

Career Builders

By Mary-Alane Wiltse

DRESS CODES

Many years ago when I was in Junior High School there was a major controversy because girls wanted the option of wearing pants to school. The day the new policy was implemented, and slacks were allowed, was one of the best days of my life. My older sister tells the story of how one of her high school friends was sent home from school three times in one day because all her skirts were too short. The skirt did not touch the ground when she knelt on the floor. Recently, I watched an internet video clip that recommended that schools require students to wear their shirts tucked into their pants. The video showed a kid pulling out all kinds of weapons from his waistband, including a rifle hidden down his pant leg. Dress codes definitely change with the times.

All of the above examples are from schools, but businesses also have dress codes that change based on cultural influences. For many companies the “business attire” standard has been relaxed to include a “business casual” option. However, the word “casual” does not seem to be specific enough, and too many people are defining “casual” very differently from what their employers have in mind.

Casual business attire means that instead of a suit and tie, men can wear a sport coat and khakis or an oxford shirt instead of a dress shirt. A tie becomes optional. Women can also get away from formal suits and wear clothing such as dress pants with a coordinated sweater set or blazer. High heels can be avoided. Business casual was not generally meant to include blue jeans and tee shirts, but many companies are finding their employees going down that slippery slope.

Because business attire has relaxed, employees in other industries or job classifications believe they can dress even more casually, since they have never been expected to dress as formally as those classified as working in “the professions”. As far as most employers are concerned, dressing down does have limits. Only life guards are allowed to wear flip flops, and depending on the recreational establishment, maybe their co-workers can get away with wearing shorts and sneakers. If they are in good condition, blue jeans are acceptable in jobs where there is likelihood the worker will get dirty (or if it is a Friday).

Certain clothing should never be worn, no matter what the job. This includes tee shirts sporting a favorite saying (unless it is the company logo), any type of shirt that could be mistaken for an undergarment, sweatpants, or low rise pants that do not really have a rise to them at all. Clothing should not be too baggy, but it should also not be too tight or clingy. On average, there should be around an inch between the cloth and the skin. Again, except for lifeguards, there are certain body parts that should never be exposed at work. Shoulders, belly buttons, midriffs, upper thighs, chests, and the entire length of the back should always be covered by clothing.

Inappropriate work appearance involves more than wardrobe. It also includes tattoos, body piercings (other than in the ear lobe), other excessive jewelry, any hair color not found in nature, and fingernails that are too long or have art work on them by a

Picasso want-to-be. Perfumes or colognes should also be used in extreme moderation or avoided altogether, basically as a courtesy to those with allergies.

It is true that all of these rules do limit self-expression, and that many of these guidelines are more likely to impact younger workers. It is also true that many employers will not confront their workers about their appearance because of its sensitive nature. This does not mean, however, that these employers do not take appearance into consideration when evaluating the performance of their workers. People whose appearance is too flashy, or trendy, or grungy will be perceived negatively by co-workers and bosses. During times of economic downswings they will be the first people to get their work hours cut and the first to get laid-off. They will also be the last ones to get promotions or other professional growth opportunities. And, in case anyone believes otherwise, it is perfectly legal for an employer to discriminate based on appearance.

The bottom line for appropriate work attire is to be clean and to be conservative. If you think it is sexy do not wear it to work. What works on television does not work in real life.

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