



Taking care of business: What you wear to work matters*

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QI supervise a young group of people, and I have concerns about their dress. Everyone has been dressing more casually than usual and some of the young girls, in particular, dress very inappropriately.

I've made a few comments, but I don't think it should be my job to monitor what people wear. Our office is casual, so people don't think what they wear matters, but it does.

Some time ago you printed guidelines for dressing casually in the workplace. I would love to see them again so I can post them -- I think it might have more impact coming from someone other than me.

Supervisor

Sue says: You are right -- it shouldn't be your job to monitor what people wear, and people should know that dressing casually for work is and should be different from dressing casually outside of work. But it remains a gray area for many.

Younger employees weren't working years ago when most workplaces were quite formal and casual dress was reserved for time off work, so dressing casually might be all they are accustomed to. If you haven't provided your employees with a written dress code, consider doing so because it will help everyone understand what is expected. That way, when someone dresses inappropriately, you can refer to the dress code rather than your opinion.

Try explaining why what people wear matters. Many people underestimate the impact their appearance has; it can affect the way people perceive you and treat you and even determine whether you get a promotion or job offer. Although it might not be fair, it is true: dressing appropriately is just as important as acting appropriately.

Dressing for a business-casual workplace shouldn't be too different from dressing for a traditional workplace -- just a bit more relaxed. Remove the tie, take off the jacket, wear lighter fabrics and more casual styles, but make sure that you dress professionally and that your clothing is clean and well-pressed.

The following should never be worn to work unless specified as permissible: jeans, ripped or torn clothing (even if it came that way),

workout or athletic wear, spandex or any fabric that is body-hugging and tight-fitting, baggy, oversized or extremely low-rise pants (don't let undergarments show when sitting down), shorts and mini-skirts, sleeveless and low-cut tops (no cleavage or undergarments should be exposed), tank tops, muscle shirts and tube tops, flip-flops and most sandals, sweatshirts and sweatpants, hats, caps, visors and other headgear.

If you are in doubt, leave it out. Nothing is more embarrassing than being sent home because of the way you are dressed, and it has happened. You always are better off being slightly overdressed than underdressed; too dressy is better than too casual, so take the time to think about what you wear.

Sue Morem is a Twin Cities consultant on career and workplace issues. If you have questions or opinions for her, you can send mail to P.O. Box 41115, Plymouth MN 55441, send e-mail to sue@suemorem.com or visit her Web page at <http://www.suemorem.com>. She can't make individual replies to all respondents.



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