
Dress Stress — The Casual Crisis

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Wouldn't you think that memos to legal staff about rules of dress would be sensitively written and happily received? Well, last year in Washington D.C., the Office of the Special Counsel (OSC)—whose mandate is to protect its employees—circulated “business-casual” do's and don'ts in its employee newsletter. As reported in the *Washington Post*, this published dress code was “dressed down in furor”.

In fact, many OSC employers thought the suggestions were really explicit directives, and found them sexist and insulting.

Do we risk heated dress code conflicts in Ontario? After all, Premier McGuinty announced that government air conditioners will be set to 26°C in order to help save energy costs? Or perhaps warmer offices make summer dress codes more acceptable.

Is summer dress for lawyers the same for work in courtrooms, corporate boardrooms, or in their own office with no client appointments? Likely not.

Here we'll lay out the edgy limits of summer casual. We hope you can live within the laws of summer dress yet still pick and choose what suits your heat intolerance and commitment to a reasonable legal image. Remember, also, that the success of what you wear—winter or summer—depends also on style, proportions, colour, fabric, and patterns.

But first, here are the top two laws of dress—for lawyers of all seasons:

Abide by the grammar of dress. We are all subject to appearance discrimination. In body language, we say that one gesture equals one word in a sentence. It is a cluster of gestures that communicates the whole message. In dress, one piece of clothing equals one word in a sentence. It is all of the pieces combined that communicate the whole message. When dressing for an event, think about where you are going, who you will be seeing and what message you wish to convey.

Dress for the job you want, not the job you have. Those who wish to promote you do not have the ability to envision the makeover you will commit to—the new you—if you get to the next level up. They surely wouldn't say: "When Sherry gets the promotion, she will dress more appropriately and of course, she will be better groomed. As far as Alex is concerned, he will no longer wear ties with funnies and pants with hanger creases at the knees."

Summer Rules of Dress for Women

1. *Dress in layers.* The difference in temperature between your office and outside can sometimes be separated by many shivers.
2. *Tops:* no tanking t-shirts or mid-drift tops. No see through or sleeveless blouse.
3. *The short on mini-skirt:* a mini-skirt is 8 inches above the knees. In the office – don't even think about it. Keep your skirt lower than 4 inches above the knees and watch your body posture when sitting and bending.
4. *Pants:* capris, skorts and shorts are not considered office wear. And no flip-flops allowed—save them for the beach.
5. *Shoes and hose:* Footwear that looks like it belongs to the gym should stay in the gym. Every summer there is a debate about hose and sandals. If your goal is to look professional, even though you have a great tan and your toes are well pedicured, wearing sandals never looks as professional as wearing a sling-back or even a peek-a-boo toe shoe. Having said that when wearing these shoes, it is more comfortable to wear hose and I suggest sheer stay-ups instead of the full pantyhose. In court, hose always—every day.

Summer Rules of Dress for Men

1. *Shirts:* There is no such thing as a short-sleeved business shirt. It is always best to wear a long sleeve cotton shirt and roll up your sleeves if it gets too hot. You should not wear a short sleeve top unless it is a knit polo style shirt. Make sure you are not showing any chest hair. Jackets: made from materials that are light and cool.
2. *Ties:* The tie has always been a sign of distinction. If you feel overdressed at a particular appointment,

just loosen it. There are many summerish ties. They are lighter weight and come in more pastel shades.

3. *Bottoms:* Your pants fabric can be cool wool or cotton. But please, no cargo pants or draw string waists under any circumstances.
4. *Suits:* I still think that top of the list for all men should be a linen suit. There is a breezy elegance about it. A linen suit is stylish and you can easily dress it up or down.
5. *Shoes and socks:* Birkenstocks or any sandals are definite don'ts and wearing socks with them will only make matters worse. Boat shoes without socks are not allowed either.

For both men and women, with today's air-conditioned homes, cars and offices, there's often a need to have a lightweight shawl or jacket to stave off cold air shivers. It is also nice to be able to go straight from work to an outdoor patio and have a long cocktail and supper as the August evenings cool quickly.

Did you ask, "Can't I be me, despite these rules of dress?" Understand just as you represent, and even construct, your client's image, who you are is often decisively telegraphed by your dress image. Sure you gotta be you, and you *can* be you. Just choose your style among the correct summery choices available everywhere.

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