

# Have wardrobe-challenged staff? Try on image consultants

If your employees hear “casual” when you say “business casual,” they might benefit from an emerging new perk: the employer-supplied image consultant. Those consultants, who charge \$50 to \$250 an hour, conduct seminars for employees and offer individuals advice on grooming and attire. They’ll even riffle through clients’ closets in search of outfits suitable for office wear.

*Example:* Pulte Homes’ Washington, D.C. division worked with an image consultant to devise different dress codes for employees who work in different kinds of jobs.

Technicians who repair homes can wear jeans, for instance, but none with holes or stains. Employees in construction or customer relations who meet customers wear khakis with collared logo shirts. Office workers dress in “business casual”—no jeans or T-shirts allowed. And sales staffers wear suits, even to in-house meetings.

Employees also attended a four-hour seminar that helped them assemble a suitable business wardrobe.

Once a luxury for celebrities and high-profile executives, image consultants have become fixtures at companies like Procter and Gamble and AIG. As workaday wear morphed from buttoned-down to belly-baring over the past few years, membership in the Des Moines-based Association of Image Consultants International grew by 125 percent to about 900.

Image consultants can teach your youngest employees—who wore hoodies and cargo pants to college classes and may not know how to dress for work—what’s appropriate to wear to your workplace. And they can show older employees, who knew what to wear when suits and dresses were required in the office, how to build a less formal wardrobe without donning their weekend outfits at work.

**Advice:** Before you hire an image consultant, decide what you hope to accomplish and convey that to the consultant.

Most consultants specialize in wardrobe and grooming, but some also teach e-mail and telephone etiquette or how to appear professional in front of a camera. Ask potential consultants to describe their expertise and experience.

Finally, set realistic expectations. Even the best consultant can’t transform a sloppy employee into a snappy dresser overnight. Sometimes, consultants meet with clients for months.

To find an image consultant, visit the Association of Image Consultants International’s Web site, **[www.aici.org](http://www.aici.org)**.

## 5 steps to a legal dress code

1. Avoid dress-code or grooming rules that have no clear business reason.
2. Document and explain the health, safety and/or business reasons for a dress code.
3. Apply the policy uniformly to men and women, but be flexible enough to make necessary, reasonable accommodations. (You can typically set gender-specific rules, such as “no long hair on men.”)
4. Notify job applicants about appearance requirements during the hiring process.
5. Consult your collective-bargaining agreement to ensure compliance.