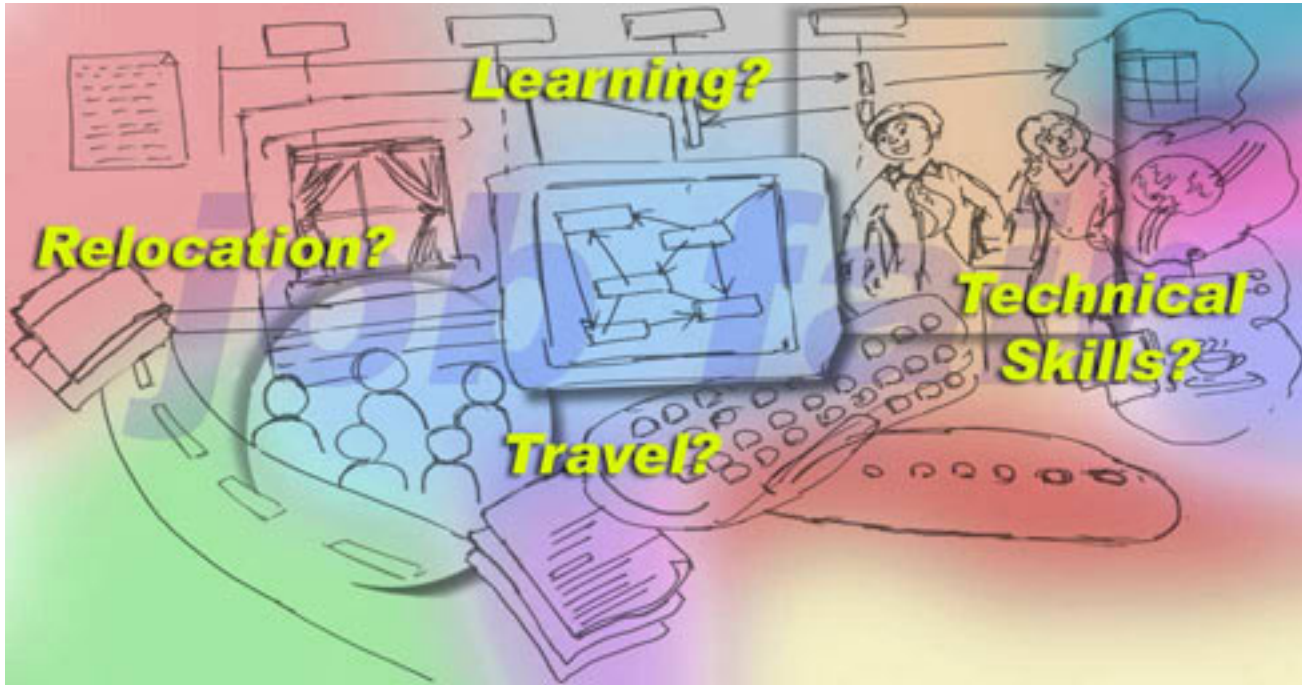# Survive and Thrive at a Job Fair

by *Jessica Ledbetter*

Recently, I was invited to a collegiate job fair. I was at the end of my academic career, had never attended a job fair, and now I was going to one that required an overnight stay.

What can I expect at a job fair?

The job fair that I was invited to was for students of all majors, but only students with high GPAs were invited. The job fair was at an upscale Washington, D.C. hotel and I decided to go because I liked the companies that would be there. In addition, it was reputed that the companies attending wanted to recruit the best students. About sixty companies, ranging from government agencies to internet companies attended the fair. Job fairs in my area are few and far between and tend to be populated, or so it seems, by advertisements, temporary agencies, and openings for sales positions. My career goals do not include sales.

Although the doors opened at 9:00 A.M. there were over two hundred students (mostly

senior undergraduates and a few graduates) waiting to get in by 8:30 A.M. When the doors opened, I first wandered around to find the booths which were crowded. I also picked up brochures about a few companies that I hadn't been able to research. As I watched the people below from a little sitting area located on the upper level of the hotel I observed that many of the waiting students stared straight ahead and didn't talk to anyone. Despite that, I used the job fair to network and talk to companies I wouldn't otherwise be able to talk to because they are outside of my area. I met a lot of interesting people and am interviewing with some companies.

The most popular booths were those at the entrance and those belonging to local companies. At least one student I talked to did not want to leave Washington, D.C. She wouldn't even consider one of the better companies there because it was in Richmond, Virginia, about one hundred miles away.

Most, if not all, job fairs have a listing available of what companies will be there so you can do your research before you go. I recommend this. Not only will it help you cut the number of companies you talk to (there are only so many hours and too many companies sometimes), you also look impressive when you mention something about the company that's not in their brochures.

Armed with about sixty copies of my resume (most students had either heavy ivory or beige paper), pressed suit, and a smile, I went to the booths I liked. I recommend a portfolio to hold your resumes. It comes in handy to have the kind of portfolio that has a pad of paper on one side so that you can take notes. It also looks very sharp. I had a shoulder bag that matched the portfolio, which became full of company propaganda and toys throughout the day. A shoulder bag is much better looking and convenient than an armful of plastic bags.

What should I do before attending a job fair?

I went to the Web site of the job fair and found out which companies would be attending. Most companies listed the positions they were hiring so I could narrow my search down even further. There were some companies that were not recruiting computer science majors, but they were big enough to have a computer department so I kept them in my list of companies to research before going to the fair.

Sites like **Vault.com** and **Google.com** are helpful for finding companies' Web sites.

Keeping track of Company information in a database was very helpful and I still use my personal database to keep track of date and time of contact and my impressions from each contact. It is also convenient to make different fields like "in the area" or "voted one of the best I.T. workplaces."

