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FASHION IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

Workplace environments differ across industries and geographic locations. They can be construction sites or stores, farms or factories, kitchens or classrooms, airplanes or ocean vessels. As such, clothing requirements differ dramatically. Yet Euro-American expectations for office attire—the focus of this survey—have been significant for not only those in the corporate world but for society at large. From [John T. Molloy's *Dress for Success*](#) guidebook to Donna Karan's "Seven Easy Pieces" and Giorgio Armani's unstructured suits, what professionals are permitted to wear reflects and reinforces ideas about gender relations, the boundaries between personal and professional life, and the nature of success. Though uniforms are not required, office employees must navigate a set of spoken and unspoken rules. Formalized dress codes and categories such as business formal, business professional, business casual, and creative professional are intended to guide employees toward appropriate attire, yet their definitions can be elusive. Meanwhile, labels like Calvin Klein and Céline help define what is stylish and suitable for the working wardrobe. As the nature of the workplace changes, expectations for professional dress—and for its designers—evolve.

History and Significance of Fashion in the Workplace

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For the increasing number of male clerical workers entering the workforce in nineteenth-century Euro-American cities, clothing choices were relatively limited. A shirt, detachable collar, waistcoat, and trousers were worn with a frock coat and top hat; these were replaced with a morning coat and bowler hat as a shift in fashion occurred. Dark wool suits could be purchased as ready-to-wear, but leading businessmen sported bespoke, or custom-made, suits from London's Savile Row, where the world's best tailors plied their trade.

In the twentieth century, jobs were classified as either white collar or blue collar. These designations differentiated higher-status salaried professionals in office jobs from lower-status hourly-paid factory employees or those participating in manual and industrial work. The names for these occupational categorizations originated from the types of clothing each would wear—fine white cotton button-downs versus utilitarian chambray or denim shirts.

Meanwhile, the sartorial objective of a twentieth-century female secretary was to adopt a neat, no-frills appearance achieved through wool skirts and washable cotton blouses called shirtwaists. By the 1920s, jersey ensembles were considered office-appropriate as well, but women were warned against appearing too fashionable. Functionality, efficiency, and smartness in appearance were essential.

By mid-century, women working as secretaries, typists, and switchboard operators could opt for pencil skirts, blouses, and cardigans, or conservative skirt suits, or dresses. Attractive hair, good grooming, and hosiery were requisites; women were expected to add a modest yet feminine touch to the male-centric office environment. It was uncommon for women to rise to middle- or upper-management positions. For men, conformity was key. The gray flannel suit became an unofficial uniform in the 1950s; it was the bestselling style at Brooks Brothers and even inspired a novel (1955) and film (1956) called *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

In response to these rigid gender expectations, subsequent generations pushed back. Their rejection of conservative values was expressed from the late 1950s to the 1970s through an array of new fashions and countercultural categorizations from beatnik to mod to hippie. Skirts ranged from mini- to midi- to maxi-length. Trousers were established as comfortable and functional alternatives to skirts, while a fad for super-short hot pants threw a wrench into previous standards of modesty in women's dress. Simultaneously, the so-called peacock revolution saw menswear embrace new garments, including the comfortable and casual polyester leisure suit and the mandarin-collared Nehru jacket. The Pandora's box was open: fashion had been permanently altered by a kaleidoscope of new colors, styles, and synthetic textiles. Many professionals faced the paradox of choice and lacked clarity over whether these styles were office-appropriate.

The 1970s saw high unemployment and stiff job competition. Thus, first impressions became crucial. Sales of classic two- and three-piece men's suits increased, particularly for first-time suit owners who had dabbled in countercultural styles yet sought a way into the workplace. Some professional women relied on skirt and blouse combinations, while others adopted crisp cotton dresses. Still others made the shift to pantsuits. The broad-shouldered styles worn by assertive 1940s film stars like Katherine Hepburn began to serve as inspiration for women seeking to make a powerful impression.

