






Post-COVID, some employers are rethinking their dress codes

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When Indiana Members Credit Union moved its headquarters from the south side to a spiffy new space at Bottleworks District in January, the organization also updated something else: its dress code.

The credit union didn't make big changes to its dress code, which focuses on business-casual attire. But the 2026 version does add some specifics, such as the requirement that polo shirts and button-down shirts must be tucked in. It also puts more emphasis on the expectation that clothing must be well-fitting and unwrinkled.

Dress-code adherence had fallen off somewhat over time, said Senior Vice President of Human Resources Chantelle Sparks, and the Bottleworks move seemed like the perfect time for a reset.

"Moving into this office gave us an opportunity to address things that we already had kind of seen slipping," Sparks said. "It just opened the door, opened the opportunity."



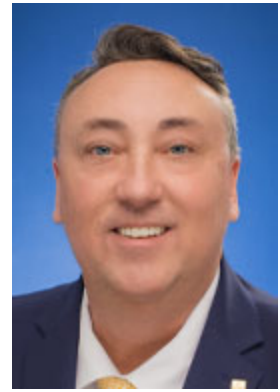
Chantelle Sparks

The credit union is among a number of local employers that have taken a new look at their dress codes over the past few years, partly due to pandemic-related factors.

But not everyone is reaching the same conclusion about whether to make changes.

In Greenwood, manufacturer Endress+Hauser USA has never had an official dress code for its 280 non-production employees — and it doesn't plan to add one, said the company's vice president of human resources, Brandyn Ferguson.

The site's 390 production employees do have some rules for safety or environmental reasons, Ferguson said. They might be required to wear steel-toed boots, for instance, or be prohibited from wearing jewelry.



Brandyn Ferguson

But for non-production employees, there are no such rules. The unofficial office dress code before the pandemic, Ferguson said, was business casual Mondays through Thursdays, with jeans allowed on Fridays.

Post-COVID, things became even more casual. Part of the shift, Ferguson said, is likely because employees brought some of their work-from-home habits back to the office with them.

Another factor, he said, is that the company has added a lot of employees since the pandemic. About half of the current workforce has been at the manufacturer less than five years. Of those new hires, about 80% are fresh out of school; the other 20% are mid-career employees.

“We’re seeing a lot more jeans throughout the week,” Ferguson said. “We started to see ball caps being worn, and we’ve never seen that before. No one ever, ever thought about wearing a ball cap for work. But we’ve started to see that. We’re starting to see less collared shirts on Fridays and more T-shirts.”

In 2021 and 2022, Ferguson said, managers began to talk among themselves about where to address the issue: Should they say something to the employee wearing sneakers on a Monday? What about that guy wearing a ball cap?

Ultimately, Ferguson said, the company settled on a more hands-off approach. If an employee shows up looking sloppy

or has a hygiene problem, a manager will talk with that worker individually.

But in general, Ferguson said, “What we’ve decided is that we’re just not going to make a big deal about it.”

What matters most, he said, is that employees do their jobs well.

“It’s kind of fun not having a dress code, because it says, ‘We trust you. We hired you for all good reasons,’” Ferguson said. “If we counterbalance that with, ‘Oh, and we have some arbitrary rules,’ then it starts to decay [that sense of trust] that we hired the right people.”



Indiana Members Credit Union employee dress codes are communicated weekly. “B” days are for business casual attire. “A” is saved for days the credit union hosts outside visitors or a board meeting; “C” days are the most casual, when jeans and clean sneakers are allowed. (IBJ photo/Chad Williams)

Legal considerations

Indianapolis attorney Joey Wright, senior counsel in law firm [Amundsen Davis LLC](#)'s Labor and Employment Group, said she's received several queries from clients trying to find a "new normal" when it comes to their dress codes.



Joey Wright

"A lot of employers had to reassess what mattered after COVID," Wright said. "And most of the time in dress code debates, it's not really about the clothes. It's about culture and control, autonomy. Those are the real issues."

Wright said she's also received some queries from clients who want to retool their dress-code policies to address a very specific issue: T-shirts with messages on them.

Known as graphic tees, the shirts include words or images that convey a message — maybe an advertisement for a beer brand, for example, or a political message.

