

Are You a Business Casualty?

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Posted: 2007-09-12 15:15:30

Workers at Google can wear flannel pajamas to work. Lawyers on Wall Street aren't caught in anything less than a suit and tie. Employees at a high tech start-up opt for a business casual look, which means they wear -- what exactly do they wear?

From the mailroom to the CEO's office, there is perpetual discussion regarding dress code in many corporate workplaces. Business appropriate, business casual, business professional -- what does it all mean?

Business casual became the norm during the dot-com boom, when a relaxed dress policy was a perk to help attract and retain young employees, says Mary Crane, founder of Denver-based consulting firm Mary Crane & Associates. After the dot-com boom went bust, some businesses reverted to more conservative dress policies to demonstrate a new, more serious business climate.

When business casual was first introduced, we did away with certain parts of business professional. For example, men lost the jacket and ties, while women dropped the pantyhose. From there, it's been a slippery slope into party attire, beachwear, sometimes even pajamas.

Does this mean business casual is dead? Not really, but you could argue the appropriate application of business casual is, says Elizabeth Freedman, author of 'Work 101: Learning the Ropes of the Workplace without Hanging Yourself' (Random House).

"Companies don't spend enough time really conveying why dress is important in the workplace beyond a 20-minute session for employees at a company orientation," Freedman says. "Over time, employees figure out what they can 'get away with' and their wardrobes reflect that." Freedman suggests companies educate employees on an ongoing basis about what is appropriate and what isn't.

Sandy Dumont, corporate image consultant, agrees that the concept of business casual has gotten out of hand.

"The moment you permit casual attire, it goes from bad to worse," she says. "Employees are like spoiled children who have been told they can eat anything they want, and now they don't want to eat their vegetables, only junk food."

To avoid becoming a business casualty, follow these workplace do's and don'ts.

Do keep a blazer or jacket in your office. Always be prepared for an impromptu meeting with an important client or customer. "Should an unplanned opportunity arise to meet with a client who

might observe a more conservative dress code, employees can simply don their blazer, add a tie if appropriate and dress up quickly," Crane says.

Don't have only one wardrobe. "To save a buck, some of us wind up wearing the same things to work that we would wear on any given weekend. Business casual isn't casual dress," Freedman says. "It's an upscale professional look -- not to be confused with what you might wear out one night with your friends."

Do ditch the khakis. They look sloppy, rumpled and slept-in within minutes. Instead wear tan or beige trousers in cotton twill in the summer or a wool gabardine in the winter, Dumont says.

Don't show too much skin. Anything that reveals too much skin is inappropriate. Keep skimpy tops that reveal bare midriffs, too-tight knit shirts that reveal bulging pecs and low-rise slacks that afford others the opportunity to potentially see more than they should, out of the office, Crane says.

Do invest in a suit. Men and women should invest in two basic suits and three coordinating shirts or blouses, advises John Heins, senior vice president and chief human resources officer for Florida-based staffing firm, Spherion Corporation. "They are timeless, neutral and almost always appropriate," he says. "All pieces work together to produce a wardrobe that is greater than the sum of its parts." And you can always ditch the suit coat for a dressed down, yet professional look.

Don't wear flip-flops. There isn't anything remotely business-like or professional about flip-flops, so save them for the surf, Freedman says. "Even if they cost you \$100 and are adorned with jewels from Tiffany, don't do it."

Do be clean and well-groomed. The way you care for yourself indicates to employers the level of care you put into your work, says Donna Flagg, workplace expert. "If you look sloppy, higher-ups in the organization will think your work is sloppy," Flagg says.

Don't confuse "casual" with "sloppy." At minimum, clothes should be ironed and unstained. "Business casual attire should be crisply pressed and wrinkle-free," Crane says.

Do follow the leader. If your office allows business casual, but your boss never wears open-toe shoes, you might consider keeping your own hidden, says Rachel Weingarten, author of "Career and Corporate Cool." "If you do go for sandals, maybe limit the pedicure to a neutral shade instead of a shocking red or quirky blue."

Don't try to "get away" with things. You'll look less like a professional and more like a teenager, Weingarten says. "The point isn't to show what you can wear; it's to show what you can do."

The Bottom Line?

"If you want to play on the team, wear the team uniform," Freedman says. "Look around your office, see how successful people dress and imitate. I'll bet you won't find senior-level folks at work dressed shabbily -- or in flip-flops."