Providing a voice of reason was [John T. Molloy](#), whose style philosophy took hold of the Euro-American business community from the mid-1970s through the 1980s. A corporate image consultant, Molloy published *Dress for Success* in 1975, followed by *The Women's Dress for Success Book* in 1977. Rooted in sociologist Erving Goffman's theories about impression management and self-presentation, these best-selling guides employed a scientific tone and identified tried-and-true styles that were easy to mix and match, replacing bewildering choice with sartorial stability. For men, *Dress for Success* recommended a tailored black, navy, or gray suit, shirt, conservative tie, polished leather shoes, and a briefcase. This look, known as the power suit, conveyed authority, competence, and status.

For women, a much more body-conscious approach—minimizing sexual appeal while still appearing feminine—was recommended. A gray or navy tailored blazer and knee-length skirt, white blouse, pantyhose, and plain pumps were considered appropriate, especially when paired with ladylike accessories such as scarves or understated jewelry. Softer accessories tempered the masculine severity of tailored pieces and established a serious, smart look—and reputation. *The Women's Dress for Success Book* offered to help readers strike the right balance between appearing too masculine, violating gender norms; too sexual, distracting male coworkers; or too delicate, risking infantilization. The right clothes, Molloy argued, would help neutralize and equalize the work atmosphere. Gender biases, financial and educational barriers, lack of mentorship, and many other obstacles hindered the professional advancement of women. Fueled by the success of the women's movement and a wave of social and legislative advancements that prohibited sex discrimination, women embraced the power suit as they strove to break through the glass ceiling.

The impact of Molloy's mantra was widespread. Corporations and business schools hired image consultants to ensure that top executives and future world leaders would put their best-dressed feet forward. The energy and ideology behind power dressing provided career-minded women with confidence, vestimentary tools, and social momentum that supported their pursuit of careers and lifestyles that previous generations were barred from. Films like *9 to 5* (1980) and *Working Girl* (1988) explored these newfound freedoms and their social, sexual, and style implications.

Workplace Fashion on the Catwalk

Numerous clothiers and designers responded to the dress for success movement. Some provided revolutionary takes on the power suit; others broke the mold with innovative career-ready collections. Men's retailers like Brooks Brothers expanded their offerings to women's wear, while department stores including Bloomingdale's and Lord & Taylor stepped in with stylists and personal shopping services designed for busy, career-minded consumers.

While Yves Saint Laurent's 1966 "Le Smoking" tuxedo suit and the women's pantsuits that followed were found to be liberating and empowering, many American designers took up the gauntlet and offered thoughtful style solutions in the 1970s and 1980s. Liz Claiborne, frustrated that the companies she had worked for neglected to provide suitable clothing for the working woman, launched her namesake brand of career-oriented separates in 1976. In addition to the boardroom-bound consumer, Claiborne considered women in other professional environments who could add stylish tunics, peasant-style blouses, and culottes to their working wardrobes. Bill Blass designed chic women's sportswear under his eponymous label, beginning in 1970. His suits ranged in style from classic and menswear-influenced to glamorous and boldly patterned. Endorsed by distinguished clients including First Ladies Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan, Blass's conservative and stylish designs were suitable for women in leadership positions. From the 1960s onward, Anne Klein designed versatile, neutral separates including bodysuits, wrap coats, turtlenecks, and trousers, keeping the working woman's comfort and style sensibilities in mind. While the label favored a warm palette of brown, beige, and cream, it was a light pink cashmere blazer that became one of their top-selling items in the mid-1980s. A widely imitated style, it hit the mark for corporate world confidence and pretty femininity. Under the leadership of Donna Karan, the diffusion line Anne Klein II continued to cater to the career woman's wardrobe, offering an urban edge at a lower price point. Donna Karan New York launched in 1985 with the revolutionary collection "Seven Easy Pieces," a system of interchangeable bodysuits, skirts, trousers, blouses, and blazers which could be effortlessly combined. Featuring sultry silhouettes, deep V-necks, and belted waistlines, the pieces were offered in black and beige and often accessorized with chunky gold jewelry. This proved to be a chic, sensual alternative to the prevailing boxy, masculine business look.

