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## Workforce Series #8

# Your Appearance at Work

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### Why Appearance is Important at Work

People who work need to consider how they look. Appearance does count and how you appear to others can make or break a job opportunity or your success on the job. Appearance counts all the time—from the job application, to the interview, to every day on the job. The key is to find a style that fits your particular job and type of work, makes you and others comfortable, and makes a positive statement about you. Consider your clothes, hair, skin complexion, hygiene, scent, posture, facial expression, tone of voice, and even the way you walk. Clothes will be the most expensive item. However, your hygiene, grooming, posture, smile, tone of voice, hair, and nails are also important. Your employer's goal is to have the employees project a favorable image; your goal is to represent the employer and yourself in a favorable way. With care and planning, you can achieve both goals with style and satisfaction.

### First Impressions

The first impression you make influences how people react to the way you look and present yourself. Most experts believe that first impressions can be very lasting, even though you may look and act differently later. Looks alone cannot bring you job success. But not caring about your looks is one sure way to keep yourself from succeeding. Looking like you are ready to work helps to make you feel like you can do the job. If you are working with the public, your customers will have more confidence in you just because you look like someone who belongs in that work environment. Your feelings and the reactions of others help you do a better job. The way you look at work is critical to your success on the job.

### Sending a Message

When we want to tell someone something, we usually think of talking or writing to them. These are examples of verbal and written communication. But we do our strongest and most honest communication without saying a word. Our looks and behavior are called nonverbal communication, and together they send a powerful

message whether we intend them to do so or not. The following are examples of your nonverbal communication: how clean and well-groomed you are; the condition of your clothes; your posture, walk, and tone of voice; your facial expression; your hand gestures, how close you stand to the other person; whether you make eye contact with the other person; and your body image.

### Your Clothes on the Job

Dressing for the job starts with the job interview. Men interviewing for any professional position should wear a suit, preferably in conservative colors like navy or charcoal gray. For several consecutive interviews at the same company, one can wear the same suit and a different shirt and tie each day. Women interviewing should also wear a business-like suit. Professionalism dictates a suit or jacket with skirt or pants matching or coordinating. A professional looking pantsuit is usually very acceptable. The key is to dress at least as formally and conservatively as the position requires, or slightly more so.

For the interview and on the job, the message you need to send is: "I am a capable person and take my job seriously. I know what I am doing, and I am ready to get to work." When you buy clothes for work, buy classic styles that will endure from one season or year to another. Watch for out-of-season sales and buy at thrift shops where you can put together several outfits for the price of a new one.

When you are dressing for work, you need to be thinking of several things: dressing for comfort in the cold or heat; what others are wearing at the time of the year; how professional you will look; the situation or the activities of the day that you are dressing for, and the message you want to send. Clothes that are unacceptable in most work settings are any clothes with a rude or controversial logo, picture, or phrase, soiled, worn-out or torn garments, wearing hats indoors (except for religious reasons, after you have received permission), clothes that are revealing, and outfits that are too dressy. In general, clothes designed for sports, the beach, or fancy parties are not suitable for work.

## Your Job Culture

Different companies and different types of work have different types of cultures. The three main types are traditional corporate culture, relaxed culture, and open culture. A workplace with a traditional corporate culture will have employees who dress in the traditional ways: shirt and tie for men, businesslike dresses, skirts and blouses for women; and/or uniforms for men and women who work in certain departments. There is little room for fashion trends or clothes that are very flashy. A workplace with a relaxed culture is more often found in smaller companies. Employees wear more casual clothes, pants for women, men may work in sports shirts and no tie, and there may be no uniforms. A workplace with an open culture may have no dress code at all; people wear what they want.

Many companies discuss their dress policy in an employees' handbook. If no such information is discussed, think about what you observed other employees wearing while you were at your interview and dress in a similar fashion. New employees are more likely to be accepted by their coworkers when they don't "stand out in a crowd."

