

Career Fair Strategies

While you may find the thought of speaking to employer representatives at a career fair to be uncomfortable, either because you are reserved or do not like crowded venues, it is important to realize that many employers prefer to recruit at job fairs as they can quickly size up those students possessing the communication skills, relevant experiences, and other qualifications needed to advance in their selection process. Because you must “work” the fair to make a positive impression with employers, the following tips will help you stand out among those who think they can just show up and distribute copies of their resumes!

Before the Event:

Clarify your goals for attending: What do you want to gain from the event? Do you need to clarify application procedures? Are you looking to discover possible career paths? Do you need to expand your network of contacts? Do you want to distribute your resume in person to maximize your professional impact?

Get focused: What types of positions interest you? A common mistake students make is to attend a job fair when they have no career direction. This is evident when students ask questions like, “What are you hiring for?” This question implies you are “shopping around.”

Gather information: Study the list of participating employers, normally available on the career fair’s website. Identify the 3 or 4 companies that most interest you. You will likely speak to many more employers; however, this small group will serve as your targeted employer group. Gathering information on each organization in advance will allow you to become an informed conversant with the recruiter(s). When you show a recruiter your intellect and understanding of his/her company, you will stand out! Try to discover:

- What products/services are provided by the organization?
- What is their predicted growth? Expansion plans?
- What media coverage have they recently received?
- Where are the geographic locations for employment (branches, subsidiaries)?
- What qualifications do they look for in entry-level hires?
- Which of their internships or jobs match your interests?

A helpful resource for researching employers is LexisNexis Academic, which is found among the University Libraries collection of research databases at: <http://library.ohio-state.edu/screens/databases.html>. Use of this library resource is explained in the tip sheet, Interview Preparation: Employer Research – which is found at <http://asccareerservices.osu.edu/guides>

Prepare questions: Be ready to ask the recruiters questions to determine if the organization would be a good fit for you. The questions should lead to further discussion with the recruiter. For example, asking “What skills should a program evaluator have?” will possibly allow you to share examples of when you have demonstrated those skills. A good resource to use to develop meaningful questions is found on the Quintessential Careers site: www.quintcareers.com/career_fair_questions.html.

Prepare your resume to perfection: Your resume will be the focal point of your chat with any career fair recruiter. Great care should be given when writing and formatting it! The Arts and Sciences Career Services Office offers resume reviews Monday-Friday on a walk-in basis. We also host Resume-O-Rama prior to each major campus career fair. Walk-in hours are posted at: asccareerservices.osu.edu.

Prepare your commercial: The impression you make when approaching employers is critical to your success as a job hunter. Improve your chances by preparing and practicing a one-minute “commercial” about yourself and the contributions you could make to an organization. See the Writing Your Commercial tip sheet found at <http://asccareerservices.osu.edu/guides>.

Consider attending a career fair preparation workshop: Make a habit of checking the Events listing at asccareerservices.osu.edu/events. Many events require you to RSVP because of space limitations, so please be sure to RSVP. This list is constantly updated so make sure to check in before major career fairs to explore special career fair related events. You can also view our web workshop on career fair strategies here: <http://asccareerservices.osu.edu/guides/generaljss>. The web workshop overlaps the information contained in this tip sheet and also includes the following content: pictures of appropriate career fair outfits, what a career fair actually is, and talking with specific employers. You may wish to gain interviewing confidence by participating in a mock interview. Visit <http://asccareerservices.osu.edu/students/services/mockinterviews> to learn how to schedule a mock interview.”

Select your outfit(s):

Determine the professional clothing you will wear to the fair and, if selected, to a follow-up interview. (The career fairs held on campus often feature an Interview Day on the following day, so it's a good idea to have two outfits ready.) Check out the Dress to Impress web site for pictures of acceptable career fair clothing: <http://amdt.wsu.edu/dress-to-impress/>.

