Dress to Impress for Interviews and Professional Workplaces

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Professional Formal

Professional Semi-Formal

Professional Semi-Casual To Casual
**Darker Suit Styling**

Dark colored suits with high contrast necklines communicate the most powerful and traditional version of this dress code. Credibility to perform to expectations is highest when the face remains the primary focus. A quality fit in a full-cut suit avoids calling attention to the body. Shoes that blend with the suit color also help keep focus on the face.

Notice that this styling is very crisp, simple and easily ignored as focus on the face strengthens perceptions of person’s capacity to perform to expectations. Darker colors communicate more about leadership.
Lighter Suit Styling

Medium to light colored suits with high contrast necklines communicate a more moderate version of this code. Credibility to perform to expectation is best protected when the face remains the primary focus. A quality fit and a full-cut fit suit avoids calling attention to the body. Shoes that blend with the suit color help keep the face as focus.

Notice that lighter colors give us more view of the fabric and style details yet retain pull to the face and to perceptions of capacity to perform to expectations. Lighter colors communicate more about collaboration.
Add Men’s Personal Taste

Within effective focus on the face, insert touches of personal taste through tie variations. For a creative workplace, consider adding a vested suit with a subtle but interesting color, texture, or pattern along with a colored shirt and contrasting tie.
Different neckline details can add personal style yet keep focus on the face. For a creative workplace, consider a style variation like a uniquely colored yet professional suit-dress. Scarves and necklaces add expected polish and should help focus on the face. Avoid scarves or jewelry that are overly distracting and diminish credibility.

Add Women’s Personal Taste

Different neckline details can add personal style yet keep focus on the face. For a creative workplace, consider a style variation like a uniquely colored yet professional suit-dress. Scarves and necklaces add expected polish and should help focus on the face. Avoid scarves or jewelry that are overly distracting and diminish credibility.
Beware of Fit Issues

Be careful with fit issues because they lower credibility. Wearing either overly tight or loose suits relocates focus to body parts or body proportion. Menswear retailers often offer alterations to insure quality fit. Women are advised to consider this approach. A good fit is worth finding what works.

We found that trying on suits in slightly bigger sizes helped avoid tightness. To get good fit all over, you might need a different size for the upper and lower body. For either men or women, a custom suit can be an effective approach for suits that support professional appearance.
Transforming to Evening Formal

Transitioning from daytime to evening wear is suitable for men with the addition of a matching black tie. If body exposure is minimal as in this, “Little Black Dress” on the left, the style can also be versatile for evening or professional formal. However, when occasion is an elaborate evening event, his dress code becomes a tuxedo with bow-tie while hers requires a very fancy full-length dress.

Her elevated body exposure in neckline and shoulders are appropriate for an eveningwear social context. However, low necklines and exotic styles put emphasis on the body and garments and are an unwelcome workplace distractions.
**Sport Jacket Styling**

Semi-formal workplaces have more tolerance for inserting personal styling but be careful to keep the outcome professional.

This version of the semi-formal code shifts from full suit to ‘sport jacket’ look of contrasting jackets. His black jacket is powerful yet we also notice the contrasting tan slacks and black shoes. Leaving her jacket open helps move the eye to the face yet the red jacket catches our eye first.

A quality fit and a full-cut suit avoids calling attention to the body. Shoes that relate to a pant or skirt color reduce competition with the face.
Vested Styling

This vested style is one step down in formality from wearing a full suit style. This look can credibility in a semi-formal workplace.

The left image shows a good fit in a slim-cut style that was managed by selecting one size up. The colored shirt and contrasting tie contribute to a polished version of styling with vests.

The right image shows how visual distractions lower credibility. Notice the obvious wrinkles on the sleeves, a tie that does not contrast with the tan shirt, and very snug pant legs ending awkwardly above the shoe.
Shirt and Tie Styling

Wearing the professional shirt and tie minus a jacket or vest is acceptable in some semi-formal workplaces. Be careful that shirt and pant fit neither too tight or too loose. The belt should match shoes. For more personal style, the shirt can be other colors. Since this is the lowest level of formality within semi-formal contexts, we recommend you ask supervisors before removing the jacket and/or vest layers.
**Varying Arm Exposure**

As you become more familiar in the workplace, express more personal taste with styles that convey a similar level of credibility. Dark colors with high contrast near the face communicate the most powerful version. Styles that cover the arms, or at least the shoulders, and keep neckline modest support credibility and show respect for the workplace.

Menswear does not allow short sleeves so this is one gender difference. Perhaps less arm exposure is more credible for women as well?

Quality fit avoids calling attention to the body. Shoes that relate to overall garment color help keep focus on the face. Open toed shoes are usually inappropriate so clarify in advance of wearing them.
Within a more relaxed workplace, it is important to keep a balance between too formal and too casual. While communicating a ‘laid-back and comfortable’ workplace culture, maintain credibility by keeping the look professional.

Introducing a sweater vest for men and sweater for women adds a ‘mix and match’ type of personalized styling. He is also welcome to remove the tie and open the collar. Rather than the black necklace, she might wear a scarf to help bring the eye to the face.

