Making the Job Fair Work for You

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Here to help you get ahead.

JOB FAIRS... many shudder at the words. Many have heard horror stories of long lines, companies attending but not hiring, confusion, crowds, and the inevitable sea of navy-blue suits. You might feel apprehensive now, but if you follow the advice below, you can have a successful job fair experience – one that lands you a more formal interview!

Develop a strategy

For many job fairs, the website advertising the event will include a list of employers who will participate, and maybe even the positions for which they are recruiting. Ideally you would look up information about the organizations that interest you ahead of time on their individual websites and even prepare tailored resumes for those positions. Once you get to the fair, if you haven't already identified companies you'd like to visit, take the list of participating employers and code the ones with whom you would like to speak, in order of importance (i.e. "A," "B," "C," etc.) Study the map outlining the location of your targeted employers. Take a couple of minutes to look around – scope out your targeted employers. If you can, walk over to the table of employers that are speaking with other students and pick up any literature they may be distributing. If the employers are talking to a group of students, listen for important information about the position or company. Remember, the "bigger name" companies have the longest lines, so plan accordingly.

Dressing for job fairs

Err on the side of being conservative when you attend a job fair. Now is not the time to "stand out and be noticed" with unusual clothing. Sure, you will be remembered – but for all the wrong reasons. The most conservative approach is to wear a business suit (matching jacket and pants/skirt) in conservative colors like navy, charcoal or black. Be sure your accessories are also conservative: white shirt/plain tie for men, polished shoes (closed toed/closed heels for women, lace-up for men), stockings if wearing a skirt for women, matching socks for men, minimal jewelry and cologne/perfume, clean hair and fingernails, clean shave for men and no food/gum or cigarette smell. Keep your pockets empty and carry only a briefcase or portfolio, where you can store your resumes and keys.

Resumes

A perfect resume is a must! Now is the time to utilize Career Services. Ideally, you should tailor your resume tailored to specific positions for the most impact.

Waiting in line

Eavesdrop (in a polite manner) on the questions and employer responses ahead of you. Speak with the individuals you are in line with regarding what they may know about the company or position. Develop some of your questions/conversations based on the knowledge you obtain and avoid questions to which you know the answers.

Cut your losses

That is, if one of your "A" employers has a long line of individuals waiting to speak with them, consider speaking to two of your "B" targets. Depending on your time schedule and how long the line(s) at your "A" target is/are, calculate your options.

What to say

Be polite at all times. The person you meet in the parking lot, elevator, hallway, or restroom may be a recruiter you will see later that day. Be professional. Show your personality, but don't be too familiar. Always be assertive, walk up to the person, offer a firm handshake, make direct eye contact, and show enthusiasm on your face and in your voice. These first 10 seconds are crucial. Introduce yourself (you can start by telling your major and your experience related to the available positions); conversation will pick up after that. Hopefully you are already prepared and know, at the very least, the basic facts about the organization. Focus on your accomplishments while speaking clearly. Relate your background and experience to the responsibilities of the position that you are seeking. Good self-presentation skills are critical in making the best first impression. Recruiters see candidates as future representatives of their organizations. Therefore, you must display confidence, enthusiasm, and the ability to think and speak on your feet – and under pressure. Make use of Career Services' practice interviews and other interview and networking resources to prepare.

60-second commercial

You're telling the employer what you can do for them – relate your experiences to the employer's needs. Be sure to name your accomplishments. The conversation is a two-way street; as you sell/market yourself, you are also gathering information.

Sample questions

What are characteristics of your successful employees in this position?
What are the qualifications?
What are specific job responsibilities?

Be sure to answer an employer's questions; if you don't understand, ask the employer to clarify.

Closing

Don't monopolize the employer's time at the job fair. Your goal is to articulate your skills and related experiences in a concise and professional manner. It only takes a few minutes if you plan ahead. Get the recruiter's business card, and discuss how and when you should follow up with the recruiter. Follow-up letters offer another opportunity to outline what you know about the company, your qualifications, and why you are a "good fit." Jot a note on the back regarding uniqueness of conversation. If relocating, ask for a contact in that city. Always leave a resume. Follow up with cover letter and additional resume stating that you met at the job fair.

