

Student Expectations Of Employers At Job Fairs

Characteristics and behavior of employer representatives are key to attracting college job seekers.

by Mark V. Roehling and Marcie A. Cavanaugh

Among employers vying for college candidates, job fairs continue to be an effective recruiting method.¹ The opportunity to meet face-to-face with prospective hires clearly appeals to many employers, but therein lies in the challenge. What is the key to creating a positive first and, perhaps, lasting impression on college job seekers? Do characteristics such as the age, gender, or race of employer representatives give them credibility in the eyes of students? Are there specific behaviors that the representatives should demonstrate or downplay? What kinds of displays are likely to draw students attention?

To identify effective employer practices at job fairs, the authors polled students and career services practitioners at two diverse campuses, a large Midwestern public university and a large Northeastern private university. The students were either conducting a job search, or planning to start one within the next 12 months. In addition, they had attended at least one job fair in the preceding eight months.

Structure of the Study

Based on input from a focus group of recent job fair attendees, interviews with career services practitioners, and a review of the literature on the topic of job fairs, the authors developed a survey for the first phase of the two-part study. The survey polled 71 students and seven career services professionals about five aspects of employer practices at job fairs, including:

- Characteristics of employer representatives, e.g., gender and race,
- Specific behaviors of representatives,
- Displays,
- Printed materials with information about the employer, e.g. recruiting brochures, and
- Giveaways.

After completing the survey, the student respondents discussed their responses in several focus groups. There was almost complete convergence in the examples of effective and ineffective job fair practices identified by the participants. The authors used the examples they provided to formulate questions for a subsequent ratings survey, one that could be distributed more broadly and would yield more precise, quantitative data. Although the results of the first phase of the study are not reported separately, comments and insights from that phase are presented to supplement the data generated in the second phase.

The ratings survey was composed primarily of questions on employer practices that could be ranked on a five-point scale. The survey also included multiple choice questions about specific employer practices and student preferences. The survey was distributed to 141 students, including the 71 who participated in the first phase of the study, and yielded a 100 percent response rate. Of the respondents, more than half (64 percent) were female and 89 percent were business-related majors.

Outcomes and Implications

The survey findings reveal student perspectives on employer practices at job fairs, from the nature and number of staff assigned to exhibits to the set-up of the exhibits themselves. The following results are summarized by subject and quantified in Figures 1 through 5.

Characteristics of Employer Representatives

Respondents considered it essential for employer representatives to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic. (See Figure 1.) Coincidentally, a recent study of employer expectations of students at job fairs found that employers value the same qualities in college job seekers.²

Overall, diversity in the race and gender of employer representatives also was rated important in the present study. However, the ratings pattern suggests that diversity is more important to subgroups within the larger respondent group. On a scale of 1 to 5, where

1 is not at all important and 5 is very important, females rated having male and female representatives significantly more important than males (females—3.3, males—2.6). Similarly, minority students rated having racially diverse employer representatives significantly more important than whites (nonwhites—3.9, whites—2.8). These findings confirm the effectiveness of including women and minorities in the recruiting team, particularly if a recruiting goal is diversity in the applicant pool. Finally, 67 percent of the respondents thought it important for representatives to be close in age to students.

Behaviors of Employer Representatives

The respondents gave high marks to employer representatives who demonstrate a genuine interest in student job seekers. They also offered examples of exemplary behavior, including taking the initiative to engage students in conversation as they approach the display, looking over students' resumes before setting them aside, and giving students a business card and inviting them to call with any questions. (See Figure 2.) On the other hand, respondents held unfavorable views of representatives who simply sit behind a table at a display or carry on a conversation with other representatives rather than engaging students. To achieve better outcomes from their participation in job fairs, employers should address these key behaviors when they select and train representatives.

