

# Career Fairs: What Does the Industry Want?

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*Career fairs are a popular function with hospitality schools. Recruiters' perceptions of these events are important to ensuring their success. The authors report on the results of their survey of recruiters participating in a 1990 career fair at the University of South Carolina, indicating directions other schools may wish to consider.*

The hospitality industry is one with many faces and an ever-changing and increasing need for new employees. Introducing students to the numerous facets of the industry is an ongoing challenge for many hospitality programs. Career fairs provide an avenue for educating students about the different career opportunities available. They also provide an arena in which job interviews can take place.

Universities and colleges throughout the nation approach career fairs with various agendas in mind. Some career fairs are designed to provide an atmosphere for interchange between hospitality students and the industry. Others function as facilitators between students and recruiters in the interview process. Often, however, agendas are planned without any insight into hospitality recruiters' requirements, preferences, or schedules.

A study was thus undertaken to evaluate the industry's views regarding career fairs; results will be used to recommend changes to improve the quality of career fairs for students and recruiters. A questionnaire was developed to ascertain recruiters' perceptions of career fairs. The instrument was created and pretested on recruiters who participated in the 1990 HRTA Career Fair at the University of South Carolina. Respondents made recommendations for revisions that were implemented in the redesign of the instrument. Data from the pretest are not included in the analysis.

Questionnaires were mailed to CHRIE Hospitality Recruiters members and selected recruiters invited to the University of South Carolina's Career Fair. Of the 118 mailed, 49 were returned, for a response rate of 42 percent. Demographic data collected on respondents showed that nearly half represented corporations that were national in scope, followed by international (27 percent), local (14 percent), and regional (11 percent). Most respondents (22 percent) were interested in recruiting students for full-service restaurants, followed by upscale hotels (19 percent), cafeterias (15 percent), and resorts and mid-priced hotels (13 percent each). Forty percent of those responding attended between one and five career fairs a year; another 40 percent were split between six to 10 and 11 to 15 fairs a year. Over half the recruiters responding attended only career fairs held in hospitality programs.

Respondents were equally interested in recruiting students for both regional and national positions (37 percent each); 19 percent were interested in hiring students for local positions, and only 7 percent were interested in students for international positions.

For the purpose of this study, students were divided into three categories: graduates, summer practicum students, and internship candidates. Recruiters were asked to rate on a scale of one to five (five providing maximum benefit) which category they were most interested in for recruitment purposes. The group receiving the highest mean score (4.07) and most frequently selected (44) were graduates; practicum students and interns received medium to high mean scores and frequencies.

Respondents were asked if they were interested in having the career fairs open to the entire university or whether they preferred to discuss job possibilities with only hospitality majors; 62 percent of those responding wanted career fairs to be open to the entire university; 32 percent had no comment, and 6 percent opposed the idea.

### **Recruiters Prefer Certain Days and Times**

An area of concern with most recruiters is the time and date of career fairs. The two most popular days were Tuesday and Wednesday; the second choice was Thursday, with Monday and Friday being the least desirable. One respondent stated, "My findings are that Mondays and Fridays are tough to attract the students (although I like attending on those days), as some students go home over the weekend."

Recruiters indicated times they felt were best suited for career fairs; most were interested in having the events begin between 9 and 10 a.m. and end between 2 and 5 p.m. There was a dip between noon and 2 p.m. where a few respondents requested a break for lunch. In conjunction with the beginning and ending times of the career fair, 37 percent indicated a half day was most preferred; 48 percent preferred a full day and only 5 percent preferred two days. Nine percent listed "other"; comments included, "Depends on the number of students and number of companies. Students should have the opportunity to visit

all companies; booths,” “two to three hours,” “four to five hours for the actual fair; other events may be scheduled around the fair,” “10 a.m. to 2 p.m.,” and “Do away with them (career fairs).”

