

How to design a Virtual Job Fair program

a common-sense approach to this new recruiting tool



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Foreword

Technology is working its way into the way Career Services centers provide services to students and alumni. Comprehensive websites, chat times, and counseling by email are becoming more commonplace. In addition, recruiters are looking for creative ways to reach students and alumni. A Virtual Job Fair can be an effective tool in connecting employers to students and alumni. Today's students are accustomed to the online environment, and feel comfortable interacting in that space. A Virtual Job Fair transcends the traditional face to face job fair time and place restrictions to bring a job fair that can run 24/7. Students, alumni, and employers can participate in the Virtual Job Fair when it is convenient for them, and it can be offered over a more extended time period.

Over the past several years, the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) office of Career Services has worked with iTradeFair.com to offer its students and alumni a Virtual Job Fair. We have experienced a great deal of success with the platform. Everyone involved tells us the site is easy to navigate and interact with. In addition, employers find it simple to

set up their virtual booth. We have a much higher participation rate from students than at our traditional face to face job fairs, as the Virtual Job Fair can include a wider net of students and alumni geographically. Employers view the Virtual Job Fair as an innovative way to recruit UMUC students and alumni. We will offer the Virtual Job Fair for years to come to offer all our constituents this convenient and effective recruiting tool.

This book by Ramesh Sambasivan uses a crisp style to share some very practical suggestions on how to make your virtual job fair program a successful one. I believe that it will be an extremely useful resource for hiring professionals, career development professionals and job seekers. Have a great Virtual Job Fair!

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The lynchpin of success

In one of my very early interactions with Michael Hughes, Associate Publisher & Director of Research Services of Trade Show Week Magazine, he said that a quality audience is the lynchpin of a trade show's success. The same goes for a job fair. It is the quality of the participants that defines the success of a job fair.

For a virtual job fair, it is the quality and the currency of the participants, job listings and resumes that make the virtual job fair a success.

For a virtual job fair, its success also depends on the time taken to nurture it as a brand. It depends on the patience in changing the habits of job candidates as well as that of hiring organizations.

Some common characteristics

Those who do well-designed and successful virtual job fairs have a few things in common:



1. The event organizer understands the Internet-habits of the targeted audience
2. The virtual job fair serves as a pre-screening tool that enhances traditional hiring activities
3. A need to beat infobesity or information overload. The event organizer and the job candidates find existing Internet-based job boards to be frustrating because they are sometimes overloaded

with outdated job listings and resumes.

4. They may be in such a niche market that the job boards do not adequately capture their industry's skilled labor pool.
5. Their Applicant Tracking System distorts the formats of uploaded resumes, making it difficult for a recruiter to decipher a resume, prompting the need for an extra exchange of messages asking the job candidate to resend a resume in MS Word® format.
6. A need to attract job candidates from far and wide
7. The best job candidates are already working elsewhere and need a convenient way to research and reach recruiters with current open positions to fill.
8. They take a long term approach to changing their user's habits.
9. They are mindful of the limitations of the Internet, and therefore manage the expectations of both the employers and the job candidates appropriately.
10. They are patient and nurture the virtual job fair, repeating them till they gain momentum.

Things to remember...



As you begin to plan your virtual job fair, remember these points. These are for those who have never attempted putting together a virtual job fair.

Set low expectations. Call it a *pilot* and let your participants know that you are experimenting with a virtual job fair and that you welcome all feedback.

Dip your toes in the water. Seek partners who can share in the cost of your initial event, whether they are various departments, regional firms or those from your industry association or fellow members of a not-for-profit organization to which you might belong. This helps you gather a larger participation for your pilot with

a smaller individual contribution of time, effort and money.



Select a technology partner. Find a technology provider who will offer your virtual job fair as a hosted service. Once you gain momentum and if the volume of activity justifies it, you can even consider having a custom-designed fair installed on your own servers. There are a few good offerings in the market. What you need to know is that you can make a successful virtual event regardless of the sophistication of the technology that you adopt. Look for experienced providers who can steer you through pitfalls. Seek simplicity with a short learning curve for your users. Ease of use and responsive customer support are critical to ensuring that all participants leave satisfied.



