



PROFESSIONALISM AND SAFE WORK SPACES

Professionalism was once associated with in-person cubicles or office spaces, business suits, a specific haircut or hairstyle, and speaking American English.

Years ago, it was considered negative or unprofessional to show emotion at work. But lately, we've seen a shift to remote work opportunities, casual attire in offices, a national effort for all hair types to be welcomed in workplaces, and companies welcoming multilingual employees.

Empathy and authenticity are considered required as foundational values for leaders, and accommodations and amenities have been added to many workplaces to support the lives of employees. There has also been a push to build a culture that no longer requires people to create a "work persona" and turn the workplace into a safe space for all types of people.

Evaluating Professionalism

Instead of professionalism focusing on attire or physical appearance, emphasis is now on interpersonal skills and competencies, such as:

- ➔ **Collaboration:** How well you work with others and build a sense of trust in group settings
- ➔ **Integrity:** Staying true to your word and following through on your promises
- ➔ **Self-Awareness:** Being conscious of your strengths and weaknesses
- ➔ **Communication:** Effectively exchanging information both written and verbally

Finding Your Safe Space

What makes a safe work environment? How can you tell if you're working in one? What happens if you end up working in a more conservative workplace? Here are a few questions to think about when finding your safe space:

Is empathy prioritized?

Empathy reminds us to consider the feelings of others around us. When organizations lead with empathy, they seek to understand the feelings of others. Are people's feelings being considered at work? Do you notice your feelings being disregarded?

Do I have a voice?

Safe work environments don't make choices about you without hearing your perspective. You should have a say in processes that directly impact your work. There should also be opportunities for you to share feedback.

Am I accepted and valued for who I am?

We know that old-fashioned professionalism standards forced employees to fit into a box, with little regard for BIPOC, women, LGBTQ individuals, or people with disabilities. Thriving workplaces are areas where all employees are comfortable being themselves and believe their unique perspectives are valuable.

Is there a focus on inclusive practices?

It's not enough for a company to say that they are inclusive, but they should actively practice inclusion. Are efforts made to learn others' pronouns? Are there policies against harmful language? Inclusive language ensures that everyone feels respected and it's essential for positive communication.

As professionalism standards shift, there is more opportunity to create inclusive workplaces that respect and value employees from diverse backgrounds.

As you're job searching and moving into your career, take steps to reflect on what you need to feel safe and to evaluate your work environment.