

# Tips to Get the Most Out of Career Fairs

**Research Employers.** With so much information about companies on the web, there is no excuse not to do your homework; in fact you will look quite dumb if you haven't. Many students go to a fair to "check it out," and are not prepared to talk to employers. Recruiters are short with such people because they feel their time is being wasted. You will be far more successful by finding the list of the companies attending the fair in advance and doing research on each of the companies with whom you want to speak. While recruiters will have company literature at their booths, you often can't access that information until after you interact with them. Discreetly look up the company on your phone before you introduce yourself, if necessary.

**Bring Copies of Your Resume.** Bring lots of resumes to the fair. There is no place close by to make extra copies. Put them in some kind of folder or folio to keep them neat and organized.

**Wear Appropriate Attire.** "Business casual" is basic, but depending on the job, a conservative business suit might be even more appropriate. First impressions are important. Dress well.

**Develop a Fair Strategy.** Typically fairs are busiest during the lunch hour, so come early. Fairs close promptly at publicized ending times to accommodate employers' travel arrangements, but some recruiters will leave even an hour early because they feel they already have enough good candidates.

Don't go to your first choice first (unless you are very practiced at career fairs). If your schedule allows, you may find it easiest to start with the employers in which you're less interested. This will help you hone your approach (even eavesdrop on the conversations around you), and be more confident when you speak with your targeted employers. Balance this tip with the reality that you may have little time overall to spend at the fair, yet may need to wait in line to talk to some recruiters.

Don't load yourself down with employer giveaways if you want to be taken seriously. Go back later, after all your important contacts have been made, and then ask for one of those flashing pens or cool T-shirts you absolutely cannot live without.

**Prepare for Recruiter Conversations.** Many experts suggest that you develop a one-minute "commercial" that highlights the key benefits you can extend to the organization. Offer a handshake, say "hello" and state your name. Welcome the representative to UMass. Have your resume ready to give to the employer. Be ready to talk about your career interests as well as your academic and extracurricular experiences and how they connect to the employer's needs.

**Remember the four keys to all career fair interactions: Make eye contact, offer a firm handshake, connect your skills to the employer's needs, and show enthusiasm.**

**Take notes for follow-up** when you inquire about next steps and the possibility of talking with additional managers. The representative at the fair may not be able to answer all of your questions or know specifics about your job interests. Write down the names, telephone numbers, etc. of other staff in the organization whom you can contact later. Note relevant employer information sessions, on-campus interviews, and projected hiring dates. Ask the recruiter for their card, and then promptly send a short, professional thank-you note by email.

# How to Ace a Career Fair - From a Recruiter's Point Of View

As someone who used to hire students from career fairs, I wanted to give some pointers on how to interact with the recruiters there.

When developing your approach with campus recruiters, put yourself in their shoes. They meet a lot of students in one day, and with so much traffic, "good" students who may be well qualified don't stand out as much as those who come in with charisma.

For example, nine times out of ten the student being interviewed is professional, eager to please, and will probably do fine in the workforce. As a recruiter, though, I don't want "fine"—I want "great," someone I would hire on the spot. How can you become one of the "greats?"

**1. Have a game plan:** Don't even think about going into a career fair without knowing who's going to be there and with whom you want to speak. I talked to so many students who just stumbled on our booth, and they asked dumb basic questions that are answered on the home page of our website – a waste of my time.

Even if you do happen to come across a company that you didn't intend to approach but looks promising, take a few minutes to **sneak out and look them up on your phone**. You want to make every recruiter feel like they are your top choice.

**2. Have a clue:** You must do your research. These days companies have put themselves out there so much on the web and through social media there's no excuse for not knowing basic information such as core services and key players. Also, if you can find out in advance who is doing the on-campus interviews for one of your top picks, don't be afraid to contact them ahead of time to introduce yourself.

**3. Understand how you're being evaluated:** To make the recruiting process more objective, most employers have recruiters fill out a simple ratings sheet for each interviewee. These sheets are usually standard and cover most of the following:

- **Personal appearance:** If you dress like you're serious, people will treat you like you're serious. For fairs, this means a suit every time. I once had a student give me a résumé that was very impressive—but he was in a sweatshirt. If he didn't make an effort, why should I?
- **Professionalism:** Have your 'elevator pitch' or 'commercial' down, because there's a good chance you'll be asked some form of the question, "Tell me about yourself." Your response should be under two minutes, extremely focused, and include some general background information, demonstrated leadership, and what you will bring to my organization.

For example: "I grew up in Philadelphia, but moved here to attend university. I'm a junior this year with a major in History, a minor in IT and a certificate in Arts Management. I know that non-profit management today is much more than helping others, so I felt my IT minor and my courses in Arts Management would prepare me for the demands of navigating non-profit company management.

I'm involved in community service as well, serving as co-chair of a community outreach committee, and in that role I've organized projects for the United Way and Habitat for Humanity. I've researched your company and I know that you are looking for management interns, and I want to bring my skills and experience to help with some pressing social issues. On your website you highlight some changing federal policies. How will the candidates you are looking for today help address these concerns?"

The best way to perfect your elevator pitch is to practice. You should be able to recite this in your sleep.

- **Confidence:** We know you're nervous, but one of the fastest ways to turn off a recruiter is to appear overly nervous. If you can't handle the career fair without a sweaty brow, then how are you going to handle my clients?

Naturally you will be anxious. The trick is to appear as if you're not. For example, look people in the eye when you speak, and be secure in your delivery (of that information you practiced even in your sleep).

- **Leadership:** Every recruiter scorecard has some ranking for leadership potential. Since you may not have any real career experience yet, this will be evaluated by how you've spent your time on campus.

Have you assumed any leadership roles within a student organization? Do you have any volunteer experience? What interests or passions do you have outside of your classes that could demonstrate leadership ability? Employers know that if you lead in any of these capacities, such skills readily translate into the office environment.

- **Etiquette:** Finally, candidates who ascend to the top of the "must have" list understand the basics of etiquette. This is about firm handshakes, addressing recruiters as "Mr." or "Ms.," and following up with a post-meeting thank you note or E-mail. These days, success is heavily reliant on interpersonal skills, meaning that having superior manners is more than just a courtesy. It's a highly-valued skill.