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Business Dress – A Very Important Career Decision

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The most important career decision you make every day could be the time you spend looking in your closet to figure out what you will wear to work. It is no secret that physical appearance is extremely important to career development. And by physical appearance, it is not how pretty you are, but how professional you look. You could be the most intelligent and innovative individual in the world, but if your attire is old, faded, outdated and sloppy; the chances are slim that you will be promoted. The higher you move up the up the corporate ladder, the more important appearance is.

Proper business attire has become very confusing. It is difficult to ascertain what to wear anymore. Some organizations require formal business attire while others have outlawed it. Some companies have gone business casual and others allow jeans and t-shirts. Still others have reverted back to formal business attire because of the horrible way the employees dressed. The Human Resources community is filled with shocking stories about dress code violations.

The Society for Human Resources Management was contacted for some research for this article. HR people are wonderful sources of information and they were unanimous in the opinion that enforcing the dress code has become one of their most dreaded job duties. Here are a few anecdotes that the HR people shared:

- The dress code stated that women were not allowed to wear Capri pants, but what do you do about the man who wears them? When a man wore Capri pants to work, he was mocked and ridiculed all day and then filed a complaint because his feelings were hurt.
- A short, but not petite woman wore a sundress to work--elasticized material around the bosom (with quite a bit of cleavage showing) and spaghetti straps. My boss had to have "the talk" with her about what was appropriate attire. We didn't see the sundress again (thank goodness).
- One of our paralegals showed up in a thermal knit top and plaid flannel pants that looked remarkably like an outfit I'd worn to bed the night before.
- We once had an employee wear a form-fitting black tank top with the words "my boyfriend is out of town" in rhinestones across the chest, with an inch of belly showing between her top and her pants.
- One woman wore a leopard printed undergarment under a too-sheer white top.

- On two separate occasions, women have shown up in a slip but without a skirt. A man also came in once wearing his boxers.
- We have a "professional dress" code. Technically this guy was compliant. He wore dress pants, shirt, tie, jacket, shoes, socks - all in purple velour. I told him that while the attire was professional, it wasn't a profession we wanted to promote.

If you want to be taken seriously, you must dress in a way that you will be viewed seriously by your co-workers. Showing too much cleavage may be OK if you work at Hooters, but it is not OK in a professional environment. If you notice the men you are speaking with are having trouble looking you in the eye, it may be time to reconsider what you are wearing to work. As for men, showing off your hairy chest may be something to do at the beach, but not in the office.

Short skirts are distracting. The Ally McBeal look was OK on the television. Regardless of what types of shows they say they are, reality and television are usually mutually exclusive. Ally McBeal was a fantasy world law office that had unisex bathrooms. It was not to be taken seriously and certainly should not have set the tone for the way to dress in the office. However, many women continue to dress as if the tight, short skirt is the only thing available in stores. So, if you notice the men in your office are fighting to sit next to you at the weekly staff meeting and then continually drop their pens on the floor so they have to bend under the table to pick them up, it may be time to change your work attire.

Spandex and Lycra are definite no-no's. Who wants to see every curve and crevasse in of another person's body. Most people don't even want to see this at the gym. Even if you have the best body in the world, it is not appropriate business attire as it distracting to others. So when your co-workers give you that "What in the world were you thinking?" look when you walk into your work area, it may be a good time to feign illness and go home to change your clothes.

As for jewelry, anything that is distracting is not good as it takes away from you the person. Do your earrings make noises when you walk? If your wind chimes warn other that you are on your way when you are still around the corner, it may be a good time to buy a quieter pair of earrings.

Facial and other body piercings are definitely not professional looking. Many of them look painful and a pierced tongue makes it difficult to talk. The people who run most businesses are not ready to deal with pierced lips, noses, cheeks, eyebrows or multiple earrings. So if you start to receive condolences letters and get well cards because your co-workers think you fell into a fisherman's tackle box, you may want to remove your facial jewelry. Think of the rule of two. You should wear no more than two earrings, no more than two necklaces at a time and no more than two rings per hand.

Fragrances are a part of your dress and appearance. If you must wear something, wear a light fragrance. No one wants to smell your perfume or cologne in the elevator, break rooms or wafting through the air conditioning system.

There is nothing more distracting than overly made-up woman. Remember how hideous Katherine Harris, Florida's Secretary of State at the time of the challenged ballots during the 2000 presidential election,

looked. Most people believe that Katherine Harris made Florida look worse than the butterfly ballots. How could anyone take Florida seriously, when the spokesperson for the state had a blue face?

Hair should be neat and styled. Orange spikes or blue or yellow streaks may be acceptable in the punk rock bar, but you can be assured of one thing, the local hospital does not want its employees looking like a pinwheel. It makes the patients a little nervous.

As for footwear, flip flops and sandals are usually not acceptable in the workplace. By the way, Berkenstocks are still sandals even if they are over \$100 a pair. Spiked heels are out, as are tennis shoes (in most places).

Remember that business casual does not equate to weekend casual. Tattoos should be covered and low cut pants with midribs showing is not appropriate business attire.

In summary, every workplace is different than the social scene. Even if your company does not have a dress code, employees are expected to dress appropriately for the business and the work environment. If you want to be noticed for your professionalism, dress "one-up" from the way the rest of the people in your workplace dress. If the rest of the workplace is a part of the "khaki culture", wear dark colored pants or a knee length skirt. If in doubt, err on the side of conservatism.

As one person from the Society for Human Resources stated, a law firm in Illinois has this dress code; "Avoid wearing camouflage, diving gear, tin-woodsman costumes, antlers (fake or real), tap shoes, smoking jackets, Enterprise Starfleet uniforms, Jai-Alai equipment, clown suits, or accessories that involve live animals."

Use your good judgment and common sense. Be the professional that you are and dress appropriately.