

Look sharp -- 'professional dress' is back

By Amy Yelin, Globe Correspondent, 4/18/04

I have a sad but true story to tell: I missed my big chance because I didn't wear the right pants.

Had I dressed professionally on that fateful day, I might have had my mug in Time magazine. Instead, I decided to dress down-- an aptly coined term considering that it indicates the direction you could be heading in before the day is out.

I worked for a local nonprofit and my mission was to escort two worthy donors being honored for their charitable ways to the Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge to have their picture taken. Knowing the bridge was not open yet, I dressed as one might to go to a construction site: jeans and work boots. When I arrived, I was handed a hard hat and orange vest. Now I was stylin'.

The donors arrived immaculate in shiny black suits, as though they were attending a gala fund-raiser rather than visiting a construction site. They knew they were having their picture taken for Time, of course. I, on the other hand, was completely surprised when the photographer asked me if I was going to be in the picture.

"Well, I wasn't planning on it," I told the photographer while adjusting my helmet. "But I'd be happy to participate."

The donors, however, did not look so happy. After a quick scan of my disheveled attire, the man shook his head. "No, I think we'll do this alone."

What brought back this unpleasant memory was a recent article announcing that professional attire is making a comeback in the workplace. It seems that in today's fierce competition for jobs -- or as a preventative measure to avoid losing one's job -- people are spending more money on clothes and dressing to impress. I am not happy about this.

"Professional dress" has never come naturally to me. I'm a casual gal. I'd try but, from my very first office job, I was at war with pantyhose. I struggled to understand the need for dressing up. Could it actually make a difference in my career? Couldn't we all be successful and dress comfortably at the same time?

It didn't help that no matter what I put on, I never felt polished, unlike so many of my peers who seemed to thrive in anything by Ann Taylor or Talbots. I felt like a 5-year-old who had just raided her mother's closet.

Fortunately, no matter what your troubles in life, there's always someone worse off than you. In my case, that person was "Joe," a new colleague who appeared about six months into my first job. He had even less fashion sense than I did and a bizarre habit of removing his shirt whenever working at the copy machine.

"Joe" was a brief but wonderful distraction for me during those self-conscious days of pantyhose runs, ill-fitting slacks from Marshalls, and awkward shoulder pads. During lunch, my coworkers and I speculated about "Joe": Did he think removing his shirt was acceptable because the copy machine had its own, separate room? Was he rebellious? Was he crazy?

Whatever the reason, peering around the corner of the copy room and seeing shirtless "Joe" -- also hairy and out of shape -- was a shock. At any other office, I'm quite sure that he would have been fired, but not here. As it turned out, he happened to be related to some high-ranking person in the company. Instead of a pink slip, he got a good talking to about keeping his shirt on and eventually, a promotion. Without shirtless "Joe" to focus on, I was back to obsessing about my own style dilemmas, which would follow me like a stalker from one office to the next.

Case in point: a couple of years later, while working as a placement specialist at a temporary agency in Cambridge, I was called into my manager's office.

"Close the door behind you," she instructed. She was standing up and seemed to be gazing at my navel. "Do you think you could just -- I don't know -- maybe tuck your shirt into your skirt, or wear a belt?"

Like a mime, she demonstrated how one would buckle a belt. I looked down at my untucked, yet professional blouse and long black skirt and was perplexed. I thought I had mastered the art of professional dress.

"It looks better without a belt," I protested. She shook her head. "You *need* to wear a belt. Or tuck it in."

This was not one woman giving fashion advice to another. This was a boss putting her foot down about a dress code. It was belt, tuck, or walk.

Fortunately for me, the mid-'90s saw the rise of the dot-com and the birth of "business casual," a more relaxed approach to office attire. It spread rapidly, moving from the West Coast to the East, where it spawned great enthusiasm and, among other things, great confusion. Even today, it's obvious that the phrase "business casual" continues to be an enigma to most employees, many of whom are still searching for answers to the age-old questions: Can I wear shorts to work? What about Spandex, or Birkenstocks? Do I need to wear a collared shirt? Is my short skirt too short?

But the confusion doesn't end there. Employers also have to fend for themselves by clarifying what's acceptable and what's not for their office, and revising where appropriate -- all safety measures to reduce the risk of lawsuits.

As for me, I've made some strides in my ability and comfort level when it comes to dressing professionally. Age and experience have given me an understanding of the benefits of dressing sharp on occasion, and I no longer see myself as a little girl swimming in her mommy's clothing. I've even grown to appreciate the admiring glances and respect that a good suit commands.

Still, I continue to have a soft spot for casual attire. As I write this from home, I'm still wearing my plaid pajama pants, a fleece sweatshirt, and fuzzy slippers. But this is my business -- my dress code. As Mark Twain once said, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society."

I don't believe he ever said anything about plaid pajama pants.