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WORK/LIFE BALANCING ACT

Summer in the workplace: How casual is too casual?

Summer retreats, casual dressing and summer time-off habits can be minefields if you make missteps.

By Cindy Krischer Goodman

Kelley Kronenberg Managing Partner Michael Fichtel quoted: “Most offices today run with smaller staffs and frown on anyone who takes off more than two weeks in a row. Michael Fichtel, managing partner of the law offices of Kelley Kronenberg in Fort Lauderdale, says his firm has a policy that prohibits lawyers from taking more than two weeks consecutive and requires they check in no less than twice a day. “Fortunately or unfortunately, there’s no longer an uninterrupted vacation in the legal profession.”

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Joanna Stiegler pondered what to wear to her company’s beach party, finally settling on a sporty bikini that wouldn’t reveal too much during the volleyball game.

“Even though it was a beach day, it was still a work day,” Stiegler says. “You just have to make sure what you’re wearing is tasteful.”

For some, wearing a bathing suit to a summer work outing is more terrifying than prying off the office lush at the holiday party. But shun the event and risk no longer being considered a team player.

Summer traditionally is a time when workplaces and attitudes become laid back. But it’s also when thorny issues arise that can impede one’s career. Everything from corporate retreats to summer vacations to casual dressing can open the door to taboo behavior.

Here are some of summer’s work/life traps and how to avoid them:

DRESS CODE

During summer, some offices go casual or declare Friday the day to dress down. But participate with caution. Rosa Fernandez, an advertising account executive, admits to a misstep in the past. On one of her first jobs, she wore sandals and a white cotton shirt on a hot summer day. Her boss pulled her aside. “She said my shirt was see-through and that I looked like I was still in college.”

Etiquette experts say almost regardless of where you work, leave your flip flops at home. An Adecco survey shows 71 percent of Americans view them as inappropriate at work — even more so than mini-skirts or strapless tops.

The recent heat wave has made casual dressing this summer more complicated. Wearing your jacket to a business lunch and arriving soaked in sweat doesn’t come off as impressive. One South Beach banker I spoke with told me he recently arrived for a business lunch at a patio café in a suit: “My client looked at me like I was crazy and asked why I had on a heavy jacket in 100 degree heat.”

Even when casual dress is a policy, gauge your boss’s lead. Shane Soefker, senior managing director of Cushman & Wakefield of Florida, says his workplace has declared Fridays as casual. However, he doesn’t feel comfortable trading

slacks for jeans and he's not really fond of his brokers doing it either. "We have lots of clients that roll through here and we still need to come across as professional," he says.

"Regardless of what you can wear, it's really about what should you wear," says business etiquette expert Barbara Pachter, author of *Greet! Eat! Tweet!* "Clothes need to fit, you shouldn't overemphasize body parts and casual doesn't mean sloppy."

COMPANY RETREATS OR OUTINGS

Work events during the summer come with their own set tricky scenarios. Showing up at the company picnic in a revealing halter top or wearing a Speedo to a law partner's palatial beach home can cost you credibility.

Of course, snubbing the event or being the sweaty nerd in jeans standing around when everyone else is splashing in the pool can brand you a loner. Stiegler, an IT staffing recruiter with Signature Consultants, recognizes the benefit of showing social skills and bonding with a boss during beach volleyball or with a client during a company clam bake. "Some people didn't show up for the beach party and I think they lost out."

Pachter agrees. If the boss organizes a summer softball game, participate and be a good sport. "You never know who you may meet or bond with. The person at the softball game from another department could be the one who interviews you for a position months later."

Summer outings at law firms typically involve cocktail parties, golf outings and formal dinners and can be a trap for the unwary, says Vivia Chen, author of The Careerist blog on Law.com. "They pose situation where you can not only dress inappropriately, but also give hints of how you don't fit in socially." Chen's advice: Stay away from anything revealing and don't hang out at the bar alone.

SUMMER HOURS AND VACATION

When asked to choose the three workplace perks Americans most want in the summer, only 42 percent chose wardrobe flexibility, compared to 60 percent who listed flex time, such as Summer Fridays.

Many workplaces do shut early on Fridays. But Pachter recommends tuning into the protocol in your department before taking advantage. Head to the beach on a Friday afternoon when the rest of the team is working on a major presentation and you might as well not come back on Monday, she says.

It's the same for vacation. Every workplace has its own etiquette, culture and policies for time off. Take off at an inopportune time, fail to check in or leave your post without coverage and risk getting fired.

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KIDS

Finding low-cost activities during summer to keep kids occupied for your full work day can challenge even the most organized parent. But even the most generous boss has limits on bringing kids to the office or calling home too often. "If you get stuck and need to bring your kid to work one day, it happens and people accept it. But if it's every day and your wild and kid is running around that's a problem," Pachter says.

The bottom line with summer etiquette, Pachter says: be a team player and look to your manager to set the tone.

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