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## TODAY'S PROFESSIONAL DILEMMA: WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO WEAR A SUIT TO WORK

Two decades ago, someone walking through Boston's financial district would have seen most people dressed in business suits. The suit was the uniform of business for decades; black suits, grey suits, pant suits, or power suits-- they were everywhere.

The 1990's brought a powerful shift in clothing trends, with the arrival of business-casual. Instead of throwing on a starched shirt and dark jacket every day, business people in even traditional industries were encouraged to wear sweaters, khakis and even (yikes) sandals, t-shirts and shorts!

Well, we all know the times have changed again. American business is wrestling with a massively confusing mix of strict-professional and business-casual. Suits are back, yet they are not necessary in every facet of business. Essentially we have clothing anarchy. One of the big questions we're often asked, is when and when not to wear a suit.

There's no question when it comes to certain situations. If you are meeting with a current or potential client or attending a business event, a suit is an absolute must! Suits must be worn for job interviews. But what about around the office? Internal meetings? Lunches with current clients?

You know the old saying, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression?" No matter what industry you're in, if you're meeting someone for the first time, and there's any doubt about casual or professional dress, you should wear a suit. According to **Ready to Wear: An Expert's Guide to Choosing and Using Your Wardrobe**, by Mary Lou Andre, not wearing a suit sends a big red flag about your judgment and business acumen.

Every-day office wear is a little trickier. Many offices have maintained their business casual policies. Generally speaking, even if your office is business casual, look around – see what the boss – or executives whom you admire are wearing. There is no better way to signal that you are ready to move up when you step-up your wardrobe. One of the biggest mistakes we've seen people make in the image department, is allowing "loosy goosy" rules about business casual undermine their careers.

When the dress is definitely business casual, be sure your clothing is high quality, with great fit and style. Business casual isn't an excuse to wear an old sweater or wrinkled khakis – you still have to look “together;” polished, professional and well coordinated.

Andre, founder and CEO of Organization by Design, has helpful articles on her website, [www.dressingwell.com](http://www.dressingwell.com). One such article has tips and suggestions for wearing suits.

For men:

- Even if you work in a business casual environment, you need to have a professional wardrobe – a few suits and jackets.
- With or without a tie, a jacket always sets a business tone and is a respectful garment to wear when you are meeting new clients or presenting in front of a formal group.
- A sport coat paired with a dark to medium color wool pant is always less formal than a suit.

For women:

- You must have at least one quality suit in a dark neutral – black, navy, brown or gray.
- Pantsuits are becoming the most practical choice for those choosing to practice a casual dress benefit.
- A suit ensemble that includes a jacket, skirt, pant and dress is a versatile investment.
- Much of the modern suiting available today has a percentage of Lycra or spandex added to the fabric which makes them more comfortable.

You need to update your wardrobe every season. Being current is critical. If you look current, people assume you are current in your thinking.

Go for quality. Wearing a suit is pointless if it's out of style, has wear and tear, or doesn't fit right. If your weight has fluctuated, go to the tailor and be fitted again.

No matter your position, gender, or industry, having a few suits in the closet is the investment you need to make in your professional image.