

Face time remains the strength of traditional job fairs; Many human resources and outplacement professionals prefer the human touch

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HR.com, an Ontario social network and online community for human resource executives, produces some 350 virtual career fairs per year, so you might expect the company to predict the demise of traditional career fairs.

Hardly. Debbi McGrath, HR.com's president, believes traditional job fairs fill a much-needed niche at the local level.

"For a local mom and pop organization, a virtual fair doesn't work -- they're looking at too many candidates from too many places," says McGrath. "For national companies like big retail chains looking for regional managers, virtual job fairs are (good)" but local companies are better served with local, in-person fairs.

Perhaps for that reason, she says, the virtual career fair market is "dead" right now -- although she expects it to pick up again when the economy does. "It's hard to get companies to participate right now -- it's not really working," says McGrath.

"There's never a good equilibrium -- right now there's too many people looking for jobs (and not enough companies hiring)," she adds. Unfortunately, money to produce the virtual fairs comes from the companies who aren't hiring.

Market forces aside, many human resources and outplacement professionals prefer the human touch.

"Face time," says Simone Walsh, executive director of the Champions Career Centre in Calgary, "is hugely important. Both the candidate and company are looking for the right fit. You learn so much more about what people are like, or what their organization is like, when you meet them in person."

Finding the right fit is a particular concern for Walsh, whose company specializes in finding jobs for persons with disabilities. She says a company's openness to hiring someone with a handicap doesn't always come across over the phone or -- especially -- online.

Now working for Career Pro in New York, Erin Duddy formerly worked for IBM's software group. While with IBM she participated in many career fairs, both virtual and in-person, and says both have inherent advantages.

"There are pros and cons to both," says Duddy. "Virtual career fairs are good in that you don't actually have to be there physically, but the main disadvantage is not seeing people in person."

Virtual career fairs afford more candidates the chance to meet (albeit virtually) with representatives of companies they might want to work for. They can "attend" at whatever time(s) might be convenient for

them. That includes breaks and after office hours, if they're still working, and from locations convenient and accessible to them.

At virtual shows, booths are essentially just chat rooms. That's the only place candidates and companies interact. "The advantage is you can chat with more than one person at once without being inefficient or rude, and you can pre-schedule chats with prospective candidates ahead of time," says Duddy.

The disadvantage, she says, is that you lose a lot by not meeting clients face to face -- for example, there's no way to see the person's mannerisms and expressions. If the position they're applying for involves a significant amount of interpersonal interaction, that's a significant factor.

McGrath agrees, saying interview and interpersonal skills don't always come across in online chats. "There's a lot you miss, not seeing body language and meeting people in person," she says, but adds that there's a potential solution: video interviewing.

However, "that still may not work for all," she says. "Some people are just uncomfortable on camera, (and) might be better in a face to face situation."

Laura Pierce, president of Calgary's LP Human Resources, doesn't see it that way. Her firm is completely virtual (they have no office and their team work remotely), so naturally they're more than comfortable in a virtual setting.

"I really don't see a downside (to virtual career fairs), but then our company is totally virtual," says Pierce.

"Resume screening, reference checks, you name it -- can be, and is, all done virtually," says Pierce, adding that one of her colleagues works from the Bahamas. They are, however, often asked by client companies to fly to various towns and cities to conduct in-person interviews. In that sense, the "virtual" job application process is just another layer for candidates to penetrate -- after all, they still have to undergo an in-person interview.

Walsh understands the cost-effectiveness argument for virtual career fairs, but says it's short-term thinking. In-person events offer possibilities for networking and new connections online chatting simply can't.

"I was just talking with a lady from Shell Canada (at a recent career show) I had seen at other fairs. She started talking about a project she was working on, looking at Shell's recruiting process for people with disabilities," says Walsh.

It was a perfect fit for the Champions Career Centre. It was literally a question of being in the right place at the right time, in front of the right people. Walsh doesn't believe that would have happened at a virtual fair.

"You make a different kind of connection face-to-face."

Some advertising for traditional and local career fairs suggests they might be more efficient -- after all, while some candidates are actively seeking to relocate, if a company needs a position filled in Red Deer immediately, they're most likely to be interested in candidates who already live nearby.

McGrath says, however, that no matter how the company and candidate are first introduced, an ultimately successful relationship depends on other factors. "There's no difference in the success rate -- the way candidate and company first get introduced, and whether they conduct the interviewing process in person has no effect on retention."

Career Pro's Duddy agrees: "We (IBM) met excellent candidates through the virtual fair; (but) we might possibly have met them through other channels -- an in-person career show or otherwise."

In the end, it's still incumbent on job seekers to find and make use of every opportunity to seek out employers and positions.

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Calgary's largest hands-on Career Show takes place on October 30 and 31st at the BMO Centre on the Stampede grounds. For more information visit: www.thecareershow.ca