

## Career Fairs: We love them! We hate them! But can we live without them!

### CERI Research Brief 2012-4

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### My First Career Fair

I had only been working about a week at the Institute (nearly 30 years ago) when “The Boss” stopped by my office and told me, “I expect you to be at the career fair tomorrow night. Everyone works the career fair.” My response (audacious in hindsight) was simply “What is a career fair?” (Having neither attended one nor heard that they even existed.) Turning back “The Boss” sneered slightly and said “You will find out!” and “You will need to work in the library Thursday and Friday as we need you office for interviewing.”

Find out, I did. I arrived as scheduled to find a long serpentine, yet orderly, line of business attired juniors and seniors (only ones allowed to attend the fair) waiting to enter the venue. (Some had been waiting in line as long as today’s students wait in-line for basketball tickets.) Entering the venue I found every nook and cranny occupied by about 125 Fortune 250 company (pre-arena days) representatives. No space was wasted and few companies had displays that took up valuable meeting space – simply a table or two draped with their corporate banner and layered with material and cool gifts (not called swag in those days). When the event started the students were admitted in groups so not to overwhelm recruiters. Soon the lines were long and congestion grew but there was no sense of chaos. Over three hours recruiters talked with students who appeared to be prepared though some did walk about aimlessly. When the event closed, recruiters, career staff and students were exhausted and dissipated quickly to homes and lodging (except for few career staff).

When I arrived early the next morning, the scene was truly chaotic. Staff had stayed up all night organizing interview schedules for the next two days. Every room was occupied by recruiters, including rooms in other units which had been commandeered for the day. More mindboggling were the rows and rows of desks lining the hallways on three floors of the building which were set up for interviewing. A road map guided recruiters and interviewees to their correct places. Interviewing began promptly at 8:30 – mostly for full-time positions and some internships (internship & co-op fair was earlier in the year) – with interviews every 15 to 20 minutes. The pace did not slacken until late in the afternoon of the second day. Over that period 1000 plus interviews had been held and quite a few job offers extended.

Jump ahead 30 years and visit a career fair today. You may witness a much different scene. First place, I admit I seldom go to the career fairs anymore. They are too chaotic and recruiters seem frazzled from the outset. Most of my colleagues with whom I would enjoy visiting have very little time to engage in a

conversation as they face a mob of students from the minute the doors open. At MSU the event is huge with over 300 organizations spread over three days in the spectacular sports arena, home of the basketball team. A visual scan sees a very different landscape. First, organizations now bid for prime space to promote their visibility which they also advance with extravagant displays that often incorporate race cars, concept cars, machinery, or whatever connects with students. Many employers seem satisfied with one or two tables but their areas are transformed with eye-catching displays. Attire varies with some students and recruiters in business formal (ties) and more in business casual; but you also notice a number of students dressed as if they just came from class or bed. No restrictions are in place and a recruiter is just as likely to meet a first year student as a graduate student. They enter as a mob and move in surges throughout the venue. When the event is over, fatigue certainly has set in among the staff and recruiters. But some seem to be more resilient (must be an age thing) than others and have enough energy to socialize well into the late hours.

The ability to extend the evening probably reflects the fact that I have not had to abandon my office for interviewing in over ten years (and it is still prime for interviewing despite the piles of articles, books, and manuscripts). No longer do we see rows of tables in the hallways. No longer do we see the intense level of interviewing after the fair. Yes, interviewing takes place; often more for internships than full-time positions. Occasionally the level of activity does spill over into staff offices. Absent are those frenzied days of 1000 plus interviews.