Day of Event:

Materials to bring to the career fair: The essential items to bring with you to the fair include multiple copies of your resume, pen and paper to take notes, and a folder/portfolio to carry these items. Most fairs will offer a coat and baggage check area, but be sure to check on this ahead of time. Some fairs charge a nominal fee to check coats, and lines can be long so bring a couple of dollars in cash and allow yourself extra time to deposit and pick up your belongings. Keep in mind that employers will have a very limited amount of time to interact with you. They will be focused on conducting a quick scan of your resume to identify key qualifications, while also evaluating how you introduce yourself. Generally they will not have the time to review additional documents such as cover letters, references, or work samples. This means that your resume should be targeted to the type of role you are seeking. You may need to consider bringing more than one version of your resume if you are targeting several different types of career paths. If you are targeting an industry that requires work samples, such as art and design, be sure to have a link to your online portfolio included on your resume. In your folder you might also include notes from research conducted prior to the fair. These notes could include details about specific positions you are interested in, or questions prompted by your review of the organization's website. You can review these items while waiting in line to meet an employer, but be sure these notes are concise and well organized so you are not shuffling through large amounts of paperwork on site.

Arrive early to avoid long lines: If you show up at the last minute, you run the risk of missing some recruiters – either because they found enough qualified candidates or had to leave early because of their travel arrangements.

Know the territory: Take time when you arrive to study the event map and determine the location of your targeted employers. Meet with those employers first; then meet as many other employers of interest as time permits. Devise an order for meeting employers and a strategy if a line is too long.

Materials to carry with you: Bring several copies of your resume(s), copies of your reference list, a pen and paper to take notes, and a folder/portfolio to hold company information. Consider providing your credentials in a folder or packet for your targeted employer group. This packet will include your resume, a personalized cover letter, list of references, and a print out of any job application you completed for that employer (many government agencies require job seekers to use online systems, including a hard copy of your completed application form in a credentials packet will make it more convenient for the recruiter to consider your qualifications). The folder will provide employers with a clean, identifiable package regarding your application.

Make your introduction:

- When you approach an employer, smile and walk towards them with good posture; make eye contact. Shake hands firmly, stating your full name. Give your "one minute commercial," speaking clearly and showing enthusiasm.
- Ask your prepared, appropriate questions. Do not ask what the company does, or any other question regarding information that is easily available elsewhere (e.g., on their website).
- Thank the employer for their time and ask permission to leave a resume. Some may not wish to receive your hardcopy resume due to a preference for obtaining electronic copies or because of organizational policy -- a practice often followed by federal agencies. Do not be offended. Ask the recruiter what process you should follow to forward your resume.
- Ask recruiters how they would prefer you to follow up – phone call, e-mail, letter.
- Do not ask about salary.
- Do not ask the recruiter personal questions. Flatter the company, not the recruiter.
- Take the company information, printed materials, and handouts - not just the free promotional items.

If the recruiter does not know of any positions in your field at their company, ask them for contact information to their human resources division so that you can do more follow up. Not every recruiter will know of every open position in the organization; you may need to do further networking.

Be sensitive to the time factor: Answer questions from employers clearly and concisely, showing you are well prepared. However, there may be many others in line behind you; you do not want to linger. Realize that time is a critical issue when recruiters need to meet as many students as possible. Make an impression by recognizing their situation. For example, you can state, "I realize our time is short, and you have other students waiting. Can I follow-up with you on e-mail to finish our discussion?"

How to address questions regarding GPA: GPA is only one of several qualifying factors considered by employers. If your GPA does not meet the minimum preferred by an employer, do not assume you will not receive consideration. Many employers will still consider you if you can effectively account for a low GPA, especially if the GPA in your major is higher. Be prepared to articulate other skills and experiences that may offset a lower GPA. Research all the qualifications cited by the employer in relevant job postings. Come to the fair with specific examples of how you have developed and applied skills valued by that employer. You can discuss the analytical thinking or problem solving skills you applied to course projects, or leadership roles you have engaged in through activities or volunteer work. The important thing is to be confident, and quickly move the conversation to your strengths and achievements. Be sure to use specific examples that demonstrate your accomplishments. Be mindful of the limited time the employer has to spend with you, and practice your delivery of these examples. You will encounter some employers that do have strict GPA requirements. If the recruiter clarifies that they have no flexibility in this area, thank them for their time and move to the next target employer.

