

JOB SEARCH

Job Fairs Reach the Senior Ranks

Should senior executives attend job fairs as part of their job-search plan? The answer is yes, but not for the reasons you may think.

By Kevin Fogarty



“JOB FAIR” SOUNDS LIKE such a quaint term. Nostalgic, but in the way that’s only good if you remember coming away from one with an internship or entry-level gig that would impress your buds on campus.

Mid-career, with a few jobs behind you and a justifiable need for the kind of salary that doesn’t show up at “job fairs” too often, the whole thing seems more pointless than nostalgic.

But the job-fair concept is moving upstream, recruiters told TheLadders. Seventy percent of recruiters polled by the Society for Human Resource Management said they attend career fairs. Furthermore, the economy is pushing organizations that operate those job fairs to include jobs more appropriate to mid- and senior-level executives, recruiters said. The events now serve much the same purpose as industry-association

meetings and other good networking events.

Should you attend job fairs as part of your job-search plan? The answer is yes, said recruiters, but not for the reason you think. Don’t expect to walk away from a job fair with a job or even a good recruiter contact. Instead, job fairs provide mid- and senior-level executives an opportunity to network, polish their interview skills and dig for job leads.



Job Fairs: More Than Kid’s Stuff

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

DOES THE PROSPECT of attending a job fair remind you of your first junior high-school dance — both in terms of the awkwardness and the average age of the participants?

Relax a little! While old-school job fairs were most often casting calls for recent college grads, plenty of events nowadays are tailored to fit grownup career goals.

Recruiters and job seekers talked to Kevin Fogarty about different types of career events available to senior talent, ranging from nonprofit local gatherings to pricey professional venues. Bottom line: While these events aren’t a magic bullet to bag your dream job, they can be a powerful resource for polishing your personal brand, learning about opportunities and making key contacts who can help you on the hunt.

And for folks who are exploring their options while still in their current positions, “It’s a safe environment to go job-seeking,” career coach Irene Marshall told Fogarty. “Even if you’re already employed, it’s an acceptable way to research the job market.”

“It’s a good tool for meeting people, making contacts, learning what’s going on. Especially in this economy, that’s the most important thing.” ■

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“Think about it: You’re going to a place filled with people with the same professional background, a lot of the same interests, all there to talk about the job market — who’s hiring, who’s laying people off, what companies are looking for different kind of skills. It’s networking,” said Irene Marshall, a certified resume writer, career coach and president of coaching service **Tools For Transition**, who works with TheLadders. “Just being there reminds you that the way you’re going to get your next job is through meeting people.”



Marshall

To make the most of the job-fair scene, choose the right events for you, and walk in prepared to walk away with the most that you can.

Why a job fair?

Traditional job fairs are usually organized by local job-search clubs, volunteer groups, churches and other organizations to bring together job seekers and companies with jobs to fill. They vary according to both the jobs and the job seekers they might work for, Marshall said.

If it’s a professional organization, generally it will have a substantial networking and job-seeking component to it, and the cost of joining or attending meetings will be low, said Cheryl Palmer, a certified career coach and president of **Call To Career**.

Alternatively, a commercial event organized by a company whose goal is to help people find jobs might be very effective because it has vetted both the companies and the job seekers

attending to make sure they’re at least in the same topic area, she said.

On the downside, they might be so focused on running the event as a business that they don’t focus enough on making the matchups work, or on encouraging attendees to help each other, Marshall said.

Commercial career events tend to cost more than local job fairs, but they have to demonstrate that they’re able to deliver either the information or the hiring companies before they’re worth a job seeker’s time or money, according to Marshall.

In either case, the best way to improve the odds is to make sure there’s significant overlap between your skills, background and interest in getting a job with the organization that puts together the event, Palmer said.