## History of Career Fairs

The literature is sparse on the origins of the modern college job or career fair. The first placement bureau was established at Yale University in 1919 but in this historical literature there are few clues as to the first fair. Recently, I perused the early volumes of the Journal of College Placement (initially title the Journal of School and College Placement) for any reference to job fairs or expositions. In the first volume, an article reviewed the career practices at four schools (MIT, Lehigh, Texas A&M, and University of Colorado) but none of the directors mentioned a fair in their practices. Scanning through the 1940s until the late 1960s, no article specifically discussed the career fair. Even the historical books by Randy Powell and Harr, Rayman and Gerris do not mention the origins of the career fair. Job expositions (now career fairs) were common right after WWII. The federal government's Office of Employment Services ran job or career expositions (several different names apply to these events) for returning servicemen.

These federal fairs in all likelihood began to take place on college campuses when GIs, using the GI bill, began graduating. The career fair is now considered a signature legacy practice that is rooted in this early post-war period. The connection makes sense in that Fortune 500 companies employed the majority of the workforce in the three decades following the war. Because they needed large numbers of college educated talent these companies endorsed practices that introduced them to many students in a short period. (Early MSU records from this period suggest that General Motors, for example, hired over 200 Spartans a year.) For Fortune 500 companies who now hire only about 35% of the workforce, the career fair remains a pillar of their recruiting strategy. A strategy that Peter Cappelli (Talent on Demand) suggests as inefficient among today's talent management practices. The question is raised as to just how useful and widespread career fairs are? And whose life depends on having the fair?

## Today's Career Fair: A Social Event

As an economist, the benefits of attending career fairs always seem to fall short in matching the costs associated with attending these events. If return on investment (ROI) really mattered, then wouldn't we see a shift to more economically viable means of identifying and recruiting talent? Of course that assumes that the primary goal of the career fair is talent acquisition. Realizing that the fair is one of several recruitment strategies that may or may not be integrated, it is difficult to determine the actual ROI of such an event. With better technologies for tracking interactions at these events and tagging them to eventual hires, the value of attending a career fair may become clearer in the near future. Until that time, career fairs will continue to flourish and remain an anchor in college talent acquisition. But it is strange as to what factors continue to sustain our interest in career fairs.

**Why do employers attend fairs?** Peter Cappelli (Talent on Demand) argues that many major corporations who have not revised their legacy recruiting systems, established in the 1950s, have failed to address the dynamics of hiring and retaining talent for today's workplace and heavily rely on decades old knowledge and practice to persist in events that appear superficially productive. Career fairs remain popular, despite the economics, because they offer employers these five key outcomes:

- Gain access to a pool of candidates for full-time positions
- Gain access to a pool of candidates for internships and co-ops
- Gain access to a pool of candidates that meet organization's diversity goals
- Extend the corporate "employment" brand to insure future student interest in the organization
- Make connections with student organizations, faculty, and other campus "talent" identifiers

**Why do career services provide career fairs?** Once upon a time (like a fairy tale), career fairs were the exclusive domain of seniors who were ready to transition into their career. For many engineers and business students the career fair was the silver bullet to their first job offer. Today, an array of objectives may vie, collide, and negate each other as campus planners and advisors strive to make sure each of their constituencies have access to the career fair. But probably the most pragmatic and necessary reason for campus fairs is the financial survival of the career office. Consider this partial list of institutional reasons given for the necessity of having a career fair, often multiple fairs each year:

- Present employment eligible students access to organizations for full-time positions
- Present students seeking internships and co-ops access to organizations
- Present recent graduates who have not attached to the workforce access to employers
- Present diversity candidates to employers

- Jump start upper-class students who have failed to initiate their job search (shock therapy)
- Allow freshman and sophomores opportunity to “see what is out there”
- Make stronger connections with key organizations, enhancing partnerships
- Generate revenue for the career operations
- Extend the institutional brand as a viable source of talent (appeasing the all seeing eye of the President and Board of Trustees that “we are doing something” and assure parents that job opportunities are available)

Two decades ago, career fairs were a clear economic strategy to gain candidates for an organization’s full-time talent pool and sustain the corporate brand (about the only way), period. Today, they are justified on a mix of reasons, including student development, cultural advancement, financial necessity, economics, organizational branding, and others. The bottom line, and there is nothing wrong with this reason, career fairs have become a big social event which muddies the waters on how to justify their outcomes.

