

Make a note of the phrase “the opportunity that is right for you.” We will want to come back to it at the end. Believe it not, you will eventually be in the position where you can pick and choose jobs—and you will want to choose positions that are skill building and not stagnating.

Reality Check—What Employers Are Willing to Settle For (or Perhaps Where They Will Meet You Halfway)

What really happens behind closed MT department doors. My own experience with dozens of offices of a national service, multiple different employers over a 25-year career, and from surveying the hiring practices of supervisors nationwide show that in spite of any stated “no newbies” policy, all MT services and departments will hire students and less-experienced MTs at one time or another. Sometimes it is out of desperation, compassion, or a con job.

As a novice, you need to have empathy with the employers and understand their needs. When you convince him/her that you have the same goals—to work together to build a productive

team—you will find an employer that is willing to work with you. Employers can have blinders on and see only production potential, but on some level they all know that there are only a limited number of experienced MTs and that someone is going to have to take the time and effort to invest in the less-experienced and bring them up to speed. The problem is that each employer wants the competition to take on this task. In fact, some employers cite this as an excuse for not hiring MT grads—that they took a chance on one and provided training and then the newbie immediately left and went elsewhere.

While you should never feel that you are forced to keep a job that does not meet your needs, you will want to display “professionalism” from day one. If an employer is investing in you, keep that investment in mind as you consider your next career move. If you need to move on, you can, but be fair with employers who are fair with you. Employers need to be reminded from time to time that turnover among experienced MTs can be costly and that a “loyal MT grad” who is grateful to an employer for an entry-level opportunity will stay a long time and be a good employee.

A “good employee” is a concept apart from a “good transcriptionist,” and this is something to keep in mind when you are attempting to “sell yourself.” What is a good employee? Someone who understands that the employer is investing time and money in you and you aren’t going to go off and quit for an extra quarter cent a line somewhere else after you get some experience on this first job; someone who is reliable and can be counted on to work the scheduled hours; someone who is not resistant to change and will contribute to the team effort. Make sure that you present yourself as a good employee and a good hiring risk, regardless of your skill set.

How to turn a “no” into a “yes” and get a testing opportunity. Start by doing your homework. Consider what I’ve said above. How many workstations can this employer afford to devote to bringing a novice along and how are they currently staffed? How can you get this information? Is this the right job for you—does the available workload realistically match your skill set? I am going to talk more about skill levels below.

If a workstation is potentially available in the near future, how can you ensure that you are considered for the job? First, you need to show off your skills. There are several ways to get a testing opportunity:

1. Ask for it straight out.
2. Bond with your contact (on the phone or in person) and build sympathy for your cause. Bonding can be handled in the usual friendly way—get someone to laugh with you or find something in common. Ask for advice. Nothing warms up experienced MTs to your cause than asking how they got started and who gave them their first opportunities.
3. If you hit a break wall, try to go through someone else in the same office. If you always get the receptionist when you call and it is her job to “screen out newbies,” you need to call at

another time to get someone more sympathetic. Here is a tip: Managers work late! Call after the receptionist has gone home. But be careful not to come off as a pest or stalker. If you need to call a number of times to get someone else, don't give your name each time. If you are told to get lost, wait a reasonable time before trying again. If you are having trouble relating to that idea, just think of a time you ever felt hounded by someone. It makes it hard to hear the message of the perceived hounder.

4. Go through someone else outside of the company—use your networking contacts to get someone to make an introduction and secure you a testing opportunity.

5. Ask your contact at this company to refer you to an associate in another company that can offer you a test.

6. Ask for a mercy test: "I know you can't take me on, but can you just give me a test so I can see where I stand and what I should work on to prepare myself for a future opportunity with your company?" That will always work so long as you haven't annoyed anyone and you catch someone at the right time. I fell for it every single time if the message was presented in the right way.

7. Remember that there is more than one fish in the sea. If you can't get through one door, find another. I had an applicant I wanted to hire but his geographical location just didn't suit the needs of the office I was hiring for unless he could work full time. He couldn't do this, so there was nothing I could offer him. He needed to look elsewhere, but I don't think he ever got over his disappointment that I couldn't help him.

Differentiation of Skill Levels

Before we look at tips for a successful test, examine your own skill level and determine if you are applying for a job that is right for your skill set. If your training did not include authentic dictation or enough practice hours, you are wasting your time applying for an acute care position or a multidictator environment. Look for a position that matches your existing skill set and then upgrade your skills.

Acute care defined. An employer looking for an "acute care MT" wants someone experienced with hospital reports—H&Ps, discharge summaries, consults, and operative reports in a multidictator environment (a hospital with a regular dictating staff of hundreds of doctors, sometimes a thousand or more). Experience in a "teaching hospital" environment (on site or through a service) where a new crop of residents comes through on a regular basis broadens experience even more.

