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A study to determine how casual dress in the workplace affects employee morale and productivity

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A STUDY TO DETERMINE HOW CASUAL DRESS IN THE WORKPLACE
AFFECTS EMPLOYEE MORALE AND PRODUCTIVITY.

By

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Abstract

Marisa Avallone Sharkey

A STUDY TO DETERMINE HOW CASUAL DRESS IN THE WORKPLACE
AFFECTS EMPLOYEE MORALE AND PRODUCTIVITY.

2000

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin

Master of Arts in Public Relations

The purpose of this study was to provide managers and key decision makers insight into how casual dress work environments compare to traditional corporate cultures by assessing the impact of casual dress on employee morale and productivity, two vital influencers of the bottom line.

Using a survey, based on a literature review, the author surveyed 148 human resources and performance management professionals serving in a human resources capacity in American companies. Responses were hand-coded and double-checked for accuracy.

This study has indicated that, overall, employee morale does improve as dress codes become more casual. However, the percentage of those surveyed that agree with this (65 percent) is lower than in previous studies.

Overall, human resources professionals indicated that productivity decreases as dress codes become more casual, but the results differ depending on the size of the company. In very small companies (one to 25 employees), it was found that 36 percent of respondents felt that productivity increases and another 36 percent felt that it decreases as dress codes become more

casual. In slightly larger companies (26 to 100 employees), human resources professionals felt that productivity slightly decreased as dress codes became more casual. In companies even larger, approximately half of the respondents (53 percent) felt that there was no change and approximately 40 percent felt that it improved to some degree.

In companies of 501 to 1000 employees, opinion bounced back the other way again with half of those surveyed feeling that productivity decreases when dress codes became more casual. In companies with more than 1000 employees, the tide turned once again with an equal number of respondents believing that casual dress codes either had no effect on or improved employee productivity.

Mini-Abstract

This study aimed to provide managers and key decision makers insight into how casual dress work environments compare to traditional corporate cultures by assessing the impact of casual dress on employee morale and productivity, two vital influencers of the bottom line.

This study has indicated that, overall, employee morale does improve as dress codes become more casual. Overall, productivity is indicated as being somewhat lowered as dress codes become more casual, but results differ depending on the size of the company.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to everyone who has supported me not only throughout the writing of this thesis but throughout the entire graduate program.

Foremost I thank my parents and my wonderful new husband Jeff for their love, support and encouragement. I thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Don Bagin, for his patience and guidance. I also thank everyone at Anne Klein & Associates for their understanding and support throughout the comprehensive exams and the writing of this thesis.

Last, but not least, I thank my Uncle Pat for helping with the surveys while I was enjoying my honeymoon and my friends for keeping me sane the past year.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

Today, 90 percent of companies and employers allow some form of "casual dress" in the workplace, according to a survey by the Bureau of National Affairs (BNA) [1].

With its beginnings in Silicone Valley back in the 1980s, dress down work environments soon took off and quickly gained popularity throughout Corporate America. First, companies adopted this new look just on Fridays. Today, an increasing number of organizations dress down every day.

Human resources managers surveyed by BNA conclude this is good for their companies. Forty-seven percent believe casual dress boosts productivity and 85 percent say it improves morale. [2]

Yet, in a recent study of high-level executives in companies throughout the country indicates that this may be a fad; a fad that has been causing the deterioration of corporate values. [3]

Need for the Study

Many companies and managers are still torn about casual-dress work environments.

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[1] Merrick, Bill. Credit Union Magazine. June 1999. Page 70.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Business Week. "Casual Dress: Is it Fraying the Fiber of Business," Jeff Magee International Inc. March 1999.

Some hail them as a welcome step into a more relaxed, people-oriented Corporate America, while others see them as a harbinger of corporate downfall that is getting completely out of hand. It has recently been reported that dress-down policies can increase worker productivity, open communication lines between staff and managers, provide cost savings to employees, and improve work quality. [4] However, another recent story reported that business owners and national human resources experts believe that this relaxed dress trend is leading a plethora of serious personnel problems, ranging from sexual harassment lawsuits to lower productivity. [5]

With an organization's chance of survival tenuous in this day and age, decision makers have no room for error when instituting policy; this includes defining corporate culture and determining how any given environment will affect the bottom line.

