

Making the Most of a Career Fair

Seattle Pacific University Career Development Center

The first experience with a career fair can be overwhelming. It's important to prepare!

- **Decide what you want to get out of a career fair.**

Do you want to learn about specific employers, explore your career options, or research the demand for your field or your skills? Do you want to make a one-on-one contact with someone in a specific company? Do you want to practice your interviewing skills in an informal situation? Do you want to apply directly for job or internship openings? All this and more can be accomplished at a career fair!

- **What to expect.**

Each February, the Career Development Center (CDC) hosts a Job/Internship Fair in Upper Gwinn. UW and Seattle U also sponsor Career Fairs that are open to SPU students. Up to 100 organizations may be represented. When you enter the room, you will see company representatives standing or sitting at tables arranged in rows. There may be several hundred career fair attendees circulating among these employers. Without a plan for navigating the fair, it is easy to become overwhelmed or distracted and leave the fair without talking to the employer you most want to meet. To get the most out of a career fair, it is very important to research in advance who will be there. (NACE study: 13% of employers formally interview students and make job offers at career fairs.)

- **Who will be there? How to research employers.**

The best source of information about the organization that will be at the fair is the CDC's website: www.spu.edu/cdc. You can find additional information on researching companies and industries once you get to the website. Click on "Students" on the menu above and scroll over and click on "Jobs". From there, select "Company Research" to access sites for learning more about companies. Particularly useful are the following sites: careerbeam.com and hoovers.com. (NACE: 38% of employers expect attendees to have knowledge of their company or organization.)

- **Develop a concise one-page resume appropriate for a career fair.**

Include the following: major(s), degree(s); expected graduation date; GPA, if it is strong; work-related and volunteer experiences; course projects; outside activities that demonstrate broad interests, leadership and communication skills; computer skills and foreign language fluency. Go to www.spu.edu/resume for guidelines on how to write a resume, samples and links to additional resources. Once you have a draft, you may have it reviewed by making an appointment with a Career Counselor, or by coming to a Walk-in Appointment (15 minute appointments with a Counselor are available every Monday through Thursday on a first-come/first-served basis from 2:00-4:00 PM).

- **What to wear.**

To make the best impression, dress as you would for an interview in appropriate business attire. If it is not possible or practical to wear a business suit, the next best option is to wear business casual clothing. (NACE: 88% of employers expect business casual or better). Remember, a career fair is a "first impression" situation and you will be meeting employers that follow a range of dress codes. Whatever you wear, make sure your clothes are clean and well-pressed.

- **What to bring.**

Bring a minimum of thirty copies of your resume (NACE: 87% of employers expect one). Carry a portfolio or business notebook to hold resumes and a notepad to jot down information and questions you would like to ask recruiters. Plan where you will put company literature and the business cards you will collect at the fair.

- **Plan a strategy.**

Before you enter the fair, pick up a packet with employer descriptions and a map of the layout of the employer booths. By studying the map, you will be able to tell where each organization is located. Take a few minutes to become familiar with the layout and mark the location of the employers that interest you. Target and prioritize specific companies. Identify 5 – 7 companies of greatest interest to you. Plan to talk first with lower priority companies on the list so you can rehearse your presentation before talking with your top priority companies.

Typically you will spend only 3 – 7 minutes with each employer. To make the most of the career fair you will need to approach the employer, introduce yourself, and discuss your strengths and how they match the employer's needs. To communicate all this information in a short amount of time, preparation AND practice is essential! Practice with a friend or in front of a mirror until you feel comfortable. It is important to appear confident and enthusiastic.

- **Prepare and practice a brief (30-60 second) introduction to use when meeting with company representatives.**

Be direct. Introduce yourself with a firm handshake and a smile. Give your name and tell where and what you are studying. Mention the types of opportunities in which you are interested and describe the skills and experiences you would bring to the position. If given more time, ask questions about the company and career opportunities to further underscore your interest. Do not apologize for lack of experience; rather mention how your academic studies and interests apply to the opportunities the employer has available. Answer questions clearly and concisely. Have your resume available and offer a copy to the representative. This meeting creates a crucial first impression; making a good impression requires preparation and practice! (You may want to schedule a Mock Interview with a counselor in the CDC (see <http://www.spu.edu/depts/cdc/students/gethired/interviewing.asp>).

- **Follow-up after the fair.**

Ask the employer representative for a business card and inquire about the best way to follow-up on your interest in their company. After the career fair, you will want to write a short thank-you letter to each employer with whom you spoke, thanking them for their time and reiterating your interest in their opportunities. Send another more targeted copy of your resume with the thank-you note! Most employers will respond with interview requests within two weeks. After six weeks, only six percent may respond (NACE).

- **Be yourself and remember to smile!**

Adapted from the University of Washington Center for Career Services

Career Fair Introduction

Sample Introduction

“Hello, I’m Tara Smith and I am a junior majoring in Computer Science interested in an internship. My background includes coding and software development using several programming languages such as C/C++ and Java, and effective leadership and communication skills. After researching your company, I am excited about what you are doing relating to embedded systems development. Would you tell me more about opportunities in this area with your company?”

Other Questions:

- What is the hiring process for your company in my area of interest?
- What is it like to work for your company?
- How might I learn more about what your company is doing currently?
- What is the opportunity for your company for internships?...advancement?... growth?
- What sets your company apart from others in the industry?
- What strengths, education, and experience are needed to qualify for entry level software engineering positions?
- How might I make myself a stronger candidate?
- How do you decide to choose one candidate over another?
- Is there someone in your company I may contact who can tell me more about this particular area of work?

