How to Work a Career Fair – at RIT or Anywhere!

Webinar Transcript

Slide 1: Welcome alumni to our mini webinar series! We’ll be keeping to our 30 minute schedule, so you can get back to your busy day. This presentation will give you information and tips to help you prepare for our (and other) career fairs. If you have questions as we go along, please type them into the question box, or ask with your microphone. We’ll also have time at the end for questions.

Slide 2: Here’s what we’ll be covering today.

Slide 3: First of all, why should you go to a career or job fair? You may think career fairs are just for students (at RIT), or that there will be too much competition (local fairs). But you have to do everything when job searching, and fairs are another resource. It’s how you approach them that will make the difference to your success. Fairs can certainly be beneficial to you in a number of ways. First there is the potential for job opportunities, either at the fair, or for you to follow up with afterward, which we’ll talk about later. Perhaps more importantly, you can connect with potential employers who may or may not have immediate openings that match your skills, but who can become your targeted companies for the future. And you can gain networking contacts to follow up with after the fair. You know that networking is the best way to find a job, so go to the fair with a goal of meeting people and grabbing business cards, so that you can add to your network of contacts and follow up after the fair with targeted networking activities.

Slide 4: RIT Career Fairs are open to all alumni, and we’ll discuss those in detail in a bit.

In addition to RIT Career Fairs, take advantage of other appropriate career and job fair options. Most communities hold job fairs regularly that are open to the public; this is a good way to expand your network, get information on companies, and talk with recruiters about openings relevant to your skills and experience. The Rochester colleges hold a consortium fair each year, which is open to students and alumni from member colleges.

Professional associations often offer career or job fairs for their members, which is another good reason for joining industry associations. In Rochester, for example, Digital Rochester (an association for people interested in computing and technology), regularly holds networking and job fair events for their members. There are also local job networking groups – in Rochester the August group is very active. These groups often have their own job fairs.

Companies sometimes hold job fairs at their location, generally open to the public. You can find out about these through Job Zone, advertisements in business publications, and by following companies in whom you’re interested, on LinkedIn and Facebook. This is a good idea, by the way, because you’ll find out about many upcoming activities and job postings.

Organizations, associations, and companies will also sometimes hold virtual career fairs, in which you’ll go to a specified website and submit resumes to participating companies.

Sometimes virtual fairs allow you to chat live with company reps for a specified amount of time, as you would at an in person event.
And for those who qualify, AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) holds job fairs for their membership, in different locations across the country.

You may find other career and job fairs in your community - keep your eyes opened!

Slide 5: I’d like to talk about your expectations and the realities of fairs, especially those at RIT. When you attend a college career fair, you'll want to make sure you have clear expectations about what will happen, and realistic goals for what you want to accomplish at the fair.

Here are some of the realities of RIT fairs. There are usually well over 240 companies, and over 3000 students and alumni, who attend each fair. This means the Field House is very crowded, and there are often lines of people waiting to talk with companies, especially the big names like Microsoft, Google, and Toyota.

As this is a college fair, companies will expect to see mostly current and graduating students, and jobs will primarily be targeted to these groups. That doesn’t mean that experienced level jobs don’t exist, but it may mean that the representatives at the fair may not be knowledgeable of, or prepared to discuss, those opportunities. They might not be the right contacts for your level or area of interest, and may be less able to relate to experienced level candidates. This is the same for any fair you attend. You might at first think the attending companies won’t have jobs that fit your skills and experience. Don’t discount them; instead try to determine how you can get the information and contacts you need to move ahead with the company.

Based on these realities, it’s important that you set realistic goals, so that you’re not disappointed by your career fair experience. Instead of expecting to walk out of the fair with a job (or even an interview), try to get as much company information and as many contacts as you can, to use for future networking and job development. If you have your own career goals firmly in mind, you can ask for what you want – for example, the name of the marketing manager. You’ll also gain confidence in the networking process, and in approaching potential employers, which will help immeasurably in your future job search endeavors.

