

How to ask for work face to face

By Peter Bowes BBC News, Los Angeles

Is a face to face meeting at a job fair the best way to get hired? Peter Bowes reports

Online job applications and CVs are becoming increasingly common - but you can still land a job by going to meet employers and asking about work.

A face-to-face meeting with an opportunity to look a potential employer in the eye can work wonders.

"I feel human contact is the best way to interact with a person and to really get the feel for that person's personality, their abilities and interpersonal skills," says Sheri Bennett, a former teacher looking for a job in California.

After having no success with more than 200 online applications, Ms Bennett attended a job fair because she felt she could be more persuasive face to face with a recruiter.

"If somebody has the opportunity to look at you in the eyes, they have the opportunity to shake your hand and know if you have a weak handshake or a firm handshake," she says.

'I can hire on the spot'

Job fairs allow candidates to leapfrog over the initial stages of applying for a job. They expedite the process for both the jobseeker and the employer, cutting out an initial online application, a possible phone screening process and the endless waiting for an interview date.

Face to face tips

Recruitment expert Shannon Robinson on how to approach an employer for a job:

- Be confident. Never speak negatively about your past jobs, employers or yourself.
- Look smart. Your outward appearance is important and you only get one shot to make a first impression.
- Give them your best brief pitch. Outline your experience and what you're looking for. Try to convey your passions and goals.
- Always be sure to have a business card or some way of providing them with your contact information and be sure to get theirs.
- A firm handshake relays confidence.
- Your personality is equally important as your qualifications. People hire for two reasons - both your ability to actually do the job and because you would be someone that they or their team would want to work with.
- Know the background of the company you are meeting, and the responsibilities and qualifications of the position you're after.

- Have a couple of questions already prepared about the position and the company. Keep it conversational - professional, but not rehearsed.

"It's valuable to go to career fairs for the face to face aspect, but to do research on companies or on industries or where the openings are at, there's so much more you can do now to ready yourself for that first interview," says Dan Sparks, vice-president of sales at Hire Live, a recruitment service in the US.

At a recent event in Pasadena, California, the hiring firms included a car rental company, a solar provider, a memorial park and an insurance company. Jobseekers were first interviewed by a company recruiter and then, in some cases, a manager.

"I can hire on the spot if I want to," says Michael Vaccaro, a district sales manager with Sears.

The department store had a position for a salesperson to go into people's homes and give presentations on home improvement projects. But Mr Vaccaro says such jobs are not easy to fill.

He says the dearth in talent means employers are often vying for the best candidates. For jobseekers determined to find a new position, it is an opportunity to make a good first impression.

Do your homework

"Some are very prepared," says Mr Sparks.

He says candidates should attend events knowing which companies are going to be there, what they have to offer and what positions they're looking for.

"Go onto their websites, learn a little bit about that company," he says.

"They can even bring what we call a brag book with them and so they can say, 'I was top 10% at my last company, I made president's club, I did this, I did that.' You can show your proof that you're good at what you do."

He says it leaves a recruiter with a good impression.

"They just think that this person knows what they want, this person is articulate, this person has already researched it, this is the candidate that we want to move forward with."

Biggest mistake

But job fairs, with the allure of instant success, also attract candidates who are ill-prepared.

"The biggest mistake is probably walking in and saying, 'I need a job,'" says Mr Sparks.

"Not 'I want to be a sales person,' it's just, 'I need a job, times are hard right now and I just need a job.'"

He says candidates must have a plan and be focused on what they want. They should know the kind of work they want to do and have an idea of the geographical area they can operate in.

A better approach would be: "'I want to be a salesperson, I like inside sales or I like outside sales. I want to work within a 30-mile radius of here. I want to be in this industry.'

"You can be open to different industries and open to sales, but you can't just walk in and tell a recruiter, 'I want a job'. Right when you say that, it doesn't matter what happens after that, they are not going to think about you after you leave."