

## MAKING THE MOST OF A JOB FAIR TIPS FOR BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER

by Denise Bissonnette

### What to do BEFORE the Job Fair

- 1. Research the employers that plan to attend. Info can be found on the company's website or at the local library or in business papers.**

Many job seekers go to fairs to see the sights and are not prepared to interview. You can get a huge jump on the competition by getting a list of the companies attending the fair and doing some research beforehand. While most of the recruiters will have company literature at their booths, you often can't access them until the time of your actual conversation. With so much information about companies on the web, there is no excuse not to do your homework.

- 2. Prepare questions for the employers.**

This is a very important part of the job search process, especially during a job or career fair. Having good questions ready for an employer exudes confidence and shows professionalism. The questions you ask can reflect your values, your strengths, and your desire to find the employer that is a good fit for you!

- 3. Prepare an introduction and a personal summary statement!**

Be prepared to answer: "What are you here for today?" and/or "Tell me about yourself." Rather than be taken off guard, be prepared to respond to this request with calm and confidence. You may only have a few minutes to market yourself and inspire the recruiter to not screen you out, thus you have to make the most of your time! Many experts suggest that you develop a "one-minute commercial" or a "two minute elevator speech" that highlights the key benefits that you can offer the organization – and then use it at the beginning of the interview. If you have done your homework on specific companies, you can tailor your answer to your interests and the interests of the company, thereby marketing yourself.

- 4. Practice your responses to typical interview questions.**

The questions you will be asked by recruiters are pretty predictable, so why not be ready for them? It's wise to prepare your responses, not so that they are

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memorized, but so that you feel comfortable and confident in speaking them. Typically, you will not be asked many questions by any one recruiter at a job fair, but it is better to be over-prepared than under-prepared! Common interview questions include:

- What are your career aspirations? What do you think you would like to do for a living?
- Why did you choose this career (or this industry)?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- Describe the best job (or best class) you've ever had.
- What makes you qualified for this position?
- If I were to pass your name along to a hiring manager, what should I include as one of your best selling points?
- What interests you about our company (our product) or (our position)?

**5. Prepare a resume that presents your background clearly and concisely. Estimate the number of employers that you plan to visit and bring twice that many resumes.**

If you have multiple interests or employment objectives, make sure you bring enough of each version of your resume. You should also bring scannable versions of your resumes. More and more career experts are emphasizing the importance of career portfolios which include copies of your resumes, a list of references, and samples of your best work. While most conversations at a job fair are fairly short, there may be opportunities for discussing your portfolio with a recruiter.

## What to do DURING the Job Fair

**6. Prepare to make a good first impression by dressing appropriately.**

You never know when you may be meeting your new boss for the first time and you do not want your first impression to be anything less than professional. One rule of thumb is that it's better to be overdressed than underdressed. Recruiters are in the business of eliminating candidates because there are too many to choose from - don't give them easy grounds for doing so. Remember, you are marketing a product -- yourself -- and the first thing the employer sees when greeting you is your self-presentation which includes your attire, your hygiene and the manner in which you introduce yourself.

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Attention to details is crucial – here are some of “the basics” in terms of good self-presentation in the job search: appropriate attire for a job interview; clean and polished shoes; well-groomed hairstyle; cleaned and trimmed fingernails; minimal cologne or perfume; well-brushed teeth and fresh breath; no gum, candy, or other objects in your mouth; minimal jewellery; no body odor.

## **7. Be prepared to approach and talk to someone at every exhibit!**

Some job seekers consider it a waste of time to approach companies they have no desire to work for. We disagree for the following reason: There is something to learn or gain from every employer at the fair, even if it's a piece of job search advice, or the name of a person or company they think you should pursue, or feedback on your resume or portfolio. You have nothing to lose by connecting with everyone, and much to gain!

Remember, in addition to employers, exhibitors may include a variety of organizations, community agencies and government programs whose services can assist you in your career planning and job search.