The concern with the lack of clarity in outcomes should raise caution flags on the long-term viability of fairs as technology and corporate scrutiny of hiring practices challenge the existing model of career fairs. It is safe to assume that career fairs will not disappear any time soon as many organizations will need to hire quickly when the economy begins to expand robustly from the current recession. Do not be fooled by this short period of chaos, career fairs have structural issues that will make them less appealing to corporate HR staffs and they will have other strategies to fall back on to sustain branding and access to talent.

## Purpose

Information on career fairs that have been collected over the past 15 years through MSU’s Recruiting Trends annual survey has been reviewed to examine changes in the use of career fairs on campus. The most recent Trends survey asked several key questions to employers about the use of career fairs in their recruiting strategies, their challenges with fairs, and what they see as alternatives to fairs if they had a chance to arrange such events. The intention is to provide this information to all parties involved with career fairs in hopes that fairs, not only continue to serve multiple, mixed goals, but actually improve the investment by all parties who attend.

## Longitudinal Insights

In the summer of 1998 the Recruiting Trends survey was revised, including questions on the key recruiting strategies that organizations used to find talent. This recruiting strategy question has been modified over the ensuing fifteen years to incorporate new strategies such as social media and alumni employees from an organization’s core colleges and universities from which they recruit. The graphic below traces the trend over fourteen years for the use of on-campus interviewing, career fairs and

internship/co-op programs as key recruiting strategies. There has been an interesting shift in the relationship between these three strategies that are worth pointing out.

In order to make this presentation meaningful, the reader needs some guides for properly interpreting the timeline.

1. Employers represented in the sample. In years 1998-1999 to 2003-2004, the sample size for the report was between 288 and 450 organizations. The organizations were mainly drawn from employers who visited campus to interview and attend career fairs. Beginning in 2004-2005, efforts were made to capture a broader representation of employers who actively sought college talent but may not make regular visits to campus. With the addition of 130 colleges and universities who assist in the research (beginning in 2007-2008), the sample size has increased more than 10 times and introduced a different mix of employers than the earlier time period. The sample size along brings a more accurate (though certainly one has to be careful in generalizing to all organizations that may hire new college talent) picture of the strategies used.

2. Key economic events. The first three years of this time sequence corresponded to the hectic recruiting period of the dot.com boom. The next period reflected the collapse of the dot.com sector and the economic downturn that lasted from 2001 until early 2004. From 2004 through 2007 college recruiting could be described as robust. The serious economic downturn began in the fall of 2008 and is still running its course

3. Correlation does not reveal causation. The three events are highly correlated (move in the same direction) until on-campus interviews (blue line) separates in 2006 (robust hiring period) and begins to decline. The correlation weakens between interviews and the other two but still trends in the same direction. From this information the reasons that on-campus interviews are declining cannot be drawn. But, something is happening.



## Return on Investment

In surveys like Trends it is very difficult to capture the real dollars spent on different recruiting activities. In fact, some companies have corporate policies that forbid them from releasing these figures to a public entity. To avoid this problem, several questions in the 2004-2005 Recruiting Trends survey (the year prior to the apparent early separation of on-campus interviews from the other two strategies) were asked about how recruiting budgets were allocated and the college recruiting representatives' beliefs on the return on investment.

On campus interviewing grabs the second highest proportion of the college recruiting budget at 21% (listing positions with web based job aggregators ate up the largest portion at 29%). Jobs fairs were allocated about 14% (on average) and internships and co-ops 12%. The latter figure does not reflect the total cost of internships and co-ops to the organization as salaries and supervise costs may be incurred by other units in the organization (another question for another time). The only strategy that exceeds these two strategies is the 19% allocated to advertising positions in media and other venues to attract candidates.