### **Activities for Fair Show Wide Range of Preference**

Some universities provide almost an entire week of activities for participants, while others provide the basic one-day career fair. As far as what career fair activities recruiters found most beneficial, on a one to five scale for breakfast, welcoming reception, luncheon, student/recruiter reception, and refreshments, the student/recruiter reception was rated as the most beneficial event (mean of 3.75), followed closely by the welcoming reception (mean of 3.48), and refreshments (mean of 2.85). Additional comments included such activities as a hospitality management meeting which recruiters could attend the evening before the career fair, and interaction with school and faculty personnel.

Respondents were also asked to list specific career fairs that are exceptionally successful and to describe the activities that contribute to their success. Michigan State University's Expo was touted by many of the respondents as the best. In fact, one recruiter said it was “Big, bold and beautiful.” Some of the activities that respondents enjoyed the most were the seminars for students, recruiters, and faculty. Michigan State also provided an excellent arena for networking between recruiters. A number of respondents were impressed by the fact that the Michigan State Expo was run completely by students.

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst was noted a number of times for its career fair and its organization. Some of the program features cited included assigning upperclassmen to act as hosts or hostesses for each recruiter and preparing a complete packet of information for each recruiter.

### **Recruiters Offer Numerous Suggestions**

Other activities or services that respondents suggested were the following:

- proper signage and program directory showing location of each company for students
- programs that provided brief descriptions of the companies and positions available
- student assistants to help recruiters
- adequate advertising of the career fair
- interview schedules after the career fair
- excusing seniors from classes and assigning juniors a project to complete to encourage them to attend

**Table 1**  
**Criteria for Choosing Career Fairs**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Reputation of school	42	3.84	1.20
Size of department	34	3.03	1.34
Geographical location	39	3.66	1.49
Past successful recruitment	42	4.11	1.37
Student participation	38	3.95	1.20
Faculty participation	35	2.94	1.28
Other	1	4.00	0.00

- organized layout of facility to ensure smooth flow
- providing students with a scorecard for recruiters to sign to encourage them to visit each booth; the completed cards would then be used as raffle tickets and prizes would be awarded
- resumes prepared in advance by students

Universities also provide a wide variety of information to visiting recruiters; respondents were asked to mark the items they felt most beneficial. The most frequently selected response was departmental information (34 percent), followed closely by resume booklets (32 percent). Lodging information (29 percent) and university information (26 percent) were also noted as very important, followed by city information (18 percent), and faculty and student activity information (17 percent each).

Respondents were asked if secondary recruiters (i.e., executive search agencies, placement companies) should be permitted to exhibit and recruit at career fairs; they were evenly divided with both positive and negative responses receiving 35 percent; 30 percent had no opinion. Due to the even division of the responses, no strong conclusion can be drawn.

Recruiters were asked if they should have the chance to make formal presentations concerning the opportunities at their companies. Seventy-nine percent said yes; 15 percent said no, and 6 percent had no opinion. Respondents were then asked when the presentations should be made. Twenty-five percent indicated the presentations should be concurrent with the career fair; 37 percent preferred the day before, and another 37 percent preferred the day after.

Respondents were asked the range of fees they paid to attend career fairs. Fees ranged from no charge (14.5 percent) to \$350, with \$100 as the fee most frequently charged (12 percent); the average fee was \$83. Comments included the following: "Once I paid \$200 but I would not pay that again"; "I do not believe I should pay a fee to hire

your students. I will pay for the extras I need—VCR, projector or reception”; and “We have made decisions not to attend future fairs based on school’s priorities away from food service toward hotel/motel and recent practices of charging for fairs.”

Recruiters were also asked how they decided what career fairs to attend. They ranked their responses on a scale of one to five. Successful past recruitment of students had the highest frequency and highest mean score, followed closely by reputation of school and participation of students (See Table 1). One respondent indicated progressive curriculum review as an important criterion for choosing career fairs.

Career fairs can be an excellent opportunity for students to investigate career options, but they must be designed to allow the students, recruiters, and university to work toward a common goal. This goal can only be obtained through continued communication between hospitality educators and recruiters.

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