

Drive-Thru Job Fairs: A Sign of the Times

By Lin Gensing-Pophal

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Despite the massive impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the U.S. workforce, some parts of the economy are still frantically searching for talent to meet business demands. And they're getting increasingly creative about how to engage with potential employees in an era of social distancing.

Drive-thru job fairs, being used by the Wisconsin Workforce Development Board and others, "are especially effective in the manufacturing, light industrial, utilities, warehouse and administrative sectors," said Mary Cavanaugh, senior vice president at Keystone Partners, a career management firm in Boston. They're also used effectively when recruiting for temporary and transitional roles, she said.

"Drive-thru job fairs are a way for our offices to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and reach job seekers in a safe manner for all parties involved," said Bill Stoller, CEO and founder of Express Employment Professionals, a staffing firm and franchiser based in Oklahoma City.

The innovative approach wasn't spurred by the public health crisis, though, he added. "Following Hurricane Katrina, several Express offices used drive-thru job fairs to help get people back to work in the aftermath of the storm." As social distancing has become an imperative during the virus, he said, "we quickly recognized they would play an equally useful role during this time of social distancing."

How Drive-Thru Job Fairs Work

At drive-thru job fairs, candidates complete any necessary paperwork from their cars, "without having to step inside an office," Stoller said. They can then be matched with opportunities that fit their skill sets and needs.

While the specifics of each job fair will vary, the way they typically work is that an area of the organization's parking lot is cordoned off for job seekers to drive through. At Express, Stoller said, "staff members take all the proper safety precautions when approaching vehicles, such as wearing a mask, wearing gloves if necessary, using hand sanitizer and maintaining social distancing." Job seekers fill out their paperwork as they would in any setting, and the Express recruiters continue with the interview process.

In some instances, candidates may have the opportunity to walk up in person to an outdoor booth where they can participate in a socially distanced interview.

"The outdoor venue provides for plenty of air ventilation to reduce potential spread of the virus, while also allowing Express staff members to interact safely with multiple applicants over the course of several hours," Stoller said.

Pros and Cons

Kristen Fowler, vice president at JMJ Phillip Executive Search, a boutique executive search firm specializing in manufacturing, supply chain and technology roles, said drive-thru job fairs offer a more personal touch than interviewing candidates online. "Drive-thru job fairs allow the hiring manager and candidate to connect more personally than over a video platform or the phone while still remaining socially distant," she said. "It can oftentimes allow the candidates to at least see the outside of where they would typically be working to get a feel for the organization."

Vincent Scaramuzzo, president of Ed-Exec Inc., agrees that the ability to meet with candidates in person is a benefit compared to video interviews, which are prone to their own problems. Meeting people in person is better than meeting them behind a computer screen, he said. "With drive-thru job fairs, I feel like we are back to getting quick yet quality interviews."

There are some drawbacks, however, Fowler acknowledged. "A con to drive-thru job fairs is they still do not allow as much time for hiring managers and candidates to connect," she said. "Oftentimes there is a line of cars and there is still the physical distance between the parties that may provide for a more rushed or more impersonal experience."

Another drawback: masks. "Of course, masks are 100 percent a necessity, and I would never think of doing an interview without one," Scaramuzzo said. "The downside, though, is that having a mask kind of muffles voices, so sometimes I feel like I am raising my voice or repeating myself to be heard." In addition, of course, "people also reveal a lot about themselves with their smiles and other [facial gestures], which are unfortunately covered with a mask," he said.

Best Practices

A critical best practice for drive-thru job fairs is "safety first," Stoller said. It's important for job seekers to know that they will be able to interact safely with recruiters. He recommends clearly outlining all of the safety protocols in any promotional materials for these events. That helps assure job seekers that they will be safe and gives them an indication of what they can expect when participating in the job fair.

"Searching for a job can be a frustrating and slow process during these times," Cavanaugh said. "The opportunity to meet potential employers during a pandemic is a win for both sides."

Lin Gensing-Pophal is a freelance writer in Chippewa Falls, Wis.

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