

Career Fairs

Imagine a deck of cards sitting before you on the table. Now, pretend that instead of suits or numbers each card represents a potential job. You can shuffle through these at your leisure, picking and choosing which ones you like the best and which ones you'd like to try your hand at.

Sounds nice, right? Believe it or not, such a concept does exist in real life. It's called a career fair. Also called job fairs, these are events that take place on college campuses or other community locations. Employers use career fairs to promote their companies and employment opportunities. They set up booths manned by company representatives to speak briefly one-on-one with students interested in their company. There may be up to hundreds of employers at a single career fair. That's a pretty formidable deck of cards.

Even if you're only a first year student, or you don't think you want to work for any of the companies that are coming, or any of a hundred other reasons that students can think of not to go to career fairs, they are still extremely beneficial. You can investigate career fields and positions for your major; meet representatives from companies for whom you are interested in working; get more information about specific companies; gain an opportunity for an interview with a company; get job and career advice from experts in the field and develop your network of contacts.

There are several things you can do to make the most out of your career fair experience. What follows is a series of strategies to use before, during, and after the career fair.

Before the Event – Prepare

Check with the Co-op & Career Services Office or event sponsor to find out, ahead of time, which companies are coming to the event.

Research Companies Of Interest To You

Check out the company web site, company profiles in directories, and search for news articles about the company. Finding out general information will allow you to ask intelligent questions of the recruiter, and learn where you might fit in at the company.

Update Your Resume

It is essential to have a resume that reflects your current skills and experiences, as most companies will be forwarding copies of resumes to many departments within their organization. Typos, grammatical errors, and inaccurate information are out of the question. The second an employer sees any of these, he or she will instantly lose faith in you. Make sure that others have proofread your resume for accuracy; your program coordinator in the Office of Co-op & Career Services is available to check it over. And, of course, the resume itself must be well written and your accomplishments clearly stated. Be prepared to print many copies.

Be Prepared To Ask Questions

Try to have one or two questions in mind for each employer, based on your research of and interest in the company. Do not ask the recruiters personal questions. (*Sample questions are listed on page 4 of this handout.*)

Know Yourself

Know why you want to work for the company, and be able to express your skills, accomplishments, and goals in a clear, concise manner. Try to identify specific experiences where you have demonstrated your strengths and skills.

Learn To Sell Yourself Quickly

You'll only have a few minutes to introduce yourself, show you know what the organization is about, and spark the recruiter's interest in you for a future, more formal interview. This is not easy, and takes

preparation and practice – use a mirror, tape recorder, friend, or practice with your program coordinator in the Co-op & Career Services Office.

Prepare Your “One Minute Commercial”

This will introduce you to the company representative, and let them know immediately what your interests and goals are. Example: “Good morning, I’m _____. I will be graduating in May with a degree in _____, and am interested in the field/area of _____. Can you tell me about current opportunities in this area at your company?”

During the Event – Professionalism and Communication

Career fairs can be intimidating and overwhelming. The tips below will give you an idea of what to expect at the event, and how to get through it successfully.

What To Expect:

- A large room, with rows and rows of booths or tables of companies.
- Some will displays, others will not.
- It will be crowded, with long lines at some tables, and loud. Be prepared to wait.
- Student registration tables are usually located at the entrance to the fair. Here you will be asked to sign in, create a name tag, and you’ll be given a map and list of attending organizations.
- Some career fairs offer additional, more private space for employers to conduct formal interviews with students at or after the event.

What To Bring:

- Copies of your resume, transcript and samples of your work (if appropriate).
- A pad of paper and pen, to take notes.
- A briefcase or portfolio to carry your resumes and notes, and to store business cards and company literature.

Plan Your Strategy:

- Plan to arrive early and stay late – this will enable you to meet with every company in which you’re interested.
- After you check in, survey the layout of the fair on the map, and prioritize the employers with whom you’d like to speak, identify the information you want to get from them, and specify goals you hope to achieve.
- You may want to start by approaching organizations that have a lower priority, to get your feet wet and gain confidence before approaching your top choices.
- If there are long lines, revise your strategy – you can always come back later in the day.

Make A Good First Impression:

- Dress for success – interview attire is preferred. You should choose a conservative approach to your dress. Wear comfortable shoes, as you will be walking and standing for long periods of time. How you look will play a big part in determining employer interest.
- Approach the employer, shake hands, smile, and introduce yourself. Remember to maintain eye contact. Be enthusiastic!
- Avoid distracting behaviors such as smoking, gum chewing, eating or drinking while with employers.
- Be polite – don’t interrupt the employer reps or your fellow job-seekers, don’t monopolize the recruiter’s time.

