

# Making the most of your time at **JOB FAIRS**

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Job fairs are a great way to meet with a variety of prospective employers in a small amount of time. They are also fast-paced, crowded, and have the potential to be overwhelming. You can *maximize your experience* and *minimize your stress* if you prepare in advance.

Let's be candid – employers pay a great deal of money to attend job fairs. This means they need to meet with many candidates throughout the day(s). They're not simply being nice when they invite you so speak with them, they really do want to meet with you. And you want them to meet you at your professional best.

## **Set your goals before attending**

It is helpful to know why you are attending a job fair. Is your goal to “**connect**” with prospective employers and sell them on your candidacy with hopes that you will be invited on site for an interview? Is your goal to “**collect**” information from them so you can expand your understanding of the field, the position, and/or their company? Depending upon specific employers in attendance, you may employ a combination of the two strategies.

### **Connect**

You need to find a way to stand out from all the other enthusiastic, qualified candidates they will meet that day. In advance of the fair, identify which companies will be in attendance and for which position(s) they are recruiting. The organization coordinating the job fair generally makes this information easily accessible. Highly motivated candidates might even choose to send a resume and cover letter to participating organizations in advance of the fair. That way they can introduce themselves and let the organization know that they look forward to meeting with them in-person at the fair.

**Do your homework.** Research the company starting with their website. Check local media sites to determine if and why they have been in the news recently. Now you are ready to develop your personal “commercial” - that 60-second introduction that lets them know who you are, why you are interested in them, and why you believe there is a match between your abilities and their organizational needs. Practice – your commercial as well as your handshake and eye contact. Also, develop questions to ask them that reflect your understanding of their needs. Be prepared to leave them a resume – and if you want to really make a powerful impression, a targeted cover letter. Don't forget to get business cards as well as organizational literature so you can “reconnect” shortly after the fair.

### **Collect**

You may choose to attend a job fair to get a better understanding of different organizations and the types of positions available in your career field(s) of interest. If this is your goal, your strategy will be very different than if you are there to “connect.” You will still need to develop a personal “commercial,” in which you introduce yourself and your career interests. Then develop questions that will help further your understanding of the organization or industry. This strategy will help you make good career decisions while simultaneously helping you develop good job search skills.

## **Collect then Connect**

There may be an organization in attendance at the job fair you did not know would be there. You think you may be interested in them, but aren't as well prepared as you ideally would like to be. Alternatively, while your initial purpose for attending the fair was to "collect" only, you may find that you don't want to miss the opportunity to "connect" face-to-face with an organization of interest.

We encourage you to minimize interaction with organization representatives until you can prepare more. Collect literature from the table, find a quiet place to review it, develop your "connect" strategy, and return to the table. Let them know that you've had the opportunity to acquaint yourself with their organization and you believe there's a fit between their needs and your goals and qualifications. Don't forget to collect business cards so you can "reconnect" with them after the fair.

## **Reconnect**

Your ability to use the job fair as a job search tool doesn't end when you leave the fair. In fact, that is simply the beginning.

Remember how hectic the experience felt to you? It was even more hectic for the employer who now has to try to put together multiple faces, impressions and resumes. Make it easy for them to remember you by "reconnecting." Follow-up with a cover letter and resume (even if you left one with them at the job fair).

This cover letter will begin by expressing your appreciation for the time they spent with you at the fair discussing their organization and opportunities. You will then go on to leverage what you learned at the fair and highlight your interests and qualifications as they match the organization's needs – just like any other cover letter you write.

This resume may be a revised version of your "standard" resume targeted to this particular organization. Again, leverage the information you learned at the fair to determine what if any strategic changes you might want to make. These changes might include

- adjusted order to highlight the skills they most desire in a candidate
- modified language to match that of organization
- deleted items that don't fit their needs
- added items that don't fit most employers but are unique to this position

If you are not actively pursuing a position at this point in time and had attended the fair to collect information, we recommend that you write a thank you letter anyway. It is good business etiquette and it helps to solidify a positive impression of you should you decide to apply for a job there in the future. Additionally, it helps to hone your job search letter writing skills.