

# The Solution to Businesswear for Women

by Kaori Nakano



As a result of recent laws to promote the advancement of women in the workplace, the number of female managers has suddenly increased at many businesses. When I meet women who have just been promoted to an executive position, they always make the same confession: "I don't know what I should wear in my new role, or where to buy it."

They say they are looking for clothes that will project the same authority in the boardroom as men; clothes that will command the appropriate degree of respect from those working under them, of both sexes; clothes that they can wear with confidence to an afterhours business reception or event as their company's representative; clothes that are not exorbitantly expensive but still exhibit a high level of quality.

I am not a stylist, but as part of my research I have accompanied such women to designer shops and department stores, and I reached the same conclusion: the type of clothes they are looking for are rather hard to come by.

As I was contemplating this mismatch between

supply and demand, a column I am writing for the *Yomiuri Shimbun* reached its hundredth installment, which we decided to mark by publishing a group discussion on fashion. Presented with this opportunity, I selected "Clothing for Women Working at the Global Level" as the discussion topic.

Yukako Uchinaga, director of J-Win, a nonprofit organization supporting women's participation in business, and Tae Ashida, whose designs have long been a favorite with women working in a variety of fields at the international level, agreed to participate in the discussion.

Ms. Uchinaga, whose stellar business career includes becoming the first female executive director of IBM Japan in 1995, recalled that clothing played a large role in that particular achievement. In the 1980s, when she was in her thirties, she says she wore what she liked, counting on her work to vouch for her abilities. But once after she had given a presentation at a directors meeting, one of the (male) non-Japanese directors suggested to her that in the future she wear a dark suit on such occasions. When

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she made a subsequent presentation wearing a suit and a bow-tie blouse, the director complimented her on learning her lesson, and she reflects that if this hadn't happened she might never have been promoted to director.

"Business clothes are your armor," declares Ms. Uchinaga. Among the many concrete suggestions she offered, backed up by actual episodes and experiences, three in particular made a special impression on me.

"Make sure your accessories are genuine."

"For receptions that will be attended by many non-Japanese, change from your daily business attire into a dress or kimono."

"The extra height provided by high heels works to your advantage when giving instructions to your employees."

It's worth it to spend the extra money for comfortable shoes, she advised, the 8-centimeter high heels she wore at our meeting and her perfect posture combining with her natural height to create an aura of gracious authority.

Today, when a T-shirt and a parka is the standard male attire in a growing number of business fields, it may be even more difficult for female managers to decide what is appropriate to wear. Even should one decide that a suit is not appropriate in such an environment, it pays to heed the tested and true advice of Tae Ashida, that "Since fashion expresses our regard for those around us, quality is important, even should casual wear be the best choice."

Our cumulative decisions about what to wear in public express our attitudes about work. As a designer, Tae Ashida always wears black, which she says she does to minimize visual distraction. Perhaps this gives her a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the colors of the clothes she is designing, allowing her to freely and spontaneously employ color in her creations, without being influenced by any extraneous factors. Consistency in a work uniform promotes trust in any occupation or profession. German Chancellor Angela Merkel wears many different colors, but always in a three- or four-button jacket and slacks combination. Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain observes a rule of "one

style in many colors." Preserving certain rules or guidelines over a long period of time is important in creating a brand image in fashion.

In my own case, in which my rather specialized field of work places me in highly creative environments, I have learned from experience that I get the best return on my investment in the effort to choose my outfits by selecting clothing with an impact that projects my own unique presence rather than trying to fit in with my environment. When I reflect on events, I find the guideline of "Go big or go home" produces just the right degree of frisson with the situations I find myself in, and often leads me to my next assignment.

In choosing your work clothes, it is important to have a solid understanding of your workplace as well as a vision of the kind of career you wish to build for yourself. There is no one correct solution to the proper business style for female managers. The clothes chosen by women with a firm career vision end up being the best solution over the long term. And that's why I understand only too well the feeling that prompts the murmur, "I have nothing to wear!"

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