

Science Says That Workplace Dress-Code Flexibility Gives Employees Better Self-Esteem and Confidence

HR Brew | Susanna Vogel | October 20, 2022



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Researchers found that on days when employees thought their outfits were attractive, workers felt better about themselves and made more progress toward their goals.

When Joseph Kim, assistant professor of management at West Chester University, was a doctorate student, his colleague, Ryan Vogel, said he let fashion fall by the wayside. Clothes are “not very important,” Vogel quipped, when you’re focusing on surviving a PhD program. But even if Kim didn’t notice whether his socks matched, Vogel did notice his wife’s fashion—and observed that she seemed happier when she dressed better. As the saying goes: happy wife, happy life—and in this case, it was also the spark for a new research project.

Kim, Vogel, and his colleagues wanted to understand the relationship between how people dress and how they feel, and if it translates to productivity on the job. By helping workers feel good in their ‘fits, they wagered, HR could unlock productivity gains. After all, encouraging flexible dress can act as a “simple, low-cost intervention,” according to the study.

Trying it on for size. To determine whether attire affects employee performance, the team measured self-esteem, coworker interaction, and progress toward goals at four organizations over 10 days. Each day, employees rated their outfit's attractiveness, uniqueness, and conformity with organization expectations, and recorded their workplace behavior.

They found that on days when employees thought their outfits were attractive, workers felt better about themselves and made more progress toward their goals. Workers generally felt the same about unique outfits, although when they interacted frequently with coworkers, there was some benefit to conformity (i.e., fitting in); on more social days, employees who felt their outfits matched their peers felt better about themselves.

Okay but...Just how much did pretty clothes matter? Did the workers get a whole quarter's worth of work done in a day? Well, no. But for a cheap productivity hack, it did pay some dividends.

Workers' outfit satisfaction generated the same productivity boost as asking workers to plan out their days ahead of time or pairing employees with "non-abusive supervisors," or those who don't treat employees with sustained hostility.

A possible alternative explanation for the findings could be that employees dressed well on days they knew they needed to #grind. To rule out the "dress for the day" theory, Vogel said the team designed a second study, in which employees were randomly assigned different outfits and asked to complete tasks. Much to his surprise, the clothing still affected the outcomes.

"It was counter to my previous knowledge of what I thought I knew about clothing."

So, what? Vogel said organizations should adopt dress codes that establish general organizational norms but allow for "personal flair."

"We know that it's important for people to feel both a sense of belonging to a community or an organization as well as a sense of distinctiveness," Vogel said. "Organizations...are focusing very, very much on people fitting in...which is a good thing, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they have to forego their own identities."

To toe the line, the authors suggested that HR encourage individuality in dress, following, for example, Disney and UPS in allowing employees to show tattoos, while also offering "organizationally branded clothing items," like shirts or fleece vests, to employees who want to fit in.

Above all, the research suggests promoting a "look good, feel good" culture—whatever that means to individual employees—to get productivity perks. (Sorry to those who were hoping to RTO in sweatpants.)