



Graduate Business Career Services Basic Skills Series:

Career Fair Success Tactics

Career fairs at which large numbers of companies gather to meet potential job and internship candidates are an increasingly popular way for employers and candidates to have preliminary face-to-face encounters. You may not walk away from a career fair with a job or internship offer in hand, but you will have taken important steps toward reaching that goal. Here are some tips from top Twin Cities' corporate recruiters and the staff of Graduate Business Career Services about ways in which candidates can prepare for successful participation in a career fair before, during, and after the event.

Before the Career Fair

- Get a list of companies who will be exhibiting at the career fair, and identify the top ten companies with which you want to be sure to connect.
- Research your top ten, using web, print, and personal resources. Know the company's history, top products and services. What makes the company unique? How is the company currently differentiating itself from competitors in the market? Check out the "Careers" or "Employment" link on the company's website. How do your strengths, education and experience match with what the company is trying to do? Print out information from the web so that you have a few pages on each company. Note: For St. Thomas's annual Graduate Business career fair, there are live links on our website to the websites of all companies recruiting at the fair, to facilitate candidates' research.
- Consider all companies recruiting at the fair before you select your top ten. Learn a little more about companies you might not have heard of before choosing. Often such companies are growing and are good sources of opportunity and more rapid advancement.
- You may want to condense the information you've gathered for each employer onto one index card that you can have in your portfolio to study while waiting in line to speak to that employer. Can you create a "hook" for each company—something interesting or unique that connects you and the company? Jot it down on your index card.

- Keep in mind that many jobs available at the company will be posted, but not all. Some are still in the idea or finding-budget stage.
- Have personal business cards made that include your name, address, phone number, and e-mail address. Self-published cards from your home computer are not recommended. A conservative, easily-read design is best, without distracting graphics. Carry the cards with you at all times.
- Prepare a 90-second-or-less self-introduction that you'll be able to use in modified form for each career fair contact. Some possible elements to include:
 - Hello, my name is....
 - I will be graduating / graduated from St. Thomas with a [degree] in [date]...
 - I'm interested in opportunities in [functional area of business].....
 - I have experience in
 - I see from the [company name] website that you have openings in
 - My strengths include.....
 - I have a "can do" attitude and ability to [have an example ready to share]...
- Prepare examples/stories from your experience that demonstrate creativity, problems encountered and solved, or possible responses to hypothetical questions ("What would you do if...?")
- Very important: Prepare a generic version of your resume that sells your strengths but leaves the most latitude for a variety of opportunities. Plan to bring about 25 copies on good paper with you to the career fair.
- Make preparations to be very well-groomed at the career fair. Men: haircut and shave, cleaned and pressed dark suit, shined shoes, conservative tie. (Wow them with your favorite Donald Duck tie *after* you get the job.) Women: neat, clean hairstyle; dark suit or pantsuit; classy but comfortable shoes (you'll be standing for hours); go easy on the make-up; no clanking jewelry or bulging saddlebag purses.
- Buy a dark leather portfolio in which to carry your resumes, company notes, business cards, and paper and pen to jot down questions or notes.

At the Career Fair

- Give yourself plenty of time. Check your overcoat so you don't have to carry it around with you. Before you enter the exhibit hall, study the floor plan to see where your top companies are located in the hall. Plot out your strategy for meeting with each of them. One idea, especially if there's a long line at your top company, is to visit one of your lower-priority companies first and "practice" on them.

- Turn your cell phone or pager OFF. Employers quickly lose interest in someone who has to interrupt conversation to take a call!
- When you approach a recruiter:
 - Look him/her in the eye—don't study your shoes!
 - Give a good, solid handshake—the importance of this can't be overstated. It's how you'll shake hands with future colleagues and customers, and recruiters are sensitive to that.
 - Use your practiced, polished self-introduction, as outlined in previous section.
 - If feasible, ask to move the conversation a bit to the side, away from the line of waiting candidates.
 - Try to relate a recent development at the company to your strengths.
 - If the conversation is developing nicely, you might ask the recruiter what s/he does, or how s/he likes working for the company.
 - Companies bring all kinds of promotional giveaways with them—pens, bags, snacks, CDs, etc. Don't use the career fair to go shopping! If you really want some of these items, circle the fair booths after you're finished interviewing and pick some things up.
 - Offer your resume (“Would you like a copy of my resume?”), but don't be surprised if some recruiters don't want one. They'll tell you to apply online. If they take your resume, they may make notes on it to remind them of their conversation with you. If there's time, you could ask for feedback on your resume.
 - Ask for the best way to follow up with the recruiter. “Should I call or e-mail you? What would be the best way for me to follow up with you? Try to remember the recruiter's name and try to get his/her business card.
 - Attitude is very, very important. Take initiative, project a positive attitude, don't leave your needs a mystery to the recruiter.

Following Up After the Career Fair

- Send an attractive, unique, hand-written thank-you note to recruiters with whom you spoke. (Option for those with poor handwriting: a typed note on very nice stationery.) Touch on elements of your conversation and reiterate your strengths and interest in a position with the company.
- Two weeks later, follow-up with a phone call or e-mail.
- Do submit resumes to the company website. Even if you have personal contacts within the company, you need to be able to say, “I did apply at the website.” Typically, resumes are scanned once they arrive and are organized and disseminated by keywords. Read job descriptions posted on the website and search for keywords that will pull up your resume when it's scanned.

- It's okay to apply for several positions at one company if you are qualified for them. Resumes are sent to different hiring managers. Seldom is anyone keeping track of how many positions you might be applying for.
- **The easiest way to find a job with a company is to know someone at that company.** A recent survey at a major company regarding hires over the past several years showed that 47% of those hires came from internal referrals—an employee encouraging or supporting someone from the outside to apply. This reinforces the importance of networking—of having contacts inside a company of interest to you who can bring attention your application.
- Some networking resources: anyone in your personal circle who comes into contact with lots of people—your religious leader, faculty members, career coaches, college friends, co-workers, etc. Use your alumni magazine, the weekly business personalities updates in the Star Tribune and Pioneer Press, and magazines such as *Twin Cities Business Journal*.

Advice for Specific Groups

Career Changers Be able to articulate when you meet with a recruiter at a career fair why you are making a change. Rather than say how burned out you are with what you do now, communicate a positive attitude and positive reasons for change—these are more likely to show you'll stick with your new career, rather than returning to your old one after a year or two. Focus on accomplishments in your old career and how these demonstrate the success you know you'll experience in your new field.

In General, Don't Ask Salary Questions Asking a recruiter about salaries at a career fair is like asking your partner on a first date, “What do you think we should name our kids?” Establish a connection first and postpone salary questions until mutual interest has been well established.

International Students If you have Permanent Residency status, mention it, using those words, on your resume and cover letter. Many scanning systems search for that phrase. If you are F-1 and will need sponsorship, don't lead with that information. Talk about your strengths, the company's needs, and how you could contribute first. Emphasize your international experience and any second or third languages, especially in dealing with companies with international operations.

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