As employees spend increasing amounts of time at work and job jumping is on the rise, employee satisfaction and morale are vital to an organization's success. If employees are not happy at work, dissent occurs. Since employees are a company's first line of defense and its best ambassadors, organizations cannot afford low morale. As corporate culture often dictates employee morale and productivity levels, it directly affects the bottom line.

Statement of the Problem

This study sets out to determine whether overall employee morale and productivity are greater in casual dress work environments or in more traditional corporate cultures.

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[4] Gutierrez, Terri and John R. Freese. CPA Journal. April 1999. Pages 32-34.

[5] Associated Press. "Dress Codes Making Comback in Some Companies." Chicago. August 6, 1999.

Limitations

This study is limited to human resources and performance management professionals serving in a human resources capacity in white collar corporations and offices in the United States. Respondents comprised members of the HR Network, HRKN (Human Resources Knowledge Network, HRNET and the performance management e-groups subscribers to the newsletter *Communications Solutions*.

Purpose

This study aims to provide managers and key decision makers insight into how casual dress work environments compare to traditional corporate cultures by assessing the impact of casual dress on employee morale and productivity, two vital influences on the bottom line.

Procedures

As Chapter Three discusses in more detail, research was conducted on the Internet through various Web sites using the key words casual workplace," "dress down days," "employee morale," and "employee productivity." The author then continued the research at Savitz Library at Rowan University using same key words in the Lexis-Nexis ® search. The information collectively generated in these searches was then analyzed and used to develop a short survey.

A cover letter was written introducing the author and the study and inviting the receiver to participate in the study by completing the questionnaire and returning it to the author. The

survey and the cover letter were reviewed and critiqued by Dr. Don Bagin of Rowan University and seven students in Rowan University's graduate public relations program. Revisions were made based on these individuals' observations.

A message was then posted on four e-groups briefly explaining the project and asking the members if they would be interested in completing a survey, and, if so, to provide contact information that would remain confidential. The survey, along with the cover letter, was also mailed to 474 human resources professionals who are also subscribers to the newsletter *Communications Solutions*. The surveys were then coded and the results were analyzed. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made.

Terminology

Business casual/semi-casual: Khakis acceptable at work during the week, blazers or sportcoats preferred. Jeans and tennis shoes not acceptable.

Casual dress environments: the workplace atmospheres at companies where casual and business casual/semi-casual dress is appropriate and/or acceptable.

Casual Friday: Full suits necessary at work Monday through Thursday only.

Corporate culture: The environment at work.

Dress down: Traditional business attire, such as the suit, not necessary at work. Casual and business casual/semi-casual dress appropriate and/or acceptable at work.

Strict business: Full suits necessary at work five days per week.

Very casual: Jeans, sneakers permitted at work five days per week.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Research

Varying degrees of research were conducted. Background information was collected from a variety of Web sites through a search of the world wide web using the search engines Yahoo! and Infoseek. The key words "casual workplace," "dress down days," "employee morale," and "employee productivity" were referenced and then cross-referenced with one another. A specialized search of human resources publications was conducted through the SHRM (Society of Human Resources Management) Web site.

A total of 21 articles, with dates ranging from February 1996 through September 1999, retrieved through these initial Internet searches. Eleven of these directly related to the thesis topic and were used for this study.

Research was also conducted at Savitz Library at Rowan University in October, 1999, via the Lexis-Nexis ® search. As in the initial search, the key words "casual workplace," "dress down days," "employee morale," and "employee productivity" were referenced and then cross-referenced with one another. Thirteen articles and five television transcripts were found.

History/Background

A product that originated in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, casual dress in corporate environments has since become standard in more than 87 percent of American companies[6] and

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[6] Adams, Jacqueline. CBS This Morning. August 9, 1997.

