

# "Dressing Down" in the Business Communication Curriculum

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*Corporate America is changing the way it dresses. Students who are preparing for careers in business should be aware of this change, because dress-down days are becoming a part of American corporate culture. Casual dressing is popular, and people-friendly companies are capitalizing on its popularity. This article discusses this corporate trend and offers discussion on the need to include this concept in the business communications curriculum.*

**I**N the business communication curriculum, students are often coached on how to dress for an interview. Many syllabi include discussion on the importance of clothing as a form of nonverbal communication. However, little attention is given to the importance of dress/clothing once employed. There is a hostile takeover trend that's threatening to change the very nature of American business. Corporate America is changing the way it dresses (Martin, 1994). Students who are preparing for careers in business must be made aware of this change. There once was a time when a person could walk into the office of a manager, account executive, or salesperson and expect to see the individual behind the desk adorned in crisply pressed suits with starched white shirts. It was something that was not open to discussion but rather ingrained in American culture that certain dress was considered appropriate in those professions. But just as American culture as a whole has undergone a series of clothing revolutions from tie-dyed shirts in the 1960s to bell-bottom pants in the 1970s to yuppie sweaters in the 1980s, so too has the American workplace begun its own fashion revolution.

In a time of increasing acceptance of such things as in-house day-care, flexible hours, and telecommuting, dressing down is another

example of corporations making workplaces more user-friendly (to say nothing of closer to home).

Casual Fridays were introduced, experts say, to improve morale among cynical white-collar folks who saw their coworkers falling like flies during the layoffs of the 1980s and early 1990s. Generally, the casual look was never meant to replace traditional Monday-through-Thursday business attire. According to Elliot (as cited in Levi Strauss & Company, 1995), the new style called "business casual," is driven primarily by employees who want to end decades of enslavement by itchy wool suits, warm polyester blazers, and choking silk ties. The outside world prefers to deal with relaxed, genuinely cheerful workers, and that's good for business.

### **Background on Dress-down Days**

Dress-down day started out as an attempt to provide overstressed corporate employees with a bit of a reprieve from their costly dress-for-success quest (Reynolds, 1995). At least for one day a week, employees could let their hair down, not have to worry about what to wear, and at the same time save a bit of discretionary income.

Dress codes and dress policies have existed in Corporate America for decades. These policies, which were not always in company policy manuals, mandated dress for the workplace. As Peak (1994) stated,

Most companies these days dictate dress policies indirectly via corporate culture rather than directly via the policy manual. That doesn't mean dress codes are any less restrictive, however. Corporate expectations can be as tough on grownups as peer pressure is for high school teens. (p. 1)

Casual dressing is popular, and people-friendly companies are capitalizing on its popularity. Brown (as cited in Reynolds, 1995), chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Northeastern University, remarked,

The dress-down mood here may be connected to the volatility of the job market in the last few years. You cannot sustain a high dress code during a period of instability. Only in stable communities, such as small towns, are there status uniforms. Everywhere else, companies are beginning to introduce a mood of collegiality in the office, and this is an attempt to negate the [differences] between workers and management. (p. 123)

Many workers and managers are saying TGIF! with more enthusiasm these days because on Fridays an increasing number of organiza-

tions "dress down." The changes to policy manuals of participating companies are usually simple, permitting people to dress casually—"within reason and observing normal business propriety."

It seems to be one corporate policy that's drawing universal raves. It's "a no-cost perk that improves employee attitudes," declared a human-resources executive in *Industry Week's* June 20 cover story, "The Casual Corporation." And it's becoming pervasive. A recent Gallup survey (cited by Brown, 1994), indicated that 57% of U.S. companies now allow casual dress at least once a week and another 18% have a once-a-month dress-down policy. Dress-down days and casual dress are being used by companies to boost morale, improve communication, and reward employees.

### The Case for Casual Business Wear

Many companies decided to adopt a casual business wear policy after observing a national trend. "Dress-down" days, a phrase that first appeared in print barely five years ago, now affect, by some estimates, more than half of all U.S. office workers (Meyer, 1995). IBM chairman Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. relaxed the inviolable, though unwritten, dress code for the 800 workers at the innermost sanctum of American capitalism. IBM has joined a long and growing list of major corporations that allow people to do without suits on designated "casual days"—or for the entire week. General Motors, Ford, General Electric, Chrysler and Mobil are some of the blue-chip corporations with more flexible fashion rules, according to *Adweek Research* (cited by Brown, 1994).

