Career Central™ Advice

Job Fairs: The Basics

Learn how to navigate a vital job search resource.

So many companies...

Job fairs, a.k.a. career fairs and expos, are events where employers and recruiters converge to meet, assess, and screen job candidates. For job seekers, they are an excellent opportunity to meet multiple employers in one convenient location. These face-to-face forums, which can host upwards of 30 to 75+ companies under one roof, allow you to learn first hand about prospective employers and their hiring needs, and to present your credentials in person without a prior appointment.

Imagine going from booth to booth knowing that recruiters are ready and willing to speak with you at *your* convenience!

So little time...!

With so many businesses present, it may seem like a job seeker's candy store. But with long lines, crowds, and possibly hundreds of other candidates also trying to secure an interview, you'll need to have a strategy to get the most out of your limited time, and the recruiter's.

Begin your job fair education with the three R's:

Register. First contact your career or employment center to find out dates, times, and locations of upcoming job fairs and career expos. Generally free, many events do require you to pre-register.

Research. Do your homework. Get the list of attendees so you can decide which businesses to target with your résumé. Visit their Web sites and learn about their recruiting needs so you can ask intelligent and relevant questions at the job fair.

Rehearse. Yes, job fairs are interview arenas, so prepare as you would for any interview. Practice your elevator speech and proper body language. Be able to answer that all-time question, "Why do you want to work for this company?" Remember, the people behind the colorful booths handing out freebies are gatekeepers evaluating your appearance, communication skills, and possible fit into their corporate culture. Your mission is to create a good impression, get past their checkpoints, and land a formal interview.

Beat the crowd. Arrive early to scope out and locate your recruiters of interest. Both you and the employers will be energized, and you won't yet be another face in a sea of faces. Plan to stay the entire day. Visit your prospects near the beginning, and thank them again at the end.

Network. Network with recruiters to get the name of hiring managers. Network with other job seekers to find out who the promising employers are. The more information you gather, the more confident and well connected you'll be later on.

Listen, *i.e.*, eavesdrop. You can learn a lot by listening to employers interacting with other job seekers. This will give you a better lead in, as well as more info to formulate intelligent questions about hiring practices and procedures.

Hand out résumés! Keep your résumé(s) current and relevant to the position(s) you're interested in. Have plenty on hand, and keep an open mind; you never know who might be interested.

Put on your game face. Be confident, direct, and take the initiative to ask questions. Enthusiasm sells. Be polite and engage. Watch the play clock; don't monopolize the recruiter's time.

An exit strategy. Reiterate your interest and qualifications. Thank the recruiters before you leave the fair. Send thank you notes, and follow up with contacts.

Be realistic.

Don't expect to be hired on the spot; often representatives who attend are not hiring managers. However, in-person networking, finding leads, plus leaving a résumé and a good impression with a real face and name are advantages that can get you through the initial screening process and your foot in the door.

And that makes attending a job fair worthwhile.

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in a nutshell:

A job fair overview to help you get an interview:

- **Professional attire is best; wear comfortable shoes**
- **Practice your elevator speech**
- **Arrive early; stay the entire day; meet as many employers of interest as possible**
- **Have plenty of résumés handy**
- **Carry a portfolio or briefcase, and take notes**
- **Obtain business cards with contact names**
- **Follow up with contacts; send a written thank you**

Know what you want, but don't forget to make your focus about meeting the employer's hiring needs.

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