



'Suited-yet-tie-less' the new office dress code

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Workplace dress standards have been in flux since the late 1990s dotcom boom, when hip IT start-ups introduced beanbags, table tennis and jeans to the office.

The dotcoms came, went, and came back again, leaving professional workplaces trying to chart a course between employee demand for less formality at work and employer desire to maintain a certain standard.

The arrival of iconoclastic Gen Ys onto the work scene and the seeping of 'Casual Friday' into the rest of the week have continued to change the face of the modern professional workplace.



Tie or no tie? Colin Gold/The Trendspotter

Has the tie died?

Walk down any CBD street and suited-yet-tie-less men may outnumber men with ties. Maybe it's supposed to look raffish and unconventional, but can also appear untidy and unfinished. Add the commuter accessories of backpack and runners to and from work, and the breach of decorum is complete.

Casual Friday, also known as Dress Down Friday, can take a good chunk of the blame. Apart from its long-forgotten function as a charity fundraiser, Casual Friday was also supposed to be a morale booster, a blind eye turned by management to reward a week's hard work. Instead, employees repaid the favour by casualising the rest of the working week.

Executive coach and image consultant Jon Michail, the CEO of Image Group International, says most companies have policies and expectations on a range of workplace issues, but when it comes to dress codes, "standards are all over the place".

"Dress codes have been relaxed to such an extent over the years that many organisations that want to tighten up, feel they can't," he says.

"Historically, HR has had the role of developing standards for the workplace, but HR today doesn't have the courage to set standards on dress, let alone enforce them where policies do exist. They've allowed standards to get out of control."

PC gone mad

Michail believes the problem stems partly from political correctness and misguided interpretations of workplace law – "managers are concerned that if they pull somebody up for how they dress that they'll be reported for harassment or bullying". Many managers, he adds, simply lack the communication skills or the confidence to explain to an employee why their attire is inappropriate.

Michail says companies should not be afraid to set "professional appearance codes", arguing that "human beings by nature want to know what the rules of the game are".

Some of his corporate clients deal with the problem of declining dress standards by appointing personal coaches for senior executives. Employee workshops, at which the importance of dress standards and good grooming are explained, are also popular.

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"At the end of the day we're talking about how we package ourselves for success, the role that perception and image play in business. When employees understand this, they make it their business to improve their dress standards," Michail says.

Image consultant and personal stylist Imogen Lamport of Bespoke Image says the relaxing of dress codes has gone too far in some workplaces.

"Many companies are trying to reverse declining dress standards but find that it's very difficult to do so," Lamport says.

And she reveals one surprising reason: "A lot of people don't want to be over-dressed at work; they have a fear of being the best dressed in the workplace."

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