

Making Career Fairs Work for YOU

Career fairs can be a great way to connect with potential employers—if you prepare in advance and use your time wisely.

The career fair is your opportunity to meet with employers from a variety of organizations, learn about their opportunities, gather information you can use when applying for jobs, and find out about next steps in the process. To achieve these goals, you need a plan of action to ensure you use your time effectively. Follow these steps.

BEFORE

Do your research: Many career centers offer a list of organizations scheduled to take part in the fair. Get a copy and review it to determine which companies seem to offer the best match for your skills by checking out their web sites and reviewing any company literature available in the career center.

Identify your targets: Use your research to rank the organizations in order of your interest to determine which organizations to visit in what order at the fair. This will help you make the best use of your time.

Prepare a short “commercial”: One of the worst things you can do is tell a recruiter, “I’ll take anything” or ask, “What jobs do you have for me?” Such statements show a lack of interest and initiative. Prepare a short “commercial” to introduce yourself to the recruiter: Provide your name, year in school, major, and area of interest (e.g., a full-time job or an internship). You’ll want to tell the recruiter a little about your background and skills as they relate to the organization and its opportunities (which you’ve found through your research), but keep it short.

Also, although many employers won’t take your resume at a career fair, you will want to prepare some copies just in case.

A word about resumes and the career fair

Not long ago, it was standard operating procedure to give your resume to a recruiter at the career fair. That is changing, as many organizations have altered their processes for tracking applicants, and paper resumes don’t work well with those processes. Now, many recruiters won’t accept your resume at a career fair and, instead, may suggest you apply online. Don’t be put off: Instead remember that you’re at the fair to gather information you can use to help you succeed when you do apply.

How should you dress for the fair?

Most experts agree: Dress as if you were going to an interview. That means a business suit (not shorts), “dress” shoes (not sneakers), and proper grooming at a minimum. Professional dress sends a clear message to the recruiter that you are serious and interested.

DURING

Focus: Concentrate on those organizations you’ve identified as your best matches, and work your way down your list.

Be professional and polite: Focus on the recruiter, not the giveaway. When you approach a recruiter, be mindful of what he or she is doing. If the recruiter is with another student, give the recruiter and student some space.

Use your time well: When it’s your turn to speak with the recruiter, use your commercial to introduce yourself. Listen carefully to what the recruiter has to say so that you can match your skills and interests to those required by the organization. You are gathering key information that you can use when you apply and/or interview for a position with the organization.

Your conversation should be productive for both you and the recruiter (who is there to meet as many qualified candidates as possible), so don’t monopolize the recruiter’s time.

Ask the recruiter for next steps: Is the organization conducting interviews on campus? Should you apply online? What should you do to be considered? Ask for the recruiter’s business card so you can follow up. Jot down notes on the back of the business card. Those notes will come in handy when you follow up with the recruiter.

AFTER THE CAREER FAIR

Don’t let your good work go to waste.

Follow up soon after the fair: Send a thank-you note or e-mail to each recruiter with whom you met. Express your appreciation for the time and advice offered, let the recruiter know that you have completed anything he or she has asked you to do (such as apply online), and reiterate your interest in the company.

Undertake next steps: Apply online, sign up for the organization’s on-campus interviews, or follow the recruiters’ recommendations to help you move to the next phase in the job-search process.

By following these guidelines, you will make the best use of your time at the career fair and make a great first impression on your future employer. Good luck! 🍀