Nearly 35% of employers felt that the return on investment for on-campus interviewing was excellent. Internship and co-op investment was similar (33%) but career fairs lagged at 25%. Yet nearly 80% of employers felt that ROI fell between good and excellent on internships and interviews with fairs lagging a little behind. Overall, on-campus interviews and internships rated the highest with an overall mean of 3.1 compared to just below 2.9 for career fairs. Career fairs were one of the strategies that received a higher percentage of poor ratings (nearly 30%).

This latter figure on the poor rates of return corresponded to a slow decline in the percentage of employers who considered the job fair one of the "best" strategies to find talent. In the 1999-2000 survey over fifty percent of employers listed career fairs among the best by the 2001-2002 the percentage had slipped to 45% (remember this was the beginning of a recession) and has never really recovered.

## Importance in College Recruiting

In a recent Recruiting Trends survey (2010-2011) several questions were directed specifically to career fairs as a recruiting strategy. The first question queried as to the importance of the career fair in the organization's overall recruiting strategy compared to five -- seven years ago. Of the 3500 employer representatives who answered this question, 34% did not include career fairs in their recruiting strategies. Of those organizations that attended career fairs:

- 33% indicated that career fairs were *much less* to *somewhat less* important than seven years earlier
- 35% indicated that career fairs held the *same* level of importance as seven years earlier

- 32% indicated that career fairs *somewhat more to much more* important with several organizations noting that career fairs were their key recruiting strategy.

Several organizational characteristics influence the use of career fairs as a recruiting strategy. Size certainly makes a difference with large organizations much more likely to place more importance on career fairs than small organizations. Consider the result that 39% of organizations with more than 4,000 employees consider career fairs to be more important (to some degree) in recruiting than seven years ago while only 28% of very small organizations (less than 10 employees) consider it to be more important.

Table 1. Comparison of Current Importance of Career Fairs with Seven Years Ago By Organizational Size (%)

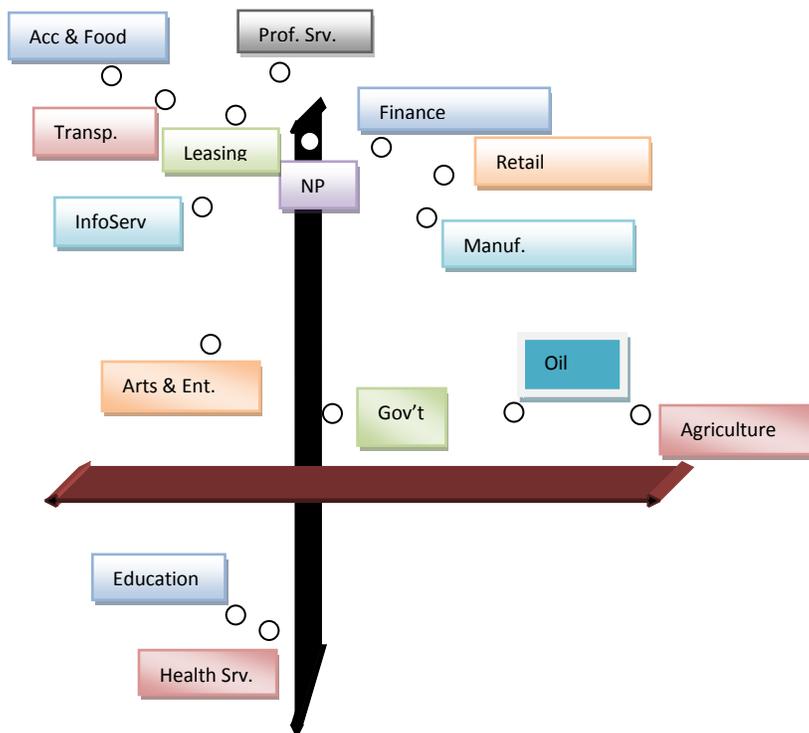
	Very Small Org.	Fast Growth Org.	Small Org.	Mid-size Org.	Large Org.
<b>Less Important</b>	29	34	32	34	31
<b>Same Importance</b>	43	36	35	34	31
<b>More Important</b>	28	30	33	32	39
<b>Mean</b>	2.94	2.96	2.99	2.99	3.19

Regional employers and organizations with global recruiting initiatives placed more importance on career fairs than organizations who recruited across the U.S. All regions were not reporting the same level of importance. Employers from the Northwestern U.S. felt that career fairs were becoming less important as a recruiting strategy; employers in the Great Lakes, Southeastern U.S., and the Southwestern U.S. indicated that career fairs held the same level of importance; and in the Northeast, mid-Atlantic, and south central regions career fairs were increasing in importance.

