

Interview Attire

Proper attire for a job interview was always well defined and understood for a long time. I know that I am dating myself, but I remember when people wore their best clothes for going out to dinner, seeing a movie, attending worship or taking a trip by airplane. For a man, it meant wearing a dark suit, white shirt, dark shoes and a conservative tie. Women wore a conservative suit or dress with coordinating shoes and minimal jewelry. This was almost etched in stone. Ask anyone who worked for IBM years ago. Early in my recruiting career, a colleague told me of a friend, who while employed by “Big Blue” made the mistake of wearing a light-colored suit to work. His boss called him in and said, “After you have that suit cleaned, burn it”. With the shift in recent years to “corporate casual”, many professionals are confused about how to present themselves in the workspace. The visual effect of some people in casual attire indicates that they should consider burning their entire wardrobes. Personal interpretation of corporate guidelines has been taken to some bizarre heights or depths, depending upon your point of view. Determining what occasions call for dressing up and which allow casual attire are open to debate, but it is safe to assume that certain rules of decorum should be followed. Nowadays it is possible to see top executives dressed on a spectrum ranging from expensive attire to something bordering on “grunge”. Appropriate business dress is also influenced by industry and company culture. Casual attire in a Fortune 500 company may be more preppy with employees looking like they dress from Lands End, Brooks Brothers, The Talbot’s, L.L. Bean and the like. In a startup software company casual attire may mean anything goes.

Preparing for a job interview is very stressful in our present slower job market. Indecision concerning proper dress adds to the pre-interview jitters. Since most of our sensory perception is visual, it is prudent and worthwhile to ensure that we look our best whenever we are being considered for a top executive post. Very few of us go through life looking like movie stars or fashion models. When it comes to most of our physical features, we have to play the hand that nature dealt us. The influence of genetics along with the ravages of time and stress take their toll on each of us. Whether you choose to dye your hair, have a face-lift or all your teeth capped are up to you, but good grooming and business appropriate dress are all you need. Remember that as you approach your interviewer, s/he will be making a split second, possibly subconscious hiring decision based upon your appearance. This may not be fair, but visual impressions are powerful. Think back to how you judged potential dance partners at college and high school mixers. The interview is very similar.

Starting at the top of your head, consider the following basics:

- Women’s and men’s hair should be neat, clean and business appropriate for the culture of your prospective employer. In other words, it should not attract undue attention due to color, cut or style. I understand that this leaves a lot of room for interpretation, but for example some companies will accept a man who wears long hair, while others may not. Women should limit earrings to one on each ear. Multiple earrings are best avoided. Earrings have become increasingly popular for men in recent years. I still feel that they should not be worn on an interview. Wear them to work after you are hired, if top management wears them and corporate culture will permit them.

- Corporate dress styles, like hairstyle, will vary by company industry, culture, location and custom. You will see differences in attire when comparing such businesses as investment banks, manufacturing companies, advertising and new media companies, to name a few. Sub-cultures that influence modes of dress may exist in any company. In a multi-location enterprise, the employees in Boston may dress different than their associates in Houston. The owner of the men's shop where I have purchased suits once said, "people either dress to attract the opposite sex or for business". Whatever the business environment, clothes should be flattering, but not distracting in any way. Although your first impression is always visual, you don't want your interviewer to be either distracted or turned off by your appearance so as to preclude them from concentrating on your message. When calling on clients, I always wear a conservative suit. Companies pay me to provide a professional service and I feel that this is appropriate dress when facing a customer. One of my entrepreneurial clients once said, "thank you for caring enough by dressing up". The CEO of another small firm told me to feel free to dress casually. Although he usually wore blue jeans, whenever I met with him after that, I dropped the suit in favor of a blazer and slacks, but with a necktie. Some feel that if possible, you should visit the company in advance, observe its workforce and dress in a similar fashion. Time and distance may not permit that. I feel that this old rule still applies, "It is better to be over dressed than under dressed". By wearing your best clothes, you are showing your respect for your interviewer, her or his company and the importance of your meeting with them. If you choose to go casual, wear conservative garments that will not attract attention. Any ill-fitting clothing that is excessively loose or tight due to weight change is unacceptable. It gives the wearer a very sloppy, unkempt image.
- Shoes should be appropriate for business and coordinate well with your total outfit. Unusual, trendy styles should be avoided unless essential to a specific industry or company culture. Casual shoes should not be worn with a suit. If not new, your shoes should look clean and not worn down. Women's shoe styles change continually, which necessitates regular replacement. Men's business shoe styles tend to stay more constant, which allows for rebuilding an expensive pair of shoes to keep them looking their best. It's a good alternative and a cost savings. Avoid using half soles when repairing men's shoes since they make your shoes look rebuilt. Pay the extra few dollars for a full sole to retain the new look.
- Jewelry and other accessories should be kept to an absolute minimum and should be inconspicuous.
- Personal hygiene and cleanliness are of utmost importance. Always have breath mints available. Avoid using strong fragrances and use any fragrance sparingly. If you are being interviewed in a small, warm room your perfume or cologne may be overpowering for your interviewer. If it causes them to sneeze, your interview may be over.
- If you smoke, try to refrain from doing so prior to the interview or smoke outdoors. The scent from tobacco smoke adheres to your hair and clothes. This odor can be overwhelming to a non-smoker in an enclosed area. Bias against smokers can approach major proportions. Some years ago, a very good client had strong preference only for those candidates who were non-smokers. He felt that smokers were less productive because they periodically would step outside to have a cigarette. For some employees, this could add up to thirty minutes or more per day. He was not willing to pay for that.

Since you are interviewing for a senior management position, you must look and act the part. You will represent your company to high level customers and business partners and your potential employer will

evaluate your presence in any meeting based upon the opening seconds of your first interview. Companies will judge you more severely than they would lower level employees and rightly so. You have the potential to make a greater impact on their business and you cost more. Everyone wants to buy quality. You must have the executive appearance, which will create an impression that you are the best. That comes through attention to details and appearance is but one. The old saying is still true, "Your first impression is your last". If you are not certain about how to dress for an interview at a specific company, post a question on the TENG-Discussion Group. Maybe another member can help you.
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Ed Pospesil
Chairman
Technology Executives Network Group

Vice President
Bruner Consulting Associates, Inc.
33 Elizabeth Street, 3rd Floor
Derby, CT 06418
epospesil@brunerconsulting.com
www.brunerconsulting.com
Phone: 203-732-7084 / 866-566-2224
Fax: 203-732-9033

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