

Job Fairs for Military Community

Overview

Job fairs are a critical part of the solution to the employment problem. They provide a direct connection between employers and the military community, and allow veterans and spouses to exercise the strengths gained through their unique experiences, many of which may not come across in a cover letter or résumé. The ability to network and receive feedback on their interview strategies, too, is invaluable. Though job fairs do not always result in jobs, they are always worthwhile for the participants.

The steps outlined in the document below are focused on veterans, Reservists, National Guardsmen and military spouses, as the employment difficulties facing these particular groups are the broadest and deepest in communities across the United States. It must be emphasized, however, that the overwhelming majority of the suggestions are applicable to all demographics.

Basic activities: 1) Identify Employers; 2) Recruit Job Candidates; and 3) Administrative and Logistical Tasks.

Is it being done already? A simple Internet search or a call to the local Chamber of Commerce will usually be sufficient to determine whether your community already has military job fairs. If they do, your participation may still be valuable. Contact the organizer, and find out if you can help using the steps outlined below. You may also wish to research the non-military job fairs in your community – in many cases it is a fairly simple matter to dedicate a few hours to military candidates, and many organizers will be willing to accommodate reasonable requests.

Step-by-Step Implementation

Step 1: Identify Employers

The most important aspect of a successful job fair is the participation of a variety of employers. Candidates will show up if employers are present, particularly in a downward economy. As a general rule, at least 15 to 20 should be in attendance to ensure a productive event. Having fewer does not preclude success, but the greater the level of participation, the greater the impact your job fair will have on the community.

- **Cast a wide net:** In order to match the breadth of skills and experience offered by veterans, service members and spouses, it is necessary to have a wide range of employers participate in your job fair. Contact the Chamber of Commerce, business coalitions and Better Business Bureau offices in your community. They can provide you with a sense of the scale and specialty of employers in your area. They may also be able to put you in contact with local businesses. Be sure to contact your local mayor's office as well, which may be able to put you in contact with other community leaders and businessmen.
- **Contact nonprofit and government organizations:** Do not forget to include nonprofit and local, state and federal employers. Universities, charities, school systems, policemen, firefighters and other public sector employers often align well with the inclinations of the military community, and most of these organizations are always looking for experienced and talented individuals.

- **Go to the top:** Whenever possible, try to directly contact the CEO or president of companies you wish to recruit. For national companies, try to contact the highest ranking leader in your community. They may direct you to their human resources department, but keep the leaders engaged with the process if possible.
- **Highlight the benefits:** When talking to employers, be sure to emphasize the benefits of recruiting from the military community. Discuss the eminent qualities of veterans and spouses: discipline, a devotion to the mission, experience working under pressure, proven ability to work in a team and so on. Hiring from the military community is also a positive public relations move, and may qualify businesses for substantial tax breaks. Finally, be sure to emphasize that participation in the job fair is an easy, rewarding way to support the military.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Campaign capacity builder

Task: Identify business organizations active in the community that may wish to participate in military job fair; initiate contact with possible participants; compile list of participating employers

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should possess excellent oral and written skills and be comfortable emailing, calling and coordinating with people they do not know; volunteers should also possess strong research skills and experience with computers; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

As you recruit employers for your job fair, there are some concerns that must be kept in mind.

- **Participation fees:** The organizers of most job fairs assess participating employers a fee ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000. The fee is generally dependent on the size of the job fair, and is designed to defray logistical costs such as payment for the venue, refreshments and staffing. Evaluate the specific needs of your job fair and decide whether you will have a fee, and what that fee will be, early on in the planning process.
- **Employer interest:** In some cases, employers may participate in your job fair for PR reasons rather than out of a genuine interest in hiring from the military community. Helping the military community provides many businesses with an easy, effective way of building their public reputation. Request a listing of job opportunities from each participating employer prior to the fair.
- **Feedback:** When planning your job fair, be sure to include a mechanism through which employers can provide feedback. It is important to know aspects of your job fair were successful and which were ineffective. See *Measuring Success* for more information.

Step 2: Recruit Job Candidates

Recruiting candidates for the job fair can be nearly as difficult and involved as finding employers. Neither high unemployment nor a lengthy list of employers guarantees success. To ensure a high level of participation among the veterans and military spouses of your community, it is necessary to raise public awareness of the job fair well in advance. Below are some ideas to get started.