Ask for the business card of every recruiter you talk to: Take notes immediately after leaving an employer's table on your next steps with that agency – do this while your thoughts are fresh. Jot down notes on the back of the recruiter's business card to remind you of the conversation, any information/contacts they gave you, and any memorable point – you can use this to personalize your follow-up letter.

Before You Leave the Event:

- Double check -- did you talk to representatives from every company you targeted?
- Did you get business cards from each representative?
- Did you jot down notes needed for follow-up (e.g., timelines, position titles, etc.) with each company?

Within a Day after the Event:

You are not done yet! Make sure you:

- Follow up with each employer of interest after the career fair by sending a thank you letter or e-mail. Include an extra copy of your resume.
- Prepare, if you have an interview scheduled. The interviews held in association with career fairs fall into the category of "screening interviews" and generally last 30-45 minutes.

Within a Week after the Event:

Complete any online applications or tests. These steps may be part of their application process and are required, regardless of the contact you have already made with the recruiter. A quick turnaround in completing these materials will demonstrate your interest and level of commitment to working for them.

Two-Plus Weeks after the Event:

Keep in contact with companies, particularly your target group. Some ways to do this include:

- A second follow-up with the recruiter you met at the career fair – sending an e-mail, or calling.
- Check the Arts and Sciences Career Services website for campus events; note any on-campus information sessions to be held by your target employers.
- Watch the local newspapers and business publications (e.g. The Columbus Dispatch, Business First) for press releases or updates. Utilize this information for further contact opportunities.
- Organize all of the information you have accumulated. Start a spreadsheet, detailing 1) information about the recruiters you've met (their full names, postal addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses), 2) the follow-up steps you've completed and still need to take, and 3) information you have discovered about the employer since the career fair.

- Take steps to increase your professional presence online by using social networking sites responsibly. Employers do check Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other social networking sites for inappropriate content, and they also use these same tools to market themselves. Make sure you and your friends do not post questionable photographs of you, and clean up any blogs that may contain extreme emotions or opinions.

Upcoming Career Fairs

Information about upcoming campus and community career fairs that are open to Arts and Sciences students is found at: <http://asccareerservices.osu.edu/events>. To find the locations of recruitment events held outside of central Ohio you can check <http://www.nationalcareerfairs.com/> and/or contact universities in your target city to see if they permit students/grads from other schools to attend their scheduled events.

Good to Know

In an ideal world, students would know in advance which career fair recruiters were genuinely interested in speaking to them. Unfortunately, the employers who participate in such events follow various recruitment practices. For instance, some are interested in speaking to freshmen and sophomores to provide pointers on building strong resumes; some are eager to discuss their internship programs with students of all ranks; some are strictly interested in collecting resumes from seniors or recent graduates who are ready to obtain full-time employment. To complicate matters further, an individual recruiter's attitude may change over the course of the career fair: someone who started out with a willingness to talk to all ranks may shift gears if they aren't collecting enough resumes for their open positions, to focus exclusively on talking to seniors or recent graduates. Additionally, some companies change recruitment goals prior to the career fair. Therefore, even though the information they provided for the event guidebook specifies an interest in collecting resumes from students with your particular major or career goals, they may be hiring for fewer positions by the time they come to campus.

It's important for you to recognize the variability in recruitment styles you will encounter at a career fair. Don't take it personally if a recruiter doesn't seem interested in considering your resume. Instead, focus on staying upbeat and move on to another employer.

"Career Fairs are a terrific way for members of the Center of Science and Industry Team to meet prospective internship volunteers. In the span of a few minutes, both students and organization/company reps can share career interests and opportunities to see if a match is possible. An exchange of position descriptions and resumes can occur with a more thorough review later."

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