

Building Opportunities: Dressing for Success

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Abstract

The "business casual" dress trend has led to confusion about what is appropriate to wear to work. Appropriate workplace dress is an important component of career success. Information about workplace dress is not always available to low-income groups. The program "Building Opportunities: Dressing for Success" was developed by university faculty in a small town to teach low-income groups about appropriate workplace dress. The program was conducted in collaboration with WorkOne, an employment service for low-income groups. Participants found the program educational. Furthermore, participant comments provided helpful information about successfully working with this growing population.

Keywords: workplace, clothing, low income

Introduction

The economy has recently been in a recession, and unemployment rates averaged 6 percent in 2003. Recovery has been slow, with unemployment rates averaging 5.2 percent during the first half of 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005). In addition, welfare programs have undergone restructuring since 1996, which continues under the leadership of President George Bush. President Bush has proposed "maximizing self-sufficiency through work," which requires states to make sure a certain percentage of participants in welfare program TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) are employed (Horn 2005). The challenges for low-income individuals are compounded because this population often has health, childcare, and transportation limitations (Garasky, Greder, and Brotherson 2003). The situation provides opportunities for Family and Consumer Sciences professionals to apply their specialized knowledge in areas such as apparel and textiles to help low-income groups overcome these obstacles so they will acquire and maintain employment.

Review of literature

According to researchers, an appropriate appearance that conforms to employers' expectations is a primary criterion for successfully acquiring employment (Fiore and DeLong 1990, Kimle and Damhorst 1997, Turner-Bowker 2001), and appearance has an influence on the perception of employee competency (e.g., Forsythe, Drake, and Cox 1985; Workman 1984). Opinions of business leaders are similar: for example, executives surveyed noted that employees who dress formally advance in their careers more easily than those who do not (USA Today Magazine 2003). Yet, in the last 30 years, casual dress has become more common in the workplace (Shellhart and Beck 2005).

Manager surveys indicate that workplace dress has become too casual (Oleck 2001, USA Today 2003). One workplace expert commented, "Given lingering high unemployment rates, employees may want to hang up the flip-flops, not just for the summer season, but for good" (USA Today Magazine 2003, 8). The trend is causing confusion, which can be detrimental in situations such as job interviews, where the appearance of an applicant can influence hiring decisions (Field 2003).

Large corporations, such as Sprint, offer opportunities for welfare participants to learn about workplace dress (Cohen 1998). Fashion Takes Action is an outreach program conducted by Sears and Women Work! in which participants shop for workplace dress with a fashion expert (McLeod 2003). A limited number of state-affiliated and private programs address workplace clothing (Turner-Bowker 2001). Programs include Dress for Success and Bottomless Closet. These services provide clothing and dress advice to low-income women (Bottomless Closet 2005; Dress for Success 2004). These dress programs are often for women, and they are available to people living in urban regions. Thus, to fill a gap, Building Opportunities: Dressing for Success was created by a professor who specializes in apparel and textiles with funding from The Community Foundation of Delaware County, Inc. The program targeted low-income individuals and was conducted in a small town in collaboration with WorkOne, an employment agency that helps low-income groups.

Program goals, objectives, and methods

The Building Opportunities program was designed to teach low-income men and women how to dress for a job interview and to develop a workplace wardrobe with limited resources. Building Opportunities was offered as a community service program through a seminar addressing appropriate clothing.

The program consisted of a one-hour seminar presented to two groups of 18 to 20 people as part of an extended workshop offered by WorkOne that helps TANF participants acquire employment. The program was conducted in August 2004 at WorkOne facilities.

