The Millennial's Guide to

DRESSING UP AT WORK

Relaxed, Casual, Formal, Oh My!

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WHY WORRY ABOUT YOUR WARDROBE?

Some people might not think that clothing matters all that much, especially in light of the t-shirt-and-jeans wearing entrepreneurs that make it onto magazine covers today. However, several studies have established that clothing can help you set the tone of your workday and what you wear can have a powerful effect on how hard you work.

In 2012, the Kellogg School of Management experimented with dressing students in a white lab coat for different tasks.[1] The researchers found that wearing specific clothing with symbolic meaning (that is, wearing the lab coat of a doctor to do work) systematically influenced the wearer's psychological processes and enhanced attention span.
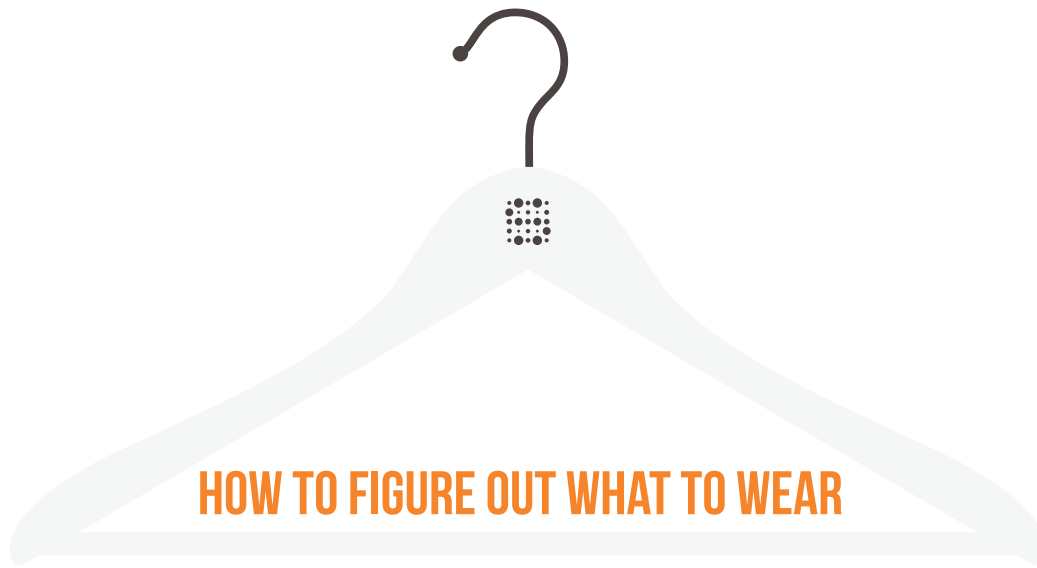
Not only does clothing enhance your personal performance, but it can also influence how coworkers and superiors relate to you. In her book *How to Get People to Do Stuff*, author Susan Weinschenk shares research about appearance and the important role it plays in building trust and establishing relationships. The right outfit for work goes deeper than you might think, helping you communicate that you understand and respect the norms of your workplace.

For example, the person who persists in wearing a full suit when the convention is jeans will stand out just as much as the person who does not dress up in a formal environment. When that's your workplace, your job is to identify which jeans to wear and what to wear with those jeans, not identifying a standard definition of "professional" and sticking with it.

As a millennial, the way you dress allows you to prepare yourself to perform in a certain way and also helps you establish your reputation in the workplace. Whether you choose to wear a standard creative uniform or use clothing to express yourself in the workplace, you need to put some thought into it. The ultimate goal is to balance a sense of personal style with something appropriate for your unique workplace.

What you wear is important, so get your career off on the right foot by crafting an appropriate, personalized approach to your workplace wardrobe.

1 Northwestern University, http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103112000200

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HOW TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO WEAR

Whether you work at a startup or an established law office, you need to dress appropriately for the setting. However, "appropriate" will vary according to your location, industry, leadership and culture.

The first clue will come from your interview experience. What was the most common type of clothing you saw? Did the clothing vary from department to department, or did everyone seem to dress on the same level?

The next clue comes from your onboarding and orientation experience. Any clothing guidelines passed down to you from human resources should be followed to the letter. Then you can adjust your clothing based on what you learn as you continue to work at your job.
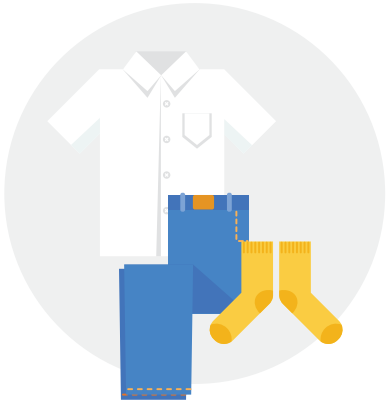
Wardrobe Tip:
Look at how the managers within your company dress, both in your department and outside of it.