90 percent of companies and employers allow some form of "casual dress" in the workplace. [7]

Eighty-seven percent of executives surveyed by Management Recruiters International say that

the business suit will disappear within 10 years. [8] To date, no global, definitive definition of

"casual dress' exists, yet, The Bureau of National Affairs reports that almost two-thirds of

companies that endorse dress actually have a written code. [9]

Overview/Analysis

Inconsistent results and conflicting views toward the topic were reported in the research.

Advocates state that it increases employee morale; it offers more comfort, greater flexibility and

creativity in wardrobe choices; and it's less costly . . . But there are many who are less

enthusiastic, concerned about whether casual dress signals (or causes) a casual work ethic. [10]

A 1992 study by Levi Strauss & Co. reported that 81 percent of white-collar workers said

that casual dress improved morale. [11] The same organization, in partnership with the Society for

Human Resources Management (SHRM) commissioned a 1995 nationwide study of 505 human

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[7] Merrick, Bill. "Don't be Casual about your Dress Code Policies," Credit Union Magazine. June 1999.

[8] Gage, Amy. "On Balance," Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News. Saint Paul Pioneer Press. April 25, 1999.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Busey, Barbara. "Strategies in Small Business: Don't Let Casual Days Lead to Chaos at your Workplace," The Business Journal of Charlotte. September 8, 1997.

[11] Gordon, Bob, Jac Lee, Chris Picard and Michele Stamps. "HR Shows its Fall Collection," www.valenj.org. August 1996.

resources managers that found that those surveyed indicated that business casual dress increases morale and is viewed as a perk. [12]

A more recent study of casual dress trends was conducted by Jeff Magee International Inc. from the third quarter of 1997 through 1998 among 500 firms from Fortune 500 to small businesses. This study found that in workplaces where casual dress was permitted, more than 50.75 percent of respondents felt that people were not as focused, committed and/or as loyal to their job, their teammates or their employers as when in traditional business attire. They also felt that the more an environment relaxed, the more employees wanted. Ultimately, this feeling led to an overall impression of "me-ism," which actually worked against the "team" concept. [13]

The research also indicates that a shift in attitudes toward the topic may be occurring. Early studies indicated that better employee morale and higher levels of productivity resulted from casual dress in the workplace; however, more recent studies have suggested that this is no longer the case due to companies not setting strict guidelines, which leads to employees taking dressing casually at work to extremes.

Proponents

In a segment on CNNfn's *Who's in Charge*, Consultant Quinn Spitzer commented that casual dress in the workplace is "good for business by improving morale and productivity. He

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[12] Gordon, Bob, Jack Lee, Chris Picard and Michele Stamps. "HR Shows its Fall Collection," www.valenj.org. August 1996.

[13] Business Week. "Casual Dress: Is it Fraying the Fiber of Business," Jeff Magee International Inc. March 1999.

cited statistics showing that 70 percent of employees thought it improves morale and that 57 percent said that it improved their rapport with their bosses. He also said that 51 percent of employees thought that they are more productive when dressed casually at work, but acknowledged that he did not have any research to prove this. [14] An article in *The Detroit News* mirrored this sentiment by reporting that dressing down often translates into higher morale and greater productivity. [15]

In *CPA Journal*, it was reported that some of the known benefits of a dress-down policy included improved employee morale, a lack of cost to the employer, increased worker productivity, more open communications lines between staff and managers, cost savings to employees, and improved work quality. [16]

Another study by Lands' End of human resources managers found that 47 percent of the managers surveyed believe that casual dress boosts productivity and that 85 percent said that it improves morale. [17]

Human resources managers surveyed by Levi Strauss & Co. of San Francisco in a partnership with SHRM in a 1995 nationwide survey indicated that business casual increases morale and is viewed as a perk by saving employees money, attracting new employees and

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[14] Spitzer, Quinn. "Who's in Charge," CNNfn. July 21, 1997.

[15] Novoselick, Paul. "Casual Catches on in U.S. Workplace," The Detroit News. November 5, 1997.

[16] Gutierrez, Terri and John R. Freese. "Dress Down Days," CPA Journal. April 1999. Pages 32-34.

