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By Dina Medland September 19, 2013



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Uniform: the suit is called 'dated'

Eyebrows were raised around the 100-year-old Institute of Directors, the business club with pride of place in London's smart Pall Mall, when it announced a relaxation of its "dress code" for a three-month trial period.

From July to September, suits and ties could be left in the wardrobe, with its website suggesting members "make the decision on what they would normally wear to do business, as long as it is not deemed indecent. They are permitted to wear jeans, T-shirts, shorts and all variants of footwear."

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The Institute has a reputation for being old-fashioned but South African-born Simon Walker, its new director-general, is trying to make changes – with mixed views among its members. It remains to be seen whether it will relax its rules on dress on a permanent basis but ideas about business attire are changing.

It raises the question of whether the business suit and tie will remain a power symbol for men – and if not, what are the implications for women?

“Suits used to be the uniforms of leaders in the City banking sector, but the notion that a man’s suit is a definition of authority is a bit dated,” says Emer Timmons, president of BT Global Services UK.

She says the suit is “indicative of a command-and-control culture which is not appropriate for knowledge-based industries like BT.”

Dale Stafford, a successful businesswoman who runs The Principle Department, a business advisory firm, says: “Suits are so linked to the corporate banking world, a shorthand for things that are not trustworthy, with everything in a state of flux since the financial crisis. The business suit is under fire: does it now stand for ruthless capitalism and liars?”

Clearly “business attire” varies according to industry sector, with banking and technology each looking very different. But as women look for equal treatment and to progress within the business world, what their dress code should be is open to interpretation.

“Male business suits are often a uniform to hide behind and can make you anonymous. What you wear is just a reflection of your individual flair – it is no longer indicative of your status,” argues Ms Timmons.

This might give women an edge in being able to make more of a statement by their choice of attire: but the trick lies in making an impression, rather than being remembered for what you are wearing.

“You only have to look at senior women to work out that their unwritten dress code is the tailored look – it involves an element of decorum,” says Vanda Murray, a businesswoman and non-executive director. “Women have more choices and can be more individualistic, but it’s also a lot easier for women to get it wrong. At worst a man may not refresh his look as fashions change, but it’s harder for them to make a mistake. “The problem is that people care more about what women wear, and the media focuses on how she looks and what she wore, rather than what she said and did.”

Ms Timmons believes that rather than emulating men in settling for a uniform, women should apply their own approach and “reflect their own values and personality in what they wear”.

Ms Stafford adds: “What you wear is part of your branding. Women are the visually

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dominant species – you have to decide the message you want to communicate.”

Ken Olisa, chairman of Restoration Partners, a merchant bank, always wears a suit and colourful bow tie. He says: “Appearance in general and dress in particular play a vital role in the ‘first impressions’ phase of building a relationship.

“However, only a fool would decide whether or not to do business with someone based on a first impression and no amount of sharp dressing can substitute for incompetence or unethical behaviour.

“A smartly dressed person is telling the world that they care about their appearance, but business success correlates with ability and attitude not apparel.”

Ms Timmons agrees: “Don’t let what you wear overshadow what you are trying to deliver. All the talk of ‘suits’ gives me a fever. These days, people are far more interested in the technology you hold, not what you wear.”

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