

Don't be casually casual

Smart casual is one of the most common, yet most confusing, dress codes.

Workplace attire in general is becoming more casual, which can make it even more challenging for workers who do not want to stand out for the wrong reasons at work or workplace functions.

Personal brand image and style expert Annie Sophia Larkin says a smart casual dress code can be open to interpretation, which makes selecting an outfit Monday to Friday or for dinners, client functions or networking events problematic.

“The word ‘casual’ could mean shirt and jeans to one person and T-shirt and trackies to another,” she says.

Larkin presents in-house workshops to organisations about dress codes because employers recognise the correlation between the way staff dress and how it represents their brand which ultimately can affect profits.

For functions, Larkin says the location, time of day, if it is a large or small event and who will attend can affect what constitutes smart casual attire. A person's goals – such as if they plan to celebrate with colleagues, or gain an introduction to the chief executive – may also affect their outfit choice.

“These are the words that you need to consider when you look in your wardrobe – professional, polished, neat, relaxed, flexible, informal, respectful,” she says.

“Then look at how you can add in your own signature statement. I believe it is better to be overdressed than underdressed – it is always better to be seen as making the effort of over dressing than be perceived as someone who couldn't be bothered.”

For men, Larkin says an open-collared shirt, polo or smart tee with a pair of suit pants, chinos, dark denim jeans or tailored shorts will work.

Boat shoes, suede lace ups, espadrilles and dressy trainers can be acceptable, and a sports jacket can complete the smart casual look.

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Smart casual can be more challenging for women who often have more outfit combinations to choose from, Larkin says.

“It is not so much what it is, but what pieces should or shouldn’t be worn together,” she says.

“The goal is to put together an ensemble that is polished, makes you feel confident and is appropriate. For example, jeans with flats could be too casual; pair with a heel though and you invite the ‘smart’ into the look.

“An embellished sleeveless shirt with shorts could be too casual; with a tailored trousers or skirt, it could be smart.”

A dress with a bold necklace or statement heels, a pencil or A-line skirt that is not too short, or tailored trousers are appropriate.

Avoid spaghetti straps and midriff tops but indigo or black jeans may be considered suitable.

“A blazer is a great addition to any smart casual outfit as it can dress up any base including a plain dress, top and dark jeans,” she says. “The beauty of it is you can also easily remove it when settled into your day or function.”

“Accessories can make or break a smart-casual outfit. You need to strike a balance between over the top bling and the underwhelming basic.”

“To feel confident, you not only have to feel comfortable in what you wear, you need to feel like you are dressing in a way that is in line with your personality,” she says. “Give yourself the permission to express your personality through style while also showing respect to those around you and the environment you are in.”

“Get this right and you’ll notice how many more people you connect with – not only will you feel good but you will look great.”

This article was first published by Cara Jenkin, Careers Editor at News Corp.