[17] Merrick, Bill. "Don't be Casual about your Dress Code Policies," Credit Union Magazine. June 1999.

increasing productivity. [18]

Opponents

In the beginning, managers saw casual dress in the workplace as a way to improve

workers' lives; however over the years, it can be debated that casual dress has created more

problems than it has solved. [19] Even though 79 percent of employees say casual dress improves

morale among employees, executives disagree on whether if signals employee-friendliness or a

decline of standards [20] and workers are increasingly complaining that casual attire has become a

corporate straitjacket. [21]

"The business casual trend has been such a double-edged sword," said Nancy Nix-Rice,

the founder of image consulting firm First Impressions and author of *Looking Good: A*

Comprehensive Guide to Wardrobe Planning, Color & Personal Style Development. "There was

a lot of research initially that seemed to substantiate that it improved morale and performance . . .

but what seems to have happened is that it decayed to such an extreme (that the opposite is

happening.)" [22]

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[18] Walter, Kate. "Dress for Success and Comfort," HR Magazine. June 1996. Pages 55-60

[19] Gage, Amy. "On Balance," Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News. Saint Paul Pioneer Press. April 25, 1999.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Adams, Jacueline. CBS This Morning. August 9, 1997.

[22] Jacoby, Nicole. "Dress for Success no Myth," CNNfn. December 8, 1999.

9

An August 6, 1999 AP story reported that business owners and national human resources experts are saying that the relaxed dress trend is leading a plethora of serious personnel problems, ranging from sexual harassment lawsuits to lower productivity due to declining customer services. [24] The same story went on to quote Anne Pasley-Stuart, president of Pasley-Stuart Human Resources Consultants, who discussed that in 1998, Pasley-Stuart's clients began complaining about casual dress codes, "Productivity didn't seem to be the same (as before). Some organizations were having to send people home without pay because their attire was inappropriate . . . Casual clothes were translating into casual attitudes." [25]

In the same story, Beverley O'Conner, office manager for Korn-Ferry International, one of the nation's largest executive search firms, reported that Korn-Ferry found that "casual dress fostered a casual attitude." [26]

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[24] Associated Press. "Dress Codes Making Comeback in Some Companies." Chicago. August 6, 1999.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

Chapter Three

Procedures

Five strategies of compiling research were used for this study. To obtain background information on the topic, searches on the world wide web were conducted via Yahoo! and Infoseek. The key words "casual workplace," "dress down days," "employee morale," and "employee productivity" were referenced and then cross-referenced with one another.

Because this early research implied that the subject of casual dress workplaces is often addressed by human resources professionals, a special search of human resources publications again using the key words above was conducted through the SHRM (Society of Human Resources Management) web site. A total of six articles, with dates ranging from February 1996 through September 1999, relating to the thesis topic were retrieved through these initial Internet searches.

For the next phase of research, the Internet was again employed. This time, it was used to reach out to public relations professionals to gain additional insight into and information about the issue from people who have experienced it first hand. A message was posted on "PRNet" that explained the study, how casual workplaces relate to employees' morale and productivity levels. The question, "Has anyone observed anything you deem noteworthy regarding this issue in your organization?" was then posted. Subsequently, three practitioners responded with observations and advice on other sources of information that should be reviewed.

Findings published in articles in newspapers, magazines and professional journals were analyzed, as well as television and radio reports. These were researched at Savitz Library in Rowan University in late October, 1999, and accessed using the Lexis-Nexis ® search. As in the

initial search, the key words "casual workplace," "dress down days," "employee morale," and "employee productivity" were referenced and then cross-referenced with one another. Thirteen articles and five television transcripts were found; 11 of these were less than one year old.

Following a through review of the articles and research data generated through the above searches, a survey geared toward human resources and performance management professionals was constructed. This survey would be used to find out if there a correlation between casual attire and employees' morale and productivity.