Market Yourself:

- Be memorable – conversations may seem casual, but you are actually being evaluated. Be direct and visible so recruiters will remember you and what you said.
- Start with your “one minute commercial” to introduce yourself. The goal is to connect your background to the organization’s needs.

- You may only have two to five minutes to market yourself and gain an interview, so make the most of your time. Prepare answers to interview questions as you would for any interview. Be prepared to explain why you came to the company's table, and what skills and qualifications you have to offer the company.
- Be articulate, and show confidence in your voice. The room will be noisy, and you'll need to speak clearly and avoid using filler words, such as "um," "like," "you know."
- As you leave each employer, learn what the next step in their process is and what, if anything, you should do to advance your candidacy.

Other Tips:

- Make sure you get the representative's business card. Take time to make notes of your discussion after you finish speaking with each company, before you move on. Without notes, you may become confused if you've visited several companies in quick succession. Use the back of the business card, or jot notes on your notepad.
- Explore all your options – speak with companies you may not have considered before.
- Don't wait in long lines early in the fair – these tend to create tension.
- Make the most of your wait in line – get company literature from the table before you get in line, so you can read about the company while waiting.
- Don't just randomly hand out resumes – if you're not interested in a company, don't approach them. It would only be a waste of time for both of you.
- Don't be disappointed when you finally get your chance to talk with the recruiter and they encourage you apply through their site, rather than take your resume. Because of new regulations, employers may need to track their applicants and for some companies the best first step is through their site.
- If the company representative works in a different field than the one you're interested in, do still talk with the company, being sure to leave with the contact information for the person responsible for hiring in that area; don't be discouraged and walk away.
- Network with your fellow job-seekers – share information about job leads, companies, and their recruiting strategies and styles.
- Don't expect to be offered a job at the career fair, but it is not uncommon to get offered an interview. Know your schedule, and schedule any interview you can attend. If you're not interested in the company, do not take the interview.
- Be polite at all times. The person you meet in the parking lot, elevator, hallway, or restroom may be a recruiter you'll see later that day.
- If you expect companies to call for an interview/follow-up, make sure you have a "serious" message on your answering machine, or that you have roommates that can take a message for you.
- Smile, relax and be yourself.

After the Event – Follow Up

Follow-up is a very important, yet an often neglected step in the career fair process. Few job seekers actually take the time to follow up on their career fair interviews, so if you follow these steps, you will have an edge over candidates who don't!

- Mail a thank you letter to all the employers you spoke with. Thank the recruiter for their time, restate your interest and qualifications for the position, reiterate your interest in a second interview, and make a promise to follow up the letter with a phone call.
- Send an additional resume with the thank you letter. Don't assume that resumes collected at the fair are saved.
- Make a follow up phone call within a week to ten days after the event. Restate your interest in the position and company; find out if you are still being considered for the opening and when you might hear about interview arrangements.

Sample Questions

Show your interest in the company by asking relevant and pertinent questions. Some suggestions are below; use these ideas to formulate your own questions.

- How would someone with my background in _____ get started in your company?
- How many employees in your company are in my area of interest (which is ...)?
- What kind of entry-level positions exist in your organization?
- What kind of position would I qualify for?
- What skills/knowledge does one need to perform his job/position?
- What does your company consider to be the 5 most important qualities in an employee?
- What personality traits are important for success in your company?
- What courses do you suggest in order to be a successful candidate?
- Is there a GPA cut-off in the recruiting process?
- As an entry-level employee, what can I expect to be doing 2, 5, 10 years from now?
- What goals does your company have for the near future and beyond?
- What made *you* choose this company?
- What things have your company accomplished of which you are especially proud?
- For how many years does the entry-level employee typically stay with the company?
- What percent of applicants are eventually hired?
- Are you interviewing for other divisions of your company?
- What type of training is given to new employees – on the job, formal classroom, individualized?
- What would a typical day be like in your department?
- Do you have any RIT alumni working for you?
- What is the timeframe for reviewing the people you've met and making hiring decisions?
- Does your company hire on a continual basis or just at certain times of the year?
- What are the opportunities for advancement and are advanced degrees required?
- What is the retention rate in the company?
- Do you expect your employees to relocate?
- What other advice would you give someone interested in pursuing this field?
- Can you suggest others who might be valuable sources of information for me?

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