Alternatively, subscribe to a shared venue. One of the main advantages of a shared virtual job fair is the low cost of subscribing to one. The other advantage is the ease of launching a virtual event in a shared venue. If you have just a single department that is hiring, and you want something quick up on the web, a shared venue can have you up and running in a couple of hours. Eventually, if your volume of hiring activity starts growing, then a step forward once you have understood how it works for your market, could be an exclusively branded but hosted software to run your virtual job fair. The ramp-up time for a shared service could be as short as a

few hours or a few days, depending mainly on how prepared you are and how much time you need to get the word out on your virtual job fair.

Caveats about webcasts and webinars: Before you embrace live webcasts and webinars as part of your virtual job fair, do consider the effort you are willing to put into production of the content in the webinars. Even making a back of the envelope cost-benefit analysis will help you justify the cost and effort of live webinars. If you are using the webcasts or webinars merely to educate or inform the job candidates, you ought to be able to make all the presentations and videos you wish to show to job candidates, available through a virtual booth. If a webinar is being done to provide visibility and as a marketing tool for sponsoring departments or organizations, be sure that the topic will attract a quality audience of job seekers.



Multiply by 20. If you want 1,000 visitors to attend your virtual fair, then invite 20,000. There are always exceptions to this rule of thumb. Attendance in virtual job fairs held in academic settings such as Universities do not always follow this rule of thumb especially when their timings are usually closer to graduation dates. This rule of thumb will

help you not only in preparing your invitation list, but also in tempering the expectations of your sponsors. This multiplier improves with repeat events held in regularity, as people learn to expect your virtual job fair and mark it on their calendars or set up alerts.

Keep it simple. Do not get overwhelmed by technology or by any jargon that may be thrown your way. Stick to what you know. If you have traditionally used email to contact your potential participants, then stick with it. Remember, your goal is to attract the best candidates for the positions that the hiring managers are seeking to fill, and engage them in conversation when they visit online should it be necessary.

Tell all the participants what to expect. This is just like any job fair that is traditionally held – except that the participants gather at a common place via the Internet. The etiquette that applies in the real world also applies in a virtual job fair. In a real world job fair it is common to see some table tops not staffed by anyone. If you are holding a virtual job fair, the least you can do for the job candidates is to ensure that hiring managers and recruiters are seriously seeking the candidates. You must ensure that the virtual booths are staffed according to a pre-announced schedule. Having live staffing at your virtual booth goes to show that your virtual job fair is the real deal. This may take the form of real individuals who are qualified recruiters or hiring managers logging into dedicated chat rooms or chat channels, sometimes that could simply be using tools such as Skype, to be available to answer questions from job candidates instantly.



Pre-screen them. The better tools in the market will allow you to pre-screen the job candidates even as you are meeting them online in a chat room. Keep the conversation brief and professional. Guide the job candidates in the right direction if they do not meet your standards.

Consider registration filters. To improve the quality of traffic in your virtual job fair, make a filter a part of your job candidate pre-registration process. Only those who answer certain questions correctly will move

on to register and upload their resumes to your virtual job fair. Design the questions thoughtfully so that visitors cannot game the filter.

A word of caution about video-chat and video-resumes. Recruiters who use virtual job fairs usually like to stay away from video or images of job candidates to steer clear of possible concerns of discrimination during their hiring process. This is something to which hiring organizations must be sensitive as they use virtual job fair tools.

Don't send them away empty-handed. Here is something that would be nice and easy to add to a virtual job fair. Bring in some career consultants – they could even be in their own virtual booths, and let them be available to offer free career advice or resume-critiques to interested candidates, or free tips on how to prepare for an interview. This will do wonders for your brand, and will create immeasurable goodwill towards your organization and its products or services.