Students who will be future employees and who understand the benefits and implications of the change in corporate America's dress will have an advantage. These findings from Evans Research (1992) provide an understanding of how and why the change is occurring:

- With the cost of health care and other benefits rising, allowing casual dress is an attractive way to offer an increasingly popular new benefit at no cost to the employer.
- Approximately 67% of all American companies permit casual dress in the office on an everyday or seasonal basis, or on designated "casual days."
- Companies that offer casual-dress benefits to their employees include Citibank, General Electric, PepsiCo., Clorox, and Allstate Insurance.

- Many of these companies report that wearing casual clothing can boost morale, improve quality, encourage more open communication, and increase productivity by creating a more comfortable work environment.
- Employees also save money because casual business wear is generally less expensive and requires less professional care than traditional business attire.
- Casual clothing can be "tested" by instituting casual Fridays for a three-month period. Clear guidelines should be developed and communicated up front.

A first-ever national survey of office workers' attitudes toward casual dress showed that boosting employee morale and productivity may be a matter of adopting a casual dress policy.

Furthermore, casual dress in the workplace is gaining widespread acceptance and support by employees throughout the country (Schonfeld, 1994). The vast majority of the surveyed employees felt that dressing casually resulted in a variety of benefits, including comfort, increased camaraderie and better work environments. The survey also included these statistics:

- 81% of the respondents agreed that casual dress improved morale
- 41% felt casual dress improved worker productivity while only 4% perceived a negative impact
- 57% of the respondents said that when dressed casually, they felt more camaraderie with managers and coworkers and 47% felt that supervisors appeared more approachable
- 51% said they did their best work when dressed casually
- 82% worked at companies with casual dress days at least once a week

The survey also confirmed that an increasing number of U.S. corporations and their employees are switching to casual business wear at least on an occasional basis. About 60% of those polled said their companies adopted the change within the past five years.

The nationwide survey, conducted last spring by Campbell Research, Inc., an independent research firm based in Minneapolis, polled 750 white-collar employees working at companies with casual-dress policies in place. The respondents represented a cross section of

industries including manufacturing, retail trade, finance, business services, health/social services, government, and education. Levi Strauss & Co. commissioned the survey.

In addition, in a nationwide poll of 500 human resource managers, 38% said that within the last five years, their company has agreed to allow employees to dress casually either every day, most days, one day per week, or on special occasions. One quarter of the companies allowed executives to wear sneakers at the office, and 34% said it was OK not to wear a tie (Hatfield, 1992).

Two-thirds of the managers in the Society for Human Resource Management agreed that wearing casual clothing at work can improve morale. A majority think it is perceived as an added employee benefit. Sixty percent also believe that wearing casual clothes to work reduces status distinctions. And 62% said employees are able to save money, recognizing that casual clothes cost less and often don't need dry-cleaning (Reynolds, 1995).

### **The Down Side of Dressing Down**

Casual business wear is not without its critics. Molloy, who added a chapter on casual wear in his latest version of *Dress for Success*, stated the adoption of "casual days" has caused confusion about what is acceptable. In many cases, casual wear for men is just golf clothing—trousers and a polo shirt. But what about jeans, T-shirts, shorts? Molloy argues that casual wear may also undercut the authority of women, minorities, and short men. They are not the people—unlike tall, white males—that mainstream society has generally identified as leaders or managers in the business world. Molloy also adds, "If you are put in a \$400 suit, you become establishment. The suit adds status" (1988, p. 67).

Indeed, the issue can foment a crisis in various ways. Brown (1994, p. 43) offers the following:

First, the old guard at many companies is still uneasy about the appropriateness of dressing down—even though these traditionalists may have signed off on a new policy. One company president confided to me that even though he was wearing a multicolored sweater and casual slacks, he kept a three-piece suit in his car and another in his closet—"just in case."

Second, some employees and managers may take things too far. Cut-off jeans and grimy tank tops do not seem appropriate dress except in the hottest of boiler-room or heavy-industry contexts. But what happens when a clerk at a public-access window in your company chooses to dress in this fashion? And what if a manager confuses the dress standard for an off-site corporate meeting with the clothing he usually dons for an afternoon of lawn mowing?

