

Making the Most of Your Next Career Fair

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Finding a job today is unusually tough. With college recruiting off over fifty percent by some reports, you have limited chances to get in front of recruiters. That's why it is critical that you make the most of the few opportunities you have. Career fairs are a great opportunity, but only if you know how to take advantage of them. Here are a few tips to help you at your next career fair.

Have a Plan

This is the most important thing. Plan your attack long before you step foot into the career fair. Your first step is to learn which companies will be attending. Contact your career services center or the career fair sponsors to ask for a list of exhibitors. They generally have this information several days before the event and often make it available to the public via the web or in print.

Study the list of companies that will be attending and mark your top prospects. If you aren't sure what a company does, go online the night before and look at their web site. After you identify the companies that you absolutely want to see, go through the list again and mark the companies that might not be your top prospects but sound interesting. This should also include companies that you would like to know more about. Note the booth number and location of each company. Most career fairs offer a map or layout of the room. Study the layout so you can work your way around the room more effectively.

On the day of the career fair, come prepared with your list of companies that you want to visit. But before you make a bee-line straight to their booth, take a moment to "walk" the fair. By this I mean walk up and down each aisle and look at all of the booths before you start talking to people. This will give you an idea of exactly where specific employers are located, how many recruiters are in attendance and how many people are lined up waiting to talk with them. Why is this important? Because career fairs are often set up like the aisles of a grocery store and the last thing you want to do is to cluelessly wander the fair like you are trying to find the Oreos. "Walking" the fair gives you an idea of the layout and how you want to approach each booth. That way when you are ready to strike you can do so with purpose and confidence.

Go Early

The earlier in the day you can attend the better. As the day drags on more and more people show up and everyone starts to sound and look the same. I've seen some career fairs stop letting people in the doors hours before it was scheduled to close because they couldn't handle the amount of candidates. I was recently at a career fair

in Dallas where 3,000 people had lined up by 2:00 p.m. The organizers had to turn people away, even though the event was supposed to last until 6:00 p.m..

Ok, so you might not have that many people at your career fair, but you still want to be there when recruiters are fresh, alert and attentive. I can tell you from experience, by the fourth or fifth hour of saying the same thing over and over again, you begin to lose focus. If you want to make an impact and really get their attention, go early.

Have A Great Twenty Second Pitch

Don't count on having a long meaningful conversation with the recruiters. You don't have much time at all. For recruiters, career fairs are about volume. If they find a diamond in the coal heap, that's great, but they want to see and be seen by as many people as possible. For that reason you should keep your initial pitch as brief as possible. Come up with a clear specific description of yourself, your area of study or experience and what you want to do. You won't have time to give them the extended dance mix version of how you changed your major three times, but during an internship after your sophomore year you decided that marketing was really the career for you. As their eyes begin to glaze over they will lose interest and politely take your resume, pat you on the head and wish you luck as they welcome the next person in line. Keep it quick, fresh and interesting.

Get the Scoop From People As They Are Leaving the Booth

Before you get in line or step right up to the booth, stand off to the side and grab someone who is just leaving the booth. Ask her how it went. What are the recruiters looking for today? What questions did the recruiter ask? This insight will help you to prepare and give you an idea of how to approach the recruiter. If you know that the recruiters are representing an engineering division, but you want to go into marketing, then you can quickly steer the conversation so that you can get a marketing lead. You won't have much time when you speak to a recruiter so use it wisely by watching your peers.

Get a Card

You should get a card from everyone you have a conversation with. Have a pen and write interesting facts, notes, or additional contact names on the back of the card. Use this information in your follow up with the recruiter. By the way, this is another reason you want to go early. Inevitably recruiters will run out of cards, so get them early in the day before they run out.

Suck It Up and Look the Part

I know that you are on a campus and that the student lifestyle grants you the opportunity to roll out of bed and throw on a sweatshirt, rack hat and sandals. But please do yourself a favor and dress the part of an aspiring young person who would

like to be employed somewhere other than the brewpub or your local Tower Records. If you find it morally reprehensible to actually wear a suit at least put on something clean and could pass for business casual in most organizations. Hint...jeans don't count. (This is bound to be a future topic, but in the meantime ask your career center for details on how to dress).

This is Not a Group Activity

You can certainly attend the career fair with a friend, but when it comes time to talk to employers, there is NOT strength in numbers. Talking to an employer while you are genetically attached at the hip with your best friend is not a good move. Employers are interested in hiring you, not a duo.

Want Attention? Don't Follow the Crowds

At every career fair there are certain companies that have candidates waiting in lines seven people deep. These are often the employers that everyone has heard of, the "brand name" employers. They draw lots of candidates for a reason, which is great...but don't make the common mistake of neglecting companies because you haven't heard them before or they don't have a line of candidates swarming the booth. These employers might not be a household name, but they may offer more lucrative opportunities than the companies everyone is lined up to talk to. You might also get more attention from the recruiters at these companies because they don't have everyone vying for their attention.

Understand Why Companies Participate in Career Fairs.

Obviously companies attend career fairs looking for candidates. But if you have attended a career fair in the past you may have noticed that some of the companies there might only have a couple of openings...if any. So, why would a company attend a career fair if they don't have any positions available right then? The key phrase is "right then." They may not have an opening at that exact moment, but that can easily change in six weeks or six months. Companies want to be prepared by having a talent pool to choose from when the time comes. They might also be gathering resumes for a particular division or department that couldn't attend. In addition to screening candidates and collecting resumes, one of the primary goals is to promote the company as a great place to work. It can be a branding mission, pure and simple.

Take note, that companies put a lot of effort and expense into attending a career fair. It is a business. They take it seriously and expect you to as well. Ok, you might have the occasional bozo that appears like he doesn't want to be there or who is more interested talking with his co-workers than you. But don't get mad. Simply ask yourself if this is the type of company you want to work for? Remember that first impressions work both ways, and if a company chose this clown as their representative, what does that say?

Follow Up

If you really want to make an impression at a career fair, pay attention to what happens afterward. A career fair is simply the first step in the hiring process. Help speed that process along by making the extra effort to follow up with the recruiters you met with immediately after the career fair. A short e-mail is perfect for this. Take the initiative and surprising things will begin to happen for you. Remember what Thomas Jefferson said, "The harder I work, the luckier I get."

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