- **Veterans:** Veteran Service Organizations, or VSOs, are an ideal way to raise awareness of your job fair. Many are willing to advertise services such as job fairs in their meetings, newsletters and on their websites. Some of the most prominent examples are The American Legion, American Veterans (AMVETS), Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), Student Veterans of America (SVA), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA). There are also a number of organizations specifically for wounded warriors, such as Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA). The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) can help you find surviving family members in your community. Local homeless shelters may also provide information about in-need veterans in your community.
- **Spouses:** Be sure to contact local military spouse and family organizations. Blue Star Families (BSF), the National Military Family Association (NMFA), Military Family Liaisons, Yellow Ribbon representatives, Officer/Enlisted Wives' Clubs, and the local National Guard or Reserve Bureau can all help to recruit participants for your job fair. Like VSOs, many have websites, regular meetings and newsletters, and are willing to advertise your job fair provided you are able to explain its benefit to the community.
- **Government services:** Communities near military bases or VA facilities will have an education coordinator, who will be able to help recruit participants for the job fair. State-level programs such as the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVER) may also be valuable in raising awareness of your job fair.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Veteran outreach coordinator

Task: Identify VSOs, military spouse organizations and government programs active in the community that may wish to participate in military job fair; initiate contact with possible participants; compile list of participating organizations

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized and interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should possess excellent oral and written skills and be comfortable emailing, calling and coordinating with people they do not know; volunteers should also possess strong research skills and experience with computers; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

You may wish to pursue other ways of ensuring participation in the job fair. Communities without a strong veteran or military presence might not have a range of organizations sufficient to raise awareness of the job fair. Here are some additional strategies you may wish to use to recruit candidates:

- **Advertise:** In order to have a successful job fair, you need to reach enough people to ensure a high level of participation. Many conventional methods of raising public awareness, such as distributing fliers, hanging posters and tabling in public venues can be quite effective ways to get the word out.

- **Approach local media:** Many local television and radio stations are willing to provide airtime for local community projects. As when contacting employers, attempt to initiate contact as high up the hierarchy as possible. While you may be referred to someone else, it never hurts to engage the sympathies of the higher-ups.
- **Develop an online presence:** A website can provide a centralized, easily accessible location for your job fair. It also offers the opportunity to provide more in-depth information about the importance of job fairs to the military community, the dire employment situation of veterans, service members and spouses, and additional steps the community can take to ameliorate these difficulties.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Job fair awareness campaigner

Task: Distribute literature regarding the military job fair, with the goal of securing as many potential attendees as possible; may also be called on to use their oratory skills in explaining the cause to interested parties

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be able to demonstrate enthusiasm and familiarity with the employment situation within the military community; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Step 3: Administrative and Logistical Tasks

Just as important to the success of your job fair as recruiting employers and job candidates are the many administrative and logistical tasks involved in any large-scale event. These generalized ideas should provide a basis for your event planning.

- **Venue:** It is important to secure a venue prior to or early on in your outreach attempts. The size of the facility will dictate precisely how many employers and candidates you can reasonably recruit. It also helps to have a firm location before speaking with employers and other organization, as it demonstrates a high degree of commitment. In many cases, facilities are willing to donate several hours of use for charitable purposes. Try to develop a list of medium- and large-scale venue in your area that might be amenable to hosting your job fair: high schools, universities, hotels and military bases are among the most common. Also be sure to ask whether the facility will provide tables and chairs.
- **Job fair workers:** You will need to staff the job fair with volunteers or employees. They will set up the event, direct employers to their assigned area, provide general support to job candidates and other employers, answer any questions the participants might have about the facilities and clean up afterward. The expected size of your job fair will determine how many workers are needed to ensure success.
- **Management:** You will also need a smaller number of experienced volunteers or employees to serve as event management. They will organize workers, answer any more involved questions that employers or job candidates might have, and provide general oversight of the job fair.

- **Survey administration:** Feedback from the participants of the job fair can be of immense help towards future event planning. Develop a survey to be administered toward the end of the job fair. Try to keep it brief and simple. For more information, see *Surveying Guideline Tool (Tool 5.2)*.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Job fair worker

Task: Organize chairs, tables, employer placards and other set-up items for the job fair; direct employers to their assigned area; provide general support to job candidates and other employers; answer any questions the participants might have about the facilities; provide clean-up for the facility afterward

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be enthusiastic about working to remedy unemployment; no experience required; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

In addition to the above steps, there are a number of ideas you may wish to consider in order to make your job fair more successful. Though not strictly necessary to success, these ideas will guarantee a more pleasant, holistic experience.

- **Manage expectations:** Consider preparing a brief primer or seminar for employers attending your job conference. Discuss common misconceptions about veterans and military spouses, highlight the strengths of recruits from the military community, and describe some of the arcane terms that might come up in the job interview context: military occupational specialty (MOS), noncommissioned officer (NCO), permanent change of station (PCS), etc. You may also wish to consider a similar primer or seminar for job recruits, discussing issues that commonly arise for veterans and military spouses in job interviews.
- **Invite local organizations:** Military job fairs provide an excellent opportunity for VSOs, military spouse and family organizations, and other service providers to interact with their target demographics. Provided there is available space, consider inviting them to set up at your job fair. It can only help military communities to raise awareness of the invaluable services these organizations offer.
- **Organize:** Ensure there is a logical organization to the location of employers at the job fair. Most common in non-specialized job fairs is an organization by sector. For example, you may wish to cluster all federal employers in one area, nonprofits in another and first responders in yet another. Job recruits will be able to meet a variety of employers in the particular specialties they favor.
- **Refreshments:** Furnishing refreshments generally yields a positive reaction from participants at public events. They are also an inexpensive way for a local businesses or organizations to generate positive PR. As a result, many are willing to provide donations of soda, coffee, pastries, etc. Once your job fair has generated a high level of interest, consider reaching out to local businesses and organizations. If necessary, offer special signage at the refreshment table.

