

Work Space

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FINANCIAL REVIEW
BOSS

Dress to impress makes dollars and sense

It's hard to get the right look for work. Yet what you wear can be an important factor in your success at the office, **Catherine Fox** reports.

Forgot to polish your shoes this week? Better make the effort because appearances really do count, right down to the shine on your footwear, according to two experts on corporate dress.

We might not like it, or want to believe it, but how we dress has a bearing on our success at work, according to recruiter Duff Watkins.

Some of the latest research on behaviour and the brain — known as evolutionary psychology — supports the theory that visual cues continue to make a big difference to how we are assessed at work and can even influence salary levels.

"We are a visual species and that's with good reason," says Watkins, who runs seminars on corporate wear with consultant Jean Woo.

"Evolutionary psychology is a hot topic. Our thesis is [that because of] the way the brain has evolved, we form first impressions quickly, and it's about survival," he says.

"We've applied this to dress and the importance of creating first impressions. So much of it is to do with the hard wiring of the brain, which will infer certain attributes to you because of your look."

But Watkins, who is a director of executive search firm Cornerstone International, says many of us are in denial about the impact of corporate wear because we'd like to believe assessments of each other are based on personality and character. Yet the reverse is often the case.

"The research we have cited says how you look can affect your starting remuneration by 20 per cent; it's a tangible factor," he says. "And there's a halo effect, so the first impression is hard to dislodge."

There are a few basic rules about office attire: if you dress too strikingly, people will comment on your clothes; and if you dress poorly, people will say, "they should be able to afford better clothes".

"I go into major multinationals and there are guys running around



Duff Watkins says billings at some professional firms dropped 20 per cent when casual dress was adopted. Photo: TAMARA VONINSKI

who look like they are there to check the plumbing," says Watkins. "It decreases your authority. If you are a female manager, the last thing you want to do is decrease your authority. I used to go to events and see men wearing ties with cartoon characters."

The strict dress codes of US companies have a logic, he says.

"The reason IBM said 'blue suit and red tie' was it transmits trustworthiness and that's important in business. You wear what you wear to be accepted. It has far more importance than I ever realised and that is what opened my eyes. You wear the business uniform to transmit signals and you want to send the right signals and eliminate the distracting signals."

The seminars run by Watkins and Woo on corporate dressing advice regularly attract 300 people and, he says, many people simply don't have

a clue about what is appropriate.

Says Watkins: "We ask people, 'Are you dressed to be hired or dated?' Women get it wrong and so do men. The HR people who are assigned to impose dress codes have the most trouble with women. With men, it's cut and dried when they are not getting it right."

One of the complications in recent years has been the rise of business casual dress during the dotcom boom.

"I think business casual should be called business casual," says Watkins. "Studies on casual dress found that workers were late and not as productive. In a lot of professional services firms, the billings went down 20 per cent when they moved to casual. There needs to be a clear delineation between what is business dress and what is casual."

The level of interest in the topic reflects a surprising level of

confusion and demand for advice — yet the impact of dress is obvious in our daily lives.

"You have to tell people it's important and you have to bring it to their attention. You have to point out it's important to them and can affect their pay. There's a biological driver and my point is, this is reality and prefer it or not this is the way the system operates."

Australian corporate-wear habits continue to be based on those of the northern hemisphere, but Watkins says there are some concessions made to our climate, particularly in the middle of summer. It's practical and acceptable these days to dress down in January, even in the CBD. And it's fine to express yourself within some basic boundaries.

Just be aware, he says, that what you wear is being noticed and sends out a barrage of signals about you.

WHAT NOT TO WEAR

Darken up: Dark colours project greater authority. We don't see policemen or judges in white. The visual foolproofing comes from dark navy or grey. There is an overlap between business and sartorial success.

Beware of earth tones: If you start deviating from blues and greys, the material has to be better quality.

Cost: There is a relationship between how much you should pay for a suit and a week's wage. It's a business investment and a tool. You can't play the game without the uniform.

People notice: Watkins says he had a flatmate who had two suits and wore them on alternate days. "Then he bought a new one and everyone commented, and he was amazed anyone noticed — but my point is they always noticed what he wore."

Cartoon ties: If you want to deviate from the funeral look of Paul Keating, you can change that tie — but NEVER wear ties with cartoon characters.

Button-down collars: These are less formal — but Australians often think the reverse.

Don't dress down: It's a myth that if you dress down people will feel more relaxed with you — they will just think you lack authority.

Layer it on: Every layer of clothing that is removed — from taking off a jacket to taking off the tie — strips away another layer of formality.

Best foot forward: Shoes should be top quality and well cared for. They are as important now as they were in the last century, when expressions such as "down at heel" and "best foot forward" were coined.