Career fairs are a great way to connect with potential employers. Here's how.

It is likely you have heard that networking is one of the ways to find employers and jobs. Well, think of the career or job fair as one giant networking opportunity, where you can meet with employers from a variety of organizations and industries. Better still, because many campuses host career and job fairs, there's a good chance that you'll have ready access.

To get maximum results from the event, you need to prepare in advance so that you manage the time available to you effectively, make a positive impression on recruiters, expand your network, and identify next steps to take.

Get ready

Many career centers will provide an advance list of organizations scheduled to take part in the fair. Get a copy and comb through it. Investigate those companies that you think offer the best match for your skills and interests by checking their websites and company literature available through the career center. Rank the organizations in order of your interest, and plan to visit those of most interest first. At the fair, as time allows, work your way through your rankings.

One of the worst things you can do is tell a recruiter "I'll take anything" or ask "What jobs do you have for me?". Such statements show a lack of interest and initiative. Instead, prepare a short "commercial" you can use to introduce yourself to the recruiter: Provide your name, year in school, major, and area of interest (e.g., a full-time job or an internship). You'll want to tell the recruiter a little about your background and skills as they relate to the organization and its opportunities (which you've gleaned through your research), but keep it short.

How should you dress for a career fair? Most experts agree: Dress as if you were going to an interview. That means a business suit (not shorts), "dress" shoes (not sneakers), and proper grooming at a minimum. Professional dress sends a clear message to the recruiter that you are serious and interested.

You should also be prepared with copies of your resume. (Tip: Bring a copy of your resume on a "memory stick" or "thumb drive" to make it easy for the recruiter to transfer it into a laptop.)

Make the most of the fair

At the fair itself, concentrate on those organizations you've identified as your best match, and then work your way down your list.

In your interactions, be professional and be polite. Focus on the recruiter, not the giveaway. When you approach a recruiter, be mindful of what he or she is doing. If the recruiter is with another student, give the recruiter and student some space.

Quick Tips for Career Fair Success

- Plan ahead: Rank the organizations attending so you can visit those of most interest first; work your way through your list as you have time.
- Dress as if it were an interview.
- Prepare a short "commercial" that you can use when you introduce yourself to recruiters.
- Come prepared with paper copies of your resumes, but also load your resume onto a "memory stick" or "thumb drive" so that it can be transferred to the recruiter's laptop.
- Focus on the organizations and their opportunities—not their giveaways.
- Display a professional attitude, and be unfailingly polite.
- Listen to what the recruiter has to say.
- Be respectful of the recruiter's time.
- Ask recruiters about next steps.
- Get recruiters' business cards, and jot down pertinent notes on them so you can follow up.
- Send a thank-you note or e-mail to each recruiter you met with at the career fair.
When it’s your turn to speak with the recruiter, use your commercial to introduce yourself. Listen carefully to what the recruiter has to say so that you can match your skills and interests to those required by the organization.

You want your conversation to be productive for both you and the recruiter, so take care not to monopolize the recruiter’s time. The recruiter is there to meet as many qualified candidates as possible, so you’ll make a positive impression if you demonstrate your interest and knowledge and your respect for the recruiter’s time.

Ask the recruiter for next steps in the process (e.g., is the organization planning to conduct interviews on campus, and when? Should you apply online?), and what you should do to be considered. Ask for the recruiter’s business card so you can follow up. (Tip: Jot down notes on the back of the business card as soon as you move away from the booth or as soon as possible. Those notes will come in handy when you follow up with the recruiter.)

After the career fair

Once the fair is over, don’t let your good work go to waste. Follow up with your contacts soon after the fair.

Send a thank-you note or e-mail to each recruiter you met with. Express your appreciation for the time and advice offered, let the recruiter know that you have completed anything he or she has asked you to do (such as applying online), and reiterate your interest in the company. Be sure to send a thank-you note even if the recruiter currently does not have jobs of interest to you. Keep in mind that the career fair is not just a great way to get in front of potential employers, but it is also a good way to expand your professional network.

By following these guidelines, you will make the best use of your time at the career fair and could make a great first impression on your future employer. Good luck!