Table 2. Level of Importance Associated with Career Fairs as a Recruiting Strategy; Geographical Comparison

	Global Recruiting	USA	North-east	Mid-Atlantic	Great Lakes	South-east	Upper Plains	South Central	North-west	South-west
<b>Less Important</b>	39	35	29	30	34	34	28	27	35	38
<b>Same Level</b>	19	34	36	33	32	32	39	39	29	35
<b>More Important</b>	42	32	36	37	34	34	33	35	36	27
<b>Mean</b>	3.11	2.98	3.13	3.14	3.01	3.01	3.11	3.12	3.04	2.85

The following figure lays out how different economic sectors use career fairs based on their increase or decrease in hiring projections for the 2010-2011 academic year. The vertical axis is hiring projection for the sector with the figure being positive above the origin and negative below the origin. The horizontal axis is the level of importance in career fairs as a recruiting strategy with the origin reflecting the midpoint or *same* position (3 on a 5 point scale). Those circles to the right of the origin tend to see the career fair as more important than five to seven years ago and those to the left view fairs as less important.



While this is a whimsical figure, several interesting points can be made.

- The old guard industries that laid the foundation for college recruiting in the early post-WWII era continue to emphasize career attendance as a key strategy, especially agriculture, oil, manufacturing, finance, and retail.
- Sectors which correspond to the new economy that include information services, professional & scientific services, non-profits and arts & entertainment place less emphasis on the career fair.
- The direction hiring projections take may not influence career attendance. If manufacturing should retrench or decrease hiring, for example, recruiter representatives from this sector are still likely to attend the career fairs at their core colleges.

### Why we like career fairs!

Over 2000 employers provided their comments to the query on what makes career fairs attractive. All the responses were grouped around several common themes. Two themes dominated the comments. The first theme was **access to students**. Many employers felt more comfortable and personable meeting students face-to-face (37%) which removes the ambiguity of resumes, phone calls, and other indirect methods of contact. A relationship is established that can be built upon during later stages of the recruiting process. Being able to see as many candidates as possible in a short period of time (14%) was important for those organizations that need to develop a large candidate pool in order to meet their yearly hiring targets. Career fairs made it easy to meet potential candidates if the organization did not have a regular presence on campus or cannot regularly visit campus because of limited recruiting staff (10%). Finally, employers hoped to find that excellent, one-of-a-kind, candidate that has eluded them (6%). A comment by a recruiter in the latter group brought up memories of the movie 10 where the waters parted and the perfect woman (Bo Derek, remember) walked onto the beach.

*“Networking with potential applicants for positions available in the future years, not just the current recruiting year. Applicants may be potential candidates for positions upon graduation, or after they have gained a few years of experience. Also develop relationships with faculty who can refer and recommend potential recruits to us.”*

Career fairs, engendering thoughts of parting masses of bodies for the one candidate they have waited all night for, strengthened the need that **building a presence on campus** would raise the odds that those perfect 10s will be found. Establishing and enhancing the organization’s visibility (branding) among students raises their awareness of the company (24%) allowing representatives to provide students with valuable information about the organization, including internship opportunities and future positions they will be recruiting for (11%). This second theme that stresses connections through fairs with faculty, career services, and other key contacts (5%) and establishes relationships with younger students who may eventually enter the organization’s talent pipeline (4%).

