

Job Interviews: What to Wear

Give your career look a makeover that matches the quality of your healthcare qualifications.

By Michael Gerchufsky

If you've ever wondered why airline cockpit crews wear those military-like uniforms, think of it this way: How confident would you be if the captain greeted you in a polo shirt and khaki pants as you boarded the plane?

If you're interviewing for a new job-or your first job-it's important to highlight the skills and experience that qualify you for the position. But as if you want your healthcare career to *really* take off, your appearance during interviews has to inspire confidence so that you can pilot your way to a happy landing in the job you deserve.

So, from wingtips to Windsor knots and from heels to hairdos, *ADVANCE* is here to give your career look a makeover that matches the quality of your healthcare qualifications.

Opinions abound about what to wear (and what *not* to wear) to a job interview, and no one set of sartorial rules works for every healthcare setting. That's why it's important to do some reconnaissance about the dress style of your prospective work environment. Don't assume scrubs or lab coats are the only clothes you'll need. During the interview arrangements, ask about the street-clothes dress code, then dress a level or two above that standard.

William Burke, MHP, RT(CV), is the administrative director of South Shore Hospital's Cardiovascular Center in South Weymouth, Mass., and has conducted countless interviews over the years. "Recognize the culture," he says. "Say you were to interview in the information systems department of a facility staffed by 20-something dot-commers. Show up in a three-piece pinstriped suit and they'll look at you as if you had a canary on your head."

If you're applying at a hospital or other open-to-the-public environment, Burke suggests a visit before the interview. "Stop in and talk to patients, or talk to a member of the housekeeping staff, or just walk in and look around quietly," he says. Burke adds that the Internet has made showing up with inadequate information unforgivable. "Google is unbelievable-if you truly want a job so badly you'd throw yourself in front of a train to get it, you have to find out everything, every ounce of research, about the facility's past, present and future," he says.

Why do employers and interviewers place so much stock in the first impressions? "It's like selling a house," says Jeanne Boegemann, RN. "You don't want to give the buyer a reason to walk away." After graduating in May with an associate's degree in nursing, Boegemann in July interviewed at (and was hired by) Deborah Heart and Lung Center in Browns Mills, N.J.

Georgann Bruski, RT(R), is the director of invasive cardiology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and frequently interviews candidates for clinical positions in the cardiac catheterization lab. "Once you are hired here, you are an ambassador to patients, their families, your co-workers and every other person who walks in the door," she says. "When people enter a facility, they judge it by the people who work there."

With that in mind, here is a list of interview fashion musts from a variety of expert sources.

A conservative solid-color suit.

One piece of advice for men and women interviewees alike on which the experts universally agree: Dress conservatively. The *de facto* interview outfit is a suit (*not* a sport coat and slacks) and tie for men and a businesslike suit for women.

Jayne Miller is a physician assistant who has interviewed for jobs nearly a dozen times in her career. She recently interviewed for and got a job in the Kansas City area after having worked in San Antonio for years.

"I always wear a suit when I interview, even if they tell me it'll be a casual meeting," Miller says. "They can see me in my nasty scrubs when I get the job, but my interview is when I need to shine, and sometimes doing more than what they expect is a pleasant surprise to them."

Whether your suit is off-the-rack or bespoke, subdued colors in shades of blue and gray are best for men and women alike, fashion mavens say. Many sources caution men about wearing black suits to interviews, though, since the color could be viewed as overly somber. And brown generally is not considered a business color, so better to avoid it.

Chrystal Solola recently interviewed for and landed a job after having worked for 15 years as a PA at a women's health practice in Indiana. "When I interviewed with the CEO of (what would become) my new office, I wore a conservative dark suit with a skirt (as opposed to pants), which is still the standard for women (in my area)," she says.

Rules for avoiding an interview fashion 911: Skirt hemlines should not be more than a few inches above the knee, and slits should be small and centered on the back. Your skirt should cover your thighs when you are seated. Think Geena Davis in "Commander in Chief," not Calista Flockhart in "Ally McBeal."

"You should be covered from clavicle to kneecap," Bruski says.

While not all experts agree, tailored pants suits are appropriate for women in many areas. But some choices are *never* appropriate for an interview.

"I remember years ago," Solola says, "when one candidate for a job at my office came in for an interview in culottes"- an interview fashion *faux pas* of the kind Solola vowed never to make herself.

As for fabrics, don't worry if you can't tell gabardine from granola. Men simply should look for suits that are wool or a wool blend; women should seek wool, wool blends or microfiber fabrics.

Miller says local climate and custom can influence interview attire. "When I set out to interview, it was winter in Kansas City, and I owned two heavier-weight dark suits. But when it came time for me to interview in San Antonio in May, those suits would have stuck out like a sore thumb-and I would have suffocated. So I bought two lighter suits, in taupe and sage green, which were more versatile in any climate-and much more appropriate for an interview in southern Texas."

If you haven't interviewed for a job in years, you may no longer own interview-worthy clothes, or your body may have changed since you last wore them. This is where a good tailor can offer advice about the latest in conservative fashion and help with a nip or tuck to your clothes.

