Dress To Impress Handbook:
Professional Workplaces

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Why Strategize Your Professional Appearance?
A large part of a hiring decision is based on assumptions made about your credibility and potential performance. These assumptions are derived from the non-verbal portions of an interview such as a handshake, eye contact, posture, listening skills, grooming, attire, and accessories. Being dressed appropriately for a particular interview or workplace helps you to project a sense of confidence and self-assurance.

Employee dress is considered part of company's image. Employers, colleagues, and clients interpret your appearance as a measure of your respect for their workplace and themselves. Location also has an affect. In Arizona, lighter colors can be perceived as formal, whereas in New York formality expectations lean toward darker colors. The West Coast is also less formal than the East Coast, which differentiates certain dress expectations. Some occasions have specific expectations for appearance while others do not. All these nuances take time in the setting and mentoring from colleagues to fine-tune what is the most effective professional dress. Being sent home to revise your appearance can be embarrassing and certainly diminishes your credibility and potential for success.

Our approach was to apply menswear dress codes to both men and women. While menswear dress codes are often more straightforward, women are constantly given mixed messages regarding appropriate professional dress. This sense of professional attire is demonstrated within the ***Dress to Impress for Interviews and Professional Workplaces site.*** Below are additional components to take into account as you built a versatile and effective wardrobe for workplaces you work in or hope to join.

Personal Grooming and Modesty Expectations
- Avoid inappropriate neckline skin exposure to minimize inferences of sexuality.
- Avoid transparency due to inferences of sexuality or social event contexts.
- Keep fit moderate since tightness/looseness calls attention to body type or body parts may infer sexuality or sloppiness.
- For women, skirt lengths at or below the knee help avoid inference of sexuality.
- Be sure clothing is clean, neat, without stains or holes and with minimal wrinkles.
- Shoes should be polished and professional in style. Women are typically required to wear closed-toed shoes; open-toed shoes and spiked heels infer sexuality or social circumstances. Low pumps or are recommended as comfortable and professional.
- Hairstyles should support focus on face rather than on hair.   Men's facial hair should likewise be in tune with a professional appearance.
- Piercings other than modest earrings should be removed to avoid distraction.
- Tattoos should be covered to avoid distraction.

- Choose fragrances that are subtle with low possibility of offending interviewer or causing allergic reactions. Keep interviewer's attention on what you say and your qualifications.
- Women's make-up and fingernail polish should be subtle so not a distraction.
- Accessories can be a good way to express your personality and accentuate your best features. For women, a scarf or necklace can help focus on your face. For men, a tie is an important focal point and should be attractive. A belt should match shoes while your watch is functional yet attractive. Keep accessories simple so they do not become a distraction.

Professional Dress Expectations
- Emphasize credibility and power with colors appropriate to prospective or actual workplace. (Use black, dark gray, dark green, navy, dark blue, and red for women, worn in the right styles. Avoid brown, and reserve tan, camel and khaki for Casual Friday or Semi-Casual to Casual workplaces).
- Choose colors and textures that flatter your coloring, face, and hair.
- Make the face the focal point with a high contrast that also has modest coverage. This also helps reinforce your credibility and potential for high performance in the workplace.
- Minimize contrast in footwear, hose/stockings and lower body garments to avoid making them important focal points.
- Minimize additional focal points by carrying just one item, such as a portfolio, briefcase, or purse.
- Select fabrics that have a look of quality and performance and thereby are indicators of your good taste, a feature of professionalism.

Research Professional Dress Expectations for Specific Workplaces
- Strategize the professional image you want to project.
- For an interview, select styles that emulate conservative versions within level of formality. Refer to ***Dress to Impress for Interviews and Professional Workplaces.***
- After being hired, ask your boss or the human resources department for a copy of the organization's dress code policy. Codes vary so don't assume you can wear the same clothes you wore at your last job. Some companies allow jeans, sleeveless tops and open-toed sandals, but others don't.
- Approach "Casual Friday" attire cautiously to retain professionalism appropriate to workplace while expressing more personal style. This style is more laid back but should retain an essence of professional dress. Notice what leaders wear as a clue to what is most effective. Work to keep the focus on your face so credibility is retained, even on Friday.

Dressing on a Tight Budget
- Don't wait until you are pressed for time and have to make a hasty decision or a choice that is not in your budget. Remember that self-confidence is your primary goal when staging your professional interview attire.

- Begin by selecting your best 'neutral' as a nucleus for a professional wardrobe. Colors like black and navy are versatile, but pearl gray, dark green, steel blue, camel and teal are fashionable options that lend new dimensions to any working wardrobe.
- Consider investing in season-less fabrics that drape and travel well, such as lightweight stretch wool, washable matte jersey or a blend of cotton and rayon.
- Invest in impressive (possibly classic cut), well-made matching separates with multi-use potential that can be combined to be more 'professional' or more 'Casual Friday'.
- Use shirts and sweaters to create a variety of visual effects.
- Select ties/scarves and jewelry that add to possible visual variety.

Beware of Mixed Messages
- Many retailers offer a category labeled "wear to work" for women that include many styles that would not help create a credible appearance in a majority of workplaces. Professional dress for men is much more straightforward and is a useful frame of reference to help women use fashion to their advantage rather than as a distraction.
- Approach workplace appearance as a professional tool that helps men and women fit into the workplace, not stand out from it.

Recommended Resources for Further Research

Bixler, S. & Nix-Rice, N. 2005. *The New Professional Image: From Business Casual to the Ultimate Power Look.* 2nd Edition. New York: Media Corp.

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Centeno, A. & Cubbage, G. (2014, January). *Dress Like a Man: A Style Guide for Practical Men Wanting to Improve Their Professional Personal Appearance.* Kindle Edition.

Commander in Chief (2005–2006). Available on IMDB. A portrayal of the first American President, this TV series shows professional dress for powerful men and women.

Fischer-Mirkin, R. (1995). *Dress Code*. New York: Clarkson Potter.

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Moren, S. & Morem, S. 1997. How to Gain the Professional Edge: Achieve the Personal and Professional Image You Want. New York: Better Books.

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