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BUSINESS

Death of the tie? Not yet, say fans, despite shift to casual work attire

By Victor Ocasio victor.ocasio@newsday.com Updated August 22, 2019 9:25 AM

The tie is a business clothing accessory quickly being left in the laundry bin of history.

As employers from investment banks to law firms relax their formal dress codes, workers have switched to "business casual" and beyond.

"There's definitely no question that men are buying fewer ties and wearing fewer ties than they have in a quite a while," said Karen Alberg Grossman, editor-in-chief of MR Magazine, a trade magazine for menswear retailers and manufacturers. When MR was founded in 1990, ties were such a large part of its coverage that many in the industry thought it was a neckwear publication, she said.

By 2008, U.S. tie sales had dropped to \$677 million from an industry high of \$1.3 billion in 1995, according to reported figures from Port Washington-based NPD Group. That same year, the Men's Dress Furnishings Association, the trade group for American tie makers, disbanded. NPD Group has stopped issuing sales figures for the industry, but Grossman said she estimates annual sales could be as low as \$450 million today.

"There's been a notable decline in the past several years," she said. "You can see it in all the major stores that used to have table upon table of tie racks. It's just a fraction of what it used to be."

The biggest culprit behind the decline has been changing standards in the workplace.

The expansion of telecommuting, the rise of T-shirt-friendly Silicon Valley and the introduction of women into corporate leadership positions starting in the 1970s have all played a part in challenging assumptions about proper attire in the office, said Emma McClendon, associate curator of costume at The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

The suit-and-tie look "is steeped in power dynamics," she said. It came to prominence in the early 19th century, and despite a few evolutions has remained largely unchanged as compared to

changes in women's office attire. "The tailored suit with a tie, sometimes with a vest — this was the day wear of the professional, respectable powerful man in western urban spaces."

McClendon, who is curating "Power Mode: The Force of Fashion," an exhibition set for December at the FIT museum, said society has been grappling with the "nebulous concept of what is and is not appropriate" in a professional setting for the past few decades.

"It just seems that now across the board we're really seeing a shift away from the uniformity" of formal work clothing, she said.

Work wear for women has relaxed, but with choices of pants, skirts or dresses in recent decades, women's attire has not been as standardized as the suit-and-tie uniform has been for men.

"The standard of full business attire has definitely changed," said MaryAnne Hyland, professor of organizational behavior and human resources management and an associate dean at Adelphi University. "Even investment banks now are changing their dress codes in areas that we always thought were going to be business formal."

In March, investment banking powerhouse Goldman Sachs relaxed its dress standard in accordance with the "changing nature of workplaces generally in favor of a more casual environment."

"We believe this is the right time to move to a firmwide flexible dress code," the company's senior leaders wrote in an email to employees first reported by Bloomberg.

"We're seeing more companies addressing this flexible dressing or 'dress for your day' idea," Hyland said. Such policies allow employees to alter their attire based on what they will be doing that day.

Marcum LLP, an accounting and business advisory firm with offices in Melville, adopted a companywide "dress for your day" policy in November, giving employees more say over their clothing choices. Before the change, the company, which has 30 offices across the country, had a formal dress code.

Under the old rules employees were not permitted to wear sneakers, open-toe shoes, jeans, capri pants, sweatshirts or sleeveless tops,

"It was something that our associates were constantly asking about," said Molly Crane, co-chief human resources officer for Manhattan-based Marcum.

"If they have a client meeting, they should dress in a suit if that's what's expected," said Crane, who works out of the Melville office. "If they're doing their regular day-to-day functions, they can come in jeans to feel more comfortable."

Workplace attire standards vary from industry to industry, and what might be inappropriate in one setting can be the norm in another.

One industry that has led the way toward more casual work fashion has been technology. Exemplified in the style choices of tech moguls like Mark Zuckerberg, with his gray T-shirt and jeans, and the iconic turtleneck sweater and sneakers combo of the late Steve Jobs, the tech world has become linked to its more freeform approach to business attire.

“It really wouldn’t work trying to hire people in this space and saying you have to dress up,” said Marie Arturi, founder and chief executive of Speonk-based tech startup Buncee LLC. “It’s just not tech.”

At her firm, which develops online presentation tools for educators and students, Arturi said T-shirts and jeans are the norm, and while employees might dress more formally when meeting with school officials, even that standard wouldn’t rise to a full suit and tie.

“If you’re sitting at a desk all day doing coding, you’re not going to be dressed in a suit,” she said.

Casual dress is so ingrained in the office’s culture that Arturi even looks forward to some of the funny shirts one of her lead developers wears.

