

The Rise of Casualwear in the Workplace

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Casual attire has become more acceptable in an increasing number of social settings in the US, and this trend is perhaps most obvious in the office environment. Rather than just "Casual Friday", casual dress seems to have

transitioned into more of an everyday practice. Consumers now have greater freedom to decide what to wear to the office.

Over the last decade, the millennial generation has entered the workforce and has reshaped the ideal workplace environment, including dress codes. Millennials prioritise work-life balance and prefer a more relaxed work environment. As this generation now represents a sizeable portion of the working population in the US, companies are re-evaluating their corporate cultures and policies to entice millennial recruits. Unlike older generations, millennials tend to value a company's culture more than its name or reputation, so adapting corporate policies to meet their preferences has been important.

Athleisure as a major driver behind the shift

Additionally, the rise of athleisure and the growing concern for health and wellness are driving forces behind the changes in corporate dress codes. These trends have certainly lifted the demand for more versatile performance apparel and footwear as more consumers prefer clothes that are suitable for multiple occasions, including work, travel and even social gatherings. Euromonitor International's Lifestyles Survey reveals that 59% of US consumers look for "comfortable" (casual) when buying an apparel or footwear product, while only 21% of consumers look for "classic-style" (formal).

As a result, sports-inspired clothing and footwear on the market are suitable for more occasions, including work, and sportswear brands are certainly benefiting from this casualisation trend. Athleisure brands such as Lululemon and Athleta have expanded their product lines to include more office-appropriate pieces like blouses and blazers that are made from the same technical fabrics as their athletic staples, marketing them as perfect to wear for the office, travelling and commuting. Last year, Gap Inc introduced the Hill City men's activewear brand, which seeks to offer versatile pieces suited for the entirety of urban men's active lifestyles. More recently, another premium men's performance apparel brand, Rhone, introduced a commuter dress shirt as part of its Commuter Collection.

With the rise of casual clothing, there has been strong demand for premium casualwear as well. New brands like Everlane, Allbirds and Rothy's are offering high-quality casual clothing at premium prices. In addition, luxury retailers like Barneys New York are offering new casual and business casual designer clothing to accommodate the growing demand.

Denim benefits from more casual dress codes

Denim companies are also benefitting from an increasingly casual American workplace as more companies allow jeans throughout the week. While athleisure tops are now a go-to for casual workwear, jeans are often the chosen bottoms as other casual bottoms like leggings and sweatpants remain unacceptable. Boosted by this workplace acceptance, the jeans market in the US is now seeing some major changes. Levi Strauss & Co filed for an initial public offering earlier this year, while VF Corp plans to spin off its jeans business. Athleisure companies and casualwear companies are also investing in the space with brands like Everlane and Athleta launching denim collections in 2017. As recent fit and fabric innovations have made jeans more comfortable and flattering, they will continue to be a popular item for Americans in the casual workplace.

Despite the growing casual dress trend, there is still an opportunity for business attire. As clothes affect the wearer's mood, many consumers still enjoy wearing professional attire at work in order to feel more confident and to boost positive energy. There are still many companies, especially in banking, finance, law and other business sectors, which require professional business attire in the office. As offerings from brands and retailers alike become increasingly casual, there is an opportunity for companies to offer simplified solutions for busy working people seeking to build a professional wardrobe. New York-based MM.LaFleur, for example, offers professionally-styled and personalised wardrobe staples for working women after getting to know them first through an online quiz or an hour-long in-store styling appointment.

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