

The Case Against Business Casual
February 2010
By Sandy Dumont

“Employees who don’t dress appropriately cap out a ceiling on their careers really quick,” says professor Dennis Tootelian. According to the study done by Tootelian at California State University, nearly two-thirds of Americans have felt inappropriately dressed at a business or a social function; and more than two-thirds are uncertain about the differences among business attire, business casual and casual dress in the workplace.

The biggest fashion problem for workers today is the concept of “business casual,” according to Tootelian. Nearly one in three reports that it is harder to know what is acceptable to wear to the office today than it was 10 years ago. Business casual is also difficult to define for 47% of the population.

It’s no wonder the term “business casual” creates confusion, because the term is an oxymoron. You are either dressed for business or you’re dressed for casual activities, and one has nothing to do with the other. Ultimately, you are dressed for your own comfort or dressed to impress clients. And clients get it. You literally hurl an insult at a client when you don’t dress professionally, because it shouts “My comfort is more important than impressing you.”

Not surprisingly, Tootelian found that younger participants in his study had a different, more casual, perception of what constitutes business attire. “For them, the concept of a coat and a tie isn’t even on their radar screen,” he said. This study was done just before the current recession. In these shaky financial times, the attitude of young employees may very well have to change if they want to get hired.

Younger employees are much like small children who have been permitted to indulge themselves with sweets, soft drinks and other things that may not be good for them in terms of healthy bodies. We would all agree that parents who let their children eat what they want are not doing them a favor. By the same token, indulgent companies who institute a “business casual” policy because employees demand it may not be doing their staff a favor. That’s because the way you dress affects many things, including your success in life. It defines who you are not only to others, but to the person in the mirror when you leave the house each morning. Casual attire suggests a casual attitude; professional attire says, “I’m serious about who I am and what I do.”

Business casual research was done by other universities, and one study chronicled in The Journal of American Academy of Business reports that the more formal the reported dress policy, the more likely employees are to report a higher level of conscientiousness. Employees who prefer a more formal dress policy report a higher level of time commitment, conscientiousness and job satisfaction.

In a study by research psychologist Jeffrey L. Magee, it was shown that when employees were polled, they reported that they were happier with a casual dress policy. It is seen as an employee perk. However, management noted increased absenteeism and tardiness among employees once the casual dress policy began. It is generally agreed that over the long haul, productivity

decreases. One research psychologist noted, “Continually relaxed dress leads to relaxed manners, relaxed morals and relaxed productivity.” He also noted that relaxed dress led to an increase in litigation.

Yet another study tried “Casual Monday” and “Casual Wednesday” in an effort to determine if productivity went down 30% on Fridays because of casual attire or because employees were simply “winding down” in anticipation of the weekend. Turns out that productivity went down 30% on any day of the week where casual attire was permitted.

The way you look and dress announces the outcome others can expect from you. It could also impact your company’s bottom line. When you dress to impress, you could safeguard your job.

Visit Sandy’s website to get your copy of her latest eBook “Seven Days to A New You” for women; and stay tuned for her book for men to be released in late January, “Seven Days to a More Polished and Magnetic Professional Image.”

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