

# THE GREAT DRESS CODE DEBATE

YOU DECIDE  
CASUAL, BUSINESS CASUAL, OR PROFESSIONAL



NextAfter

# A QUICK INTRODUCTION

My name is Kevin Peters and I am the Chief Technology Officer for NextAfter. I started at NextAfter as employee number three over six years ago now. My primary role and responsibility here at NextAfter is the oversight of data analysis, web development, helping clients better understand the data they have in front of them to make strategic plans. With me today, I have Courtney Gaines.



I am Courtney Gaines. I'm a Vice President here at NextAfter and I've been with the team for four years now. I was actually employee number four. I am part of our client services team and help oversee several of our different clients' work which includes everything from strategy to the actual execution the digital fundraising program. As a side note, I'm also the most fashionable employee at NextAfter. This is not a humblebrag. This is facts.

- ④ That is accurate.  
Today, Courtney and I are going to be engaging in a lively debate revolving around workplace dress code. But before we enter into that debate, it's probably best we lay a little bit of background on why this debate even exists.  
I think the debate started about two years ago when we made a hire for one of our data analysts, a woman named Kristen Allcorn. As part of her onboarding, I was communicating with her on benefits, salary, and all the normal things that go into a hiring process.
- ④ It's important to point out that Kristen would have been employee number three for females, the third female employee on our team.
- ④ Correct. One of her first questions she asked was, "What is the dress code for NextAfter?" Since I am largely fashion-illiterate and have no idea how to describe dress codes per se, I asked the most fashionable person at NextAfter, Miss Courtney Gaines, what she would describe our dress code as, and she said...
- ④ "Smart casual."
- ④ So, I told Kristen that our dress code is smart casual. Courtney, how would you describe our dress code?
- ④ If I had to be very honest, our dress code is actually more like "very casual," not really smart casual.

🌀 Courtney, could you define smart casual?

🌀 I think smart casual is, you can wear jeans but also have a nice top, or nice shoes, or something like that. But you wouldn't wear, I don't know, sneakers that you'd wear to mow the lawn or a hot dog shirt or Texas A&M T-shirt.

🌀 You would be wrong. According to Wikipedia, the definition of smart casual includes “khaki pants, slacks, and skirts, as well as short sleeve polos and long-sleeve shirts, but excludes jeans, tennis shoes, tights, or short skirts, T-shirts, and sweatshirts.”

🌀 I don't think Wikipedia is correct. That's an interesting definition. I would say that's more business casual than smart casual.

🌀 **If the internet is wrong, I don't want to be right.**

Moving on. So, we told Kristen that our dress code was smart casual, at which point Kristen then went out and bought a new wardrobe so that she would have it ready when she started work at NextAfter. Within the first week she came to Courtney and said, "I feel very overdressed. Is it really smart casual?" At that point, we had to admit, “no”, our dress code is hyper-casual.

This is for a good reason; one of our annual events is the Nonprofit Innovation and Optimization Summit, in which we usually get eight T-shirts made. So now, in Year #5 of our Summit, we have a plethora of different T-shirt options that we can wear. It's become kind of the norm around here to wear NextAfter swag.

“Smart Casual: Khaki pants, slacks, and skirts, as well as short sleeve polos and long-sleeve shirts, but excludes jeans, tennis shoes, tights, or short skirts, T-shirts, and sweatshirts.”  
- Wikipedia

That said, Courtney and I have decided that, as a result of this debate that's been ongoing, it would probably be helpful if we clearly stated the benefits of the different dress code options. I personally am more on the side of the a more formal dress code. Not formal per se, but that you would dress as business casual.

🌀 You would want to wear khakis every day?

🌀 Yes. I think I could be a more productive ... But we'll get to the debate part of it, in a second.

## **BEFORE WE START...**

🌀 I think it'd probably be best to address what we're both wearing now.

Kevin, why don't you go first? Since you are wanting our office environment to be more business casual, more professional in nature. Kevin, what are you wearing to work today?

☉ I am wearing jeans that are dirty, a long sleeve T-shirt that has a hot dog on it and I haven't shaved for three days. But in my defense, this is because I have faced two days of air travel delays, but then still came into work due to my high work ethic. Courtney, how would you describe what you are wearing today?

☉ I have jeans on that have a hole in the knee, a blouse, and a duster, or a cardigan for people like you who don't know what a duster is. I had lipstick on earlier this morning. I combed my hair, have makeup on and have nice boots on.

Really what I'm saying is, I feel a little bit like I am smart casual today.

☉ According to Wikipedia, you are not because you are wearing jeans with holes in them, which is your standard outfit.

## THE GREAT DEBATE...

☉ Courtney, why do you believe a more casual work environment dress code would be better for NextAfter?

