

# Career Fairs: Tips to Fare Well



By Erin Hovanec

A career fair can make your job search much easier. It gives you the opportunity to meet recruiters from dozens of companies -- all in one place over only a few hours.

But career fairs have their own special set of challenges. Impressing all those recruiters from all those companies requires a lot of preparation, practice, skill and stamina.

Simply put, a career fair is a lot like a job interview -- multiplied many times over.

Read on to learn how you can plan a strategy to survive, and even shine, at career fairs.

## **Do Your Homework, Plan Your Attack**

What you do BEFORE a career fair can be just as important as what you do when you get there. So what should you do? Your homework.

Most career fairs publicize a list of companies, along with their industries, that will be attending the fair.

Review this list and highlight the companies that interest you. Then, make a list of companies you want to speak with in order of importance. You want to make sure you speak with your top choices first in case you run out of time.

Research each company you plan to approach. Write down some key points about each, and bring them with you. If you have your research handy, you can refer to it to refresh your memory. Take a quick look at its key facts before you approach a company's booth at the fair.

## **Practice ... And Practice Again**

You're at a career fair. You walk up to a recruiter, smile and say ...

"Ummmm .... Hi ... How are ya? ..."

That's probably not the polished, confident approach that'll get you a job.

The first 10 seconds are often the most important. So you need to make a strong first impression.

Prepare your introduction in advance. Practice how you'll greet a recruiter (complete with smile and handshake) in front of a mirror at home. You should also prepare a 60-second summary that explains your basic skills and experience along with what type of job you're seeking.

Practice both your introduction and your summary until you no longer sound rehearsed, but natural. It's even

a good idea to try them out on a friend.

### **Wear Your Ambition on Your Sleeve**

If you're confused about what to wear to a career fair, don't be. The answer is easy: A suit.

You should dress just as professionally for a career fair as you would for an interview at a company. That means wearing a suit in a basic color, like black or navy, and conservative shoes. Men should wear a tie; women should wear stockings.

It's also a good idea to call the venue holding the fair and ask if they have a coatroom. You don't want to have to lug around a heavy winter coat or wet raincoat unexpectedly.

Not only do you want to look professional, but you'll need your hands free for all that recruiter handshaking. So if the venue doesn't offer a place to store your belongings, bring only what you absolutely need. Leave large tote bags, shopping bags and lunch bags at home.

### **Resumes: Don't Leave Home Without 'Em**

How many resumes should you bring to a career fair?

Ten? Fifty? One hundred ...?

Well, that depends on how big the fair is and how many companies there interest you. But follow this rule of thumb: Bring many more resumes than you think you'll need. You don't want to find yourself halfway through the career fair and realize that you've run out.

If you have more than one version of your resume (say, one version for sales jobs and another for marketing jobs), bring copies of both. After talking with the recruiter, you can decide which resume is most appropriate.

# Create a Job Search Support System



*By Caroline Levchuck*

A job search can be a lonely, isolating process.

So where can you find support, empathy and encouragement in this difficult time? Join a job club or start one of your own.

Job search techniques conducted in groups are 15 percent more successful than those same techniques followed individually, according to Richard Nelson Bolles, author of the classic career book "What Color Is Your Parachute?: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers."

Regular meetings with other jobs seekers can help you stay motivated and optimistic. They can also be a source of new job search strategies, tips and tricks.

## **In the Club**

It's true: There IS strength in numbers.

Meeting like-minded job seekers in a job club can be a great motivator. Plus, clubs help with technical aspects of a job search, such as writing cover letters and resumes and developing interview skills.

While all clubs differ in their structure, most sessions begin with a check-in in which members share progress reports on their searches. During check-in, members cheer one another's successes and support each other through frustrations.

Meetings often include brainstorming job search ideas, sharing job leads and contacts and swapping strategies, tip and tricks.

At the end of each meeting, members usually make job search goals for the coming week.

## **Becoming Part of the Crowd**

Job clubs are cropping up all over. And it may be easier to find one than you expect.

First, check with your state employment office. Many offices sponsor job clubs throughout the state and can point you to the nearest one.

Also check local colleges, libraries, places of worship, women's centers and the calendar section of your local newspaper.

Keep in mind that you might want to visit a few clubs before making a commitment. Not all clubs share the

same approach to job seeking.

Some clubs may focus on job seekers of a particular age or gender, like clubs for older job seekers or for women. Some will emphasize sharing contacts and networking, while others will focus on job search skills and strategies. Others still may have an emotional or spiritual approach to job searching.

Haven't found a local job club yet? You can also find job search strategies and support online. Visit Yahoo! HotJobs career communities here: <http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/client/splash/communities/>

### **Jump Start Your Club**

Haven't found a job search club that fits you yet? Start your own.

Here are some general guidelines to follow:

- Limit the number of people in the group. You want everyone to be able to get to know one another and have a chance to participate.
- Recruit members to your job club by word of mouth. You can also place an ad in a local paper or on an online message board.
- Ask members to commit to meet consistently and to actively participate.
- Designate one person to lead the group. Choose someone to manage logistics.
- Select a comfortable, free or inexpensive place to meet.

It's OK to change your framework as the club develops. But these five steps can get you started on the right track.

### **'Membership Has Its Privileges'**

These four tips can help you get the most out of a job club:

- Attend meetings consistently and actively participate in them.
- Set specific and realistic goals for your job search.
- Be willing to make changes to your search strategy.
- Give yourself a limited time to be a member of the job club, for example, 12 weeks. If you're not moving closer to your goals by then, it may be a signal to try a new club.