

Dress Right for Interview

Clothes might not make the person, but they can reflect your personality

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At 21, Deepak Dhawan understands one of the fundamental rules of job-hunting: that despite your brilliance, education and solid resume, you won't nab that coveted job if you don't dress seriously for the interview.

"I always wear a shirt and tie to interviews," said Dhawan, a student of microbiology and immunology at McGill University. "I don't believe that clothes make the man but they do reflect personality. When you're dressed well, an employer will see that you're serious about the job. It shows that you've put in that extra effort."

Lynda Goldman and Sandra Smythe-Thibaudeau, workplace image consultants with Montreal-based Goldman Smythe & Associates would like all students heading out into the job market to adopt that attitude. Co-authors of *How to Make a Million Dollar First Impression* (GSBC, 2001), Goldman and Smythe-Thibaudeau teach people in the workplace how to polish their professional images.

And they say that academe often does not instill in students a sense of business etiquette or an understanding of how to dress for job interviews. Moreover, they add, the current crop of university students, poised to burst onto the job market, is a "casual generation."

"We're seeing a lack of awareness among students of business conventions and what's expected," said Sandra Smythe-Thibaudeau, who is also director of studies in the business communications program at the Ecole des Haute Etudes Commerciales. "Mistakes that young men make include wearing baseball caps to interviews, not shaving or wearing clothes that aren't clean or pressed. I've encountered young men who clearly have borrowed an ill-fitting jacket for an interview."

Mistakes that young female job-seekers make include wearing outfits to job interviews that would be more appropriate for a Saturday night date. "Young women often confuse dressing up with dressing for parties because student life is either casual or dressing for something fancy," Smythe-Thibaudeau said. "They'll often wear shiny fabrics or low-cut tops, too much jewelry or too many accessories. These are the kinds of mistakes that make people judge you before you even open your mouth."

So before you head out to dazzle a would-be employer, make sure you're wearing the right duds.

Smythe-Thibaudeau and Goldman say regardless of your sex, the best outfit for an interview is the classic suit. "The plainer the texture, the better," Goldman said. "A woman should wear a plain skirt and jacket with a crisp, white blouse. A

monochromatic look will be more formal."

And they encourage students to invest in a good-quality suit rather than borrowing one.

Make sure that the shoes are clean and polished and that they go with the outfit," Goldman said. "Also, long hair is fine for university but if you have long hair, it's going to make you look younger. If you're a woman with long hair, you should put it up and have it neatly styled. Men also need to have clean hair and should invest in a good haircut to make it look neat."

Keep in mind that not all corporate cultures are equal. Some are casual, others more formal. Assess the culture of the organization you're targeting before the interview, say Goldman and Smythe-Thibaudeau. "If you're being interviewed for a bank, it's best to wear a suit," Goldman said. "For an advertising agency, which wants creativity, you can look a bit more funky, trendy and up-to-date."

They say the best way to gain an understanding of the workplace culture is to call the company's human-resources department before going to the interview and ask about the dress code.

Shortly after he was hired by a consulting firm last summer, Deepak Dhawan made a point of checking out what other people were wearing in the building where he would be working. "If you look at the address and see what building the employer is in, you can pretty well tell what the dress code is," he said. "The company where I worked last summer is in the IBM building on Rene-Levesque Blvd. Two days before I was to start working, I sat outside of that building just before people started leaving at the end of the day. I watched what they were wearing. They were all in suits and ties.

Dhawan says regardless of a company's dress code, he always wears a formal suit. "When in doubt, I always dress like this and wear a tie because I know that if I arrive and the culture is casual, I can remove the tie. But if I walk in causally dressed, where am I going to get a jacket and tie if I need it? When you go to a job interview, you're going there to prove something to someone - that you're competent, that you belong and that you excel at what you do."

Colleen Bronson, a career counselor at McGill, said she sometimes encounters resistance from students when she advises them to dress in "a dull navy uniform" for interviews "even if they're going to be working outside or in a lab."

"Colours like navy, charcoal, taupe or black are best," she said, adding that women sometimes question her advice to wear a skirt rather than trousers to interviews.

"Many think that their clothes should be gender-neutral," Bronson said. "But you should wear low-key, conservative, professional garb so as not to distract an employer. Remember, if your grandmother would like your outfit, it's probably appropriate for an interview."

Eleanor Fast is careful not to make any fashion statements when she attends job interviews. The 24-year-old McGill graduate student, who is studying entomology, says she always wears a plain navy jacket and skirt. "The most important thing is that your clothes are not really noticed by the employer," she said.