☉ I'm going to start by asking you a question. Kevin, is the culture of our company important to you?

☉ Very.

☉ Well then, if it is, in fact, important to you, you would want to know these things... A more casual dress code is going to attract and retain talent, which should be very important to our business. Especially being in the space that we're in, digital fundraising, a lot of the people in this space are younger. Can we say that? We just did.

And so, as we're looking for new talent, we need to be appealing to that young workforce and not just appeal so that they would want to start working here, but they would want to stay and become invested in the company. So that's number one.

I was doing some research around this, I found that actually one in three workers would rather have a casual dress code than an extra \$5,000 in pay. I found that fascinating. And you should love that as being the financial guy at our company, that you wouldn't have to pay employees as much just for the fact of letting them wear what they want, so that's a huge benefit.

More casual dress code, I believe, also leads to happier employees. The reason why I say this is that it allows them to wear what they want; it lets them express themselves how they want and ensures they are not required to be a certain kind of person because we're making them dress a certain way.

I have actually a great example of how terrible this can be if you force people to dress a certain way. I used to work at a very conservative organization where women had to wear nylons if they wore dresses or skirts. The skirts had to be at the knee or below. You had to be very conservative dress and very, very modest. I definitely stuck out to the organization because I didn't follow those rules very well.

I had a friend my age who would wear this big pearl necklace every day. I thought it was pretty ugly and I didn't understand why she would wear this pearl necklace every single day. One day I asked her, I said, "Why are you wearing this necklace every day like that?" Because it did not look like her at all. I knew her personality. She's very outgoing, she's very fun, and this pearl necklace made her look 20 years older. And she told me that she was wearing that because, "That is what you do at this job. That is who I have to be at this job." And the moment she said, "This is who I have to be at this job," I said, "Then that is a job I never want to be at. I should have to be or feel like someone else by wearing a specific thing." And in this case, it was this pearl necklace and I just wanted to like rip it off her neck and throw it in the garbage and tear her nylons.

Why would we want to force people to be someone else or something else at the place where they work? They're not going to be nearly as productive. They're not going to be nearly as expressive in the work that they do. Their motivation is going to go down because they're having to adhere to some rule just to look a certain way. We should never force people to look a certain way. It also has a direct impact on our mood, our thoughts, and our behavior.

When you think about more professional dress, it can most of the time be much more restrictive in nature. Think about a business suit, when you wear a jacket, it is much more restrictive. What's the first thing men do when they sit down to eat or when they sit down at a meeting? They unbuttoned their coat or they take off their jacket. Why? It's restrictive, they don't have full movement. And so again, there's this physical restrictiveness that leads to a restrictiveness in the work that people will do.

They have done studies around this. They've shown that when people feel restricted in their clothing, the work is a direct correlation of their work.

Additionally, people feel more connected to the company and the team as a whole. Again, going back to that restrictive nature of clothing, this might sound like a stretch but go with me for a moment. Restrictive clothing could be a representation of what the company is like as a whole. So the company could feel more restrictive to them, closed off, rigid. Where, when you have a more casual environment, it feels freer, more inviting for people to know what's going on, to ask questions, and all of those things. There's just more freedom, not just in their own personal work, but in the team as a whole. There's this border that comes down and it makes even some of the decisions that leadership is making more visible and less like the big guys said this upstairs, and that's what we have to do, but more like people are a part of a team, that they're a part of these decisions when they can be expressive and free to wear what they want.

More and more companies are moving away from more formal business attire. They're embracing this casual dress environment in the office. In fact, 50% of companies are allowing workers to dress down whenever they want, which I think is a great perk. Casual dress truly is a workplace benefit just as much as vacation time, and healthcare, and all of the other benefits that we can offer employees. Casual dress is a great benefit that costs you nothing and actually is less expensive than having to have a Kristen go out and buy more formal clothes.

And then the other thing I want to point out is that a lot of work environments, and as I think about NextAfter, we have more flexibility in where people work sometimes. Some people can work remote. So as much as we want to try and level the playing field amongst our employees on where they're working, if someone's at home in their casual attire and someone has to be in the office, it's a great way to level that playing field by saying you can wear what you want.

Now, I want to make one note about this whole casual dress attire. As much as I'm all about freedom of choice to dress how you want at work, I do feel like there needs to be standards. A company can be super relaxed with a dress code policy, but that that doesn't mean that there are no standards. So standards need to be put in place, it's just a matter of communicating what those are and then allowing still that freedom to wear what you want.

🌀 What are your minimum standards?

🌀 No pajama pants, no slippers, brush your teeth, comb your hair, look presentable. My whole thing is if we had someone come in the office, which we do on a very frequent basis, right? We should be able to, no matter what you're wearing, still be presentable to people visiting. I'm not saying that we let people wear whatever they want and have to worry about when clients come in or vendors come in that we look sloppy. It's not that at all.

