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## **Overexposure at the office**

AS MORE WOMEN DRESS LIKE TV ``ATTORNEYS,"EXPERTS WARN OF CAREER LIABILITIES

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### Article Text:

If television truly were a mirror aimed at reality, Assistant District Attorney Leslie Hansen might be seen in an 18th Judicial District courtroom wearing a sausage casing for a skirt and a plunging whisper of chiffon under her suit jacket.

But she is not a member of the self-proclaimed "hot, young cast" of "Conviction," a courtroom drama that recently wrapped up its inaugural season on NBC. Instead, Hansen is a longtime member of the bar who views the court as a place of reverence.

Drawing attention to yourself by dressing provocatively, she says, not only is tacky but demeans the entire legal process.

Coroner Joanne Richardson's workplace in Frisco is decidedly more laid back than criminal court. Skirts wouldn't be practical for someone crawling around the underbelly of a mountain car crash, but Richardson still requires her staff to wear business attire: No shorts, sandals or jeans.

And "sexy" won't do. Wearing leather and a cleavage-enhancing, tiger-print top on the job is as plausible as a 10-minute toxicology test. It might happen on "CSI," but not in her office.

These women follow expert advice that says if you want people - of both genders - to focus on your brains, then you can't dress for distraction.

But many more women these days are ignoring what Miss Manners advocated for years and are baring bosoms in the office.

"Professional women watching television are taking it as a guideline for what to wear to work," says David Wolfe, the creative director of the Doneger Group, fashion analysts and consultants based in New York.

Remember Ally McBeal, a television lawyer famous in the late 1990s who wore short, short ... really short skirts?

"It wasn't long before women, no matter what their body type, were wearing copies to work," says Wolfe.

"It wasn't the downfall of America, but it's an ongoing problem, and we're still slipping. Women are torn between fashion, which is sexy and provocative, and being a serious professional. It's a tightrope women seem to enjoy walking, especially in high heels."

### **A style of your own**

While fashion designers might vie for some kind of "how-low-can-you-go" award, it's important for women to create their own style, says Jo Farrell of Denver.

For years, she's taught communications and image skills through The Farrell Group, counseling everyone from business executives to politicians running for office.

"What image do you want to be remembered for? It's not putting yourself out there as a flashing billboard. Unless, of course, you don't have the talent or the brains, so you have to sell sex."

Even "reality" television shows such as Donald Trump's "The Apprentice" play up the notion that sex sells. In a late 2004 episode, two team members, Jenn and Sandy, dressed skimpily to sell 50-cent candy for \$5. Another contestant, Ivana, took off her skirt on Wall Street to sell the same candy for \$20. It was considered a low point for the show, and working women in general.

It proves the idea of a sexy career woman is a dangerous one, says Peter Glick, a psychology professor at Lawrence University in Wisconsin. He and his class studied how sexily dressed women were perceived.

What they found, not surprisingly, is that women in high-status positions who dressed provocatively were rated as less competent and elicited negative reactions from participants.

The same was not true for women in what was considered a low-status position, such as a receptionist.

"There are three ways in which women are subtyped - career, homemaker and sex object. What we're seeing in the media is a fusion of career woman and sex object, and that's a real problem," he says.

Initially, there might be benefits to dressing like a sex kitten, but there are hidden costs. "For young women starting out, it's a real temptation (to be sexy). You get more attention; you might even get hired; but it will only take you so far. Eventually, it undermines perceptions of your competence."

Carly Drum, the managing director of Drum Associates, an executive search firm in New York, agrees risqué dress abounds, even on conservative Wall Street.

"I don't know why. Maybe the fashion-focused are more willing to show their risky side with clothing," she says. Still, there's a big difference between flaunting your personality and being professional.

"A beautiful woman came into our office in a beautiful suit. She looked great. But she wasn't wearing a shirt underneath her suit jacket. (Before long) everyone in the office knew she wasn't wearing a shirt," says Drum, who promptly pulled the woman aside.

"She had a great background, but I told her I wouldn't represent her" unless she added a shirt to the ensemble. The woman said she was "very confident" in herself and didn't believe she would or would not get a job because of the way she dressed.