*“The on-campus career fair provides candidates an opportunity to meet recruiters face-to-face. The face-to-face contact provides both the recruiter and candidate the opportunity to know each other at a personal level. Most candidates still make their decision to join an organization based on the skills of the recruiter.”*

## Why we hate career fairs!

Employers were not shy about telling us what they did not like about career fairs. Nearly 2000 respondents provided their reasons that were sorted into several major themes. The first theme was the cost associated with attending fairs in terms of both dollars and time.

- **Direct Costs.** The costs of travel, lodging, and meals associated with staff assigned to fairs (19%). Even when staff from facilities closer to the fair sites can serve as representatives, the costs still added up. As more fairs are being crammed into the recruiting season and as the schedule becomes denser with fairs at different schools right on top of each other, human resource departments (if the organization even has one) are indicating that a larger proportion of the budgets are going to fairs.
- **Direct Time Costs.** Time away for the office for managers and alumni representatives is not always an ideal option for many organizations (28%). Many of the organizational representatives leave their designated responsibilities for the short period of the fair. This work still has to be done and that is usually during the evenings after the event in their hotel rooms or on the weekend upon their return. Some companies reported that they are having increasingly more problems getting staff to attend fairs because they cannot rearrange work or are reluctant to do so. Again with more fairs the pressures mount on the staff that does attend.
- **Direct Costs – fees.** The career fair fee assessed by the college or university should appear above as part of total direct costs. The fact that many representatives complained about the rising costs of campus fees served to highlight the issue separately (32%). Colleges and universities seem to be raising fees yearly, reaching a level where employers are being to balk at the price. This issue appears to be linked in the same comment to the decline in the quality of students attending the event and the poorer planning that seems to go into so many of these events.
- **Time.** Another aspect of time surrounds the fair itself. They are scheduled at times few students can attend. Faculty refuse to allow students to leave class to attend fairs, even from heavily demanded majors in engineering and business (13%). The length of the fair is too short to allow meaningful conversations with students (10%) and because of the mass of students (many just strolling through) short fairs seem more like a cattle auction (10%).

**Students** generate a number of issues for employers as many observers might expect. First, many students come unprepared for the fair. They lack the skills and experiences required by the employers (16%). Too many are undergraduates who have no understanding of why they are there which wastes representatives time (12%).

*“Being overwhelmed by student flow and having those students that didn’t research what we are recruiting for, therefore just stop by the table to chat. Yet they have no interest in pursuing a career with us.”*

Because many fairs have little structure (they are not for defined majors) employers have to converse with many students to find the few that are interested in possibly working for the organization (15%). Finally, students do not seem too motivated even when they attend (10%), if they attend at all (10%).

*“Big time commitment, most of which is spent talking to students who have no interest in our jobs or any jobs.”*

*“It doesn’t present a realistic environment for students and recruiters to meet. The cattle call-approach doesn’t give enough time for some students and others, who might be shy, would avoid the opportunity to meet with us.”*

The problem with poorly prepared students, dazed and confused underclassmen, and poor attendance is the image employers’ form of the students from that particular college or university. A number of employers mentioned the negative image they left with based on the way students presented themselves (18%).

*“Candidates are not prescreened, efforts are not targeted, and the highest quality candidates often do not attend.”*

A troubling problem for many employers is the apparent lack of quality candidates who attend the fairs. In fact, some employers now believe the best candidates are not even active in the recruiting process and avoid fairs. There may be some truth in this belief. Prior to his retirement, Larry Hanneman, director of engineering career services at Iowa State University, was researching this question. From his preliminary findings within the College of Engineering, a number of engineering students returned from their internships and co-ops having already accepted job offers (personal communication). He found that these students opted out of the interviewing process and did not even register with the career office. While his retirement precluded the completion of this study, his evidence, as well as anecdotal observations, suggests that employers may be correct in their assumption that many top candidates are sitting out the career fairs.

