JOB FAIRS

By Bill Gaffney

Q: What is the best way to use job fairs in my search?

A: Let's first establish some who, what, etc. regarding job fairs. I will say I am not opposed to them and I think they can be used advantageously in a job search. Some of my opinions and thoughts might be a bit outdated since I haven't attended one in years.

Here are some points to consider:

1. Who is doing the job fair? Typically it is either a local media outlet like a newspaper, radio station, etc. or it is an organization that specializes in doing these events. Those are not necessarily bad things but it is important to understand the background, influencers, motives, etc.

2. The HR department much of the time is the people working the job fairs and doing any on-site interviewing that goes on. Remember who I always suggest you start with, the hiring manager. Much of the time you will not find these at job fairs. Also remember that one of the HR department's primary functions with hiring is to screen out and eliminate the bulk of applicants. A job fair will have thousands of these so that is what the HR department does at the fair as well.

3. You are typically one of hundreds visiting any of the booths. Chances of you creating a memorable lasting impression are very small.

4. Many of the job fairs are aimed primarily at less experienced or "lower level" applicants. An example: You will find AT&T at many of these. They are always hiring sales people. What they are focused on is the "less experienced" level sales positions. They are not generally targeted towards higher major to global account types that make good 6 figure incomes.

5. Most job fairs ask in advance for a copy of your resume. They then distribute these to all the participating companies.

So how can you use job fairs to your advantage? Here are some ideas:

- Do some homework up front to see which companies are at the job fair you might want to target in your search. If none of the companies would be ones you want to target don't waste your time by going.
- As with any networking opportunity more is not better. Your "success" is not based on how many booths you get to but the "value" of each booth you visit. This could be determined in several ways including strong contacts, more knowledge about the company, developing leads to contacts within those companies, etc.
- This **is** a networking event. It is not really a hiring event. Do you know anyone at your level that actually got hired at a job fair? Don't go with the idea of getting a job. Go with the idea of gathering information.
- Other attendees are there for the same reason you are, looking for a job. Make some new friends. Exchange personal information, including background, etc. This person is now a new network connection. Use them for support, encouragement, sharing ideas, techniques, etc. They don't have to do the same thing you do. In fact it would be better if they don't. That widens your network. **Remember**: Try to ask more questions about them than they do about you and let them brag on themselves. At the end of your conversation exchange business cards. Make little notes on the back to prompt you in the future who this person was.
- Remember this is informational so focus on gathering information. When you go to a booth don't do an immediate 45 second regurgitation of your background, don't ask if they have any jobs available (Why else would they be there?) and don't start by asking for names, suggestions, etc. As in the point above show interest in them first and think about how you could

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help them. Many times you might know someone who is exactly what they are looking for. Tell them you know someone and you will refer them. That will create a lasting, memorable impression.

- Instead of carrying a bunch of resumes have a one page (or less) informational (some people call them personal marketing flyer) sheet about you. This should include contact information, the last ten years of work experience, industry specific skills (not I know Office, Excel, etc.) you have developed and tons of accomplishments. **Do not** hand them to someone unless they ask. Leave the resume at home. If they really want one you can always e-mail it to them. Besides that way you won't be in that stack of several hundred.
- Dress professionally. This does not necessarily mean a suit. But I think it does require at least a nice pair of slacks, sport coat, business shirt and tie. If you don't already have them purchase a more expensive pair of slacks and sport coat. Don't buy them from the bargain section at Wal-Mart. Obviously the above was what the men should wear but women should get the idea from this.
- Turn off your cell phone and lose the Blue Tooth earpiece. You just aren't that important. I personally find it rude when I have a meeting with someone and they leave the headset on and/or answer their cell phone. Aren't I worth your total attention if I am giving you my time?
- Spend some time around the food area. At any event this is always the best place to meet people and it is much more relaxed there.

This should get your juices flowing and change some of your preconceived notions. Job fairs are about networking, not about getting hired. As with any networking event be selective. Many years ago I was taught as a salesperson to leave the brochures and sales cap in the car. I am there to gather information and help in any way I can. It is always better to give than to receive and generally much more rewarding.

Here's Wishing You Terrific Hunting,

Bill

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