

Plan Now for Career Fair Success

With the proper planning and approach, career fairs can provide the perfect format for your organization to begin building personal relationships with students who might become your future employees.

Following are eight best practices to use in your career fair planning and approach:

1. Make the most of your time on campus—Ensure that your time on campus is well spent by scheduling activities around the career fair, such as hosting faculty roundtables or dinners, visiting the career services office to discuss student trends and preferences and provide updates about your organization and industry, instructing a class or workshop for students, or speaking to a student organization.
2. Know your audience—Discussions with career services practitioners and faculty should yield information about student desires and preferences. Using this information, have your recruiters share both how your company can benefit the student and how the student can benefit the company. Be aware that each campus has a culture and characteristics unique to its student body. Customizing your approach to each campus could set your organization apart from your on-campus competitors in the eyes of the students there.
3. Pick the right people—Students want to interact with line of business representatives, not HR staff. Still, it's important to keep in mind that the behavior of career fair reps is as important as their knowledge about the company and career opportunities. Make sure that everyone who staffs the booth clearly understands that students extrapolate about your company culture from such cues as the friendliness and enthusiasm of your representatives. When selecting your team, identify those who have a passion for what they do and an interest in building relationships with students. Understand that you can't train an individual to be warm, personable, or interested. Also, be sure to have your organization's diverse range of culture, age, and gender reflected in the recruiters at your booth.
4. Enlist the help of campus advocates—Ask your interns who are back on campus, career services professionals, professors, and student organizations to spread the word about your organization. Have university alumni conduct a classroom talk for some of their former professors to apprise them of developments in the company and industry, and offer insight into your culture. Questions such as, "What do you like about your position?" and "What opportunities for growth have you had in the company?" are best answered by employees who have traveled the same career path the students are pursuing.
5. Prepare for the fair—Career fair teams should be assembled and oriented at least several weeks prior to the event. This gives team members time to prepare—not just by ingesting the information you give them about skill sets to look for, numbers, logistics, and more—but also if they want to coordinate plans to contact students ahead of time or visit faculty while on campus. Make sure recruiters and employees assisting at career fairs know which positions are available, which skills and qualifications the company seeks in candidates, and the company's hiring goals. Having specific positions to share creates deeper dialogue between candidates and recruiters.
6. Focus on meeting student needs—Too often, the emphasis on employer branding supersedes communicating with students about positions and company culture. Career fair attendees often leave the event without gathering much meaningful information. Because the primary reason that students attend career fairs is to learn about job opportunities, employers should focus their efforts on meeting those needs. Also, students expect to be treated with respect during

the event. This means there should be no cell phone calls by your recruiters while at the booth, and no blowing off students by sending them to your organization's website for information or to submit a resume. Get students' contact information so that you can continue the dialogue. Don't just recruit them, but ask their opinions, offer relevant advice, and more.

7. Make a break from the typical—Re-think every aspect of your approach: your booth, your message, and your participants. Make your organization memorable during the career fair. Offer a five-minute massage to students who are obviously stressed out by the job-search process or offer a \$15 gift card for any student who comes to your booth wearing your company's logo. Instead of offering giveaways, ask students to write down their favorite charity and conduct a drawing at regular intervals throughout the fair and announce the winning charity. Then send a donation to their charity in their name and, of course, send them an acknowledgement.
8. Be prepared for the follow up then do so—Determine your follow-up process (who is doing what and when) before the career fair. Then, while the impression is still fresh, categorize your candidates into groups as the career fair ends: best matches, possible matches, and no matches (or some form of this grouping). Although every candidate should be viewed as a potential customer or future client, differentiate your follow up according to the groupings. During the career fair, your recruiters should schedule interviews with the candidates they see as potential matches for open positions and meet with them on campus the next day. Send a "thank you" e-mail to everyone else that stopped by your booth and left their resumes. You've got a great opportunity to reinforce a first impression.

Courtesy of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.