Creative Access report Navigating hair & clothing codes in the workplace

Research findings & practical guidance for an inclusive workplace

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red CONSULTANCY

Avoiding the unwritten codes around hair & clothing

As we enter the busy post-summer recruitment period, this research shows how important it is for employers to provide clear guidance to candidates on all aspects of the recruitment process, including what to wear. Navigating vague or confusing dress codes or no dress code at all is adding an extra layer of unnecessary anxiety and our research shows is particularly impacting those from under-represented groups

Over 2,000 people were surveyed by Creative Access on their experiences in interviews and the workplace to explore the experiences of different ethnicities and socio-economic groups.

Based on those findings, we've outlined how those in influential hiring or people management positions can communicate any expectations clearly & inclusively about how to style or present yourself, and in some cases check their own biases at the door.

Bibi Hilton

CEO, Creative Access

Research executive summary

A lack of or unclear workplace & job interview dress codes and guidance is causing confusion, anxiety & feelings of disadvantage amongst job seekers, particularly for those from groups under-represented in many professions, in terms of their ethnicity, socio-economic status or disability.

Half (43%) of respondents say they have never received guidance on what to wear for a job interview or when starting a new job, yet 82% say they would find clear guidance helpful. And over half (55%) said they found the common dress code 'smart casual' confusing.

After examining sentiments among both under-represented talent and the general population professional about expectations on hair and clothing, here's what we uncovered:

- 59% of Black candidates worry 'dressing like themselves' or wearing their hair 'naturally' will result in discrimination at work
- Almost a third (27%) of people from minority ethnic groups feel pressured to change their hair
- Over half (55%) find the term 'smart casual' confusing
- 82% of candidates say they would welcome guidance on what to wear for job interviews or when starting a new job. Almost half (43%) have never been given this kind of guidance
- Almost half (48%) from lower socio-economic groups find it more difficult to decide what to wear/how to style their hair compared to 36% of those from wealthier backgrounds

Vague HR guidance is unhelpful to those who are neurodivergent

It's ok to have expectations or norms around how talent or new staff should present themselves. However you shouldn't expect everyone to understand those expectations if they're 'implied'.

Inclusive best practise for HR suggests that any standards around workplace styling do's and don't's should be clearly stated to prospective interviewees or new starters. And this is really important for those who identify as neurodivergent.

Over a third (37%) of neurodivergent people have never received instruction about what to wear in an interview. When asked, would you find it difficult to decide what is appropriate to wear and / or how to style your hair for a job interview? 59% of neurodivergent individuals said yes, citing two main reasons:

- That 'smart casual' is confusing (58%)
- And worrying that dressing like myself or wearing my hair naturally or in the way I feel comfortable / want will result in discrimination (56%)

Historically minoritised workers face discrimination

Of the **2,000** people surveyed, **59%** of Black candidates worry 'dressing like themselves' or wearing their hair 'naturally' will result in discrimination at work.

Once a job is landed, workers feel the potential for discrimination based on clothing and hair style choice continues. Those with afro/kinky hair are less confident in bringing their personal style into the workplace – with more than 1 in 10 (**14%**) believing it will have a negative impact on their career.

Those with naturally straight hair broadly did not feel compelled to change their hair texture for interviews (**86%** said no), whilst a third of those with kinky/afro (**31%**) or curly hair feel compelled to change their hair texture (**32%**) and more than 1 in 10 of those with kinky/afro textures would wear a wig for interviews (**15%**).

What do the experts say?

"I regularly get asked by candidates what they should wear for interviews or first days, particularly by those from minority ethnic backgrounds. It's no use saying 'smart casual' which means different things to different people. We have had instances of people turning up in suits in a bid to look professional, but then felt too 'corporate' as they are interviewed by people dressed more casually. I usually direct people to our company Instagram page to show that we have, and we welcome a very broad range of looks."

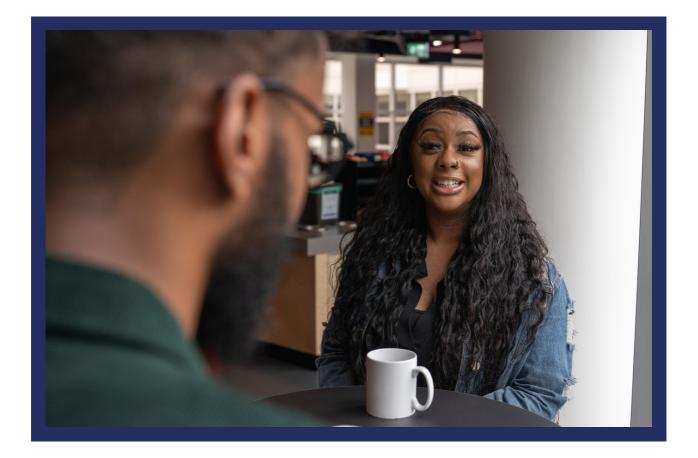**Nargis Choudhury, People Co-ordinator at Red Consultancy**

"Those from under-represented backgrounds seeking to break into the creative industries find 'what to wear' guidance particularly vague, particularly where it references 'smart casual'. Creativity is often thought to be expressed and appreciated through a certain style. And navigating or uncovering that style can be tricky if you are neurodivergent or from a different socio-economic or ethnic background to those who are interviewing you."

Bibi Hilton, CEO at Creative Access,

What to keep in mind for employers

- Interviewers should be made aware of any existing bias before entering the interview room. '**Unconscious bias**' training is engineered to navigate this.
- Remember, whether someone does or doesn't have a similar style to you or the rest of your organisation has no bearing on their **capabilities**.
- It is ok to have clothing guidance for **certain workplace scenarios**, such as meeting clients. Perhaps you need to prohibit strappy tops, short shorts or political/slogan logo tees when staff are in front of clients. If so, **clearly state this** in interviewee or **new starter packs**.
- Help candidates feel prepared by sharing company social media channels where they can see how people dress / hairstyles choices or give them a **visual montage featuring actual employees**.

The bottom line? Clear instructions & expectations benefit everyone.

Tips for job hunters

- Read up on **accessibility rules** to know what you're entitled to at all stages of the application, interview and new starter processes. Be sure to take a look at our accessibility & reasonable adjustments page where we outline this: https://creativeaccess.org.uk/accessibility-reasonable-adjustments
- If you're unsure about how to style yourself, **ask for advice** from the recruiter/HR person on company style & where possible ask to see visuals.
- **Research the company** website and social media channels to see employees for yourself. Having done your research, choose something that makes you feel positive.

The bottom line?
- Whatever you choose to wear, ensure it is comfortable, clean and ironed.
- Wear your hair in the way you feel most confident!

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Thank you for reading. Have you got questions about fostering an inclusive workplace?

Get in touch: Info@creativeaccess.org.uk

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