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## Casual to spiffy also offers a way to fit in

By Susan Weiner, Globe Correspondent, 1/23/05

An old friend I'll call "John" cleared his throat before saying softly, "You've got to dress like one of them." He pointed his well-tailored, pinstriped arm to the suit-wearing employees walking rapidly past the conference room of a financial firm.

I looked down at my bulky red overblouse punctuated with big black buttons. It puddled over the top of black pants made of sweatshirt material. I felt my cheeks redden. I looked like a sloppy woman in the early stages of pregnancy.

However, I thought that John should have known that I wouldn't dress this way once I started my new job at the big company. I was enjoying one of my last days of freedom between jobs.

John continued. "I buy all of my suits at Filene's Basement. I get a designer suit for just \$300." Dressing properly, he said, is the price of admission to the world of big corporations.

I'd come to John for advice on my job transition. I was moving from a financial publishing company where I worked among casually dressed employees in their twenties, to a stuffy, large firm where it seemed even the secretaries dressed better than me. John's advice was right on, but I couldn't help feeling miffed. His comment summoned up unhappy memories of being judged on my exterior appearance, and flunking.

I grew up in a family that was very clothes-conscious. Until I graduated from college, whenever I bought new clothes, my mother had veto power at the store. Then, my clothes would have to pass muster in a "fashion show" for my father. I had to try everything on and prance in front of him like a runway model. I wearied of being told what to wear.

But my new job was appealing enough that I was willing to don corporate dress. When my husband, Allan, came to visit me during my first week at work, I wore a navy suit, white blouse, pumps, and ladylike, small pearl earrings. I went through the motions of dressing corporate, even though I felt I didn't pull it off as well as my colleagues.

Allan, on the other hand, wore casual clothes - jeans, polo shirt, and scuffed leather shoes. He looked so out of place when he walked the halls of my new company that observers probably assumed he was a new mailroom employee - or a wealthy client who could break the dress code.

I introduced Allan to Mark, my well-groomed boss of distinguished gray hair complementing a much younger face. They chatted amicably - or so I thought - for a few minutes. Then the three of us said goodbyes. Allan and I adjourned to my spacious cubicle with a large window overlooking a side street in the Financial District.



Illustration/Anthony Schultz

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"He was looking at my shoes, wasn't he?" said Allan. "He couldn't stop looking at my shoes."

"What do you mean?"

"You saw his shoes, didn't you? They're so shiny I could see my face in them," he said. "Susan, he was looking at my shoes and looking down on me because they weren't perfectly polished. I wonder if he gets them polished at the train station every week."

Maybe men become fascinated with shoe polish because they're denied women's scope for wearing varied colors. Anyway, the shoe-polishing thing is another aspect of the corporate dress code that I find difficult to embrace.

On the other hand, I see the virtues of dress as camouflage, as a means of fitting in. I'm prone to feeling like an outsider in any group. When I wear a smartly tailored blue suit, I can pretend I belong in corporate America. If I slap on some makeup, then I get the added benefit of feeling as if my colleagues can't see my insecurities.

Some folks - like Allan, who worked in a white-shirt bank for more than a dozen years - can't wait to shed the formality. Feeling rebellious one year, he organized a pink tie day in his department. I think pink shirts would have made more of a statement.

Another time, one of the bank officers' meetings fell on a day when Allan was feeling defiant. He shuffled into the large auditorium as just another face in the drably suited mob. But when the chairman called for questions, he stood up. "Mr. chairman, would we have a casual Friday here at the bank?" he asked. I imagine members of the audience gasping, or at least holding their breath. His boss probably thought, "There goes Allan again."

I heard secondhand of a similar incident at the big company when we merged with a competitor that had long enjoyed casual summers in addition to casual Fridays. "I can't believe that Fred asked about casual Fridays at the town meeting with the chairman," exclaimed one of my new colleagues from the acquired company. "I felt so embarrassed," he said. And the chairman apparently was not amused.

My company's ban on slacks fell during a harsh winter and the need to mollify merged employees led first to casual Fridays and next to casual summers. But that was "business casual" - no jeans, tank tops, T-shirts or sneakers allowed - and only at the discretion of the department. And not recommended on days when employees would meet with clients.

As a communications coordinator for my department, I forwarded the e-mail memos announcing the dress code changes. I can't remember any memos received more joyously.

But business casual brought its own set of issues. Clearly khakis and polo shirts fit the bill.

The hordes of golfers in my department gained a new venue for their weekend wardrobe. But what about slobs like me who lounged in jeans, faded T-shirts from college, and old sneakers? I had to buy a new wardrobe for the space between suits and jeans.

Traditional cleavage of the neckline was verboten in this environment, but toe cleavage was open to debate. Could I wear open-toed sandals? I thought back to my three-year stint in Tokyo. There, a woman's heel was the sexiest part of her foot. Women deliberately bought slip-on shoes one size too small, so their heels would fall provocatively over the back.

The software firm where my husband works pushed the dress code even further. When he first arrived there, men could wear sandals and shorts. During Allan's first few weeks at work, I learned what an ear-to-ear grin really looks like when he told me, "I'm ready for work" and presented himself wearing a plaid short-sleeved shirt, rumpled khaki shorts, and leather sandals.

But, alas, his company was bought out by a corporate giant and shorts, among other things, were ruled out. When Allan read the list of forbidden garments, he had only one question: "Can I wear a skirt? I don't see it on the list."

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