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## Some are too undressed for success

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The other day at work, a young woman who reports to one of my peers was dressed in a halter top, tightly cropped pants and sandals.

I watched a number of our employees, men and women alike, closely scrutinize her as she sauntered down the hallway. I'm assuming that's the reaction she was hoping to elicit from her co-workers.

This generation grew up at a time when some of our parents' companies were adapting to the concept of "business casual." Gone were the days when dear old dad donned a conservative suit, white shirt and subdued tie. Equally notable is how the term quickly changed over a short period of time.

When introduced, casual meant the elimination of a necktie for men and jackets for men and women. This "revolution" was intended to allow working professionals the freedom to wear more comfortable clothes, while still maintaining a business-like appearance.

Now, however, the extremes in casual can be seen in many of our offices on any given day. Add a little summer weather, and you'd think some of us were working at the snack bar at Grafton State Park.

Should you be planning to lay out a tank-top -- with no jacket -- for work tomorrow, please listen up. Despite what you think, what you wear is precisely how you will be perceived.

I've heard it said that you should "dress for the position you want." I believe this to be true. If you aspire to be a CEO someday, invest in a wardrobe of well-chosen suits and wear them.

Study after study shows that professional people are treated differently, depending on their attire. Someone in a dress suit still commands more attention and respect than another in jeans. Whether we like it or not, appropriate attire is a form of symbolism, which can embody auras of power, authority, competence, knowledge, experience and even wisdom.

How we look at others often affects our own judgmental assessments of them. While it's often difficult to change these perceptions, we can change the way we dress.

The aspiring business professional should know almost intuitively that few places of employment would consider tank or tube tops appropriate attire, and that also goes for cut-off shorts, flip-flops and tennis shoes. Discerning women should know that a skirt shorter than the top of your knees is better left for the bar scene. Remember, Ally McBeal was not a real attorney.

When in doubt about company rules, ask your HR department. Just last week, the president of my company sent an e-mail outlining our summer dress code -- right down to skorts and "muscle" shirts.

I admire the thoroughness of this e-mail, because it left little doubt as to what constitutes acceptable casual attire for the summer. However, I'd bet that many companies don't go to such prescriptive lengths. In the absence of similarly published definitions, here are some simple and prudent guidelines about casual attire for the uninitiated:

- Men: Chinos, dress slacks, oxford shirts, golf-shirts in good condition (sans another company's logo), and any shoes that are not sandals or running shoes.

• Women: It's easier to say what not to wear: tube or tank tops, short skirts, strapless or spaghetti-strapped dresses, midriff shirts, and rubber flip-flops. A special note about Spandex: It's never appropriate in the workplace -- and what's more, I hope no one ever wears it again.

Adhering to company guidelines, however, doesn't mean you cannot express yourself. In fact, it's paramount to dress in a way that's conveys personal style and is comfortable. I don't wear black suits every day to work for this reason. My business wardrobe reflects who I am and who I aspire to be -- unless the laundry is overdue. Then, I just end up looking like I thought it was casual Friday.

All joking aside, as a member of company management, it's incumbent upon me to know what the definition of appropriate attire is. And for those of us who have been dressing for success for years, this column probably seems redundant. But it never ceases to amaze me how I'm periodically caught off guard by the flash of a midriff promenading down the hall at work.

So, dear Ally, do yourself a professional favor and save the casual stuff for a warm summer weekend.

NextGen Workbytes is written locally by and for Gen Xers learning the realities of the workplace. Bettyjo H. Bouchey is the dean of ITT Technical Institute in Colonie and is involved with a local young professionals' group. The views expressed in this article are her own and not those of ITT Technical Institute or any of its subsidiaries.

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