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UNDERSTAND COMMON CLOTHING GUIDELINES

Customization to your workplace is the goal, but first you should start with the well-established common clothing guidelines. **Here's a look at the established norms for casual, business casual and formal environments:**

CASUAL, STARTUP OR RELAXED

A casual, startup or relaxed environment is still a stylish and professional one; it's not an invitation to break out your weekend wear.

For women, wear skinny jeans, a blouse and flats, or perhaps a sundress or maxi skirt, weather permitting. Flip-flops or jeans with holes are not recommended, as you are still in a professional setting.

For men, dark wash jeans and polo shirts that fit well create a standard casual wardrobe. Gym shorts, yoga pants, sweat pants, shirts with stains or baggy pants would not be appropriate. As for shorts, you'll want to get a sense of this over time. You need to know both your workplace and your specific department.

BUSINESS CASUAL

Business casual is a step above casual, startup or relaxed environments. Business casual clothing is less recreational and more professional, skipping any clothing that shows bare arms or legs.

For women, this means non-jean pants and a blouse with flats or heels. When wearing skirts or dresses with a hem shorter than 3 inches above the knee, you should wear pantyhose or tights underneath.

For men, slim-cut pants or khakis with a fitted button-down shirt, leather belt and nice shoes will give you a great starting point for a wardrobe.

BUSINESS FORMAL

Business formal is the most formal business environment, requiring a more polished approach to clothing. Most appropriate outfits involve some reflection of a full suit.
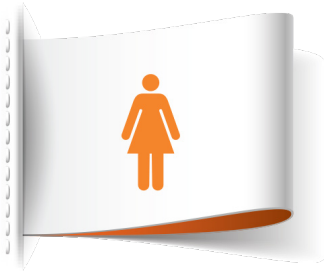
For women, a pencil skirt or slacks with a blouse and blazer is appropriate.

For men, a well-tailored suit in navy, black or dark gray is appropriate.

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TEST OUT YOUR OUTFIT

When you choose an outfit for one of the three most common office environments, you may wonder if it is appropriate.

When in doubt, test your outfit with these measures:

Clothing Questions For Women

- Are these clothes clean?
- Does this top reveal cleavage?
- Does this top show my midriff when I make normal movements?
- Is the length of this skirt more than 3 inches above my knees? (If so, wear tights or pantyhose beneath.)
- Does this piece of clothing (pant, skirt, top) fit well? (Not too large, not too tight)
- Are these heels less than 3 inches tall?
- Does any piece of clothing appear to be transparent?

Clothing Questions For Men

- Are these clothes clean?
- Do my pants fit well, neither too tight or too loose?
- Are my shoes clean and polished?
- Is the style of my clothing appropriate? Men's clothing goes out of style more slowly, so it is more obvious when your clothes are outdated (think 1970s, short-sleeved salmon button-up shirt).

If you are questioning a piece of clothing's appropriateness, err on the safe side and wear something else. At the very least, run your choice through this checklist of common borderline wardrobe choices:

Fabric is dirty, stained or ripped	Sleeveless	Shoes feature exposed toes	Shorts
Cotton T-Shirt	Capris	Leggings	Athletic fabric or style