Slide 6: Here are some general preparation tips for fairs. Recruiters expect professional attire, even though you may not expect to wear a suit once on the job, and even though attending recruiters may be in company attire, instead of suits. This may be a good opportunity to update your professional wardrobe if needed. Also take a look at your whole appearance – is it fresh, polished and professional? You’ll be expected to make the first move as you approach the recruiters, so prepare your 60-second commercial, or elevator speech – your introduction. We recommend that you practice your introduction out loud; the more you practice, the more comfortable and natural you’ll be. You should bring many copies of your resume of course, and may want to consider making tailored resumes for each of the companies you’re interested in, as well as targeted cover letters. This will show the companies that you’ve done your homework and are able to match your skills to their needs. In addition, bring samples of your projects, in a format appropriate for your industry. Business cards are a good tool for demonstrating your brand, are easily obtainable, and will help differentiate you from the competition. Think about what else you can bring to market yourself to prospective employers – remember you’ll only have a short period of time with each, so your marketing materials will have to grab attention and generate interest quickly and effectively. Is a portfolio appropriate? Can you put your materials on a CD? Think outside the box.
You’ll want to research the attending companies, and plan your strategy before the event. For RIT fairs, you’ll also want to know your schedule for the following day, in case recruiters ask you about interviewing. It’s a good idea to bring your calendar to any fair, for potential follow up and future interviews.

Slide 7: How you approach the recruiters at the fair is crucial, so plan ahead. The RIT fair is from 10-4; come as early as you can to be sure you have enough time with the companies you’d like to visit. You don’t want to show up at 3:30 when companies are getting ready to pack up for the day.

Be confident in your approach. Prepare and practice a 60-second commercial, or elevator speech, that clearly and concisely introduces your brand and your targeted career goals, and emphasizes why you’re a perfect fit for this particular company. A solid introduction will be a good lead-in to your conversation. Research of course is essential; know the companies that you approach as thoroughly as you can, so that you can demonstrate your fit and have a good conversation with the recruiter.

Try to build rapport with the company representative as you talk with them; be personable and find commonalities, which will further show that you’ll fit right in with their company environment. This will also make them more amenable to providing information on other people within the company that you should connect with, including appropriate department managers for your targeted field, or HR recruiters who work with experienced hire positions.

Differentiate yourself to stand out from other candidates as much as you can, and marketing materials will help in this process. Again, business cards are an essential marketing tool, and easy to acquire. Think about adding bullet points to highlight your top skills, and a title that specifies your brand statement or value proposition. Consider other materials appropriate for your industry or field, as well, such as a portfolio.

Slide 8: As you may have heard, it’s not always the best candidate who gets the job, it’s the candidate who can best sell him/herself to a prospective company. If you can effectively demonstrate a perfect fit between you and the company, you’re well on your way to an interview, or at least to further contact with that company.

Again, you need to be clear on your career goals, and your value proposition or brand – what you have to offer. When you research companies, do so with an eye to determining where you can best use your qualifications to help them solve a problem or meet a need – where, how and why you fit with and are the best candidate for the company.

Keep these things in mind when selling yourself to a recruiter. Emphasize your skills – not just the ones that directly relate to the job, but also the transferable skills you’ve gotten from previous jobs and life experiences; communication, leadership and teamwork skills are always valued. Emphasize all your experiences; for example, a leadership role in a volunteer organization is valuable also. Be open to new opportunities instead of narrowly focused on a specific job, company or industry; you may be able to use your skills in a new setting that may be very satisfying to you. If you’re more experienced, keep a positive attitude and emphasize the qualities you have that will be valued by an employer; you have a history of dedication, commitment and maturity that a new graduate does not have. Combined with flexibility and openness to new situations, this makes you a valuable candidate, and if you believe it, you can convince prospective employers also!
Slide 9: Here are some other tips to help ensure you have a successful career fair experience. As we mentioned, fairs will usually be crowded and may seem confusing. It’s worth taking a few minutes to walk around, get acclimated and gain confidence before you actually approach companies. And though you want to spend as much time with as many companies as possible, it’s helpful to take time after talking with each representative to make notes about your meeting, including other contact information, that you will use for your follow up activities. Definitely try to collect business cards or contact information from each recruiter you speak with; some may not give that information, but make an effort to at least get a name. Of course, you’re also looking for as much information on the company as possible, including other people in your relevant area, with whom you can connect after the fair.

Here’s a tip. Remember it’s all about differentiating yourself from the competition, so before you leave, you may want to staple one of your own business cards with a handwritten thank you note to another copy of your resume and put it on the company tables.

