

To dress for success at the office, motto should be: 'In doubt? Don't'

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Expert Opinion

Expert Opinion offers the insights of law-firm management specialists on a variety of topics related to the administration of a law office.

How we dress sends a message, and the old message in the legal community was stiff, stuffy and professional. Everyone knew the rules: Suits, starched shirts and ties for the men; suits, pearls and pumps for the women.

In the past decade, the pendulum has swung toward a poorly defined "business casual," supposedly to relate to more modern clients, and the rules got fuzzy. Professionalism is still the goal, but in its newest iteration, professional has come to mean sport coats sometimes, ties on rare occasion, starch and ironing seemingly optional; tight shirts and pants all right for slim-figured women, flip-flops allowable, too, providing they are expensive.

However, for court appearances, the "old" rules apply. Judges adhere to precedent, and precedent says a lawyer looks and acts like a lawyer, not like a modern client.

Loosening the rules in the office certainly has confused the work force. Dress that once was only suitable for casual Friday has seeped into the rest of the week. Secretaries used to dress as conservatively as the attorneys, in an effort to project the appearance of a professional office. Far fewer assistants observe those niceties now, with the younger staff in particular influenced by the blatant sexiness pushed by the fashion industry. This trend has put firms squarely in conflict with their goal of maintaining a work environment free from sexual undertones.

What's a firm to do? As with most management problems, the answer lies in the firm's administration facing the issue head-on and up-front. A clearly articulated dress code promulgated with the imprimatur of a firm's governing body can clear up the confusion quickly.

Offering definite guidelines does your firm and staff a favor in many ways. The partners set the tone in the office that they wish to create, whether casual or formal. Staff and attorneys now have guidelines to follow that may limit impulse purchases for clothing unsuitable to the office. A clear policy will avoid ambiguities that can cause resentment among the staff.

What follows are general guidelines. A firm should first decide the appearance and tone it wishes to set in a business-casual environment, then tweak the guidelines as necessary.

Attorneys are expected to dress in formal business attire for court appearances and may dress in casual business attire in the office. Support staff is expected to dress in casual business attire at all times and may elect to dress more formally. Good judgment, demonstrated by appropriate dress in the workplace, will be considered when evaluating compensation, bonuses or promotion at all levels.

Appropriate casual business attire does include:

Slacks of cotton, wool or synthetic material and attractive women's dress pants. Inappropriate pants include Capri pants, sweat pants, exercise pants, Bermuda shorts, short shorts, shorts, bib overalls, leggings and any spandex or other form-fitting material.

Casual dresses and skirts, hemmed at or below the knee. Skirt length should allow one to sit comfortably in public without the skirt riding halfway up the thigh. Mini-skirts, skorts, sun dresses, beach dresses and

spaghetti-strap dresses are inappropriate.

Shirts (casual or dress), sweaters, tops, turtlenecks and golf shirts, suit and sport jackets. Inappropriate are: tank tops; midriff tops; shirts with words, terms, logos, pictures, cartoons or slogans; halter-tops; tops with bare shoulders; sweat shirts, and T-shirts (unless worn under a blouse, shirt, jacket or dress).

Shoes (loafers or laced), dress boots, flats, dress heels and dress sandals. Going without hose is acceptable in warm weather. Beachwear, flip-flops or thongs are inappropriate anytime. Foul-weather footwear is out during business hours.

Jewelry should be moderate, with body piercing limited to earlobes. Co-workers may be allergic to the chemicals in perfumes and make-up, so those substances should be worn with restraint.

Hats of any kind are inappropriate. Head covers to honor religious or cultural tradition are allowed.

Denim jeans, shirts, jackets and dresses may only be worn on Fridays. The same goes for sneakers and deck shoes of any kind.

No dress code can cover all contingencies, so an employee must be expected to use good judgment in choice of work wear. Tears, wrinkles, frays, too much cleavage or any mid-torso skin showing are inappropriate. Follow the simple guideline: "When in doubt, don't."

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