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The Dressing Dilemma - Part 1 of 2

by Sarah Welstead

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It first struck me that the standards of corporate attire had really changed when I went to a meeting with a client who said "Well, when you look around the boardroom table and see someone in a suit, you know who's trying to sell you something."

And of course no one likes salespeople—it makes them think of bad real estate agents or insurance salesmen or door-to-door evangelist types. Except that, in business, we're all salespeople of one kind or another: we're trying to sell ourselves, our company, our product or our services, and we may be trying to sell to our colleagues (for respect), our bosses (for a promotion) or to outside clients (for real money).

The old adage used to be "dress for what you want to be, not for what you are." But the information economy has created a couple of new difficulties for those of us in the service industries: first, the oldest person in the group is not always the most knowledgeable or most experienced; second, in many fields there seems to be an inverse paradigm: the smarter and more talented one is, the less "together" one is expected to appear. In a knowledge-based economy, it's not so much what one wears as what one knows, and the people with the money (i.e. the clients) are beginning to respond to this.

There is simply too much to know—a Fast Company article quoted a 40-something executive saying "In my old-economy job, I thought I was working hard because I worked 10-hour days, five days a week. In my new-economy job, I could work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and still not be able to keep up with everything I needed to know"—in this environment, dressing "for what you want to be" becomes impossible. Who knows what their job is going to be in 12 months or 3 years? We all have to reinvent ourselves constantly.

So now the adage seems to be "Dress for what you are, so I can recognize what the heck you do at this company, because I am too busy trying to keep up with my job to spend any time figuring out whether you are a newly-graduated corporate flunky or a highly-experienced technical geek."

This kind of attitude allows for a great deal more creativity in dressing, without a corresponding loss of credibility. In fact, you'll



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"In a knowledge-based economy, it's not so much what one wears as what one knows, and the people with the money (i.e. the clients) are beginning to respond to this."

probably get better results if you dress in a way that helps others recognize your role right off the bat.

In our company (a small ad agency), we originally went to meetings looking fairly homogeneous—not too formal (clients prefer their ad agencies to look a little "hip"), but not too creative, either. However, we found that the clients weren't sure who did what, and didn't know to whom they should direct their questions. So our creative director became a little more inventive (bleaching his hair white and ditching the dress shirts) while our client services people got a little more polished (kept the turtlenecks but put them with suits) and suddenly we had instant credibility. Clients seemed to figure that our creative director must be really, really good in order to dress that outlandishly, but they weren't afraid to sign over the cheques because of the nice, responsible-looking people in suits sitting beside them. And we all knew what everyone else's role was.

We've seen this in other industries as well: as more and more people opt out of big corporations (or are "downsized"), they're having to find their own niche or specialty, and part of communicating that specialty is in the way they dress. If consultants from smaller, specialized consulting firms, for example, show up in navy-blue suits with white shirts, the clients ask themselves "How are these guys so different from Deloitte & Touche? Their suits look kind of expensive—are they going to cost me as much as KPMG? I thought they were supposed to be different—but they don't look it."

The bottom line? In an environment where there is so much to know, it's more important to let others know what you do than it is to look like part of the corporate army. And since others will see you before they hear you, help them out by letting your outfit do some of the talking.



Sarah Welstead

After several years in advertising agencies and internet consulting firms, Sarah started her own ad agency, StayAwake, last year. A member of DigitalEve since 2001, Sarah has written white papers and articles on user experience and networked communications for a number of publications, including Broken Pencil and Harcourt Canada.

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**The Dressing Dilemma - Part 2 of 2
Productivity and the Workplace**

by Sarah Welstead

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It seems as though practically everyone works from home at least part of the time these days. Whether it's a "regular" worker who just wants to get away from the clamour of the open-plan office cacophony, or someone who fell out of the dotcom disaster and into freelancing, hardly a week goes by that I don't get an email from someone that includes the phrase "...and it's so great to work in my pyjamas..."

But one sometimes wonders: if their body is in pyjamas, where is their mind?

There's no question that working at home can be far more productive than working in a more public environment—in a big office, sometimes it can be impossible to work quietly at one's desk without being interrupted every five minutes. But the office is a supervised environment: even if you're the boss, you at least have to look busy. You have to haul your behind out of bed and be at your desk by a certain time, looking reasonably presentable, and making at least a show of working assiduously. We all know the adage "put a smile on your face and happiness will soon follow"—is it too much to think that if you put your "work face" on for others, doing the actual work will soon follow? Does what you wear have a measurable impact on your productivity?

Somewhere someone is probably doing a study on this very thing, but rather than limit ourselves to facts here (all right, here's a link if you want some statistics on [telecommuting](#), let's let our minds drift in to the world of the anecdote.

It used to be that 95% of the people I knew, both personally and professionally, worked in a normal office, 'normal' here meaning with office hours that were approximately 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., desks or offices that were assigned long-term, dress codes, workstations instead of laptops—you get the picture. Now,



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"How important can your office attire really be if you never actually see the people who write the cheques?"

however, probably half the people I know work in some kind of "alternative" office environment, whether that means that they work a lot at home, run a business from their home office, work on a contract basis only, or travel with their office in their knapsack (the laptop/cell phone/Palm triumvirate). Personally, I have sold and then completed large projects without ever having to meet the client in person. How important can your office attire really be if you never actually see the people who write the cheques?

Old-school theories maintained that workers were more productive if they "dressed up" for the office. But the nine-to-five job has become notional, at best, in a world where more and more of us are freelancers, contract workers, or otherwise independent. Email, cell phones, and wireless devices mean that the workday begins well before 9 a.m. and extends well past 5 p.m., and in many fields, job security is only as good as the numbers you posted in the last quarter.

Thanks to these non-traditional work environments, most of us are more cognizant of our individual productivity than we used to be. Not because of The Boss—who, after all, may only be our boss for a few weeks or months—but because we know that sooner or later (and probably sooner), we're going to have to justify our time to someone, whether it's to the client, to our next employer, or to our accountant. We don't all work the same way. For some people, working at home in their pyjamas is highly efficient: they can get out of bed, turn on the computer, and work without distraction. Other people seem to think that "working from home" is synonymous with "mental health day." But it's funny how, when our livelihood is at stake, we learn how to work most efficiently: the person who is not efficient at working in his pyjamas soon learns that freelancing is not profitable, and the salesperson who doesn't close her deals has to eventually face the fact that maybe clients don't want to write big cheques to someone who wears a jean jacket to meetings.

When everyone is responsible for their individual productivity, employers soon find that enforcing an arbitrary dress code is not only a time-waster but can also have a negative impact on the business: Mary Kay, for example, recently had to change its long-established "No pants to be worn by women at any time" dress code. While this had, presumably, been perceived as a reasonable rule at some point, the company found that it was losing good employees—and, more importantly, good potential employees—who felt that this was no longer a reasonable request, especially if they were also required to work more than eight hours a day. Does what one wears have an impact on one's productivity? Of course—an uncomfortable worker is an unproductive worker. Are the rules the same for everyone? Of course not—in the new New Economy, the best worker is one who knows how she works most efficiently, and behaves accordingly.

Also check out...

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