

Job Fair Boot Camp

Part 1. Preparation

Career fairs are like candy stores for jobs. You have a room filled with employers who need talent and you get an instant interview. What more could you ask for, right? Well, this is kind of what a career fair is, but you don't always get the interview and you don't always get hired. The truth of the matter is: career fairs are great opportunities to seek new employment if you approach them in the right way and use them to your advantage.

Here are some strategies to consider before you attend one:

Research

There is nothing more embarrassing than to walk into a crowded room of career fair companies and not know the background of each one. It is crucial to research all companies before attending a fair. Knowing which ones are of interest to you will help you better plan your time at the event and concentrate on the mini-interviews and networking discussions. It will also demonstrate that you are goal-directed and have the kinds of skills that employers are looking for.

Advice: Check the fair's web site often for updates, especially the week of the event. If you know what companies will be participating in advance, review each one's web site. On most company sites, there is a tab labeled "Company News, Archives, and Press Releases." Be sure to read up on the most current happenings within a company as this will give you more insight into how it operates, both internally and externally.

Create an Action Plan

After reviewing the list of participating organizations, decide which recruiters interest you most. Remember: don't just concentrate on the big companies. You may find the best opportunities with those you least recognize. The key is flexibility—always consider alternate career opportunities and paths. Any job that leads you to gaining valuable experience and bringing you closer to your goals is worth the effort.

Advice: If this is your first career fair, plan on visiting your second-choice companies first. This may sound strange, however, this will help you practice your overall approach as well as gain confidence. On the other hand, if you are well-prepared and feel confident, plan on visiting your top choice companies (three to five) first.

Prepare

Preparation falls in line with researching and now that you know what companies interest you most, you'll need to prepare *how* to execute your business pursuits. The best place to begin is to design a mini sales pitch for yourself, one that can be delivered in under a minute. You should memorize your sales pitch and make it sound as though you thought about it "on the spot." Be sure to introduce yourself and naturally hold your hand out for a traditional shake with the employer: "Hi. My name is _____. It's nice to meet you. I understand (company name) is hiring for _____."

Advice: Review all common interview questions...any question that may be asked of you and about you. Rehearse your answers and tailor each one to the position you are applying for and the company you are interviewing with.

Polish your Résumé

Your résumé is your selling point, so you need to polish it up. Now that you know what companies (and the industries they represent) will be attending the career fair and what positions they are hiring for, add in the positions you will be applying for in the objective to give yourself an edge.

Advice: Bring five résumés for every company you are targeting, and ten to 20 for companies you might wish to visit. You never know what opportunities will arise at a career fair. Also, create a plan of action—what companies do you want to visit first and in what order? Be sure to organize your résumés to reflect this action plan so you are not shuffling around as you approach an employer.

Dress for Success

The old saying is true: dress for success! Business professionals tell us that a person trying to make a good impression should dress one step above the employees that work at the company. Keep in mind that it's always better to be overdressed than underdressed. Dress in formal business attire, nothing fancy. A crisp, clean shirt, slacks/skirt, and possibly a professional suit coat will be perfect. Avoid bringing items that are not related to your mission of getting hired: backpack, luggage, three-course lunch, etc.

Advice: Press your clothes the night before and get a good night's rest. This will give you more time the day of the fair and relieve any unnecessary stress. It will also give you extra time to review your résumé and go over your "sales pitch."