

A column sponsored by the ABC Business Practices Committee

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THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF BUSINESS ATTIRE

Sam H. DeKay, Editor

The Bank of New York Mellon Corporation and St. John's University

DOI: 10.1177/1080569909340680

MANY BUSINESS COMMUNICATION textbooks offer only a cursory exploration of the topic of business attire. Emphasis is usually placed on appropriate interview wear, and job seekers are frequently admonished to “dress for success” when presenting themselves for the employment interview. Readers are often informed that the successful interviewee will select a conservative suit (dark blue or gray is preferred), and women are advised to keep jewelry to a tasteful minimum. The gist of this advice is that attire must not create an *unfavorable* impression and possibly pollute the verbal communications that comprise the interview’s substantive content.

This column presents five studies which maintain that business attire is not a mere preliminary to serious communication but is itself a form of communication. These articles offer analyses of how clothing conveys meaning in specific workplace environments and suggest that employees must attend closely to the semiotic functions of their attire. The studies reflect a broad variety of research methods: historical, quantitative, anthropological, and ethnographic.

Tom Kiddie presents a historical analysis of the emergence, and possible decline, of business casual clothing in the United States; in addition, he provides advice to students seeking to understand a potential employer’s notion of acceptable attire. Peter Cardon

and Ephraim Okoro document the results of an extensive study, conducted at two universities in the United States, concerning student attitudes toward formal and casual business attire. Their conclusion lists specific recommendations for human resources managers and other corporate executives. Terri Grant and Gaontebale Nodoba explore the powerful political, historical, and cultural influences that shape the understanding of appropriate attire within a specific environment; their study focuses upon the evolution of workplace wardrobes in South Africa. Barbara Burgess-Wilkerson and Jane Boyd Thomas, commencing with an interpretive analysis of the *Ugly Betty* television series, maintain that many “Generation Y” students hold seemingly contradictory attitudes concerning the meaning of attire as, simultaneously, a statement of conformity with corporate culture and also an assertion of individuality. Sabine Tan and Monica Owyong explicitly maintain that attire serves a semiotic function; their study of the clothing associated with male and female television business newscasters provides an example of the manner in which this function operates.

RECENT TRENDS IN BUSINESS CASUAL ATTIRE AND THEIR EFFECTS ON STUDENT JOB SEEKERS

Thomas Kiddie

West Virginia State University

DOI: 10.1177/1080569909340681

WHEN I INTRODUCE the unit on job hunting in my business communication course, I begin by relating my experiences searching for my first “real” job. I point out that the deciding factor for me in accepting a position at Bell Labs, instead of IBM, was Bell Lab’s casual dress code. During my interview in 1980, I saw programmers wearing corduroys, polo shirts and t-shirts, and sneakers with white socks. The only sports jackets and ties that I saw (many matched with corduroys—nary a business suit in sight) presumably belonged to managers. Since the official “uniform” for Bell Labbers matched my college-student wardrobe perfectly, I knew that Bell Labs was the place for me.

When I decided to retire from the former Bell system and return to academia, most businesses were still casual at least one day a

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