

Business Advice

Rite of spring: Updating dress code

Ah, spring! Flowers sprout, the air fills with the sweet aroma of orchard blossoms and employees shed their winter clothes. Thoughts turn to golf, gardening and ... updating the dress code.

The dress code? With warmer weather comes the temptation of some to appear at the workplace in, shall we say, less than appropriate attire. This inevitably raises questions: What does the dress code say? Do we have a policy that addresses this? What does “business casual” really mean? Those who face the task of updating — or creating — a dress code, should consider the following:

The first rule of a dress code is to keep it simple. Clearly written guidelines that are distributed and consistently enforced is a good start. Communicate the policy. Explain the business-related reasons for the specifics of the policy. Ensure that employees understand the rationale behind restrictions. Handbooks and memos offer tools to alert and update employees about the dress code and any changes that could occur. The dress code should be communicated to potential new employees as well. In addition to the policy itself, clearly communicate the discipline for violations. Apply all discipline consistently. These are critical aspects of making a dress code effective.

While creating or updating a dress code, address who has the final say in what is deemed appropriate and what is not. If employees come to work in what’s considered “inappropriate attire,” what happens then? A policy without consequences is not worth writing. Making sure all potential ramifications are known adds credibility.

Be prepared to make reasonable accommodations involving

religion and disabilities. Require employees to be well-groomed in appearance and give examples of unacceptable or inappropriate clothing. Are there safety issues to consider? If so, the dress code should plainly state the specific types of clothing and shoes that are required.

Consider the culture of the business. Do some employees have direct contact with the public or service providers while others never see anyone but co-workers? Do the same rules apply? If so, how will this be perceived? How is the overall image of the company affected by the policy?

The increasing popularity of body art constitutes yet another factor to consider. Safety can be a reason for addressing such items as piercings. As with many personal appearance and grooming standards, employers have latitude to set policies regarding body art and piercings.

Regardless of the size of the company, nature of business or desired outcome, establishing a dress code can be tricky. Consulting your employment lawyer could be necessary.

Much like the changing seasons, fashion trends come and go. This leaves employers with the task of anticipating how to address dress codes.



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