Third, customers might shun an insurance salesperson or the service manager at a car dealership who strikes them as too casual to entrust with their family's security or their car's care. Yet, employees may react negatively to a business-dress dictate from management.

Workers should be aware that some companies are still very conservative. This example is from a company memo, dated May, 1995, from Investor's Bank, which does not favor dress-down days. The memo from the human resources department was directed to all employees:

The bank requires a certain standard of appropriate appearance. It is important for all employees to set an example of good dress and good grooming. An employee's professional image has a direct impact on the Bank's ability to keep existing clients and acquire new business. Therefore, all employees should emulate a professional business style in dressing 'for success'. The following guidelines will help you make the appropriate decisions.

#### **Example of Acceptable Attire for Men and Women**

##### **Standard Business Attire, Men**

- conservative business suits
- collared, button-down business dress shirts
- business tie
- business socks and shoes

##### **Standard Business Attire, Women**

- conservative business suits
- business blouses and skirts
- business dresses
- business shoes

#### **Example of Unacceptable Attire for Men and Women**

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• corduroy or jean-style pants or dresses</li> <li>• cotton or khaki (Dockers) pants</li> <li>• stretch, stirrup, capri, harem or spandex pants</li> <li>• shorts or culottes, including short suits</li> <li>• mini-skirts</li> <li>• casual or faddish styles</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• denim clothing</li> <li>• T-shirts</li> <li>• sweatpants or sweatshirts</li> <li>• halter, tube, cropped or tank tops</li> <li>• patterned or textured nylons</li> <li>• sneakers, deck shoes, cowboy boots</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

This list can provide students with an idea of what is considered professional wear, casual wear, and unacceptable wear. Some of the items like khakis and denim are considered casual in many companies. As Molloy (1988), the author of the popular *Dress for Success* writes, man-

dates have long since given way to more flexible notions. But the unspoken rule is still as sure as ever: Dress for the job promotion you hope to win.

Discretion seems to be key in dressing down. The question for many employees when taking advantage of dressing down is the definition of "casual." Human resources managers are forced to define the concept in the company's dress-down policy. A director of corporate affairs at South Bank in Atlanta does not want to be in the position of deciding what is appropriate denim and what is not. Cadwell (as cited in Reynolds, 1995), of Cadwell Davis Advertising in New York, conducted a survey on dress-down policies among *Fortune* 1000 companies earlier this year. She found that almost half of the companies surveyed have regular casual days throughout the year and that there was sometimes significant confusion about what was acceptable dress. Corporate image is still a concern. To uphold the corporate image, a dress-down policy must not get too comfortable. Shorts, sweats, cutoffs, and sneakers are generally frowned upon by most companies. And, at some firms, so is denim.

### **Casual-Business-Wear Policies**

Although the trend toward more casual clothing in the workplace is well documented, actual policy examples and implementation procedures can be difficult to find. Many companies have approached the process of "going casual" as a learning experience. The range of experiences to implementing casual dress illustrated below shows that an approach tailored to each company's unique culture is required. During the pre-employment process, students should be encouraged to inquire about the dress code.

Some companies mandate dress policies indirectly via corporate culture rather than directly via policy manuals. That doesn't mean, however, that dress codes are any less restrictive. Other companies adopt a policy that considers the corporate environment, employees, and customers. The following company policies are cited by Levi Strauss & Co. (1995).

A manufacturer of skin care products with more than 600 employees at their Cincinnati headquarters site, Andrew Jergens Company recently adopted a written casual-Friday policy after a successful summer test program. Katherine Vanover, Manager of Organization

Development and Training, reports that some executives were skeptical of the benefits at first. The test program demonstrated, however, that their employees truly appreciate the casual-dress policy. And, with the help of some guidance provided in two company-wide memos, all employees now follow the "clean, neat, and professional" guidelines.

AMR, the parent company of American Airlines with more than 10,000 employees in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, enjoyed similar success during a summer test program, which led to an indefinite extension of one casual day per week policy. While the corporate headquarters sets the guidelines for the entire organization's casual dress policy, each site has the freedom to choose the particulars of how its policy will be structured and implemented.

