



How to Work a Career Fair and Be Successful

Career fairs have become a staple of internship, co-op and employment recruiting. Where else can a potential job seeker find tens if not hundreds of employers gathered in one location willing to talk about their organization and employment needs? Many college students and graduates, however, often overlook them or are not prepared to make an effective impression on would-be employers. Here are some tips to follow to make them work well for you.

Have a purpose in mind for attending

Be aware of your objective in attending the career fair:

- Information about occupations, majors or graduate schools
- Networking opportunity to obtain contacts and organizational information
- Job leads for full-time, internships, or summer employment

Be prepared to talk about yourself

Research the employers in which you have an interest. Plan and practice an introduction or “commercial”, not more than two minutes long, that advertises your skills and experiences.

Consider incorporating the following:

- Greeting: name, major, expected graduation date
- Purpose in attending the fair
- Summary of your skills and experience to demonstrate how you may meet their hiring needs
- Your knowledge about their organization, products, or the career field

Be tactical and plot a strategy

Most universities will have a webpage devoted to the career fair. Create a list of employers/ graduate schools with whom you would like to meet. Prior to the fair, conduct preliminary research on these organizations. At the fair, find a map outlining their locations and plot a course to meet with as many of them as possible. Allow yourself to “warm up” by talking with other employers/ universities before heading for your favorites.

Bring copies of your supporting documents

Make sure you carry plenty of copies of your resume and any other pertinent documents that will help present your qualifications. Put all of your documents into a file folder or portfolio so you may move about freely and have a place for the literature and business cards that you will acquire.

Dress to impress

Don't overlook the importance of making a good first impression. If you are seeking full-time, professional employment, you should wear a suit or dress as close to “interview attire” as you can. If you are seeking an internship, part-time or summer employment, try to dress in “business attire” or at least in “business casual” clothing. (Please speak with a career counselor for more details.)

You are on stage--expect to be evaluated

Career fairs are more than extended versions of informational interviews. They are attended by hundreds of job seekers. Recruiters may seem to be conversational, informative, and friendly, but they are frequently screening you to help them narrow the field of candidates. Be relaxed, act confident, and be willing to talk about yourself to the employer.

Be organized and take notes along the way

After visiting with dozens of employers, it can be very easy to get them mixed up. It is a good idea after meeting an employer to write down notes about your experience: Is the organization worth more consideration? If so, list questions you may want clarified or a date to follow up with them. Remember to collect business cards when possible. You need to evaluate the organization as well to see if it meets your criteria.

Career fairs should be used as screening devices

The most important aspect of a career fair is to make contact with many employers or graduate schools in a short time, while obtaining enough information about them to ascertain whether future follow-up is desirable. Pick up literature on organizations of interest to study in your free time.

Career fair guidelines:

- Be respectful when approaching the recruiter as others may be concluding their visits
- Give a firm handshake, maintain eye contact, and smile
- Address the recruiter politely -- introduce yourself by name, major and graduation date, and begin your commercial
- Remain poised and exhibit a positive attitude and an interest in the conversation
- When speaking with a potential employer or internship site, present your resume and mention your purpose for attending the fair
- Relate your education, skills, interest, or experience to the specific needs of the employer
- Refer to leadership roles, volunteer experience, or internships
- Ask open-ended questions; carefully listen to employer dialogue as it may yield clues to leads or opportunities
- Be responsive to employer questions and be honest with recruiters concerning your qualifications
- Keep your hands free to shake hands or to write down important information
- Request a business card and be sure to take organizational literature
- Conduct yourself professionally at all times
- Follow up your networking with email or phone calls

Employer turnoffs at career fairs:

- Lacking focus or not knowing what types of positions attendees are seeking
- Attire that is sloppy or unprofessional
- Not having copies of a resume
- A lack of enthusiasm or interest
- Taking their promotional items but not being interested in a conversation
- Poor communication skills and not making eye contact
- Asking about salary information