As Miller prepared for her most recent interview, she tried on the suits she had bought two years before. Since then, she had lost some weight. "Thank God I pulled them out a week before my interview, because they were virtually *hanging* on me." She had to get several quick alterations, but she says it was cheaper than buying a new suit.

While there's no need to mirror the latest runway fashions from Milan, make sure that your clothes aren't too far out of style, experts caution. For example, men's lapels that are too wide (three or more inches) or too skinny (an inch or less) can be altered by a tailor.

A coordinated blouse for women, and a shirt and tie for men.

Women, if you are wearing a black suit, consider a colorful accent such as a scarf near your face to soften the look. Or wear a tastefully colorful knit shell underneath the suit.

For men, a conservative silk necktie is the safest choice, at least at the first interview. If you feel strongly about not wearing a tie, at least wear a collared shirt. Unless you're George Steinbrenner, avoid wearing a turtleneck with a suit. Generally speaking, it's best to avoid shirts and blouses with busy plaids or stripes. Men can't go wrong with a crisp white shirt-always long-sleeved, no matter what the climate.

"I like to see a nice, neat, clean white or light blue shirt on a male interviewee," Bruski says. And, she adds, make sure your blouse or shirt is neatly pressed. "Wrinkled clothes show me that a person is too lazy to care about appearances. You don't have to come in clothes from Neiman Marcus. Just make sure your clothes are well pressed."

Appropriate hosiery and shoes.

Women should always wear neutral-colored hosiery, even in warm weather, and leather or cloth closed-toe shoes, such as pumps. Avoid open-toed or backless shoes; Manolo Blahniks may excite Carrie Bradshaw but aren't necessarily best for landing a *job* in the city. And since heel styles and heights quickly go in and out of fashion, the best advice is to avoid the extremes-not too chunky, not too high and definitely no stilettos.

Men should wear dark socks that coordinate with their suit pants and sport neatly shined, lace-up shoes in black, cordovan or chocolate brown (with matching belt), depending on the color of their suit. While not everyone agrees, some fashionistas say that slip-on shoes for men are not the best choice-if it's true that you are what you wear, best not to be a loafer at a job interview.

Minimal scents.

You've probably been trapped on an elevator with someone wearing cloying perfume or cologne. Don't risk making that mistake in an interview. Different noses perceive scents differently, and while you may not notice a strong scent, your interviewer might notice-or worse, be allergic to it.

Solola says that she did not wear any perfume at all to her interviews. "You never know whether you'll meet in a small room, which could make a strong scent even more noticeable," she says. "They'll be more interested in getting you *out* of there rather than what you have to say about your qualifications."

Bruski echoes that sentiment. "I'm asthmatic," she says, "and I'm often allergic to what interviewees wear." And, she speculates that if a person wears a strong scent to an interview, he or she is likely to wear it on the job, too. "Strong scents do *not* help sick patients feel better," she says.

If you're a smoker-and we hope you aren't-refrain from lighting up before your interview, Boegemann advises. Many people find tobacco odors offensive, and smoky clothes don't send a positive message to potential employers.

Minimal jewelry and good grooming.

Men and women alike, go easy on the bling. Women generally should avoid wearing more than two rings per hand or

one earring per ear. If your jewelry jingles, you're probably wearing too much. And facial jewelry is a definite no-no. Most experts recommend leaving ankle bracelets at home, too.

In short, "Mr. T doesn't work here," Bruski says. She notes that an aversion to lots of jewelry isn't just a matter of personal preference, it's an infection control issue. "If your hands are decked out like Diamond Lil's, they will cut examination gloves." Bruski suggests limiting rings to one per hand-two if you count an engagement ring and a wedding band.

Men and women alike should cover any conspicuous tattoos, and men should remove visible piercings. Women, go light on the makeup-remember how the erstwhile Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers was savagely lampooned for her heavy eyeliner?

And men, consider shaving your facial hair. (Food for thought: Until Sen. Jon Corzine was elected New Jersey governor in November, no sitting governor had sported facial hair, and Corzine was the only bearded U.S. senator. The last president with a beard was Benjamin Harrison, who left office in 1893; the last one with a mustache was William Taft, who left office in 1913.)

Interviewees of both sexes should sport neat professional hairstyles. Pay attention to your hands, because your interviewees surely will. Neatly trimmed nails for men and conservatively manicured nails for women (avoiding offbeat colors and acrylic tips, which are infection-control no-nos) are the benchmark.

One other note about appearance: Your mother was right when she told you to sit up straight. Consider your body language during interviews. "This is the one piece of advice I'd give before all others," Bruski says. "Don't slouch! There's nothing worse than a slumped over interviewee. You are selling yourself and your intellectual capital. Don't undermine yourself with bad posture."

"And shake hands, and make eye contact," Boegemann adds.

A portfolio or briefcase.

"Huge, cavernous purses send the wrong message," Boegemann says. Purses and handbags should be inconspicuous, conservative in color and in good condition. Leave your bulky backpack at home. Men and women alike should opt instead for a slimmer portfolio or briefcase at an interview.

Remember that it's the *sizzle* that sells the steak. You have the education, the skills and the experience that will allow you to excel at any job-you're the complete package. But make sure your wrapper doesn't prevent you from landing the job you deserve.

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