## Wearing Uniforms for Work

If your job requires a uniform, keep the following things in mind. Your uniform must be exactly what the company says it should be. Your uniform must be clean. If your work is hard on your clothes, you need to replace your uniform whenever it starts to wear out. Wear your uniform as it was intended to be worn. If the shirt is meant to be tucked in, tuck it in; if the collar is meant to be folded down, fold it down. Avoid dressing up your uniform with a lot of personal accessories and jewelry. A simple neck chain or ring is generally acceptable. Keep in mind, the company wants to convey a professional image to its customers.

## Identification

Most large organizations today require an identification badge for all employees. This is used for several purposes; including security at the work site and immediate knowledge of a person's name. If your employer requires a badge, wear it all the time when at work. Your supervisor and customers will notice.

## Hair, Skin, and Nails on the Job

Your hair, skin, and nails say as much about you as your clothes do. In all cases, keep your hair, skin, and nails clean. This is the heart of good grooming. The main rule for hair at work is an easy one: keep it clean and simple. You send the right message when your hair is clean; kept neatly out of your face and out of your way; worn without too many beads, jewels, bows, and clips; not demanding your attention all day; and in step with your

organization's dress code. Employees preparing or handling food may be required to wear a hair net.

Hair growth patterns vary a great deal among people, but most of us have to deal with hair that is somewhere other than the scalp. If the hair from your nose or ears is clearly visible, clip it, or have someone else clip it for you. For men, mustaches and beards are almost always acceptable as long as they are clean, well trimmed, and conservatively styled. For women, removal of facial hair and hair on legs and under arms is a personal choice, unless your job specifically requires that the hair be removed. Your total look should be one of neatness and cleanliness.

We have much less control over our skin than we do our hair; you cannot change your skin tone, birthmarks, scars, etc. Don't worry about them; instead, focus on the things you can change. The most important thing you can do about your skin is to keep it clean. If your skin is greasy, dirty, or loaded with make-up, you don't look clean. Make-up, including eye shadow, eyebrow pencil and lash mascara, blush and lipstick, should be applied with a light touch to accentuate facial features during the work hours. If you have a skin condition that you cannot deal with on your own, see a dermatologist.

Your fingernails send a message, too. It is important that fingernails be kept clean. Keep in mind that at work, you express yourself with your hands and your nails are seen. Nails need to be clipped, filed, and smoothly shaped.

## Personal Differences

Employers know that people are different. But every employee needs to understand that the work world is the place that is the least tolerant of personal differences. In the workplace, you are not just sending a non-verbal message about yourself; you are also sending one about the company. Many employers have some very specific expectations of how you should look and present yourself. In general, employers want their workers to have a fairly conservative and traditional image. Employers are thinking of their customers and how the customers will react to your appearance. These concerns will determine the expectations of your appearance and the rules or policies in the workplace.

## Cultural Diversity

Some of our differences are due to individuality, religion, or ethnic background, and there is acceptance for cultural and ethnic differences in the workplace. However, remember that your organization expects you to represent them in a way that will not discourage customers from purchasing their goods and services. Study the unwritten rules that govern the behavior in

your organization. Regardless of how you are accustomed to dressing, adapt your style to the organization.

Some of our greatest cultural differences are expressed in how we physically relate to others. In some cultures, people stand very close to each other when they talk or work. In American workplaces, allow about two to three feet between yourself and your co-worker or supervisor.

Touching another person's hand or putting your hand on the shoulder is normal and even a positive signal in many cultures. In the American workplace, touching is generally limited to handshakes. Avoid touching others in more personal ways.

Most of the people in the world expect other people to have a natural body smell. In the American workplace, a natural body odor is exactly what is not expected or desired. It is necessary to be clean and use deodorant if you are to avoid disapproval of co-workers and supervisors.

We naturally express ourselves in our facial features, hand gestures, and tone of voice. That is not a problem as long as you don't become too dramatic. Think about your tone of voice, as sarcasm, loud laughing, loud talk-

ing or shouting will cause others to think that you are out of control or drawing attention to yourself.

### **Exercise Regularly**

Getting into a regular exercise routine—whether it is walking, jogging, swimming, or dancing—will help you in a variety of ways. You will look better, sleep better, radiate more energy, and have a more positive image. There is increasing evidence that being in good, physical shape helps to minimize the psychological impact of stress. Being physically fit will benefit you in many ways.

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