As for how employer representatives should dress for the occasion, respondents frowned on casual clothes unless that is typical attire in the employer's work environment. (See Figure 3.) Interestingly enough, the aforementioned study of employer expectations of students found that the vast majority of employers expect students to dress professionally or in business casual attire at a job fair. In the present study, most respondents (59 percent) also preferred that representatives of an employer wear the same style of clothing, i.e., professional, business casual, or casual, not a combination of styles.

Displays

What makes for an effective job fair display? According to the respondents, a display should prominently feature the employer's name, list available positions, and look professional. (See Figure 4.) Somewhat surprisingly, the vast majority of respondents (91 percent) indicated it was "important" to "very important" for the display to include the employer's mission statement. (During informal visits to recent job fairs, the authors found that few exhibits include this information.) Beyond a professional-looking exhibit with pictures of the employer's products and work environment, respondents were receptive to a variety of displays. However, one thing is clear from

Figure 1

What Students Expect of Employers at Job Fairs

Student Expectation	Average Rating
Employer representatives who are knowledgeable about the organization and available positions	4.8
Information about available positions	4.7
Employer representatives who are friendly and enthusiastic	4.7
Information about the qualifications needed for available positions	4.7
Information about the employer's hiring process, e.g., how interviews are set up	4.3
Information about typical career paths	4.3
Information about the employer's products or services	4.3
Written materials about the employer that students can take with them, e.g., recruiting brochures	4.2
Information about employer locations and branches	4.2
Sufficient personnel to avoid lines or backups at the employer's display	4.0
Information about the employer's culture	3.9
Information about training available to employees	3.9
Information about starting salaries	3.7
Information about the employer's past and projected growth	3.7
Information about the benefits offered	3.5
Presence of recently hired and senior staff	3.5
Presence of racially diverse employer representatives	3.1
Information regarding the employer's web site	3.1
Presence of both male and female employer representatives	3.0
Presence of employer representatives close to students' age	3.0
Information about employer's primary competitors	2.8
Giveaways	2.2
Snacks	1.8

(On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1=not at all important and 5=very important)

Figure 2

Behaviors of Employer Representatives	
Characteristic	Average Rating
Shows interest in student's resume before setting it aside	4.8
Smiles at student	4.7
Gives student a business card and invites him/her to call with any questions	4.6
Initiates contact with student, e.g., greets student as he/she approaches	4.6
Reaches out to shake student's hand	4.5
Asks student questions about him-/herself	4.4
Stands in front of display	4.0
Points out how employer is better than its competitors	3.2
Carries on conversations with other employer representatives	2.6
Sits behind display/exhibit	1.9

(On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1=not at all effective and 5=very effective)

Figure 3

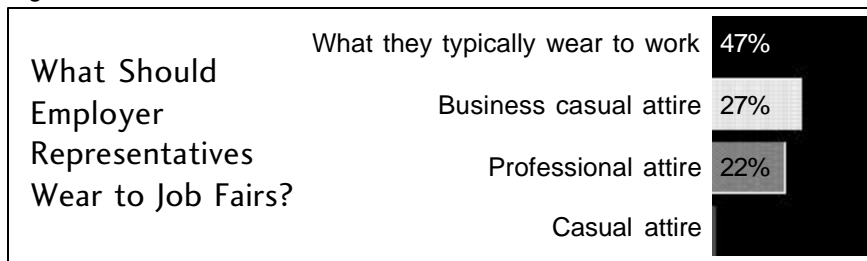


Figure 4

Features of Job Fair Displays	
Feature	Average Rating
Prominently highlights the employer's name	4.4
Is not left unattended at any time during the fair	4.3
Lists currently available positions	4.0
Is very professional in appearance	4.0
Includes the employer's mission statement	3.5
Features pictures of the employer's products	3.4
Features pictures of the employer's work environment	3.2
Is colorful	3.2
Features pictures of employees	2.6

(On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1=not at all important and 5=very important)

the feedback of students and career services practitioners: Employer representatives who do not have any kind of display but merely sit at a table can expect to be among the loneliest people at the job fair.