Things to do

I have listed below in simple steps things that you need to do for conducting an effective virtual job fair.

Find a place for it in your recruiting calendar. Your pool of potential job candidates must be able to schedule time and mark their calendars in advance. Having a recurring series of virtual job fairs also helps the event's branding by making virtual job fairs a part of the job seeker's lexicon and job-search habit.

Create conversations. Talk about your virtual job fair even as you are thinking about it. Make your recruiters and hiring managers comfortable with the idea of virtual job fairs. Ask for suggestions on how to make it effective. Involve your recruiters as you plan the event, especially when it comes to matters of scheduling a team to be available online to engage the online visitors who might come in seeking jobs. If you are comfortable with media activity

for your job fairs, get the word out to the media in regions where you want to attract employees.



Plan where and how you will promote it. With a virtual job fair, you can promote it from one region to another, depending on which locations you have open positions to fill. Since changes on a virtual booth take very little time or effort you can even create something like a roadshow, customizing the information on your virtual booth in the virtual job fair based on what region you are focusing on during a certain week.

Schedule the booth staffers. Your virtual job fair will be considered a success if job candidates find a knowledgeable recruiter or hiring manager available to get their questions answered immediately during

pre-announced hours. You might consider breaking it into hourly sessions by a rotating staff.

Decide on what you will display in your virtual booth. The nice thing about the virtual booth is that it allows you to get creative with the kind of information you want to present to potential employees and the format you want. You could feature videos of current employees speaking about what a typical day at work is. You could offer a downloadable list of benefits on your virtual booth. Perhaps, a link to a map of the work location. A link to a page about the stock prices if employees get rewarded with stocks in the company. There are several possibilities to give the job candidates well-rounded information on what it would be like to work at your organization. Your virtual booth should allow you to simply point to existing information without duplicating effort. However, be mindful of information-overload. It is safe to assume that even if information is offered on the virtual job fair site, visiting job candidates may prefer to chat with a recruiter to obtain a level of comfort. It is safe to assume that not all people like to read stuff. Offer a combination of literature as well as slideshows, where practicable.

Use the virtual job fair reports to improve future events. The virtual job fair ought to be able to track the activity of every click of the mouse in the fair. Analyze it to identify features that were popular or not popular in the job fair.

Track the success of the virtual job fair. Keep a record of job candidates who moved to the next step in the hiring process. This is very hard to do for the software company that might be powering your virtual job fair due to privacy concerns of the hiring organization. However, if you are the organizer or the exhibitor in a virtual job fair, this is an important piece of information to determine the return on the investment and effort for the virtual job fair.

Branding a URL is important for your long term plans. If you are planning to use a virtual job fair for the long haul, you are better off owning a URL that you can brand for your own organization, e.g., <http://www.yourcompany.com/virtualjobfair> and use that in all your promotions even if you are going to use a shared virtual job fair venue.

Before you start marketing your virtual job fair

Have the virtual job fair site ready before the first announcement goes out. If you are scrambling for time, which usually is the case for virtual events, you must at least ensure that visitors can complete the pre-registration process by clicking on a link in the invitation they receive.

Minimal human intervention should be the goal. The best workflow is the one where job candidates receive a link to the job fair, and have all their questions answered on the event site, and be able to pre-register smoothly.

Maximum human availability should be the goal. Ensure that you or the technology provider offer outstanding customer support with instantaneous response-times to requests for help. By instantaneous, I am not referring to system-generated auto-responses. Often virtual event organizers prefer to have their own representatives for first contact with sponsors and advertisers who might be exhibitors.

Detailing your virtual job fair



No matter what technology platform you adopt for your virtual job fair, here are some details that can make or break your virtual job fair, so I have listed them below for your benefit.

Auto-responses may never reach your participants. Email filters have become so aggressive

that it is safe to expect some auto-responses, or system-generated responses such as an automated password retriever may never reach the intended recipient. Besides asking your

participants to white-list the email addresses that the job fair will use, be prepared to offer support via phone.

