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-Bjorn Nasett, Fashion Consultant

DRESS FOR Success

Have We Gone Too Far With Business Casual?

By Lisa Schmelz

Todd Straub is the human resources manager for American Family Insurance's corporate office in Madison. He's been with the company for 23 years and commands respect from the firm's nearly 1,000 employees.

Yet every time he visits his mother, she greets him with the same question.

"I'm from Milwaukee," says Straub, "and when I go home, my mom always asks 'Why don't you ever dress up anymore?'"

Good question, Mrs. Straub. But don't blame your son for his dialed-down duds, which at the time of this interview were neatly pressed Banana Republic khakis, a deep blue button-down shirt, a pull-over taupe sweater and brown lace-up Allen Edmonds oxfords.

It seems a funny thing happened on the way to the 21st century. Men threw off their ties, women discarded their nylons, and in droves proletariats donated their robotic business suits to Goodwill. Then, dressed in garb June Cleaver wouldn't wear to do the vacuuming, we went to work. If mock black turtlenecks and jeans were good enough for Steve Jobs, why did the rest of us have to keep up appearances?

Define casual

But like beauty, business casual is in the eye of the beholder and it's a look some of us struggle mightily with.

Bjorn Nasett is a Milwaukee-based cosmetologist, wardrobe stylist and fashion writer. Helping people look good has been his job for 30 years, and he's frequently horrified by what he sees in many Wisconsin offices.

"I think we've taken the word 'casual' to have a million connotations," he says. "That's the problem with it. Clothing needs to denote what you bring to the table. It still makes sense, but people reject it."



Todd Straub and his American Family Insurance colleagues enjoy a business casual culture.

Photo by Shanna Wolf



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Todd Straub, the human resources manager at American Family Insurance in Madison has to counsel employees on appropriate office attire. Here Straub and his coworkers provide a glimpse of the tasteful yet comfortable apparel that's typical of their 1,000-employee workforce.

What does Nasett make of the late Jobs' wardrobe?

"Terrible," he says with a shudder. "What was he thinking?"

That's a question Straub, 48, asks when he's asked to counsel an employee whose wardrobe choices necessitate an immediate "What Not to Wear" intervention. While American Family Insurance has a stated business casual dress code and allows jeans on Fridays, Straub says business casual isn't code for anything goes and says he's "seen some pretty crazy things."

Women with skirts way too short and cleavage way too long, men he simply describes as "slovenly," young men in baggy drawers with boxers exposed, and members of both genders in love with the shredded Abercrombie look have all crossed his path. But Straub isn't blaming business casual for the failings of what he calls a few.

"The same people who appear slovenly or over-the-line in business casual probably didn't, and wouldn't, look so hot in suits either," he says.

A gentle reminder

Last spring, Michelle West, a 26-year-old senior marketing and communications representative for Milwaukee-based Johnson Controls, organized a fashion show to help prevent workplace wardrobe malfunctions often associated with warmer weather.

The models were employees and, no, they were not letting June bust out all over. This was a showcase of fashion do's — not don'ts.

"We wanted to give a refresher on the dress code policy," recalls West, "This was a lighthearted way to do that."

Ever the model employee herself in black slacks, a patterned blouse in varying hues of brown, a lightweight cream cardigan and closed-toe wedges, West

explains Johnson Controls' dress code leans more toward business than casual.

Here, you will not find jeans any day of the week, shorts are always a no-no, spaghetti is better reheated in the cafeteria microwave than served as a shirt strap, and flip-flops, well, let's not even go there.

Does the twentysomething West feel her sense of style is stifled at Johnson Controls? Not at all.

"There are Gen X and Yers who like to dress up," she says, adding she'll gladly don a suit when her day calls for one.

Times and styles change

Melanie Holmes, 61, and a Manpower-Group vice president in Milwaukee, has left suits — once the material symbol of a woman's ascent on the corporate ladder — behind. Manpower, she says, is a business casual workplace, where employees are expected to dress for their day. For her, sleeveless shift dresses

with jackets have become the answer to the suits she wore early in her career.

“In the ‘80s,” says Holmes, “women wore suits and ties, and the ties were wonderful. I just loved them. There’s two in particular that I had that I’m thinking about right now. They were bright colored and wonderful.”

Straub isn’t missing the noose that used to hang around his neck.

“When we went to business casual,” says Straub. “I couldn’t wait to get rid of them. I haven’t worn one since.”

Business casual doesn’t work in Judge Eugene Gasiorkiewicz’s Racine County courtroom. Shortly after taking the bench last year, the circuit court judge restored fashion order in the court. Male and female lawyers were expected to not just show up but suit up.

For men that meant a jacket and tie. For women, it meant “L.A. Law” wear and modest cleavage. His Honor reports that he’s “not had to invoke” the cleavage rule yet, but male lawyers who thought he was kidding about jackets and ties have been sent into the halls of justice begging for loaners.

Also noticeably absent in this courtroom are disposable beverage containers. Unwilling to sentence serious felons when counsel tables are cluttered with gas station Styrofoam coffee cups, he says he forked out \$300 of his own money for reusable travel mugs. Emblazoned with the scales of justice, they’ve made legal blogs around the globe.

Sporting French cufflinks, Gasiorkiewicz says his Catholic school upbringing may be responsible for his decorum demands. But this judge of the crimes of man and of fashion makes no apologies.

“This is business, ladies and gentlemen,” he says. “This is not an informal type of activity.” 🍷

Lisa Schmelz is a freelance writer based in Delavan.

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