

Getting the Most Out of a Career Fair

In today's hot job market, more and more employers are using career fairs – both on and off campus – to promote their opportunities and to pre-screen applicants. Career fairs come in all shapes and sizes, from small community sponsored events to giant regional career expositions held at major convention centers.

Most career fairs consist of booths and/or tables manned by recruiters and other representatives from each organization. For on-campus events, some employers also send alumni representatives. Large corporations and some government agencies have staffs who work the career fair “circuit” nationwide.

An employer's display area is also subject to wide variance. It could be a simple table with a stack of brochures and a lone representative or an elaborate multimedia extravaganza with interactive displays, videos, posters, and a team of recruiters.

Fashions and Accessories

Generally, the appropriate attire for career fair attendees is more relaxed than what you'd wear to an actual job interview. In most cases, the “business casual” is the norm. If you're unsure of the dress code (particularly in off-campus events,) it would be wise to err on the overdressed side--you'll make a better impression if you appear professional. Think of it as a dress rehearsal for your real interviews!

Remember to bring copies of your resume (or resumes, if you have several versions tailored to different career choices), a few pens and pencils (have backups, they have a way of disappearing), a folder or portfolio and some sort of note taking device (a paper or electronic pad). Keep track of the recruiters with whom you speak and send follow up notes to the ones who interest you. Don't bring your backpack; it's cumbersome for you, it gets in the way of others, and it screams “student!” instead of “candidate!”

Stop, Look and Listen

Keep your eyes and ears open – there's nothing wrong with subtly eavesdropping on the questions asked and answers received by your fellow career fair attendees. You might pick up some valuable information, in addition to witnessing some real life career search “do's and don'ts”.

In order to maximize your career fair experience, you must be an active participant and not just a browser. If all you do is stroll around, take company literature and load up on the ubiquitous freebies, you haven't really accomplished anything worthwhile (unless you're a collector of key chains, mouse pads and pocket flashlights). It is essential to chat with the company representatives and ask them meaningful questions. Here's a great bit of advice from Stanford University's *Career Fair '99* guide:

“Create a one minute commercial as a way to sell yourself to an employer. This is a great way to introduce you. The goal is to connect your background to the organization's need. In one minute or less, you need to introduce yourself, demonstrate your knowledge of the company, express enthusiasm and interest and relate your background to the company's need.”

You're a Prospector—Start Digging

The questions you ask at a career fair depend upon your goals. Are you interested in finding out about a particular career field? Then ask generalized questions about working within the industry. If you're seeking career opportunities with a specific employer, focus your questions on the application and interview process, and ask for specific information about the employer.

Fair Thee Well

By all means, try to attend at least one career fair before beginning your formal job interviewing process. For new entrants into the professional career marketplace, this is a good way to make a transition into “self marketing mode” without formality and possible intimidation of a one-on-one job interview. It's an opportunity that's too valuable to miss.

A Few Words About Career Fair Etiquette

1. Don't interrupt the employer reps or your fellow job-seekers. If someone else is monopolizing the employers time, try to make eye contact with the rep to let him or her know that you're interested in speaking. You may be doing them a favor by giving the recruiter an out. If all else fails move on to the next exhibit and come back later.
2. If you have real interest in an employer, find out the procedures required to secure an interview. At some career fairs, initial screening interviews may be done on the spot. Other times, the career fair is used to pre-screen applicants for interviews to be conducted later (either on campus or at the recruiter's site).
3. Sincerity always wins. Don't lay it on too thick, but don't be too blasé either. Virtually all employers are looking for candidates with good communication skills.
4. Don't try to drop your resume on employers' display tables. Try to get it in a persons' hands and at least say a few words. If the scene is too busy and you can't get a word in edgewise, jot a note on your resume to the effect of, “You were so busy that I didn't get a chance to meet you. I'm very interested in talking to you.” Look around the display for the recruiters business card (or at the very least, write down his name and get some literature on the company's address) and send a follow up note and another copy of your resume.
5. If you know ahead of time that one of your “dream companies” is a fair participant, do some prior research (at minimum visit their website and, if available, view their company video tape). A little advance preparation goes a long way and can help you stand out among the masses of other attendees.