

Too casual with summer attire, they can feel heat from their bosses

By Barbara Bradley (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal
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Michael Mayo, 28, got away with wearing Birkenstock sandals as a FedEx Corp. intern for two weeks. Then he made the mistake of crossing his legs in his boss's office and flashing his toes. Mayo was quickly sentenced to life in loafers.

That didn't stop Mayo, a software developer who writes codes and programs and creates Web sites, from trying to sabotage dress codes in the summer at every place he worked in the city.

"You sit at work eight hours a day. That's a large chunk of your waking life," he said. "I'm smarter when I'm comfy. I operate better. Everything is better."

With temperatures expected in the high 90s most of this week and a heat index as high as 110 earlier this week, folks around town have shed clothes and tried to skate past dress codes. Some companies look the other way as long as employees are tastefully dressed. But few bend the rules very far.

In a recent online newsletter, Steve Brown of Crye-Leike Realtors reminded agents not to give in to summer temptations. The company prefers that male agents wear ties "unless it's miserably hot outside," said the vice president and general manager. Women are asked to wear suits, pantsuits and dresses.

"We don't relax our dress codes during summer," said Joe Bell, marketing and public affairs manager for Kroger Food Stores Delta Division. Male managers, in the corporate offices and in the stores, must wear shirts and ties and dress slacks, and women must wear nice sweaters, pants and dresses. But shirts can be short-sleeved and shoes, which must be closed-toed, can be as casual as dressy Rockports or women's flats.

"Our appearance is a reflection of how the store is operated," he said.

True. Yet people everywhere fudge.

In the summer, business casual tends to be "widely interpreted" at AutoZone, said Allie Stover, a senior programmer. Some dress strictly business casual, she said, but a few will show up in tank tops, flip-flops and tops scooped low in the front or back.

"Periodically an e-mail will go out asking people to please adhere to the dress code and people will tighten up," she said. "But some people think they can get away with it."

Bare little sundresses appear at Signature Advertising and Marketing Solutions in East Memphis, said Taylor Grisham, 25, an account manager.

"Today I have on a tube dress from J. Crew and I put a little sweater over it," she said. "Outside in the heat I can take it off. ... I'll try to get away with some sandals."

Online comments from our readers cited exposed midribs, halter tops, sleeveless blouses with "arm dangle" and an overall lack of modesty as common in Memphis. One commentator urged women to "put that pantyhose back on. Nobody wants to see your veiny, bruised, scaly, hairy legs, or your crusty, nasty flip-flop feet. At least pantyhose hide most of that horror."

Debbie Neal, owner of The School of Protocol, in Germantown, said the most common clothing complaints she hears from Memphis companies are very short skirts that show too much when a woman bends, low-cut blouses, shirts that strain at the buttons and simply taking business casual too far.

Business casual for men means button-down shirts and short-sleeve knit shirts, especially solid-color golf styles without the banded arms, she said. Khaki pants should be midweight and high quality. Loafers are fine, but not Topsiders.

For women, it's nice-looking trousers and a sweater or shirt with sleeves. Knit shirts should be ironed, she said. Sandals are acceptable if the company is not especially conservative. Otherwise, it's closed-toed shoes and flats.

But few women are required to wear pantyhose anymore, she said. They have simply rebelled against wearing that suffocatingly hot torture garment in the summer.

"They just don't care," she said.

The rules differ in different parts of the country, she said, "But we are a more conservative business community. It's still the South."

Many employees can exploit fashion trends to stay cool at the office. Wide-legged pants can feel as cool as a dress. And small, featherweight cardigans, cropped cardigans and short, lightweight jackets are plentiful. Short skirts are back in pencil styles, and popular peep-toe pumps, with a bit of the toe open, are acceptable in many offices.

Appearances are important. But companies should know that allowing comfortable clothes, especially in jobs that don't require meeting the public, can be an advantage in competing for the best employees.

The issue is so important to Mayo, who grew up in Southaven, he once offered to forgo part of a raise for the privilege of dressing as he liked. He even turned down a job with a local corporation that offered him the biggest salary and the biggest bonus of any other because the dress code demanded a tie.

"What's \$10,000 if you're miserable all day?" he asked.

So recently he took a job with a San Mateo, Calif., company. As we spoke one day recently, he was parked at his desk, happy as a clam wearing a Memphis T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops -- acceptable attire in the laid-back corporate style of Silicon Valley.

"It's the culture to pamper software people here," he said gleefully, noting his free drinks and snacks. And you don't get those blistering summers. "When it's 76, people start complaining about how hot it is."