- **Speakers:** Attracting high-profile members of the community to speak at your job fair can provide excellent publicity and spur people to action. Consider reaching out to high-profile individuals active in your community – well-known employers, members of the armed forces or local politicians – and inviting them to partake in the job fair.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Job fair capacity builder

Task: Contact local businesses, charities, schools and other organizations to solicit materials for the job fair; compile a list of services and organizations valuable to the military community; contact service providers and organizations and discuss their presence at the job fair

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be enthusiastic about working to remedy unemployment, comfortable speaking with people they do not know and have some basic research experience; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Measures of Success

It is important to provide a complete assessment of your job fair. By learning what the strengths and weaknesses of your particular plan are, you will be able to more effectively implement job fairs in the future. Knowing that success will be measured can also be a strong motivating factor for your volunteers and workers. Your findings may also be of value to other communities who are hoping to hold successful job fairs. Below are some basic ways to evaluate your event:

- **Employment:** The ultimate goal of the job fair is to find employment for veterans and military spouses in your community. How many job candidates are selected through your job fair? Consider requiring employers to commit to the completion of a survey about 30 days after the fair. You may also wish to survey a random sample of the candidates, as surveying only the employers will not account for jobs found through networking.
- **Satisfaction and suggestions:** In order to measure the level of satisfaction felt by participating employers and job candidates, consider requiring that they fill out a simple exit survey. Questions to consider: “What do you feel were the best aspects of the job fair?” “What do you feel could have been done better or more efficiently?” “How would you state your personal level of satisfaction with the job fair and the employers present?” You may also wish to provide a section asking for suggestions for future job fairs. For more information on how to design a survey, see *Surveying Guideline Tool (Tool 5.2)*.
- **Participation:** A simple measure of participation can also be quite helpful in measuring the impact of your job. Providing a simple sign-in sheet at the entrance is perhaps the most effective way of tracking participants. Additional levels of granularity include tracking the status of participants, e.g., veteran, wounded, spouse, reservists, as well as the number of open positions offered by employers. Combined with the post-fair survey discussed above, the participation survey allows you to get a complete picture of just how effective your job fair was.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Job fair survey manager

Task: Create a series of basic surveys for use before, during and after the job fair; manage the survey process; tabulate survey results; present compiled survey data

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be enthusiastic about working to remedy unemployment and have some statistical knowledge; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Resources:

- **America's Heroes at Work:** <http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov/>
 - A U.S. Department of Labor (DoL) project addressing the employment challenges of returning service members and veterans living with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Offers detailed support for employers, such as the Veterans Hiring Toolkit and the TBI, PTSD & Employment Training Tool.
- **Corporate Gray:** <http://www.corporategray.com/>
 - A private company that holds military job fairs throughout the country. Their services are expensive, but their fairs are free for job candidates. Their website, blog and job fairs may be of interest as a model for your own community.
- **Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service (DoL VETS):** <http://www.dol.gov/vets/index.htm>
 - VETS provides a center for information regarding veteran and service member employment. The site explains government hiring programs, contains toolkits for employers, and details the programs available to veterans and service members seeking employment.
- **Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESRG):** <http://www.esgr.org/site/>
 - A U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) organization within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (OASD/RA), which is itself a part of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). ESGR was established in 1972 to promote cooperation and understanding between Reserve component members and their civilian employers and to assist in the resolution of conflicts arising from an employee's military commitment.
- **Hire Our Heroes:** <http://www.uschamber.com/veterans>
 - A nationwide campaign launched by the Chamber of Commerce to help veterans and their spouses find meaningful employment. The program began as a partnership with DoL VETS, with the ultimate goal of improving public-private sector coordination in local communities through the nation.
- **Military.com:** <http://www.military.com/>
 - Military.com provides information on a wide range of issues facing service members, veterans, military families and prospective military recruits. The site also offers services such as job listings and transition assistance.
- **Return To Work:** <http://www.return2work.org/>
 - Return to Work provides career counseling services to Americans with disabilities interested in returning to the workforce. Their services may be of interest to attendees of your job fair.

- **Veteran Employment Coordination Service (VECS):** <http://www.va.gov/vecs/>
 - VECS provides veteran employment advocacy, hands-on employment assistance, resume review and federal application tips, skills and qualifications assessment, placement assistance, case management, training and development counseling, and one-on-one peer counseling.