As an example, Wright said a client described a situation in which an employee showed up to work wearing a Confederate flag shirt. The next day, a different employee responded by wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt.

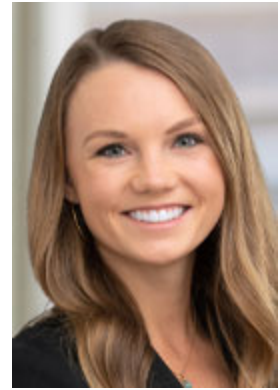
"There's a lot of messages that can be taken from somebody's clothing that maybe aren't appropriate for the workplace, and employers really want to head off liability if they can," Wright said. "And dress codes are a good way to do that."

Banning all graphic tees can eliminate this problem, Wright said, but employers must be careful to enforce the rule — or any dress code policy — consistently.

"What we don't want is the company to kind of take a side or a stance through policy. So we try to draft a neutral policy and

enforce it evenly,” Wright said.

Labor and employment attorney Colleen Schade, an associate at [Barnes & Thornburg LLP](#)’s Indianapolis office, also said she’s received queries from clients who want to bar their employees from wearing political attire.



Colleen Schade

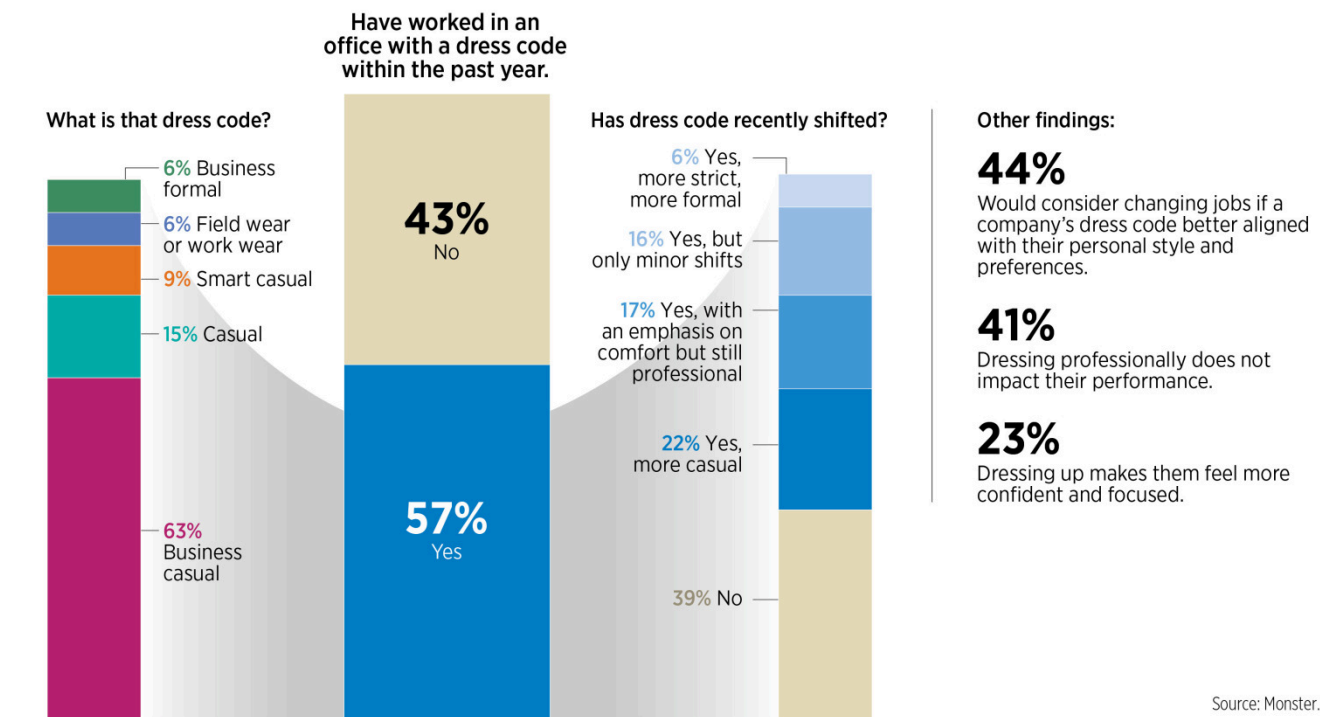
“That has come up with some frequency, and I always approach that with some caution,” Schade said.