The limited-dictator environment. An MT with no authentic dictation exposure or limited practice hours can succeed in a limited-dictator environment, i.e., transcribing the work of no

more than one or two dictators at a time, relying on repetition to make up for lack of experience. One doctor tends to say the same thing all the time and limited training can prepare you for this environment. Once there, however, you are not automatically prepared to enter acute care transcription unless you are building your skills. A 20-year veteran of an ophthalmologist's office is not going to get hired by a service that does multispecialty clinic or hospital work.

Just FYI, it is a bad practice for an MT service to hire a niche employee—someone who does only ER work or limited clinic work. Workloads fluctuate and the needs of the employees who can do every account will always come first.

Everything in between. There are many skill sets in between the acute care MT and the limited-dictator environment MT. There are so-called acute care MTs who do everything but operative reports, those who do only discharge summaries, those who've worked in a small hospital with a very small staff (as few as a dozen dictators), those who have a wide range of "clinic" skill sets from working in 100+ dictator multispecialty clinics (which would provide a broader experience than someone who had worked in an extremely small hospital), and so on.

I may sound like I'm downplaying the viability of the limited-dictator environment as a career choice, but I am not. Sometimes the highest income can be made in this environment. The multi-skilled acute care MT, however, is the one who never has to worry about being unemployed. So even if you happen into a "gravy train" account on your own, keep skill building uppermost in your mind to increase your job opportunities.

Overcoming Barriers to Success

The primary cause of failed tests: Test anxiety. Tips for dealing with test anxiety include mastering this list and the Do's and Don'ts that follow, get adequate sleep and lay out everything in advance, arrive early (practice the route you will drive to an on-site test), deep breathing and relaxation exercises. Imagine how you would handle a worst case scenario so that you can manage anything. Test for a job you know you don't want both for practice and for the joy of refusing a job opportunity (in case you get an offer!).

Second, lack of preparedness. Use the tips below to be prepared.

Third, an unmatched skill set. If your training did not include authentic dictation or enough practice hours, you are wasting your time applying for an acute care position or a multidictator environment. Look for a position that matches your existing skill set and then upgrade your skills. Some services do offer limited-dictator environment opportunities and will train you one dictator at a time. Use your networking skills to locate these opportunities.

Fourth, poor skills. In spite of a lack of exposure to adequate authentic dictation, your grammar, spelling, and referencing skills can and should be top notch. If not, hit the books and bone up.

Do's and Don'ts

1. Do stay professional at all times even if you think you are alone (you probably are not). Applicants who display a “can do” attitude are given the benefit of the doubt in a borderline test. Pay particular attention to this one. Someone I recommended for a position was not hired recently and when I asked the employer the real reason for the nonhire (I knew the student had a good skill set), she said it was because her clerk had overheard the applicant swearing and grumbling under her breath at the testing station. She said she felt the applicant would be difficult to work with. I personally know this student to be a thoroughly professional individual who would make a great employee. She just goofed in this one area because she thought she was alone.
2. Never fabricate experience to get a test. By all means build up the experiences you've had, but never lie to get a test because it will come back to you.
3. Don't complain even if hit with the unexpected. Sometimes how you deal with the unexpected is actually part of the test. One employer used a ridiculously substandard workstation to “test the ingenuity and patience” of applicants. I don't agree with this technique, but it has been done.
4. Do be prepared for every eventuality. Ask questions in advance of the employer and among your networking group so that you can anticipate as much as possible.
5. Dress right for the part. Even though you may wear your jammies when you work at home, wear business attire when applying for a job. This seems obvious, but you'd be surprised at how some people interpret “business attire.” This is true even if you know for a fact that everyone in the office wears jeans and sweatshirts.
6. Keep your conversation professional. Never share details of your personal life, medical condition, and so on, even if you are baited into doing so. Resist this temptation, as it is likely to be held against you.
7. Keep your cool no matter what happens.

Tips for Test Preparation: A Checklist for Success

1. Know your own skill set and focus your job search on positions that match up well.
2. Do your homework on the company.
3. Do your homework on the company's testing practices.
4. Ask questions in advance of the test.
5. Come prepared with all the materials requested or that you are permitted to bring.
6. Keep your cool no matter what happens. Notice how I repeated that one from the last list. It is important as it shows you are professional and can handle disruptions in your routine.

7. Follow up appropriately. This is important whether or not you hear from the employer. Sometimes the first person that is hired for a slot doesn't work out and you may be given the next opportunity.
8. If a job is not offered, have a Plan B.