While some companies attempt to prohibit specific inappropriate garments—shorts, open sandals, leggings, T-shirts, and torn or distressed clothing, others simply request that all employees maintain a professional appearance. Kroger Co., a Columbus, Ohio, wholesale and retail food company, bases its casual dress policy on such a policy statement. Human Resources Manager Terry Kuhl found casual Fridays so successful that she has begun to examine the possibility of implementing a casual business wear policy five days a week.

Other companies prefer to have casual days correspond to pay days, bad weather, company picnics, or charity events. For example, the Dallas office of Fireman's Fund, with 225 employees, requests that employees contribute \$1 to a charity fund or a company party fund each time they choose to dress casually.

The 20,000 employees at the Langley, Virginia, headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are now encouraged to dress casually every Friday. According to the CIA, a healthy percentage of employees have been loosening their dark, conservative ties and taking advantage of the new perk for months now. The program was instituted on a trial basis last summer but was so successful that management decided to make casual Fridays a permanent perk. According to CIA spokesman David Christian (as cited in Levi Strauss & Co., 1995), the move to casual Fridays has definitely boosted morale. He stated that many people have remarked how much they love the new freedom. The program has been a great success. Now outfitted in

jeans and blazers, CIA agents may find they are blending into the crowds much more easily than ever before.

Employees at American Express Travelers Cheque Operations Center in Salt Lake City have developed a clear and effective approach to casual dress. A company team, formed to explore different casual business wear policies, decided to give employees responsibility for their own casual business wear choices every day of the week. When getting dressed for work, employees are requested to ask themselves the following questions:

“If I have a client meeting, am I dressed appropriately?”

“If I have a staff meeting, am I dressed professionally?”

Managers report that the empowerment inherent in this approach has been a remarkable success. Another bonus—employees report that as a result of the new dress policy, they work more comfortably with management (Levi Strauss & Co., 1995). A Deloitte Human Resources assistant (as cited in Levi Strauss & Co., 1995) stated that the dress policy is an added benefit and a morale booster. She feels that the more comfortable employees are, the more productive they will be. Marketing experts call it a megatrend in corporate dressing.

### **Casual Business Wear Guidelines for Students**

The following suggestions from the Levi Strauss & Co. (1995) provide a handy guide for business communication students to follow once employed.

1. Aim for a classic and understated look when selecting casual business wear for the day. Pick clothing that is comfortable yet communicates a professional attitude. Subtle, quality accessories (belts, jewelry, and scarves) coordinated with an outfit can show attention to important details.
2. Combine some existing business wardrobe with casual attire; for example, try wearing a button-down shirt with khakis and loafers, either with a more colorful tie/scarf or just a sport coat or sweater. Ask, “Am I successfully representing myself and my company?”
3. Casual does not mean sloppy. Clothing should be clean, pressed or wrinkle-free, and without holes or frayed areas. Like suits and tailored clothing, casual business wear lasts longer and looks better with special care.

4. Keep the focus on work quality. Anything worn to the gym, to the beach, or to clean the garage, leave at home. Avoid clothing that is too revealing or tight-fitting. Trendy or “high-fashion” clothing may communicate a whimsical or pretentious attitude that is not suitable for many offices. T-shirts with messages other than the company’s logo are probably not a good idea. Keep clothing colors muted and coordinated to help create a professional appearance.
5. Pay attention to the fit of the clothing. Pants should break just above the shoe, sleeves should reach the base of the hand and just show a bit of the cuff when wearing a jacket, and shirt collars should button comfortably without pinching or leaving gaps. Also, if a tie is worn, its tip should reach just below the bottom of the belt buckle.
6. Shoes matter. Leather shoes are generally preferable, but if athletic shoes are allowed, make sure they are clean, subtle in design, and scuff-free. Leather shoes look best when polished and in good repair. For most offices, open-toed sandals and beach/river thongs are probably not OK.
7. Take the day’s schedule into account when dressing. If a meeting is scheduled with visitors, dress more traditionally or check to see if casual dress might be appropriate. Some men keep a spare jacket and tie in their office for unexpected meetings. Women should take precaution as well.
8. When in doubt, leave it out. Casual clothing should make the employee and coworkers work more comfortably. Check with the manager ahead of time if there are any questions.

