



The way you look

Julia Campion shows how your appearance can influence your workplace personality



In an age when soft skills are valued so highly in the workplace, your personal image is a vital tool that you can use to achieve whatever you want to achieve.

Deciding what to wear – we do it every day and yet it can remain confusing, time consuming and, perversely, it gets harder rather than easier as we get older. Ask most senior people in the workplace today what they are most short of and they will probably say “time”. With increasing numbers managing both a challenging career and family commitments – time has become a commodity as precious as diamonds.

Yet somehow successful people do find strategies for

using the precious time they have in the most effective way possible. Whether they have learnt by trial and (sometimes expensive) error or have consulted an expert, they have found what works for them, enabling them to make quick decisions each morning on what look that day’s schedule requires. This knowledge also helps save time through more decisive and effective shopping trips.

The saying, ‘dress for the job you want, not the job you’ve got’ has always worked but for many it can be a minefield of confusing choices. Making these choices is not always made easier by the barrage of advice from magazines, TV shows and the high street. Why? Because



not only is the advice often one-dimensional – perhaps looking at just one aspect of clothes such as colour – but also it can be rather simplistic and, most importantly, can only ever be general advice as it doesn't take into account the most important factor – you! However fashionable something is, if it just isn't 'you', you won't enjoy wearing it and probably won't wear it very much.

There are three key things you can do to make those early morning clothes decisions easier. Firstly, you need to know yourself and what suits you. That might sound odd but there is no reason why we should be born knowing what works for us and what doesn't.

Giving clear messages to your employees about how you expect them to dress at work will make them feel far more comfortable than a confusing 'anything goes' atmosphere where staff can end up feeling either over or underdressed or embarrassed by colleagues when they turn up for an important meeting or event wearing something that others consider inappropriate.

Think about your working environment and the culture and values of your organisation. Those running their own businesses can obviously make the rules, but should remember that they are role models for those following them up the career ladder and so should set the standard for the company. Match your image to these and you'll get, or keep, the job you want. This might mean that, in a young, innovative company, you'll need to be more casual or keep a closer eye on fashion trends, although I suggest you avoid extremes if you want to be taken seriously. In a more traditional organisation, you are more likely to need a slightly more formal look, possibly suited and booted on a regular basis.

Whilst you need to dress to fit the 'dress code' that your job requires, showing imagination and creativity in your appearance will demonstrate that you can apply those characteristics to your job – valuable assets in most roles. Whatever activities your working week entails – from meetings with investors to dress down Fridays – an understanding of what to wear when will subtly position you as an effective and persuasive player. ■

Julia Campion is managing director of First Impressions. A full Member of The Federation of Image Consultants, Julia also received the TINA Award in 2003, the Federation's Award for Excellence, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the industry.
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HINTS&TIPS

FORMAL BUSINESS WEAR

A formal look isn't needed very often these days but there are still occasions when you want to look sharp and only a smart suit will do.

Do:

Choose a darker suit or jacket and combine it with a light or bright shirt or top, to create 'contrast'.

Select clothes that are 'structured', preferably in plain, closely-woven fabrics with a smooth finish.

Button your jacket, polish your shoes and carry a smart bag or briefcase.

Aim for sleek, well-groomed hair, and for women - subtle but immaculate make-up.

Choose simple, un-fussy jewellery in silver, gold or other metals

Don't:

Wear lots of light or bright colours, too much pattern or for women anything too silky, lacy or overtly feminine, especially if it shows too much flesh. Keep your look simple and try not to carry too much – juggling a bulky over-loaded handbag with a briefcase or laptop just looks disorganised.

RELAXED BUSINESS DRESS

Unless your organisation has a dress-down policy, this is the look you'll probably wear most of the time. You need to look business-like, but relaxed and comfortable too.

Do:

Choose neutral shades for maximum flexibility, although colours can be lighter and brighter than for formal dressing.

Wear trouser suits or separates and you can incorporate subtle pattern and texture too.

Co-ordinate your look with less formal

accessories – such as boots, bags and belts in leather and suede.

Remember that grooming is just as important as for formal business

Don't:

Wear soft, unstructured or floppy styles, e.g. unfitted or unlined, and avoid inappropriate shoes - trainers, mules or strappy sandals.

SMART BUSINESS CASUAL

Dressing-down effectively requires good quality casual clothes, well co-ordinated and with the same attention to detail as for business dress. Expect to spend as much on your casual working wardrobe as you would on your formal wardrobe – quality fabrics and construction are just as important.

Do:

Build your wardrobe around your most flattering neutral or basic shades but use more colour to add informality and individuality.

Choose structured skirts, trousers or dresses and fine-gauge knitwear, although jackets can be less structured than usual.

Use plain colours and subtle patterns, with textured fabrics to add interest.

Build up a collection of accessories in flattering colours and styles, to help you link separate garments together.

Make sure your shoes, bags and belts are smart and appropriate - neither too casual and chunky nor too dressy for this look.

Don't:

Wear scruffy jeans, denim or chunky knitwear or anything from your evening, holiday or weekend wardrobe. Avoid accessories that are too dressy or too casual and don't wear anything that needs repairing, cleaning or pressing.