

Tips for a Successful Job Fair

Job fairs, career fairs, career expos...whatever they are called, you should make these events a part of your job search strategy. Job fairs are a unique opportunity to actually meet employers you might not have access to any other way. They are an opportunity to learn more about a company, to talk one-on-one with a company representative, and to make that ever-critical first impression. In this day of online applications and key word searches, a face-to-face opportunity is vitally important. No connection should be wasted, since it may lead to further opportunities. Speaking with other job seekers can also be beneficial. The following are general tips for getting the most out of a job fair. (Also see our tip sheet on successful interviews, because many of those tips apply to this scenario as well.)

1. Do your research ahead of time.

Before the event, research which companies will be in attendance and what job openings they have available. Visit their websites. Write down questions you may have for different employers. If you spend a little time getting background information in advance, you can ask very focused and specific questions. This impresses representatives because it shows a genuine interest and effort on your part.

2. Come prepared.

It's been said that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. Make the most of this one by coming prepared to stand out from the crowd. Along with your background research, bring with you:

- Several copies of your resume (more than you think you may need)
- A pad of paper to take notes
- Personal care items (breath mints, tissues, etc.)
- Your portfolio of work if appropriate in your field
- Business cards if you have them
- Extra pens or pencils

3. Dress professionally.

Dress as if you were headed to an interview, because that's what you are doing. Employers will make decisions based on first impressions. These can make a lasting impact, and can open doors or close them. (TIP: wear comfortable but professional shoes. You may be on your feet for several hours.)

4. Arrive early.

In some cases, you can pre-register for the event. Do so. Lines can be long at the larger fairs, so if you arrive early and have your targeted companies in mind, you can meet them right away. In addition, some employers are impressed with the eagerness of the first arrivals—it's all part of making that lasting impression.

5. Map out your day.

You've done your research. You should have "A" companies that you know you want to meet and "B" companies about which you want to know more. Locate each company on the event map so that you can make the most of your time. Budget your time as well—don't spend it all with the first employer.

6. Don't be shy and practice your 30-second elevator speech.

As you approach an employer's table, be friendly, be confident, smile and be prepared to say something about yourself. Practice your 30-second elevator speech (see our tip sheet) and to discuss your qualifications that are most relevant to the job or company. Include clear, concise examples to demonstrate these qualifications.

7. Listen, ask questions and take notes.

Recruiters spend all day hearing people talk about their professional background. Try to make it a dialogue. Demonstrate your research by asking the recruiter questions. Show off your listening skills and make the screening process more of a conversation than an interview. Take notes so you can follow up later or include the information in your next cover letter.

8. Follow up after the event.

When you make a connection, be sure to get a name and contact information or a business card. Within 48 hours, be sure to send a thank you card or email, sharing again your qualifications for any interesting opportunities. Showcasing your ability to follow-up on leads will help set you apart from others.