To gather information from a large population of human resources professionals, more than one means was employed. Professionals were solicited to participate in the survey through four e-groups: HR Network, HRKN (Human Resources Knowledge Network), HRNET and the performance management e-group. Approximately 2,000 members comprise these groups; however, because membership in more than one group is possible, the exact population is not known. A message was posted to members of these four groups briefly explaining the project and the survey. The professionals were then asked if they would be interested in completing a survey and, if so, to provide contact information that would be kept confidential. Thirty-seven responded, however seven could not be included in the study because they were from foreign countries.

A mailing list of 500 of the human resources professionals who subscribe to the industry newsletter *Communications Solutions* was rented and the survey was mailed to 474 of these to complete. Because the study was limited to corporations, the survey was not mailed to the 26 that represented hospitals and places of worship. Eight surveys were returned for incorrect addresses. Of the professionals who received the survey mailed, 118 responded.

A total of 148 surveys were used for this thesis. The surveys were then coded.

Following this initial tabulation, the surveys were separated by organization size. These were subsequently coded by the respondents' views on how dress codes affect employee morale, productivity and the overall quality of work.

The results were analyzed and conclusions were drawn. Recommendations were then made based on the findings.

Chapter Four

Research Data

This study was conducted to determine how dress codes at work affect employees' morale and productivity. Through a survey that was distributed to human resources and performance management professionals serving in a human resources capacity in American companies, answers to the following questions were sought:

- Do casual dress codes negatively or positively impact employee morale?

- Do casual dress codes negatively or positively impact workplace productivity?

- Do casual dress codes negatively or positively impact the overall quality of work?

- How do the majority of employees dress at work?

- How do employees feel about their dress codes at work?

A total of 155 surveys were completed and returned; however only 148 of these could be used since seven were returned by international professionals and this study was limited to American companies.

In this chapter, the survey results are presented, along with a question-by-question breakdown, frequency and percentage, of responses to the questions.

The questions regarding how dress codes affect employee morale, productivity, and the quality of work are also broken down by size of the organization. All of the responses were hand-tabulated.

Survey responses

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	5	33.8
Decreases slightly	16	10.8
Doesn't change	26	17.6
Improves slightly	60	40.5
Improves significantly	36	24.3
Don't know	5	33.8
Total	148	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	6	4.1
Decreases slightly	36	24.3
Doesn't change	38	25.7
Improves slightly	44	29.7
Improves significantly	18	12.2
Don't know	6	4.1
Total	148	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	7	4.7
Decreases slightly	23	15.5
Doesn't change	67	45.3
Improves slightly	29	19.6
Improves significantly	15	10.1
Don't know	7	4.7
Total	148	

How would you describe your organization's dress code?

	Frequency	Percent
Very casual (jeans, sneakers permitted five days per week)	25	16.7
Business casual/Semi-casual (khakis acceptable during the week, blazers or sportcoat preferred)	85	57.4
Strict business (full suits necessary five days per week)	4	2.7
Casual Friday (full suits necessary Monday through Thursday only)	17	11.5
Other	17	11.5
Total	148	

How do you feel the majority of your company's employees view the corporate dress code

(either written or implied)?

	Frequency	Percent
Too relaxed	9	6.0
Just right	96	64.9
Too strict	30	20.3
Don't know	13	8.8
Total	148	

How large is your organization?

	Frequency	Percent
One to 25 employees	44	29.7
26 to 100 employees	30	20.3
101 to 500 employees	34	22.8
501 to 1000 employees	10	6.8
1001 employees	30	20.3
Total	148	

Observations and other comments included in the surveys by the respondents were:

- We went to business casual three months ago after 20 years of "ties required." No changes of any kind in employee behavior.

- Morale is not the issue at all. The issue is attitude toward the working environment. Casual dress equals a decrease in the professionalism perception at the office – mentally and physically.

- When my company went business casual, I was one of those people that was not going to go out and buy all new casual clothes. Being in HR, I personally maintain the casual on Fridays. When I'm not feeling well at all, then I'll dress casually. This is basically the attitude with my coworkers as well. Our policy states no jeans, halters, mini skirts, etc. However, some departments ignore the policy and wear what they want. I don't know if upper management will revisit the policy and make it more strict or lenient.

