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YOUR WORKING WARDROBE

what does your **work look** say about you?

In an era when CEOs sport jeans and hoodies, it's hard to know how to dress for your job. As part of this special section on work clothes, *Real Simple* asked professionals in a range of industries to reveal what they think about your 9-to-5 style—and what it means for your climb up the ladder.

WRITTEN BY Sarah Stebbins ILLUSTRATIONS BY Joana Avilez ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY N. Jamiyla Chisholm



dress = success?

Anyone who owns a power outfit knows that the right clothes can be a big confidence booster. There's even proof: In a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, subjects who donned doctors' lab coats scored higher on attention-related tasks than did those who did not. And while an employer should really be focused on your brilliant ideas, it helps to have the whole package. According to a survey of business leaders published this year by the Center of Professional Excellence at York College of Pennsylvania, two-thirds said that when it comes to getting ahead, image makes a major impact. Curious how your work look measures up? *Real Simple* consulted human-resources professionals, executive coaches, and style experts for the new office-wear do's (flashy colors!) and don'ts (flashing skin!).



IF YOUR LOOK IS...

a conservative, timeless suit

Griffin: These days, wearing a suit daily is pretty much just for lawyers and politicians. But I advise women in any corporate environment to wear one for big meetings. It makes you look put-together, competent, and trustworthy.

Rajkumar: Make sure you show some personality or you'll miss an opportunity to stand out. A cool necklace can be a conversation starter.

Nancy Connery: At most technology companies, if you wear a suit, they'll wonder if you can relate to the casual culture of the industry. Nowadays, as long as you wear nice jeans, you'll fit right in.

IF YOUR LOOK IS...

head-to-toe designer pieces

Jennifer Baumgartner: Designer labels are connected to financial success. And we tend to directly correlate financial success with the characteristics that help achieve prosperity, such as discipline, hard work, and intelligence. Due to these subconscious associations, we may give the person we believe to be successful a higher salary or more opportunities.

Kat Griffin: It shows a commitment to your job if you buy quality items. That said, for young women, starting out of the gate with an Hermès bag can signal that you don't need to work. You have to overcome that impression to show you care.

Roshini Rajkumar: You may want to scale it back at times if you dress more extravagantly than clients or coworkers. I've coached executives who won't wear their Italian leather shoes when they visit their factories. They want to be a "regular guy."



panel of experts

THE PSYCHOLOGIST: **Jennifer Baumgartner, Psy.D.**, a clinical psychologist, the author of *You Are What You Wear*, and the owner of InsideOut, a wardrobe-consulting business based in Washington, D.C.

THE PR EXEC: **Alliza Bogner**, the vice president of human resources for Alison Brod Public Relations, in New York City.

THE TECH RECRUITER: **Nancy Connery**, the founder of Connery Consulting, a San Francisco consulting firm for technology companies, including Dropbox, Twitter, and Lithium.

THE FORMER LAWYER: **Kat Griffin**, the New York City-based founder of Corporette.com, a fashion and lifestyle blog for lawyers, bankers, M.B.A.'s, and consultants.

THE ACADEMIC: **Linda Koch Lorimer**, the vice president of Yale University and a member of the board of directors for the publisher McGraw-Hill.

THE REAL ESTATE GURU: **Lauren Mathisen**, a recruiter for Jones Lang LaSalle, a commercial real estate firm headquartered in Chicago.

THE EXECUTIVE COACH: **Roshini Rajkumar**, the Minneapolis-based author of *Communicate That!: Your Toolbox for Powerful Presentations*.

THE IMAGE CONSULTANT: **Michelle T. Sterling**, the founder of Global Image Group, an image-consulting business headquartered in New York City.



IF YOUR LOOK IS...

sloppy genius

Rajkumar: If you're a financial planner and you look like you don't care, clients will think, She's going to be sloppy with my money.

Griffin: Men can pull off the eccentric-genius look, but I haven't seen a woman do it successfully. I have a theory that it's one of the last gender boundaries.

Linda Koch Lorimer: There is no dress code for successful women professors: You'll see a woman in casual chinos who is a nationally regarded scientist and another with an Hermès scarf who is a leading humanist. I do know a couple of women, including myself, who when appointed college or university president were given a few tips to improve their attire and presentation.



“Grungy: OK. Poor hygiene: not OK. Unbrushed hair and unkempt fingernails are hard not to notice. Ultimately, cleanliness matters more than whether one wears jeans, slacks, or a suit.”

—Nancy Connery



IF YOUR LOOK IS...

trend-tastic

Michelle T. Sterling: The perception is that you spend a lot of time keeping up with trends, so it seems like you care more about clothes than about the job.

Baumgartner: When I dress professionally, my clients feel comfortable putting their trust in me. Yet when I was a high school teacher, my students related to me more when I wore trendy items. Depending on your field, age, and audience, your best outfit will be different. Understanding this can be a valuable tool.

Aliza Bogner: People think that working in a creative office means they can embrace every trend, but that's not always the case. If you want to take risks, do it with accessories versus a whole outfit.

Griffin: I wouldn't wear harem pants on Wall Street. And if platforms are affecting your gait, they're a no. Try out trends using colors and prints. It's with shapes that people tend to go wrong.



IF YOUR LOOK IS...

young and casual

Griffin: Someone in comfortable clothes comes off as relaxed and easy to talk to. But dressing that way can prevent you from moving up. It seems like you're not willing to put in the effort.

Bogner: I have a love-hate relationship with jeans. They're OK with heels and a jacket, as long as you look polished.