Palmer

Events organized by local government agencies or chambers of commerce tend to be more scattershot, rounding up companies to participate because they’re local, not because they’re relevant, said **Travis Buonocore**, a FinanceLadder member who has been looking for full-time work for a year and has attended a number of career fairs sponsored by professional groups, volunteer organizations, chambers of commerce and government agencies.

“I have been to events that were very good and some that really weren’t very helpful,” Buonocore said.

Executives’ 11-Step Guide to Job Fairs

They’re not just for entry-level positions. Tips and tricks for mid- and senior-level executives to get the most of choosing and attending job fairs.

By John Hazard

THE RECESSION IS FORCING job fairs to move upstream, bringing in recruiters and companies hiring for mid- and senior-level executives. It’s worth your time to attend a few, if you’re looking for a job or just curious about your options.

TheLadders asked recruiters and career coaches for their advice and compiled this guide for more-

seasoned job seekers to get the most out of finding and attending job fairs.

1. Avoid general/government job fairs.

Events organized by local government agencies and chambers of commerce tend to be unfocused, involving companies because they’re local, not because they’re relevant.

2. Target a session or recruiter, and get there early.

Look at the agenda ahead of time to see if there’s a particular session, recruiter or company in which you are interested. Get there early and talk to other early arrivals; they probably have a special interest in the topic or company. Find out what they know and who they know you should talk to. Find out

“A lot of them, I won’t say they’re not worthwhile, but they say there will be opportunities in financial services, and it might be a regional bank opening a branch office — do they need a teller? Do they need just one manager? It’s not clear,” he said. “You look around and the rest [of the companies present] are Verizon, Cabletron, franchising opportunities. Not very focused.”

The best reason to try job fairs or other events, though, are that they really are tailor-made for people looking for jobs, Marshall said. They’re like mixers for people too shy to mix on their own.

“It’s a safe environment to go job-seeking,” she said. “Even if you’re already employed, it’s an acceptable way to research the job market.

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Pick your party

The first thing to realize is that you have to be as picky about your events as you are about any other use of your time, Marshall said. And don’t judge an event by the name or location of the group that is holding the event.

A well-regarded California publisher that focuses on job seekers invited Marshall to speak at its job fair/conference every year for the past five years, but in all that time she hasn’t signed up a single client and got the feeling she hadn’t helped the attendees much, either. The job seekers were too far down the salary ladder to be able to afford personal coaching, and

they were at the wrong point in their careers to be able to use her best advice, she said.

On the other end of the spectrum, Marshall attended a volunteer organization with few career-industry credentials but a lot of enthusiasm. The group not only packed the church function rooms where it was held, it spilled over into the sanctuary and was thick with mid-career people helping each other out on job searches, mostly broken into groups focused on specific industries or job functions.

“Their meetings are on Saturdays, so they draw people who are working as well as those who are unemployed,” Marshall said. “So when they have a job-fair type event, they draw so many people they have to move into the sanctuary rather than in the meeting rooms. It’s a great event, for employers and job seekers.”

Sometimes you have to make the leap and attend an event you might not be sure is going to be helpful, but most of the time you can do enough research on the group by looking it up online or calling its current officers or a member you might know to tell how useful it will be ahead of time, Call to Career’s Palmer said.

The more similar to your goals or specialties an organization is, the more likely it is that you’ll find good contacts, good information or a good lead on a job there, Marshall said. Professional associations, conferences and trade shows are especially good for that, said Charlene Li, president of the Altimeter Group and co-author of “Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies.”



Buonocore

who in the room is influential in that area, and talk to them.

3. Don’t hover or wait in line.

Don’t stand still while someone else talks to the contact you want to meet. Pick up the contact’s information and leave your card; come back when the contact is free, or follow up later.

4. Research the host.

Before you attend, learn about the organization hosting the event. Check it out online. Find members or leaders in the group, and call or write them for details. Sometimes you have to make the leap and attend an event you aren’t sure will be helpful, but most of the time you can do enough research to know before you go.

