

SUMMER'S HERE AND DRESS CODES ARE FEELING THE HEAT

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Now that summer is upon us, you may be getting added pressure to relax your dress standards. Do you give in, or hold the line? Managers and H.R. practitioners are increasingly going with the latter approach, and here's why.

Dress codes and other employment policies are designed to provide employees with notice of reasonable workplace expectations. That means that for all intents and purposes, they are at their most effective when they provide clear standards for employee behavior. If employees are subsequently unable to conform to those standards, the thought is that they were on advance notice, and must live with the consequences. That's the challenge with summer casual policies in a nutshell. The law affords employers a great deal of latitude when it comes to crafting guidelines in this area, but how much detail can you cram into any policy, let alone one that may not last beyond the summer months?

Conventional wisdom tells us that some of the best dress code policies are those that keep it simple – and call upon the employee to exercise professional judgment when it comes to appropriate dress. That may well be true, but experience also tells us that when the temperature eclipses 95 degrees, the summer heat can get the better of employee judgment every time, especially when the latest fashions encourage even traditionally conservative employees to test the waters as if they were dressed to go clubbing or to the beach.

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So as the temperature rises with the hemlines, do you trot out your existing policy, implement something new, or leave things as they are? The best answer may be to leave your more restrictive policy where it stands, and remind employees that they are there to service the customer, and not to free their innermost inhibitions. After all, a drastically relaxed dress code with vague standards may also cause employees to relax their approach to dealing with coworkers, customers and the public at large. That puts your public image at risk and exposes you to perceptions of discrimination and harassment that can tear at the morale of any workplace, not to mention your pocketbook. And if you presently lack a written dress code, then perhaps now is the time to put one in place.

So before you give in to the temptation to declare casual summer this year, be sure to consider the potential business impact, and be prepared to ask yourself the tough questions. Here are a few to start with:

1. What kind of working environment am I hoping to achieve, and how would relaxed standards impact our overall corporate culture?
2. What has been the practice within our area and industry, and how will this impact public perception within the local business community?
3. Have we relaxed standards on Fridays or on other occasions in the past? If so, have employees been willing to hold up their end of the bargain?
4. Is it sensible to apply an across-the-board approach, or are we better off holding the line with regard to those departments that have regular customer interaction?
5. What do you visualize when it comes to acceptable "business casual" attire? Do your employees share that view, or is the emphasis too often placed on "casual?"
6. Is there any risk of implementing a policy that alienates employees by treating them like children or singling them out on the basis of gender, race, religion or any other protected characteristic?
7. How big an issue is this among employees to begin with? Am I at risk of giving in simply to gratify a handful of employees at the expense of several others?

8. When it comes to revealing and inappropriate attire, where am I prepared to draw the line, and what steps am I prepared to take to enforce it? Can I say with a straight-face that this standard applies equally to all employees in the same group? What about forms of self-expression such as tattoos and body piercings?
9. What is the most effective way to communicate our standards to employees, new hires and candidates alike? Company-wide meetings, mass emails, circulation of a written document, or all of the above?
10. Are we prepared to live with any and all internal dress code guidelines, and have they been reviewed lately? If we are not prepared to enforce them to the letter, isn't it time to revisit them? If we are prepared, have we trained our supervisors to do so on a consistent basis, and are they willing to set the example?

Honest answers to these questions can save a good deal of heartache – and uncomfortable conversations with employees down the road. Look to maintain a policy that makes good sense for business reasons (such as upholding a positive public image), and be prepared to explain the business rationale behind it. If you can satisfy yourself in each of these areas, chances are you are well on your way to a successful summer – casual or not.