🌀 Okay. Couple of rebuttals for you:

🌀 You mentioned that one-third of employees would rather have casual dress than \$5,000, but that means two-thirds of the people would rather have the company make more money so that they can make more money and they're willing to sacrifice their casual dress to do so. Would you agree with that?

🌀 I mean it's not a matter of agreeing, it's, I guess, math.

🌀 Along with math, I like how you mentioned that 50% of companies allow for casual dress code. That would mean that 50% of the companies also require professional dress code.

🌀 Yes. But, more and more companies are moving towards this. I think that we're in a stage in life in the professional environment that flexibility will grow, and grow, and grow because of the emphasis on the acquisition and retention of new employees.

🌀 Okay. A point on unbuttoning the coat to make it less restrictive.

That is actually the requirement; that's the social norm for when you wear jackets. You always unbutton it when you sit down. It's not to be less restrictive, that's just the way the fashion works. The last rebuttal I would have is that a more professional dress code environment does not necessarily have to be more restrictive. It's possible to express yourself wearing nicer clothes.

🌀 Can you give me examples of how you would do that?

🌀 I would not wear a hotdog T-shirt. Now it is time for my pros.

🌀 You know that I had a job where I was paid to debate.

🌀 For the record. I did not know that before invited you to this debate. This may be my very first debate ever.

“You know that I had a job where I was paid to debate.”  
- Courtney Gaines

④ My gosh.

④ OK, now for some of the pros for a more formal dress code where the professional clothes help mirror a professional environment. People behave more professionally when wearing more professional clothes.

How often, Courtney, would you say that clients visit our office?

④ Maybe once a week.

④ Once a week. How often do I remember to tell you that they're coming?

④ Never.

④ Never. That's really on me but it is still true.

However, a mandated level of dress code would ensure that sloppiness just can't happen because whenever we leave it to individuals' judgement, there is no standard. Employees will take what they interpret as being nice in their own mind. While, yes, I want to allow people to express themselves and to be creative, some individual's level of understanding of what professional attire is, is different than our own.

Additionally, it saves time. Professional dress takes the decision making out of getting dressed every day. In fact, Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook CEO has been famously quoted as restricting his types of clothing he even has available to him in his closet so it's not a decision he has to make. It's less time he needs to spend, and that time equates to money in an hourly basis.

A standardized dress code also can protect the company from lawsuits, where it is possible for someone's clothing causes an accident. Actually, now that I think about it, that reasoning might only work factories. We're going to move on.

Additionally, professional attire has been proven to boost confidence in individuals. When people look nice, they feel nice. When people have a higher confidence, they are more productive, as studies have shown.

④ Okay. Kevin, I have a rebuttal to one of your three points...

You said that it saves time and you even had a quote by Mark Zuckerberg about his wardrobe. Mark Zuckerberg, you had said, likes to know what he's going to wear every single day because it saves some time, and you said more work means more money. That doesn't mean that that wardrobe has to be professional in nature. You can do the same thing with casual clothes as you would with professional clothes.

I have a friend, who in his closet has Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, all picked out for the week with his professional clothes. I can do that same thing for casual attire. I could choose the pants I want, or skirts, or dresses I want, yes, even those can be casual, in my closet for the specific days of the week. Now, I don't because that's not my personality, but I could, and it would save the exact same time. So all I'm saying is, it doesn't matter what kind of clothes it is, you can do the same thing with casual clothes as you would professional clothes.

Also, your comment about having a higher confidence because of people wearing professional clothes, I can see what you're saying with that. But I will say this from a very personal side of things, when I'm dressed, no matter what I'm wearing, whether it's professional or casual, I could have a really cute new athleisure outfit that I love, which I do, and I wore it the other day, I felt so confident in it because I felt cute and put together. So, professional attire does not equate confidence.

Did I win?

## WHO IS THE WINNER...



During this debate, I've learned a handful of different things.

1. That we don't work in a factory? Yes, that we don't work in a factory.
2. That Courtney has previous debating experience, far exceeding my own.
3. What the word "athleisure" means.
4. And so much more.

I think we can safely conclude that **Courtney definitely won this debate** and that **NextAfter will continue to have a casual work attire.**

## WHAT'S NEXT...

This is obviously not one of NextAfter's normal eBooks. It isn't as highly visual as normal, it doesn't contain our nonprofit research, and is FAR less professional. That said, it is a good example of what is possible to create with limited resources and limited time.

This eBook was designed, written, and edited in less than one hour for less than \$50 in hard costs. Creating content doesn't have to be a long and laborious process. It is likely that you have unique viewpoints to express or stories that only your organization can tell. Those can be your offers;