

# Japan Asks Workers to Dress Down This Summer; What about the U.S.?

By [Carla Fried](#) | Jun 2, 2011 | [0 Comments](#)

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With its power grid still hobbled by the March earthquake and tsunami, the government of Japan is asking businesses to go easy on the air conditioning this summer by keeping the thermostat at a ripe 82 degrees. That's led to yet another official government push: encouraging Japan's workforce to dress more casually so it can better withstand what looks to be a very hot summer at the office.

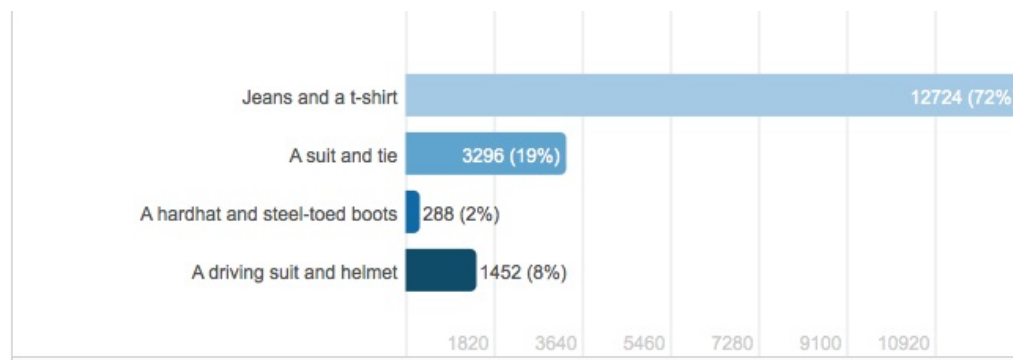
The Super Cool Biz initiative — yes that is the official name of the program launched by Japan's Department of Environment — is mostly geared toward getting men out of suits and ties, and into polo shirts, aloha (Hawaiian) shirts, and jeans. So if the notoriously formal Japanese are being pushed to dress down, then that's surely got to mean just about anything goes here in the States, right?



Probably not. Given the state of the economy, fighting through stifling summer heat with a wardrobe that skews to casual t-shirts, shorts, flip flops, and revealing necklines/hemlines is generally not advised. “With so much competition for jobs and for promotions, the last thing you want to do is have your attire stick out,” says Lori Ann Robinson, an image and clothing consultant based in Los Angeles who works with private clients and by corporations such as Macy’s and Morgan Stanley to deliver etiquette seminars to their workers.

## Clothes Call

There's no question that casual is what we want to wear to work. In a LinkedIn poll last year that attracted nearly 18,000 votes, jeans were the ideal office fashion statement.



But unless you're self-employed and working in your home office, what you want takes a back seat to what the boss wants. And in a recent OfficeTeam survey of 500 human resource managers, nearly 75 percent said their company isn't relaxing the dress code for the summer months. If you're intent on going extra laid-back (and cool), set your job sights on Canada, where more than 40 percent of employers relax the dress code during the summer. After the winters they put up with, there's probably some overcompensation in that.

Here are some tips on how to balance your desire to dress comfortably for the sweltering months with that other desire: career success.

- **What's the boss wearing?** If your company has a clearly articulated dress code, then you know the rules of the road. If not, take your cue from your boss. "That doesn't mean a 30 year old needs to have the same style as their 50 year old boss. You can adjust and personalize everything. But if the people you work for aren't wearing jeans, than you shouldn't be wearing jeans," Robinson advises. On the other hand, if your CEO happens to think dress-up is a newly laundered hoodie, then you probably can't be too casual if you tried. "Every industry is different, every company is different," Robinson says. "The goal is look around you and see what is appropriate." If that's not exactly your personal style, well, that's what weekends are for.
- **What's the client wearing?** If you're in a client-facing job, you've got two competing goals here: following your office dress code, and making sure you fit in with your clients as well. This past winter, Vanguard chairman William McNabb issued a company wide edict to retire the formal suits after his sales team told him the fund giant's formality was actually making some clients uncomfortable. Following that logic, if you're angling to get your boss to ease up on the dress code, have your clients put in a good word for business casual.
- **Business comes before casual.** "Talk about an oxymoron," says Robinson of the term "business casual." The problem she sees is that everyone focuses on the "casual" and pays no attention to the "business." Apparently the partners at the Jones Day law firm have been struggling with this same workplace wardrobe malfunction issue. From a recent staff memo:

"As a reminder, the key word in our business casual policy is business. Clothing that works well for the beach, exercise sessions, night clubs, and shopping malls should not be worn to work. While business casual attire is permissible on Fridays, it is by no means mandatory. We assume you will consider your client and other responsibilities, and the image of the Firm generally, in connection with the foregoing."
- **Dress for the next step on the ladder.** "It may sound a bit old fashioned, but if you're interested in getting promoted, dressing in a way that is appropriate for the next level you're aiming for is part of the game," says Robinson.
- **Make the case for a more lenient dress code.** If you'd really like to dress more casually at work, try to couch it as a business proposition to your boss (or start with HR and have them do your bidding). There's no real definitive study that says dressing up or down impacts workplace productivity. In a 2008 poll of managers and execs, 60 percent supported casual work attire while the other 40 percent thought it hurt productivity. So your best gambit is to start with the "morale boosting" idea that won't cost your boss a dime to deliver. You want to be careful in how you pitch this; a more casual dress code does not replace a raise, but it's a nice complement. You might also try the Japan angle if your company pays

its utility bill directly (rather than having it covered in the lease agreement). See if your office mates are OK with ratcheting up the thermostat a few degrees — maybe not all the way to 82, but a little higher — in exchange for being able to dress a bit more informally. That will save the boss on the air conditioning bill. And if you can talk your boss out of requiring fancy pants attire, that just might help you spend less on your workplace wardrobe and dry cleaning. With fat raises hard to come by, that's at least one way to stretch your paycheck these days.

*Photo courtesy Flickr user [bccnyc](#)*

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## **Carla Fried**

Carla Fried started reporting on retirement way back when the 401(k) was a new-fangled oddity (i.e., the mid '80s). As a senior writer at Money magazine in the 1990s, she wrote extensively on retirement planning and investment and covered a wide range of personal financial topics, from real estate to insurance. She is a dot-com veteran, having served as the managing editor at Quicken.com. Since 2002 she has freelanced for publications and websites including Business 2.0, Kiplinger's, Money, The New York Times, and Real Simple.

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