

How to Work a Job Fair

Have you been searching long and hard for a job, only to keep hitting roadblocks when you try to make contact with companies in your community? If so, it's time to start utilizing another great job searching resource – the career fair.

Career fairs are great places to get your foot in the door. These events provide job seekers with important face time with dozens of companies that are actively looking for candidates, and do so all in one place. However, making your mark at a career fair does not happen just by showing up. A successful career fair experience takes planning, preparation and the confidence to sell yourself. If you want to use this resource to help jump start your search, follow these tips before, during and after the fair.

Before the Fair – It All Comes Down to Homework

- **Get a guest list.** Your first step is to find out which companies will be participating. You can do this by contacting the career fair organizers or by doing your own research. Many career fairs have Web sites that list participating companies or list the companies on brochures and other advertising materials. Once you have the list, highlight several companies that are of interest to you.
- **Do your research.** Research the companies that will be attending the fair. Look at their Web sites, read their press releases, and search your local newspaper for stories. Look for recent acquisitions that indicate that the company is growing, new products that have been introduced, or any other business news that gives you an idea of where the company is headed and how you can play a role.
- **Put your tools together.** Once again, it's time to dust off your résumé and make sure it is in tip top condition. Make sure it is current and that it sends a clear, concise picture of who you are and what you have to offer. Double-check for spelling and grammatical errors and make sure your contact information is correct.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** Get together with a friend or family member and practice answering typical interview questions such as "tell me about yourself," or "what kind of position are you looking for?" Additionally, develop a list of questions you want to ask each company. One of the best ways to look prepared and professional is showing up with thoughtful, intelligent questions.

During the Fair – Put On Your Best Show

- **Dress the part.** When you go to the career fair, you will undoubtedly see people walking around in jeans and t-shirts. Don't be one of those people. A career fair is your chance to make a good first impression with a potential new employer. Wear a conservative business suit, make sure you look well-groomed, and carry your materials in a professional folder or portfolio.
- **Don't forget your ammo.** You spent all that time making sure your résumé was ready

to go, so don't blow your chances by forgetting to bring it. Bring many copies printed out on professional résumé paper, as well as a few copies of your references list. Be prepared to hand these out many times throughout the day.

- **Be confident and proactive.** A career fair is no place to be shy and demure. The best way to make a lasting impression is by being aggressive. Approach the companies that interest you, make eye contact and introduce yourself with a firm handshake. Take the initiative and tell them about yourself and why you are interested in their company. Answer questions succinctly, with solid examples of your strengths and qualifications. Ask your prepared questions and listen intently to the answers. Tie in what you know about their company from your research to the type of job you are seeking.
- **Ask for information.** Whatever you do, don't leave a company booth without getting a business card and company brochure. This might be the only opportunity you have to meet with the hiring manager face to face and you will want his or her contact information later.

After the Fair – Close the Deal

- **Follow up.** Just like a job interview, it is important to follow up after a career fair. Using the business cards you collected, write letters to key company representatives. Thank them for taking the time to speak with you, reiterate your strengths, and let them know that you will call them to follow up in a couple of days. Then, be true to your word and call. Just make sure you don't waste the opportunity you had at the career fair. Your due diligence afterwards can be as important as your preparation.

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