

DOES IT MATTER WHAT STAFF WEAR?



Jacqui Burke, of Flourishing People, discusses dress codes in the workplace, and gives some tips to ensure fairness

This question can cause employers to get tangled up in all sorts of issues about what's appropriate, being fair and not discriminating, so here are some tips:

- As an HR consultant, when I get calls from clients about concerns over what someone is wearing, my first reaction is to ask them what their dress code says about this. Except in situations where there are health and safety requirements for wearing protective clothing, employers often haven't thought to put such a policy in place. So this would be my first recommendation.
- When writing a dress code think about how it will help your business. This might typically include ensuring safe working, promoting a consistent brand image for your business, and setting clear expectations for staff and managers to refer to.
- Consider what's appropriate. This should be based on something other than your personal preferences e.g. you may prefer men to be clean-shaven but is this really a requirement for your business. A recent case that hit the news related to a receptionist in a City firm who was suspended because she wasn't wearing high heels. She felt that this rule was inappropriate and discriminatory as she was wearing smart flat shoes and felt that wearing high heels had no impact on her ability to do her job. So what is

appropriate will depend on the nature of the work that people do within your business, not on personal taste.

- Avoiding discrimination is of course vital. Discrimination on the grounds of gender and religious beliefs is a particular risk when writing a dress code. Would the firm have asked a man to wear high heels? Is wearing a beard a matter of religious observance?
- Your customers' views may be an important consideration. It's interesting how society's views about what's appropriate have changed, but some people still find tattoos and piercings alarming and off-putting, whereas many younger people consider them acceptable. So think about your customers and maybe ask their opinion.
- Younger staff coming into the workplace for the first time may be unaware of what is considered appropriate so don't shy away from communicating your expectations clearly and discussing with them immediately anything that isn't quite right.

This recent blog post might be useful to share with staff if you work in an office environment www.flourishingpeople.co.uk/navigating-office-dress-codes

You'll find more detailed information at www.acas.org.uk to help you get your dress code right.

MORE INFORMATION

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