Job fair leads and follow-up

Debriefing

- As soon as you get home, organize your thoughts and create your employer files. Make stacks of any literature you gathered for each employer and place a Job Fair Follow-Up sheet on the top of each stack. Attach business cards from the representatives you met to the follow-up sheets.
- Use folders to create employer files, stapling your follow-up sheets to the inside covers and labeling each file. Rank your employer files from most to least favorite. Think of what you hope to achieve with your top five employers. You have already made contact with a representative at each organization. Now, you need to parlay those initial encounters into on-site interviews, then job offers.
- Write down your initial impressions of each organization on your follow-up sheets. What did each representative tell you about hiring needs? How busy were their table? Did they seem sincerely interested in your background? Skim the literature you collected. Try to identify two or three attributes each organization seems to be looking for in a job candidate (i.e. teamwork, leadership, initiative, ability to manage, multi-tasking). You will want to demonstrate these attributes in your follow-up letters.

Prompt follow-up

- Now that your thoughts are organized, draft your follow-up letters for those "favorite" employers and send the next day (or as soon after the job fair as possible). Even if you gave representatives copies of your resume, attach another copy with any additional information you might like to provide (i.e. list of references and letters of recommendation if you have them). It is vitally important that your follow-up be prompt. You may choose to email, fax or mail your materials. Always keep copies of any follow-up letters in your employer files.
- Your letters should achieve the following; each should be typed and personalized to the individual employer (this is not the time for form letters); each should demonstrate your writing ability; each should remind the representative where and how you met; each should explain that you have read through the materials and are confident you possess the qualifications they seek; and each should conclude with a statement that you will follow-up within a week by phone.
- If your employer file includes an application for employment, you should complete it with great care and attach it to you letter and resume. The application should be typed or printed neatly. Their screening process could rely heavily on completed applications. Follow all instructions. Never write, "See attached resume." If an item does not apply, write "Not applicable" – never leave blanks.

Continued contact

- Call your targeted employers one week after sending your follow-up information to be sure they received your materials. Ask if they would like you to provide additional information (i.e. writing samples, letters of recommendation, list of references, transcripts). If you are able to travel to their worksite, ask if it might be possible to schedule a visit (perhaps during an academic break). If you cannot get through to your contact, do not hesitate to ask the administrative assistant about the status of your materials or the search, and make sure you get his or her name and position title (correct spelling of both). Make sure you note any conversations on your follow-up sheet.
- Below are some additional questions you might ask when you place your call:
  - Does the employer have a hotline you could call on a regular basis to learn of job openings?
  - Is there another person in the organization who will be examining your materials?
  - Would it be possible to visit the organization for a brief tour or informational interview?
  - Are there any alumni from your school working for the organization? In what capacities? You might ask to give them a call to get a better idea of the culture of the organization.
- Over the weeks after the job fair, keep "working" and "reworking" your employer files. Although you never want to appear desperate, you do want to learn when each employer will be making final hiring decisions. If an employer says they will know by April 15, then wait until April 18 to give them a call. Keep the lines of communication as open as you can, and don't lose your persistence unless it's clear you will not be offered a position. In this case, it is appropriate to ask the employer where you fell short in the application or interview process. But don't stop there – keep looking for new opportunities until you secure a position.

Evaluate potential employers by critically reviewing their recruiting materials

Knowing how to read between the lines of corporate literature to extract information you need to impress interviewers is a critical skill few students bother to learn. A candidate's responses and questions in an interview set the stage with the employer as to how the student views the company. Entering an interview without prior knowledge of a company is lethal, and posing questions that were clearly answered on a company website or in a company informational presentation on campus will surely eliminate you from consideration.

Begin by developing an employer sheet for each company you've targeted. Start with a simple question: "What can I learn about the company from this material that will help me perform well in interviews?" Record thoughts into five sections: (1) Hard Information; (2) Technology; (3) Stories; (4) Lifestyle; and (5) Transition. Under each heading, make notes that will come in handy as you prepare to face interviewers.

Hard Information

Are there charts outlining an expected career path and a section explaining such benefits as medical insurance and vacation time? Can you glean any statistics to mention knowingly in interviews, such as the number of employees, new branches opening in the next year, profitability expectations and so on? Scan the annual report and 10K for signs of corporate expansion. You don't need to be an accounting major to realize the advantage of a profit statement that shows consistent financial growth. Another type of hard information is company jargon. Pick out key words that appear often and write them down. How are people addressed? What are sample job titles? What acronyms are used frequently? Your ability to speak this language will communicate an interest recruiters won't miss.

