

Decoding the Dress Code

It's not your parents' workplace anymore - nor their dress code. Gone are the stuffy three-piece suits and conservative skirt sets of times past, replaced with a canvas of khaki on which a world of individuality is expressed, as if to say, "Trust me: I'm casual." In some corporations and industries, it's Casual Friday every day of the week. Yet even with today's relaxed standards, it's still not a good idea to show up for work in torn shorts and a baggy tee shirt. Especially if you deal directly with customers, the way you express yourself to the world is far more important than the true you - at least while you're on the job. With a little thought and creativity, you can bring the two into harmony with positive professional results.

Evaluate your workplace

Whatever shall you wear to work? Before you can answer, look around you in the office - as early as the interview stage. What's the company style? How does dress relate to the nature of the work? What are people wearing these days to make design presentations? automobiles? closing arguments? pizzas? Get ready to dress the part - in this year's style.

Look to your coworkers for direction, and take your lead from the top, as the catch phrase "dress for the job you want" still applies.

"There's a gray area," said human resources professional Lena Bottos of Salary.com. "If your boss breaks a few dress code rules, then it's okay to adjust your wardrobe choices. Just don't be the first one in the office to break the style barrier."

Also, think about who visits your office when deciding how to dress. Is your space open to visitors, or is it strictly down-and-dirty? Are the visitors from inside the company or outside? What impression do you want to leave on them? And don't forget company executives - top brass might not appreciate the deep cultural symbolism of your latest music concert acquisition.

Some people keep a business suit or the equivalent in their office or workspace in case guests arrive on short notice. Are you ready for a television crew to arrive and film you for the news?

The do's and don'ts are changing

Etiquette books tend to take a conservative approach to the office. Emily Post, for example, swears that "business casual" doesn't exist, while Amy Vanderbilt prefers women not to wear pants to the office. Workplace style in the 1990s was liberated from the structured 1980s, and improvements in synthetic fabrics have given designers new materials from which to create casual clothing that appears professional. During the Internet boom, the startup culture of the West Coast brought business casual to an art form.

So, is it "anything goes" today? As in the past, your appearance on the job is a mirror that reflects your personal style in the context of the office culture and the nature of your job. What you wear continues to say a lot about your work. So think about your company, your teammates, clients,

management, and your position when reaching into your closet, and you'll always come out a winner.

- *Regina M. Robo, News Editor*