



**Dressing down and up**

How to dress up as a professional is an art, says Chan, but understanding how to dress to suit your job role is a good place to start.

Professionals, for instance, should avoid wearing items that would be better suited to their superiors, says Chan, who is CEO of Cell Therapeutics, a naturopathic company, and was Founding President of the Association of Image Consultants International.

"It's assumed that underdressing was the main problem [when it comes to dressing well at work] but nowadays, with younger professionals being able to afford better clothes, some would overdress," Chan says. "For example, they would wear an expensive watch or cufflinks that's far more sophisticated than what the boss is wearing."

While some firms have embraced more relaxed dress codes, many like Mazars still believe that formal first impressions can

be critical for fuelling strong relationships with clients.

"For the first meeting with a client, we always recommend that staff dress formally. Some clients, however, may be quite casual so we will try to accommodate their style," says Chan at Mazars. "This is quite important because if we are working with them, we shouldn't look very different from them."

For CPAs with hectic schedules, Sze suggests to aim for a daily look that's both professional and personalized. "I think enhancing your individuality can make you stand out," she says. "Of course, while most people would like to pursue that look, many just don't have enough time in the morning. But once their mindset changes, self-motivation will follow."

Eric Tong, Audit Partner at Deloitte and an Institute Council member, believes that CPAs should constantly make efforts to dress appropriately rather than stylishly. Focusing

on the cultural aspect of international dress codes is also important. "We are dealing with multinational clients, who all dress slightly differently," says Tong.

"If you go to a country, a lot of people may take off their jacket [in meetings], but if you meet those in another country, they may not," he observes. "So I think it's more about, how to dress appropriately as well as what's the right dress code for the client," he adds. "Our staff need to understand when to dress down, when to dress up, and when in doubt, always dress up."

**Model behaviour**

Building up an intriguing professional image goes beyond what one should and shouldn't wear. It includes focusing on soft skills and etiquette. "Nowadays, people are getting more demanding. They don't just want to look at a professional's certificates, they want to look at them holisti-

cally, how you look, talk and behave like a professional."

However, as Harry Wong, a neuro-linguistic programming trainer and Institute member, observes, some accountants are resistant to the idea of attending refresher courses that cover such skills. "Some CPAs do not realize the importance of learning new things because of the work experience they already have. But they come to realize that they are becoming more obsolescent every day because of factors such as technological advancements."

Wong encourages both younger and senior Institute members to continuously learn. "Skill-wise, I think we're technical enough. How to observe what's going and be able to respond, those are what I call the soft skills," he says.

Accounting firms such as Deloitte say they recognize the importance of soft skills. "Our profession involves motivating and managing a team," says Tong. "We put a lot of emphasis on such skills, with internal courses for managers, senior managers, and even for partners."

"One thing that is very important is negotiation skills," he adds. "We always engage external consultants to help us with this. It's an eye opener to have somebody in to cover human behaviour and go through how to communicate with different types of people."

Having understood proper local etiquette is good for portraying a more positive professional image when working with clients and is important for both younger and senior professional accountants, notes Tong.

"How to conduct meeting in a western organization is very different to how you do it in a Chinese organization," he says. [That's why] we have internal courses that cover Chinese business etiquette: how to open up a conversation, what sort of topics you should talk about and table manners."

As Wong notes, working on one's personal and professional image as well as being open to changes are ways for accountants to stay proactive. "What more can you offer so that when the next promotion comes up, your name will be remembered and when the next redundancy process comes up, your name won't be thought of?" he asks.

"The answer is simple," he says. "Work smart by delegating work to spare extra time to chase new challenges." **A**



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