Keeping the focus on feminine tailoring, Perry Ellis created witty updated classics for women while gaining a reputation as a standout name for menswear in the 1980s. For men, he promoted a loosened-up formality through color, pattern, and unique construction details; one of the label's signature pieces was a dress shirt featuring a sleeve pleat at the shoulder. But arguably the most influential designer for men's business attire in the late twentieth century was Giorgio Armani. In 1976, Armani began creating men's suit jackets without linings or rigid internal padding. A significant departure from traditional Savile Row tailoring techniques, these unstructured suits met the demand for comfortable and smart suiting. Giorgio Armani became a household name after his effortlessly cool designs appeared on Richard Gere in the 1980 film *American Gigolo*.



David Fielden, fall/winter 1995. Source: Niall McInerney, Photographer © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

The 1990s saw a gradual shift away from power dressing ideals. Many workplaces instituted Casual Fridays, encouraging employees to dress down and ease into the weekend. This led to widespread acceptance of the business casual dress code, which generally suggests smart but less formal attire such as khakis or chinos; colored, plaid, or striped button-down shirts worn without neckties and with rolled-up sleeves; polo shirts; sweaters; and less formal footwear. These options are available to women, as are less formal blouses, dresses, and skirts with bare legs being permissible. Ralph Lauren, who began designing ties in 1967, became well known for the Polo brand and its popular logo-embroidered polos, oxford shirts, sweaters, and khaki trousers. Through the late 1960s into the 1980s, Calvin Klein designed tailored pieces along with more relaxed sportswear with day-to-night versatility and sensuality. His clean lines and minimalist sensibility were widely embraced in the 1990s as the brand expanded globally. Klein's edgy aesthetic, provocative advertisements, and innovative CK collection appealed to a younger consumer, while the denim division's continued success parallels the increasing casualness of the workplace from the 1990s into the twenty-first century.



Giorgio Armani, spring/summer 1993. Source: Niall McInerney, Photographer © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

New understandings of the corporate workplace have resulted in different dress considerations. Entrepreneurship, freelancing, telecommuting, and the use of e-mail and video conferencing rarely require professionals to dress formally. The introduction of computing saw the glamorization of new industries and office environments. A new tech-sector style was spurred on by Apple founder Steve Jobs, whose uniform consisted of a black Issey Miyake mock-turtleneck, Levi's 501 jeans, and white sneakers. This informal minimalist air has been widely adopted. Certain employment perks, such as the gyms found on corporate campuses, blur the line between professional and personal, formal and informal. And yet, with the explosion of social media, personal branding has become the watchword of the 2010s. For those who are on call and on display nonstop, crafting a suitable image, lifestyle, and wardrobe is essential. In creative industries like media, fashion, and design, a unique personal style is a desirable credential. Affluent professionals pair high-end pieces by labels like Céline, known for its sharp minimalism, with affordable high-street finds from H&M. Fashion magazines and blogs promote capsule wardrobes consisting of a limited number of high-quality, interchangeable separates of varying formality—not unlike Donna Karan's Seven Easy Pieces. Although business formal dress is restricted to just a few industries, many workplaces retain dress codes of varying specificity. Tailored suits are considered timeless investment pieces, indispensable for interviews. It seems that Molloy's advice on how far a little sartorial confidence can propel a professional still ring true.

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See also [1980s Style: Key Themes and Trends](#); [Anne Klein](#); [Bill Blass](#); [Calvin Klein](#); [Céline](#); [Donna Karan](#); [Jazz Style on the Catwalk, 1970s–2000s](#); [Giorgio Armani](#); [Men's Blazers and Jackets of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s](#); [Ralph Lauren](#); [Shoulder Pads](#); [Uniform](#); [Women's Blazers and Jackets of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s](#)