
Press Releases - 2008 May 27

SUIT ON THE DECLINE AS BRITISH BUSINESS GOES SMART CASUAL

- Six out of ten offices have adopted a smart casual dress code
- Only one in four employees is now required to wear a suit to work
- Most businesses now allow more casual dress on certain days, such as dress-down Fridays
- Almost half of employees would dress more smartly if their job was under threat
- Short skirts and skimpy tops divide the office, with approval dependent on age and sex

The 'smart casual' dress code has come of age in the British office, with most employees putting on their suit only for business meetings, according to research by executive leadership and development consultancy **The Aziz Corporation**. Just over half (51 per cent) of employers allow their staff to wear smart casual attire for everyday office life, but require them to wear a suit, or equivalent for women, for business meetings. A further 12 per cent have gone a step further and allow their staff to wear smart casual for business meetings as well. .

Less than one in four offices (24 per cent) now require staff to wear suits at all times, representing a considerable slide from over a third (37 per cent) in 2004. However, completely casual dress is still frowned upon, with only 12 per cent of employers allowing their workforce to dress exactly as they wish.

The research suggests that most people want to appear smart and professional at work, but no longer equate this with wearing a suit. 66 per cent consider smart casual to be the most appropriate dress code for everyday wear. An overwhelming majority (90 per cent) of office workers believe that simply wearing a suit does not automatically make you look smart.

A completely casual dress code, allowing staff to wear whatever they want, including jeans, trainers etc, is rejected even amongst those whose offices have such a code. Two thirds of employees who are allowed to dress casually at work in fact disagree with this policy, and only 6 per cent of them consider it appropriate to dress casually for business meetings.

Professor **Khalid Aziz**, Chairman of The Aziz Corporation, commented: "Far from wishing they could get away with ripped jeans and T-shirts, most employees take their professional image at work very seriously and will dress smartly by choice. However, there is no longer a perception that we have to wear suits in order to be smart. Enforcing a suits-only dress code is seen as outdated and perhaps a little insular in an increasingly international workplace, an image which savvy modern companies want to steer clear of. Suits are best saved for business meetings where a very formal appearance is desirable."

Dressing for a downturn

The research does however suggest that, if the current economic downturn worsens, many workers fearing for their jobs may want to smarten themselves up. Almost half (47 per cent) would seriously consider dressing more smartly than usual if they felt their job was at risk due to financial conditions.

Professor **Khalid Aziz**, explained: “Like it or not, people will always be judged on their appearance as well as their abilities, and in the current climate some bosses will be reassessing their workforce. So it’s only prudent to look the part as well as acting it.”

Sex appeal

Other office dress issues meet with a more varied reception. Men are much more tolerant than women of very short skirts at work: 34 per cent of men see them as appropriate compared to just 16 per cent of women. Middle-aged men (aged between 40 and 49) tend to appreciate a bit of cleavage on show, with 60 per cent feeling that this is acceptable in the office. But female bosses become less tolerant of low-cut tops as they age, with only a third of those over the age of 50 prepared to put up with displays of cleavage at work.

Many executives admit to being puzzled by the smart casual dress code, with 62 per cent voicing a concern that the term causes confusion about what was appropriate. Some items of dress were vetoed by the vast majority. Flip-flops were deemed unacceptable by 84 per cent of respondents. Perhaps of greater surprise is the fact that visible tattoos are thought acceptable by 45 per cent, while facial piercings other than earrings are deemed acceptable by 40 per cent. Unfortunately for men gearing up for a hot summer, shorts are still an office pariah with almost nine in ten (88 per cent) considering them inappropriate for office wear.

The jury is also still out on the subject of ties carrying a jokey motif: respondents were divided almost fifty-fifty in their opinion of them, with 47 per cent happy to see them worn about the office and the remaining 53 per cent insisting they should be banished in favour of something more sober.

Professor **Khalid Aziz**, explained: “The office is not a catwalk, and it is desirable to be noticed for your professionalism rather than for your mini-skirt. Jokey ties and other items of questionable taste are probably best saved for the weekend. Even if half of your colleagues wouldn’t bat an eyelid, the thought of the other half questioning your sartorial decisions should be enough to put off any career-minded dresser. As a rule, conservative clothing will always be the wiser option if boundaries are unclear.”

Attitudes to office dress vary significantly across sectors. Almost half (43 per cent) of those in financial services are still required to wear a suit at all times. The media business is resolutely informal, with one in four being allowed to wear casual clothing to work and to business meetings (compared with an industry-wide average of just over one in 10).

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Professor **Khalid Aziz** of The Aziz Corporation is available for interview on this story. If you would be interested in speaking with Khalid then please visit our [Contact us](#) page.

Notes to Editors

The Aziz Corporation

The Aziz Corporation is the UK’s leading independent executive communications consultancy. Its mission is to add value to businesses by ensuring their people are effective communicators. Consultancy services offered by the Aziz Corporation include presentation skills, cross cultural communications, media training, crisis management, image consultancy and voice development.



About the survey

This survey was completed by 205 senior managers and directors of major companies based across the United Kingdom.