
The future of corporate fashion after lockdown

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Suits, sweatpants or somewhere in-between

The coronavirus pandemic and ensuing lockdowns have sent shockwaves of change rippling throughout the world. In addition to the tremendous cost to lives and livelihoods, the unique combination of a highly contagious viral pandemic paired with solitary lockdowns has produced distinct social changes. We have been forced to adapt how we communicate, work, exercise, date, and even the way we look.

While many of these social changes will revert back to the 'old normal' once the pandemic is over, some are here for good. It is difficult to imagine ever again being in a crowded public space without wearing a mask, and hand sanitizer is sure to remain a permanent fixture in handbags and at shop entrances.

The effect of the pandemic on fashion and style, especially in the working world, is less clear. As the lockdown confined us all to our homes for months, the usual attention we paid our appearances all but disappeared as we had nobody other than our families, housemates, or pets to impress. This change was especially acute for those fortunate enough to be able to work from home. The dress code of the corporate world – one of the last bastions of sharp suits and sleek skirts – was replaced by whatever we were bothered to throw on between our bed and our desk (if we even made it that far).

Safely hidden during “cameras off” meetings (or at least behind a grainy webcam), we were able to continue wearing the same comfy clothes for days. At first, we were grateful for the time and energy saved not needing to shave, put on makeup, and tie a Windsor knot each morning. It was also a chance to try new looks. Many a video call icon steadily filled up with “lockdown beards”. But over time, we grew **jaded** as our slovenly appearances began to affect our moods and productivity. The closure of gyms and nearness of the fridge added to the ruin.

Appearances matter – especially when we work. Of course, how we look determines a major part of how colleagues, superiors, and clients perceive us. It is no secret that our appearance is an essential way of communicating things about ourselves (there is a reason we consider buying a new suit for a big interview or getting a fresh haircut before a first date). Looking sharp conveys to the person in front of you that you care about their first impression of you – hence the adage “dress to impress”.

To be clear, this does not necessarily mean dressing particularly formally (depending on the nature of the occasion). It simply means looking presentable, to give the impression that you gave a moment's thought to the way you appear. Wearing a more casual outfit, as long as it is well put together, is not the same thing as looking sloppy or unprofessional. Unfortunately, many of us working from home ended up dressing casually without the care or attention that prevent the decline to sloppiness.

As well as the obvious point that how others see us matters, especially in significant situations, the way we dress affects our own psychological and physical performance. Studies have found that dressing more formally **improves negotiation outcomes** and **increases abstract thinking**. Since the start of lockdown, there have been **countless articles** advising us that taking the effort to dress properly while working from home improves our motivation and sense of purpose. Putting on a crisp new t-shirt at the start of the day does feel like a fresh start, even if it is still just a t-shirt.

As we have become more accustomed to the routines of working from home, most of us have ditched the decaying sweatpants and stained hoodies. Yet very few have opted for the same formalwear worn to the office pre-lockdown. At the end of the day, we are still in our homes, and the idea of clacking through the lounge in heels is absurd. Plus, the time saved really has allowed more time for work, exercise, or (if we're honest) extra rest and downtime. So instead, we have

gone for outfits that are still comfortable yet presentable; that make us feel good and look good, even if it is in the corner of a colleague's screen. Fashion magazines have published **guides** on "working-from-home looks", which combine more comfortable 'athleisure' garments such as leggings with slightly smarter buttoned shirts and turtlenecks. Some have **described** their home office style as a "mullet" – business on top and party at the bottom.

What is the future of corporate fashion? Will the eventual end of lockdown see a return to the old normal of strict formal dress codes or will the happy medium of working-from-home-smart-casual become the new normal?

The answer may simply depend on whether we are working from home or not. It seems likely that in the medium term at least, companies will move to a **hybrid model** in which workers spend some days in the office and other days back at home. Perhaps corporate fashion will simply mimic this: workers will keep it casual while at home but take it up a notch at the office. But perhaps the days of strict workplace dress codes are truly numbered, as even the most corporate workers lose the ties and high heels in favour of the "Zoom chic" of polo necks, slacks, and loose buttoned shirts.

Hopefully, workplace dress codes will align with the new flexibility of the workforce. There should be a greater embrace of less strict dress codes that allow for more individual freedom. The traditional suit-and-tie is certainly not for everyone, and many people are far more happy and comfortable wearing more casual clothing. Traditionalists may argue that nothing less than formal attire counts as 'professional'. But they will need to catch up to the times and understand that as long as someone has made an effort to look presentable and they are comfortable, the quality of their work will be just the same (if not better).

Of course, wider trends in style and technology should not be ignored. The traditional fashion gender binary is being constantly disrupted, with the line between 'men's' and 'women's' fashion becoming more and more hazy. Many workplaces and schools are making their dress and uniform policies **gender neutral**. The unlikely sartorial icons of 'Big Tech' such as Zuckerberg and Jobs long ago disrupted corporate style with their infamously simple '**uniforms**'. With the pandemic accelerating the shift to a more virtual world, perhaps we will simply be able to rely on software that does our makeup for us, such as Zoom's "**touch up my appearance**" feature.

Formalwear is inherently traditional, with rigid rules that are ill-suited to the more liberal world of the 21st century. The impact of lockdown on corporate fashion will quicken the shift to more relaxed styles in the workplace, with greater freedom for individual expression without negatively impacting performance. Working from home should have taught us that feeling comfortable and confident in one's skin is far more important than complying with arbitrary and archaic dress codes. With this greater freedom, workers will be more happy and more productive in the post-pandemic world.