

CAREER SERVICES *at Whitworth*

Impressing Recruiters at Job Fairs

To succeed, you can't just wander from booth to booth collecting information packets and company mugs. When hundreds of hiring managers converge, watch out. A recruiter's alert eyes and ears may be focused on you when you least expect.

"I'll never forget the time I was in the restroom and overheard three students critique my company, the jobs we had to offer, our booth setup, and even the suit I had on," says Patty Pate, a recruiter and project-control analyst at Westinghouse Hanford Corporation in Richland, Washington. "Luckily, they were complimentary, but their luck changed when they mentioned they hoped we wouldn't find out about an earlier academic suspension. Whoops, but thanks for the info, gals!"

It's not hard to foul up your candidacy one way or another at a job fair. Few students know how they're supposed to act at these events, especially since they may attend only one during their entire college careers. But with the employment market for new grads so tight, you can't afford to take any opportunity for personal contact with a hiring company lightly. If a job fair is coming up on your campus, the following advice will help you survive and thrive.

Don't Just Browse.

Once considered a low-pressure, low-cost way for students and employers to get to know each other, job fairs are becoming increasingly high stakes events. 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 before entering the booth area.

Companies once attended job fairs primarily to publicize themselves, so students could count on a certain degree of anonymity to protect them when they displayed blatant ignorance or committed horrendous faux pas. Now, however, the recruiter to whom you say, "I know I've heard of EDS. Tell me again what line of business your company is in exactly," will probably have your resume in hand and might circulate your name as an applicant to avoid.

You're most likely to impress recruiters if you decide ahead of time which companies to see. "Some students flounder around as if they're at a carnival," says John Blumberg, recruiting director for Arthur Anderson & Co. in Phoenix. "Do a little homework before you go so you can focus your efforts. Now is the time to plant seeds with the employer."

Once you've determined which companies to visit, imagine reversing roles with these recruiters, advises Mike Sinnett, a manager at the Denver branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. "Think of the things that you'd like to hear if you were on the other side of the table," he says. "Use those things to set yourself apart from others."

George Wood, advertising manager for General Motors' GMC Truck division in Pontiac, Mich., says students should introduce themselves, shake hands, then either thank the recruiter for coming, ask about his or her trip to the city or make some other type of small talk.

"I have a bad impression of the person who comes up and says, 'I'm not sure I want to work for your company, but what are your starting salaries?'" he says.

Pace Yourself.

To make it through what likely will be a long, grueling day, a well-stocked briefcase is important. Be sure to have the following items on hand: a stack of resumes, pens and paper for note taking, tissues, a small mirror and breath mints. Women should carry an extra pair of stockings in case of runs. To keep your energy up, bring along an inconspicuous, non-messy snack. Beware of keeping fruit in your briefcase, though, or you might end up handing out banana-scented resumes. Juice or a soft drink will help you fend off dry mouth.

When you snack, do it out of recruiters' sight and be careful not to spill. A candidate once dropped a can of Pepsi on Patty Pate's foot during a job fair. "This was a great opportunity for the student to show his sense of humor during an embarrassing situation," says Pate. "Unfortunately, he gave in to the embarrassment and I had to stop him from getting on his knees to wipe my feet."

When the opportunity arises (as when 30 anxious students are lined up at the Microsoft table), sit down and take a break. Standing in a crowd won't get you the personal contact you want anyway. If you feel compelled to be constantly active, use downtime to learn more about a company whose booth has no students in front.

If it's 9:30, this must be Merrill Lynch.

It's not always easy to keep track of who's who when you're meeting so many people in one day, but you don't have to resort to crib notes on the back of your hand. Instead, be sure to get a business card from every recruiter you meet. Immediately after each interview, jot down the time you met and a brief description of your conversation.

Later, send a written thank you to each recruiter you spoke with. Referring to your notes, personalize each letter by recalling a common interest or business matter you discussed.

Keep your foot out of your mouth.

Sincerity is as important as technical skills to employers. If you tell Johnson & Johnson how desperately you want to be a sales rep, then a half hour later tell Deloitte & Touche that your lifelong dream is to be an accountant, you're taking a big risk. During lulls in the action, recruiters from different companies often talk with each other about their days and compare notes on candidates they've met. Thus, any contradictory statements you've made may come back to haunt you. The best strategy is to seriously consider your career goals before arriving, then be sure to communicate them consistently to recruiters.

Go to extraordinary lengths.

Despite your best efforts, you may have been left off the interview list of your dream employer. In that case, is it worth offering the company's recruiter a ride to the airport, a tour of the city or a free lunch? No way, they say. After a long day with students, they're tired of happy talk. Similarly, recruiters don't appreciate being cornered in the bathroom by interviewees who want a little extra time to sell themselves. Don't try their patience; instead, get hiring authorities' business cards and write a note explaining that you were unable to meet (or talk for a sufficient length of time) at the job fair and would like to make other arrangements.

If you're determined to interact closely with recruiters, one effective way is to volunteer to help with the day's events. As you help them unload their cars, set up booth and get organized, you can casually discuss your background while impressing them with your spirit of altruism.

"Volunteering is the ideal thing to do," says George Sandoval, director of the career counseling and placement at the University of New Mexico. "The student becomes visible to the employer and also represents other people at the institution."

Check out the competition.

The other students swarming about are a valuable source of intelligence during job fairs. You can exchange information about the questions being asked, the types of jobs available and recruiters' interview styles at different companies. Two cautions, though, are in order. First, never say anything negative about a firm, since you never know who might hear you. Second, never rely completely on another student's opinion; always get your own information since only you know what's right for you. Anyway, a ruthless rival might intentionally mislead you about key facts.

If you pay attention, fellow job seekers also can help you improve your interview techniques. When you spot others who are connecting effectively with employers, try to learn from them. Look at their clothes. Watch their body language. Try to overhear their conversations. Then try copying their approach when you meet with hiring managers.

By the time the fair is over, you'll probably have a large stack of materials on different companies to organize, and an assortment of t-shirts, toys and other freebies bearing corporate logos. And if you heeded the tips above, you may leave with an attractive job offer to consider as well.

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By Mary Fachman