What is going to be on the test? Everyone tests differently, but here is an overview of what to prepare for:

Strategies for different test types. There is one primary screening instrument and one secondary, plus a whole host of other tests that may be administered. Let's go over each:

On-site transcription test: Ask in advance whether you will be allowed to use references and whether you can bring your own. If they provide references, find out which ones they use and become familiar with them. For example, if they use Drake & Drake as a drug reference, know what it looks like and how to use it. Ask what the test will cover. If it includes operative reports and you have little or no surgery transcription experience, own up to this prior to the test. Be prepared for every report type (i.e., find out what is unique about ops!). Ask about time limits and how much dictation you will be asked to do—and practice timing yourself. Remember it is always better to leave a blank than guess. Ask for instructions about blanks—do they want an underscore, a space, or a (“sounds like”). Don't rely on a spellchecker whether or not one is available. Most test sites won't care what format you use, but don't second-guess this—ask in advance.

Off-site transcription test: Ask what references and resources you may use. Never assume a spellchecker is equivalent to looking something up—it isn't. The odds are that a better performance is expected with an off-site test since the testing situation cannot be monitored. If you are not told *not* to ask someone to proofread your work, plan to do so. In an uncontrolled testing environment, a valid test takes into account the fact that the applicant may have had some kind of outside help. If it is made clear to you that you are not to do so, follow the test instructions and let the employer know that your work is in fact your own.

Spelling test: Bone up on your spelling, common abbreviations, and so on in advance. Take practice tests. Consult lists of frequently misspelled medical and English words. And if a spelling test or any written instrument is administered off-site, you can expect that only a 100% score is acceptable because it would be assumed that you had every possible reference available and possibly even asked for help from a friend (even if you did not).

Grammar test: Bone up on this as well. Take practice tests. There is no excuse for not doing well on a grammar test. Good grammar skills are a prerequisite for being an MT.

Written test of medical knowledge: Be comfortable with the multiple-choice format. Take practice tests.

Auditory discrimination—a dictated or written test of terms that sound alike or are similar in some way. You can find these kinds of test items in most transcription training materials, including *The Medical Transcription Workbook*. Prepare for this, e.g., you should know there is an *ileum* and an *ilium* and which is which.

Editing skills: You may be given a proofreading test. This is also something you can practice in advance. Learn what errors are most egregious and which ones are most common.

Decision making/judgment: “What would you do if . . . ?” A test of this nature relies on common sense and your knowledge of confidentiality laws, ethics, and so on.

Reference book skills: You should know about all the common reference books found in the MT workplace, what they look like, and how to use them. You should be able to rattle off the names if asked. Get your hands on them even if you can’t buy them (try bookstores and libraries) and read the preface material to help you know how they are organized.

Keyboarding: An inexpensive typing tutor program can be relied upon to bring your basic keyboarding up to 60-75 wpm in short order. Even though actual keyboarding speed has little relationship with transcription speed, a big deficit in keyboarding can impact your productivity. PLUS some human resource departments place way too much emphasis on this. Be prepared for something ridiculous like a copytyping test.

Basic computer knowledge: You need to know how to use Windows and Microsoft Word. You need to know how to name and transfer files in each environment. You need to know about your own computer system in depth if you are working at home. You should know tons of stuff about the Internet, about FTP, wav files, and so on.

Essay test: Yes, a writing sample is legitimate. And in fact, I personally recommend it to employers. If you can express yourself well in writing using good grammar, spelling, and organizational skills, you have the potential to be a good MT and a good employee who communicates well with others. This is also something you can practice to be prepared for.

Personal interview: As noted above, never discuss your personal life, illnesses, childcare problems, and so on, even if the employer seems to invite and encourage this discussion in a friendly way. It is a way employers try to get you to admit to being a problem employee from the start. Steady eye contact and a firm handshake are also important. Have some reasonable questions prepared in case you are asked if you have questions. Even if you have unusual work requirements, don’t tell an employer in advance how inflexible you intend to be on the job if you actually want to get hired. Think in terms of getting your foot in the door, showing how valuable you can be, and then earning the right to enjoy some flexibility. **Good questions to ask:** What is most important to you in a new employee? Tell me more about how you got started with this company. **Bad questions:** When will I get a raise? When can I begin taking time off?

Watch for trap questions: What do you dislike or like most in a supervisor? Why did you leave your last job (never say anything negative, even if you worked for Attila the Hun). **Good comments to make:** I enjoy learning something new every day. I have a great deal of respect for experienced MTs and am privileged for this opportunity to work closely with you and your staff. It sounds sappy but it is tried and true. **Bad comments:** I'm looking forward to not having to pay a babysitter and to be able to work when I feel like it. I hate picky QA people, etc.

