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Holiday office party fashion: Think velvet, shimmer and (a little) bling

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As fun and festive as it can be, the office holiday party is also a potential minefield, as sticky a proposition as a Christmas pudding. One drink too many and you might be telling the boss what you really think; on the other hand, talk shop all night and you risk becoming known as the office bore.

Besides the burden of knowing how to behave, you also need to know what to wear: A dress showing off too much cleavage will start tongues wagging as much as a face full of stubble and a rumpled pair of jeans.

“Don’t be fooled by the word party,” says Toronto fashion designer Rosemarie Umetsu, who doesn’t discourage letting your hair down and having fun, but encourages doing so with calculated panache. “Look at it as a great opportunity to do some positive networking and PR for yourself. Highlight your ability to exhibit poise, good judgment and great taste. Most importantly, present yourself with confidence.”

Regarding attire, both workplace culture and the invitation will suggest appropriate party wear, but it’s always a good idea to err on the side of elegance, which will stand you in good stead if or most likely when you start doing the Twist with your workmates.

“Check with co-workers and then dress slightly above average,” suggests Kerry Patterson, the popular U.S.-based business consultant and co-author of 2002’s *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, a New York Times bestseller. “You don’t want to be the slob, but you also don’t want to be the goofball in the tuxedo.”

Adding to the sartorial challenge this season is the fact that, as economic uncertainty continues to cloud many industries, some holiday parties are likely to take place in-house and immediately following business hours, so a quick trip home to change for the occasion might not be feasible. This makes dressing for the office party tricky, concedes Luisa Rino, a Vancouver style consultant.

“It’s a bit awkward to roll out the fox-fur stole and sequin dress when the laser copier is just three feet away,” Rino says. “My advice is to dress up just a little more for work on the day of the party. Think of it as the opposite of casual Friday. A full sequin dress might be a bit

overboard for daytime dressing, but the luxury-casual trend of a sequin skirt paired with a cozy oversized cashmere sweater is perfect for the office and dressy enough for an afterwork soiree.”

Lloyd Boston, style editor for NBC’s Today and host of the popular Closet Cases on HGTV, recommends transitional dressing on the day of the party. “Why not add some flair to your daytime style to make the shift into party mode feel special? It doesn’t have to represent a huge change,” says Boston, who is also a style consultant for Jones New York.

“Desk-to-dinner is simpler than ever with the right accessories and layering pieces. A shimmery cardigan atop a crisp white shirt, a metallic belt worn over a simple black double V-neck sheath dress or swapping out your black work pumps for an animal print shoe are some of the ways to easily achieve this.”

Toronto stylist Erin Nadler suggests wearing basic black on the day of the fete and then punching it up with accessories at the end of the day. “Holiday dressing does not have to be complicated; accessories can instantly change an outfit without breaking the bank,” says the president of Better Styled, a personal shopping business. “Nothing says holiday like colour and texture. Reds, winter whites, plums and lush greens are always a hit; fur and velvet also scream holiday luxury.”

Attention, she adds, should also be paid to makeup: “Never wear glitter on your eyes if you’re wearing a sparkly top – that’s just way too much bling. A smoky eye is much more sophisticated.”

For men, Nadler continues, appropriately festive clothes combos include “a crisp dress shirt layered with a stunning V-neck sweater – something they could bring to work with them.” Alternatively, “what about a cashmere half-zip sweater layered underneath a velvet dinner jacket? That look says instant party.”

Grooming is also key: Men should shave on the morning of the party, while women might consider treating themselves to a professional manicure to look polished and on-trend.

What not to wear? Rino advises staying away from denim, which has “permeated almost every aspect of fashion, but the evening event should still remain somewhat sacred territory.”

That doesn’t mean overdoing it, however. “If you’re asking yourself, ‘Is this too much?’ it probably is,” Umetsu says. “Understated glamour is always the best rule of thumb.”