

**Rejected: Readers Reveal Interview Don'ts -  
Picking Attire is Tricky if You Don't Know Boss's Pet Peeves;  
Jeers for Shoe Tassles, Pantsuits**

*By: Christina Binkley, The Wall Street Journal*

One of the most fearsome things about dressing for job interviews is the conflicting opinions people have on what clothes say about the person wearing them.

Whether it's skirts vs. pants, dark suit vs. light, or cuff links vs. none – and don't even mention shoe tassels – many hiring managers have firm opinions on what their ideal candidate will wear, down to the color of his socks. Last week's On Style column about the subliminal messages sent by clothes people wear to job interviews unleashed a flood of mail, including tips, myriad questions, and even a lively poem about shopping.

Even obscure rules – one reader recommended that men's haircuts be tapered in the back, rather than cut straight across – make it clear that office culture is rife with minute inspections of job candidates' appearances.

Just about everything is subject to scrutiny, including cars. Joe Eichberger, chief executive of AMT DataSouth Corp., a printer manufacturer in Camarillo, Calif., likes to take a look at the inside of a job candidate's car, particularly if he or she is a prospective salesman or consultant. "If it looks like he/she lives there, it's an indicator of how they run their lives and thought processes. Neat as a pin, ditto," wrote Mr. Eichberger.

Perhaps it's lamentable that a person should be judged on how he maintains his car interior or what he wears. "I've encountered far too many empty suits who are perfectly groomed but have little relevant knowledge," wrote Marty Robbins, an attorney in Buffalo Grove, Ill. "Conversely, many people who emphasize keeping current with their technical skills and industry

knowledge do not have time to spend preening over their wardrobes.”

True. Yet employers are attempting to see the character and abilities of people they often hardly know. You go with the information you have.

A surprising number of readers, both male and female, wrote in to say that women need to pay more attention to how they look at work. “Women in particular are so focused on delivering results as they climb the career ladder – hardly a thought is spared for their wardrobes,” writes Alicia Kan, global head of communications in Chicago for Synovate, a market-research firm.

One reason may be that women lack a clear executive uniform – which means they have more rope with which to hang themselves. It can be hard for a woman to imagine what’s in the minds of people with whom she works. One woman wrote to say she often wears crisp suits but after reading last week’s column, she was suddenly worried about her hoop earrings and collection of dresses by Diane von Furstenberg, whose designs can be clingy and plunging, though they are a favorite of professional women.

“I want to be perceived by my teammates as approachable, professional and appropriate. If my wardrobe is giving off unknowing messages, I would really like to know,” wrote Erin Alexander, district manager of major accounts with Automatic Data Processing Inc. in Dearborn, Mich. Later, she said, when she asked a male friend about it, he told her, “Those dresses you wear make me want to take you to dinner, not take you seriously.” “I’ll stick to suits on client calls!” Ms. Alexander wrote.

One suggestion in last week’s column – that light-colored suits can look less intimidating than dark suits on women in positions of power – generated consternation from several readers, who argued that women shouldn’t have to apologize for power. Indeed, they shouldn’t. But tell that to the New York-area financial executive who wrote me, extensively, that he avoids hiring women who wear pants because, he argues, women who wear skirts and pantyhose tend to be better employees. He

considers a woman in a pantsuit equivalent to a man in a suit with no necktie. “Certainly, no man is going to get offended if she shows up in a skirt and hose, but there are men like me who feel a pantsuit on a woman is a stepdown. Why take the chance?” he wrote. This 35 year old man asked not to be quoted by name because he said his comments could be interpreted as sexist.

But his candor provides insight into the thoughts of some hiring managers, who may be more tradition-bound than one would expect in 2008. It may be a jolting reminder for women contemplating jobs in the field, but financial companies have some of the most conservative dress-code traditions.

Ultimately, though, people have to be true to themselves. We can’t possibly meet all the conflicting expectations for our wardrobes. If a light-colored suit is a compromise for you, don’t wear one. If you meet the opportunity to wear ivory Chanel with joy, then by all means, leap. The only thing that is certain is that some people will like, some won’t. Sometimes the dress code may even be telling you something you should listen to about a corporate culture. An organization that is firmly devout about pantyhose might not be the right place for a woman who views hosiery as an elastic torture device.

Being loyal to one’s own professional style, within bounds, is important for people in midcareer. But recent graduates can benefit from the basic polish-your-shoes rules given out by their college placement offices. In fact, I heard from several college career counselors and numerous parents who worry that their 22-year-olds disdain the idea of hiking up their low-riding pants and relegating flip-flops to Saturdays.

Dressing to fit in with an office’s individual character shows respect and commitment. At one Des Moines, Iowa, insurance-industry company, the president asks job candidates to interview in business-casual clothes because that’s how the office operates. Regularly, the candidates show up in suits. “If he can’t follow the simplest instructions about how to dress, I certainly don’t need him

on my staff,” is the executive’s response, according to a staff member who wrote me.

***Dressing the Part – Want that job? Readers Weigh in with Their Tips:***

- **Shoes:** Wear well-made shoes, spending a bit more than you think you can afford. Closed toe and heel for women. Gentlemen: avoid tassels, which are as controversial as a bow tie.
- **Men’s suits:** Spend some money here too. Men should generally wear dark-colored suits; but if a tan suit is clearly appropriate, then wear a blue shirt, not a white one.
- **Women’s suits:** Avoid pastels and crimson, which can be interpreted as overly soft or trying too hard respectively.
- **Cosmetics:** Avoid French manicures and wet-looking lip gloss. Men should avoid hair gel. Everyone should avoid fake tans.
- **Styles:** Avoid low-riding pants and other signals you haven’t fully graduated from college.
- **General:** Remember what your mom said: Spit out your gum. Sit up straight. Make eye contact.