



# Organizing a Reverse Career Fair

## The “How-To” Guide

### **Purpose: A New Kind of Career Fair — A Reverse Career Fair**

A career fair that flips the table:

- Job seekers create displays and presentations that showcase their talents
- Employers then have the opportunity to circulate among the booths and introduce themselves to the job seekers whose skills and abilities meet their needs

### **The Reverse Career Fair:**

- Helps job candidates highlight and showcase their skills and abilities in a comfortable environment
- Helps businesses to recognize the talents of the job candidates by watching them demonstrate examples of their work/abilities

### **Benefits to Employer (Return-On-Investment):**

- Connects businesses with high quality, but often overlooked, job seekers
- Requires less financial and logistical burden (no employer display booth to set up)
- Demands no registration fee or booth cost from the employer
- Allows for a more relaxed conversation that is conducive to a meaningful exchange
- Provides a platform where the event organizers can pre-screen and assist to match job seekers to the positions that are needed by potential employers that have provided essential job function information

### **Benefits to the Job Seeker**

The three-phase process includes a career readiness Workshop that assists job seekers to develop presentation materials and practice interviewing skills. All job seekers will come to the Fair with:

- A high quality portfolio of information to share, including resume, references, cover letter, etc.
  - A tri-fold poster board or other display and the skill to present on:
    - Who you are
    - What you know
    - What you’ve done
    - What you hope to do
- **Job Seekers will know beforehand what the essential job functions and requirements are in order to be well-prepared to explain why they are a “right fit” for employers.**

## What you need to do:

### 1. Identify the right team members.

We found the team approach works best and should include as many partners as are planning to include job seeker participants.

### 2. Identify a “chairperson” to keep things organized and moving.

The chairperson will set meetings, monitor applications and keep the timeline going for a great event.

### 3. Identify the dates for the three phases of the process.

Phase One is the Workshop, where we introduce the overall concept and give practical instruction. Phase Two takes place two weeks later and is called the Rehearsal. This is where we do a “dry-run” to familiarize the job seekers with what to expect. Then one week after that, we hold Phase Three, the actual reverse career fair. We typically chose to hold each phase on a Tuesday, from 9 am – 11 am.

### 4. Identify and secure a location.

This was the most challenging aspect. Ideally, the location will be FREE, have easy and convenient parking, and will be available on the dates needed. Additionally, the location needs to be large enough to host the booths of your candidates, be comfortable for employers to walk through and get to know the candidates, and have enough room for a registration/welcome area.

We also like having a separate “employer room.” It is critical that you visit the location prior to securing it, to make sure the room will fit your needs and that the parking is adequate. We strongly recommend that you keep the location and time-frame the same for all three phases, in order to make it easier for the job seekers to learn the transportation and parking logistics, find the room location, and get comfortable with the process.

### 5. Identify your job candidates.

We decided that each partnering agency would be allowed to bring 5 job seekers to the event. It is a lot of work to prepare the candidates, so you will want to make sure that only allow the number of job candidates that each partnering agency has time to personally provide 1:1 support with each of their job seekers. Candidates will range in their skill-level and should be selected by their job coach, counselor or staff member. We did not have any criteria other than making sure that the referring staff member understood the need to select persons who would be willing and able to fully participate and benefit from the event. An application was given to participating agency staff members to complete with information about the job candidates they plan to sponsor. The candidate and staff members reviewed the expectations and conditions, and provided basic information including the “sector” of their employment interest. The chairperson also keeps a database of the job candidates attending, along with their career sector of interest.

### 6. Invite employers.

Employers are selected based on the career sector interests of our job candidates. The employers are told how many candidates will be available in each “sector” so they can determine whether their job openings will be able to be filled. When an employer registers to attend the fair, we ask them to send us job descriptions of their openings. Invites are handled

emails, in-person visits and phone calls. We also send a Google calendar invite. RSVPs are emailed to the chairperson to keep a database of those employers planning to attend.

#### **7. Identify the sectors and coordinate matching colors.**

Each sector has a different colored tablecloth to reflect the skillsets of the person, to help employers understand which jobseeker is looking for a career in each area. For example:

- a. Healthcare- red tablecloths
- b. IT- green tablecloths
- c. Advanced manufacturing- blue table cloths
- d. Janitorial- purple table cloths

The colors and sectors can be whatever you wish, based on the tablecloth colors you find. We purchased throw-away plastic tablecloths for the event.

#### **8. Organize and complete the Workshop phase.**

This should be set up in a conference-like environment where there will be a “Keynote” who introduces the overall concept to the job candidates. This helps our candidates to be their best selves for the event. The format of the workshop is also explained by the Keynote. The breakout sessions should include:

- A. *The Look* – grooming, hygiene and what-to-wear. This breakout is all about the presentation of the job candidate and what they need to do to prepare their bodies for the event.
- B. *Interviewing* – business partners perform mock interviews with job candidates and then provide immediate feedback, to help the candidate better prepare for the actual interview.
- C. *Resume and Application* – We took the job descriptions provided by attending business partners and helped our candidates mold and modify their existing resumes to match the skillsets of the employer needs. We demonstrated the difference between “bad,” “good,” and “outstanding” resumes.
- D. *30-Second Elevator Speech* – You have 30 seconds to make a good impression and this session prepares the job candidate to take advantage of this well-known truth. The leader should practice a role-playing scenario with each job candidate. A cell phone can be used to record these introductions, and then be played back so the candidates can see real audio/visuals in order to learn to improve their handshake, eye-contact and overall introduction of themselves.
- E. *Display 101* – Each job candidate’s booth needs to be eye-catching and different from others. In this breakout, we help job candidates identify their strengths and then tailor their booths to reflect their style. Examples have included a “wheel of fortune” wheel that employers would spin to land on a skillset that the JC would explain, “adaptive equipment” to show how the person could do the job with the accommodations, an “Apple ball” manipulated by an Apple i-phone to get the attention of business representatives walking by, and a set of oversized cardboard dice with employable skills written on them to help prompt the job candidate to talk about the skillset that the die landed on.