5. Match yourself to the host.

Do research about who’s behind the event so you can identify the best match for your skills, background and interests. A pharmaceutical marketing manager in New Jersey will get more mileage out of an event hosted by an organization of New Jersey pharmaceutical marketing managers than by a general marketing-industry event.

6. Research the companies in attendance.

Read up on the companies going to the event; make a list of the ones you want to talk to and what you can glean from them. If you can narrow down the list to identify the actual company representative to whom you’d like to speak, you can prepare a better case

for why you’d make a good contribution to his or her team.

7. Participate.

Find a way to be more than an attendee. If you’re the speaker, you don’t have to worry about chasing down recruiters or fellow job seekers. They will find you.

8. Be prepared.

Prep for a job fair, a professional conference or a meeting of a professional organization just as you would for a job interview, a presentation or a meeting with a client. You must demonstrate that you are knowledgeable, professional and capable.

Do your research

You can't walk in cold, Li said. Be prepared ahead of time, and participate.

"If you can speak at some of these conferences, that's even better," Li said. "Then you're the focal point, and you're the one giving the information. When you're networking, it's what you're giving, not necessarily what you're getting, that's important right then."

"If you're the speaker, you don't have to worry about chasing people down later," Marshall said. "They follow up with you."

Just walking in and trying to talk or hand out a resume to everyone doesn't work. It takes too much time and effort, and it makes you look a little desperate to the people to whom you do want to talk.

"Just like with a trade show, you should know what companies you want to talk to before you get there; know what you want to ask them or what information you want to give them; and, if possible, (know) who to give it to," Marshall said. "When you've done that, you have time to wander around and find things you didn't know about before."

Conference sessions where there are specific topics on the agenda are good venues because you know at least one

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set of interests of everyone who goes to that session, Li said.

"Look at the agenda ahead of time, and if there's just one session you're interested in, see if they'll let you sign up for just that one. Get there early, scope out the place, sit in the right spot," she said. "Talk to the other people that are there early — they're not going to be there early if they're not interested in the topic. Find out what they know, who they know that you should talk to; find out who in the room is influential in that area, and talk to them."

If it's a traditional job-fair format, don't stand by a counter for 15 minutes while someone else talks to the contact you want to make, Palmer said. Pick up what information they have and leave a business card; then come back when the subject of your interest is free.

And talk — to everyone, not just the people behind the counters. Chat with people in line; chat with people at the bar. Show up early; sit next to strangers; and, if there's a speaker, ask for her take on the subject for the night, Palmer said.

Everyone at a job fair or other career event has been doing research into his own focus area, and most will be willing to share their findings with you, she said. That kind of information is the most valuable kind of intelligence for a job seeker.

It has helped Buonocore focus his efforts and develop a consulting business, although he hasn't managed to land the right job yet.

"Usually what happens is someone standing in line behind me works in the same group at some bank as my cousin, and we talk about what's going on there," he said. "All that is good. You make contacts, you learn a lot." ■

9. Bring a resume.

Unlike the Internet, where most job applications occur these days, in-person events, require a paper resume you can hand out. Follow the resume rules: no images, no fonts that can't be scanned.

10. Bring business cards.

You might also want a private business card. If you're still working and are uncomfortable handing out your work card, have some made up with your name and private contact info. They're cheap, they're easy to hand

out, and they give the impression of professionalism.

11. Talk to everyone.

Talk to your fellow job seekers. Job fairs are tailor made for people looking for jobs. "They're like mixers for people too shy to mix on their own," said Irene Marshall, a certified resume writer, career coach and president of coaching service Tools For Transition, who works with TheLadders. Everyone at a job fair has been doing their own homework, and most will be willing to compare notes with you. ■

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—Irene Marshall, Tools for Transition

Career Advice from TheLadders

- Can You Facebook Your Way to a New Job?
- Avoid the Job-Fair Line
- Dress to Network — Every Encounter Counts
- Interviewing On the Sly