

# HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A CAREER FAIR

## *ESSENTIAL TIPS AND STRATEGIES*

### What is a Career Fair?

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Two-thirds of all people get their jobs using informal job search methods such as networking with people and making direct contacts with an employer. The career fair is an excellent opportunity to use both of these job search methods to decrease the time spent looking for a job and find the job that's right for you!

Career fairs are face-to-face meetings between jobseekers and employers. They offer participants opportunities to learn about and apply for openings, meet with company recruiters, submit resumes, or just gather information about career opportunities. It is also an opportunity to develop your network of career contacts. If you haven't done any interviewing before, or recently, a career fair is also a good place to learn or practice interviewing skills.

Career fairs are one of the easiest places to find good job leads. At the fair, you will have the opportunity to personally distribute your resume directly to a recruiter. If you are well prepared you may end up participating in several interviews at the career fair, which could lead to a second interview and possibly an offer of employment. A job fair is also an excellent opportunity to learn about different careers. You may discover that you qualify for a position at a company you never considered before or you may find out about alternate career paths for someone with your experience or major.

The career fair offers several ways to build a network. You will be able to make several contacts with recruiters, establishing a network of resources for job leads. You can also expand your network to include other jobseekers and share information with each other about job leads, employers, and career opportunities. Professional organizations are another good networking resource - they may be represented at the fair along with employment agencies.

### Benefits of Attending a Career Fair

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- Learn about the variety of positions available in a career field.
- Talk to someone currently working in your field of interest.
- Learn about internship and/or employment opportunities.
- Establish employment contacts.
- Obtain referrals for job leads.
- Obtain interview experience.
- Obtain employment.
- Get pre-selected for Campus Recruitment interviews.



## Tips and Strategies for Making the Most of a Career Fair

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Getting the most out of a career fair takes some advance preparation on your part. Whether you hope to learn more about career opportunities or secure a full-time job, you will want to stand out from other candidates and make a positive impression. This section will give you some tips and techniques on how to prepare before the fair, what to do at the fair, and how to follow-up after the fair:

### Things to do Before the Career Fair

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#### **Research participating employers in advance.**

**Why?** By knowing which employers will be at the fair and knowing something about them, you will be able to take advantage of the event's networking and job-placement opportunities instead of wasting time sorting out what companies are there and what they do. Furthermore, you will have plenty of time to approach your first choice companies, ask relevant questions in an interview, and even follow-up with a thank you at the end of the day.

**What do I need to find out?** Find out what the company does. One way to demonstrate a strong interest in a company is by knowing something about them. It also demonstrates that you are goal directed and have the types of skills employers are looking for. Knowing about the companies will also help you determine which employers you are most interested in visiting at the fair.

**Where do I find information?** The best source of information is the company's website. Job descriptions, which can often be found on-line, are a good way to find out more about the position requirements and skills sought by the company. Informational interviews, which can be scheduled with employees of the company, are an excellent source of information.

**Prepare questions to ask the recruiter at the fair:** Use information you obtain in your research to prepare at least 2 questions to ask the employer at the fair either in an interview or after table introductions. You will be able to engage the recruiter in dialogue when you approach the table and stand out among other candidates. Since you have researched the company you will not need to ask, "What does your company do?" Instead, ask pertinent questions that reflect your research on the employer, your interest in the position or in finding out more about the company and what jobs are available for people with your education.

Avoid questions about salary and benefits. Ask, "what are growth opportunities, what do you like most/least about working for company XYZ, what is the training program like, what are your/the company's greatest challenges, describe the company culture?" if you have researched the company in advance and know whether they are currently recruiting through your university's campus recruiting program or have in the past, you could comment, "I've noticed you've been on campus to recruit in the past, but are not scheduled to interview this semester. When do you typically recruit on campus, or are you going to be recruiting this semester?" Since there is limited time available for you, you will want your statements to be as effective as possible.

**Determine how you fit with the company.** To maximize the brief time you have with each employer, you need to know how your skills and interests match their needs. This will also help you focus on why you want to work for the organization and what you can do for them in an interview.



### Plan a strategy.

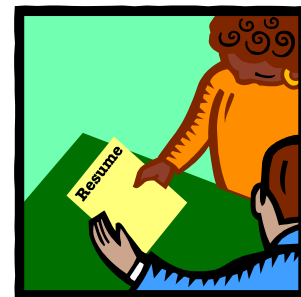
**Map your itinerary.** Review the list of participating organizations and decide which recruiters you are most interested in speaking with. Make a list of the top 10 companies whose booths you plan to visit, and study the floor plan, if available, to find out where they'll be located. You might want to plan on visiting some of your second choice companies first if this is your first career fair so you can practice your approach. If you are confident in your approach, you should plan on visiting your top choice companies (3-5) first.

**Broaden your focus.** Don't just concentrate on the big names; there are often great opportunities with companies with which you are not familiar. Consider many different employers. For example, you may not have considered working in a hospital, but hospitals recruit and hire in fields other than health care, such as management or information systems. Be flexible and consider alternate career opportunities as well. You might consider a job that helps you gain valuable experience to get you closer to your real objective.



