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E M P L O Y E R
EXPECTATIONS
OF STUDENTS ATTENDING JOB FAIRS

Research suggests how career services practitioners can help college job seekers stand out in the crowd.

by Amber Palomares



Survey Results

The survey polled employers about their expectations of students at job fairs, including how they should conduct themselves and dress for the occasion. Not all respondents answered every question. Percentages are based on the total responses for each question. (See Figures 1-8.) The responses of employers who conduct formal interviews at job fairs are presented in conjunction with and separately from the responses of other employers.

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Figure 1

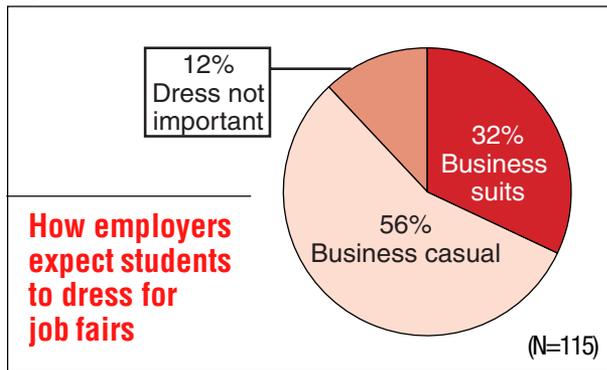


Figure 2

What employers expect students to bring to job fairs

Item	Total responses	% Yes	% No
Resume (hard copy)	120	87%	13%
Scannable resume	115	13	87
Cover letter	116	28	72
Professional portfolio	115	9	91
Reference letters	114	13	87
Knowledge of company or organization	117	38	62

Figure 3

Employer practices at job fairs

Practice	Total responses	% Yes	% No
Formally interview students	115	13%	87%
Discuss salary	116	45	55
Discuss company benefits	119	84	16
Provide information on job openings	120	97	3
Provide company information	120	97	3
Make job offers	118	13	87

Figure 6

Job fair no-nos for candidates according to employers

No. of responses	Description
18	Lacking focus and not knowing what type of position to look for. Admitting "I'll take anything" or answering "I don't know" when asked about interests.
17	Not dressing neatly or professionally.
16	Not bringing a resume.
8	Lacking knowledge of a company and/or confusing the company with a competitor.
7	Lacking enthusiasm or interest in the company or job opportunities.
6	Asking about salary.
5	Not asking any questions, asking inappropriate questions, and having a poor or unprofessional attitude.

Other student mistakes cited by several respondents included grabbing free stuff, not making eye contact, lacking communication skills, not being willing to relocate, not bringing a transcript or anything to write with or on, giving a weak handshake, and not taking time to fill out a job application.

(N=79. Some respondents gave more than one answer.)

Figure 4

Follow-up employers expect from interested students

Follow-up Action	Total responses	% Yes	% No
Cover letter	116	58%	42%
Phone call	115	55	45
Completed job application	115	48	52

Figure 5

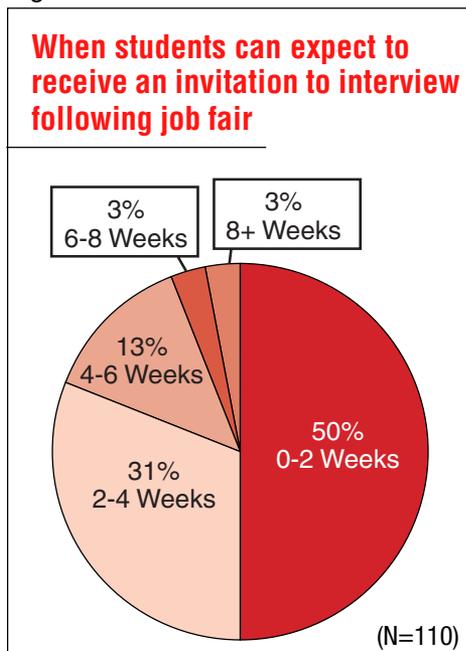


Figure 7

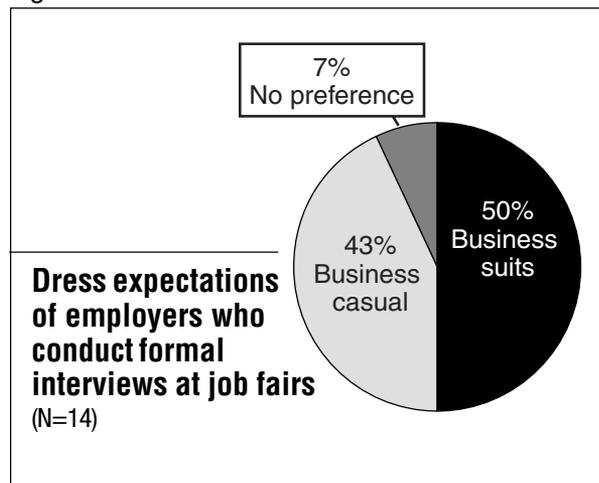


Figure 8

	Total responses	% Yes	% No
Expect a scannable resume	15	27%	73%
Expect a professional portfolio	14	21	79
Expect reference letters	15	27	73
Will discuss salaries	13	77	23
Will discuss company benefits	15	100	0
Will make job offers	13	54	46