Most people can follow guidelines, but some have been known to make poor judgments in dress. So many companies today have established a “dress-down” policy. Most companies suggest that common sense should prevail. For men, appropriate dress would be collared knit shirts and slacks; for women, skirts and blouses or nicely tailored shorts or pants. It appears most companies frown upon jeans, bare midriffs, sweatshirts/sweatsuits, off-the-shoulder blouses/sweaters/dresses, T-shirts, and exercise wear.

### **Guidelines for Business Communication Faculty**

As faculty prepare students in business communication, it is critical that the concept of dress-down days be discussed. Corporate America

is dressing differently now and the trend will continue into the 21st century (Saporito, 1993). Some widely used business communication textbooks (Boone & Kurtz, 1995, Bovée & Thill, 1995, and Locker, 1995) do not cover the concept of "dress-down days." Business communication faculty typically emphasize "dressing for success" for the interview and discuss the importance of clothing as it relates to body language. But, information on dressing down needs to be included in the business communication curriculum. Students should be able to get jobs and keep them. Lecturing, along with current case studies would prove helpful in providing students with the necessary skills to adjust to corporate life.

Corporate culture is discussed in many business communication textbooks. Yet, casual business wear or dressing-down is omitted. Casual Day is becoming a way of life—rather than a special event—at many U.S. companies where younger managers, at-home offices, and corporate restructurings have all taken the bite out of the power suit (George, as cited in Levi Strauss & Co., 1995). It takes time for everyone, including employees, management, and customers, to become accustomed to change. Implementing a casual-dress policy at some previously buttoned-down companies can be a shock to corporate culture.

In order to aid the business communication instructor in presenting a unit on dress-down days, the following suggestions are offered for teaching this subject:

*Nonverbal Communication.* During the unit on nonverbal communication the information on dress-down days could be presented. After the discussion on how clothing acts as a nonverbal message, present the trend of casual wear in the workplace.

*Article Reviews.* After the unit has been introduced, have students research articles on dress-down days in corporate America. A written summary and reaction, along with a copy of the article, will reinforce that dressing down is happening in the workplace.

*Resources.* Contact companies like Levi Strauss for free promotion materials. Levi Strauss will provide an entire kit that includes articles, videos, and company policies.

*Group Work.* After the concept of casual wear has been introduced, break students into groups and have them develop appropriate casual wear guidelines for men and women in the workplace. Have students

place their suggestions on large poster paper to be hung around the classroom. Discussion on the various items that are included for casual dress can be quite different from group to group. The instructor should develop a list of appropriate casualwear by reviewing current corporate dress policies and developing a composite scheme.

*Interviews.* Assign students to interview current human resource directors on company dress code. This assignment can be varied. In one class, they may just conduct telephone interviews with a pre-defined set of questions. In another class, they may be required to set up a formal interview.

*Employment Unit.* Dressing for the interview is always discussed during the job search. Expand by introducing the concept of casualwear in the workplace. In addition, in looking for questions to ask during an interview, the students might ask about the dress code.

*Case Problems.* Conduct a literature review and develop some case problems related to dressing down in the office. Certain articles offered scenarios that will strike some interesting discussion and debate on casual wear in the workplace.

These suggestions are only a start. They provide the instructor with methods to introduce and instruct on the topic of dressing down in the workplace.

## Conclusions

The concept of "dress-down days" is a part of business in America. Advocates boast that adopting the policy has improved employee communication. Epps (1994), from Saturn Corporation, states the policy improves communication by doing away with symbols that dictate differences between people and bringing the whole organization together. Casual dress in the workplace is gaining widespread acceptance and support by employees throughout the country. The vast majority of those companies that have instituted this policy have found that their employees felt that dressing casually results in a variety of benefits, including comfort, increased camaraderie and better work environment.

The benefits of dressing casually are many. Dressing casually can lead to better attitudes about work, greater spontaneity, and improved relations among employees. Moreover, benefits such as these can be had with no added expense to the company.

Faculty should stress the importance of good taste and common sense when instructing students about dressing for the workplace. When students become employees, they should use common business sense when dressing down on Fridays or other days. Instructors should encourage them to decide what is appropriate dress for different occasions.

People, employees, and companies have every reason to be "up" on dressing down. Managers should look more at professionalism, performance, and productivity as personal attributes that really matter in the workplace (Brown, 1994). An employee should be able to come off as a professional without having to dress like one. The business communication curriculum should be "dressed up" by including instruction on "dressing down."

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