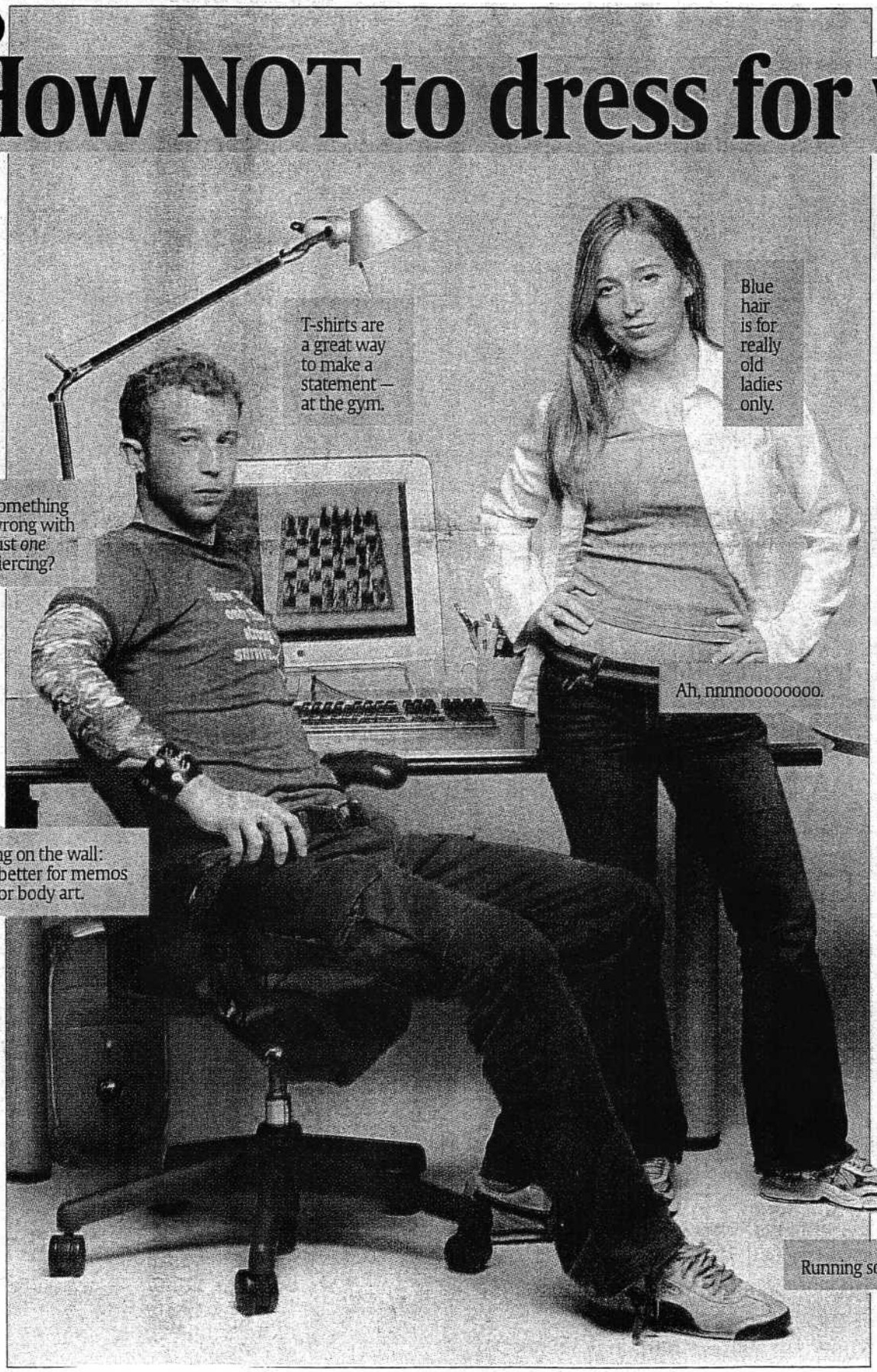
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How NOT to dress for work



Take the jacket, forget slippers and remember the underwear

By Maria Puente
USA TODAY

Cover story

She was young and ambitious, and she wanted to make an impression on her first day as an administrative staffer at a Los Angeles architecture firm. And she did: She showed up wearing a slinky black cocktail dress. Without a bra.

The guys at the firm noticed.

"It did seem sort of strange," says Anthony Poon, principal architect and founder of Poon Design Group, one of those hip firms where creativity and pizazz are admired.

But not *too* much pizazz.

