Business Casual Causes Confusion

Stephanie Armour

1 Business casual has become a staple of the office, but more companies are trying to enforce rules that set at least a minimum standard of dress, and an increasing number also are enforcing more formal attire — especially at meetings or on days when clients may visit the office. As summer heats up and fashion trends become even more laid-back, employers are wrestling with how to adopt dress-code policies that encourage both productivity and professionalism.

2 There is little question that business casual, largely popularized by the dot-com craze in Silicon Valley①, has permeated the workplace, with six in ten employers allowing a dress-down day at least once a week, according to a 2006 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management. But a backlash is brewing. The number of employers allowing casual dress days every day has plunged from 53% in 2002 to a new low of 38%.

3 The return to more dressed-up attire is, in part, because of the confusion generated by business casual standards. Should flip-flops, tennis shoes, jeans, shorts, T-shirts and sleeveless dresses be allowed? Younger employees are more likely to push the envelope, rankling more veteran generations who have long worked in offices where ties and skirts were expected no matter which day of the week it is. Many employers resent becoming fashion police.

4 "It started with casual Fridays and got out of hand," says June Webb, a fashion consultant in Alexandria. "Now companies are starting to clamp down a little bit. They've found women have a tendency to show off too much skin, and men tend to show up in clothes that are wrinkled and not ironed."

5 Despite the push toward a more dressed-up workplace, employer policies still run the gamut. Some are gussying up. Because firms like McGrath/Power② are based in the

① Silicon Valley: a nickname for the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay Area, which is located in part of the U.S. state of California known as Northern California. It is home to many of the world's largest high-tech corporations, as well as thousands of startup companies.

② McGrath / Power: short for McGrath / Power Public Relations and Communications, which is Silicon Valley's most established digital communications and public relations agency. Its bi-coastal U.S. presence and offices around the world give us diverse vantage points to forge engagement with target audiences and create the industry's biggest success stories.

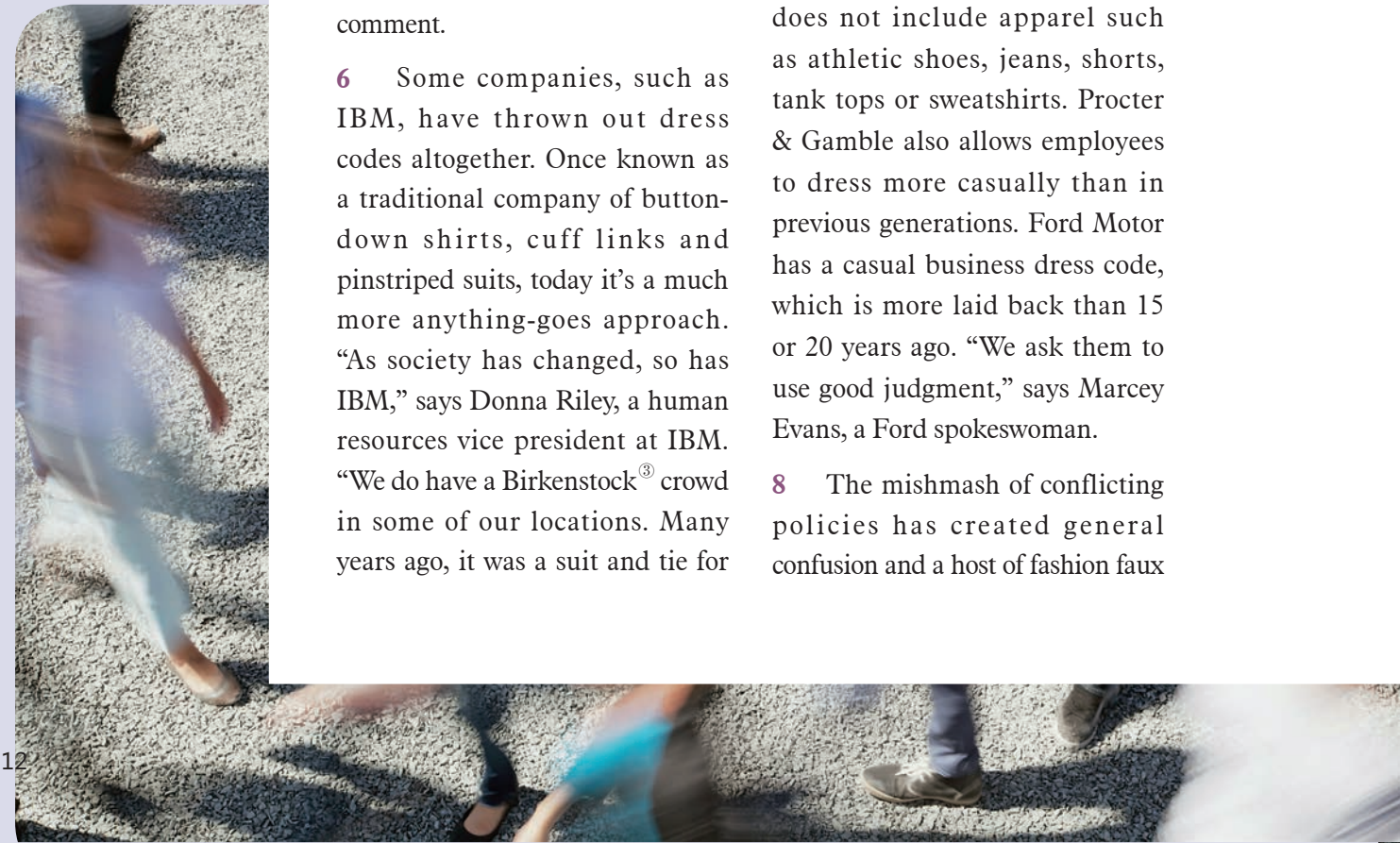
heart of Silicon Valley, they used to allow shorts, T-shirts and baseball caps. But now they require a more businesslike attire, with business casual including slacks and skirts. Still, there have been situations where employees have been asked to take off a baseball cap, leave on a sweater or not wear something again. With the third warning, employees are sent home to change. "The pendulum has swung," says CEO Jonathan Bloom. "We went through a too-casual period. In the aftermath of the dot-com bubble, we tightened things up a little. When we were very casual, the quality of the work wasn't as good." Others are getting strict. In Auburn, N.Y., the city manager made headlines in April when he banned most city employees from wearing jeans on Fridays, a day that had long been reserved for casual attire. His office did not return calls seeking comment.