“We have one guy that every day I look forward to his T-shirt,” she said. “He has the best collection of T-shirts known to man.”

Still, there are traditionalists.

Robert E. Caulfield, president and chief executive of Jefferson’s Ferry, an upscale senior living community in South Setauket, said a casual dress standard wouldn’t cut it with the residents.

“I wear a suit and tie every day,” said Caulfield, who oversees 320 employees ranging from nursing staff to administrative office personnel. “It’s not a casual setting. We’re dealing with a clientele at a senior community ... we’re dealing a lot with the Silent Generation.”

Caulfield said his company’s formal dress code is geared to presenting an image of professionalism.

“For me, I’ve always been in a professional career, starting in accounting,” he said. “To me, this is my uniform. I have never, and probably will never, come to work without a tie on.”

In some industries, like the legal profession, the suit and tie remain the clothing of choice for men even as some firms have loosened their attire rules.

“I really think that people are judgmental when they first meet you,” said Ben Weinstock, senior partner at Ruskin Moscou Faltischek, based in Uniondale. “You make an impression on someone when you meet them.”

The law firm has a "business casual" policy in place when employees are not meeting with clients or in court.

While Weinstock said standards of dress for attorneys have evolved over time — 30 to 40 years ago wearing khaki pants or even a colored dress shirt to the office was “probably the wrong thing” and would make a lawyer “stand out” — he insists on wearing a traditional suit, white shirt and tie.

“Wearing a suit and tie doesn’t make you a better lawyer, but it avoids having someone think you’re too casual in your thinking,” he said. Weinstock, who has about 25 suits, all black, navy or gray, said even with the option to dress more informally, he’s comfortable in formal attire.

“I don’t really pay close attention to the policy because all I do is wear suits and ties every day,” he said.

At Eugene Barnosky’s Melville-based law firm, Lamb & Barnosky, the casual dress option is one more way to appeal to younger attorneys.

“Most firms like ours have moved into the business-casual arena,” said Barnosky, a partner at the firm. “We have causal-dress days every Friday throughout the year.”

When recruiting, the firm lets prospects know that “we have casual Fridays, and if there’s a need to be casual on a day other than Friday, that’s fine too.”

Barnosky, who dresses down on casual Fridays, said the industry has changed over the generations, but he’s not sure the profession will ever go completely casual.

“Whether you’re going to have lawyers sitting around in T-shirts and shorts — I don’t know,” he said.

While the traditional tie has taken a hit over the years, MR Magazine's Grossman said formal menswear isn't at death's door, and neither are ties.

“In many stores there’s a younger customer whose father wore khakis and golf shirts, and the suit — it’s new to them,” she said, adding that higher-end fashionable ties have found a market among younger, sharp dressers. “There’s a little more interest dressing up, however dressing up does not always require a tie. Pocket squares have taken off.”

While only 11 percent of men with full- or part-time positions said they wore a necktie every day in 2015, it's up from a low of 6 percent in 2007, according to Gallup polling data. Still, 66 percent said they never wore one to work in 2015, a segment that's relatively unchanged from 67 percent in 2007, and significantly higher than 59 percent of men who said they never wore a tie in 2002.

For some, the question of business dress is more about personal expression than meeting long-held expectations.

“It’s not what you wear, it’s how you wear it,” said Ron White, a Hamptons real estate agent with Saunders & Associates who sells homes worth millions to luxury home buyers.

“I’ve seen people dress up and have the most expensive top-of-the-line stuff on, and they couldn’t sell water to a fish,” White said. “Your dress should not make you. It’s your substance that comes out.

“I’m a person of color, and I love vibrant colors and I love to express how I’m a feeling,” he said. “I’ll go to a black-tie event with a purple tie and a light blue shirt, and everybody will say, ‘That’s completely you.’”

A lot has changed since Liz Uzzo, vice president of human resources for H2M architects + engineers, started at the firm more than 30 years ago, including what a professional might look like on any given day.

“It’s a little old school to always expect women to wear stockings,” said Uzzo, who donated her collection of wool suits after the firm switched to business casual more than a decade ago. “I think those kinds of things have gone out the window.”

Uzzo, whose firm hires many younger professionals, said even with a more relaxed dress standard, employees still questioned why they couldn’t wear jeans and other street clothing to work. Ultimately, employee feedback led to H2M’s current casual Friday dress policy.

“One of the common themes that have come out of surveys are ‘Why do we have to wear fancy clothes, why can’t we wear jeans?’ ” she said. “Generationally things have changed, and sometimes people just have to change to be with the times.

“I could see it even relaxing potentially further in the future, but right now we want to make sure we’re portraying a professional work environment, and I think that’s really important,” she said.