

Suitable: Work Couture

Think business before pleasure on casual Friday

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Here's the good news: Today's topic has nothing to do with what you're wearing today, assuming that you're reading this on any day except Friday.

The bad news is not bad per se; it's simply a reality check for those who look forward to the one day each week when they think they have carte blanche to wear whatever they want.

It has come to Suitable's attention that people need a refresher on the meaning of casual Friday.

Especially since warm weather is now within bare arm's reach, let us explore the subtle sartorial nuances that allow you to dress down without abandoning your professional polish.

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For starters, and this is the mistake that most people make, casual Friday is not a preview to what you will be wearing on Saturday and Sunday.

No matter whether you consider yourself a workhorse or worker bee, the office is no place for outdoorsy attire.

Running shoes (which are different from fashion "trainers") are intended for exercise, says Toronto image consultant Wendy Natale. "They give people the leeway to go crazy," she explains, citing sweatshirts and yoga pants as related offences. One exception: "If you're in the gym business, it's completely understandable."

To be sure, nothing about casual Friday is completely black or white (speaking of which, this is as good an opportunity as any to wear colour).

Oakville-based image consultant Angèle Desgagné's rule of thumb is that "business casual" still puts the business before the casual. "It has to be business appropriate," she says.

Men who know to steer clear of golf shirts are otherwise in good shape. As discussed in the previous column, jeans are sanctioned so long as they're not sloppy. Go ahead and leave the tie at home, but keep the other suit components intact and add a pocket square.

Polos are fine, too, but consider topping them with a jacket, or at least keeping a jacket at the office for meetings.

Ms. Desgagné says that jackets (for men and women) will always complete a less formal outfit because they offer a structured silhouette and a collar, which is fail-safe and flattering.

"Often times, sweaters don't have a collar," she says. "And as soon as you take the collar away, you lose a lot of power because a collar has a lot of power."

The primary challenge for women is avoiding clothing that reveals too much. In the summer, skirts tend to get shorter and fabrics get more transparent. This is all well and good until they reach the point of being distracting.

"[Women] take liberties we think we have, but when we look at the business world, it is a man's world – so you have to learn the rules and it's their rules," Ms. Desgagné says. "If a man wouldn't do it, don't do it."

She uses sandals as an example. Men don't typically come to work in a suit and sandals and, therefore, neither should women.

"The more body parts you show, the more you lose your personal power and credibility," she continues. Indeed, it seems there's an inverse relationship between showing skin and being taken seriously.

But if there's anything universally true about dress codes, it's that they don't adhere to a one-size-fits-all approach (CEOs generally set an example for employees and are held to different standards than support staff), and image consultants are the first to admit as much.

Unlike Ms. Desgagné, who is a proponent of stockings, Ms. Natale does not think they need to be worn in the summer. In fact, she says sheer pantyhose can make legs look like sausages, which for her is far worse. (Just make sure hemlines aren't too short.)

She's also okay with exposed arms, primarily because most offices are so over-air-conditioned that most women cover up with cardigans and only take them off when going outside.

Sloppiness is Ms. Natale's biggest pet peeve; she also does not want to see tattoos on full display. She stresses that casual Friday is not a catch-all for casual fabrics. Clothes that look washed out are problematic because they are the opposite of sharp and fresh.

With equal parts luck and wardrobe savvy, the oft-used saying TGIF can apply as much to attire as to office attitude. Save the track suits, swimsuits, heck, even the birthday suits for weekends.

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