



When faced with the daunting task of finding a job, it's nice to know that career fairs exist – not too many major life transitions have such a ready-made, free, and publicly accessible way to make the needed connections.

But that's not to say that career fairs absolve you of hard work in the search for the right job. To make the most of a career fair, you need to be prepared. Here's a step-by-step approach to help you make the most of this great opportunity to connect with employers.

Before the fair

At least a couple of weeks before the Career Fair, take a good, hard look at your résumé.

- Is it up to date? Does it reflect your most recent experiences and job-related accomplishments in a compelling and concise way? (One page is best.)
- Is your contact information complete and current?
- Is the format clean, organized, and easy to read?
- Are you able to give a recruiter examples or details about every item on that résumé?

Based on your review of the résumé, make needed changes and have your most detail-oriented friend or colleague edit it for you. Revise and proofread again.

During the week before the Fair, find out which employers will be represented at the Fair. Most Career Fairs now post Web sites that list recruiters who will be attending. Your job at this point is two-fold: 1) make a priority list of which employers you want to talk to and 2) read those employers' Web sites to learn about their organization: their mission, customers, products, history, employment, etc.

Print enough copies of your résumé (plus extras) to share with recruiters from your targeted companies at the Career Fair.

Prepare a 30-second introduction to open conversations with recruiters at the Fair. Your introduction should include your name, your area of study or expertise, your graduation date, and why you stopped to talk to this person. For example, you might say that you'd seen in the Career Fair publicity that this company would be attending, you'd researched the organization online, found it intriguing, and you were wondering what sorts of opportunities might exist at the company for someone with your background. Practice this self introduction out loud until you feel comfortable with it and you're confident that it will initiate a conversation about job opportunities.

The day or two before the Career Fair, plan and prepare your attire and accessories. The goal is to make a good first impression, so be well groomed: have neatly trimmed hair, be freshly bathed (forgo perfumes and colognes, however), and wear clean, wrinkle-free clothing in good repair. The safest bet is to wear a comfortable suit.

Women can choose either a skirt or pants suit, depending on how conservative their preferred industry is.

(over)

Choose neutral or dark hosiery and comfortable, closed-toed shoes. **Men** should wear polished and comfortable dark shoes and dark socks. For accessories, leave flashy jewelry at home. Carry a professional-looking portfolio with a pad of paper and pen. Store and protect your résumés in the portfolio, and use it to collect business cards from recruiters. Don't carry much else, if anything – you need to be free to shake hands.

On Fair Day

- Arrive as early in the event as you can. Some recruiters may leave the Fair before it's over, so if you arrive in the later part of the event you may miss your targeted companies.
- Bring a friend if you must, but once you arrive at the Fair, go your separate ways to begin conversations with your targeted companies. Don't "huddle" with your buddies on the sidelines; it indicates a lack of confidence. Recruiters may be watching.
- If you're feeling shy, keep these things in mind: 1) One of the ways recruiters judge a Career Fair's success is how many people they get to talk to. They're *hoping* you'll come up to them. After all, this is their job! 2) Everyone acknowledges a Career Fair can be a little intimidating, so it's okay to say to a recruiter that you're new to the Career Fair scene, but really wanted to take this opportunity to speak to him or her.
- Smile!
- Don't just "cruise" the booths collecting "freebies" offered by recruiters. This isn't a shopping trip; it's a professional networking event.
- Collect business cards from recruiters. You may find it particularly helpful to write a note or two on the back of each card to remind you what you spoke to each recruiter about.

After the Fair

Follow up with your target companies by writing a thank-you note or e-mail to recruiters with whom you had good conversations and/or with whom you'd like to continue discussing opportunities. You might reiterate some specific qualification you have for their opening and restate your enthusiasm for the organization. And, of course, ask for the interview!

How to Find a Career Fair Near You

- Check with your school's Career Services office. Many of them post information about school-sponsored and other career fairs geared to the local community or to specific industries of interest to their students. Check the office's Web site.

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