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How to Use a Career Fair

Many times you will see materials promoting a career fair in various outlets. Often colleges, departments of labor, regional groups, or corporations themselves will sponsor this type of event. Most often, these events are open to the public. On occasion, they are by invitation only geared to a specific group. Many times individuals are unsure what the purpose of this event is or how to utilize it in a job search. Here is some information that may assist you in utilizing these activities in your overall job search strategy.

There are three primary reasons why employers attend career fairs. Most companies attend these events to promote the company itself and its image. Often, recruiters, company representatives, will share information on careers, career tracks, or the mission and purpose of the organization itself. Lastly, many organizations will utilize a career fair to attract candidates for employment.

Attendees as well go career fairs for multiple reasons. More often than not, participants use career fairs to make contacts in the professional world. In additions, individuals utilize these venues to gather information on career fields as well as specific employers. Lastly, most people attend career fairs to obtain job leads. Seemingly, there is a reasonable match in purposes of employer and participants. Let's explore how you may best prepare to participate in these events.

Preparation for the Fair

Prior to the Fair

Before you attend a career fair, there is a certain amount of preparation to do. First, clarify your goals. Try to assess what you hope to accomplish. Are you attempting to gain information on careers? If you are still in the process of determining the type of major or career you hope to enter, career fairs are wonderful opportunities to gather this type of information. Another goal you may have to determine the types of companies and organizations that might hire you after you complete your education or who might be interested in the transferable skills you have. In addition, a career fair is a solid venue in which to make initial contact with recruiters for internship or employment opportunities. Quite often, employers will gather the credentials of potential candidates to review at a later date.

Once you have determined your goals for the career fair, it is time to research the companies that are attending. Most career fairs will provide a list of corporations that are attending the event. Utilize resources such as the internet, company profiles, and newspaper/journal articles to gather information on those companies you would like to explore.

Prepare a well thought out, error free resume to bring with you to the event. Many employers will scan your resume at the event and have a very brief conversation with you concerning your background and experiences. In order to provide the employer with accurate information, this document will aid in this conversation.

To best utilize this interaction at the fair, prepare a brief introduction of yourself that you will utilize at the fair. Practice a firm handshake as you introduce yourself to the company representative. In this “one minute commercial,” attempt to demonstrate knowledge of the employer based on your research. In addition, relate how your background, skills, and experiences would prove useful to the organization. Express interest in exploring further interactions with the company. Although this should not be a “canned” statement, it should provide you with comments about yourself that may be modified to specific employers. Plan your professional wardrobe, suit, shoes, accessories, including a folder to hold information and your resumes for easy access before the event. Career fairs may be overwhelming, the better prepared you are, the more relaxed you will be at the event.

At the Fair

When you attend most career fairs, there will be individuals there to assist you. Typically, hosts of the event will provide you with a floor plan of where the employers are located. Acclimate yourself to the event. Take a walk around the venue to become more comfortable with your surroundings. Ensure that your resumes are easily accessible. Be prepared to positively sell yourself. Career fairs are an active process; be ready to approach the table the recruiters are at with a sense of confidence and a smile. Make eye contact and begin to utilize your introduction. As the conversation ensues, be prepared to be able to access your resume should the employer want it. After this brief conversation, the attendee should attempt to obtain the business card of the individual with whom you spoke. Ask how to best follow up with the recruiter. Whether you are trying to obtain job leads or gather information on careers or the company itself, this information is vital for further contact with the company. After each conversation at the fair, take a couple of moments to take notes. Write down what was discussed, what you might feel you could have better described, and how the recruiter recommended you follow up.

After the Fair

Within 48 hours, prepare and send a thank you note to each recruiter with whom you spoke. Discuss the content of the brief interaction, re-express your interest in the organization, and identify what you hope will occur after the fair. This might take the form of statements such as: I would like to further explore employment with your company or I would welcome the chance to speak with you about how students majoring in x might be utilized in your organization.

Many people attend career fairs. They go through the process of preparing, attending, but do not follow up with recruiters after the event is over. By doing so, you may minimally get your credentials reviewed a second time and hopefully obtain an opportunity to again interact with those companies and organizations in which you had an interest. By assessing your intent for attending, preparing prior to the event and following up after the event, career fairs will provide an additional component of a well thought out employment search.