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Working a Job Fair:

The Good, The Bad and...the Good, Again

Given that the average employee will hold down 6.4 different jobs during his or her career, you can almost bet that you're going to attend a job fair at some point, if you haven't already had the pleasure. You see job fairs are a mixed blessing, with good and bad points. Here's how you can maximize the positive and mitigate the negatives of job fairs.

The Upside to Job Fairs

In three words: convenience, convenience, convenience. Where else can you get some face time with ten potential employers in six hours? That's a *real* plus.

Job fairs bring employers and employees together – kind of like speed dating. You stop by a booth, shake hands (remember firm, but not too firm), drop off your resume, get five minutes to describe 15 years of solid work experience – before moving on to the next interview, three booths down. It's a long day, no doubt about it. But job fairs are anything but a waste of time. In fact, they're a valuable resource for finding that perfect position. That's a *big* plus.

Job fairs tend to be regional: The Bay Area Job Fair, the New England Job Fair, Colorado Careers on Parade and so on. This is a good thing. It gives you the opportunity to focus on positions that don't require uprooting the family (or yourself) with a move across country. Another plus.

Finally, job fairs are great places to network – to meet people who know people who know of a company looking for someone just like you. Perfect! Meet anybody, meet everybody. You never know where it'll lead.

The Downside to Job Fairs

Ever eat a \$4 hotdog or a \$2 cup of really bad coffee. You have if you've been to a job fair. The food tends to be dreadful, but then we're not here to eat, we're here to find the next, perfect position. Even so - \$4 for a hotdog? There ought to be a law.

Another downside? You'll be meeting with human resources personnel who have already interviewed 82 people that day, they're tired, they want to get back to the hotel, and unless you've got a squirting flower boutonniere, you may get lost in the sea of faces, names and resumes.

The Upside to Job Fairs, Part 2

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It's important to remember – no one ever got a job at a job fair. What you *can* get is your foot in the door – an interview. And that's what you shoot for – an interview where you can really strut your stuff.

If you know what to expect, if you plan your day at the fair with military precision, you can make an impression and you can make a difference in the direction of your job search. You'll also maximize the positives and lessen the impact of the 'cattle call' aspect of some job fairs.

Working a Job Fair

The key to making the most out of a job fair is planning. There are steps you can and should take before, during and after your trip to the fair.

Prepare for Success

Do Some Research

Start by doing some research and information gathering. Obtain a list of company attendees. Out of the 60 or 70 businesses with representatives staffing booths, chances are you won't want to see them all, so cull the list down to the 10 to 15 companies that most interest *you!*

Use the Internet

Next, log on to the Internet and visit the web sites of your prospective candidates. Develop a feel for the company, its mission, objectives, management hierarchy – anything you can glean from a thorough examination of each web site. Download the company's annual report for even more background. This research will, no doubt, eliminate a few contenders, paring your list to 10 companies or less. Step one completed.

Develop a PEP

Next, put together a professional employment portfolio (PEP) to hand off to company reps. Your portfolio should include a flawless (absolutely flawless) resume, a cover letter or letter of introduction and, if you've got them, a statement of professional or academic accomplishments – everything from your Phi Beta Kappa key to regional sales leader six months running. A professional business card should round out the package. *Don't use the computer printout kind – they look cheesy.*

What About References?

If you have written references, put them in there, though in middle- and upper tier career strata, hard copy references are more the exception than the rule. Instead, provide a sheet with reference contact information: name, e-mail address, telephone and a paragraph describing your relationship.

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Looks Matter

Your PEP will represent you back at company HQ so all documents should be professionally printed on the best stationery you can afford. It should be watermarked, slightly textured and either white or off-white. Skip the flowery letterhead your mom gave you for your birthday. That PEP should look professional in every way. Neat, spotless, mistake-free and *unfolded*. Instead, place your portfolio in a plain manila envelop so the documents aren't separated. Label with your contact information.

Get Professional Help

If you've already got a resume, update it. If you don't have a resume (and you don't know the difference between an employment objective and unemployment insurance) hire a professional resume writer to develop the perfect resume to shine a spotlight on your career highlights.

Plan Your Job Fair Strategy

Plan your day. Some company reps at job fairs will let you make an appointment. If so, do so. Then, plan your other visits around those appointments.

You can usually pick up a map of the venue showing the locations of exhibitors' booths. If you can get one before reaching the front door, use it to plan your day to avoid running from one side of the hall to the other all day long.

Welcome to the Job Fair. Please Dress Nice.

What to wear. Female or male, go with a suit. Let's face it, if you show up wearing your Metallica t-shirt and a neck tattoo, you can kiss goodbye that regional sales position. It's just not going to happen. Go with your best business suit. It's expected.

Other suggestions:

- Don't wear perfume or cologne.
- Don't wear the funny tie your kid gave you.
- Don't wear new or uncomfortable shoes, you'll be walking – a lot.
- Leave your overcoat in the car, it's just one more thing to carry.
- Suit pressed, shoes shined, faced scrubbed clean, just like mom said.
- Carry an attaché case, even if you have to borrow one.