*“Rarely meet candidates who are ultimately hired. Most new employees are hired through internships or interviews who did not attend the career fair.”*

The structure of the fairs also received attention, as alluded to above. Issues surrounded poor planning, including scheduling, location, chaotic atmosphere, and poor choice of time of year (18%). The huge fairs presented problems for small employers who feel they are pushed to the side (15%), given poor locations (8%) and generally felt unwelcomed.

*“I really rue the loss of the old career services office. They employed people who really knew their students and could put small employers like us in touch with just the right candidates. Or they*

*could put out flyers and email blasts to the campus body that actually got their attention instead of me just putting ads into a depersonalized job board system.”*

*“Larger corporations get all the attention and as a small company we had very little response from fairs. A company like Google or financial institutions gets the majority of the interest and time of students.”*

Employers also direct their frustration at their peers who attend fairs knowing they do not have either internships or full-time positions to offer. These companies aggressively court students and distract them from visiting companies that actually have opportunities (again small employers stressed this).

*“Aside from the travel time out of the office and travel costs, I am extremely disappointed at the level of service provided by career services offices. I have been out of recruiting for 15 years and at my first fair I felt like things had not changed. The potential advantages provided by technology are absent to a stunning degree. The career offices are failing to provide useful pre-registration information and are still using system that was used 15 years ago.”*

### **What can we do to improve the career fair?**

Employers were next challenged to make suggestions on improving the career fair environment so that it is more productive for their staff. Nearly 1500 employers offered their suggestions. Employers do not want to have to make multiple trips to campus to handle major specific fairs. Rather they would like the typical one day fair or multiple day fair to be restructured into meaningful segments. The segments they are concerned with are internships, full-time candidates and invited or targeted candidates. A typical one day fair would designate the first 90 minutes (assume a four hour fair) solely for the purpose of internship and co-op recruiting (and other forms of pre-professional experience) that would target sophomores, juniors, and seniors who were prepared to discuss opportunities. All other students would not be admitted. The venue would then be cleared and the next 90 minutes would be recruiting for full-time (entry level) positions would take place. This would be restricted to seniors and recent graduates.

The final segment would be for invited students. Employers want the opportunity to meet with pre-selected students who they have invited for in-depth conversations. They seldom have time for these types of interactions under the current career fair format.

To reduce the chaos further, employers strongly suggest removing students who are strolling through the event to see what is going on, fulfilling course requirements (extra credit), and trying to job start their job search. This venue, they believe, is poorly designed for these activities. Several employers made the suggestion that prior to the fair employers present to groups of students in classroom information about careers in their company, the experiences they require, and skills necessary to be competitive. Rather than the student mulling around, the employers can move between rooms (like every 15 minutes) so these students can see a variety of employers. One employer suggested theme classroom that are hosted by several organizations in that theme. The bottom line is twofold: to

continue to help students make career decisions and to reduce the clutter in the fair to maximize employer time.

Some intriguing options were presented that would be appropriate at the right schools. Instead of a career fair dedicate the month of October for employer awareness, as several coalition members do. Each day one or two employers (who would typically attend the fair) visit campus and the entire day is focused on them. Students have opportunity to receive a general overview of the company and then meet in smaller groups with representatives from areas of the company they would work for. Several respondents who have participated in these events raved as to how productive they were. I recently attended one of these events on a coalition member campus. Several hundred students turned out (the pizza was excellent); managers from each of the organization's functional areas had an opportunity to talk in-depth with about 50 students. For a large school this option may not be practical; but for a small school that struggles to sustain a career fair this approach may have merit.

Better use of technology was encouraged by many respondents. Several suggested that career services employ technology to target students and match them with appropriate companies. Technology can be used to prepare students for the event by familiarizing them with companies who will be attending. Technology can also be used to replace the traditional on-campus fair. Nearly 10% suggested wider use of virtual career fairs. Even though this option has not been adopted by most employers, use is inching up.

Some companies who are deemphasizing their presence at career fairs are opting to strengthen their internship programs, to visit freshman and sophomores in various settings, and to target smaller groups of viable candidates to work with. These companies will actually spend more time on campus, just not in the usual places.