"We have a bunch of creative people here, and they're not wearing navy suits and white shirts," Poon says. "But we do have clients we can't alienate. So there's a balance of expressing creative flair and also being professional."

Ah, yes, finding that balance. These days, scores of young workers are seeking answers to the age-old question: What do I wear to work? So many workers and workplaces are in such a muddle

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'Help! People are wearing spandex to work!'

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over this that a growing band of consultants has appeared to help them clean up.

"It has gotten so crazy, a major pharmaceutical company called up and said, 'Help! People are wearing *spandex* to work!' " says Gail Madison, a Philadelphia-area etiquette and protocol consultant who regularly advises students at prestigious colleges that it won't kill them to take out their nose rings before a job interview.

"They say, 'I'm not going to be someone I'm not,' " Madison says. "They're clueless about how the world works. I tell them if you want to play basketball you can't run on court without a uniform or without knowing the rules. It's the only analogy that works with these kids."

It's fair to say it was ever thus: Cranky oldsters have always harrumphed about "those kids" who show up for work dressed like slobs or sluts. Yet these days it really does seem to many — young, old and not all cranky — that a lot of newcomers to the workforce are either completely unaware or outright defiant about what is appropriate attire for the office.

"There's a deep narcissism in this generation," says Kelly Lowe, an English and American Studies professor at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio. "They are really, really focused to a fairly unhealthy extent on themselves. They talk on their cellphones *in class*."

Meanwhile, the economic downturn is driving increased wardrobe conservatism, prompting workplaces to move away from the "business casual" dress codes instituted in the 1990s back to "business formal."

For men, that usually means a tie and at least a sport coat. For women, well, that can get tricky. As a result, businesses find themselves laboring (with their consultants) to write new or more explicit dress codes, spelling out exactly how many ear piercings are allowed and what does "dressy dress" mean, anyway?

Discussing what's appropriate

Then there's the even trickier business of enforcement. How does a middle-aged male manager tell a young, nubile employee that flouncing about with an exposed belly is just not OK — without embarrassment, misunderstandings or really bad legal trouble?

So, yes, there's lots of confusion out there, and not just among the young and inexperienced. Listen to some of the voices from workplaces around the USA:

► "A woman, and not a young one, wore yoga-type pants, a baggy T-shirt and *slippers* to my office. And not those semi-trendy Chinese beaded slippers, but terry-cloth-type scuff slippers," says Dana Marsh, 35, a software company employee outside Washington, D.C.

► "Our receptionist comes to work dressed for a night on the town, in tight pants, low-cut tops, short, short skirts," says Taresa Mikle, 29, a university business manager in Houston. "When I spoke to her, she flat-out said that since she had it, she was going to flaunt it. She said she couldn't help it if the older, 'fatter' co-workers couldn't deal with her body."

► A young woman arrived for her job interview wearing a short, short sundress, looked completely sunburned and windblown, had on a raggedy backpack and Birkenstock sandals. For an interview. When I interviewed, I wore a suit and tie and I combed my hair," says Chris Massey, 24, who works at an advertising agency in Jacksonville.

► "Oy vey! I know of a recent graduate who showed up for an interview at a doctor's office wearing club clothes," complete with fishnet stockings and stiletto-heel boots, says Jenny Skinner, 36, who works in finance in Akron, Ohio. "The doctor said she wore no bra and no panties, which he was able to determine from her extremely unladylike posture.

"After this girl's interview, the doctor phoned the school to say he would no longer accept interviews from their new graduates."

Making the transition

Yikes. All of this leads to another age-old question: What were these people thinking?

Actually, experts say, the problem may be just that: They weren't thinking. Many have spent the previous four or five years in college happily dressing like slobs. Once they graduate, they don't have professional wardrobes, or the money to assemble one quickly, even if they know what to buy.

"Look at guys in college — they've got pierced ears, gel-spiked hair, goatees, urban, flashy clothes, baggy jeans, big boots, unironed shirts, lint, stains, nothing matches," says Jared Shapiro, co-author of *Going Corporate: Moving Up Without Screwing Up*, a survival manual for the young and clueless. "In the corporate world, you have to dress like your boss, or the people above your boss."

At Wingate (N.C.) University, a 1,500-student Christian school outside Charlotte, career counselors are discussing hooking up with a local department store to help graduating students make smart investments in their first wardrobes.

"We have a lot of students who don't understand either business casual or business formal," says Stacey Harris, a university orientation official. "Even for a formal event on campus, they'll show up in a skirt but a really, *really* short skirt. It's ridiculous."

