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The Three Types of Job Fair Interviews

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It's important to understand the basic types of interviews that take place at a job fair since your approach should be different with each. As you watch and listen from the side, you will be able to determine which type of interview is being conducted and modify your approach accordingly. Following are the three basic types:

Screening Interview

This interview usually lasts no more than two or three minutes and is usually conducted by employers whose main interest is in gathering resumes and initial impressions before making decisions as to whether they will move to the next step. Your strategy should be to quickly point them to the key areas in your resume that reflect their needs. What needs? The needs they enumerated six candidates ago when you were standing off to the side as another candidate naively walked up and asked, "So what is your company / district looking for?" You need to fill the employer's list of requirements or you will never see the light of day at the next level. This is the time to use the Thirty Second Elevator Pitch, keeping it short and succinct. Ask for a business card and inquire as the next step.

Mini-Interview

This interview usually lasts five to ten minutes and is conducted at the employer's booth. Be prepared to give a full introduction of your background and quickly position yourself as someone who is a good fit in relation to the employer's needs. The recruiter will usually want you to elaborate on the information contained in your resume, so it is crucial that you are prepared to comment on each and every item on it. Be prepared to give a full explanation of what might be only a single-line bullet item on your resume. Often there will be final questions related to some of the qualitative issues that resumes do not reflect. Make sure all your answers position you as the candidate that meets the employer's needs. Ask for a business card and inquire as to the next step.

Full Interview

The full interview (if there is one being conducted) typically takes place behind a curtain or screen at the employer's booth, or maybe in another part of the hall altogether. Most employers use the full interview only as a secondary interview. In other words, you have to be invited to the interview based on the previous screening interview or mini-interview. Be prepared for 20 minutes or more, but probably no more than 30 minutes, since most employers have a tight schedule to keep. Consider this interview the same way you would any full-length interview. Be aware that you may actually be interviewed by technical or line managers. You will be asked a great number of qualitative, open-ended questions and will be expected to provide elaboration of your answers. At the end of the interview, if you are truly interested, let the interviewer know and ask what the next step will be. Assume that he or she is also interested.

Unless you are certain that the employer is conducting secondary interviews, do not consider it a negative if all you went through was the screening or mini-interview. I realize that it can be rather depressing to spend two quick minutes with a recruiter after a 30-minute wait, but that is the reality of the meat market mentality of job fairs. Just make sure you know what the next step is and follow up. This is not the time to cross your fingers and hope – take charge and make things happen.