Quality fit helps avoid calling attention to the body yet color changes bring the eye to contrasting areas. Shoes that relate to pant color help reduce competition with the face.
Women’s Relaxed Sweater Styling

Wearing sweater combinations or a more casual dress style works for this more relaxed workplace that fosters collaboration and a more personalized appearance.

Quality fit helps avoid calling attention to the body yet color changes brings the eye to the contrasting area. Keeping shoes close to skirt or pant color helps reduce competition with the face.
Beware of Social Assumptions

Semi-casual expectations allow for more personal styling. Be careful to keep it professional!

Due to a good fit and A-line style, the floral print dress works for a relaxed workplace. The all-over pattern brings zest to a professional style. Transparency seen in the white chiffon top brings attention to the upper body and should be avoided. The skirt style and fit would work if your paired it with a professional style black collared blouse.

Directional contrasts within the striped dress and fitted waistline focus the eye on bust and waist areas. This visual competition with the face introduces sexuality and lowers credibility.
5.1.2 Degrees of Appropriateness

Notice that taking off your jacket and opening the collar lowers formality of the white shirt of a typical suit.

Wearing khakis with a sweater over a collared shirt is an acceptable look for semi-casual menswear. Short sleeve collared shirts are also acceptable when tucking belted khakis.

There is more range in acceptable shoes but avoid overly casual or sporty shoes that detract from the face and contradict acceptable workplace expectations. Keeping the fit moderate is also an expectation for this code.
Potentially Unacceptable

Check with supervisor before wearing jeans. If allowed to wear jeans, choose dark jeans that do not have the visual distraction of holes or shade differences. A short or long sleeved shirt tucked into jeans might work in this very relaxed workplace. However, wearing an “on vacation” short sleeve shirt that is also not tucked into belted jeans might get you sent home to change.
Potentially Inappropriate

If everyone is allowed to wear jeans, the abstract print top with jeans could work although the busy print detracts attention from your face. Replace white sport shoes with dark shoes that blend with jeans and be sure jeans are not tight.

A long sleeved shirt with jeans can also be appropriate. The center image with a thin, see-through shirt fabric exposes her black bra, stomach and jean waistline. This amount of body exposure is not allowed in the workplace. You will be sent home to change.

The snug striped dress on the right might not get you sent home to change but would diminish workplace credibility. It is more suitable to a social environment where flaunting one’s body is more acceptable.
Beware of Featuring the Body

All three styles diminish workplace credibility and are more suitable to social contexts. An overall tight fit in the simple shirt and pant outfit puts focus on the body. It is also so basic as to appear underdressed for the workplace.

The red cowl top and skirt style is also quite revealing. The thin knit fabric stretches across the whole torso and reveals contours of bust, abdomen and hips. Many people would also interpret the skirt length as eveningwear.

Finally, the black and white dress paired with the loose white jacket makes us focus on the garments and question the outcome. Did you notice the white jacket does not match the white in the skirt? The transparency in the skirt adds sexuality and infers social context.
Dress to Impress Approach. This site was designed to demonstrate professional workplace dress under the premise that men and women are applying for similar positions or are colleagues in the same workplaces. Notice a similar perspective from recruiters who input to Recruiter Advice on Professional Attire pdf.

Appearance as a Professional Tool. As a first impression, your appearance communicates your confidence, credibility, and potential performance in the position you interview for or begin as a new hire. Employers expect people they hire and promote to be appropriate representatives of their company to supervisors, coworkers and customers. Your well-stratagized appearance is also their evidence that you understand and respect the people, position, and environment. To understand what is appropriate:
• research each prospective company’s culture and expectations for interview and work attire.
• study the ‘brand” of a company presented on their websites and reflect it in your own attire.
• contact the HR department for recommendations on attire to clarify expectations for the interview.
• ask for dress code information when first hired to continue exhibiting appropriate attire.
• observe your supervisor and other successful employees for what works well in the workplace.
• use this resource to become familiar with visual examples of types of professional dress codes.

Credibility in the Workplace. Credibility is highest when your attire convinces colleagues and clients to keep their focus on your face to reinforce your capacity to perform the job. Avoid distractions that lower credibility, put emphasis on sexuality, and infer poor taste:
• styles that focus attention on your attire and potentially on body features.
• fit that is overly tight or loose and draws attention to body features.
• neatness oversights such as personal grooming, noticeable wrinkles, food stains, missing buttons, etc. convey lack of respect for people in the workplace.
• See Dress to Impress Handbook pdf for more on managing your professional appearance.

Level of Formality in the Workplace. Professional workplace cultures include:
• Professional Formal has a clearly defined dress code associated with traditional corporate style.
• Professional Semi-Formal has more range in meeting the dress code for a less formal professional style.
• Professional Semi-Casual to Casual has the most range and uncertainty in what is appropriate for a more laid-back professional style. This category is often called “Business Casual” where it is important to not dress too formally or too casually as to be a poor representative of workplace culture and image.

Origin. This website was created in 2015 by Carol Salusso, Ph.D. and Quinn Sullivan, Intern to replace an earlier Dressed to Impress website. We appreciate support from a 2015 College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resources internship grant and long-term support from the Department of Apparel, Merchandising, Design and Textiles and JC Penney, Inc. We designed this site to facilitate access to content and appreciate hearing from you how it is used.