

Network to Work Meeting

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RESOURCE DOCUMENT – *NETWORKING*

Successful Networking at a Career Fair

Networking is an important career development skill. In its simplest form, it involves having a “career conversation” with someone for the purpose of exploring careers or searching for a job. Networking also involves building, reinforcing and maintaining relationships with others to further your job-related goals. When done well, networking with your current or new contacts can help you to:

- **Explore careers and jobs** – When you talk to professionals in an informational interview or job fair setting, you can gather information about a job, career field, industry, or workplace so you can determine if it is a good fit for you.
- **Find a job** - When you are actively looking for jobs, use networking to market yourself. By talking to people about your qualifications, as well as the positions and employers of interest to you, you may hear of job leads and other resources that you wouldn't find elsewhere.

So, where do you find people to network with? All around you! You can network with family members, friends, colleagues, service providers, former co-workers, clients, social contacts, and professionals you meet at career fairs or other events. You can also use LinkedIn, the online professional networking website, to find professionals in your areas of interest.

While networking can and should happen in a variety of informal and formal settings on an ongoing basis, one of the best places for the job seeker or career transitioner to network is a career fair. Career fairs provide a great opportunity to learn about companies and what it’s like to work for them, while at the same time making a positive first impression. They offer a unique opportunity to make personal connections that are impossible when submitting a resume online.

There are several types of job and career fairs — from those scheduled for specific majors on college campuses to industry-specific events for seasoned professionals. But they all share a common theme: when approached optimally, a job fair is *the* place for job candidates to shine and make valuable connections.

Tips for Successful Career Fair Networking

Career fairs are not a sure fire way of getting hired, however, for someone who is looking to take the next step in their career, they can be very helpful. They allow you the opportunity to meet one on one with company representatives that could potentially be responsible for you getting hired. Therefore, in order to maximize the opportunities presented by a career fair, it is crucial to prepare in advance.

Advance Preparation -

To help you make the most effective use of your time at the fair, here is some critical advance work:

- **Find Out Who Will Be There**

Look—or ask—for a list of all the companies who will be attending prior to the event, and prioritize the ones you want to approach. Narrow in on the top five with whom you most want to connect. This way, if you run out of time to meet everyone, you'll at least be sure you've hit your top choices.

- **Map it Out**

Secure a map (usually available online) that shows the career fair layout so you can locate where these organizations' booths will be.

- **Do your research**

Go to the careers page on the websites of your companies of interest and find out which are hiring in your field. These are the companies you should be spending your time networking with. Knowing a little bit about these organizations in advance will allow you to ask deeper questions and to tailor your conversations specifically to each recruiter. You want to be able to say more than "So what does your company do?"

- **Practice your Introduction**

Hone your 30-second elevator speech designed to introduce yourself, who you are, and what you do. Practice it to make sure it sounds natural, clear and dynamic.

- **Pack your bags**

Pack a small bag or dark, plain folder with:

- At least 20 copies of your resume;
- A stack of business cards that include your name, email address, and phone number;
- A pen and paper for taking notes

Don't carry a bulky briefcase or handbag—you want to be able to easily make your way across the room, have your hands free for handshaking, and not look disheveled. Also, be sure the bag or folder also has room for any materials you pick up at the event.

At the Event -

- **Network, don't interview**

Attending a career fair usually will give you direct access to a company's recruiter, human resources representative, or hiring manager, who is usually the first point of contact in the interview process.

Your goal shouldn't be to try and get hired right on the spot. Instead, you want to introduce yourself to this person, tell them a little about your background and most importantly make sure to get their contact information. You want to look at being hired like building a house, it all starts with a strong foundation. The career fair is the opportunity to start that foundation.

Once you meet that person you can then follow up with a call or email with your information and why you would like to be considered for their opening. Treat this meeting as an opening to discussions around your background and not the interview that lands you the job.

- **Stand out**

A company representative at a job fair will see hundreds of potential candidates and it is easy for candidates to get lost in the crowd. You need to stand out in some way.

Standing out—in a positive way—is no easy task. When you're piled into a packed auditorium and competing with hundreds of other job seekers for just a few minutes of a recruiter's attention, it's crucial to show up prepared, ready to face the day, and knowing what it takes to distinguish yourself from the crowd. Whether it is dressing nicer than the standard dress code asks for or highlighting career honors and awards on your resume, do something that helps separate you from the crowd.

Speaking of how you dress, you want to dress for success – and comfort. As with any interview, it's important to dress professionally—but at a career fair, you want to be comfortable, too. Wear a lightweight outfit that won't get too hot, and check your coat or leave it behind. And make sure your shoes are extra comfortable—you might be on your feet for several hours!