Choose simplicity. When choosing a virtual job fair technology or a designing a virtual job fair, try to make every feature modular so that the event organizer has the option of using some or all of the features. It would be prudent to assume that not all participants are comfortable with the Internet. It would be prudent to assume that some participants do not like the Internet and want to pick up the phone and talk to a human. The virtual job fair must present the participants with an array of options to use based on their comfort levels.

Avoid annoying things. Unless something really adds value to your virtual job fair, avoid it even if your vendor offers it for free. Avoid useless surprises. Avoid startling your audiences with a loud video or audio message that plays as soon as they enter a certain area.

Choose simple demos. They must be quick to load and easy to view without special software installations. They must help a user understand how to get ready for the virtual job fair.

There can never be too many ‘Help’ buttons. Displaying an easy way to contact you for help in every page, even if it is in the footer - will make life very easy for your participants.

Conveying a sense of a gathering

We are now entering the live phase of a virtual job fair. This aspect of conveying a sense of a real gathering is tricky. In a virtual job fair most participants are geographically dispersed. If you do not have at least 20 or 25 users simultaneously gathered in the same area inside the virtual job fair, it will look scarce. Forget flying formations of avatars, but here are some simpler suggestions that might help overcome the challenge of conveying a sense that everyone is gathered in one place even though they are not physically in the same location.

A common reception area. Have a place where participants can come in and leave a comment or hang around and chat with others. Call it an online coat-check or a welcome wall.

Embedded live chat modules in various features. Let us say that a job candidate is looking at a slideshow. She should be immediately able to click on a chat icon to ask a question about a particular slide.

A group walk-through. I do not know if this has been tried online, but it would be worth trying because the technology exists. Virtual job fair candidates could be ushered into a virtual meeting room and given a quick walk-through repeating the session every 30 minutes.

Leave no chat room unstaffed. If you have a chat room, make sure you have at least one official to steer any conversation.

Keep it short and sweet. The shorter the duration of the live event, the better the quality of the gathering will be. When participants know that recruiters are going to be online and waiting for no more than 2 hours, they will set aside time for live interaction and show up online for live interaction. The more participants engage in live interaction, the more it will convey the sense of a large gathering with many-to-many interaction.

It is just another tool in your arsenal



The virtual job fair is not designed to replace the conventional job fairs. It is a relatively new tool that brings together some useful capabilities of the Internet to give a well-rounded pre-screening experience. When you want to bring together a possible match quickly with little time, expense or effort, there is nothing better than a nicely arranged virtual job fair environment. Here are some closing thoughts.

Do not take it literally. Just because it is called a virtual job fair, do not invest time and money recreating a world where face-to-face contact is avoided.

Do use it frequently. Make it a part of your company's

hiring process. When done with simplicity, the learning curve is short and the benefits huge.

Do not wait for the perfect virtual job fair. The field is new and it is evolving. There is a temptation to throw in a lot of new technology and tools. Choose the pieces that work for your organizational culture. Know what you can handle and find a virtual job fair provider who knows how to deliver what works for your recruiting needs.

Do not forget to inject fun into your virtual job fair project. Consider bringing in elements of appropriate fun depending on the industry for which you are recruiting.

Be forgiving of all participants and be patient. There are several variables in a virtual job fair. The internet is still unstable. Participants are not visible; you can't tap on their shoulder and explain a nuance, so you have to develop a sixth sense of what is going on in their minds based on their online actions. Repeat the virtual job fairs a few times, and you will start giving it your own personal stamp. Find a vendor that can wrap the experience around your needs.

Know that it is only meant to supplement other recruiting tools. If you think it is easier to talk to a certain job candidate by picking up the phone and combining it with the online booth, then do so. The virtual job fair must be flexible enough that you can move from one tool to the other in a nimble fashion, always keeping an eye on the purpose of the event – to find the best match between the job opening and the job candidate.

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