Implications

Based on the results of the research, career services practitioners can advise students on how to better meet the expectations of employers at job fairs. This information can be conveyed in counseling sessions, career workshops, and through other media, including career center web sites and print materials used to promote an event.

Upon request, students should be able to provide employers with the following:

- Hard copy and/or scannable resume*
- Cover letter
- Reference letters*
- Professional portfolio, including examples of work and accomplishments*
- Transcript copy
- Completed job application

Yet, some indicated that a common mistake students make is “not being dressed professionally.” In addition, dress expectations were higher among employers who formally interview students. One recruiter noted that dress expectations are different depending on the part of the country where the job fair is being held. He explained that he would wear business casual at job fairs in California and expect the same from students, but would wear a business suit and expect students to dress in a similar fashion in the Southeast.

To help create a good first impression, students usually can’t go wrong by dressing as if they were going to a job interview. However, career services practitioners might want to consider further research to determine how employers define business casual and if there is any correlation between type of company and dress expectations.

Although only a few employers formally interview students at job fairs, students should be prepared in case a company they are interested in requests an interview on the spot. For JobFest, the career services staff posted on its web site the employers that were going to be conducting formal interviews at the job fair. The staff also circulated flyers on campus that included this information. At JobFest, some formal interviews took place at employers’



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More than a third of the respondents indicated that they expect students to be knowledgeable about their company or organization. Although many career services offices include information on their web sites about companies that will be attending the job fair, they might consider adding a link to the home pages of those employers to assist students in the research process. They can also include employers’ web addresses on flyers that are distributed and posted before the fair. In addition, practitioners should ask all companies, especially those that do not have web pages, to submit current company literature for the employer library at the career center. Flyers and web sites should mention the availability of these resources.

Most employers reported that they consider business casual appropriate for job fairs, and many of the employers at JobFest were, in fact, casually dressed.

*In general, only employers who conduct formal interviews at job fairs (21 to 27 percent) expect students to provide a scannable resume, reference letters, and a portfolio.

recruiting tables or tables nearby. Some students were invited to interview in the days following the job fair in the university's career center.

A majority of respondents indicated they are willing to discuss company benefits with students at job fairs, but many (55 percent) do not discuss salary, and some consider it a mistake for students to ask about it. However, employers who formally interview students during job fairs are more inclined to discuss salary.

Many students are under the impression that most employers make job offers at job fairs; the survey found that only 13 percent actually do. The likelihood of receiving a job offer increases to 54 percent for students who are formally interviewed at job fairs.

Most employers indicated that they follow up with students within two weeks of the job fair to request an interview. They also expect some type of follow-up from students, such as a cover letter, phone call, or completed

job application, and may not extend an invitation to interview to students who fail to take this initiative. Where job applications are concerned, some respondents noted that they prefer students to fill them out at the job fair instead of mailing them afterward. To that end, practitioners can advise students to bring information with them that they may not have included on their resume, e.g., addresses and telephone numbers of employers; addresses and dates of attendance for high school and other schools; and contact information for references.

According to the respondents, lacking focus/a clear career objective accounts for the most common mistake students make at job fairs. This problem could, of course, be corrected with career assessment and counseling. Admittedly, many students often do not seek out this expertise before they choose their major and/or they often do not know what careers their degrees have prepared them for. On the other

hand, some students may be pursuing degrees that are not career specific, such as liberal arts, or have a variety of interests, and they may be doing career exploration at job fairs. If students aren't focused on a career, they could approach recruiters by telling them what their major is and what types of positions they are interested in instead of asking "What are you hiring for?"

Career services practitioners can help students avoid other common job fair mistakes, such as asking inappropriate questions, by distributing handouts with examples of questions they should ask. Practitioners also can provide handouts on following up with employers by phone or letter, and include this information on their career center's web site.

These educational measures can help students derive the greatest benefits from job fairs, including a deeper awareness of the career opportunities available to them and, ultimately, more job offers from which to choose. ■