The seminars gave participants guidelines for dressing for a job interview. These guidelines were developed from employee dress codes from banks and retail stores. The study was framed by the fundamental reasons that people wear clothing, such as decoration, group membership, and modesty-sexual attraction (Tortora and Eubank 1998). The guidelines suggested that appropriate job interview attire would have the following characteristics:

1. not distracting, such as clothing with subtle colors and small accessories
2. similar to or slightly more formal than the clothing worn by employees
3. limited in self expression
4. focused on the face
5. comfortable and boosts confidence
6. up-dated, but not too trendy
7. wouldn't interfere with performing tasks

Initially, two female models modeled clothing: one dressed professionally and the other, unprofessionally (Figure 1). Using the guidelines, participants discussed why the models were dressed appropriately or inappropriately for a job interview.

Figure 1: Example of inappropriate dress (left) and appropriate dress (right) for a job interview.



To address appropriate workplace dress once hired, the "wardrobing" concept was presented. This included three female and two male models wearing outfits composed of interchangeable separates. A range of appropriate workplace dress was presented from a formal suit to casual khakis and a dress shirt. The outfits presented reinforced dress guidelines. Each set cost approximately \$250. Outfits were purchased at moderate-priced retailers, such as JC Penney and Kohl's, to maintain quality and a low cost. Each participant received a packet with copies of Microsoft PowerPoint slides, and information sheets about fabric properties and further resources.

Evaluation of the program

Pre- and post-seminar questionnaires were distributed. Both questionnaires included items addressing each guideline presented during the seminar. Participants ranked importance of the guidelines to them when dressing for a job interview using a 7-point Likert scale. The pre- and

post responses were compared using a paired sample t-test. Comparisons indicated that after the seminar, participants thought that the guidelines were more important to consider when dressing for a job interview. Participants noted they were more knowledgeable about dressing for a job interview and the "wardrobing" concept. Participants indicated that they would plan job interview attire more carefully (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between pre- and post-program responses

Survey guidelines	Items	Dress reason	DF	SIG
Identified the degree of importance of each of the following when preparing for a job interview	The design of the accessories and fabric prints	Decoration	30	.001*
	How the people at the place where I would like to work dress	Belong to a group	29	.040*
	How well the clothing and accessories express my individuality	Belong to a group	30	.007*
	How well the clothing emphasizes my face, rather than my body	Modest / sexual attraction	29	.000*
	How well the clothing and accessories boosts my confidence	Self-esteem	38	.004*
	How up-to-date I will look	To look up-to-date	30	.000*
	The tasks performed at an interview	Utility	29	.048*
Identified the degree of agreement with the following statements	My level of knowledge about dressing for a job interview is extensive	N.A.	30	.005*
	For my next job interview I will plan what I am going to wear	N.A.	31	.045*
	I am very familiar with the concept of "wardrobing"		31	.004*

* P < .05

Written comments by participants indicated that the program was educational and fun. One participant said, "I enjoyed the seminar, and I feel that I am more educated now than I was about 'wardrobing.'" Critical comments provided insight into improvements for the program and effectively speaking to low-income groups. One participant indicated that the outfits cost more than his monthly income. Adding dress examples from discount retailers, and a list of resources for free clothing and other appearance products would strengthen the program.

After the first seminar, WorkOne staff said that the presenters needed to note that these guidelines were not rigid rules that only low-income groups needed to follow. In support of staff suggestions, a participant described the guidelines as "arguments" and commented that the presenters "needed to develop arguments for rebuttals." Such comments were avoided during the second seminar where presenters noted that the guidelines were inspired by recent confusion in society about dressing appropriately at work. Presenters also said that there is opportunity for individual interpretation in the guidelines.

Conclusion

The program, including the participant information packet, seminar script, and clothing, was donated to WorkOne for further use. This program was timely. It was featured in the local press and several other groups asked to hear the program (Koch 2004). The program provided university professionals with an opportunity to learn about working with low-income individuals by collaborating with an organization that helps this population. It also provided convenient access to information to low-income groups in a small town, which will help them acquire and maintain employment. Further applications of this program include giving clothing and makeovers to participants. The program could be expanded to other rural areas. The program could be broadened to lifestyle lessons that incorporate topics related to other family and consumer sciences disciplines, such as eating healthfully to enhance work productivity while maintaining a budget.

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