

YOU THINK YOUR COMPANY'S DRESS CODE IS BAD?

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In the new "casual business" era, employee dress codes can be tricky, especially in the relaxed Pacific Northwest. On one hand, employees should have freedom and feel comfortable at work. But that can conflict with the need to maintain a professional business atmosphere and project an appropriate public image. Where should the line be drawn?

The line certainly shouldn't be near the one drawn by Swiss bank UBS. The global employer just announced plans to relax its world-record 44-page (that is not a typo) dress code. Presently, the dress code requires employees to wear only certain dark colors, because they "symbolize competence, the formality and seriousness." Skirts and pants must be lean and form-fitting while also "providing sufficient amplitude." For women, the policy provides detailed instructions about how to apply makeup, what length of skirt to wear, what kind of perfume to wear, acceptable colors of stockings and nail polish, and a prohibition on showing roots if hair is colored. Men receive instructions on the proper way to knot their ties (which must be "adapted to the morphology of the face"). They are told to keep their facial hair in check, and are required to get their hair cut monthly.

Although UBS has not described the specific changes in store for its dress code on steroids, it will surely still be more strict than any here in the Portland-metro area. The good news is that employers actually retain a lot of discretion in what they demand from employees in regard to clothing and appearance in the workplace. The key is to carefully draft and consistently enforce a reasonable dress code and grooming policy that doesn't go overboard. As long as the

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dress code is based on business needs and is applied uniformly, it will generally be legally acceptable.

Employers will want to implement a dress code before an issue arises, or else an affected employee might be able to claim that the rule change unfairly targeted them. Finally, like with all policies, the language is worthwhile only if management enforces the rules. Be sure that managers are trained to follow the company policy and not to ignore violations.

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