

## **JOB FAIR TECHNIQUES**

**by Patrick J. Jolly**

"I'm really excited about the chances of working for United," said the attendee at a recent job fair.

Unfortunately, he said that at the end of an interview with Mark Powers, a human resources recruiter who was at the fair representing Southwest Airlines as a part of their "People Department". Wearing a Southwest Airlines name tag. Standing in front of a very large banner proclaiming "Southwest Airlines".

Attention to detail pays off if you plan to attend a job fair!

There are advantages and disadvantages to job fairs. A job fair lets you meet a large number of potential employers in a very short time. You have the opportunity to get some interviewing practice with a lot of different types of people. It's also a great place to conduct some basic research and to network with others.

Companies represented at job fairs often have a number of different type of jobs to fill. Sometimes the jobs require skills you possess, even if your military specialty is in an entirely different field. Recently, Michelle Cohen, a Human Resources specialist with Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) approached the Transition Assistance Center at Naval Air Station Alameda looking for air traffic controllers who were leaving the military. Now BART is a light rail commuter...no airplanes. But, the people who control the trains use the same management, routing and prioritizing skills as do the air traffic controllers. It really pays to check out each employer, even if you think they won't need your rate or military occupational specialty (MOS).

I think the payoff is somewhat greater for military people attending job fairs. For one thing, many military people have little experience looking for civilian jobs, and a job fair is a low stress means of checking out the job market. Also, many people leave the

military unsure of what they want to do next, and a job fair lets them look at a broad spectrum of career opportunities. Finally, it gives one the chance to see how others present themselves in an employment interview. You can learn good techniques and also benefit from other's mistakes. (Besides, where else can you get the chance to step in for an interview right after someone managed to look like a complete idiot!)

On the down side, it's often a zoo, particularly at larger job fairs, with hundreds or even thousands of others competing with you for a few minutes with a company representative. It is very often noisy, very distracting, and almost impossible to make a good lasting impression. (They will remember if you were the one with mustard running down your shirt!) But all in all, it's probably well worth your time and effort.

Job fairs are very often specialized, perhaps focusing strictly on computer technology, medical equipment operation and/or repair or some aspect of the food service industry. If you aren't in the appropriate field, you would probably be wasting your time attending a specialized fair. On the other hand, many job fairs are actually held on a military installation. I most strongly recommend attending these; after all, the employers are targeting their search toward military people leaving the service.

But be aware...disaster lurks for the unwary. Picture this:

You're in a room with more than one hundred companies competing for potential job applicants. This is good for you. After all, Ed McMahon hasn't called to give you ten million dollars, and that lotto ticket in your pocket didn't let you to call in rich, either. On top of everything else, you just finished your tour in the military and Uncle Bob ain't hiring. You gotta get a job, so there you are, at a job fair.

The booths are stacked high with each organization's literature. A small television/video player may show how wonderful life is at their company. Some may even have free canvas bags, combs, shoeshine kits and other goodies emblazoned with their logos.

Imagine further that their goal is to persuade you to apply for work with their organization. They have job openings, probably many of them, and you're looking for work! What a chance!

Now imagine all those prospective employers looking over your shoulder at the job applicant behind you, a lady or gentleman dressed professionally, waiting patiently for you to finish blowing your opportunities. Waiting for you to step aside and let them get the job you want.

Maybe this wasn't the best day for you to wear cut-offs!

Fact is, this happens all too often. However, with an understanding of the basics of job fair strategies, you can avoid the pitfalls and stand out above the others as a job candidate any company would want to interview.

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Meeting the company representative at a job fair often constitutes the initial, or screening interview. This is where the company gets their first impression of an applicant, perhaps even when they decide whether a formal job interview is in order.

The person representing the company is very likely part of the human resource or personnel office. In other words, this may very well be the person who conducts the job interview at the company.

"You have to know what they (the company) do. You have to find out what kind of person they're looking for, to see if you are a match. You can't sell the product (yourself) if you don't know the customer," says Mike O'Boyle, a retired Master Chief Navy Corpsman working for the California Department of Veterans Affairs.

