CAREERS

Time To Change What You Wear For Job Interviews

What is the best way to dress for an interview

What would you think if a CEO showed up for an online job interview wearing a T-shirt? Well, that is precisely what Bill did. He thought casual was hip and his usual work attire. When Bill didn’t get a second interview after conversations with two recruiters, he wondered why. He contacted me for interview coaching, thinking he wasn’t answering the questions effectively. For our coaching session, I asked him to dress like he would for his interview. When we started on ZOOM, I immediately saw the problem. The image he presented was all wrong for his C-level role. That was an easy fix. Next interview, he showed up in a suit jacket and opened collar shirt. He sailed through and moved on to the next round of interviews.

Katherine, 26, was targeting a consulting job. She inquired if she needed to wear something nicer than dress pants and a blouse for an interview at EY. For any high-level customer-facing position, really dressing up is the correct answer. So, Katherine bought a classy-looking dress with matching accessories.

The “what I should wear to my interview” is a critical question to get right. Whether the person is interviewing online or in person, many job candidates admit they are unsure what they should and shouldn’t wear. Many have forgotten what professional wear even looks like. What may have been okay before is not acceptable now.

It has become common to see people online in comfortable clothes. Tops often become whatever you pull out of the drawer. The prevailing attitude was that clothing didn’t matter anymore. You could go very casual, and it was deemed okay. Unfortunately, some people have taken casual dress to a new level of sloppiness, disregarding how they present themselves. This has been true for many tech workers. With more employees headed back to the office, job hunters are questioning what is appropriate.

What doesn’t work is projecting a persona of someone who doesn’t care. Recognize that your dress for work is not what you wear to the interview.

What to expect in this changing hiring environment

Currently, most job interviews remain online. However, that is starting to change. Look for companies to use more of a hybrid method, with the first screening interview online with a recruiter and the next in person. This seems to be the way some employers are headed. There is also another consideration. As many companies now do a regional or national search, out-of-state applicants would rarely be flown in for a live interview. Yet, a few of my executive career counseling clients have recently caught a flight for the last rounds of interviews.

What is the employer thinking

Does the employer care if you dress like you do every day? Are comfortable clothes acceptable for online meetings? Do they wonder if you have ever heard of business casual?

Let’s consider what an employer might object to. When hiring managers see you for the first time, they carefully assess how you present yourself. They immediately notice your clothes. They think, “Would you be a good representative of our company? Will you quickly be respected and listened to during a presentation, or will your outfit hurt your credibility?” “What will leadership think of this person? How will your appearance be viewed by a client or customer?”

Another consideration is that you act a bit more formally when you are dressed up. That polish comes through when chatting with prospective bosses and hiring team members. You want your attire to be accepted quickly, allow the interview to proceed, and not be rejected in the first few minutes.

Online interview

Your first impression is critical because, like it or not, employers make a snap judgment based on your attire and presentation. Employers are already nervous about hiring people they cannot “see.” You want to reassure them that you will dress appropriately as an employee. Take a moment and evaluate how you look on screen. Ensure the lighting is good, so your face is well-lit. Select an outfit you’d wear if you were meeting them in person. Pay heed to your job title and the level you’d have inside the company. Are you client-facing? Do you collaborate with external customers or vendors? Do you regularly meet with C-level people? Are you an executive? Will customers see you in that job? Dress for that role.

Men should always have on a collared shirt. For a more executive look, an open-collared dress shirt with a suit jacket but no tie is a sharp way to present yourself. If you wear a tie, avoid any loud colored or wild print as they look bad onscreen. Some people should wear a suit and tie, including anyone on Wall Street, executive leaders, consultants, or lawyers. Do dress conservatively.

Ladies, wear solid colors and avoid prints, plaids, or bold colors as distracting when viewed online. No t-shirts, athletic wear, party, or sexy attire. Exclude any dangle bracelets that might clank together and make noise. Most ladies will look better wearing some makeup. Use a light hand when applying and double-check your look online before you ever stare into an employer’s eyes. Lipstick is a must. Colors look different online so ensure the color is not too strong or bright – think pinks or corals, not red.

In-person interview

A firm handshake and a warm smile projecting confidence that you are the right person to hire are essential. Give off a polished, contemporary image.

Ladies, for most positions, a classy-styled dress in a solid color is ideal. A blouse with a blazer and dress pants, or matched with a skirt, works too. Choose a color that makes you look good, and the outfit is a perfect fit. Light makeup but nothing sexy or too trendy. Other women notice your purse, accessories, and shoes - select accordingly. Jewelry should be simple and tasteful.

Men, start with clean, polished shoes. People notice and they can ruin an image if you ignore how your shoes look. The advice given above for online interviews is accurate here but be sure the pants are matching, pressed, and the entire outfit is an excellent fit. If you choose just a dress shirt, try adding a tie and see if that isn’t an improvement.

In-person or on a virtual screen, your warm smile is your best asset, so smile often.