6 Some companies, such as IBM, have thrown out dress codes altogether. Once known as a traditional company of button-down shirts, cuff links and pinstriped suits, today it's a much more anything-goes approach. "As society has changed, so has IBM," says Donna Riley, a human resources vice president at IBM. "We do have a Birkenstock③ crowd in some of our locations. Many years ago, it was a suit and tie for men and skirt, dress and stockings for women. Today's policy says we trust our employees to use good judgment." In an IBM research lab in San Jose, Calif., Dan Gruhl, 35, a researcher who works in text analytics, typically shows up in flip-flops and shorts. He owns only two button-down shirts. "Having a relaxed environment encourages you to think more openly," Gruhl says, "Dress is part of a much larger culture. It really encourages camaraderie."

7 General Motors, where suits were once expected, now is also much more casual. While business casual is considered appropriate during the workweek, employees representing GM to customers, suppliers and visitors are expected to dress consistently with the norms and expectations of the meeting or event. Business casual does not include apparel such as athletic shoes, jeans, shorts, tank tops or sweatshirts. Procter & Gamble also allows employees to dress more casually than in previous generations. Ford Motor has a casual business dress code, which is more laid back than 15 or 20 years ago. "We ask them to use good judgment," says Marcey Evans, a Ford spokeswoman.

8 The mishmash of conflicting policies has created general confusion and a host of fashion faux

③ Birkenstock: a shoe manufacturer headquartered in Neustadt (Wied), Germany. The company sells Birkenstock, a German brand of sandals and other shoes notable for their contoured cork and rubber footbeds.



pas. Fifty-five percent of employees consider tank tops and exposed undergarments the season's top work-wear mishap, according to an April survey by Monster, an online career and recruitment resource. Nearly 30% cited flip-flops, while just 8% were put off by Hawaiian-print shirts. The online poll got more than 18,000 responses. It's enough to baffle executives like Suzie Boland, president of RFB Communications Group in Tampa. "I saw something new recently. It was an invitation to an evening business reception that said the dress was 'dressy business casual.'"

9 When it comes to dress policies, there are legal issues, too. Employers who enforce dress codes on women but not men risk sexual discrimination claims, and companies also can get in trouble for taking some steps, such as banning styles that are worn as part of religious beliefs. Some have been sued over policies, such as dress codes requiring Muslim female employees to remove headscarves. In June, a Phoenix jury awarded $287,000 to a Somali employee who had worked at Alamo Car Rental. The Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ④ says the company engaged in religious discrimination for firing her for wearing the scarf during Ramadan.

10 But employers can legally enforce dress requirements as long as they are not discriminatory, and courts have given employers leeway. Harrah's Casino in Reno requires women to wear makeup. Bartender Darlene Jespersen sued the company, saying the policy discriminated against women. In April 2006, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with a lower-court ruling that it was not unlawful gender-based discrimination for an employer to dismiss a female bartender for not complying with dress and grooming standards.

11 Greater leeway is also creating increasing havoc for job interviewees, who are finding the traditional suit may make them seem too stodgy in a more laid-back workplace atmosphere. How employees look can affect how they're perceived: Thirty-six percent of respondents said those who dress casually are perceived as more creative, yet 49% said they run the risk of being taken less seriously, according to a 2006 survey by online job service TheLadders.com. But dress is also about personal statement and comfort, and that's why some employees such as Jennifer Cohen, the marketing employee in Philadelphia, bristles at policies and attitudes that she believes stifle self-expression.

(Total words: 1088)

④ The Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC): a U.S. organization that is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, colour, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information.

Comprehension Check

I. Reading for specific information

Answer the following questions according to the text.

1. What confusion does business casual cause in the office?

2. Why do some companies decide to require employees to be dressed in more formal attire?

3. Why is business casual encouraged in some companies?

4. What strategy does the author use to present the attitudes of companies toward business casual?

5. What type of discrimination may dress policies of companies provoke?

6. What does the author mean by saying "how employees look can affect how they're perceived"?

II. Reading and making interpretations

Read the text again more carefully. Paraphrase the following sentences from the text.

1. As summer heats up and fashion trends become even more laid-back, employers are wrestling with how to adopt dress-code policies that encourage both productivity and professionalism.

2. Younger employees are more likely to push the envelope, rankling more veteran generations who have long worked in offices where ties and skirts were expected no matter which day of the week it is.

3. The mishmash of conflicting policies has created general confusion and a host of fashion faux pas.

4. Greater leeway is also creating increasing havoc for job interviewees, who are finding the traditional suit may make them seem too stodgy in a more laid-back workplace atmosphere.