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## Question: Why is a career fair like speed dating?

By **Barbara E. Cohen**  
For Custom Publications

**Answer:**  
Because you need to make  
a good impression — *fast*.

As in the dating game, a career fair gives you five minutes at most to make a first impression while potential employers tell you a little about themselves.

Just as a successful evening of speed dating might lead to a few first dates with a couple of new “just friends,” a career fair may lead to an interview with only a few potential employers. Getting to a first interview requires the same preparation, implementation and follow-through as that first date.

### Know your objective

Have a realistic expectation about what a career fair can and can't deliver.

“The biggest mistake job seekers make is thinking that a career fair will lead to an interview,” said Becky Garrett, job fair coordinator for the Career Center at IUPUI. “It's just a short screening interview where you can learn about a lot of companies that might be looking for job candidates. You won't get a long interview or a job offer at a career fair.”

Companies send recruiters to job fairs to increase their applicant pool and to raise your awareness of them as an employer of choice. They meet many potential candidates in a short time span.

“They get a big bang for their buck at a career fair,” Garrett said.



File Photo

### Career Development Fair

Tuesday, April 18  
Noon – 5 p.m.  
Indiana Convention Center  
Sagamore Ballroom  
[www.starcareerfair.com](http://www.starcareerfair.com)

**Before you go, do** your research. Look for the career fair special section in tomorrow's Indianapolis Star and learn more about the recruiters scheduled to attend.

“They can see a lot of people, just like you can see a lot of employers in one place. But they aren't going to hire you on the spot.”

Recruiters want to interest you in their company because the potential exists for a job requiring your skills, not necessarily because there is a current opening. As a job seeker, worry less about what jobs are being filled and more about whether the company could meet your long-term goals.

### Ask intelligent questions

In speed dating, you try to determine if your date has similar values, goals and interests. If you're the marrying kind, you want

to rule out confirmed bachelors. Likewise, ask recruiters what you need to know about the company as a potential “mate.”

A day or two before the fair, review the companies scheduled to attend, targeting those that might be of interest.

“Research target companies through the Web, library and networking with people,” said Patrice Waidner, a career counselor with WorkOne Indianapolis Employment Services. “Determine the questions you would like to ask regarding the industry and the company, and anticipate questions the job fair interviewer or contact person might ask you.”

Asking a question like “What does your

company do?” shows you haven't done your homework. It's better to ask questions about how the company nurtures employees, the potential for career growth and the corporate culture to determine if there's a match. If not, move on.

### Show up on time, dress the part

Arrive in time to make your way around the room and locate companies you've identified as possible good matches.

“Case the room, noting who is there, who you want to approach and in what order,” Waidner said.

Map out employers you want to meet, starting with the one with the best potential.

“Get a feel for where the employers that interest you are,” she said. “Also, show up early or late in the day. Lunchtime is the busiest time, so it's the worst time for you to get much opportunity to talk to the recruiters.”

Your approach is important. Be prepared to deliver a resume or mention you've applied online, according to Garrett. Dress the part, too. Business casual isn't appropriate for a career fair, according to most career counselors.

“Dress up for a job fair as for an interview,” Waidner said.

For Garrett, that means a conservative, dark suit with neutral accessories for both men and women.

Speak clearly, offer a firm handshake and don't chew gum.

Finally, make notes for your follow-up after the job fair, and don't overstay your welcome. If you sense a possible match, ask for a suggestion about contacting the human resources department. If you've already applied online, ask, “What is the next step?”

Walk away from the meeting with a plan, but don't turn the speed date into an impromptu job interview. ●