

## Work It, Mom! Daily

### It May Be Casual, But It's Still Your OFFICE!

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A decade ago, casual Friday attire was a novelty in most work places. Businesses had specific standards of dress for employees, most of which involved dressing up for the office. But office environments have changed dramatically in the past few years, with the advent of open-plan office spaces and the growth of freelance or contract-based workers. In many places, this more fluid environment is credited with increased productivity and workplace satisfaction. But it can also lead to an office environment that feels more like a college dorm than a place of business.

According to an article in this week's [USA Today](#), business casual guidelines are often unclear, which leaves employees struggling to find appropriate office attire.

Business casual has become a staple of the office, but more companies are trying to enforce rules that set at least a minimum standard of dress, and an increasing number also are enforcing more formal attire — especially at meetings or on days when clients may visit the office. And as summer heats up and fashion trends become even more laid back, employers are wrestling with how to adopt dress-code policies that encourage both productivity and professionalism.

USA Today profiled 24-year-old Jennifer Cohen, who was barred from attending a meeting when her boss decided that her summer wardrobe of Bermuda shorts and sleeveless blouses was not professional enough.

"Each generation seems to have a different idea of what is acceptable in the workplace, and in this situation I was highly offended," says Cohen, who works at a marketing firm in Philadelphia. "I was actually not allowed to attend a meeting because my attire was deemed 'inappropriate.' People my age are taught to express themselves, and saying something negative about someone's fashion is saying something negative about them."

I want to feel for Jennifer Cohen, but I just can't. In fact, her story strikes me as precisely what is wrong with the "business casual" dress code dilemma: employees are erring so far on the side of *casual* that they are forgetting that this is a *business*. I find her assertion that "saying something negative about someone's fashion is saying something negative about them" so interesting, because I think you can turn it the other way as well: Cohen's fashion choices were saying something about HER, and for her superior, that something was that she was not professional enough to meet with clients.

I don't think that's the message Jennifer Cohen—or any of us—wants to send.

I am all about [defining your personal style](#), but when you're talking about what to wear to work, it is important that your personal style conform to the requirements of your office. I don't buy the argument that "I don't meet with clients" or "I only ever

see the people in my office." Dress for the office *as if* you were meeting with clients, or *as if* your boss's boss were going to stop by your desk.

I have written before about the [most basic office fashion faux pas](#), but just keeping your underwear under there isn't always enough. A good rule of thumb is this: any outfit you would wear to a weekend cookout is TOO casual for the office. Think about it this way: if you were going to the pool after work, you wouldn't wear your swimsuit and cover up to the office. By the same token, Bermuda shorts and a tee are terrific for after hours, but during the day you need to take it up a notch.

So how do you know what the rules are in your *specific* place of business? USA Today says that more and more companies are developing specific dress codes with clearly defined regulations about what is and is not acceptable.

Five Point Capital, a San Diego-based equipment-leasing specialist, allows jeans with no rips or holes on Fridays for operations and support departments. No T-shirts, tank tops or exposed thong undergarments are allowed. The company asks that no body parts from the shoulders to the knees be seen, except for arms. The goal is to keep cleavage and belly views at a minimum.

But what if your office place is not quite so clear? Look at what your superiors are wearing, particularly the people who have the jobs you think you might want someday. Finally, pay attention to the details. Make sure that your casual clothes are clean and unstained and wrinkle-free. Make sure everything fits properly. And then ask yourself: if I suddenly got the chance to interview for my Dream Job, today, in *this* outfit, would I regret what I was wearing?

The answer should always be no. There's nothing wrong with business casual as long as you remember—and dress for—the business part. Bermuda shorts and sleeveless blouses are fine for a cook out, but not for the office. Make the effort to get dressed for work, and save the casual casual clothes for the weekend.