



An Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

What is Appropriate Dress for an Interview?

By Harrison Barnes, Managing Director from Los Angeles Office

I have thought a lot about this question over the years and I really believe I have the answer. The answer is as simple as this: Dress as you want to be seen. While this may seem an overly simplistic answer, I believe that with some further elaboration the meaning of this will become clear.

In my first law firm job out of law school, I worked in a law firm in Southern California that literally had been featured in magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and other trendy magazines because it had no dress code. Today this is the norm for a lot of law firms and other employers around the country. However, more than a decade ago this was considered extremely unusual – even in free spirited Los Angeles. This particular law firm loved to talk about how casual they were and how easy going things were because of no dress code. Partners would wear Hawaiian shirts, shorts and sandals, and the dress code of the firm really did contribute to a certain sense that things were much different here than they were in the formal New York City law firms most of the attorneys came from.

The thing I realized after being at the law firm for some time and being involved in the recruiting at the firm was that there were generally two types of people the firm interviewed: Those who came in dressed casually in shorts and those who did not. Law students loved to show up for interviews dressed ultra casually and really felt they were doing the right thing. More often than not, however, the law students did not dress casually, and it was even rarer that a lateral attorney candidate would dress casually.



After watching approximately one year of interviews I began to notice a pattern: Everyone who showed up for their interview dressed very casually did not get hired. In almost all instances the “casually dressed” associates interviewing them would make one remark or another about how the person did not seem that serious about the job and so forth. On perhaps one or two occasions, I heard something about how the person was dressed, but for the most part they would refer to other reasons for the person not being hired that had little to do with how the person was dressed. Deep down, though, I know that the reason the person was not hired had to do with how they were dressed. I just knew it.

When I consider the importance of dress in business and in the practice of law, I keep thinking more and more how important it is. Generally, when people are younger they are more shallow and tend to focus on style over substance; however, in my case I may be different. I firmly believe that among the most important things you can do is keep a flawless appearance – both in interviews and at your actual job. You must always be acting the part, and in order to act the part you must look the part.

One of the first things I realized when I started practicing law came from a very intelligent judge I clerked for, Robert H. Cleland. When I was younger I loved quoting people such as Judge Posner and using outside philosophers in my writing. I felt this made my job all that much more enjoyable and really added an extra level of intellectual depth to the work I was doing. In fact, I would venture to say that I viewed the content of what I was writing as more important than having perfect punctuation, for example. A few weeks into this first job, Judge Cleland said something to me that I will never forget. He said something to this effect:

“If your presentation is not perfect, people assume the logic you use to reach your conclusions is also not perfect. No matter how brilliant you are you will never have your point heard or taken seriously because your presentation will not be taken seriously.”

Judge Cleland was right about the presentation of written work, and I believe this is also applicable to how you dress and present yourself. If you walk into a Rolls Royce dealership dressed like a construction worker they are not going to take you seriously. If you walk into a bank looking for a big loan with scruffy shoes they may not take you seriously. If you walk into court dressed poorly they will not take you seriously.

Think about the organizations you have belonged to and jobs you have held. I would venture to say that the best dressed people in these organizations were generally at the very top of the food chain in their respective organizations. Why do you think this is? There are several reasons looking the part is a good idea.

First, can you imagine the Vice President of the United States meeting an important world leader dressed in a cheap suit – or a suit that was well worn? How about if he wore a winter parka at a ceremony at Auschwitz?

This picture was in the media for days and was the source of numerous, numerous outraged blogs and media stories. People were very, very upset because they felt that Cheney had disrespected our country – and Jews killed by the Nazis – due to the way he dressed.



I have been completely ripped off only a few times in my life. One was by a sleazy dishonest insurance broker who sold me a whole life insurance policy that was barely worth the paper it was written on. I remember to this day that this guy was among the best dressed individuals I had ever seen when he signed me up for the insurance policy. I believe I must have fallen for this because I believed that someone dressed as well as he was must be honest and delivering a solid financial product.



Who would you want to represent you:

- An attorney dressed in an expensive well fitting European suit; or,
- An attorney dressed in a cheap suit that was ill fitting?

