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Office attire dos and don'ts

By Tara Weiss, Forbes.com

As the temperature rises each spring, so do hemlines. And as they rise, necklines plunge. Many uncomfortable conversations can be avoided by asking a simple question: Do I want my boss gazing at my cleavage? Even worse, do you want a view of your boss' upper thigh?

Probably not. But too many employees don't consider this, and the result is unfortunate. Aside from becoming the office joke, these scantily clad employees undermine themselves professionally and force their manager into the uncomfortable position of addressing their inappropriate attire.

"Cleavage is the worst," says Ann Demarais, co-author of *First Impressions: What You Don't Know About How Others See You*. "It draws attention to your breasts, and in the workplace, that's not what you want attention for."



Exposing cleavage draws attention to your breasts, and in the workplace, that's not what you want attention for. (Clipart)

In Pictures: What Not To Wear

Cleavage and short skirts aren't the only culprits. Once warm spring days hit, many employees forget about their professional wardrobe and opt for T-shirts and other clothes reminiscent of beach wear. Men shouldn't wear sandals and T-shirts, and women should never wear flip-flops. While each profession calls for different wardrobes, everyone interacting with clients must maintain a certain level of professionalism--and that includes clothing. If you're in doubt, look to the senior level employees at the company and emulate their standards.

Last summer, Demarais worked with an advertising firm and, on her first day there, was greeted by an administrative assistant wearing flip-flops. "It was shocking," she says. "I felt like we should be at the beach. It's noisy too. Flop, flop, flop. It's unnecessary and undermines her professionalism."

Debi Collins had the icky task of addressing this with a young hire on her sales team. The female employee dressed professionally for the job interview, but once she started work, her necklines crept lower and lower. "It was very distracting to people in the office," says Collins, owner of Atlanta-based Team Sales Effectiveness, a consulting firm that specializes in training salespeople.

Collins saw a larger problem, though. "I was worried she thought cleavage would get her sales," she says. Collins approached the situation as a coaching opportunity. She opened the discussion by asking her what clients' criteria are in their decision-making process. The young staffer's answers, credibility and trust, were accurate.

Next, Collins said, "When you go in to see customers and show cleavage, do you notice the customer looking in the wrong direction?" She said yes.

"So I asked if that's what she felt she needed to do to get the sale," says Collins. "She said no. I told her, 'I know you're intelligent and will make great inroads in the industry. But this attire isn't appropriate in the office or when you're seeing clients.' "

From there, they discussed affordable retailers to purchase more professional ensembles. When confronted, many people say they can't afford to buy clothes. In those cases, Collins directs staffers to hit discount stores that sell professional attire. She recommended Filene's Basement to the young saleswoman, for instance.

Each generation makes this common mistake, but the youngest employees tend to be the worst offenders. "It's comfort at all costs, especially with the new hires," says Gretchen Neels, owner of the Boston-based etiquette and communication consulting firm Neels & Company. "The mentality is, 'I'm comfortable and doing my work, so leave me alone. What does what I wear have to do with the work I produce?'"

A lot, actually. Clients don't take them seriously and managers question their judgment--a substantial factor in gaining responsibility at the office.

Employers can preempt poor wardrobe choices by having HR issue guidelines to warn weather dress each spring. One company that Collins worked with even held an in-house fashion show displaying appropriate and inappropriate ensembles.

Don't let inappropriate dress go on for too long. If one person starts coming to work in clothing more appropriate for the beach, it'll likely spread to the rest of the staff. Many managers worry that broaching this topic will get them in trouble with sexual harassment laws. Avoid that by having someone of the same gender discuss wardrobe choices with the offending staffer. Also, bring someone from HR into the conversation. Preface the discussion with kind words about the good work the staffer is doing.

If you're in doubt about an outfit ask yourself this: Do I feel comfortable attracting attention to this body part? If not, find something else to wear.

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