### Prepare a Targeted Resume.

You will want to prepare an up-to-date resume that markets yourself to the employers you are targeting. Use your research to identify the types of positions you are interested in and what skills and abilities employers are looking for to fill those positions. You could have several different versions of your resume available depending on the various positions and industries of interest to you. If you possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities employers are looking for they should be reflected in your resume. You should have a targeted objective – you might want to tailor this for each company you are interested in to fit the particular position you are applying for. Objectives are very important, especially when an employer has 500 resumes to screen. You should also consider bringing a scannable version of your resume. More and more recruiters are simply bringing stacks of resumes back to the office and scanning them into a database. Be sure you are able to talk about and elaborate on EVERYTHING in your resume. Your resume will often serve as the outline during an interview.



**GPA:** You will need to determine whether or not to include your GPA. If your GPA is 3.0 or above, you should include it on your resume. If, however, your GPA is not one of your strengths, you might choose not to include it on your resume. Keep in mind however, that employers will be looking for your GPA and may wonder why it was not included. Be sure you know your **semester, cumulative, AND major** GPA prior to attending the fair. If asked about your GPA by a recruiter, be honest – you will be asked to submit a copy of your transcripts if hired!

**PROOFREAD** your resume and have at least 2 other people review it for you as well. You can schedule an appointment with your university's Career Center to have your resume critiqued. There should be NO TYPOS or misspelled words and formatting should be consistent throughout. One typo could be the basis for screening out your resume. Your resume should be limited to one page unless you have extensive experience. If your resume does go over to two pages, then you should have 2 full pages, not 1 1/2. For the career fair only, you can staple your resume if it is 2 pages.

**PRINT 30-40 copies.** When you are confident that your resume is complete, print 30 copies of your resume to distribute at the career fair. You can opt to print your resume on high quality resume paper and you should stick to neutral colors such as cream, white, and off-white. Be sure you keep track of your targeted resumes so you can distribute the correct one to each recruiter.

**Career Portfolio.** You might also consider preparing a career portfolio. A career portfolio would include your resume, a list of references, and samples of your best work. While most career fair interviews are fairly short, there may be opportunities for discussing your portfolio with a recruiter – either over a short break or meal or during a second interview on-site. It is best to always be prepared no matter what happens.



### Prepare your Introduction.

**Create your “commercial.”** You will probably only have a brief amount of time to spend with each recruiter. You will want to make a strong first impression within the first few minutes of conversation and maintain the recruiter's interest. To do so, you should prepare and rehearse a 30-60 second “commercial” to sell yourself to potential employers. Think of the job you are seeking and then determine how your knowledge, skills, and abilities contribute to this position. Include the strongest and/or most relevant points in your “commercial.” Tailor your introduction to each employer based on research and knowledge of the company. Articulate how you'll fit with the company based upon your research. If you are gathering information, let employers know that you are interested in materials and information.

- Include your name, class year, major, academic preparation, experience, strengths and skills.
- Give an example of an accomplishment you're particularly proud of.
- Indicate why you came to the company's table.
- Demonstrate your knowledge about the organization and how it works.
- Communicate your interest in the organization.
- Explain how you can help the organization achieve its goals.
- State the type of position in which you are interested.
- End with a focused, open-ended question that will engage the recruiter in conversation.
  - ⇒ “Could you tell me more about the new product you are developing?”
  - ⇒ “Could you tell me more about your financial management training program?”
  - ⇒ “Does my background and skills fit into your organization's needs?”

You can keep notes for each company on a separate note card and review it before approaching the booth. Be sure that your introduction feels natural for you and reflects your personality. You'll project more confidence if you are comfortable with what you are saying. Incorporate positive nonverbal communications, such as eye contact, facial expressions, body language, posture, etc. Avoid distracting mannerisms such as playing with jewelry, hair, rocking back and forth, and chewing gum. Practice your introduction in the mirror, with friends, or with a Career Counselor at UCS over and over until it flows smoothly. A solid introduction will help you move on to the next important step - the interview.



### Prepare for Interviews.

Many companies whose college recruitment budgets have been sharply reduced now rely on campus job fairs for the bulk of their interviewing. That means you must be well prepared to interview on short notice. Every time you speak with an employer, no matter how briefly, consider it an interview. Recruiters will expect you to introduce yourself, shake hands confidently, answer questions about your coursework or experience, and have an idea of the type of job you want. Demonstrate confidence, interest, and enthusiasm. Employer surveys identify the single most important personal attribute of a first impression is enthusiasm.

Try to anticipate the kinds of questions employers will ask you. Prepare answers to interview questions just as you would any employment interview. The most common question you will face is something along the lines of, "What are you here for today?" Tailor your answer to your interests and the company's interests. Make sure you have questions to ask the interviewer. End the interview with asking what the next step in the process is.



