

and Ephraim Okoro document the results of an extensive study, conducted at two universities in the United States, concerning student attitudes toward formal and casual business attire. Their conclusion lists specific recommendations for human resources managers and other corporate executives. Terri Grant and Gaontebale Nodoba explore the powerful political, historical, and cultural influences that shape the understanding of appropriate attire within a specific environment; their study focuses upon the evolution of workplace wardrobes in South Africa. Barbara Burgess-Wilkerson and Jane Boyd Thomas, commencing with an interpretive analysis of the *Ugly Betty* television series, maintain that many “Generation Y” students hold seemingly contradictory attitudes concerning the meaning of attire as, simultaneously, a statement of conformity with corporate culture and also an assertion of individuality. Sabine Tan and Monica Owyong explicitly maintain that attire serves a semiotic function; their study of the clothing associated with male and female television business newscasters provides an example of the manner in which this function operates.

RECENT TRENDS IN BUSINESS CASUAL ATTIRE AND THEIR EFFECTS ON STUDENT JOB SEEKERS

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WHEN I INTRODUCE the unit on job hunting in my business communication course, I begin by relating my experiences searching for my first “real” job. I point out that the deciding factor for me in accepting a position at Bell Labs, instead of IBM, was Bell Lab’s casual dress code. During my interview in 1980, I saw programmers wearing corduroys, polo shirts and t-shirts, and sneakers with white socks. The only sports jackets and ties that I saw (many matched with corduroys—nary a business suit in sight) presumably belonged to managers. Since the official “uniform” for Bell Labbers matched my college-student wardrobe perfectly, I knew that Bell Labs was the place for me.

When I decided to retire from the former Bell system and return to academia, most businesses were still casual at least one day a

week. So when we studied the unit on job hunting, I told my students that researching dress codes was not necessary anymore since just about all companies have embraced business casual. While doing some reading for a new semester, however, I became aware of the trend back to business formal. I believe now that teaching students about trends in business attire is essential as well as teaching them how to determine if a company they are considering for employment matches their preferences for business attire.

The Rise and Fall of Business Casual

Fashion experts have a variety of opinions about the origins of business casual attire. Some believe that it began in the early 1990s with the boom in “eBusiness” coinciding with the economic downturn and the recession in the early 1990s (Vangen, 2002). Lamb and McKee (2005) credit Levi Strauss’s invention of the Dockers brand in 1986 with the rise in acceptable business casual attire for men, while Gutierrez and Freese (1999) argue that dressing down for businesses can be attributed “to the high-tech companies in the Silicon Valley of California that . . . hired primarily people from blue-collar backgrounds . . . [who] were more comfortable in the casual clothing they had worn all their lives” (p. 33). Their observation agrees with my own experience, even though Bell Labs was in New Jersey and most of its new hires were college graduates.

Although experts may disagree on when business casual came into style, they do agree that by the mid-1990s, all but the most conservative businesses in the U.S. were relaxing their dress codes at least one day a week. Clothiers noted a drop in sales (Fassnacht, 2004), and the business world viewed casual dressing as a new clothing trend (Gray, 1994; Kaufman, 2002). By the end of the decade, even the more conservative financial, accounting, and law firms began to experiment with dress-down days. Some firms limited business casual only to Fridays, while others adopted a relaxed dress code for every day of the week. Some accounting firms even allowed employees to wear t-shirts and jeans as long as they were neat (Cruz, 2000; Fortune et al., 1995).

Until the end of the 1990s, many companies seemed to function well without a clearly defined dress code. The two unwritten rules

that most employees who interacted with clients were expected to follow were (1) keep it neat and (2) dress to match the client's attire. Sabath (2008) suggests that "the real definition of business-casual dress is wearing clothes that will allow professionals to represent their organizations if they are called to a last-minute client meeting, without feeling obliged to apologize for their appearance," and the literature from the late 1990s agrees with that general guideline (Edelstein, 1998; Miller, 1999).

By the early 21st century, however, many businesses started to believe that it was necessary to establish new dress codes. A debate began about productivity. Some companies earlier claimed that they saw an increase in productivity after allowing their employees to dress more casually (Jones, 1996) and quoted 1999 surveys that proved that "companies that embraced casual business attire enjoyed a 40 percent increase in productivity" (Wood & Benitez, 2003, p. 31). However, in the first few years of the new century, many were arguing that "relaxed attire promotes a certain laxness in workplace behavior" (p. 31). Industry watchdogs noted that companies started to return to business formal attire in 2002, as evidenced by new dress code policies at major financial firms and increases in sales of business suits (Alexander, 2002; Dumont, 2005). Kaufman (2002) even directly attributes the shift to 9/11, although I found other articles predating September 11 reporting a return to formal business attire.

The interesting question centers on why the reversal is happening. Heroux Pounds (2007) argues that some employees, after being passed over for promotion, began to believe that they were not being taken seriously because of their casual dress. Most businesses mandating a return to business formal believe that the real blame, however, lies with employees who became too casual. Employees were coming to work in grunge jeans, t-shirts, tank tops, shorts, sweat pants, piercings, and flip-flops. Interpretations of business casual were becoming too liberal, and many employers believed that such attire was beginning to affect employee performance. As a result, some companies reinstated suit-and-tie rules, and the percentage of employees allowed to dress casually dropped from 53% in 2002 to 38% in 2006 (Sowa, 2007; Wood & Benitez, 2003). And in many of those businesses that opted to keep business casual, management

wrote clearly defined guidelines for what is acceptable casual dress (Reddick, 2007).

Recommendations

Given the current mix of policies that companies have adopted for business attire, job seekers who have strong preferences should research a prospective employer's corporate culture. The following are suggestions that I use in my business communication course to discover how companies communicate their corporate culture.

1. Browse the company's Web site. Look for videos and photos to see how the employees and the company's customers are dressed. Don't assume that because the members of the leadership team and the board of directors are all dressed formally that the company requires formal business attire. A better barometer is the everyday work pictures that companies often put on their Web sites.
2. Investigate the company on the Internet using a search engine. Search for photos of employees in the company.
3. Find a copy of the company's annual report. Such reports often have employees photographed in the workplace dressed as they would on a normal day.
4. Check out the company's diversity statements. While not an indicator in itself of a company's dress code, you could safely assume that a company with a conservative diversity policy also has a conservative dress code.
5. Ask the person with whom you are discussing the job opportunity what the company's dress code is.
6. During a telephone interview, ask whether the company has a dress code. If the answer is "business casual," delve deeper to find out the interview team's interpretation of casual attire.
7. In a face-to-face interview, take the opportunity to observe how the company interprets business casual. Observe how other employees who are not interviewing you are dressed. If offered, go for a walk to the cafeteria for a coffee, ask to use the bathroom, or ask for a tour of the building. Any opportunity to get out among the people will give you a good indication of how people dress for work. Be on the lookout for employees wearing shirts with company logos on them. That is often an indication that the company has limits and prefers that its employees wear a kind of uniform when dressing down.

While being familiar with a company's products and services should clearly be the applicant's focus, knowledge of a company's culture, including its dress code, will help applicants determine if they would be satisfied employees if that job offer materializes.

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