

Getting the Most Out of a Career Fair

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You spend days -- sometimes weeks -- preparing for that big career fair. With resumes in hand, your best clothing neatly pressed and coordinated, and your knock 'em dead strategy rehearsed over and over, the big day comes and you enthusiastically step into the hall where that job fair is being held. You're ready to meet your dream employer, who will not only sweep you off your feet with a dynamite career offer, but who will also throw lots and lots of money your way because YOU are the one they've been waiting for all this time!

If this scenario reads like a fairy tale, it is because it is. The reality is that very few people are hired on the spot, leaving many that attend disappointed, frustrated and jobless.

Before you give up on what job fairs have to offer, there are five things you need to remember in order to get the most out of your experience -- and avoid disappointment.

1. **Don't expect to get a job at a job fair.** The description "job fair" is a misnomer. However, that doesn't mean that the companies who attend aren't looking to hire. Typically, a recruiter at a job fair will glance over your resume, spend about five or ten minutes talking to you, and then move on.

The job fair, in many ways, is like a dance -- it is an opportunity for you to scout what's out there and pursue what's interesting. It is not the place for the candidate or the recruiter to fall in love with each other upon first sight.

2. **Don't be afraid to leave your résumé at every table.** I once had a client who was interested in an information technology position call me in a panic from a career fair I had referred her to. "All that's available are sales positions!" she gasped. "What should I do?"

I calmly explained that she should leave her resume with every company that drew her interest, regardless of their advertised position. These human resources folks typically do all the recruiting for their respective organizations. If Company ABC isn't offering anything in your desired field, it doesn't hurt to leave a copy of your resume with them in case something opens later. Think of it as performing a mass broadcast delivery of your resume in person.

3. **Bring along a cover letter.** You are probably wondering, "What's the point of reiterating what you'll probably say in person to a recruiter?" Remember at most job fairs, recruiters see dozens, if not hundreds of candidates. A well-written, one-page cover letter keeps your name fresh in their minds, and helps the recruiter better place you within their company, especially later on if they want to share notes with managers within their companies. Moreover, you can use it as a script when reciting why you are one of the most attractive candidates that recruiter is going to meet all day.
4. **Don't grab the goodies and run.** Many companies offer some sort of small premium item, such as a pen, scratch pad, candy, or some other token. Moreover, many people can't resist stuffing their bags or pockets (or sometime mouths, if the giveaway is edible) with anything that's free.

If you're one of those collectors, think for a moment about the message you're sending. If you show up at a table with a bag full of goodies that you've accumulated from other tables, it makes you look as though you only came for the giveaways. Worse yet, if you approach a recruiter after eating chocolate, chewing gum, or licking a grape flavored lollipop, do you think a recruiter is going to take you seriously?

- 5. *Know what you want, and be able to summarize it in 60 seconds or less.*** When times are tough, it's not uncommon for the person who's been unemployed a while to be less discriminating about the employment they'll accept. In reality, you're willingness to do "anything" the company has to offer is more frustrating than you realize. You can't expect the recruiter to read your mind and find the perfect role for you; you need to meet them halfway by offering a hint as to where your interests lie.

One last piece of advice concerning using career fairs to your advantage. They are an excellent way to network, not just with recruiters but with people on your level who might be able to help you advance your career. I once had a client who ended up getting her ideal job on a referral from a friend she had met at a career fair.

Career fairs are a great way to see what's out there if you know how to take control, and they're worth your time and effort. Good luck in your search!