Technology

If you're looking for cutting-edge technology, but a company's website looks outdated, the job probably isn't a good match. Just as your resume has a section describing your technical expertise and training, a company's materials should emphasize its commitment to innovation. Remember, since new graduates rarely stay with their first employers for more than a few years, you want to ensure that your training will give you a technological advantage in the marketplace. Write down what's said in presentations about the firm's approach to technology and training, and ask about systems and programs of interest. Are specific systems and programs mentioned? What technical support does one receive? These are questions to ask recruiters when they aren't adequately explained.

Stories

Recruitment literature often includes excerpts from recent grads who have worked for the firm only a year or two. Scan materials to see if these recent hires describe their work experiences in detail. Employees depicted will illustrate the kind of person the company is looking for. Are these the types of people you'd enjoy working with? Chances are your experience will be similar to theirs if you work there. Your research also should include discussions in person or by phone with current employees, including last year's grads from your college now working there. That's the only way to gather a true reading of working conditions and advancement opportunities.

Lifestyle

You should want to know more about an organization than what you'll do during business hours. You should uncover the social, cultural and political environments of both the organization and its surroundings. Look for standards regarding working hours. Will these parameters allow a fit between your intended lifestyle and the expectations of the company? Find out whether the company sponsors charity events, inter-departmental sports teams or summer picnics. Is it a good community citizen, allowing its employees to help those less privileged? If you're planning a family, does the firm offer day-care? Is information about the city included? Does it offer a lifestyle compatible with your needs?

Transition

As you prepare to leave good friends and the familiar structure of college life behind, make sure the company you're joining will do all it can to make you feel at home. No literature can really prepare you for what you're going to do, but gathering as much information as you can about the first few months on the job can lower your anxiety level and help you prepare for the adjustment. If you're thinking about relocating for a position, be sure to assess your prospective move carefully before agreeing. How compatible is the corporate philosophy to your own? Take a close look at the working environment, leadership styles, mentorship possibilities and use of skills. Once you move, a bad match is even more painful in a new city. Look for answers to other questions, such as: What's said about the training program? Will it begin on your first day? How long will it last? What's the mix of classroom time vs. on-the-job training? Does the company help you find housing? Does it offer a roommate referral service?

By the time you've completed your tip sheet, you should have dozens of questions to ask interviewers. Although you shouldn't ask them all, pose those questions that relate to the contributions you can make to the firm. Save the ones about perks and salary for after you have received an offer.

Quality organizations want to make as good a match as you do. Many strive to offer the information you'll need to make a sound choice. After all, it's costly for companies to hire people who become miserable and quit within a year. Still, the burden rests on you to gather the information you'll really need.

Adapted from National Business Employment Weekly*, Fall 1992*

Develop your 60-second commercial

The implicit question "Tell me about yourself..." exists in many situations besides the job interview. Developing a "sound-bite," or oral resume of about one minute in length, will enable you to be articulate and enthusiastic about yourself. Use the following outline to make rough notes under each category, then fine-tune and practice this information.

1. Background education and/or how you began in the world of work

2. Skills, strengths, and accomplishments

3. Job focus and future career plans

This short verbal presentation:

- Advertises your best skills and accomplishments.
- Highlights the strengths and advantages of your liberal arts education.
- Tailors itself to each listener and situation.
- Demonstrates your own enthusiasm, personal style, and judgment.
- Presents you with clarity and focus.
- Generates appropriate information and interaction.
- Markets you effectively in such situations as social occasions, job fairs, networking, information interviewing, and cold calling.

You can also use this information when answering interview questions such as:

Tell me about yourself.
Why should I hire you?
Why are you qualified for this job?
Why do you want this job?

Evaluate your performance:

Consider the content, style, delivery and follow-up interaction. Is content clear, organized, purposeful, impactful, interesting? Does your delivery style include good vocal tone/rate, eye contact, gestures, enthusiasm, confidence? In follow-up interaction, did you ask questions, listen well, customize information? Note your strengths and what you need to work on further.

Organizing your job search

Keeping record of the employers you apply with is an important part of the job search process.

Employer name: _____ _____

Contact Person: _____ Title: _____ _____

Address: _____ Phone: _____ _____

Employer information: _____

_____

_____

_____

Application deadline: _____

Resume/cover letter sent: _____

Interview date/time/place: _____

_____

Thank-you letter sent: _____

Date	Action Taken	Response

Employer name: _____ _____

Contact Person: _____ Title: _____ _____

Address: _____ Phone: _____ _____

Employer information: _____

_____

_____

_____

Application deadline: _____

Resume/cover letter sent: _____

Interview date/time/place: _____

_____

Thank-you letter sent: _____

Date	Action Taken	Response