# Workplace dress codes loosen as post-pandemic style blends comfort with professionalism



The conversation began innocuously enough, but for Kelvin, it proved a moment of stark realisation regarding workplace attire. An unsolicited query about his rather informal shirt — emblazoned with the cheeky phrase “Who farted?” — prompted a reconsideration of expectations around professional dress. Standing amidst tailored suits within a plush financial centre, he faced the jarring contrast between his relaxed style and the polished appearance of his colleagues. “I was in a rush,” he laments, acknowledging that despite pouring countless hours into a work project, his outfit ultimately overshadowed his efforts.

This incident raises the pressing question of what constitutes appropriate work attire in today’s business landscape, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has irrevocably altered norms around dressing for work. Indeed, the shift towards casualisation is reflected in changes across industries, as both employees and employers grapple with dress codes that now require a balance between comfort and professionalism.

Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, recently addressed this evolving dynamic by simplifying her company's dress code to the succinct directive: “Dress appropriately.” This reflects a broader trend where organisations are moving away from rigid dress codes towards fostering an environment where employees can express authenticity through their attire. Such flexibility fosters engagement and may, indeed, enhance productivity, as evidenced by many businesses adapting to post-pandemic realities. This adaptability acknowledges the confusion that often arises as employees transition back to in-person environments, bringing a mix of current styles back into the workplace.

Fashion trends within corporate settings have also embraced a more relaxed interpretation of business casual. No longer strictly defined by chinos and blazers, the modern smart casual attire allows for jeans and even athleisure elements like sneakers, provided a polished overall look is maintained. This notion is complemented by the suggestion that individuals tailor their wardrobe choices to their schedule and work activities while remaining mindful of traditional formalities during crucial meetings or interviews.

Notably, retailers have responded to this cultural shift by prioritising comfort. Fabrics that allow for mobility — such as cotton, silk, and stretchy textiles — have gained popularity, as employees increasingly seek breathable, relaxed fits that still adhere to a semblance of professionalism. The new mantra seems to endorse both style and substance, forging a dress code that allows personal expression without sacrificing the impression of competence and seriousness.

Some experts suggest that achieving a smart casual aesthetic hinges not only on clothing but also on accessories and footwear, which can elevate a seemingly casual outfit to something appropriate for corporate settings. By recognising that smart casual can encompass diverse styles ranging from blouses and skirts to jumpsuits and tailored co-ordinates, individuals can navigate workplace attire more confidently.

As Kelvin reflects on his dressing mishap, it becomes clear that while he may have felt his expertise should take precedence over his appearance, the realities of business etiquette often tell a different story. Today, as workers return to their offices, the conversation around what to wear is evolving and becoming more inclusive of comfort and personal style. This may ultimately create a more engaged workforce, prepared to dress not only for the job they have but also for the future they wish to build.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 5
2. Paragraph 3
3. Paragraph 4
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 6
6. Paragraph 7
7. Paragraph 7

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/today/voices/appropriate-work-wear-office-dress-rules-casual-attire-5119156> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.womanandhome.com/fashion/smart-casual-outfit-ideas/> - This article provides seven smart casual outfit ideas to help individuals navigate the tricky dress code. It emphasizes the importance of balancing relaxed and polished styles, offering suggestions such as smart casual dress outfits, smart casual jeans outfits, smart casual skirt outfits, smart casual blazer outfits, smart casual blouse outfits, smart casual jumpsuit outfits, and smart casual co-ord outfits. The piece also highlights the significance of accessories and footwear in maintaining a smart casual look.
3. <https://www.axios.com/2022/04/04/gm-mary-barra-two-word-dress-code> - The article discusses General Motors CEO Mary Barra's simplified dress code, which was reduced to the two words 'Dress appropriately.' It explores the confusion employees face regarding acceptable attire as they return to the office post-pandemic, highlighting the shift towards more casual workwear and the benefits of allowing employees to choose appropriate clothing to foster authenticity and engagement.
4. <https://www.randstadusa.com/business/business-insights/future-workplace-trends/dress-codes-decoded-search-new-business-casual/> - This piece examines the evolution of office dress codes as employees return to the office post-pandemic. It notes a shift from traditional business casual attire to more relaxed options, including jeans, casual tops, and sneakers. The article emphasizes the importance of maintaining a polished appearance, even with more casual clothing, and the need for companies to adapt to these changes.
5. <https://www.roberthalf.com/us/en/insights/research/back-to-office-attire-4-tips-to-help-you-dress-for-a-more-flexible-workplace> - The article offers four tips to help individuals dress appropriately in a more flexible workplace. It suggests considering business casual as an extension of the new flexible workplace, keeping one's schedule in mind, following basic guidelines for attire, and dressing more formally for interviews. The piece highlights the importance of adapting to the evolving dress codes in the post-pandemic era.
6. <https://fairygodboss.com/career-topics/3-ways-covid19-has-changed-workwear-forever--and-4-things-that-havent-changed> - This article discusses how COVID-19 has changed workwear, highlighting the rise of 'smart casual' attire, the importance of comfort in business attire, and the persistence of certain traditional elements. It notes that smart casual style falls between dressy and business casual, often pairing semi-dressed down items with more polished pieces. The piece also mentions that comfort has become a priority, with many workers finding productivity benefits in relaxed dress codes.
7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/07/15/office-work-clothes-post-pandemic/> - The article explores how office attire is evolving post-pandemic, with a shift towards more comfortable and relaxed clothing. It discusses the increased demand for natural fibers like silk and cotton, the popularity of T-shirts, and the preference for looser fits and stretchy fabrics. The piece highlights the desire for comfort and flexibility in workwear as employees return to the office.