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Bring Your Own Food

Bring your own food. Forget the \$4 wiener or the corporate smorgasbord at the end of aisle 5. Bring bottled water, fresh fruit, some nuts – in other words, keep it light so you stay quick. Remember, you're performing. You want to be alert, sharp and nimble, so eat in between interviews, stay hydrated and you'll look fresh all day long. (And you won't get cake crumbs all over the Brooks Bros. suit)

Bring Your Own Pad and Pen

You're having a great interview, the interviewer gives you his personal number and extension...and you sheepishly ask to borrow a piece of paper and a pen. Not very professional. Bring paper and pen to take notes and write notes for others.

Sleep Well

The night before the event, go to bed early and get up a little earlier than usual. If you can prepare without the stress of a ticking clock, you'll look and feel better for that first interview. Leave in plenty of time to get there when the doors open. Show them you're a go-getter.

Implementing Success

You arrive cool, calm and collected. You've got your PEPs, some extra PEPs, some gorp, bottled water and a whole lot of energy. Time to get busy.

Refresh Your Memory

Before introducing yourself to a company rep, quickly review the information you've gathered on the company. The mention of a new product launch shows you know the business and may score you some points – especially if you're the only one who brings it up. Try to 'personalize' your interviews, making them relevant to the employer's needs.

Gather your thoughts, collect yourself and approach with purpose and confidence.

Face Time

This is what you've prepared for, what you're there for. Don't wander up, as though you're just browsing. You're there because you want to talk to *them*.

During your discussions, ask appropriate questions. Remember, an interview – especially an initial interview – is a give and take, so ask away. You've got nothing to lose. However, keep your questions on point. Don't ask about the fabulous, annual,

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company retreat in Hawaii – stick to how you can help the company, not how the company can help you.

Never bad mouth your past employers. Everything about the interview should be positive, upbeat and energetic.

If foot traffic is slow by the booth, take your time. No rush. You and the HR rep can talk about the business in general, expand on your professional experiences and establish ‘contact’. You want to stand out from the crowd. You want that rep to remember you as s/he goes through that stack of resumes. So, if time permits, take advantage of it. But also remember, that this is your preliminary contact with the company and your goal? An in-house interview. So no pressure, no hype.

Take Frequent Breaks

Be sure to take breaks in between each interview. First, you need a few minutes to clear your head and freshen up a bit. Again, looks count at the job fair.

It’s also a good time to review your notes on your next company interview. Remember, try to personalize each interview by showing you’ve done your homework. Very impressive.

Hand Out Those PEPs

Everybody gets one. In some cases, you’ll see a resume drop box at the front of the booth. Now, it may not be a company on your top 10 list, but who knows? You drop a resume in the box and get a call from your old college roommate – the HR Director. You’re in.

Work the Floor

Don’t be afraid to strike up discussions with other job seekers. You’ll be amazed at what you can learn, especially in a small industry. Who’s hiring, who’s firing, where ‘Old Lou’ is working now, which companies are there to hire instead of just fishing – meet the competition. You’ll learn a lot and get some networking in. Oh, and don’t forget to exchange business cards in case something comes up a month from now.

Follow Up for Success

Record the Day

When you finally get home after a long day, take a few moments to jot down some notes. To whom did you speak – name, title and company. What were your impressions of the company, the interviewer and the prospects for gainful employment?

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Even though you're beat and suffering brain fade, take 10 minutes to jot down some key notes while the adventure is still fresh in your mind.

Follow Up – Fast

If you promised a list of references to an interviewer, get them out, along with a nice note expressing your appreciation for the company's interest and the interviewer's time. Don't wait on these. In some cases, your response time is being measured. Be there.

Thank You Notes?

Tough call, here. If you think the interviewer went the extra mile, or you think there's genuine interest in hiring you, by all means send a thank-you note. However, follow the basic rules of business etiquette and practice:

- Use business stationery.
- Typed, not hand-written (even though hand-written is more personal).
- Reference your meeting at the job fair. Mention the specific name of the job fair. Some of these people do a couple of shows a month.
- Keep it short. Don't waste the reader's time on a rehash of what's contained in your PEP. Hello, thanks for your time, here's my card, yours truly, over and out.

Follow Up Telephone Calls?

If that was the arrangement, get on with it. However, if you haven't heard from a company in the first few days, chalk it up to plowing through 100 resumes. Give the human resources department a couple of weeks. If you haven't heard after two weeks, give them a call (through the main switchboard) to see if any decisions have been made.

Whatever you do, don't be a pest. It smacks of desperation and desperation doesn't sell, as you well know.

The Bang for Buck Equation

You get good bang for your job fair buck, so it's a resource you should use during any job search. The key is planning, preparation and implementation. You also pick up a couple of side benefits by following basic job fair protocol.

First, you'll feel more confident – ahead of the pack because you've done your fact gathering, developed a professional PEP and worked the floor with laser precision. Hey, you *are* good!

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Second, you've met more key people in marketing and sales. There are lots of stories of people who landed a job two or three years after meeting someone at a job fair. It could well happen to you. So, meet, network, interview, surveille and take notes. There's a lot to learn and a lot to see at any well-organized job fair.

Finally, if you can ace eight interviews in a day, than that single, follow-up interview will be a walk in the park. Think of job fairs as opportunities to practice your interviewing skills, your people skills, and as a showplace where you're the star.

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