

Dress-Up the Economic Downturn

By Dawn Waldrop

Ten years ago the subject of casual attire was a hot topic, and today we are still talking about casual attire in the workplace. An August issue of the Columbus Dispatch published an article titled, “Too Casual?” And the Wall Street Journal carried an article titled, “Get Serious!” So, why are we still talking about business casual?

Many office managers regret making the decision to “go casual.” Employees simply wanted the choice of not having to wear a full suit in all business situations. They weren’t asking to wear shorts and baseball caps, yet companies have allowed employees to wear just about anything. This has caused real confusion to what business casual really means.

Companies are in a dilemma with employees dressing as though they are going to a family picnic. Employers are now scratching their heads as to what direction to move given they’re hesitant to approach employees on the inappropriateness of their choice of attire. It has created a situation that can affect the bottom-line of the company and the future career of the employees.

Organizations such as Merrill Lynch and Lehman Brothers are rethinking their image. Xerox rescinded its casual dress code. Even small businesses are reconsidering their image to achieve a sense of trustworthiness and professionalism. Fifty-six percent of companies polled recently have revamped their dress guidelines to include suits.

My research as found:

- People who say casual dress has raised their productivity are not actually dressing casual. They are dressing professionally. Many people do not know the difference in these categories of dress: Powerful Professional, Professional or Business Casual.
- With all this confusion, oftentimes people say it doesn’t matter or they don’t care. The real interpretation is—“It’s too confusing” and “I don’t know what to do.”

You may have read articles that describe how employees enjoy the perk of dressing down. However, those employees don’t realize the damage they may be doing to both their own professional image as well as that of the company they represent. Look at pictures of a woman in a sleeveless top, Capri pants, and sandals. Then look at a woman in a blouse and trouser-style pants with a closed-in shoe. Who is the more professional appearing?

Yes, many companies have shed the full business suit that is considered the Power Professional look, or what was previously called the Dress for Success look. Some examples of professional dress are:

- Wearing a different color jacket with pants for men and skirt for women.
- A long sleeve sweater or jacket over a dress (unless the dress is denim).
- A colored shirt with or without a tie with suit pants is professional for men.

You must decide how you want to be perceived by those around you. Is your dress professional, approachable, fun, competent, knowledgeable? Give your image serious consideration when you look into the mirror before you leave for work each day. Is every detail of your choice of attire congruent with whom you are and what you are looking to accomplish in your career (whether that is respect, recognition for the job you do, a promotion, or to make more money). Then dress accordingly.

Stop – Don't Let Yourself Wear Attire that Doesn't Match your Goals.

Here are the biggest respectability robbers of business attire—regardless of what industry in which you work:

Men:

- Wearing dress shoes without socks. (This is the worst)
- Unpolished, worn heels, scuffed shoes, or too casual shoes.
- Pants too casual.
- No belt when pants have belt loops.
- Button-down collar with double breasted jacket.
- Faded polo with a suit jacket.
- Shirt tails worn out.
- Wrinkled pants.
- White socks worn with a business suit.

Women:

- Too short a skirt or dress.
- No hosiery.
- Sandals.
- Sleeveless tops.
- Unpolished, worn heels, scuffed shoes, or too casual shoes.
- Jacket sleeves too long
- Blue nail polish.

These respectability robbers do not belong in an office environment. If your shoes are scuffed, don't expect to be on the fast track to growing your career. Casually dressed individuals do not come to mind when promotional opportunities surface. Don't limit your career by wearing clothing that is too relaxed for the business environment.

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