

# Blame it on business casual

IMAGE CONSULTANT GINGER BURR of Boston remembers when there was no confusion about what was appropriate for women to wear at the office. They threw on a navy suit, a white blouse, and a demure pair of kitten heels and bravely faced the day. Now the rules are changing — all the time.

“First it was getting more casual, and then there was a backlash and companies are headed back to more professional business dress,” she said. “Now everybody is more confused than ever.”

To clear up any sartorial doubts, we queried a handful of experts about appropriate workplace attire, and then asked the Boston chapter of the

nonprofit Dress for Success to outfit one of its success stories — 50-year-old Consuelo Paredes — in an interview-ready ensemble. Paredes landed a job at local real estate management firm The Samia Cos. more than a year ago after Dress for Success helped supply her with suits for her interviews.

“It’s funny how everyone’s idea of business casual is different,” said Dress for Success executive director Kimberly Todd. “We have companies that come to us and ask us if we can come to their office to talk about business casual. They have problems with people coming in not dressed appropriately.”

—CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

Dress for Success is “a great refuge for me and other women who feel like they don’t have any other place to turn,” Consuelo Paredes says. “This aid gave me the confidence that I needed to get the job of my dreams.”

You don’t want people to notice your earrings when you walk in the room. They should complement your look, but not distract from it, Todd said.

Dressing appropriately doesn’t mean losing your personality. Burr said jewelry and scarves are a great way to avoid coming off as a corporate drone while still maintaining a professional look.

“A suit that’s too big and baggy can be distracting, and clothing that’s too tight is inappropriate,” said Mary Lou Andre, editor of [www.dressingwell.com](http://www.dressingwell.com). “People should be paying attention to what you’re saying, not what you’re wearing.”

Start by building your wardrobe with tailored separates in neutral colors, said Gregg Andrews, a fashion director at Nordstrom. Buy jackets, pants, and skirts in gray, black, navy blue, and tan, then add accent color with your blouse or shoes.

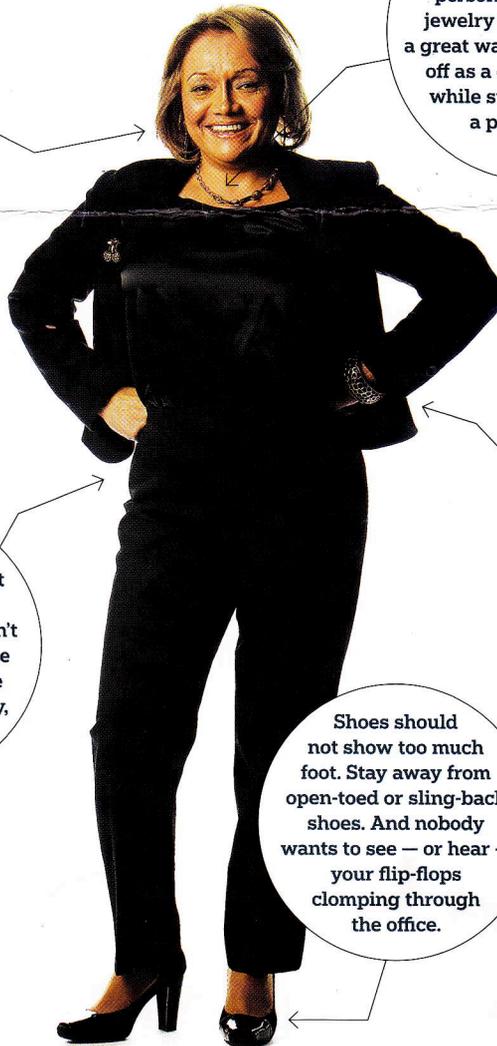
If you’re pairing two different blacks, two grays, or two navys that aren’t from the same suit, be very careful that the shades match closely, Todd said.

A jacket is a great way to show power and gain respect, Andre said. “I tell a lot of women who have gotten in the habit of dressing down that they could be sending messages that they’re inexperienced and not taking the job seriously if they’re not wearing a jacket.”

A word about your décolletage: Never show it. All of our advisers agree that cleavage is never appropriate in the workplace.

Shoes should not show too much foot. Stay away from open-toed or sling-back shoes. And nobody wants to see — or hear — your flip-flops clomping through the office.

Andre teaches her clients that “less skin equals more power,” but Andrews said if you do choose to go sleeveless in the office, first make sure that your arms are in shape to pull it off (try a quick jiggle test). Second, make sure that your bra straps are not showing.



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