The company has invested a great deal in their appearance at a job fair. They may pay upwards of two to three thousand dollars just to set up a table, and they've spent considerable time and money in preparation, travel and attendance. They may have put out big bucks for advertisement in the form of pens, coffee cups and bumper stickers, and brochures aren't cheap, either!

In spite of this, people arrive at job fairs wearing shorts or cut-offs and tee shirts, maybe even a ball cap proclaiming "I'd rather be fishing". People show up without a pen and a pad of paper to jot down names, addresses and phone numbers. People show up without a resume, and more often than not, an unclear concept of what kind of work they want. They sometimes are even unable to articulate what skills and attributes they have to offer.

In short, they come totally unprepared for the event.

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Preparation. This is the key to success at a job fair. Combine preparation with attention to detail and you have an unbeatable combination.

To begin with, find out in advance which companies will be at a job fair by checking with the event sponsor or coordinator. Then research those companies that interest you. What is the company's profile? Are they economically sound? What is their product? Are they expanding in a new field or location? What is their reputation, both professionally and in the community? This information will provide you with much material for questions and comments.

Prepare a master list of companies you will visit and make a brief fact sheet on each company. The fact sheet can include physical information on the company (i.e., location, number of employees, financial outlook), special interest items you may have uncovered, such as community involvement, and a list of questions you may have for them. Try to focus your questions on professional topics ("what is a typical workday like?" rather than "How much vacation time do you offer?").

Before you leave for the job fair, prepare a briefcase or portfolio with a few essential items. In addition to your list of companies and company fact sheets, you'll need:

-- Four pens - two blue and two black, in case they should want you to fill out an application at the fair. You'll want the different colors because some applications specify

what color to use; and you'll need two each because Murphy's Law dictates one pen will run out of ink.

-- A pad of lined paper to jot down notes and appointments. A pad of paper is easier to control than several sheets of loose paper and looks more professional than writing your notes on the laundry receipt you have in your pocket.

-- Sufficient copies of your resume for each employer of interest. If your resume is on computer, consider "personalizing" resumes by including individual company names in the job objective ("An administrative position with XYZ Corporation") and targeting your information to their specific needs. Use their job titles whenever possible. If you do this, use a paper clip to keep individual resumes with the company fact sheets you've prepared. Be sure to have a number of non-personalized resumes in case there are companies you didn't expect at the job fair. Be careful to not give Sprint a resume detailing your qualifications to work for MCI!

Don Seeman, recruiting for HMT Technology at a recent job fair in Alameda, CA, noted; "Many of the applicants did not even have a resume! They weren't even sure when they were available. Why should I consider them?"

-- A master application form with complete information on previous jobs, schools and references including dates, addresses and phone numbers. This will prevent leaving blank spaces on an application. With references, be absolutely certain to gain prior permission. Never embarrass your references, and quite possibly yourself, by forgetting to ask if you can refer prospective employers to them!

-- Samples of your work, if possible. (Photographers can do this; tank drivers probably cannot.)

Next check your appearance. Are you dressed for success or are you dressed for the beach? The successful dresser is well groomed, with all articles of clothing matching or complimenting for a professional appearance. For the gentlemen, a sport coat and tie is a minimum requirement -- a suit is better. Ladies are also advised to wear a suit;

a dress or pants just aren't formal enough. Again, attention to detail pays off. Make sure the shoes are shined and the clothes in good condition. Be very conservative in jewelry and fragrances. Do not wear a lapel pin showing an aircraft designed by Boeing if McDonnell Douglas representatives might also be there.

Michelle Cohen, a human resources representative with Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) isn't always impressed with many of the attendee's attire: "I'd say it's 50-50. Half the people going to the job fair don't look like they are looking for a job. This is an interview, and they're not dressed appropriately."

When going to a job fair, you must be totally aware of the first impression you are about to provide. Remember, you're about to conduct a job interview.

If this preparation seems excessive, consider the impression it will leave with a prospective employer. It does involve extra work. It also pays off.

Once at the job fair, make your rounds efficiently. Rather than waiting in line at a crowded table, check your master list and start with tables that are currently empty or have the shortest lines. Quickly review your fact sheet, and keep it available. Don't hesitate to refer to this sheet during your visit; the employer will be impressed with the homework you've done. Be sure to cross off each company from your master list as you finish at their table.