### Clothes and Accessories:

**Dress for success!** Consider the career fair as you would a job interview. You may end up participating in several "mini-interviews," which are often the first round of screening candidates. Dress in conservative, business attire - it is always better to be overdressed than underdressed. Do not carry your backpack, large purse, or other paraphernalia with you. Remember, first impressions are vital!



**Pack your portfolio/briefcase:** Be organized! Keep each version of your resume separated in a portfolio. Know where your pen is located. As you walk through the fair you will accumulate company literature - be sure you have space in your portfolio or briefcase to keep this information organized.

**Stock your briefcase with the following additional items:** paper for note taking, tissues, a small mirror, breath mints, and a snack to keep up your energy throughout the day. Women should carry an extra pair of stockings in case of runs. When you snack, do it out of recruiters' sight and be careful not to spill.



### Get plenty of rest the night before.

## The Day of the Fair

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**Go alone.** A professional image is easier to maintain if you speak to employers alone. Leave children and other relatives at home, go separately from friends.

**Arrive early.** Arrive as early as possible to see those recruiters you expect will be busiest. Use the “peak” hours to speak with other recruiters. Don’t come late or you may miss the organizations you wanted to contact. When you arrive, see if any new companies have registered. Survey the layout and plan a route. Meet with your top choices in the morning and return at the end of the day to thank them again for their time. Remember to stay flexible, as your top choices may be the choices of many, creating long lines that you may wish to avoid.

If you did not find out in advance which companies will be represented there, at least read the career fair handout the day of the fair while you’re walking in. You should learn about participating companies and organizations before you approach recruiters. You will not want to ask, “So what does your company do?” You want to demonstrate that you are knowledgeable and prepared.

**Maintain professionalism.** Behave professionally, even in elevators, corridors, parking lots, etc. You never know when you may have personal contact with a recruiter and you will want to be sure you leave a good impression!

### Introductions.

**Approaching the Table.** Approach the recruiter with a smile and offer a hand when you introduce yourself. Maintain professional space and behavior. Avoid taking “freebies” until after your conversation. Hand the recruiter a copy of your resume and expound on it quickly with your “commercial.” Speak naturally; avoid presenting your introduction as a speech. Display a friendly, confident attitude. Watch out for “you know, um, uh,” and distracting mannerisms. Don’t ask the recruiter personal questions. End your introduction with open-ended questions. After a brief discussion with the recruiter, collect the organizational literature and the recruiter’s business card. Ask about the next step in the recruiting process or the preferred method of follow-up.

**Complete applications flawlessly.** You may be asked to complete the company’s application form as well. When a company distributes application forms, take two. One will be a rough draft. If you bring an application home to send later, consider adding a note saying you met the recruiter at the fair.

**Pick up on cues that it is time to leave.** If the recruiter is looking over your shoulder at the line or says, “Thanks for stopping by” – it’s time to thank the recruiter for his/her time and move on. Ask for a business card if you have not done so already and the preferred way for you to follow up. Thank the recruiter by name.

**Take notes of conversations and interviews.** Immediately after leaving the table, jot down notes about your conversation as well as names of contacts you spoke with who may not have had a business card. This will help remind you of information to reference in a thank you letter (see follow up section below).



## After the Fair

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**Follow-up.** Once you're home, you should begin preparing thank you notes. Not only is your memory still fresh with details of your conversations, but recruiters often make decisions on following up with candidates a few days after the fair. Go through the company literature you picked up and review your notes from conversations with recruiters. (Save the literature, you may want to use this information in preparation for a future interview). In the letter, thank the recruiter for his/her time, restate your interest and qualifications for the position, recall something that you discussed, reiterate your interest in a second interview, and indicate when you will follow up. Send your thank you notes the next day. You may also want to include another copy of your resume with a cover letter highlighting your discussion at the career fair and how your qualifications match the job. You can send your "thank you" via email as long as you keep the letter professional.



**Maintain contact with employers.** Perseverance is good. Follow up with the employer 10 days-2 weeks later. Follow up again 3-4 weeks – one message per 2-4 weeks, no more.

**Improve your resume.** If you learned something that better reflects your qualifications or focus, then revise your resume to include that information.

## Career Fair FIVES adapted from JobWeb.com

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### Five things to TAKE to a Career Fair

1. Copies of your resume – 30-40.
2. A smile, a strong handshake, and a positive attitude.
3. A 30-60 second sales pitch or “commercial”.
4. Information about the organizations that will be attending.
5. Energy!

### Five things to TAKE AWAY from a Career Fair

1. Business cards from the recruiters you have met.
2. Notes about contacts you made.
3. Organization information.
4. A better sense of your career options.
5. Self-confidence in interacting with company representatives.

### Five things NOT to do at a Career Fair

1. Cruise the booth with a group of friends.
2. Carry your backpack, large purse, or other paraphernalia with you.
3. Come dressed for rugby practice.
4. "Wing it" with employers.
5. Come during the last half hour of the event.