



"I think most people would assume a suit is the proper interview attire. However, that's apparently not always the case."

MATT NEFF, assistant superintendent,
Wedgewood G&CC, Powell, Ohio

No jacket required

This past winter at the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation Conference and Show, I attended a couple talks on career development led by a human resources director and a respected superintendent. I took quite a bit away from both speakers, but a comment on interview attire from one of the attendees — and the resulting discussion — is what stuck with me.

He relayed the story of an interview he had for a superintendent position. The interviewer had commented on the fact that he wore a suit and said he should have dressed more casually.

The story stuck with me because the same thing happened to me, and, as it turns out, to another guy in the room.

In my case, the interviewer actually said, and I'm not making this up, "You look more like a banker than a superintendent." I don't want to imply that he was rude. But he made that comment more than once during the interview.

Now, to be completely honest, I do look great in a suit. And I do have impeccable taste in shirt-and-tie combinations.

Nonetheless, I've wondered ever since if the fact that I looked "more like a banker" to him factored into his decision to not hire me.

I'm still not really sure what a superintendent is supposed to look like. Maybe I should have shown up in a pair of Carhartts that smelled like 2,4-D with a Stimp meter hanging in the hammer loop and a hose over my shoulder.

I could have opened with a Carl Spackler impression and then randomly alternated between a slight country drawl (to subtly imply that I was raised on a farm) and a Scottish brogue (to subtly imply that I'm descended from Old Tom Morris). That would have covered pretty much all the major stereotypes while leaving a lasting impression

of professionalism and mental stability.

In any case, that incident, along with the discussion at the OTF conference, got me thinking about how to handle the same situation in the future. I think most people, me included, would assume a suit is the proper interview attire, unless otherwise told. However, that's apparently not always the case.

It may not necessarily be a bad idea, but I've always been a little uncomfortable asking the contact person with whom I'm setting up the interview how I should dress. On one hand, by asking, you run the risk of coming off as unprofessional or ignorant. On the other hand, you may lose an opportunity because your attire is not exactly what was expected.

The key, as I see it, is to listen carefully to the contact person when you're setting up the interview. Take note not only of the person's words, but also of his or her tone.

The importance of both of those things can be easily forgotten when you're in the midst of trying to coordinate schedules, learn about the interview format and deal with the other miscellaneous details that are involved in setting up an interview.

Nonetheless, listening carefully on that phone call will enable you to more accurately gauge the company's expectations and give you an idea of how best to approach the interview.

I knew my interview was going to be a one-on-one meeting with the owner, and I got the impression that it wasn't going to be a highly structured, formal interview. However, attire wasn't addressed in the phone call, and I chose to go with a suit. Frankly, I'd rather be overdressed than underdressed for something as important as a job interview.

Maybe it cost me an opportunity, I don't know. I do know that it made me realize the need to listen intently when dealing with potential employers, and to always trust my judgment about their expectations.

And I guess, if all else fails, you could just ask.

Matt Neff (mneff4@yahoo.com) is assistant superintendent at Wedgewood G&CC in Powell, Ohio.