Guide to Preparing for a Career Fair

Overview

Career and internship fairs provide students and alumni with an opportunity to meet employers from a wide variety of industries and receive first-hand information about organizations and available positions. Companies typically attend these events because of the large and diverse pool of talent present. Through networking and sharing of information the pre-screening process of candidates for their job and internship openings is streamlined and effective for time-sensitive hiring.

Expectations

Employers attending career fairs expect students and alumni to:
- Have knowledge of their organization
- Dress in professional attire
- Have the ability to answer questions
- Ask appropriate questions about their company or openings
- Follow-up after the fair

Students should expect companies to:
- Provide information about present openings and opportunities
- Supply instructions on how apply for internships and jobs
- Bring Human Resource representatives, Hiring Managers or event alumni to the fair

Preparation

Resume- if you do not have a resume already prepared, be sure to have one written and reviewed prior to attending a career fair. Some employers will collect resumes and some will refer you to their online application system. Have a resume that is clear, concise (one page is preferred), easy to review by a reader within a short amount of time. Be sure that you have enough copies to take to the fair with you.

Attire- Wear business professional attire for a career fair. It is better to err on the side of formal versus casual. http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/career-services/offering/guidelines-on-what-to-wear-for-the-interview.html

Research- Review information about the fair and the employers who are scheduled to attend. Many will have links to their websites, a list of positions available, and contact information.

Prepare Your Elevator Pitch- Planning and executing you pitch is vital, so take time to carefully prepare and practice your pitch before the fair. http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/career-services/offering/networking-tips.html

Questions- Develop specific questions you may have about each employer of interest based on your research. Questions may range from specifics about the organization to work tasks of typical positions.
Based on your research, determine what you need to learn about the employer to decide if you are interested. Remember, asking good questions shows genuine interest.

Sample Questions:

- Can you tell me, what are the characteristics of your most successful employees in this department?
- What types of training are provided for new employees?
- What is the hiring process for your new employees?
- Is there an application online that I need to complete in order to apply for this position?
- If I have additional questions, whom may I contact?

Plan Your Strategy - After reviewing the list of employers; develop a list of those you intend to visit by a priority order, especially if you have a limited amount of time at the fair. Start by visiting with employers mid-way on your priority list. When you feel more comfortable, visit your top priority employers. This will help you utilize your time efficiently and put your best food forward.

Network - Be prepared to talk about your career interest areas, strengths, educational and work background. Utilize your Elevator Pitch to begin your conversation.

At the Fair

- When you arrive (early, if possible), view the layout of the fair, noting the location of the employers you want to meet. Plan your strategy for visiting with your top employers, making the best use of your time.
- Be patient! Some employers will have a line of candidates waiting to visit them. You may visit with another employer and come back later or use this time to review the employer literature as well as your questions. While in line be sure to smile and not look frustrated because the representatives may pick up on any negative non-verbal communication.
- Listen. While waiting in line, you may have the opportunity to listen to employers. You may be able to hear what questions other candidates are asking, and the responses to these questions.
- Act professionally. Be courteous. Introduce yourself and use a firm handshake and genuine smile to begin the conversation. Do not interrupt others that are in conversation.
- Answer questions directly and concisely. The conversation should be two-sided, with both parties asking questions and providing information. You will have a limited amount of time with each employer.
- Ask well-thought out questions from the list you prepared. You may think of addition questions as you circulate through the fair.
- Take notes. You will be able to use these after the fair to assess your interest in certain organizations or compare organizations. Jot down career ad vice that the employer may provide you.
- Be positive. Even if an employer doesn’t sound like a future alternative for you, be gracious and thank them for their time.
• Collect business cards and company literature. You will be able to use these to do further research as well as to send an application or thank you note after the fair.
• Network. Keep an open mind while you take to employers, as they may be able to provide you with resources, ideas and contacts.

After the Fair

• Send a thank you note within two business days vis email, Linkedin or mail.
• If an employer has asked you to complete an application, send transcripts (or other materials) or contact them, be sure to do so in a timely fashion. Failure to follow-through will most likely eliminate you from the candidate pool.

Things to Keep in Mind

• You get only one chance to make a great first impression!
• Rarely, if ever, are employers going to extend an offer at a career fair. Do not expect it!
• Career fairs offer the opportunity to present yourself to potential employers, and the opportunity for you to interview them.

Things to Avoid

• Unprofessional/inappropriate attire.
• Answering your cellphone while inside the career fair.
• Not asking the employer any questions.
• Asking questions about salary.
• Lack of goals or career direction, preparation of questions, enthusiasm or interest in an employer.
• Only taking the freebies (swag) and walking away.
• Poor communication skills (eye contact, speech, interrupting others, weak handshake).
• Waiting until the end of the fair to arrive, i.e. not allowing enough time to fully participate in the fair.

For information contact Medill Career Services at 847-491-2049, medillcareerservices@northwestern.edu