For some young people, it's not ridiculous, it's who they are. For their baby-boomer parents, "being themselves" probably meant wearing their hair long; for this generation, it might be shaved heads and lots of tattoos.

"There is this attitude of, 'This is how I am, take it or leave it,' " says Jennifer Bosk, director of alumni relations at the joint campus of Indiana and Purdue Universities in Fort Wayne, Ind.

"I wish there was a college course on how getting ahead doesn't depend just on how smart or good you are — it's partly playing the game and looking the part. But it doesn't seem to matter to this group."

That attitude won't do in the current take-no-prisoners economy. "Today's world is very competitive. Getting and keeping a job is tough," says Kim Johnson Gross, co-author of several *Dress Smart* books. "It's not about you and your rights, it's about you representing a company and the brand culture of that company. It's about your clothes getting in the way of your message."

So cosmetics makers are responding with products such as heavy spray-on makeup to temporarily cover tattoos during the workday. And at Indiana-Purdue, the career counseling and alumni departments recently organized a sold-out dinner at a local restaurant to introduce graduating students to the niceties of business dress and dining.

"They see that this fork is for that, don't drink from the finger bowl, how to eat French onion soup," Bosk says. "We'll be throwing them a lot of curves so they can learn how to handle a real job interview if it's done over dinner."

Advice can come from a variety of sources. When the Washington law firm Haynes and Boone dropped its business casual dress code, it hired the men's apparel company Paul Fredrick to come in and do a tutorial for young lawyers. "They had some young associates who don't own any of this stuff, and there were even partners who had not been required to wear suits for a few years," says Allen Abbott, a vice president for Paul Fredrick.

When Tierney Communications, a downtown Philadelphia firm, became concerned that some young employees were wearing skimpy outfits during hot summer months, the Banana Republic across the street offered to organize a fashion show to demonstrate how to look chic, appropriate *and* comfortable. It was a big success for both Banana Republic (new customers) and Tierney (better-dressed employees).

Deciding what's offensive

At nearby Wharton, the University of Pennsylvania's business school, Tiffany & Co. vice president Sandra Alton has talked to students about how job interviewers may care more about their cuff links and wristwatches than their test scores.

"They've spent years in an academic environment where success is predicated on how well they test, but now they're going to be judged on how they present themselves," Alton says.

Of course, no one wants to return to the silly old days when women could be chastised — or even banned from the U.S. Senate floor — for wearing a pantsuit. But many people say the pendulum has swung too far.

Mary Lou Andre, an image consultant and author (*Ready to Wear: An Expert's Guide to Choosing and Using Your Wardrobe*), helps her corporate clients understand the effect of wardrobes on their communications and their bottom line. "I always say: more skin, less power."

Once, she saw a young woman in a Boston office lobby wearing an Ann Taylor suit, hot-pink blouse — and hot-pink flip-flops. "People can't help connecting dots. Why would anyone trust (that woman) with their investments or their project if she doesn't have enough common sense to understand that's not OK?"

Even businesses that prize a cool look, such as Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, a chain of 38 boutique hotels and eateries, agonize over these questions. Kimpton hired Andre to help them spell out to employees what is and is not appropriate.

"Twenty years ago, I used to get upset because the uniformed employee was wearing black pants and shoes with white socks, or the shoes weren't shined enough, and did they shave today," says Niki Leondakis, Kimpton chief operating officer. "Today, he might show up with a tongue piercing and exposed tattoos.

"At what point is that just part of the culture and people are used to seeing it, and at what point is that offensive to the consumer?"

Young people who treasure their Goth look are just going to have to suck it up and go unGoth — or work in a record store, because the rest of the American working world is, as the current saying goes, "just not that into you" anymore.

"Please. What's the big deal about putting on a tie? Or having only one piercing in each ear?" Gail Madison demands. "You can't go to London or Paris for business with orange hair."



By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODA

Loose guidelines

There's no hard-and-fast rule about what not to wear to work, because it all depends on where you work. But in a typical American office, there are some things that are probably safe and others that just aren't a good idea. (Please, no pajamas.)

Probably OK	Not OK
Sleeveless tops	Spaghetti straps
Leather mules	Rubber flip-flops
Multiple gold earrings	Nose rings
Highlights	Blue hair or other colors not found in nature
Above-the-knee skirts	Micro-minis
Cropped pants in dressy fabrics	Shorts
Neatly trimmed beard	Three-day stubble
Colorful cashmere socks	No socks
Sport coats	Denim jackets
Lace camisole peeking from blouse	Underwear as outerwear

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— Niki Leondakis, Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants