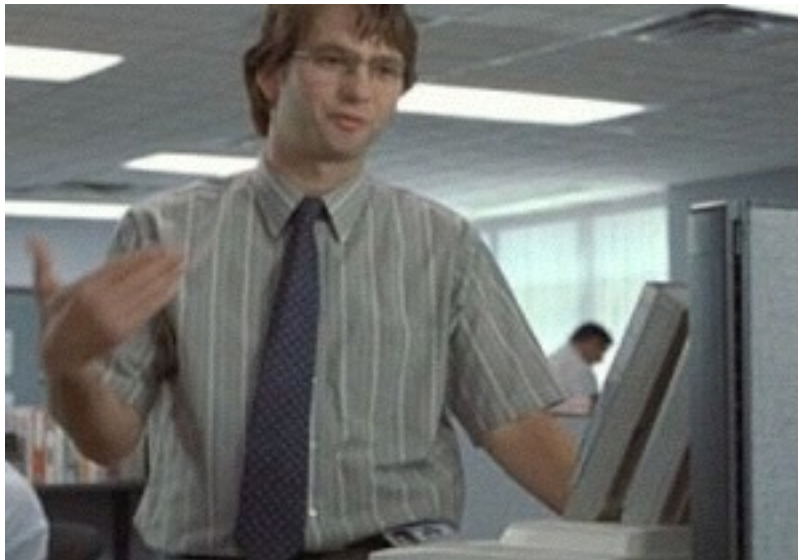## The Rise and Fall of Business Casual

by Brian on January 30, 2012

A lot of great things came out of the 90's. The World Wide Web and HTML made their debut in 1990, the Pentium processor delivered us from DOS in '93, and in '95 came the DVD. Unfortunately all the greatness that came from the tech boom of the 1990's would also give birth the one of the most heinous atrocities to gentlemen everywhere, business casual. The same group of brilliant minds that gave you the web and the technology to use it, also deemed it appropriate to wear pleated beige slacks and boxy dress shirts to work. I would like to think that they were unaware of the monster they

created, but over a decade later, long after we discarded our tower PCs, their uniform of frump has remained.

There is an old adage that says the "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". That means that somewhere between here and hell is a very long and winding road made of New Balance sneakers and polyester striped shirts. The idea of business casual was a hopeful and pure one. A dress code that would allow a blend of work and leisure so that employees would be more relaxed and therefore more creative. Business casual became a quiet form of rebellion. Losing the suit became a symbol of losing the constraints of old world business practices. It was the 90's. The world was moving forward at light speed and these men where at the helm.

Michael Bolton wants you to stop undressing him with your eyes

Ironically these brilliant minds that delivered us to the 21st century forgot one very important high school physics lesson, inertia. Soon the loss of the suit jacket became the loss of the tie, the loss of the tie gave way to the short sleeve button down. In 15 short years most offices around the country have hung up their suits and adopted comfy sneakers and broken in jeans as part of the casual business professional's wardrobe. It has gotten to the point where office managers and small business owners are loosing control of enforcing professional dress codes. Seminars have been created to reeducate employees

on how to dress, books have been published on the subject; money has been spent and earned to slow down the downward spiral of the ever-growing, more casual, business casual.

What does that mean for us, the young aspiring gentlemen? Well the bad news is that we may be forced to cohabitate with employees that feel a dress shirt is anything with buttons down the front, the good news is that we have an opportunity to advance ourselves within our fields by simply dressing better. It's quite apparent that our employers are just as disgusted with the current state of business casual. Dressing to their standards will surely make an impression that states you are a professional with ambition.

Not only will you appear more professional, but you will also feel more professional. Much like the psychology of going casual in the 90's was to inspire creativity, dressing up will encourage confidence. Wearing more form fitting clothing will help with posture, giving you that confident look and feel. Below I listed some casual dress faux pas that may help in your quest to dress more professional.

Some notes on business casual dress:

Ditch the humor tie. Humor and wit should come from your personality, not your closet. Wearing joke ties can be offensive especially if they have hidden sexual connotations. Wear fun, funky, or humorous attire and you'll sure to be taken as seriously as a never-ending joke.

Be yourself, not a billboard. Playing off my previous point, avoid any corporate merchandising in your professional wardrobe. Beer and Spirit companies come to mind as brands that should never make formal attire, but yet make money off men who feel it is important to advertise to their co-workers that they REALLY love to drink.

Dress like your boss's boss is another old adage that stands the test of time. A simple rule that will give you a better reference to what people with power and responsibility deem appropriate for the work place. Sure there are exceptions, but for the most part I found this rule to be insightful.

Dress shoes belong in offices and sneakers belong in gyms. It's my guess that the father of the iPod started this one. New rule, don't wear sneakers to work unless you're the founder of a multi-billion dollar company, that or you're a gym teacher.

Lose the windbreaker and fleece. I don't know where this style came from. We've all seen that guy walking to work, laptop case in hand, wearing outerwear that is only appropriate commuting to work if your office happens to be up in a tree. Sports coats and blazers are relatively inexpensive and a good substitute to the light active wear jacket. Trench coats can be a bit pricier, but invest in a high quality one, and you'll use it for years to come.

Wear a belt. For some wearing a belt isn't necessary to keep their pants on. Congrats utilitarians. Not wearing a belt will make your outfit look incomplete and messy.

I hope you enjoyed my ranting. Once again this article is something that I have come up with working in various offices in different parts of the East Coast. That doesn't make me a professional on the subject, but on the other hand it kind of does.

Best,
Brian Coppolo

*Cover photo courtesy of **The Office**: a NBCUniveral production*

*Body photo courtesy of **Office Space** a Twentieth Century Fox Film*