Make sure your resume is top-notch. I took mine to my career center and had it critiqued. Be sure to bring plenty of copies: it's better to have too many than not enough! I brought one resume per company attending the fair and a few extra. I saw a student with a CD of his code samples, a good idea because the recruiter had to handle it differently than just tossing it in a box with a hundred other ivory resumes.

What do the recruiters ask?

Some companies had lines leading up to the recruiter to talk one-on-one with her. Others had informal gatherings where we listened to the spiel, submitted our resumes, and asked questions.

I mentioned the long lines to a few recruiters. It seems we are trained to stand in lines. I prefer gathering in groups instead of standing in lines. The informal gatherings were also appealing because they allowed me to hear other people's impressions and questions better. Although I was allowed as much time as I wanted with each recruiter, I averaged around 3-5 minutes per company. Much of my time was spent in lines and group talks.

A few companies had interviews and testing. If there is testing, it will probably not be anything you can study for. Example test questions include describing the kind of team player you are and analyzing problems. Calculators are often provided for tests. However, I suggest bringing your own because you are more familiar with it. One test asked me to extrapolate data from tables and graphs. Not many people finished that one. Even though I didn't finish it, I was still called back for the next level of interviews.

Most recruiters asked about my career goals. Even if you are chatting casually with the recruiter, the usual interviewing skills come in handy. If you have an actual interview at the job fair, it will usually be at the recruiter's table or in a special curtained interviewing area. In one interview, I was asked about my internships. The recruiter was seeing my resume for the first time and saw many resumes after mine. It helped that I had internships to talk about. If you don't have internships, perhaps list projects that you can discuss with a recruiter.

I was asked a few times what I do as managing editor of *Crossroads*. Recruiters were impressed when I said that the *Crossroads* team does all of its work through e-mail and the Web. I was told working through e-mail was a skill that will come in handy. Being familiar with different working styles is great, especially in the popular teamwork environment many companies have. *Crossroads* has definitely taught me how to work well with a team!

Not all the recruiters are technical recruiters. For example, after standing in line for 15 minutes, I stepped up to an available recruiter. After looking over my resume he told me that he liked what he saw, but he worked in finance. Although he could not tell me the turnover rate in the IT department he did know the company's overall turnover rate. I prefer talking to technical recruiters because they can answer IT-specific questions, however, I was able to ask him general questions like working hours, benefits, and the overall culture of the company. Another company had a technical recruiter but his specialty was hardware so he didn't know a lot about the programming environments used.

When I sat down for brief interviews at the table, students stood in line behind me but far enough that I doubt they could hear what was being discussed. When I was waiting for another company, the line stretched near another business' table. I was able to hear the interviewer but couldn't hear the interviewee. The questions were:

- "What do you want to do?"
- "Do you mind relocating?"
- "Tell me about one of your strengths."
- "Tell me about one of your weaknesses."
- "What did you learn from <insert job here>?"
- "Do you have any questions for me?"

What do you want to do?

You will get asked "What do you want to do," or some derivation of that, many times. Come prepared with a good answer. Also, feel free to turn to other students and ask them what kind of career or workplace culture they're looking for. You never know, they might have run into another company that you didn't think about. They also might know something about one of the companies you were looking at. They might be from your school and you didn't know them!

A person graduating with a degree in computer science can go into almost anything. If you are a programmer, consider the type of programming you want to do. One recruiter was impressed when I mentioned "object-oriented programming." I was surprised, but it seems that people rattle off the languages but don't use the terminology.

First impressions, of course, are key. A smile goes a long way. Confidence will carry you through. Demonstration of effort (research) will endear you in the minds of the recruiters. Fresh breath is very much appreciated.

One company was known for its casual atmosphere. When I was waiting in line for that one, I turned to the student behind me and struck up conversation. She filled me in on another company and its on-site interviews. I mentioned the cool toy companies. She found being "serious" all day was the most difficult part of the job fair. Then, it was my turn for the little one-on-one with the recruiter. "Oh, time for me to be serious," I joked. He shook his head, laughed, and said, "Better not be!"

Tips for Travel

If you are going to an out-of-town job fair, remember that you do not have to pack anything that the hotel will provide. A lot of the nicer hotels (those that probably have the job fair) have shampoo or even a clothes iron. My hotel had a hair dryer but it only allowed me to change the air setting, not the heat.

The humidity level may be different. Remember your hair gel. Remember your lotion. The little bottle supplied by hotels is just not enough when static decides to rear its ugly head. Women (and men), if you find your clothing clinging to you, try lotion. I put lotion on after I put on hose because moisture combats static. Weird, but it works.

Sodas can cost up to $1.50 in the hotel vending machines. Snacks from the machines were more reasonable. Therefore, if you are driving, I recommend packing some sodas. Most of the nicer hotels have a free ice machine down the hall next to the snack machine.

If you forget something, call housekeeping. They might have items like toothbrushes for free or they might be available at the hotel's convenience store.

Conclusion

Job fairs can be powerful tools in the search for employment after graduation. There are a lot of opportunities for entry level computer related jobs at these fairs, but coming prepared is the key. You serve as your cover letter, so be at your best.

Biography
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(**jledbetter@acm.org**) is an undergraduate Computer Science senior at **Christopher Newport University**. She's a staff member of the student **ACM** group; sister of **Alpha Phi** fraternity; online editor of the **campus newspaper**; member of Sigma Tau Delta , an English honor society; Vice-President of **Omicron Delta Kappa**, leadership honor society; and President of **Upsilon Pi Epsilon**, honor society for the computing sciences. Her interests include Java, C++, Palm programming, web design and readying herself for post-graduation. To relax, she enjoys making web pages, working at **Crossroads**, doodling, and reading.