GETTING THE MOST FROM A CAREER FAIR

Career fairs are one of the most organized and primary ways for you to meet company representatives – and to stand out from the crowd. They provide opportunities to be interviewed on-the-spot, to network, and to gather information about companies and their needs. Although you shouldn’t expect to land a job as a result of a visit to a company table, you can significantly improve your chances of securing an interview.

Companies use career fairs for different purposes. Some see it as a place to hire; others as a place to scope out potential candidates for future hiring needs; others as an opportunity for visibility.

Many job seekers neither prepare themselves well nor present themselves well at career fairs. The keys to improving your odds at landing an interview and landing a job are things that you can do before, during and after the career fair. Remember: the point of the career fair is not to drop off your resume. It is to get through this screening process and make it to the next step.

BEFORE – The Rehearsal

1. The first and most important step in preparing for a career fair is to answer the question, “What do I want to achieve?” Your goals might include learning as much as you can about lots of different companies and industries, or talking with recruiters from all the accounting firms that are represented. The conversations you have with company representatives should vary according to your objectives. If you’re seeking information, it’s appropriate to say, “I’d love to learn more about your company. Can you tell me about your products?” If, however, you want to land an interview, you must know what the company does, what skills it seeks in candidates, and what kind of position you are looking for – before you introduce yourself with your 30-second commercial and hand over your resume.

2. Even if you aren’t sure about the specific company or industry in which you want to work, advance research can help you get a lot more out of the career fair. At a minimum, it should help you decide where and how to spend your time. Find out which companies will be attending the event and identify 8-10 companies that most interest you. Be open-minded: a career fair is an excellent chance to explore new options in a low-risk environment. Take a look at their web sites and read timely articles about them and their products/services, and senior leaders.

3. One good way to show your commitment to a target company is to find people who work at the company, contact them, and ask them about their jobs and what it’s like to work there. Use our UCAN database of alumni/ae (accessible through your eRecruiting account), LinkedIn groups, and your personal connections to help you expand your network and get this information.

4. Prepare good questions to ask the recruiters at the fair. Don’t ask questions to which you can easily find answers on the company web site or via other resources. Good questions show off your research. A few that you might consider are, “What is the culture really like?” “What are three things you most like about your job?” “What are the company’s priorities right now?” “What characteristics do you most look for in candidates?”

5. Prepare and practice your 30-second Elevator Pitch. Typically you’ll only have a few minutes to talk to a recruiter. Make a good first impression by introducing yourself in a focused and concise way. See our handout – 30-second Elevator Pitch.
6. Have an **up-to-date resume** that has been reviewed by our office. Most recruiters receive so many resumes at career fairs they often can’t connect a face with the piece of paper. If you impress them with a good introduction and intelligent questions, they will jot down notes on your resume.

**DURING – The Performance**

Companies typically send two types of people to career fairs: HR representatives and hiring managers. When you visit a booth, introduce yourself with your 30-second Elevator Pitch and make sure you find out what the person you are talking to does (sometimes this information will be on their name badge). **Ask for business cards** from all of the people you speak with – and get the name of the hiring manager in the department you are interested in if he/she is not there.

Ask the questions you have prepared. And, listen to other people asking questions – or read the company’s brochures while you’re waiting in line. These are both good ways to absorb additional information that could help you stand out as a potential candidate.

Be sure to have a notebook, pen, and a list of all the companies attending so that you can take your own notes.

**AFTER – The Encore**

The career fair is over, but your work isn’t finished yet. Now is the best opportunity to improve your chances of being called back for an interview. **Follow-up is key!**

If you did your job at the fair right, you will have come away with lots of contacts – business cards or names, phone numbers and/or e-mail addresses of the people who work at the companies you’re targeting. If you made a connection, **call or e-mail to follow-up**. Communicate your interest and explore current or emerging opportunities.

**Write a thank you letter.** It’s another great way to get your name in front of that person again. It also provides an opportunity to send another copy of your resume, in case it got lost in the shuffle.

**Ask about internships.** If you found out at the fair that the company has no immediate needs, ask if you can work on a project or do an internship. This provides an opportunity for the company to get to know you better, and for you to get to know them better.

**A few final thoughts:** Most recruiters advise job seekers to get as many exposures as they can with the company. Keep your eye out for local job fairs – and if the companies you are targeting will be there, go if you can. If you have a friend that works at a company in which you want to work, consider taking him or her out to lunch. Make sure your friend has a copy of your resume to circulate inside the company. Or, identify UML alumni/ae that currently work at the company to expand your network. The more connections you make with the company and its representatives, the less of a stranger you become.

*Adapted from WetFeet.com*

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