- Once we went to business casual we had to be very specific as to what was appropriate "business casual." The employees (not all) felt we were strict – the employees began to "push the envelope" with regard to "business casual."

- While I do not believe clothes styles are responsible for increased productivity, I do believe image and professional appearance are vital in a professional world.

Results for companies with 1 to 25 employees:

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	2	4.5
Decreases slightly	8	18.2
Doesn't change	8	18,2
Improves slightly	15	34.1
Improves significantly	9	20.5
Don't know	2	4.5
Total	44	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	4	9.0
Decreases slightly	12	27.2
Doesn't change	10	22.7
Improves slightly	12	27.2
Improves significantly	4	9.0
Don't know	2	4.5
Total	44	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	4	9.0
Decreases slightly	11	25.0
Doesn't change	18	40.1
Improves slightly	6	13.6
Improves significantly	2	4.5
Don't know	3	6.8
Total	44	

Results for companies with 26 to 100 employees:

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	1	3.3
Decreases slightly	3	10.0
Doesn't change	7	23.3
Improves slightly	15	50.0
Improves significantly	3	10.0
Don't know	1	3.3
Total	30	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	1	3.3
Decreases slightly	10	33.3
Doesn't change	9	30.0
Improves slightly	7	23.3
Improves significantly	2	6.6
Don't know	1	3.3
Total	30	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	2	6.6
Decreases slightly	6	20.0
Doesn't change	16	53.3
Improves slightly	4	13.3
Improves significantly	1	3.3
Don't know	1	3.3
Total	30	

Results for companies with 101 to 500 employees:

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	0	0.0
Decreases slightly	4	11.8
Doesn't change	7	20.6
Improves slightly	15	44.1
Improves significantly	8	23.5
Don't know	0	0.0
Total	34	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	0	0.0
Decreases slightly	6	17.6
Doesn't change	8	23.5
Improves slightly	15	44.1
Improves significantly	4	11.8
Don't know	1	2.9
Total	34	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	0	0.0
Decreases slightly	2	5.9
Doesn't change	18	52.9
Improves slightly	10	29.4
Improves significantly	4	11.8
Don't know	0	0.0
Total	34	

Results for companies with 501 to 1,000 employees: *

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	1	10.0
Decreases slightly	2	20.0
Doesn't change	2	20.0
Improves slightly	3	30.0
Improves significantly	1	10.0
Don't know	1	10.0
Total	10	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	1	10.0
Decreases slightly	4	40.0
Doesn't change	3	30.0
Improves slightly	0	0.0
Improves significantly	1	10.0
Don't know	1	10.0
Total	10	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	1	10.0
Decreases slightly	4	40.0
Doesn't change	3	30.0
Improves slightly	0	0.0
Improves significantly	1	10.0
Don't know	1	10.0
Total	10	

* Because of the small sample size, these results may have a high margin of error.

Results for companies with 1,001 and more employees:

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	0	0.0
Decreases slightly	0	0.0
Doesn't change	3	10.0
Improves slightly	12	40.0
Improves significantly	14	46.7
Don't know	1	3.3
Total	30	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	0	0.0
Decreases slightly	2	6.7
Doesn't change	8	26.7
Improves slightly	12	3.3
Improves significantly	7	23.3
Don't know	1	3.3
Total	30	

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

	Frequency	Percent
Decreases significantly	0	0.0
Decreases slightly	1	3.3
Doesn't change	12	40.0
Improves slightly	8	26.7
Improves significantly	7	23.3
Don't know	2	6.6
Total	30	

Findings

- Overall, the respondents felt that employee morale improves as dress codes become more casual, regardless of the size of the company.

- Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of the respondents believed that casual dress codes improve morale to some degree.

- Overall, the respondents felt that productivity is somewhat lowered as dress codes become more casual but this is dependent on the size of the organization.

- In companies of one to 5 employees, an equal percentage (27 percent) of respondents felt that productivity increases and decreases both slightly and significantly as dress codes become more casual.

- In companies of 26 to 100 employees, the respondents felt that productivity slightly decreases as dress codes become more casual.

