Dress for success

Level: Intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about what we wear to work. In this lesson, students:
1. read what various reports, surveys and experts say about current attitudes to what we wear at work;
2. talk about their own experiences and opinions;
3. create, hold and evaluate a survey about other people's attitudes to dress codes and what to wear at work.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 6/2019.

Warmer #1

In a quick-fire discussion round, students discuss what they understand by each of these expressions and come up with examples of clothing for expressions 2–5. This will help ensure that later when reading and discussing the article everyone knows what the author means when he uses these expressions.

Key (possible answers):
1. **dress code** = *a set of rules about what you should wear in a particular place or at a particular event*
2. **casual dress** = *clothes or shoes suitable for everyday wear, which are not formal, e.g. smart everyday clothes, sandals or shoes with low heels (for women)*
3. **comfort dressing** = *wearing clothes that you feel comfortable in, e.g. jeans and a loose-fitting shirt or blouse*
4. **power dressing** = *a choice of clothes that makes you look confident and in control at work, e.g. expensive-looking suits or dresses, statement accessories, high heeled shoes or smart and polished shoes*
5. **formal business clothing** = *clothes people wear to work to show their position or for meetings and client interaction, e.g. suits and ties for men, or trouser or skirt suits for women,*
often in neutral or single colours (knee-length dresses with a modest neckline may also be considered formal business wear, especially when worn with a smart blazer or jacket).

Warmer #2

In pairs, students ask each other the three questions that the article begins with (*What do you wear at work? How do you decide? Does your workplace have a dress code?*), and compare their answers. Pre-experience learners can talk about their place of study. Hold a very brief class feedback session before moving on to the next task. Do the majority of students work or study in a place that has a dress code?

Key words and expressions

Students match the key words and expressions with the definitions and then find them in the article, reading carefully to see how they are used in context. The words in the task are in the order that they appear in the article.

Key:

1. collaborate	8. determined by
2. outfit	9. attributes
3. tolerant	10. barriers
4. perception	11. ambition
5. enforced	12. attire
6. recruitment perk	13. policy
7. visual cohesion	14. express

Understanding the article

In part a, students read the sentences and cross out the word they do not need.

Then, in part b, ask students to tell you whether any of these trends have become apparent in their profession or place of work.

Key:
1. less
2. more
3. less
4. more
5. more
6. more

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Discussion #1

In small groups, students read and discuss the quotes from the article, some of which give advice and some of which provide an expert's opinion. Giving reasons and examples from their own experience to back up their answers, they should say whether they agree or disagree with the comments and advice.

Discussion #2

In pairs or small groups, students discuss the questions. Hold a short, whole-class feedback session afterwards.

A survey

Parts a–c of this multipart task can be carried out in class. Parts d and e can be done as homework or as a break-out activity in which they talk to other people outside the classroom, and the results, in part f, can be discussed next time you meet as a group.

It is very important that part c is carried out very carefully as the questions need to be written precisely and clearly to provide the students with the answers they need for their results table. That is why they should try them out in class and adapt where necessary before interviewing other people. Obviously, the questions should be adapted very slightly to fit the students' situation, for example 'British' should be removed from the questions – see example given in the task.

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❶ Warmer #1

Quickly discuss what you understand by each of these two-word expressions. For expressions 2–5, give examples of clothing.

1. dress code

2. casual dress

3. comfort dressing

4. power dressing

5. formal business clothing

❷ Warmer #2

The article starts with three questions. Read them and talk about your answers to these questions in pairs.

❸ Key words and expressions

Match the key words and expressions to the definitions below. Find and underline them in the article, and then read the article and note how they are used in context.

visual cohesion	tolerant	recruitment perk	perception
outfit	enforced	collaborate	

1. work with someone to produce something _____

2. a set of clothes that are worn together _____

3. willing to accept someone else's rules and ways of doing things without criticizing them

   _____

4. a particular way of understanding or thinking about something _____

5. ensure that something happens or that rules are obeyed _____

6. a benefit offered to encourage people to join a company _____

7. a situation in which lots of different parts or things look good when they are put together

   _____

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ambition	attire	attributes	barriers
determined by	express	policy	

8. decided or controlled by something in particular _____

9. someone's qualities or features _____

10. things that prevent people from communicating, working together, etc _____

11. the feeling that you very much want to become successful _____

12. the clothes that someone is wearing _____

13. a rule, or set of rules or actions, agreed on by a business or other group

_____

14. give information about how you are feeling, or show something about yourself

_____

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Dress for success?

by Julian Earwaker

The way people dress in the workplace has become more relaxed in recent years. Often there is no dress code anymore. But does that match customers' and clients' expectations? And what does your choice of clothing say about you and your company? JULIAN EARWAKER reports.

1 What do you wear at work? How do you decide? Does your workplace have a dress code? Clothing really matters — to organizations as well as to individual workers — and it can have a deep psychological effect. "What we wear has a real impact on how we feel about ourselves," says Arianna Huffington, founder and CEO of *ThriveGlobal.com*. "And that, in turn," she adds, "influences our work — our confidence, creativity, ability to focus and collaborate." Her research shows that 80 per cent of employees have increasingly experienced casual dress codes at work.

2 Nevertheless, according to *TotalJobs.com*, the average female worker still spends five months of her life thinking about what to wear to work. No surprise, perhaps, since more than a quarter of women have had to deal with unwanted comments about their appearance at work, and one in ten has been sent home to change as a result of their outfit choice. Meanwhile, 88 per cent of men say their work dress code causes them no concerns.

3 What we wear at work is subject to generational differences, too. *CEO Today* reports that the younger generation are much less tolerant of dress codes — and that a clear majority of young jobseekers would "have a negative perception of any company that enforced a dress code". According to a study by outdoor clothing company Stormline, allowing employees to wear what they want can make them happier and more productive.

