

Job Fair Survival Guide for New MHCI Folks by Lee Hillman (MHCI 2010)

MHCI candidates come from a wide variety of disciplines, walks of life, and career/life stages. As a result the Job Fairs at CMU can mean very different things for different people. However, there are some general guidelines that apply to everyone. Following, I will attempt to describe the elements of the job fairs that everyone found useful, and a few pointers for people in their specific situations. I can only speak from my experience as a recent MHCI grad, but I hope this is helpful and at least somewhat informative.

Part 1: General Tips for all MHCI Peeps

The job fairs at CMU are extremely powerful tools to help place students with corporations that are hiring and primed with knowledge about your skill set and field. However, it is easy to misconstrue these events as only being useful to undergrads or internships. This is not the case. Many MHCI folks, including myself, got significant interest, interviews, and even jobs from these events. They are especially relevant to new MHCI students as the fairs present an enclosed, supportive environment to learn more about potential employers, get yourself out there, and practice facing down your fears about jobs and interviewing.

Definitely go! In the fall, you have no work from the program to speak of and, for some, only a hazy impression of what your professional life will be like post-MHCI. This is all the more reason to go to the fair and learn as much as you can about the companies there and what they are looking for. You can get a first impression about culture and corporate goals/needs based on a quick conversation with the people that the company sent to the event. Don't be afraid that you are closing any doors with a purely exploratory visit to the fairs. It would take a really significant event to get black listed by a company from a job fair.

Look Sharp: This seems like a silly point, but presentation of yourself and any work/resume you may bring makes a big difference. Basically your only interaction with the company is a first impression. So even if you are only trying to learn about the company, you should do your best to appear professional and confident, like you already have the job.

Learn Stuff About Companies: When you all are proud owners of the MHCI degree and all the honor and glory that comes with survival of that harrowing journey, there are A LOT of different ways you can put your new knowledge and skills to use. A wide variety of companies come out to meet CMU students and you should do your best to explore what life is like at these different types of organizations. Additionally you can get names of companies that you are interested in and ask Jenna or Nicole about Alumni that may already be placed there. Many alumni are more than willing to contribute to the growth of the program and help out current students (case in point: this document).

Beyond all of these points, the field of HCI in the wider world is fairly nebulous. What people with our backgrounds do at different companies can vary greatly and all of those

paths are not suited to all MHCI alumni. Do your best to ask questions about what the roles, titles, and skills people fill at each company that you engage at the job fairs.

A quick list of possible job titles or fields for MHCI alum: interaction designer, user experience designer, information architect, experience architect, user advocate, user researcher, digital designer, interactive technologist, user experience engineer, information engineer, functional analyst...and many, many more

As we are working in a relatively new field (especially within larger corporations) we have many titles and many skill sets. Interaction Designers range in responsibilities from doing most of the front-end development themselves to doing almost exclusively visual design and motion graphics. Find out from each company you talk to, what version of HCI they do and how they do it.

Learn Stuff About Yourself: It's hokey I know, but given the wide variance of jobs/skills/roles that HCI folks fill, the job fairs can also give you an opportunity to find out what your options are and help you to define where you want to go. Do you want to work at a consultancy? Or in-house? Do you want to code? Or not? Do you want to talk to users all the time? Or some of the time? What is the work/life balance you are looking for? All these questions will be explored during your time in the program, so it's a good idea to look at companies now that provide the framework in which you would like to work after your studies are complete.

Rigor and Method (mostly rigor): My experience so far, has show that the reason that CMU MHCI Alumni are held in such high regard breaks down into three parts:

1. MHCI folks are smart: You can't do anything about this; you are in the program so you are smart or extremely charming. (Maybe both)
2. MHCI folks know good methods: You can't do anything about this; you are in the program so you are going to learn the methods. (pay attention) Not all companies use them in an unadulterated fashion (few do). But all companies want you to know them and be able to speak eloquently about them.
3. MHCI folks know how to work hard: You can do a bunch of stuff about this. Most important? Work hard. Seriously, it is a silly piece of advice but it is really important. On some level every company needs to know that you can leave it all on the field. Show this in your work and in your presentation of yourself. It won't be difficult; you have to work hard to survive the year. Make sure that you make that known and package the fruits of your labor in a manner that conveys your level of effort.

Part 2: Tips for Folks with No Work Experience

Don't be Afraid: Looking for work is terrifying! Also, at this point you probably feel like you have no idea what you're going to do. This is also terrifying! However, do not despair. The best, absolute BEST, thing you can do for yourself is to be proactive and get out in front of your job search. Learn as much as you can (see above section) and start to form a path of learning through your year at CMU. The CMU name does open doors.

This is a fact. However, once that door is open you have to walk through it. Make sure you learn what you need and earn the right to carry the name. It's on you to decide what doors to open and to ensure that you want what is on the other side.

Just Show Up: Motivating yourself to go out and talk to people is a huge win. Get out there and learn as much as you can, this will help you to find direction as the program goes forward. You are a valuable commodity and the more you can do to build up that confidence the more choice you will have when you are done at CMU. Don't worry if you don't have work, put together a resume or at least talking points about your skills and wants. If you get in line, give some companies your email address, and learn about what they do, you have done yourself a great service and you haven't wasted anyone's time.

Show you Want to Learn: Nothing will close somebody off to you faster than you appearing cocky or full of yourself. However, it is the universe's cruel joke that these are the easiest ways to act when you aren't sure of yourself. Review what you know and what you will know after your year at CMU. Put that stuff in your back pocket and go in as a clean slate. Every single company wants to hear that you have a passion for learning and know how to work hard. Tell them those things and mean it.

Part 3: Tips for Folks with Work Experience

Be Creative About Your Expertise: Because the world of HCI is large and ill-defined, no matter where you are coming from, you can make your expertise work for you. Think about who your "user" was and what problems you needed to help them solve. Don't feel like any of your prior experience is useless, just work to determine how that gets spun into your new skillset. For some there are direct correlations. For others these relationships aren't so obvious. If you were a chef with a passion for technology before you came to CMU you can still use that to your advantage. You know how to manage large systems, you understand dependencies, and you know about professional practice and customer service. You can weave an awesome brand for yourself that could land you a job at the digital arm of the food network or creating new experiences at Whole Foods via Ogilvy or JWT. Your prior work may not always relate directly, so it is important that you tell the story. That being said, you need to have razor sharp skills or you don't have a chance. Spend your year sharpening the tools in your toolbox, but use the job fairs as an opportunity to practice your story and test the waters.

Get on the Web Immediately: Do not wait to create a website with pictures of your work and your contact info. Even if it is a very humble, minimal placeholder get your presence established. You will be very surprised how far this takes you. Get on LinkedIn and link to your website. It doesn't have to be beautiful, but it does have to be there. As time goes on you can flesh it out and make it more sophisticated. However, right now, you just need something out there. The program intensifies at a crazy pace after the fall semester. This is your best shot to get this done with the least stress. Jenna and Nicole have tons of examples of sites with varying fidelity, representing alumni from all skill sets.

Part 4: Deep Thoughts

This pretty much concludes the survival guide. If you take nothing else away from the notes above, know this: Getting up and going out with an open mind is the best thing you can do to alleviate your fears about the future and your changing professional life. The more you learn the better you can define the picture of what you want for yourself and the easier it will be to tailor your work to match this vision.