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START SIMPLE AND BUILD WITH YOUR WORKPLACE IN MIND
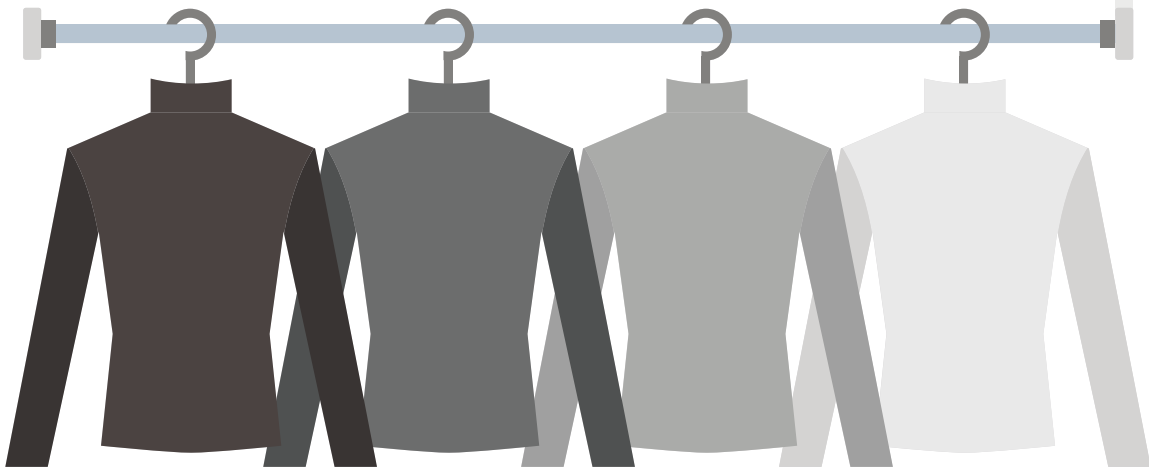
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While it's important to grasp the concept of casual, business casual and business formal, none of those guidelines can help you determine exactly how to dress in your workplace. It's far more important to start with basic outlines and pay careful attention to build and tweak your wardrobe with your unique workplace in mind.

Instead of celebrating your new job with one big shopping spree, pick up the basics outlined below and build and accessorize your wardrobe over time.

Here's how to get started:

KEEP
IT
SIMPLE

BEGIN WITH THE BASICS

When dressing for work, don't feel pressured to build a brand-name wardrobe. Most of your coworkers are not looking at the label on your pants to determine the designer, and if they are you likely won't be able to fool them about the quality of your clothing.

Classic basics in dark colors often look just as good as more expensive versions. The best outfit isn't necessarily the most expensive one; it's the one that flatters you most (by being clean and well-fitting) without drawing inappropriate attention to various body parts. The best fashion is fashion that your coworkers and clients don't even notice because they're focused on what you're saying and not what you're wearing.

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Get your wardrobe off on the right foot by picking up these often inexpensive basics:

MEN

A black, navy or gray suit

A reasonably priced suit in gray, navy or black will form the backbone of your wardrobe. You can wear the suit in separate pieces to avoid being too formal.

Choose a solid, conservatively colored suit over bold colors or funky patterns.

A blue or white shirt

A solid, long-sleeved white button-up is often your best choice. This look is classic, goes with any color suit and errs on the side of professionalism.

Ties, grooming and accessories

Wearing a tie every day may not be appropriate in your workplace, but you should have one or two that you can pull out for special occasions such as a client visit or presentation.

Your hair should be neatly groomed, facial hair trimmed or clean shaven and nails clean and trimmed, as well.

Avoid wearing wallet chains at work, as it often looks unprofessional and can be a distracting source of noise.

Black leather shoes

A basic pair of lace-up leather shoes or wingtips will pass with more formal clothing as well as standard khakis.

Avoid distracting socks or socks that show your bare leg when you cross your legs or sit down

WOMEN

A black, navy or gray suit with slacks or pencil skirt

A basic suit is important to own, even if you work in a casual environment. You can wear the suit in separate pieces to avoid being too formal.

Choose a solid, conservatively colored suit over bold colors or funky patterns.

A simple blouse

Classic colors and cuts will allow you to accessorize with colorful scarves, hats and jewelry.

Accessories and makeup

Keep your totes and bags to a conservative shape, but feel free to express your style in the form of creative color and texture (that is, bring your kelly green Kate Spade, but leave your Hello Kitty-shaped tote at home).

Your hair, nails and makeup should be on the basic side, as well. Manicured nails in neutral tones, naturally colored hair (or natural-looking), light eyeliner and subtly colored eyeshadow and lipsticks are the best place to start. You can expand or experiment as you learn more about your workplace.