4 With the majority of employees, especially millennials, favouring more casual clothing, many employers are offering casual dress as a recruitment perk. Even formal professions such as law and accountancy are becoming more relaxed. "This is particularly true of brands that try to capture the young adult and student markets — people who are most likely to experiment with their appearance and fashion sense," say HR experts *BrightHR.com*.

5 Why do dress codes matter? "An employer's standard for dress codes creates a standard for visual cohesion," writes Olivia Durden at *SmallBusiness.Chron.com*. "This allows employees to feel part of a group and lends itself to a feeling of all working toward one purpose."

6 The formality of the workplace is often determined by the extent of direct customer interaction and client expectations, says HR consultant Susan M. Heathfield at *TheBalanceCareers.com*. "In workplaces where some employees interact with customers or clients and others do not, an organization may choose to have two dress codes," she notes.

7 Comfort dressing triumphs over power dressing, says Professor Karen Pine of Hertfordshire University, commenting on research by *Travelodge.co.uk*. Casual dress, she explains, "enables workers to be independent, and showcase their personality and attributes by how they dress rather than the position they hold. This leads to stronger bonds between co-workers and removes barriers, enabling everyone to get on with their jobs."

8 Role models for women include the fashion designer Donna Karan and Whitney Wolfe, founder of dating app Bumble. For men, Richard Branson, Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs have been key in the move towards informal dress codes.

9 Fashion psychologist Professor Carolyn Mair says that casual dress can flatten out hierarchies if leaders and staff all wear similar styles of clothing. Alternatively, wearing formal business clothing can represent ambition. "The power of belief is strong," she told *The Daily Mail*, "so if the wearer believes that the suit will make them appear more competent and professional, they may well behave in that way."

10 Recruitment consultants *MichaelPage.co.uk* have a number of tips for potential employees. "You spend more time in work gear than in casual attire — budget accordingly!" says legal managing director David Forsdyke. Meanwhile, Ben Lyons, operating director in logistics, suggests looking upwards. "Dress for the job you want to be doing! Look at the senior people in your company; how do they dress and present themselves?" Still not sure about your organization's

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dress code? At *Forbes.com*, HR expert Liz Ryan reminds readers of the need to communicate policy clearly, to involve the whole workforce — and to encourage conversation. "One of the signs of a healthy workplace," says Ryan, "is that people are always discussing and debating questions like 'What's OK to wear to work around here?'"

Arianna Huffington agrees. "The workplace is changing," she says. "And more and more workplaces are realizing the value of allowing employees to express themselves through what they wear."

JULIAN EARWAKER is a freelance journalist, prison writer-in-residence and book author.

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4. Understanding the article

a. Choose the best word to complete each statement. Cross out the word you do not need.

1. Young people are *more / less* likely to apply for a job at a company with a dress code.

2. Employees who have a lot of contact with customers are *more / less* likely to wear formal business attire.

3. Men are *more / less* likely than women to spend a lot of time carefully thinking about what to wear to work.

4. Older employees are *more / less* likely than younger employees to be tolerant of a company's dress code.

5. People who work in a company that has a relaxed attitude on how staff dress are likely to feel *more / less* equal to their co-workers.

6. Traditionally formal professions are becoming *more / less* relaxed about how employees dress at work.

b. Are any of these trends noticeable in your profession or place of work?

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5 **Discussion #1**

Discuss these quotes and advice from the article, and say whether you agree with them or not. Give reasons for your answers.

What we wear has a real impact on how we feel about ourselves.

A dress code allows employees to feel part of the group.

Casual dress […] leads to stronger bonds between co-workers and removes barriers.

… if the wearer believes that the suit will make them appear more competent and professional, they may well may behave in that way.

You spend more time in work gear than in casual attire – budget accordingly!

Dress for the job you want to be doing!

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6 **Discussion #2**

Discuss these questions.

- Should everyone be allowed to wear shorts and flip-flops to work if they want to when the temperatures go above 30°c?

- In your place of work, who has more freedom to choose what they wear to work: male or female employees?

- Can you think of any reasons why your company might need to implement a strict dress code?

- Are there any reasons why your company's dress code is no longer relevant and should be relaxed?

- If there is no official dress code policy, who (if anybody) in your department or place of work sets the standard for what employees wear to work?

- Are there any days or particular occasions at work when you might need to wear formal business clothes? Conversely, are there any days or occasions when you feel able to wear comfortable casual clothes?

7 **A survey**

a. **Read the information in the table. You are going to write a survey using this information to find out whether the people you interview answer the questions in a similar way.**

b. **Write ten questions for your survey based on the information in the table. For example, in order to find out whether your respondents give similar answers to the first statistic, you will need to write a clear question for your survey such as:** *Does your workplace have a dress code?*

c. **After you have written your ten questions, test them out on your partner. Do your questions enable you to gather the information you need? If not, rewrite or adapt your questions. Make sure you are happy with your survey questions before you start interviewing other people!**

d. **Interview ten people and make clear notes of their answers.**

e. **Use your ten respondents' answers to produce your own table of survey answers.**

f. **Compare the results of your surveys in class.**

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A QUESTION OF STYLE

50%	of British workplaces have a dress code
76%	of these organizations have a casual dress policy
69%	of workers feel more comfortable dressing casually for work
22%	believe that dressing casually allows them to express their personality
43%	believe that suits are no longer appropriate as office clothing
1 in 10	British workers wears a suit to work
42%	think that a tie is out of date for workplace fashion
60%	of workers believe that a casual dress code encourages a more relaxed office environment and friendlier colleagues
26%	say that a casual dress code reduces the pressure of having to look good all the time
Over 50%	of workers say that a casual dress code is more affordable and takes less care