Real time chat and/or e-mail interview: Never send out an e-mail that is not grammatically correct and thoroughly spellchecked. Think of every e-mail to a potential employer as an extension of your resumé. Real time chatting can be a bit more difficult. Pay attention to your text as you type it, and do correct your mistakes as you go, even if the employer tells you not to worry about it. S/he may be evaluating your basic grammar/spelling as you "chat."

Having a Plan B: What If I Didn't Get Hired?

Securing a retest. So what if you get bad news or no news at all (generally interpreted as bad news)? Consider these factors: Did your test performance reflect your true skill set and abilities? If you honestly believe that something prevented your best performance, say so and ask politely for a retest. For example, ruffled nerves because you had a car accident on your way to the interview or a death in the family the previous day; an unexpected equipment failure during the test; a legitimate misunderstanding about the test instructions (you stopped prematurely because someone instructed you to do so)—any of which might be real reasons for a retest. Some companies require time to elapse before a retest. Ask for an exception to this rule and a different test and come to the retest better prepared.

Is this job the right match for your existing skills? If not, look for opportunities that do match and/or begin revising your skill set. Ask the employer for a referral to another company that might be able to use your skill set. Expand your network. Finding entry-level opportunities is about being in the right place at the right time. Sometimes you can achieve this randomly but you increase the odds by building a network in the industry—among your new MT grad peers, among your new more-experienced peers, and among employers. Keep a notebook with names, numbers, and contact dates. Follow up regularly with everyone from the day you enroll in school until you are gainfully employed in your dream job—and then keep your notebook just in case.

Skillbuilding. Expand your experience beyond a limited-dictator environment through additional training or stair-step jobs. If you can do acute care work but feel you cannot do operative reports or foreign accents, look for work opportunities that will broaden your exposure to areas where you feel weakest. Finally, never burn bridges. Estimates of the number of MTs in the U.S. vary from 250,000 to 600,000 or more. And yet you can easily play 6 degrees of Kevin Bacon with every MT you meet. It is a tight knit community and we all need to work together to build the profession. Be ever vigilant about the quality of your work and your professional reputation.

Q&A Session

How do you recognize the “scam” MT companies?

Everyone has different opinions, but mine would be that I would not take a job that required me to purchase anything from that company. Nor would I work for a ridiculously low line rate under the guise of getting experience unless it was part of an actual structured internship. By ridiculously low, I mean less than a nickel a line. The reality is that novice MTs produce very little to start; if you are working for a dollar an hour, . . . well, there are other ways to get experience. Of course, that assumes that you’ve done all you can to build your skills.

It would be okay to incur a bit of cost doing re-recording, but I wouldn’t buy someone’s software program or purchase a bunch of equipment to suit one employer. Nor would I work for free to provide a sample of my work unless it was an actual internship with a beginning and an end and clear expectations of what would come next.

Do you recommend completely finishing school before testing?

That depends on your own skill set and your goal. A former student of mine tested and got a job in a limited-dictator environment two months into her school program. She made good money, too, but then the job dried up and she had no skills to fall back on. She is still struggling a bit and wished she had finished training. Another thought is that you can go out and try a test here and there in places where you aren’t expecting to get a job . . . just to see what you should be prepared for.

Do you feel newbies are best served starting out in acute care facilities where opportunity for mentoring is more in place vs. working for a national company from home?

I believe that mentoring is very valuable and that if you have the opportunity to work in a situation where someone is giving you feedback and you are able to continually stretch your skills and learn more—more specialties, more dictators, and so on, then that is the best choice. Here is an example. A former student of mine landed a job in an acute care facility part way through her program. She was excited and so was I. But they put her on evening shift and she worked alone with no supervision. She never got feedback on her work; they just stuck it on the chart. She knew she left lots of blanks and goodness knows what kind of actual mistakes she made with no QA going on.

She got the opportunity to take a job with a transcription service that only did clinic work, but the environment would be supervised with lots of feedback. So you can see what I’m getting at: it is the mentoring that has the value and the learning opportunity—not just the magic words “acute care.”

Are smaller companies necessarily “bad” too—those that start up and hire a few people to do their work? Do you have any experience with the smaller companies?

A small company can be a very good company. The risk that you take with a small company is different in the Internet age, however, than it was when I was a bit younger. The risk involves the sanctity of your paycheck. You don’t want your paycheck to bounce. If you can’t see the company you are working for, it makes it difficult to know for certain they are for real

and that your paycheck will come. The environment itself can actually be very good in a small company.

Our local hospital advertises constantly for MTs, but on a per diem basis (when work is available). What are pros and cons on that?

Usually per diem jobs have no benefits attached and no guarantee of hours. That doesn't make it bad for a new MT starting out. I recommend that you evaluate each job for its potential as a learning opportunity and balance this carefully against your own personal requirements for income, hours, working conditions, etc.