The issue, she said, is that under the National Labor Relations Act, employers cannot prohibit employees from talking about work-related concerns such as pay or union membership.

“There are some restrictions about what employers can prohibit – and oftentimes political things are related to workplace concerns, but not always,” Schade said.

What to wear?

In January 2025, job-search website Monster.com surveyed 1,300 U.S. employees – both full-time and part-time – about workplace dress codes. Respondents included workers in different industries, age groups, genders and education levels.



A day-to-day approach

Several employers say they allow some flexibility depending on what employees will be doing on a given day – an approach popularly known as “dress for your day.”

Indiana Members Credit Union follows that model, designating days each week as either “A,” “B” or “C” days. Most days are “B,” or business casual. On “A” days, when the office will be hosting outside visitors or a board meeting, employees are asked to wear what the credit union calls “business professional” attire: a button-down shirt and a sports coat with dress slacks, for example, or a dress or a skirt and blouse. On the occasional “C” day, jeans and clean sneakers are OK.

The credit union’s senior managers decide on the categories each week and notify employees via email and through digital message boards throughout the office. This week, for example, Monday through Thursday were “B” days. Friday, which the credit union designated as Employee Appreciation Day, was a “C” day.

Indianapolis-based [!\[\]\(9dfdaff1d86ba3c1f8353b4d1b61b8c5_img.jpg\) OneAmerica Financial](#), Indianapolis-based [!\[\]\(bcef2083a617d3f771f1bcdf2f97158d_img.jpg\) Elanco Animal Health](#) and Carmel-based [!\[\]\(2c64db98cee6d30f87a54305b47fe92d_img.jpg\) CNO Financial Group](#) also allow day-to-day flexibility.

“OneAmerica Financial follows a ‘dress for your day’ policy, which allows associates to choose attire that is comfortable yet professional based on their work location, schedule, and meetings. Employees are expected to use good judgment, maintain a positive professional image, and represent the company well,” Jim Gavin, the company’s senior director of external communications, enterprise marketing and communications, told IBJ via email.

CNO told IBJ it implemented its “dress for your day” policy in 2018 and has not changed it since then.

Elanco said that it does not have a formal dress code and that its “dress for your day” policy allows employees to adjust their attire for activities like working in the lab, meeting customers or visiting the neighborhood meeting with impact partners.

One potential pitfall of the “dress for your day” approach, a human resources expert said, is that not everyone in the same workplace is having the same type of day.

“If the culture of the firm is to project a professional image, and you wear a suit because you’re meeting a client who’s wearing a suit, but all the people down the hallway are wearing shorts and flip-flops, that’s a real disconnect,” said JoDee Curtis, founder and owner of [Purple Ink LLC](#), a Carmel-based human resources consulting firm.



JoDee Curtis

Curtis said her staff works remotely most of the time, so her main concern is that they wear business-casual or professional clothes from the waist up — so they look professional during video meetings.

Asking around

Purple Ink has fielded queries from clients with dress code questions, Curtis said. One of the recurring questions, she said, is how their workplace rules or dress code culture compares with others’.

“I get the sense that they’re wanting to raise the bar on their dress code again because it has gotten very, very casual,” Curtis said. “But most people aren’t doing it.”

She said employers might be hesitant because they think a stricter dress code might hurt their ability to attract and retain employees.

At some point, Curtis said, the pendulum might shift back, “but I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

Endress+Hauser’s Ferguson is also taking the long view.

“We know everything’s cyclical,” Ferguson said. “You know, the Alpha Generation [those born from 2010 to 2024], they may come to the workforce and we’ll start wearing ties again. So, who knows? We’re just not making a big deal about it right now.”•

About the author



Susan Orr



Orr joined IBJ in 2016. She’s been a reporter since 1995 and has worked at four newspapers in three states. Before moving to Indianapolis, she wrote for the Courier & Press in Evansville. When she’s not working, she enjoys cooking, travel and spending way too much time on Twitter.

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