"There are groups of employers...twidgets, twidgets, twidgets, cops, cops, etc.," according to Mike O'Boyle. O'Boyle has been to a number of job fairs since retiring from the Navy in 1994. "Working the groups keeps a good routine going, rather than shifting back and forth in job types.

"I've found you need to take the time to translate what you did. In addition to resumes, I bring background data sheets explaining, in civilian terms, what I did. They don't understand LPO or OIC. I have to be able to tell them a master chief is a combination team builder, pastor and medical advisor."

As you approach the table, are you smiling confidently or do you look like a scared rabbit? Check your posture. (Mom was right...stand up straight!) If the company representatives are busy with another applicant, wait patiently. Don't tap your feet, drum your fingers or fidget, and never interrupt. Wait your turn. Don't chew gum, and for goodness sake, don't flirt with others in line or at the tables. This is, however, an excellent opportunity to network with others. Browse through the company's literature. Read the job postings, and make sure you qualify!

Michelle Cohen (BART): "If we say a bachelor's degree, we don't mean 110 credits. Many applicants want the great salaries and don't even look at the qualifications. They blow the interview because they didn't read the posting to see the minimum requirements. Also, even if they are qualified, if they don't complete the application entirely, they may be rejected."

Introduce yourself properly when it's your turn ("Good morning, I'm Pat Jolly") and explain your presence ("I've used your product for years and would be very interested in seeing if I might fit into your team.") Listen to what they have to say, without interrupting. If appropriate, take notes.

Use the questions you prepared, both to gain information and to let them know you've done your homework. Get first hand information about the company. Not only will this help you decide if this is a company you wish to work for, but it will give you powerful information to use during a formal job interview.

"The thing I like about job fairs is the employers attitudes...they're more relaxed and easier to talk to," according to Sam Cajudo, a Navy Counselor Chief who recently attended a civilian job fair. "I've been given great material, and many of the representatives are quite willing to refer me to other companies, sometimes even competitors, where they think I'd be a good fit. I always listen completely, giving them my full attention...you wouldn't believe how rude some of the attendees are, sometimes even wondering away while the company representative is still talking."

When the conversation is finished, find out how to get a formal job interview if you're still interested in the company. If possible, get the name of the person you will interview with. If you've hit it off well with the representative, you can even ask for suggestions on how to best present your qualifications. If the company doesn't have openings in your specialty, the representative might know someone else who could help you. It doesn't hurt to ask.

As you leave, thank the representative for his or her time and information. Be sure you have their name, address and phone number. Now take a minute to jot down some notes about what just took place. You'll be talking to perhaps dozens of potential employers and cannot possibly remember every conversation.

Once you've left the job fair, take the time to drop a short thank-you note to each person with whom you've talked. If possible, mention something you've discussed that you feel they will remember. This is a step virtually every attendee will leave off. If you do it, they will remember you out of the dozens, or even hundreds of people they interviewed during the job fair. People remember nice people! If they plan to interview only a few applicants, this step could put you in front of the competition. When they receive your letter, they will try hard to figure out who you are, and that will help them remember you in the long haul, maybe even six months down the road when they finally call you in for an interview.

Remember, your competition is fierce. Details such as the thank-you note will pay great dividends.

After the job fair is over, the representatives will finally get to go home. That may be in an entirely different state, so it may be a few days before they get back to their office and begin reviewing all the applications and resumes they've received. If they have an immediate need for the qualifications you presented, they will probably be in touch within a few weeks. If not, it may be months, if ever, before you hear from them.

Be sure to keep the notes you made after each conversations at a job fair for a minimum of six months. They can be worth their weight in gold.

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Job fairs are an efficient means of initiating contact with a large number of potential employers. If you treat it as a professional endeavor, preparing and executing it in a professional manner, you will very likely have a successful and possibly even enjoyable time.

Remember the basics:

- ◆ First impressions are important and are also a one-time opportunity;
- ◆ Preparation pays off;
- ◆ Every part of the job search, including job fairs, can be considered a form of an employment test;
- ◆ Every contact with any employee of the company to which you are applying can be considered an interview; and,
- ◆ People remember nice people.

Oh, one other thing... leave the cutoffs, straw hat and sandals at home.

THE END