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Key steps to job fair success

Job fairs are becoming a more common method for companies to meet and screen a large number of potential job candidates. The fairs range from those scheduled periodically throughout the year for college students to industry-specific ones for professionals. These events are a good way to make connections, learn about companies and open positions as well as pave your way to a potential opportunity. Job fairs do have a set of protocols all their own. So, unless you do your homework, you can end up wasting your time.

In order for you to maximize your efforts, we will present the key steps in “before, during and after” categories.

Before

- Do your research. Identify, whenever possible, the companies that will be at the job fair. Decide on several companies you want to target, then do your homework. You want to be prepared to present to the recruiter your knowledge of and interest in the company. So, be aware of their industry, policies, strategies, competitors, issues and trends.

- Prepare and rehearse your “30-second sell.” A first impression is always important at a job fair. You want to make sure to create a positive impact in a very short period of time. When you approach an employer, be prepared to introduce yourself, and give a quick overview of your skills and qualifications. And, yes, you can do this in 30 seconds. Remember to practice, though, so that your story flows smoothly. It’s also a good idea to review possible interview questions. You want to continue to reinforce your positive first impression as you continue the conversation with the recruiter.

During

- Bring lots of résumés. Make sure your résumé is up to date and printed on quality paper, preferably 24-32-pound ivory or off-white paper. Bring a portfolio with a notepad so that you can professionally carry your résumé copies, take notes and store company materials that you pick up.

- Dress professionally. In dressing for the job fair, proper business attire is essential because image and first impressions are critical. Good grooming coupled with good taste is always desirable.

- Arrive early. When you get to the job fair early, you avoid having to stand in long lines, plus, you give yourself time to survey the layout of the fair and determine the order that you plan to visit with companies. Large companies with high profiles will generally have the longest lines, so if some are on your list, you should visit them first. In case you end up standing in a long line, simply use the time to review your “30-second sell,” company facts and how you plan to sell yourself to the company representative.

- Gain rapport with recruiter. Make eye contact, smile and have a firm handshake. Show confidence and motivation. Listen carefully to what the recruiter has to say before you respond. Although the atmosphere of the fair may be casual, the recruiters will be closely screening you.

- Be time-efficient. Keep in mind that there are lots of people wanting to talk with the company recruiters, so avoid monopolizing their time. You can also learn a lot simply by hearing other people’s questions.

- Obtain recruiter’s business card.

Take their business cards so that you can follow up. On the back of the card note the name of the job fair, relevant points of your discussion and something that you felt stood out about the interaction. Before leaving, it is a good idea to ask the recruiter what is the best way to follow up. And, of course, be sure to thank the recruiter for the opportunity to talk with him/her.

After

You’ve attended the job fair, so now, what next?

- Follow up. Keep your name fresh with the recruiter by sending a follow-up letter thanking the recruiter for his/her time as well as indicating your interest, qualifications, a few details of the conversation and your desire for a second interview. It’s best to mail or e-mail the letter within 24 hours. To continue to assertively sell yourself, consider a follow-up call within three to five days after you’ve sent your letter.

- Create a “continuity” plan. Organize your business cards. Develop a networking system to keep track of names and titles, contact dates, important comments, planned actions and company responses.

The bottom line is that you must go to the job fair with a plan of attack. Remember, whether the interaction with the company recruiter is 30 seconds or 30 minutes, you are being evaluated. To make sure you have a productive job fair experience, give each opportunity your best shot.

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