

A New Look at Dress Codes

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From the service uniform of the UPS delivery person to the formality of an expensive suit on the CEO, how we dress identifies us with what we do at work. Dress can be functional, providing protection from work hazards; promotional, displaying company logos and slogans; it can associate us with specific professions, or it can be a mix of these and more.

When an employee dresses for work, it can establish an identity or association with colleagues or the company. Work dress can make a statement. Whether that statement aligns with corporate expectations or intent is an important question.

How the employee perceives appropriate dress depends on several factors: tradition, generation, gender, ethnic or cultural preferences, and explicit policy, to name a few. Establishing effective dress codes that serve both the employee's preferences and corporate policy can be a challenge. Dress codes are not simply a choice on the part of the employee. Employers have, and routinely exercise, rights to specify particular standards in dress codes for their employees based on several factors which are generally spelled out in company employee manuals and policy handbooks.

Standards in dress code not only entail the clothing one wears, but often the general appearance. This includes grooming, perfumes, personal hygiene, and footwear, all of which make up the total presentation of the employee. It is important to remember that as an employee, your rights in dress preferences become more limited. Dress projects an image and the employer can, and does, exercise rights to manage that image through dress codes.

Depending on circumstances (profession or service, customer facing or backroom, for example), dress codes can be general or they can be quite specific. Some items that dress codes routinely ban include:

- clothing with objectionable language or images
- torn or badly worn clothing
- sweat pants or sweat suits
- spandex, tank tops, halter tops, or other garments exposing too much skin
- hats and related headgear

As the company embarks on the development of a dress code (or on a review of the current code for possible updates), it is important to be aware of potential conflicts with federal laws. Cultural diversity has brought with it a nuance of dress that, if banned in dress codes, would violate anti-discrimination or disability laws. Such items can include, but are not necessarily limited to banning ponytails or earrings for men but not for women or prohibiting employees from having facial hair or headwear when it might violate some religious beliefs.

While dress codes are likely to be in effect in most organizations, and even formalized, it becomes difficult for a company to articulate every aspect of dress that an employer might find objectionable. This is particularly true for companies with employees who have varied roles. Consider, for example, companies that have manufacturing employees, marketing/sales staff and administrative support staff. The standard of dress and what is considered acceptable will vary depending on the employee group and their respective roles.

In short, even when a company has an articulated dress code policy, it may be subject to interpretation by employees.

Companies may have one of several reasons for considering standards for dress and grooming practices at work. Dress codes can present or create a professional or identifiable appearance for customers, suppliers, and the public; they can promote a positive working environment and limit distractions caused by outrageous, provocative, or inappropriate dress; and finally, standards of dress can address safety while working. Companies have a reasonable amount of latitude in setting policy in this area provided that such policy does not collide with laws preventing discrimination.

Setting the dress code achieves several objectives. Dress codes can help the company to set a standard and minimize ambiguity which can help to avoid nasty confrontations with employees with strong opinions and preferences. It can also help to manage its image among customers. Making employees aware of the dress code upon hiring is one of the most effective ways to ensure compliance. When you hire a new employee, it is important make him or her aware of the policy; and review it as part of the orientation process. You will avoid future conflict this way.

It is important to be specific; it leaves less to interpretation and can obviate the need for uncomfortable and avoidable confrontation.

In developing standards for dress at work, it can be useful to consult many opinions in the company. The more employees contribute to the dress code, the less likely they will be to criticize or violate it.

But what happens when the dress code standards are clear, and an employee fails to comply with the standards? A company's response is important. It's often an uncomfortable issue for managers, but one that cannot be ignored. A company's response can vary from a discrete and gentle reminder, to a warning, or to having the employee leave work to change.

Clearly, in our growing tendency towards the casual, companies have been more challenged to develop standards of dress that suit the company culture and create an employee focused environment.