

How do you tell an employee to dress more professionally?

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What we consider to be appropriate attire in the workplace has shifted dramatically over the past few decades. We've gone from suits and ties to t-shirts and sneakers, as our ideas around professionalism have evolved with our impression of what a workplace should be.

But, in certain situations or workplaces, it may become apparent that an employee is not reflecting the business' brand, and an employer has to step in.

We spoke to Shana French, lawyer at Sherrard Kuzz, who gave us her take on the sensitive issue.

"It's interesting," she explained, "because when we have these conversations, I always feel like we're talking about women. This is an issue for all genders in the workplace, dependant on the workplace culture. Sometimes businesses struggle to align their employees with the brand of the business.

"In Ontario, gender expression and gender identity are protected grounds under the human rights legislation. So, when an employer has dress code policies that seem like they were dreamt up in the 1980s – i.e. tops that expose mid-drifts, no spandex shorts, no black nail polish, no nose piercings and so on – it's apparent they need to dust them off and get with the times. Employers are well advised to start looking at dress codes from a none-gendered perspective.

"When you're encouraging employees to dress more professionally, I caution employers to look beyond 'gender appropriate behaviour'. Gender stereotypes in policies shouldn't overstep, from human rights perspective, into an area that could be an attempt to enforce gender stereotypes on an employee."

Instead, French advocates instilling a policy that's appropriate to your particular workplace culture. If your office has a business-casual dress code, it should reflect this - if it's a jeans and tee-shirt start-up, explain this.

"Have a conversation," added French. "Employers can sometimes be afraid of approaching the employee and simply talking to them about the issue. You should be putting in some thought about what you're going to say before you have the meeting, so it doesn't come out as 'when you wear those low-cut tops, it makes the men feel uncomfortable'.

"Think about why you're having the conversation too – how have you reached this point? If the employee in question specifically asks what's unprofessional about their attire, then you can mention specifics – but when approaching the conversation keep it gender neutral.

"Be sure to document the conversation in the employee's file, for future reference. Overall, just be sensible about having a fresh policy, that both reflects the brand of your business and doesn't gender stereotype."