

Summer dress codes: Inclusive policies for warm weather



The weather is warming up and it may be time to roll out your summer dress code policy. Navigating summer dress code policies can be challenging. You want to help your staff stay cool in the summer while maintaining a professional appearance and environment. Some businesses create a separate policy for summer attire, whereas others stick with their established year-round policy.

There has been a lot of discussion over the past year regarding discriminatory dress code policies as well, so the changing season is a great time to reevaluate your dress code policy. Consider revamping your standard dress policy and rolling out a summer policy to make expectations clear. Ensure that both policies are inclusive to employees of different backgrounds, gender identities, cultures, and religions. This protects you and your business while making employees feel comfortable and respected.

Here are some tips to manage dress codes and grooming expectations this summer.

Remote dress codes

If you're having a work-from-home summer, be flexible with your dress code. Employees are in their own homes and should be comfortable. You probably won't be seeing their full-body over zoom, so banning leggings or sweatpants won't do you much good.

Still, reminding employees to dress professionally and appropriately this summer is important. Understandably, they would get comfortable in their own homes. However, tank tops, athletic wear, and revealing or low-cut shirts should be avoided when joining video calls. Send out an email on Zoom etiquette and remind everyone to dress as they would for work when reporting for meetings or video calls.

Put it in writing

Ambiguous dress code policies are dangerous. They lead to uncertainty and unequal enforcement (something that can result in discrimination concerns!). Be sure that your summer dress policy is provided in writing. Your dress code policy should be found in your employee handbook so that employees can reference it as needed. If you are going to make adjustments for summer or remote work, add these policies to the handbook or policy resources. Also, be sure to send the policy out via email (or another method) when changes are made or at the start of summer.

If your summertime dress code differs from your standard dress code, decide what marks the beginning and end of the summer policy. Put that in writing too! It can be the actual start and end dates of summer, but depending on your region you may have warmer weather beginning in the spring or continuing into the fall.

You can find a written sample summer dress code policy from [SHRM](#). Notice that they were very clear about what clothing items are acceptable and what clothing items or styles are not acceptable. They also use Memorial Day and Labor Day to define the applicable summer period. Be clear and do not leave anything up to interpretation. You can also take a look at [this policy](#) for an example of a standard dress code policy that incorporates guidelines for summer.



Be consistent in application

The most important aspect of your dress code policy is applying it consistently and fairly. Exceptions should be made for religious or disability-related reasons, but otherwise, the dress code needs to be enforced. If you do not stay on top of dress code enforcement for everyone, people will feel singled out or discriminated against when you do decide to enforce it. Concerns of favoritism may also arise if it is perceived that certain members of the office are allowed to break the dress code frequently.

When writing a dress code policy for summer or in general, understand that clothing looks different on different body types. The dress code should be written in a manner that it can be consistently applied to everyone. Clothing items will look different on short, tall, thin, and curvy body types. Include measurable and enforceable rules such as dresses needing to go to the knee so that they may be applied fairly.

It can be cumbersome to routinely enforce the dress code, especially during the summer when attire may be more relaxed and provide less coverage. If there is any rule in your dress code that management is not consistently enforcing, consider removing that section. Leaving unenforced rules in the dress code can give employees the idea that the whole policy is outdated and no longer applies. Only include articles that you will consistently enforce.

Hair and grooming

Creating an inclusive environment is extremely important. Develop a dress code approach that can accommodate religious attire and is inclusive to different styling practices.

A frequent dress code issue is hair. Dress code policies are often not written to be inclusive to those with different hair types. It is reasonable to require that employees' hair be neat and clean. However, you shouldn't associate neat and clean with straight hair. Curly hair of all levels and textures and protective styles such as braids are also clean, professional options. Women of color are often targeted by hair and grooming policies. Before approaching an employee about a concern, consider whether you could be falling into unconscious bias.

Banning unnatural hair colors is also allowable, though this rule has been going out of style. Gen Z and Millennials use creative hair colors as a form of self-expression, and many companies are becoming more lenient regarding unnatural colors. Consider the overall culture and image of the company and customer perceptions when deciding whether to allow unnatural hair colors. If you're a tech startup or creative company, you may want to allow them. If your company operates in a more traditional industry where clients may have a bad impression of bright and unnatural hair colors, consider the impact on the business.

Use gender-neutral policies

Another concern is gender-specific dress codes. I would recommend avoiding these altogether. Focus on what articles of clothing are appropriate for the workplace, but leave it up to the employees to create an outfit that fits the requirements and feels comfortable to them.

Having separate dress codes for men and women is often unnecessary in office settings. It also excludes nonbinary staff members who may feel as though neither or both labels apply to them. All gender identities and expressions should feel comfortable working within the dress code. Gender identity is a protected characteristic under Title VII, as clarified by the Supreme Court last year in [Bostock v. Clayton County](#), so ensure that your policy is written and applied in a manner that would not be discriminatory to any employees based on their gender identity.

Be realistic

Ultimately your dress code policy should be realistic. Don't require a long-sleeve dress shirt, blazer, and tie if your staff would be uncomfortable. Professional appearance is important, but be flexible. People will do their best work when they are comfortable and feel respected.

Your dress code should be clear, easy-to-follow, and enforceable.