Think about these questions. Ask yourself who would you rather hire:

- An attorney dressed in an expensive well fitting European suit; or,
- An attorney dressed in a cheap suit that was ill fitting?

I could go on and on with this, but the fact of the matter is that you need to put yourself in the shoes of your employer and your potential clients. Both your employer and potential client will be most interested in hiring superstars. They want someone representing them who really reflects the professionalism and esteem that they personally hold themselves to. What brand would you prefer to represent you or your law firm or company: cheap or expensive?

Take a moment to think a bit about this. A man or woman who dresses exquisitely needs to put a lot of thought and effort into this. They need to ensure that they shop diligently for the right clothing and get clothes that are most suitable to them. They need to take the time to make sure their clothes are well kept up and pay attention to details, from the dry cleaner they use to the creases that appear in their pants. They need to make sure their clothes are tailored properly. They need to make sure they are purchasing good quality shoes and that these shoes are well polished and the heels are not too worn down. They need to make sure their belt has no scratches. They need to ensure there are no runs in their pantyhose and they need to ensure their slip is not showing. The list of what is required to dress like an outstanding professional could go on and on and on. Being a very professionally dressed person requires a ton of effort and an enormous amount of attention to detail. Being a good dresser also requires an enormous amount of multitasking. In fact, being a good



dresser requires so much attention to detail that most people are simply not willing or capable of doing this.

There is a final point that I bring up with the effort to be a good dresser that is perhaps among the most important of all: In order to be an outstanding dresser you must have a lot of self-confidence and self-esteem. You absolutely must have a lot of self-esteem if you are going to purchase an expensive blouse, shoes or other sorts of clothes for work. You also need a lot of self-esteem to believe you are worth dressing the part. Most people do not have the self-esteem it requires to look their best at all times. In order to look good you must believe that you deserve to look good. Napoleon Hill once made this clear in his book [Think and Grow Rich](#): *“What you think, so you will become.”*

Just as most people do not have the ability to master the details of dressing well, most people do not have the ability to master the details of being good attorneys. The level of detail and coordination required to be a good attorney is simply far, far too much. This is no different than what it takes to dress well. Most people are simply not able to look the part needed to dress well.

You cannot change where you went to law school. You cannot change how you did in law school. You cannot change who your parents were. You cannot change where you worked last. You cannot change your race. You cannot change the degree of attractiveness you generally have to the opposite sex. You cannot change your accent rapidly. You cannot change the quality of jobs you have held in the past. You cannot change whether you were fired from your last firm or not. There is way, way too much that you cannot change. The one thing you can change, however, is how you present yourself every single day. You owe it to yourself to go all out in this category. Not being your best is the absolute biggest mistake you can make.



The law student who is first in his/her class may have studied until 2:00 am every night for three years to get where they are. The law student who goes to a top Ivy League law school may have gotten a silver medal in the Olympics and an A average in college to get into the law school of their dreams. Your competition for a job may have worked in a better ranked firm in a bigger city. None of these people may get the job you are seeking if they do not dress as well as you do for interviews. None of them may get promoted if they do not look as good at work as you do each day.

Is it shallow for me to say that dressing well at work and interviews is one of the most important things you can do? Most definitely. Am I right? Most definitely. Why not change the thing about yourself that is easy to change?

Tons of people out there go to self-help interviewing seminars. They read books, they hire career coaches. Why don't they wake up and do the easiest thing of all: Look and dress flawlessly for work.

I urge you to make the most out of every day at work, regardless of whether you are interviewing that day or not. Look professional and dress in a conservative and well thought out way for work. This will position you well, help you keep a job, and discipline you to pay attention to details. Refine your appearance throughout your life by dressing better and better and better. Over time, your world, the people around you, and your surroundings will continue to change for the better. Look your best for interviews.

See the following articles for more information:

- [21 Major Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs](#)
- [The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews](#)
- [How to Talk About Other Interviews in Your Interviews](#)
- [How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Interview Question](#)
- [How to Answer the Do You Have Any Questions for Me Interview Question](#)