Some employers would like to see a ranking system for seniors, like one used in the NFL draft (not my agent model) where each student is ranked based on a set of criteria that could include GPA, leadership experience, internship experience, work experience, extracurricular activities, and faculty recommendations. The rankings could then be shared with corporations so they have information on who to target. This option while intuitively appealing (assumption that rankings make things easier) but probably is not practical given legal and economic factors, plus faculty and career staff time to prepare the evaluations. What happens when a top rank candidate fails? Like the NFL, a number of first round picks do not make it. Yet, sixth round picks often become All Pro. For these picks, the organization will have to work harder to make a match which may involve an element of risk; with training and coaching the recruitment of that candidate will pay off. A ranking system will not work unless all parties are prepared to work hard to build into young adults the capacity to succeed. Rankings seldom tell us that.

### Thinking about the near future

This report reviewed information collected over the last few years about how employers currently perceive career fairs as part of their strategic package of tools to identify and recruit college talent. For some observers no surprises pop out from the results that have been presented. To others this may

give pause for reflection on current career fair practices and offer an opportunity to evaluate the desired outcomes of hosting or attending such an event.

The first observation that was striking to the authors was the separation of on-campus interviewing from the career fair. The senior author has long held the belief, based on years of experience that career fairs lead to interviews and eventually jobs. In a very early study during my tenure with the Institute, I conducted a study on the influence of on-campus career activities in obtaining employment (paper is in archives). The results showed that approximately 25% of the graduating class could attribute their starting position to engagement with employers through Career Services. The percentage was higher in engineering (about 55%) and business (about 40%). An interesting finding was that about 20% to 30% of those students who obtained job offers through campus interviewing turned them down and took a job they sought themselves or through a family member. A replication of this study seems warranted with this shift in the focus of the career fair. We can hypothesize that the number of students obtaining positions is the same as in the earlier study but the origin of the offer has shifted from the on-campus interview to the internship.

A second insight that raised the interest of an economist, like me, was the self-reported lower return on investment on career fairs as reported in both 2005 and again in 2012. Multiple motives dilute the need to justify career fair attendance from the economic perspective of identifying talent for the organization. Organizational branding is a powerful motivator to establish presence among students. However, determining whether the career fair is the best way to establish one's brand is difficult. I have not seen a study that examines career fair as a branding activity. It is possible some of the marketing and branding gurus at a company like TMP might have this information. It would be interesting to compare branding activities because the bottom line on career fairs makes it hard to justify attendance at so many fairs.

Career fairs are the financial life blood of many career centers, especially at large public institutions. To cut off this source of funding would be suicide. Having career fair attendance slowly erode, cutting into revenues, would also be disastrous. Career fair planners need to take into consideration some of the suggestions employers have made to improve the career fair environment. Centers need to have honest discussions about the role of the career fair. They have too many objectives that have muddied the waters. In the long run none of their students may be well served. Employers in particular want the drifters moved out of the event into side events. The fairs need to be better focused regardless of how the event is stratified or segmented.

I remain optimistic that career fairs can continue to play a constructive role in facilitating the transition from college into the workplace. I do believe that attendance will continue to decrease as some employers adopt more effective recruiting strategies. The career fair will become the domain of organizations that need to meet and greet a large number of students in order to meet their yearly hiring targets. Organizations that also have to jump start their college recruiting programs which have been on hiatus because of the recession will leverage career fairs which they may be able to do with smaller, less experienced staff.

The purpose of this report is to provoke discussions between professionals whether on an individual campus or at an association meeting on the future of career fairs. Career fairs have been changing for the better part of a decade now. On the surface career fairs may have the look and feel they always have. This sensation is a delusion. Companies are seeking more effective means of strategically developing talent. Technology will play a big role in this shift. In the not too distant future, smart technology may be able to produce better results than a career fair. Campuses need to be ready for such changes.

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