- In companies of 101 to 500 employees, half of the respondents (53 percent) felt that there was no change and approximately 40 percent felt that it improved to some degree.

- In companies of 501 to 1000 employees, half of those surveyed (50 percent) felt that productivity decreases when dress codes become more casual.

- In companies with more than 1000 employees, an equal number of respondents believed that casual dress codes either had no effect on or improved employee productivity.

- Overall, those surveyed felt that dress codes have no bearing on an employee's quality of work.

Chapter Five

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The purpose of this study was to provide managers and key decision makers insight into how casual dress work environments compare to traditional corporate cultures by assessing the impact of casual dress on employee morale and productivity, two vital influencers of the bottom line.

The author conducted initial research on the Internet through various Web sites using the key words "casual workplace," "dress down days," "employee morale," and "employee productivity." The author then conducted research at Savitz Library at Rowan University using the same key words in the Lexis-Nexis ® search. Collectively, the information generated in these searches was then analyzed and used to develop a short survey.

The author then wrote a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey. Both the letter and the survey itself were reviewed and critiqued by Dr. Don Bagin of Rowan University and seven students in Rowan University's graduate public relations program. Revisions were made based on these observations.

A message was posted on four e-groups briefly explaining the project and asking the members if they could complete a survey, and, if so, if they could provide contact information that would remain confidential. Thirty-seven responded; however, seven could not be included in the results because they were international professionals and the study was limited to American companies.

A mailing list of 500 human resources professionals who subscribe to the industry newsletter *Communications Solutions* was rented and the survey was mailed to 474 of these individuals to complete and return. The surveys were hand-coded and analyzed. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made.

Conclusions

Consistent with many of the studies discussed in Chapter Two, this study has indicated that, overall, employee morale does improve as dress codes become more casual. However, the percentage of those surveyed that agree with this is lower than in previous studies.

Just about 65 percent of the respondents believe that casual dress codes improve morale to some degree, whereas a recent survey by Lands' End of human resources managers found that 85 percent of human resources managers believe that casual dress improves morale. [27]

Contrary to the recent study by Jeff Magee International, Inc. that indicated that casual dress negatively impacts employee morale [28], this study has indicated that employees are more productive, albeit only be a narrow margin, when dressed more casual at work..

Separate from morale, productivity is indicated as being somewhat lowered as dress codes become more casual. The Lands' End survey found that only 47 percent of human resources managers surveys feel that casual dress boosts productivity [29] and the results of this

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[27] Merrick, Bill. "Don't be Casual about your Dress Code Policies," Credit Union Magazine. June 1999.

[28] Business Week. "Casual Dress: Is it Fraying the Fiber of Business," Jeff Magee International Inc. March 1999.

[29] Merrick.

survey with 42 percent of those surveyed concurring is consistent.

However, when the companies surveyed were broken down by size, the results were varied. In very small companies (one to 25 employees), it was found that an equal percentage (27 percent) of respondents felt that productivity increases and decreases both slightly and significantly as dress codes become more casual. This is a direct contradiction and warrants further study and scrutiny.

In slightly larger companies (26 to 100 employees), human resources professionals felt that productivity slightly decreased as dress codes became more casual. In companies even larger, approximately half of the respondents (53 percent) felt that there was no change and approximately 40 percent feeling that it improved to some degree.

In companies of 501 to 1000 employees, opinion bounced back the other way again with half of those surveyed feeling that productivity decreased when dress codes became more casual. In companies with more than 1000 employees, the tide turned once again with an equal number of respondents believing that casual dress codes either had no effect on or improved employee productivity.

Two respondents noted on their surveys that they believed that neither morale nor productivity is the issue at hand, but professionalism and the level of professionalism that employees uphold should be managers' primary concern.

The survey indicated that, overall, dress codes have no bearing on employees' quality of work. With the exception of companies of 501 to 1,000 employees, approximately half do not feel work quality changes. However, in companies of 501 to 1,000 employees, 40 percent of human resources professionals feel that the quality of work decreases slightly.

The study did not attempt to find out if the level of casualness (i.e. very casual, business casual, etc.) had any effect on morale, productivity or quality of work.

