



Lisa Quast on Looking the Part



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Climbing the career ladder is not just about what you know and whom you know; it's also about your appearance. I once worked with someone at the beginning of my career who was incredibly bright, had several college degrees, excellent work experience, and was highly professional. But she never seemed able to get promoted. Puzzled, I had a discussion with our manager. The manager's comment? "Good grief, Lisa. I understand her business strengths, but there's just no way I could put her in front of the management team or customers for a presentation—they wouldn't take her seriously. Have you actually looked at her?"

So I did take a good look at her. She mainly wore slacks and a blouse to work each day, her hair was long and straight (think late 1960s/early 1970s) and she rarely if ever wore makeup or jewelry. At the time, I was working

in the medical industry for a Japanese firm. The industry, as well as the company, was very conservative. I wore a suit to work every day of the week and for trade shows, the appropriate attire for employees was a black, navy, or dark brown suit.

"Allie," as I'll call her, didn't want to wear suits to work every day, and she didn't like having to take the time to apply makeup. She wanted to wear comfortable clothes and had the attitude that no one could make her do any differently—and she had apparently told this to our manager several times when he had discussions with her about her attire.

In Allie's case, I watched as she sacrificed career promotions for what she felt was comfortable clothing at work. It was a lesson I learned quickly: To hold a certain position—and secure the one after it—you not only need the knowledge, skills, and experience, you also need to look the part. It's pretty simple: While your work ethic might show that you're a super star, your attire might imply laziness and sloppiness. A polished, professional wardrobe that clients and colleagues respect will send the message that you should be taken seriously for new opportunities, promotions, and pay raises.

This is what I wish more women starting out in their careers understood. It's vital that you consciously think about the persona you want to project at work and then dress the part from head to toe. The four most common problems I see with women's appearance are:

Wearing clothes that are inappropriate for the company/industry: A client I once coached was having problems obtaining promotions at an advertising company, so, among other things, I evaluated her work attire and overall "look." Her typical outfit was a grey or navy pantsuit, with minimal makeup and jewelry. Unfortunately, her image projected her as dull and unimaginative—yet the company wanted creative employees who were on top of current trends. By overhauling her wardrobe, hairstyle, and makeup, we were able to update her persona to someone who looked stylish and unique—fit for a job in advertising. This got her the attention she needed from management, and eventually, that much-coveted promotion she wanted.

When dressing for work and shopping for new work clothes, remember the industry you're in. While you don't need to "look like everyone else," you certainly don't need to look like you don't belong. If you feel lost on how to start building a professional wardrobe, ask for help! Go to a large department store and request a personal shopper, or hire a personal stylist. Once that is done, assess your hair and makeup. Spending time and energy to update both conveys that you take pride in yourself and that you stay on top of current trends, which are both important qualities to employers—no matter what the industry.





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Wearing clothes that are inappropriate for the geographic area/season of the year: If you move from a colder climate to a much warmer location (or vice versa), you'll need to re-think your work wardrobe. The typical dark clothes you wore almost year round in New York or Seattle won't be appropriate in Phoenix or Atlanta. And don't forget about your outerwear coats. It's not acceptable to wear a leather jacket or your ski coat over your business suit, and sorry ladies, but showing up at a client's office wearing a silk blouse, wool skirt, and heels paired with your winter fleece doesn't create a very pulled together look that instills confidence in your skills.

Taking casual Fridays way too far: Casual Fridays can mean different things to different companies, but no matter the company, it doesn't mean you can show up at the office in your gym workout clothes. Wearing tight black leggings with a jog bra underneath a t-shirt will never allow you to project a leadership image. Step up casual Friday. Even when you're given the option to dress casually for work, take it up a notch from your weekend wear. If wearing jeans, choose a dark wash with a trouser cut and a chic shirt with jewelry. Instead of t-shirts, opt for a silk blouse, and always have a third piece like a blazer or cardigan handy, which helps give your outfit that extra bit of polish when needed.

Under-dressing: I nearly gasped when a young woman who I and several other colleagues were interviewing showed up looking like she had stepped right off the set of a trashy reality TV show. Unfortunately, a tight black mini-skirt, a blouse showing lots of cleavage, high heels with no nylons, and five earrings in her ears made it difficult for the interview panel, especially the men, to concentrate on her assets—and not those other “assets” she was so proudly displaying.

I wish I could say this was a rare occurrence, but I find myself constantly amazed by the club-like clothing women wear to work. If you want to advance in your career, then avoid wearing anything remotely skimpy, suggestive, or too tight in a professional office environment. Don't take your work attire cues from reality TV shows; take them from real life by conducting research to ensure your wardrobe is appropriate for the company and industry.

Now that you know what an employer looks for in terms of appearance, apply these suggestions and watch how your boss—as well as everyone else at work—responds to you. Looking the part may just help you obtain that new position you've been hoping for or the promotion you covet.

Lisa Quast is a certified executive coach and mentor, successful global corporate executive and business consultant, and award-winning non-fiction author. Lisa founded Career Woman, Inc. in 2005, a Seattle-based international career coaching and consulting company dedicated to the advancement of women in business and the achievement of their personal and professional aspirations.



Career Woman, Inc.