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"With Change in Economy Comes Change in Dress"

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The business casual backlash, it seems, has begun.

No, there has not been any across-the-board rescinding of the business casual policies that in recent years have taken over the workplace. But at least one major firm, Philadelphia's Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, has told its workers to watch out, lest they find themselves back in pantyhose and pinstripes.

"We are not yet ready to pull the plug on the business casual policy," wrote a senior partner in a firm wide e-mail distributed to employees. "However, I am confident we will eventually repeal the policy unless people dress in a more business-like manner."

While this lawyer's missive caused a fair amount of grumbling within the firm, I can tell you that he's not alone in his sentiments.

Business casual became all the rage in the past couple of years, particularly as normally buttoned-down firms started to woo high-tech clients who took their casual dress seriously. But there remained a vocal minority, of whom I consider myself a member, who wish we hadn't gone through that door.

Yes, the workplace is becoming more casual. And, yes, the high-tech clients who were so coveted didn't want to be the only ones in the room not wearing suits. But there were two problems with "bis cas" policies: Lawyers were paid a lot of money to inspire confidence, and it's hard to do that when you look like a creature from a Gap ad; also, too many people took "business casual" to mean "dress like you're in a garage band."

Let's face it, there's something a little cocky about casual dress codes. It says to the client, "Hey, you need me more than I need you, so I'm going to dress for you as if I were dressing for a golf game. Got a problem with that?"

Pantyhose and Neckties

Business casual really hit its stride back when the economy was booming like mad, and new work was walking in the door, practically unbidden.

Like so many things, however, the pendulum is beginning to swing back on the casual dress code.

With the economy a bit less robust these days, firms (and all businesses, for that matter) are a bit more hat-in-hand. So it serves us all to approach our clients with all the reverence we can muster.

That doesn't mean we have to revert to the days when everybody wore suits day in and day out. But there's a middle ground between pinstripes and miniskirts. And although the "business casual" dress codes were meant to be that middle ground, the reality is that too many people are erring on the "casual" side of "business casual." Frankly, too many of us just don't look like lawyers any more. And if I'm paying somebody \$300 an hour, I want him to look like a lawyer.

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Of course, we still have to listen to and watch our clients. If you're summoned to a meeting and the client specifies casual or business casual attire, you'll just look like an idiot if you show up in a suit. One obviously has to use common sense.

But it's always safer to play it a little conservative, particularly if you're young and particularly if you're a young woman. You're still proving your worth, and suits convey more competence than khakis.

It's a buyer's market now, so it's time for the sellers to start looking a little more conscientious. Whether you're a would-be associate looking for a job or a senior rainmaker trying to drum up business, it's not a bad idea to spiff up your wardrobe and stop buying all your clothes at Banana Republic.

Besides, you may need to start re-stocking your pantyhose and necktie stash for the eventual return of business attire.