

Millennials lead charge for more flexible office attire

Comfortable clothes said to spur a more productive environment

By MIKE COSTANZA

Megan Aaron donned a brightly colored, patterned dress for a recent day at the offices of Bergmann Associates, in keeping with her generally casual style at work.

“Wearing high heels and a blazer or skirt, if you’re just kind of sitting doing office work and typing reports, it’s just not practical,” says the 27-year-old urban planner. “I personally like to be very practical.”

Aaron is one of the many Rochester-area millennials who have eschewed formal business wear in favor of more comfortable, and for them, stylish, casual business outfits. Executives and office workers who once would have headed to work in suits and ties or pants suits might now show up in anything from polo shirts and khakis to skinny jeans. Their styles reflect more than their tastes in clothing.

“There’s an interest in being a little more unique, and dress is a way to bring that out,” says Carolyn Stiles, a 26-year-old account executive with the advertising firm Partners + Napier.

For Stiles, that generally boils down to wearing business casual.

“Typically, my everyday’s a pair of pants—they might be jeans, they may be just black pants—and just a nice shirt,” she says. “If I have a client-facing meeting, then I may be dressing up a little bit more.”

Those styles appear to have grown more common in U.S. businesses as more men and women in Stiles’ age group have entered the workforce. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, millennials—defined as those aged 18 to 34 in 2015—numbered 75.4 million last year. Those in that cohort—who would be about 20 to 36 years old this year—now surpass baby boomers as this country’s dominant age group.

As important as the influence of millennials could be upon some local businesses, it’s not the only one driving changes in office styles. Depending upon the roles they held at Bergmann Associates, men

once had to wear suits in the office.

“Our code changed with the times and became more flexible as time passed and as fashion passed,” says Human Resources Director William VanBuskirk. “Our clients were also big influencers, as they allowed their teams to be more business casual.”

Nowadays, those who work for Bergmann Associates need not dress up under most circumstances if they don’t wish to.

“Business casual attire is relaxed and comfortable, but still professional,” VanBuskirk says. “Most days, it consists of khakis and shirts for men—with the addition of skirts and dresses for women—but it can also include jeans and sneakers, depending on the circumstance.”

How far has the change of styles proceeded at the firm? Though Aaron will don heels and a skirt for an important meeting, her wardrobe only goes so far.

“I don’t actually own a suit,” she says.

Employees of all ages might welcome the shift to more casual office wear, but studies have shown that millennials as a group particularly value the flexibility that more casual office styles can confer. That, in turn, can boost workplace creativity.

As Canandaigua National Bank & Trust Co.’s new media coordinator, Ashley DiDia handles social media for the bank and spends a lot of time writing for her job. The 29-year-old often wears polo shirts, khaki slacks, tunic tops and leggings at work, particularly when out of sight of the bank’s customers in her basement office.

“If I’m comfortable, I’m not focused on my shirt being wrinkled, or, if I sit too long, on my pants being creased,” DiDia says. “My mind is free, and comfortable to focus on what I’m trying to do.”

Greater stylistic flexibility might also reflect a different view of work in general.

“The definition of what it is to be professional has changed,” Stiles says. “There’s a lot more weight in what people say, and the way that they present their opinions and their views in our workplace and our work, than the way that they’re dressed.”

Business casual can also help draw in prospective clients who share that style—or future employees. Doug Parton, Partners + Napier’s head of talent, usually wears an untucked button-down plaid shirt

and jeans to work.

“A company like ours is looking for what’s going to attract and retain talent,” he says. “When I’m meeting with other people, I’m also displaying the culture of our company. I’m not...interviewing someone with a suit and tie, because that’s not who we are.”

That’s not to say that sloppiness is allowed.

“Even if someone is wearing shorts and a T-shirt, I would say they still have a huge element of style to them here,” Parton says.

Of course, business casual is not appropriate for all positions, work-related activities and individuals. Though millennials might feel more comfortable dressing casually in the office, many seem to accept the need to dress more formally when working closely with customers or attending important meetings.

“If I’m going to be giving a presentation or if we have a special guest or I’m going to be speaking in front of the agency, sometimes I throw on a sports jacket and tuck in my shirt, but it’s still jeans,” Parton says.

Over at Canandaigua National Bank, the office dress code for some positions requires more formal outfits. Thirty-three year-old Shawn Hall, who is the community office assistant manager at one of the bank’s Webster branches, usually dons a shirt, tie and sport coat for work.

“We can’t have our people out in front of our customers wearing sneakers,” he says. “We all understand we’re in a professional business and we need to dress appropriately for our position.”

Moreover, it just feels right to Hall to do so.

“I do feel more like a banker, more professional, wearing a shirt and tie,” he says. “I think the customers feel the same way.”

For many millennials, the freedom to dress as desired is an essential element of a workplace.

“There’s a level of empowerment to be able to wear what you want to wear,” Stiles says. “That, I think, definitely reflects in the work, too, because you feel empowered to do better work.”

Mike Costanza is a Rochester-area freelancer writer.