- **Don't Be Shy**

As you approach each table, be friendly, be confident, and be prepared with something to say. Introduce yourself with a smile, eye contact, and a brief, firm handshake. Often, the recruiter will take the lead and ask you questions, but you should also have your elevator pitch ready. To really

use your time wisely, you should be able to concisely convey why you're interested in the particular company and how your skills or qualifications suit the position. You are there to learn AND you are there to impress, so make the most of your exchange with the HR staffers on the other side of the booth.

Here are some great questions you can ask:

- What types of strengths and experience do you look for in new hires?
- How would you describe the organizational culture?
- How long does the hiring process take and what does it consist of?
- What type of training or ongoing professional development does the organization provide?

You'll be asked questions too, so be prepared to speak about your strengths, experience, goals, and how and why you would bring so much value to the organization.

- **Make a Good First Impression**

A big part of why people are hired, right or wrong, is how well an interviewer believes the prospects will get along with the rest of the team. When engaging with company reps and fellow career fair attendees, be sure you come across as the warm, confident, energetic and likable person you are! That means stand tall, make the right amount of eye contact, have a firm handshake, and keep your cell phone tucked away.

But at the same time—don't go too fast! Job seekers have a tendency to speak quickly, which comes across as rushed or nervous. You want to speak slowly and with interest.

- **Get Your Resume in Their Hands**

One of the biggest mistakes job seekers make is not giving out their resume until the end of a conversation—at this point, the recruiter may have gotten interrupted or moved on to someone else. Instead, as you speak about yourself, hand your resume to the recruiter, and point out the places that substantiate what you're saying. This will draw her attention to your resume and make you stand out from the other faces at the table, too.

- **Give a Memorable Goodbye**

You want the person you're speaking with to know you're interested in his or her company, so be sure to ask about next steps. You should also offer to come by the recruiter's office for a longer conversation in person.

By all means, ask if you can connect with people you meet on LinkedIn. Then follow up with a personalized invitation that mentions something from your conversation with them. This serves

two purposes, first, it prevents your invite from getting overlooked, and second, you make a memorable impression.

When the conversation is wrapping up, make sure to thank the person you're speaking with for his or her time. Most importantly, request a business card, as you are unlikely to remember everyone's names at the end of the event. Plus, you'll want to have an email address so you can follow up.

Close with "the give." Instead of focusing on your agenda, needs, wants and requests, listen for the opportunity to give. The give could be a recommendation, the sharing of relevant information or resources, or even a tangible gift. Networking isn't really about you or your needs. Think about the memorable people you've met. What was it that made you remember them? They most likely put the focus on you. The best way to network is by making the other person feel special or important.

- **Be selective**

Don't be afraid of walking away if you realize you aren't the right candidate for a company. You should not feel like you need to be a match with every company in attendance. Be comfortable with acknowledging when you are not a fit, thanking the person for their time and walking away. Your time is valuable and there are companies out there that better match your needs.

- **Prepare for your Next Steps**

Before you leave the venue, make sure you have all of the business cards and contact information you need to connect with every single person you met there. Take the time to jot down some notes about particular points you discussed with these individuals so you can send a tailored, follow-up email to them that evening.

After the Event

- **Follow Up**

Whenever possible, send a follow up email that same day to everyone that you met with. Don't copy and paste, though - it's OK for your messages to be short, but you'll want to personalize them to each company and recruiter.

Within 24-48 hours of the career fair, send a thank you note to each person you met with, whether you're interested in the company or not. Even though they will have just received your email, reiterate your appreciation for their time with a note, and always be sure you include an offer that lets them know you are happy to be of help to them as well. Who knows—the next

time you go to one of these things, the recruiter you met representing an unimpressive company could be working for your dream employer!

If you indicate you will be connecting again with them the following week, be sure you do. Also, if you had a substantial connection with someone you met there, consider sending him or her a personalized LinkedIn connection request.

- **Take Action**

For the companies you are interested in, follow the recruiter's instructions about applying for a position. If you need to submit your resume online, do so within a few days of the event so that you're still fresh in the company's mind.

And if there's no position available right now of interest, ask the recruiter if you can come in for an informational interview. Getting even more face time with the company is always a good thing!

It's not always easy to stand out at a career fair, but if you arrive well prepared and organized, approach the tables politely and well-practiced, don't check your phone during the event, dress professionally, don't spend your whole time clinging to the friend or colleague you brought with you, and follow up the right way—you'll already be ahead of the pack.

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