But, says Drum, believing in your abilities is no match for bodacious diversions.

"Or maybe you're not showing cleavage, but lots of skin. It's still not appropriate; it's still distracting and people won't hear what you're saying."

### **Company cultures**

Some company cultures - in fashion, entertainment and other creative industries - consider wearing trendy clothing necessary. But, says Wolfe, that doesn't mean women should "dress for a night on the town, or even worse, a night on the streets."

Clients and fellow office workers might find some choices offensive.

In a business like public relations, it's important to be fashion-forward, says Stephanie Houser, the owner of Launch in Scottsdale, Ariz. "I dress conservatively, but I like to have fun, too, and show my personality. It's important in my business that I stand out."

Her office has very specific guidelines about what's appropriate to wear and when, but the rules don't address cleavage.

Once, Houser wore a V-cut camisole underneath a conservative, brown pinstriped suit for a client meeting. During the discussion, which included another member of her team, the male client remarked that he could see her breasts.

"I was shocked and all three of us were uncomfortable for the rest of the meeting. I've never had any other complaints," she says.

She banished the blue cami to the closet, but recently brought it back into the office under the same suit.

"The client is very conservative. And at this point in my career, I feel like I can wear what I want to wear. I don't trust ... sales clerks with advice, but I check with my husband when I'm in doubt" about whether something is appropriate.

And, says Houser, she dresses very conservatively when she's meeting the complaining client. "We tease about wearing turtlenecks to that site."

### **Different goals**

Another part of the clothing conundrum, say experts, is that young women don't separate the different goals of attracting men and job success.

Employees are working long hours, and more heavy socializing takes place in the office, says Elizabeth Freedman, owner of a corporate training and consulting firm in Massachusetts.

"The result is you have younger associates (particularly the women) who are trying to multitask - work and find a date."

That tack can cause a different set of cubicle crises. "Men find you attractive, but you're also a competitor. Sex sells and men can resent that," says professor Glick.

"Women also can be resentful. They don't like it when other women aren't nice. And being flirty works against women too, because it shows deference and is an act of submission."

In other words, women must constantly think about how they present themselves. Men, on the other hand, don't have to worry as much about perceptions. The attributes they are rewarded for in romance and on the job are the same: masculinity, assertiveness and being ambitious.

Women entering the workforce also have limited funds, so they buy sexy things and try to fit them in a business world, says Debra Lindquist, an image consultant with Color Profiles Ltd./The Total Look in Denver.

"They say, 'I'm going to be sexy, come hell or high water.' But you can have a feminine cut or fabrication. A teddy spells bedroom ... it's an invitation ... you're wearing your bedroom persona."

It's about time for companies to take control, says Donna Flagg, owner of the Krysalis Group, a human resource and management consulting firm in New York.

"A company has to say it's not OK, and then it would be over. But there's this passive/aggressive thing about enforcing a dress code."

Her company recently wrote one for a cosmetic fashion company that included a "no cleavage" rule. "At first, the employees took the idea as a personal affront, but we wrote the policy in a kind of tongue-in-cheek way.

"Companies are killing themselves to manage and control sexual harassment and unwanted advances, but lots of that could be mitigated and defused" if employees had to change the way they dressed.

One local company owner learned the hard way that pushup bras can be bad business.

When Cynthia McKay hired an all-woman workforce for Le Gourmet Gift Basket Inc., she specifically allowed her employees to wear what they wanted. She had just escaped from the oppressive atmosphere of a law firm and found that "especially in the summer, the less-dressed were happier, cooler and more productive."

At the time, her company's headquarters - the old gas company in Castle Rock - was being totally refurbished. "I didn't really think cleavage was an issue, because there was lots of construction and we didn't bring clients to the office."

But when construction workers started bringing employees coffee and doughnuts and finding reasons to stay on site, she knew she had a problem.

Then a client visited McKay. "She was greeted at the door by several employees ... (and) was escorted into my office. She said she was confused: She thought she mistakenly arrived at Hooters."

McKay lost the account ... and the cleavage.

"I gave all the employees a clothing allowance to make up for it. I tell them to dress like their mother-in-law was coming for dinner."

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