

Five Rules of Style for the Business-Casual Workplace

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Dressing for work used to be pretty easy: a suit and tie for men, and a skirt suit or pantsuit for women. Then came casual Fridays and “**Hawaiian shirt day**.” Today’s business-casual workplace (where, according to Gallup, just 6 percent of American men bother to wear a necktie) would seem to be a world without rules.

Of course, there *are* rules, they’re just more subtle — which makes them even harder to follow. If you think a “jeans OK” dress code means that no one’s judging your appearance, think again. There’s a big difference between dark jeans with a belt and faded jeans that hang a little *too* low — and it could mean the difference between being taken seriously and being taken for granted. Here are five rules for making “business casual” work for you — not against you.

1. Give Details Their Due

As a sergeant in the U.S. Army, Matt Eversmann, whose heroics inspired the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*, had to instill in his men unquestioned faith in his leadership. His first step? Making sure he always looked just a little better than they did. “It was always incumbent upon me to have my shoes better shined than any one of my subordinates would ever dream of,” says Eversmann, who is retired from the army and now runs Freeman-Phillips, an organizational development consulting firm. “For leaders and larger-than-life people we follow into battle, you have to look the part.”

Companies that understand this principle often send newly promoted managers to places like the Bixler Consulting Group for an extreme office makeover. The Atlanta-based company specializes in turning office schmucks into boardroom heavyweights.

Take Harry, for example: an extreme case who was sent to Bixler after a promotion put him just two steps below the company president. Harry’s unique “style” included a belt held together with duct tape, holes in his badly scuffed shoes, pattern balding combined with long and unruly hair, shirts that were yellowed and frayed, and a mustache that “gave him a negative appearance,” says senior consultant Shelley Hammell. With a new wardrobe, haircut, and clean shave, Harry was less of a liability when talking to the board of directors. What’s more, Hammell says, they paid attention to his words rather than his appearance.

2. Dress One Step Up

“If you want to know how to dress at work, look at the top,” says corporate style consultant Anthea Tolomei, whose clients range from buttoned-up Accenture to dressed-down employees from Google. While executives at your firm may be casual, you’re unlikely to see one of them in a Guitar Hero T-shirt (unless he’s [Sergey Brin](#)). More likely, the men will be in a collared shirt worn underneath a sport coat, blazer, or other low-key jacket. The women will probably wear slacks, designer jeans, or a skirt with a modest top and jacket.

But remember: it’s *one* step up, not two, advises Kristen Harper, of Wing Woman, a style consultancy. “If you’re working every day in a three-piece suit and everyone else is in jeans,” she says, “it’s going to give off a stuffy odor.” That said, Harper notes, “You can’t really overdress for an interview. If you’re dressed to the nines, all it should say to your prospective employer is that you’re taking it seriously.”

3. Know Business Casual from Weekend Casual

One of Tolomei’s favorite quotes comes from the late couturier [Bill Blass](#): “Style is synonymous with the appropriate.” But with today’s lack of clearly defined standards, many people don’t know what’s appropriate when. Men may come in on Monday morning still in their weekend-warrior gear of cargo pants and Texas. Women can err on the skimpy side, wearing outfits more suited to the beach than to the boardroom. On a recent hot day, Tolomei was stunned by the fashion choices at a consulting firm: “We had belly buttons showing. We had short-shorts. We had flip-flops. We had not-enough-fabric all over the place. I had to say, ‘Be careful—your clients could show up. The rules don’t change just because it’s 110 degrees outside.’”

Of course, there’s business casual and then there’s business *casual*. Bechtel’s casual Friday is going to look a bit dressier than, say, Yahoo’s. If you work in one of the more conservative business-casual environments, Tolomei offers a simple litmus test to tell at a glance if a garment is really work-worthy: the detergent test. If you wash it at home, it’s probably not business wear. If it’s professionally dry cleaned, however, it’s almost certainly appropriate for business. There are indeed exceptions, and Tolomei admits that they include jeans. One way to make a pair of jeans more businesslike, she says, is to take them to your dry cleaner once a month and have them pressed. The creases should hold through several machine washings.

“Remember: There’s the weekend you, and there’s the you that has to fit inside the rulebook, because you’re going to suffer if you don’t,” Tolomei warns. “People are going to raise eyebrows at you. Why test it? It’s only clothing.”

4. Temper Trends with Classics

One perk of the casual-dress workplace is the chance to ditch yawn-inducing business classics and embrace contemporary styles. But trendy clothing poses a problem in itself. If your look changes too often, you'll appear as if you don't know who you are. "Head-to-toe trend is real fickle," says Tolomei, "and head-to-toe time-honored classic is real boring." The trick is to find the right middle ground for you — depending on your workplace, age, and position. Tolomei suggests blending the classic with the contemporary. For men, that might mean wearing more daring shirts and a pair of hipper shoes. For women, it can translate to accenting a classic wardrobe with a few fashionable accessories. Take a Bixler Group client named Ida. She preferred loose, unstructured clothes to uptight suits, but the look diluted her authority. The consultants recommended tailored clothes with bolder colors instead of bland and muted shades, and helped her find a pair of glasses "with a little flair to them," Hammell says.

The important thing, says Tolomei, is never to look dated. "It makes you look older and, more important, makes your credentials appear to have expired. People will assume that your philosophy is as dated as your clothes."

5. Use Pictures to Shape Your Style

People naturally want to express themselves and their interests through what they wear. But in most business environments, even the more casual ones, it's just not OK to show up in your favorite Rolling Stones T-shirt or square-dancing outfit. Being true to yourself in a business context means something else entirely. It's not just about who you are but who, and what, you want to be.

What you should look for in a business-casual wardrobe, says Tolomei, is not an idiosyncratic or eccentric you but "an enhanced you." She suggests forming a clear mental picture of what that person looks like. In her practice, she has all her clients clip or copy images of ensembles they like from magazines and books. This clarifies things greatly. Figuring out what you want to look like before going shopping can save time and money and help you achieve your stylistic goals. Bring your images with you to show the salesperson and say, "Something along these lines." Just don't expect to look like a Meryl Streep or Cary Grant after one shopping spree.

And if you really must express yourself at work as, say, a Mick Jagger fan, consider [a pair of Rolling Stones cuff links](#).

Additional reporting by Michael Mattis