

Dressing up for business success

Dress codes can be difficult instruments to both implement and enforce at the office.

Most banks have an employee handbook or a policies and procedures manual to provide guidance to employees. But it's not uncommon for the manual to leave some questions unanswered — for both employees and their supervisors — when the topic is proper dress on the job. Clearly, preparing and implementing dress code policies appropriate for the banking industry is a challenge. And, our tendency to dress more casually during the heat and humidity of our Oklahoma summers can make a difficult policy even harder to administer.

It may be surprising to know that, as employers, we have flexibility when establishing a dress code policy. However, it's also important that a highly restrictive dress code, which is not well justified by the business need, can negatively affect employee morale.

In general, employment discrimination laws do not limit your ability to establish a dress code. The exception is that discrimination laws do apply when the dress is related to an employee's religious preference. And, it's important to note that some comments made to an employee about appearance or dress may be construed as sexual harassment, which is prohibited by discrimination laws. If you have a dress code, it must apply to all employees and not a particular group of employees, such as women or minorities.

When preparing a dress code policy, employers have a wide range of choices. Many employers will implement a policy that is broad, such as, "Employees are asked to dress in a professional manner, and use common sense when choosing attire for work." However, others may want to develop a more restrictive dress code, which defines what can and cannot be worn to the work environment. Others have a dress code that is more restrictive until the summer months, when more casual attire is appropriate. Still others choose a dress code for most days, with special days on which employees may wear jeans or special shirts. Depending on the size and structure of the organization, some dress codes may vary according to department or branch location.

If you do prepare a dress code policy, the best approach is to restrict dress and appearance in ways that you can justify for legitimate business reasons. Even though it's difficult, it's important that we don't inject our own values or opinions into this policy — if you can't explain the business reason for the dress code, then it may not be appropriate for your policy.

Here are some key points for developing a dress code policy:

- Describe the attire that is appropriate for work, as well as the attire that is not appropriate. This portion of the policy can be as detailed as you prefer. Many policies are specific about details of clothing that is appropriate. If you have different requirements for Fridays or "casual days," you may want to include a list of appropriate and inappropriate attire for those days.
- Some policies are very detailed and may state length of skirts, the types of shoes to be worn and whether stockings for ladies are to be worn. Many policies will state that "logo" attire is not acceptable, along with T-shirts, jeans, etc.
- Don't forget about shoes — in some cases, the type of shoe worn can be a safety hazard. Tellers wearing flip-flops can certainly experience serious injury if they drop a bag of pennies on their feet.
- Some policies include the highly sensitive discussion



Gayla R. Sherry

PRESIDENT/
GAYLA R. SHERRY
ASSOCIATES, INC.

of personal hygiene, and encourage employees to not wear strong perfume or cologne out of respect for co-workers and customers who may have allergies to perfume. Along with this, some policies include a discussion of appropriate jewelry to be worn.

It's very important, as with any HR policy, that you outline the consequences of not complying with the dress code. It's common practice to send an employee, who is dressed inappropriately, back to his or her residence to change clothes. If so, is the employee paid during this time, or is the time away charged against vacation or other paid time off leave? And, if the employee continues to violate the policy, what are the steps for progressive discipline? Is an employee who repeatedly fails to comply with the policy subject to termination?

As mentioned earlier, an overly restrictive or inequitably administered dress code policy can cause low morale among employees. Here are some suggestions for gaining employee support of a dress code policy:

- Accept the reality that some employees will question your dress code.
- Be prepared to be challenged! Always be prepared to explain the business case for the dress code requirement, such as safety. The phrase, "our customers don't like that type of dress," will not likely solicit support.
- Be prepared to provide justification and explanations for the policy, based on business reasons. Employees tend to support a policy once they understand the rationale, even though they may not fully agree with the policy.
- Be clear about your policy.

Regardless of the level of detail for your dress code, be clear and descriptive. Avoid being overly general or vague by making statements such as "employees should avoid wearing the latest fashions or fads." Again, without substantiating a business case for dress requirements, employees may not support the policy.

Be consistent

Consistent enforcement of all HR-related policies is important, but it is especially important when enforcing a dress code policy. The reality is that some of us appear to be dressed suitably, while others of us wearing the same type of clothing item do not appear to be dressed as suitably. If, for example, your dress code prohibits ladies from wearing Capri pants, then make sure no one is allowed to wear them.

Avoid imposing your own values or tastes into the policy. It is human nature to expect others to have similar values and tastes, but that is not always the case, especially with regard to tastes in appearance and dress. The dress code policy is about appropriate attire for the business atmosphere, not about whether we would necessarily choose the same attire. This is a difficult line to walk, but continually asking, "What is the business reason for this dress or appearance requirement?" will help keep our tastes and values in check.

Developing and administering a dress code is one of the most challenging aspects of human resources management in today's banking environment. By realizing the significance of the policy for employees and its relationship to good employee relations and morale, we can develop an appropriate policy to present our best appearance to our customers.

Gayla R. Sherry, SPHR, CMC, is President, Gayla R. Sherry Associates, Inc., which is an Oklahoma City based consulting firm specializing in human resources consulting, training, workplace conflict resolution and workplace mediation. She can be reached at 405-755-0597 or grs@grsainc.com. She is on the Web at www.grsainc.com.