If you want to add a splash of color, use a bright scarf, necklace, belt or earrings.
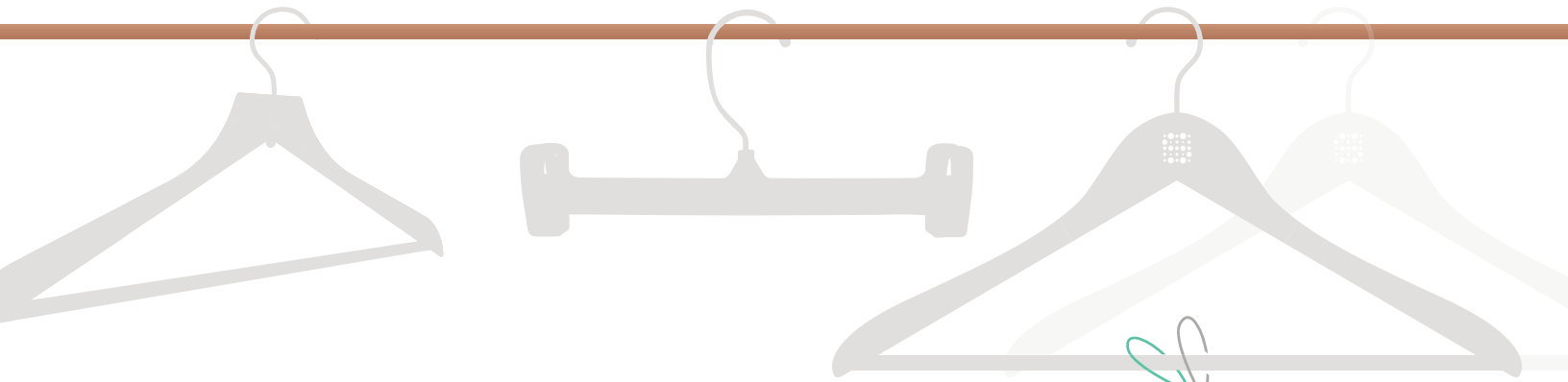
Black heels, boots or ballet flats

Shoes should be close-toed and made of a non-flash material (leather and fabric are good, shiny plastic is not).

When it comes to a heel, conventional advice recommends you stay under 4 inches. Choose your heel height based on factors such as your height, the hemline of your pants and your ability to walk comfortably. The best choice for the health of your knees, spine and walking gait is a supportive shoe under 1 inch in height.[2]

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CUSTOMIZE FOR YOUR UNIQUE OFFICE

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It's easy to say "*know your workplace norms,*" but it can be tough to figure out what the norms are for your workplace. Often wardrobe norms vary by location, company and even department, and it can be easy to miss the subtle signs of appropriate and not appropriate when you're busy learning how to do your job.

NOT SURE WHAT'S "NORMAL" OR "ACCEPTABLE" AT YOUR WORKPLACE?

Build on the starter outfit above by answering the following questions to nail down a more specific workplace norm at your company:

On any given day, would your co workers look out of place at a cocktail party? What about an intimate gathering at someone's house?

Scale up or down your choices in formality based on the answer. More formal refers to more structured garments like suit jackets and pantyhose and stiffer fabrics like tweed and wool. Less formal allows for less structured garments like a two-piece sweater set or a dress shirt without a tie and more forgiving fabrics like cotton and jersey.

What kinds of clothing do popular television and media characters wear to work?

Characters on the screen often wear more expensive clothes than the average citizen, but the shapes and styles chosen might reflect basic expectations for appropriate size, tightness and texture.

In your industry and within your company, what do your manager's peers wear to work?

Don't just focus on your manager; consider what your manager's peers choose to wear, as well. For example, some of the engineering managers might wear jeans throughout the week while others don't, but if none of them ever wear shorts, that sends a clear sign to you not to wear them, either.

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Does your company encourage the spirited celebration of holidays such as Halloween, Christmas and the 4th of July?

Some workplaces are somber and stylish year round, so you should leave your santa hat at home; others find it appropriate to celebrate every holiday through clothing and will embrace nods to turkeys at Thanksgiving and fireworks on the 4th of July.

The same approach goes for holiday parties. If the invitation to the party doesn't indicate the wardrobe you should wear, take cues from the time (daytime is more casual, night time is more formal) and location of the event (a five star restaurant or the CEO's home will be more formal, a local bar will be more casual).

However (and whatever) you celebrate, your clothing needs to meet your workplace's daily minimum requirements for cleanliness and body coverage.

How does weather play into your office environment?

When you're building your wardrobe, also factor in what kind of outerwear you'll need indoors. It may be cold in winter, but sometimes that means your office will turn up the heat. Same in summer, when a hot temperature means the office A/C runs full blast. Observe what your coworkers do when the temperature is colder (sporty outerwear or structured jackets and elegant sweater sets?) and follow suit as you build your wardrobe.

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BUILDING A WARDROBE THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Clothes are so much more than how people might judge you or your income. Your wardrobe goes deeper than the surface to reflect your respect for your occupation, workplace and employer. By customizing classic, clean and comfortable clothing to your unique workplace, you'll feel better and perform better on the job all while reflecting your individual style.

Want to read more about building a wardrobe for work?
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**What Does "Business Casual" Mean? Build a Better
Career with These Clothing Basics**

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