Career Center
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Professionalism: Dressing and Acting the Part

The not-so-good news: Multiple studies show that employers think that many recent college graduates lack professionalism in their first year on the job.

The good news: This gives you an opportunity to shine.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONALISM?

Be Prepared – Before you show up for an interview, research the company and have intelligent, informed questions to ask.

Exhibit Courtesy and Respect – Be polite to everyone, from the receptionist to the director. Maintain good eye contact and never interrupt the person interviewing you. Turn OFF your cell phone before the interview. Thank your interviewer for his or her time in person and in follow-up communications.

Be On Time – Confirm the appointment ahead of time and arrive a few minutes early, but not 20 or 30 minutes early – being too early inconveniences the office staff.

Use Good Listening Skills – Pay more attention to what the other person is saying than worrying about what you are planning to say next.

Demonstrate Effective Communication Skills – This starts with your written cover letter and resume, and continues through the interview and into the workplace. Weed out speech that is littered with "like," "you know," and "um." Practice with a trusted adult and ask for feedback on your speech and inflection. Written communications should be free of casual syntax, texting abbreviations (lol, etc.), emoticons, and the like.

Articulate Your Skills and Accomplishments – Know your resume backward and forward. Have concrete examples of your experience that demonstrate the skills the employer is seeking.

Pay Attention to Details – After an interview, follow up with a handwritten thank you note and check in on the status of the job. After you're hired, complete your assigned tasks thoroughly and on time.

Sustain a Positive Attitude – Showing yourself as a professional asset is important in the interview and after you're hired. If you come across as negative or bored, or say "oh, I don't do that" to professional assignments, you make it easy for the employer to find someone else. Some employers have noted an "attitude of entitlement" among recent graduates. So make sure they can't say that of you. Be proactive and receptive to feedback – remember, there is always more to learn.

Maintain a Professional Appearance – This is one of the most common areas that employers and hiring managers cite for people not getting or keeping jobs. It's also one of the trickiest for job applicants to navigate. So what does "professional appearance" really mean? Flip the page to learn more…

DRESSING TO GET HIRED

Be well groomed. Take a shower THAT DAY. Make sure your hands, nails and hair are neat and clean, and your clothes are clean and pressed. Shoes should be polished. Avoid heavy makeup, strong cologne or aftershave.

Dress for the industry. Different industries have different standards. For conservative industries like banking or financial services, wear a black or navy blue suit to your interview. For a less formal environment like a nonprofit, a blazer with khakis or a skirt is appropriate. For creative industries like the arts or advertising, you can show more personal style within reason – funkier jewelry, brighter colors and cooler accessories. Jeans are not recommended.

Dress for the job you want, but slightly better. Do your research. Find out how the people who work there dress. Go to the organization's website – do they have photos of people on the job? Ask friends if they know people who work there. Dressing slightly better than the job you're applying for says that this interview is important to you but keeps you from going over the top.

Don't spend a fortune on a new outfit. You can buy nice clothes for interviewing at discount stores like Ross, Marshall's or T.J. Maxx. You may even find options at secondhand stores – but avoid stained, faded or pilled clothes. And check with friends who wear the same size.

WARDROBE MALFUNCTIONS THAT CAN SINK AN INTERVIEW

Too much skin. If your outfit is short, tight or low-cut and showing cleavage, it's not right for a professional interview. This is not the day to wear your muscle shirt or show off your tattoos with something unbuttoned to mid-chest.

Exposed tattoos and body piercings. This is a touchy one – body art is highly personal and, for many, part of their identity. That's fine. However, be aware that there are some jobs in the professional world that will be off the table if your body art is on display.

Dirty, wrinkled or disheveled clothing, hair or body. You want to give a first impression that you are prepared and professional, not that you just rolled out of bed.

Jeans, sweats or pajama pants. Unless you are applying for a job at a construction site, warehouse or landscaping company, leave the denim at home.

Flip-flops, casual shoes/sandals or sky-high heels. Remember, it's an interview, not a day at the beach or a night at the club. And contrary to popular belief, Uggs don't go with everything.

Gum, sunglasses or a pen you keep nervously twirling or clicking. All of these will drive your interviewers crazy and distract them from your strengths.

Cell phones. Your iPhone may feel like an appendage, but it will lose you the job if it rings, buzzes, chirps or sings during the interview. Remember to turn it off and keep it out of sight.

BUT I STILL WANT TO BE ME!

Great! The point of a dressing for an interview is not to stomp out your personal creativity and style. It's to translate your uniqueness into a framework of professionalism that makes employers want you to be part of their team. You want the interviewer to focus on you and not be distracted by your outfit. So put on your best professional self – and go out and show the world why you're a great choice for the job.