Also don’t hesitate to interact with other attendees – though everyone is there to talk with companies, this is an opportunity for networking too. You never know who might be able to help with your search, or who you might be able to assist, so be friendly with the other people in line!

As with any other job search activity, follow up is the key to success. Send thank you notes to any recruiters for whom you have contact information, complete any follow up application processes, and initiate contact with any new company contacts you’ve received from recruiters you spoke with.

Slide 10: Now we’ll talk about the RIT Career Fairs. RIT has two general career fairs each year; usually the 4th Wednesday of the Fall and Spring semesters – check our website for specific dates. These fairs are held in the Gordon Field House, from 10-4. Since the fairs are open only to RIT students and alumni, you’ll need to bring your Alumni ID, or a resume with your RIT degree indicated. If you don’t yet have an RIT Alumni ID, you can obtain one from the Registrar’s Office, located in the Eastman Building.

Once you arrive at the Field House, you’ll register at a check in table – no pre-registration is required. You’ll receive a detailed map, with all company locations indicated.

Some companies choose to stay and conduct interviews; these are on the following day, Thursday, also at the Gordon Field House.

In addition to our general fairs, there are some major specific Career Fairs throughout the year, including our Accounting, Packaging Science, and Hospitality Fairs. Dates and information on these events are found on RIT Job Zone.

Remember that parking is very limited at RIT, so come as early as you can – you can always hang out at Java Wally’s until the fair starts. You may want to bring comfortable shoes in case you have to walk a distance. The campus bus does make a circuit of the parking lots.

Slide 11: Before attending the RIT Career Fair, you should use our online job listing system Job Zone to view attending companies and plan your fair strategy. We’ll take a look at this process now.

Slide 12: When you go to our website – www.rit.edu/co-op/careers, and click the Alumni button, and click on the Job Zone login button, use your RIT login information to login, you’ll come to the Job Zone main menu. If you don’t have an active Job Zone account, you can register for one by clicking the Alumni tab, and then Job Zone access.
Slide 13: Click the events tab along the top menu bar, and you’ll see all active Career Fairs listed under the Career Fairs tab. Click on the fair you’re interested in to get more information.

Slide 14: Here you’ll see a list of all companies attending the fair. You’ll want to sort this list, though, so you can find those who will be looking for your major or industry, and for those who are looking for full-time, not co-op, candidates.

Slide 15: Click on the Advanced Search button, and you’ll see a menu of options for selecting your criteria. As alumni, you may want to adjust your criteria, especially with different majors, and cluster groups, and run several searches, to get a good list of prospective companies for your career interests.

Slide 16: Once you have your search results, you can begin your research of the companies and available positions. If you click on the organization’s name, you’ll get additional information and a link to the company website. Here you’ll also see which companies are staying the next day to conduct interviews. This more easily manageable list will help you plan your career fair strategy and determine which companies you’ll approach. We like to recommend a tiered approach; make a list of your top 10 companies – those that you’re most interested in, then a list of another 10 that you’re somewhat interested in, and so on, depending on how much time you’ll have to spend at the fair. You can then conduct your research and target your marketing materials accordingly, spending the most time and energy on the top 10 group, etc.

You can use your lists in your approach strategy as well, for example, start by approaching companies not on your top 10 list, to gain confidence, or visit companies on your other lists if your top 10 companies have long lines. Some companies have posted jobs for the fair – these are found by going into the jobs section of Job Zone, and putting the employer’s name in the keyword section.

Slide 17: Some companies will be conducting information sessions prior to the Career Fair; these will be listed under Information Sessions in the Events section of Job Zone. Information sessions are open to any student or alumnus/a, and allow you to get an overview of the company in a more informal setting, as well as additional time to talk with the company representatives. RSVP’s are encouraged, but not required.

Slide 18: We also conduct numerous workshops to help you prepare for Career Fair; many presented by company recruiters attending the fair. The workshops are listed under the Workshops tab. You’re welcome to attend any in which you’re interested. You can also connect with your career services coordinator in our office for individual preparation, like a resume review or mock interview.

Slide 19: We encourage you to take advantage of Career Fairs as a resource for your job search. Please feel free to contact our office if you have any questions, or would like to meet with your career services coordinator prior to the fair. Good luck with your job search, and we’ll see you at the fair!