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Don't let 'business casual' debate heat up

For many companies, warmer weather and the more relaxed vibe of summer mean a wardrobe switch to “business casual.”

But the definition of this attire category can be a source of friction for both employers and employees that could prompt sticky situations.

Outlining clear expectations is important from the get-go, said Theresa Valade, CEO of Success Trek, a business consulting and coaching company with offices in Valparaiso and Chicago.

“A dress code can help avoid uncomfortable situations where an employee may not be dressing in a way that best represents them or the company,” she said. “One thing about dress codes is that they can quickly become nit-picky, but a general list of expectations allows for a basic understanding among management and employees, so energy and efforts can be directed to more productive activities.

“Once you have a company policy in place, it is part of an effective intake process in which the employee reads and understands the dress code and your organization’s reasoning behind it.”

Desila Rosetti, past president and current member of the Northwest Indiana Chapter of the Society of Human Resource Management, said the culture a company is trying to institute is important.

“In establishing the culture, organizations cannot take the summer off. The key for both culture and dress code is consistency,” she said. “Do not leave it up to your employees to determine what ‘business casual’ means. This definitely means different things to different people.

“I have found that establishing guidelines from the beginning is always the best approach. It won't work for every situation, but it does help.”

Rosetti has helped business owners write policies through Organizational Development Solutions, her training and project management company. It is also a topic that she addresses with students at Calumet College of St. Joseph in Whiting, where she is program director for the school’s masters in management and an undergraduate business course instructor.

“I do general workshops for our students preparing for internships and we spend a great deal of time on this topic as well as networking and business etiquette,” she said.

“Remember, workplace policies are statements from company leaders outlining standards of behavior and limitations. They are used as guidelines ... They will not cover every situation. Some organizations determine that only company ‘logo wear’ with khakis or black pants will be appropriate for ‘casual days.’”

Rosetti said while men can rely on the standby of polos and khakis, women need to be aware of many possible wardrobe mishaps.

“Women need to consider length of the dress, bare arms, sun dresses, open-toed shoes, sandals, tank tops and many other things,” she said.

Mara Post, image consultant and wardrobe coach at Judee’s boutique in LaPorte, said no matter what the dress code, women need to keep “club” wear and revealing clothing out of the office atmosphere.

“As we know in the summertime, we tend to wear less clothing because it’s hotter. But in the business world, the rule of thumb is a skirt should be no shorter than one inch above the knee,” she said. “Studies have shown that people look at exposed skin when someone walks into a room and you want that to be your face. You need to keep it professional and not give the wrong impression.”

Post said dress capris and cap sleeve blouses are good choices for women. If an employee has crossed the appropriate wardrobe line, employers should discuss the issue right away, Rosetti said.

“Managers need to address this as they would any other workplace rule,” she said.

“If an employee pushes the boundaries of company policy, the written dress code provides an objective basis for the conversation with the employee,” Valade added. “If your company doesn’t have such a policy, there is an increased risk of an employee feeling singled out for their own personal appearance.”