**9. Assist job candidate preparations.**

So now the workshop is done, and the dry run is 2 weeks away. This is when staff members work with the job candidates on what they learned in the workshop, providing 1:1 or group meetings to create a display, practice an elevator speech and update their resume to reflect suggestions made at the workshop. This is where the real value of the process takes place. It is very time-consuming to create, assemble, and complete the displays, and to practice all that needs to be practiced. This, however, is critical to the success of the event.

**10. Think through logistics.**

At this point we recommend you measure the available event space and create a chart for placement of the tables. This helps you to arrange the tables so that no same-sector colors are beside each other. You will want to ensure that you have enough tables for the event, enough tablecloths for each sector and that it is arranged in a manner that you can easily set up on the day of the Rehearsal and the day of the actual event.

**11. Create a handout for the employers.**

This will list what sector each colored tablecloth represents. You will need to print enough to give one to each employer during registration.

**12. Create satisfaction surveys for the job candidates and for the businesses.**

This will give your group insight into what went well and what you need to improve for the next one. Again, be sure to make enough copies for each job candidate and business that participates in the event. They can be as simple and straightforward as “What did you like?” “What would you change?” etc.

**13. Create and print the list of employers that have RSVP'd.**

This is helpful to have at the event, to track which employers actually attended, and to use for follow up.

**14. Organize and complete the Rehearsal Phase.**

This is where job candidates participate in a dress rehearsal in anticipation of the upcoming reverse career fair. Coordinating staff members need to arrive at MINIMUM one hour before the event to put the tables where they need to go, get the tablecloths on the tables and help job candidates to find and set up their booths. It is good to have staff members outside the room to encourage and direct participants as well.

We also learned that you need to tell the candidates to arrive a MINIMUM of 30 minutes PRIOR to the event start time. Inevitably there are unforeseen complications, and with this 30 minute cushion the job candidates can still have a successful experience. In addition to our own partner agency staff members that play the role of employers, we invite actual employer representatives to participate in the rehearsal, to make the event as “real” as possible. We walk through and interview our job candidates, providing immediate feedback for improvement and

immediate encouragement about what went well. We also relay this information to their support staff to make sure that any needed improvement areas are addressed *prior* to the real career fair.

#### **15. Reminder notification.**

On the date of the Rehearsal, the chair person sends a reminder email to the businesses that have expressed interest that the event is only one week away, and encouraging them to RSVP if they have not already done so. This is a good opportunity to remind the employers of directions, parking and expectations. Most employers ask “What do I need to bring?” and we have found they typically will want to bring a notepad, several business cards, and any materials they may want to leave with the job candidates about their business.

#### **16. Final administrative review.**

The team meets to discuss any last minute details/concerns.

#### **17. Organize and complete the Reverse Career Fair.**

It’s finally here! -You have worked so hard to get to this day!

- Event staff MUST arrive a MINIMUM of one hour before the event and begin setting up tables with the colored tablecloths
- Set up the “employer room” with the registration, handouts and surveys. The employer room is a great place to “hold” the employers upon their arrival until the career fair is ready. You can provide coffee or snacks if you want. This will also be a good networking opportunity, and is a good place to provide the business cards of all staff members on the organizing committee.
- Put up signs with arrows directing participants to your event.
- Staff will need to be available to direct job candidates to the event and may even help carry items in.
- Staff will need to be available to direct employers to the employer room and to get them signed in on the registration form.
- Staff will be available to help job candidates put their displays together.
- When it is time to start the career fair, the designated team member will get the attention of the business participants gathered in the employer room, and will give a brief overview of the process, what to expect, and what the colored tablecloths mean. All organizing staff members introduce themselves and remain available to answer questions. Each business participant is given a flyer with a map of the color coordinated tables.
- Direct employers to the career fair. Some staff will accompany the employers, and some will stay in the business room to engage and direct employers that arrive later. These staff members will make sure to orient the incoming business partners to the process, and make sure they get signed in on the registration form.
- Answer any and all questions, build connections, provide value.

- As business partners leave, a staff member encourages the employers to complete the employer survey, and then collects those completed surveys.
- When the event has concluded, all job candidates are also given a survey to complete, and these are then collected as well.
- Help the job candidates tear down their booths and put all tables/chairs back to the designated area. Clean the space in accordance with the host agency's expectations.
- Meet as a team to review how it went!

**18. Chairperson follows up with all employers who attended.**

See if there are any job candidates with whom they were interested in pursuing further, and then coordinate to be sure that information is relayed to the appropriate staff person/agency.

**19. Chairperson reviews and tallies all survey results.**

Forward the feedback to the team members.

**20. Chairperson schedules a follow-up meeting.**

**21. Chairperson continues to monitor placements of job candidates.**

Reach out to staff to gather information and record data.

**22. Complete the follow-up meeting.**

Review all feedback materials and discuss plans for the next event.

**Forms You Will Need:**

- Job candidate application
- Employer survey
- Job candidate survey
- Employer flyer
- Registration sign-in