

The new green dress code: office cool

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If the contrast between outdoor air and indoor air conditioning feels extreme during the summer in Canadian cities, imagine living in Dubai.

"I come from the Middle East so I know about hot weather," says Mack Albalouchi, who works in sales at the Bank of Nova Scotia. A Toronto resident for seven years, he says it's just as important to be prepared for the heat as to look office-appropriate.

"We don't have to wear ties, but I like to wear a nice cotton shirt," says Albalouchi, who is sporting a stylized pink check button-down. Even with air conditioning, he says, the office still feels hot.

Some offices are about to get even hotter. To compensate for turning up the thermostat by lowering the air conditioning in government offices, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty is giving the green light to casual summer work attire.



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Bank of Montreal executive assistant Cheryl Jenkins, left, snapped in downtown Toronto this week, snazzes up her fuchsia shirt dress with black pumps and bold accessories. Bell Canada sales specialist Souk Sengthavy describes the airflow in his office as stuffy but insists on wearing a suit. The secret is opting for grey over black. (*Tibor Kolley/Globe and Mail*)

The initiative, which went full steam ahead last week, is meant to conserve electricity and fight climate change and McGuinty is hoping that private companies will follow suit.

When stopped on a sweltering weekday in Toronto's financial district, people generally agreed that they are allowed greater liberty to lighten up, regardless of whether their office is a sweatbox or icebox.

"I've been here a year and the dress code has come under review many times," says Cheryl Jenkins, who works as an executive assistant at the Bank of Montreal. "First capris were out and now they're back in." Still, Jenkins was concerned that her short fuchsia shirt dress may have looked too summery and so she snazzed it up with black pumps and bold accessories.

Cathy DeSerranno, wardrobe consultant and stylist for First Canadian Place, the Toronto office tower with more than 120 retailers on its concourse level, says the surfeit of dresses this season has been a boon for women who want to look pretty, polished and perspiration-free. She recommends steering clear of spaghetti straps and hemlines that are more than a hand's width above the knee.

She also underscores the importance of keeping a jacket at the office even if it's not always worn. "It's the fundamental key item for both men and women," DeSerranno says.

With this in mind, Bell Canada sales specialist Souk Sengthavy earns an A for appropriate attire. He describes the airflow in his office as "stuffy" but insists on wearing a suit because "customers expect a certain level of professionalism." The secret, Sengthavy says, is opting for grey suits over black, Egyptian cotton shirts, and tan shoes and belts. He still looks cool, style-wise, despite noting that his suit gets hot. "Isn't it sad that this is called 'dressing cooler?'" he says.

Vancouver personal stylist and image consultant Diana Kilgour points out that there are varying degrees to which people can beat the heat. A shorter haircut is one approach. Another is to apply an absorbent body powder such as Shower to Shower. And few people realize how big a difference lighter makeup, jewellery, shoes and bags can make. "Anything that requires an expenditure of energy will heat you up," she says.

Pat Sullivan, president of online job site Workopolis, says McGuinty's eco-slant not only provides a legitimate reason to dress lighter, it also lightens people's attitudes. "It speaks to the desires of employees now to have greater work-life balance," he says, adding that the office is an "environment" too.

As for whether Sullivan thinks some higher-ups will reject cool summer attire on the basis that it recalls dot-com era sloppiness, he answers, "It wasn't only the clothing that was casual. We were throwing pool tables into the workplace and setting up Friday-afternoon keggers. I think that was probably taking casual too far."

Yes, because as nice as a swimming pool and an ice cold pint sounds when the thermostat is set at 26, a swimsuit will never be office-sanctioned.

Toronto Hydro is presenting an eco-conscious fashion show this Wednesday at 12:15 at the Commerce Court Compass, 25 King St. W., Concourse Level.