



Navigating a Career Fair

Even in a high-tech age, with entire networks of strictly online friends and colleagues, career fairs and similar networking events offer a unique and valuable chance to identify opportunities, investigate organizations, network with others in your field, and land a new position. Navigating the whirlwind can be challenging, but a few tips can help you work the room like a pro.

BEFORE

If you walk into a career fair with nothing but a stack of résumés, you will likely be overwhelmed by the number of employers and candidates. In the days or weeks before you plan to attend a career fair, some thoughtful preparation can make all the difference for your success.



FIND OUT WHICH EMPLOYERS ARE ATTENDING

Career fairs typically post a list of employers attending. Review the list in advance and look up any organizations with which you are unfamiliar. This will also force you to consider what types of philosophical “deal breakers” may exist. It is important to be honest with yourself and prospective employers about your policy positions.



MAKE A TARGET LIST

Once you have investigated the organizations represented at the event, identify those you most want to learn more about. Try to determine the names of the people representing those organizations, what suitable openings they have available, and whether they will conduct actual interviews on site. If they do, it is critical to be ready and prepared.



REVISE YOUR RÉSUMÉ

If you know you are going to be visiting with representatives of an organization or industry in which you have a particular interest, take the time to customize your résumé to highlight specific abilities and accomplishments that will be relevant to them. This may mean highlighting your involvement with conservative policies or noting the ways your private-sector skills translate to match their organization.



PRACTICE YOUR PITCH

You should be able to clearly and quickly (in a minute or less) explain to the recruiters who you are, what type of position you are seeking, and why you'd be a great fit. Enlist an honest friend to help you practice. You want to sound sincere and natural. Remember, many conservative organizations seek to hire only those who share their mission, so give it some thought before you find yourself on the spot.

DURING

Successfully working a busy room over the course of a long day requires thoughtful organization. Have a plan of attack, focus on clear and concise verbal communication, and secure the contact information for the people you have just met.



DON'T WEIGH YOURSELF DOWN

Both men and women should bring printed résumés in a simple folder or portfolio that will also hold a pen and paper and business cards (if you have them.) You will need to be able to carry those items around all day without looking disorganized or messy while shaking hands in a crowded room.



DRESS FOR SUCCESS, BUT ALSO COMFORT

You will be spending a long day on your feet in a crowded room, so dress accordingly. Your attire should be sufficiently professional for the situation, but as cool and comfortable as professional attire allows. This is not the time for your highest heels or your warmest wool suit. In cold weather, check your coat at the coat-check, or consider leaving it at home.



WORK YOUR PLAN

When you arrive at a career fair, take a minute to check out the map or circle the room to get the lay of the land and identify where your target employers are located. Long lines to speak with recruiters can often form over the course of the day, so make a plan to get to your highest priority tables first. That said, if you are nervous, consider talking to some lower priority tables first to get warmed up.



SPEAK UP!

Career fairs are often noisy and crowded, so be sure to speak loudly and clearly when talking with recruiters. And don't forget: after you ask all of the insightful questions you have prepared in advance for your target organizations, remember to tell them about yourself, too. Leave recruiters with the impression that you want to work with them and also with enough information about you to make the case that you would be a great fit.



ASK FOR BUSINESS CARDS

If you leave with business cards from the representatives you have met, you will have contacts at the organizations with whom you have already spoken. That is a big first step, even if their organization is not hiring someone with your qualifications right now. If the representative is out of cards, write his or her name and email address down before you leave.

AFTER

Often overlooked, careful and considerate follow-up after a job-seeking event can make all the difference in helping you stand out from the crowd.



FOLLOW UP

You took business cards from all of the recruiters you met, right? Now use them. Email the recruiters to thank them for their time and remind them of your conversation. If the representatives you spoke with did not know much about the things most important to you, ask if they can connect you with someone else in the organization who might. Remember to be exceptionally courteous and respectful of the representative's time.



GET CONNECTED

If you do nothing else, connect on LinkedIn with the representatives you met. Don't let your preparation and time spent at the career fair go to waste, even if you did not meet your future boss this time. There is no time like the present to start building the professional network you need to achieve your goals. This is particularly true in the tight-knit world of conservative policy.

At the end of the day, “success” at a conservative career fair means leaving the best possible impression with the people you meet there. Employers attend career fairs to meet high-potential candidates, and your goal in every interaction is to leave them with the impression that you are just the person they have been looking for!