## **8. Use your “waiting time” wisely.**

While standing in line at an exhibit, introduce yourself to the folks ahead of or behind you, taking the opportunity to connect with your peers. Alternatively, see if you can pick up the company literature before getting in line so you can read it before conversing with an employer.

## **9. Make the most of your time with recruiters!**

Be responsive to the employer's questions, while maintaining a positive attitude that exudes professionalism. Remember that common courtesy and politeness go a long way in building a good first impression. Some of the basics include:

- Don't overstay your welcome. Meet with the recruiter, make your pitch, get the key information you need, but don't linger too long - especially if there is a long line of people behind you. (You can always return later.)
- Maintain a comfortable distance. When talking with the recruiter, you want to be close enough to be able to communicate, but not so close that you invade the recruiter's personal space.

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- If the employer doesn't ask you if you have any questions, request their permission to ask a few, rather than launch headlong into your questions.
- Demonstrate that you are a good listener. Once you ask a question, let them know that you are actually interested in their response!

### **10. Always ask about "the next step" before wrapping-up!**

As your time with the employer comes to a close, there are three final things to ask before thanking the recruiter for his or her time:

- a. "What's the next step?" What is involved in the recruitment process? What is the timetable? Is there anything I can do to help move my resume or application to the next step or to aid in the decision-making (such as submitting work samples, references, etc.)?
- b. May I have your business card? If the recruiter does not have a business card, ask for his/her contact information. Be especially careful in getting the title correct, as well as the spelling of his/her name.
- c. Finally, "What is your preferred method for me to follow-up our conversation?" Some folks love email, others prefer a phone call. Ask for his or her preference.

### **11. Thank the employer for his/her time and consideration.**

It can be an exhausting process for recruiters to meet so many people in one day, and it is refreshing and memorable when someone takes the time to express their appreciation by saying something like: "Thank you so much for being here today and taking your time with me. I am excited to learn about your company and I am so glad that I met you!" Or, "I really appreciate this information and I plan to put it to good use. You were very helpful – thank you!"

### **12. Take notes of your conversation.**

Listening skills are an often overlooked part of good communications skills -- and listening intently is often harder to do when you are focused on making a good first impression and pitching yourself to the recruiter. Listening is one thing; remembering everything is another. So, be prepared to take down some notes on each interview or conversation. Some people like to take notes during the interview, and others wait until after the interview. Be sure to jot down anything that will help you remember who the employer is and what your conversation was

about, so you can refer to it in your follow-up thank you letter. This will also help the recruiters remember you!

**13. Take breaks so that you can maintain a positive and upbeat attitude.**

While attending a job fair can be an exhilarating experience, it can also be draining. It is not easy to always have to be "on" when meeting recruiters, trying continually to make that first good impression and having to talk about yourself over and over again. So, as needed, take breaks. Sit somewhere off to the side and get re-centered and re-focused on your goals and your plan. If you need to, get a snack or go to the bathroom, or go outside for some fresh air -- whatever it takes to regain the positive energy you need to face the remaining recruiters. You want to make the most out of your time at the fair, so take good care of your energy and stamina!

**14. Network, Network, Network!**

Regardless of your specific goals for attending the career fair, always remember that one of the biggest benefits of attending is adding additional contacts to your network. Of course, the recruiters are the main people you are networking with (often with the intent of getting to the next step in obtaining a company visit), but don't forget all the other participants at the fair. Network with your peers as the sharing of information and resources can be quite beneficial -- not only at the fair, but beyond. So take the time to chat with other fair-goers and be sure to get contact information for those with whom you wish to maintain contact.

### What to do AFTER the Job Fair

**15. Follow-up by sending a thank-you letter to those you met at the fair!**

Finally, don't forget to follow-up. Enough cannot be said about this important step in the job search process! If you want to make the most of your time at a job fair, write a brief thank you note to everyone who you spent time with at the fair, mentioning some concrete points you remember or other parts of the conversation or interview. Too many people overlook this step, so it could be the step that helps you get a competitive edge!