

WEEKEND Workout: Workplace attire

What not to wear – is there still a dress code?

Kira Vermond dissects the latest workplace and career trends.

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How did you dress for work on Friday? Maybe you threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt before heading out the door. Or perhaps you slipped into some sort of formal attire for your back-to-back meetings with that new client.

Either way, if you're like the majority of employees in Canada, you're allowed to dress more casually at least some of the time at work. But do dress-down days inspire a case of dress like a slob, work like a slob? Or is the workplace becoming so relaxed on the whole, the concept of casual Friday seems like a musty throwback to the pre-dot-com days?

The morph

How did we go from casual Fridays, first promoted in the 1950s, to casual every day? **Linda Allan**, a Toronto-based management consultant who specializes in workplace behaviours including dress etiquette, says two factors led to the trend in the early 2000s.

Downsizing kept management's eyes off the seemingly insignificant trend toward relaxed dress at a time when more pressing matters, such as globalization and corporate takeovers, seemed more important. Part-time and contract workers added to the feeling of slackened expectations. Then there was the influx of dot-com companies. "They were so busy with the cerebral that other stuff fell apart. Employees said, 'We can work just as hard, make as much money and dress any way we want,' " she says.

Productivity plummets

Although there is plenty of anecdotal evidence stating that relaxed wardrobe leads to relaxed attitudes about work, studies don't seem to bear it out, says Todd Dewett, professor of management at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and author of *Leadership Redefined: The Secrets of Surviving Cubicleland*. "I think those people making those comments are absolutely full of hooey. As a social scientist, I want something that is a little better explanation for dropping productivity than people's attire," he says. He's not alone in his thinking. According to a recent survey conducted by FPC, an executive recruiting firm in the United States, 60 per cent of managers, directors, vice-presidents and bosses said they like casual dress at work and think going back to suits or dresses would spoil productivity.

It's about choice

In Toronto's funky Queen Street and Spadina Avenue neighbourhood, Elaine Kunda, CEO of 54-employee ZipLocal Inc., says dress code is left almost entirely up to her employees' discretion. "There aren't really too many restrictions beyond what you would expect - like bikinis," she admits. Despite the laissez-faire attitude - some employees wore short-shorts to the office this summer - Ms. Kunda opts to dress more formally.

Grooming gumption

In an era when companies swing between lax and ultra professional, it's impossible to decide what to wear to a job interview. Or maybe not. Lisa Skriloff, president at Multicultural Marketing Resources Inc. in New York City, says despite having a casual office, she expects job searchers to dress formally for the interview. She wants to know they take the job seriously. "I want to see what they're going to wear. If it's not appropriate for an interview, I do note that," she says.

Nature of the business

Conceivably, deciding between casual dress and business attire is not an issue of right or wrong at all. Dress code simply reflects the business's mandate, culture and fashion.

"There really are still some industries that you have to project an image and dress a few notches above. Would you want to go to an accountant who had rips in the jeans, particularly if it's the first time you're meeting him or her?" asks Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a leadership and workplace communication consultant in Calgary.

But sometimes dressing the part actually does mean dressing down, Ms. Kunda says. "In the Internet industry, you wouldn't want someone coming in to sell to you looking like a banker, because then you would question whether they knew anything about the Internet," she says.

Worldwide view

Not surprisingly, casual Fridays hail from Canada and the United States, two countries that esteem relaxation and ease. But according to Jason Hancock, president of Sowilo Consulting LLC, an international business consulting firm in Arlington, Va., a laid-back dress code slaps of unprofessionalism in parts of the world.

Organizations wanting to do business with Japan or Russia, in particular, should think twice before attending a meeting overseas wearing khakis and a company logo-embroidered shirt. "The folks from Great Britain and Germany quite often get off to a better start with their initial meetings in places like that simply because they're dressed better. From the moment they walk through the door, they're taken more seriously," he says.

His advice? "Dress up - even if it's uncomfortable."

Make a dress code work

Present the dress code in the context of your company's objectives. Lay out the "musts" for both men and women. What's the minimum standard? List the taboos. Offer examples for both men and women.

Managers can offer some flexibility, so long as it's within guidelines. Today's fashion world is fickle. Without taking this step, your dress code will be out of date before you know it.

Source: Merge Gupta-Sunderji

The upside

"Allowing, within obvious constraints, the freedom to dress as one wishes is actually one of the cheapest, most cost-effective ways to be pro-employee and bolster employee morale." Todd Dewett, Professor of Management at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, and author of *Leadership Redefined: The Secrets of Surviving Cubicleland*.

The downside

"Casual Fridays turn into sloppy every days, and that can hurt a company's image in another market, especially one like Japan, where most men and women dress to the nines on most days."

Jason Hancock, president, Sowilo Consulting LLC, Arlington, Va.

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