

Working A Job Fair

Job fairs are popular events for recruiters and candidates—it provides an efficient and effective means for both groups to meet a lot of people at one time and place. From the employer's perspective, job fairs serve as a means of identifying candidates for follow-up action (usually scheduling an interview). Recruiters at job fairs usually place candidates' resumes into one of three stacks—'Yes', meaning that they'll recommend the candidate for follow-up; 'No', or 'Maybe'. Your goal, of course, is to land in the 'Yes' pile (or at least the 'Maybe' pile) every time.

For candidates, the job fair is a dual-edged sword. While giving students an opportunity to talk with a number of employers, it generally allows only a few minutes with each one. So it's important to maximize your impact at the event. Here's a few strategies to use at your next job fair:

Prepare in Advance. The first step is to determine who's coming to the event. Most job fairs (including TOC, BOC, EOC, CAOC, etc.) list the employer attendees in advance, often online. Look over the roster and identify eight to ten 'target' companies, that is, those companies that you will research prior to the event and will meet with at the fair. You can base your choice of target companies on any number of factors; geographic location, company description, company reputation, etc.

You'll also want to identify your strengths as a candidate in advance, and to put together a 30-45 second 'commercial' for yourself. You'll recite this commercial as employers are scanning your resume. To construct your commercial, sit down with your resume (Need help in writing a resume? Go to the Resume section) and try to identify broad areas of excellence. You may identify a 'strong academic background', or 'relevant experience', or 'programming skills', or 'interpersonal skills', or a practically infinite number of other possibilities. The important thing to keep in mind is that your commercial should reflect you as a unique candidate with unique talents.

Now put it all together—take the information that you've uncovered for each of your target companies, plus your own strengths as a candidate, and compose your commercial. Here's an example:

I'm a third year Computer Science student looking for an internship opportunity for next summer. Over the past couple of years, I've developed strong Java programming skills through research work and class projects. As my resume indicates, I've also had an opportunity to develop teamwork skills through involvement in a couple of student organizations. In going through your company's description posted on the job fair website, I was interested in your company's development of custom products using a variety of software and languages, including Java. I'd like to spend a few minutes discussing how my background and skills might fit your needs for an intern next summer.

You could 'recycle' a lot of this text for use with your other company commercials. The key element in an effective commercial is summarizing the match between the

company's business and needs with your skills and goals. The closer that this match is, the better. One final thought: It's not recommended to memorize the commercial. At the fair, you may end up sounding, well...like you memorized it. Just be sure to know the main points of the commercial—the exact wording that you use will fall into place more naturally that way.

Make sure to take an adequate supply of resumes with you to the event (at least a dozen or so). Keep them in a portfolio so they stay flat and clean.

One of the questions that always comes up relates to timing—when's the best (or worst) time to go to a job fair? Generally, earlier is better than later (the recruiters will be fresher); however, timing is not nearly as important to success as your preparation and delivery. So if you only have time in your schedule to attend during the last half hour of the fair, by all means go anyway.

Check Out The Action. When you get to the fair, take a walk through the fair and find your target companies. Where are their tables or booths? (NOTE: some job fairs have printed directories and floor maps at the venue entrance, making this process easier). How busy are the recruiters at these booths—is there one or two people waiting to talk with them, or is there a line that's 20 deep?

At this point, you can do one of several things. You could (1) wait in a long line at one of your target companies (generally not a good idea—if you have the time, it's better to visit other booths instead, and then come back later to see if the line's any shorter), or (2) you could go to one of the less busy target company booths, or (3) you could go to a booth that is not one of your targets (Why? Some people need to 'warm up' first before going to an employer that 'counts'). Regardless of whether you pick option 2 or 3, the best approach to use is to:

(A) Smile, shake hands, and introduce yourself to the recruiter

(B) Hand the recruiter a copy of your resume

(C) Deliver the commercial that you had prepared in advance for that company as the recruiter looks over your resume.

By now, you've already done a lot to help you to stand out from other candidates. The recruiter knows your main strengths, and why you're interested in their company. And all in the space of a minute or so.

Normally, recruiters will also ask you a few questions after reviewing your resume. Your goal (as in an interview) is to 'three-dimensionalize' your resume through examples from your background.

Summarize Your Strengths. In most cases, you only have a few minutes (at most) to spend with a recruiter at a job fair, although in rare cases an employer may have the time

and the interest to spend more than this. When your time with the employer is over, they'll usually tell you about the next steps in their company's hiring process (i.e. 'We'll take these resumes back to HR and go over them, and contact those candidates we're interested in interviewing on campus'). If the recruiter does not mention at least a general timeframe for completion of this process (a couple of weeks? Two months?), make sure to ask. Then it's your turn to end your meeting on a high note. Thank the recruiter for their time, summarize your strengths, and reiterate your interest in being considered for an interview. Also, ask if they have a business card so that you can e-mail them with any follow-up questions. Use that e-mail address to send a thank-you note to the recruiter within a few days after the fair.

You'd repeat the process outlined above with every recruiter on your target list. Of course, if time permits, you should visit other booths at the fair as well. Sometimes the company with the 'dream' job or internship wasn't on your target list.