



HR Broadcast – Appropriate Dress

Over the years there have been numerous scares as regards what employers can and can't say or do concerning what employees wear for work, in particular relating to women.

Back in 2009 it was rumoured that the TUC wanted an outright ban on women wearing high heels whilst at work as this encourages sexism and is "demeaning to women." This was totally incorrect; the TUC had merely tabled a debate about the wearing of high heels which was at the request of the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists.

Employees have often requested to wear fancy dress to work on certain days in recent years. Sometimes this is due to staff wanting to immerse themselves in the spirit of a festive occasion such as Halloween, whereas at other times it's linked to charity fundraising activities. Often, the two events are combined.

Please remember that an employer is under no obligation to agree to a fancy dress day, even if it's for a worthwhile cause. Also remember that you do not have to give any reason if you refuse, although some explanation might be appreciated. That's because you're the employer and you make the rules on dress and appearance in your workplace. So if you believe that a fancy dress day would be inappropriate or appear unprofessional you are well within your rights to refuse.

However, for me, before any decision is made you should ask yourself two questions;

1. Is it safe? Depending on your work environment, if an employee wears a long flowing costume, silly shoes or a face mask that restricts their vision, you will certainly be in trouble if they, or someone else, is injured as a result.

2. Is it professional? Whatever the occasion or reason for wearing fancy dress, it won't look too good if you have an important customer or client coming in to see you. In my view there should always be at least one senior person who doesn't participate in the fancy dress activities. The simple reason for this is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to deal with serious issues effectively when you're dressed up in a silly costume, and you never know what might happen on any given day.

Back in 2003 a very large and well known law firm made a bit of an error when it issued a list of behaviours relating to the personal presentations it expected from female employees. These included statements such as; "act your age", "don't giggle", "don't wave your arms", "no clunky jewellery", etc, etc. Whilst there is nothing wrong in issuing a dress policy, issuing such a policy for females only is discriminatory. In any dress policy, what you can't do is apply different standards to men and women, although you can justify different requirements, e.g. insisting that men wear a collar and tie.



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A large law firm has very recently released the findings of its survey of 2000 employees which claim that approximately 30% of females have been told to, “Change their appearance to win extra work.” It is also claimed that 10% of women have been told that their bosses preferred them to wear high heels at work or with clients because it made them more appealing.

These findings have led to accusations that women are being subjected to unnecessary harassment and discrimination in the workplace as a result of dress and appearance requirements.

So please remember;

1. You can have a dress policy that sets out required professional standards of dress but you should never demand that particular types of dress or footwear are worn by female employees.

2. Also, women should never be required to wear make-up or have painted nails as you don't need these to look professional.

Where an individual doesn't meet the required standards of dress then it is ok to speak with them about this, provided it is done in a private area.