

CAREER FAIR STRATEGIES THAT WORK

by **Kathy Douglas**

If you are in a Google group, are a member of a family, or have met someone at your college or university orientation who is still your friend, you already know how to network. We meet, form bonds, text, and call our friends to share good news. As a species, we are natural networkers—our survival depends on it.

Schmoozing at career fairs and events is what most people think of when defining networking—standing out in a crowd, making a lasting impression that will land you a job or internship. The reality for most mortals is, however, that although it is important to practice small talk and have good interpersonal skills, most of us do not exude extraordinarily magnetic personalities.

Working magic in a crowd, in fact, is not the most important part of networking.

Great networkers know what any career fair recruiter will tell you: At the end of the day, recruiters' feet hurt, their voices are raw, and aside from a few exceptional interactions, they have spoken with so many individuals they don't remember who they spoke with about what.

This is why the real art of job-search networking comes in *after* the actual fair—the follow up.

When advising students on strategies for two major annual career fairs (one for 1,300+ students from eight universities; one for 250 students from two universities), I emphasize four things:

1. **Strategically select top employers to visit:** Quick Internet research provides information to help determine which employers align best with your career goals. Arrive early and visit your top choices while you (and the recruiters) are fresh.
2. **Ask good questions:** Advanced research will help you prepare smart questions. After a quick introduction, ask a question about recruiting level or specific practice areas to be sure you are not wasting your time or theirs—Are you hiring at the master's level? Are you interviewing for your renewables practice? If you already know what they are recruiting for, start there—"I'd like to learn more about the project areas for the policy internships."

3. After discussions, find a place to stop and take notes: Notes don't have to be extensive. I use business cards and/or a small notebook to write the reason I want to follow up, contact information, and content of conversation.

4. Follow up within a few days: Decide which leads are of interest and follow up with an e-mail that picks up where the discussion left off. If you have been directed to an online application, complete it, send the recruiter a thank you and let him or her know you applied. If you connected personally with a recruiter, but there is no immediate opportunity for you, send him or her a thank you note and a LinkedIn request. There is no need to follow up on every single contact. *It's OK to be strategic.*

If you have taken good notes after a productive conversation, it is easy to follow up. And most often you are doing the recruiter a favor. The work you put in to making the recruiter's job easier, whether it results in an immediate outcome for you or not, is a positive and generous act.

And you never know where follow-up will lead. Through courteous follow-up and strategic networking, job seekers get interviews, discover the hidden job market, and learn the inside scoop on organizations.

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