

Dress code meltdown

Casual? Formal? The rules no longer apply

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I had my first taste of incompatible workplace apparel early in life. Soon after graduating from university, I worked behind the reception desk of a boutique public relations firm with the kind of well-polished women who awoke extra early to blow dry their perfectly glossy hair. Most mornings I was hoping to get by without a shower.

At the time these seemed like ideological choices. You either worshipped at the church of fashion-magazine simulation or you convinced yourself that you could coast on personality (usually in the form of too much caffeine). But when one of the vice-presidents sat me down and gently advised me that a homemade skirt wasn't exactly the image they were trying to project, I realized there were some rules I would have to follow if I wanted to work in that world.

But I didn't. So, I ditched the job and kept my skirt. But the debate continues over what constitutes appropriate dress in the workplace. What was once established by industry-wide standards is now a question of finding a balance in each individual workplace.

Brett Wilson, chairman of First Energy investment bank in Calgary, doesn't always look the part he plays. "I used to be the classic investment banker with suspenders and Armani suits," he says. "Whenever I wear a suit now, my staff asks if I'm going for an interview."

"It's not meant to be disrespectful," says Mr. Wilson, who says his work wardrobe consists of 10 different pairs of runners and blue jeans. "It's about comfort and being a little different. I've got guys who work for me and they dress up in suits and ties every day. This is how I dress, this is how they dress."

But not everyone agrees an improvised tendency in professional attire is a good thing. Shannon Smith, personal

branding expert and author of *Power Manners*, believes casual dress in the workplace has been taken too far and says she is often hired to tighten up company dress codes.

Ms. Smith says Casual Fridays have led to everyday slackness and that ground rules no longer apply. "We're seeing flip-flops, low-cut tops, unshaven looks and holes in jeans," she says. "The sloppier the dress, the sloppier the attitude and the sloppier the work ethic."

Peter Post, a director of the Emily Post Institute and coauthor of *The Etiquette Advantage in Business*, agrees sloppiness should not be permitted but disagrees that casual dress has a negative impact on productivity. "If it were true, business formal would be the standard," he says. "It doesn't stand to reason that so many of the businesses that have gone business-casual would just decide to get less work done."

According to Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a leadership expert, changing standards may be related to generational preferences. "Many managers and supervisors are Baby Boomers and they have a whole different idea of what constitutes appropriate office wear," she says. "I tell them that if they cancel body piercings, they aren't going to have any staff."

Dress-- casual or formal-- is now often considered part of the overall branding of an organization. Ms. Gupta-Sunderji works with an organization that sells snowboarding equipment and she says it is common for the youthful staff to wear denim cutoffs and midriff-bearing tops. "That's part of their brand," she says. "That's who they sell to and those are the employees they want to attract."

Mr. Post believes office dress is trying to find a happy medium. "Ultimately, we have to get to a place where people are smart. They think about what they're wearing, why they're wearing it and what their needs are," he says. "You want to represent your company and yourself in the best light possible."

Mr. Post says there are some basic guidelines that need to be followed in any office -- nothing odiferous, revealing, wrinkled or stained. But ultimately, it's up to every distinct workplace to decide on a sartorial standard.

Ms. Smith recommends taking a look at the leaders of the industry whose ladder you aspire to climb. "They're comfortable with people who look like them," she says.

Aaron, who works at a bank in Toronto's financial district, had a recent reminder of the old guard that continues to set the traditional tone for style in his office.

Aaron sat down for a drink with a colleague who had missed his morning shave and they were soon interrupted by a superior who informed them that even a single day's stubble was not acceptable for young men in their position. "I guess we've been warned," says Aaron, rubbing a hand over his Saturday afternoon fuzz.