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## **How Casual is Casual? Time to change: Warmer weather brings relaxed dress codes, within limits.**

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It's that time of year again.

Temperatures are rising, and if your company hasn't already done so, it may soon relax the dress code around the office. Some 42 percent of the 750 corporate benefits executives surveyed last year by the Society for Human Resource Management said their companies allowed casual dress every day, compared with 36 percent in 1998. Fifty-one percent of corporations employing more than 5,000 workers allow casual attire during the five-day work week, the society found.

But how casual is casual is the key question you must ask to avoid being a workplace fashion "don't."

While the precise definition of business casual may vary from company to company, corporate image consultants can easily rattle off a list of fashion offenses in most any corporate environment, including tank tops, flip-flops and ripped jeans.

Any of those items may seem right for summertime fun, and that is how they should be worn: For fun, not business, Atlanta sales consultant Myra McElhaney says.

"One thing that happens in the summer is that people tend to want to dress in summer fashion," McElhaney explains. "The cute capri pants and the halter tops are not acceptable for business in most companies."

Many times, the business casual uniform for men is what McElhaney describes as your basic golf attire - khakis and a golf shirt.

"With men, it seems to be a little bit easier because women have so many more fashion choices. There's more room for error," McElhaney says.

Sleeveless blouses, sandals and bare legs are options in women's attire that are debatable in the workplace, McElhaney says. Again, there is no one standard that covers all industries and all job levels. For her part, "I would never consider myself professionally dresses without hose if I were wearing a dress," McElhaney offers.

McElhaney stresses an important rule of thumb: "The first rule to remember is that business is the first word in 'business casual.' Secondly, it depends on what your industry is, as well as what your job is, as to what is acceptable for you" to wear to work.

Even when it comes to business casual, bankers and folks who work in finance industry, for example, typically have a more restrictive dress code than, say, a dot-com firm. Yet, "for the majority of companies, capri pants and even sleeveless tops are not acceptable," she warns

That's because image is often at the heart of the dressing-down trend, says Lisa Scherrer Dugan, Executive Vice President, The Professional Image.

"Companies feel like some of their clients have gone to business casual," Dugan says, so they, too, dress down "to mirror and match that [client] behavior so that they don't feel overdressed when they work with them."

So, the bottom line to corporate dressing is, casual or otherwise, image and impressions, according to Dugan. "It all goes back to how you want to be perceived," she says.

When it comes to evaluating your competency, Dugan cites what she calls an age-old rule: 67 percent of perceptions about us is accurate, and 55 to 80 percent of what is believed about us is visual, not verbal.

"It is about communication," she says. "What do you want to say about yourself and your business?"

The best place to begin evaluating the fashion statement you're making is to have a quick conversation with yourself before you get dressed, Dugan says. Ask yourself, Who am I going to see today? What do I want to project about myself? What's going to be the best, image-wise?

"It has to be a conscientious decision," Dugan says.

Further, if your company has guidelines for appropriate work attire, consult them.

"A lot of companies do have a formal dress code that will be issued to employees when they're hired," McElhaney says.

And though "many companies have gotten away from that as they move to business casual," McElhaney points out, "several of the clients I have worked with have found a lot of things were being worn [to work] that were not appropriate, so they came back and issued a business casual dress code," McElhaney says.

If you're a manager, and you don't like what you're seeing, it may be time for you to draw up some directions for business casual dressing.

"It's important for companies to give guidelines to their employees," Dugan says. "Some companies do put out some sort of, 'This is what we don't want to see' [lists]. Clearly it's difficult for them to identify this is what you have to wear."

In the absence of written guidance, "A lot of times the way [business casual dress codes] get established in companies is by just word of mouth through the human resources department or management levels," Dugan says.