Closely consistent with the survey done by Management Recruiters International that reported that 87 percent of companies have instituted casual dress codes [30], this study indicated that 82 percent of the companies surveyed have casual dress codes of some kind. For the most part, employees are satisfied with their dress codes. The majority of those who are not satisfied would like to see their dress codes become more casual.

Recommendations

Based on this study, the author recommends the following to managers and companies that are concerned about their organization's dress code or are considering changing it:

- Keep the focus on the work issues at hand: morale, productivity and quality of work. These directly affect a company's bottom line. If, through research, it is discovered that dress is affecting one of them, then alter the dress code.

- Have a written, very specific formal dress code that is explained to employees.

- Enforce the policy and change if necessary. For instance, if casual dress becomes distracting, set more limitations and make this, along with the reasoning, known to employees.

- Because all companies are different, in number of employees, in industry and in corporate culture, companies should develop and implement a policy that is tailored to their individual needs.

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[30] Gage, Amy. "On Balance," Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

- Companies should not change their policy from strict business to very casual overnight or vice versa. If interested in changing dramatically, this change should be made through a gradual succession of steps in the desired direction.

For Further Study

- A segmented study by industry can be conducted.

- A study with more open-ended questions that would give additional insight into reasoning behind dress code decisions and examples of how morale and productivity are affected can be conducted.

- A study on how each specific dress code (i.e. casual, business casual, strict business, etc.) affects employee morale and productivity can be conducted.

- A study to determine if dress codes affect employee morale and productivity differently in small companies than in larger organizations and vice versa can be conducted.

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May 8, 2000

I am a graduate student in Rowan University's public relations program. For my thesis, I am examining how dress codes affect employee morale and productivity. Following is a very brief survey. I would greatly appreciate you taking a few moments to fill this out and fax it back to me.

If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please feel free to contact either me or Don Bagin, professor. Our numbers are:

Marisa Avallone
(609) 259-3226
marisa905@yahoo.com

Don Bagin
(856) 256-4332

Please respond by Saturday, May 20, 2000 to meet the program's deadline for completing my thesis. My fax number is (609) 259-6716. There is no need for a cover letter and I'll be happy to send you a summary of my results. Thank you very much for your time and insight.

Sincerely,

Marisa Avallone

P.S. All information will remain confidential.

Fax to:
(609) 259-6716

Based on your observations, please check the answer that you feel best completes or answers each of the following statements. Again, all information will be kept confidential.

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee morale _____.

- ☐ Decreases significantly
- ☐ Decreases slightly
- ☐ Doesn't change
- ☐ Improves slightly
- ☐ Improves significantly
- ☐ Don't know

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, employee productivity _____.

- ☐ Decreases significantly
- ☐ Decreases slightly
- ☐ Doesn't change
- ☐ Improves slightly
- ☐ Improves significantly
- ☐ Don't know

As dress codes (written and/or implied) become more casual, the overall quality of work _____.

- ☐ Decreases significantly
- ☐ Decreases slightly
- ☐ Doesn't change
- ☐ Improves slightly
- ☐ Improves significantly
- ☐ Don't know

How would you describe your organization's dress code?

- ☐ Very casual (jeans, sneakers permitted five days per week)
- ☐ Business casual/Semi-casual (khakis acceptable during week, blazers or sportcoat preferred)
- ☐ Strict business (full suits necessary five days per week)
- ☐ Casual Friday (full suits necessary Monday through Thursday only)
- ☐ Other _____

- Over -

Continued.

How do you feel the majority of your company's employees view the corporate dress code (either written or implied)?

- ❑ Too relaxed
- ❑ Just right
- ❑ Too strict
- ❑ Don't know

How large is your organization?

- ❑ One to 25 employees
- ❑ 26 to 100 employees
- ❑ 101 to 500 employees
- ❑ 501 to 1000 employees
- ❑ 1001 employees or more

Would you like a summary of my results?

- ❑ Yes, here is my name and address, which I understand will be kept confidential:

_____

_____

_____

_____

- ❑ No

Thank you!