The respondents also concurred that employers should arrange to have an adequate number of representatives on hand, specifically to staff exhibits during lunch or other breaks. In fact, 78.5 percent preferred that employers send three representatives to job fairs. The results suggest that employers who assign several representatives to job fairs can demonstrate diversity in their work force, reduce lines at exhibits, and ensure that exhibits are never left unattended.

Recruiting Literature

Eighty-six percent of the respondents considered it "important" or "very important" for employers to have recruiting brochures or other handouts available to job seekers. The findings of this study and previous research also suggest that students prefer print materials that look professional and include descriptions of available positions and the qualifications students need to be eligible for consideration. (For more information on the subject, see the Fall 1999 *Journal of Career Planning & Employment*.³)


Giveaways and Snacks

Giveaways held little appeal for most of the respondents. Focus group participants in the first phase of the study suggested that giveaways should be provided only if they are likely to be of value to the student job seekers. Employers considering a giveaway should ask themselves this question: Is this the kind of thing that job seekers might otherwise purchase for themselves? Giveaways identified as being of value included high-quality pens, prepaid calling cards, company products, mousepads, and mugs. Items considered "cheap" and a poor reflection on employers included inexpensive pens, plastic key chains, and other small plastic items of dubious use. In addition to providing something of

value, employers should include specific follow-up contact information (phone number and/or web address) on the giveaway.

Whether employers provide snacks for students at job fairs also was widely viewed as unimportant. Focus group discussions revealed that while a few student job seekers make a point of systematically loading up on snacks for later consumption, many were uncomfortable about snacking while seeking to impress employer representatives.

Conclusions

Given the findings of the study, employers can take a number of steps to derive the most benefits from a job fair. (See Figure 5.) Employers who act on the recommendations of respondents can expect to attract more students to their exhibits and, ultimately, their organizations. 

Endnotes

¹National Association of Colleges and Employers. *Job Outlook 2000*, November 1999.

²Palomares, A. "Employer Expectations of Students at Job Fairs." *Journal of Career Planning & Employment*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2000) pp. 20-23.

³Roehling, M.V. and Winters, D. "The Elements of Effective Recruiting Brochures." *Journal of Career Planning & Employment*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (1999) pp. 57-64.

Figure 5

Job Fair Dos and Don'ts For Employers

Employers should:

- ❖ **Assign three representatives who:**
 - Are knowledgeable about the company and available positions.
 - Are friendly and enthusiastic.
 - Reflect the diversity of the target applicants.
 - Demonstrate a personal interest in job seekers, e.g., ask questions about their career interests.
- ❖ **Design a professional-looking display that prominently features employer's name**
- ❖ **Post available openings on display**
- ❖ **Provide professional-appearing recruiting materials that include:**
 - Detailed information about available positions.
 - Qualifications needed for available positions.
 - Information about training and career paths.
 - A description of the company's hiring process, e.g., how interviews are set up.
- ❖ **Follow up with job-seeker contacts after the job fair, even if they are not viewed as desirable applicants.**

Employers should ensure that their representatives do not:

- ❖ **Leave display unattended at any time during the scheduled job fair hours.**
- ❖ **Sit behind a table at the display.**
- ❖ **Carry on conversations with other representatives if job seekers are in the vicinity.**
- ❖ **Dress casually unless they typically dress casually at work.**
- ❖ **Provide cheap, unusable giveaways.**
- ❖ **Run out of recruiting materials.**

Mark V. Roehling is an assistant professor of management at the Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University. He has previous experience as a HRM practitioner and an attorney in employment law. His research has appeared in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*. Roehling received his Ph.D. in human resource management from Michigan State University and his law degree from the University of Michigan.

Marcie A. Cavanaugh is an assistant professor of human resource studies in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University. She has published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, and *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. She received her Ph.D. in human resources and industrial relations from the Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota.

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