Lorimer: Looking young is no bar to performance. For example, Ruth Turner, who was an aide to Tony Blair [the former UK prime minister], is one of the most youthful women, with her long hair and bangs. Yet she's also one of the most powerful, effective people I've met.

Connery: Casual attire is more accepted on the West Coast than on the East Coast, which is usually more formal.



IF YOUR LOOK IS...

sexy and you know it

Griffin: If you're dressed provocatively in court, you're conveying something about yourself instead of about your client, whom you're supposed to be representing. I've also witnessed male bosses—and females, too—who don't want to be seen with the lady in the plunging dress. You'll cut yourself off from mentorship opportunities.

Bogner: Skirts and dresses that hit midhigh are OK, provided that they aren't tight. It's safer to pair them with opaque tights.

Baumgartner: Ask yourself, "If I were going to a nightclub after work, would I have to change anything?" If the answer is no, you're dressed inappropriately and probably wearing too much makeup.

"Cleavage is not appropriate in the workplace unless you work at Hooters. And hems should be just above the knee—an inch or two max."

—Michelle T. Sterling

IF YOUR LOOK IS...

severe schoolmarm

Baumgartner: People worry about age being a liability, but the issue is really about seeming disconnected or behind the times. If you're working on something innovative and you're wearing a double-breasted suit from the 80s, the question becomes, Does she have enough of a handle on what's current to pull this off?

Griffin: Playing it safe may be boring, but a judge is never going to rule against you for being frumpy.

Sterling: Classic clothing, if worn properly, looks appropriate and dependable. This is what business attire is supposed to be. However, if garments fit poorly, it's the same as looking sloppy.



IF YOUR LOOK IS...

rainbow brights

Bogner: As long as it looks polished with the right shoes and accessories, it can be great.

Griffin: When I worked on Wall Street, there was a man who was known for his bold suits and colorful ties. It spoke very clearly: "I take risks."








Sterling: Be mindful of the psychological effects of colors. Some studies have shown that yellow represents positivity, and blue, trustworthiness. Red is good when you want to appear assertive, but don't wear it if you're firing someone. Green, the color of empathy, is better.

Rajkumar: For TV appearances, I tell clients to wear a red or purple top that lights up the face, not black or white, which can wash you out. This works for everyday life, too.



can I wear this to work?

If your office dress code hasn't been updated since the days of *Working Girl*, here's your cheat sheet.

are they appropriate?	at a corporate office	at a business-casual office	at a creative office	RS readers who said yes*
bare legs 	It depends. "Don't go without hosiery until you see someone senior doing it," recommends Kat Griffin.	Sure, but opt for shoes with more coverage instead of sandals. "In our workplace, hosiery is encouraged, but we do make exceptions for the summer," says Lauren Mathisen.	Absolutely—nude hose can actually make you look stodgy. (No offense, Duchess.) Still, don't go there with a miniskirt.	75%
open-toe shoes 	Doubtful. Slingbacks can be OK. "I've known judges who have worn peep-toes, and red ones at that," says Griffin.	Yes, but the more covered up, the better. Also, avoid backless footwear that makes flapping noises when you walk.	Go ahead—straps and all. But keep the flip-flops (especially if they're rubber) on the beach.	69%
jeans 	Not a chance.	If and when denim is allowed (most likely on Fridays), polished, dark trouser jeans are the way to go.	Skip the weird washes, but colored denim gets a thumbs-up. Always dress jeans up with a nice top or blazer.	65%
cropped pants 	A pair made of suiting fabric that hits near the ankles may be doable on laid-back days.	Go for it, but follow the criteria at left.	Yup. Just stay away from weekend cargo pants and dumpy wide-leg styles.	53%
leggings 	Nope.	Still no.	Proceed with caution. Only wear them dressed up and as a layering piece (that is, with a long jacket or a tunic that covers your derriere).	26%
shorts 	Never.	Probably not (even on a summer Friday).	Rock on, but stick to a tailored knee-length pair with a silky top and a jacket. Anything shorter should be paired with tights.	12%
strappy tops and dresses 	Sleeveless dresses and those with thick straps might be fine—just keep a cardigan or a jacket handy for meetings.	See the advice at left. Flutter or cap sleeves are OK, too, says Michelle T. Sterling.	"Never wear straps so thin that you need a strapless bra," advises Jennifer Baumgartner.	12%

*According to a Facebook poll of 2,560 Real Simple readers.

6 pet peeves of interviewers

No one needs to tell you to make sure that your suit is pressed and to tuck in your shirt before a big interview, but you would be surprised at some of the missteps made by a few less savvy job applicants.

1. FAILURE TO CARRY A NOTEBOOK. "It's a good sign when people take notes—that's a signal you're engaged. But it can be off-putting to pull out a smartphone or a computer to jot things down." —Nancy Connery

2. LOUJEWELRY. "The problem is big, dangly earrings that move when you talk or anything that makes noise, like bangles." —Kat Griffin

3. CRAZY COLORS. "Extreme hair dye and bright eye shadow and lipstick are not the best choices during the evaluation process." —Connery

4. CRUMMY NAILS. "If your dark polish has noticeable chips, it looks unprofessional." —Aliza Bogner

5. CARRYING A GYM BAG. "One woman I interviewed actually had her sneakers tied to the zipper. I assumed she was going for a run after our meeting. With better planning, that could have been avoided." —Lauren Mathisen

6. SUNGLASSES. ON YOUR HEAD. "It's distracting. We expect you to look yourself over and make sure you're presenting yourself well before you come in." —Bogner