

Career Dress Pizzazz for Women

by Pamela Fay

According to a 2010 study by the Society for Human Resource Management, just 34% of employers permit casual work attire every day. This represents a drop from 55% in 2002, presumably due to a backlash against terrible career dress habits. With so many career dress style options, employees may find themselves struggling to put together a work-appropriate look. If you are a woman whose career dress style is lacking, it's time to expand your thinking beyond khakis and a polo shirt. You can have great style, look professional, and project a credible image by adopting a quasi-uniform from coordinated tops, bottoms and shoes.

Jeans, Pants and Skirts

Jeans are an everyday career dress option for some. They are comfortable and versatile. However, you still want to look your professional best. A dark-wash trouser cut is both professional and comfortable. Skip the bedazzling on the rear pockets, go for fitted, but not tight, and wear a belt or make sure the loops are covered by your top. Of course, holes are not acceptable, though subtle fading or whiskering may be, depending on your office environment.

If your office dress code isn't as casual, you can still find comfortable alternatives. Look for twill, fine-wale corduroy, or even materials with a little spandex for stretch. Yoga pants can work, too; just make sure they don't look like yoga pants, i.e. a logo, visible drawstring, stripes down the side, and, as a general rule, cover your bottom. The most body-flattering pant styles have flat-fronts (no pleats), minimal pockets and details, medium rise and a straight or boot cut leg. Most women should avoid boldly printed pants as the look can be childish, clownish or pajama-like.

Pencil skirts are always sharp, but you can also select a knee-length A-line, pleated or gathered skirt. Be careful, though, to avoid a schoolgirl look. Remember to compensate for volume on the bottom with a more fitted look on top. With skirts, you can also select prints. Choose prints that are in proportion to your body and avoid anything that looks like a day at the beach. For a more formal office, select pants and skirts in fine woven fabrics like wool gabardine.

If the dress code allows shorts, find classic, tailored styles in dressier material, seasonless wool or polyester blend, and of a modest length. Shorts become professional when paired with tights and even boots in the fall. Make sure you finish the look with a jacket to avoid looking like you are headed to the company picnic.

Jackets

To up the style quotient, top your jeans, pants or skirt with a jacket. This completes your uniform look and makes it easy to look pulled together even when you're late getting out the door in the morning. The more casual the bottom, the dressier the jacket can be while still maintaining a casual dress vibe. Some career dress style ideas include a traditional Chanel cut, a bomber style, a swing jacket, a crop length, or soft leather jacket.

Lightweight cotton jackets with short sleeves or self-ties are nice, as well. Jackets that end at or above the hip and define the waist are most universally flattering. Or, you can forego the jacket and wear a cardigan sweater. For a more polished look, belt the sweater or wear a matching shell and sweater. If you want to make a dress bottom more casual, take it down a notch by adding a blazer layered over a hooded or turtleneck sweater. If you choose to wear very casual pants or skirt, like a cargo style, pair it with a fur trimmed sweater for a chic contrast.

Shoes and Leg Wear

Sneakers, even if they are allowed in the casual dress code, are too casual. Try boots in ankle to knee high with a lace-up or sleek style. Forego combat, snow boots and over-the-knee styles. Ballet flat and loafers are fine if you are leggy and these styles complement your feet (you know who you are!). Otherwise, flat shoes can tend to shorten the leg line and add pounds to your hips. Be aware that although flats work well with dressier career styles, they make a casual look even more so. For comfort, try a mid-height heel, perhaps a wedge or modest platform. Straight leg, dark-wash jeans have star power when you cuff them to the knees and wear them with pumps. Don't forget color: pair a subdued gold or eggplant heel with a neutral outfit, or a sleek leopard print bootie with a skirt.

In cooler weather, wear tights. Be careful with crazy patterns and animal prints—best to stick with basic black or brown and vertical ribbing. Tights can also be worn with shorts in a casual office. Unless you are trying to look like a school girl, avoid wearing socks with skirts even if you are young enough to wear them.

Accessories

Accessories tie your outfit together and let the office know that you got dressed with a purpose. Push up your jacket sleeves and layer chunky watches and bracelets on your wrists. Drape strands of pearls around your neck. Throw a muffler over your shoulders or knot a lightweight scarf. Wear a belt over or under your jacket or sweater. Try using a robe or wide ribbon as a belt, too. Of course, don't wear anything that is distracting, noisy, or likely to get caught in office equipment. Limit your statement-making, ginormous accessories to one. And if you have to fuss with it, take it off.

Colors

Matching can look dated, but it can also look elegant. Decide the vibe you're going for and adjust your colors as needed. Whether you match or not, make sure your colors are coordinated. Prints can go together if they include the same colors, but for your career dress style keep it simple. You will get more mileage from your wardrobe if you stick to neutral basics and add color through your accessories. Think of blouses as accessories, as well. A jewel-toned blouse with a cowl neck can look elegant, yet career-worthy, under a casual zip front jacket. Women can get away with wearing t-shirts and layering tanks in many work environments if they are good quality and worn under a jacket. They are relatively inexpensive and add pizzazz.

References

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Resources

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