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**The Dress Code Dilemma:** Did ZZ Top Have It Right? By Kathi Guiney SPHR, GPHR President *YES!* Your Human Resources Solution.

In 1983, ZZ Top sang: “Every girl's crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man.” Yet here we are 30 years later, crazy about dress that is less than sharp. Where are the suits, the shirts with collars, the modest heel, and the knee-length skirt? Gone, and unless they are brought back as Halloween costumes or in an episode of *Mad Men*, probably gone for good from the workplace.

So how do employers navigate this new world of work attire, and what will 2013’s definition of business casual be? Is a hoodie OK for a customer meeting? Is yoga wear passable for work attire? And how about cargo pants and Black Sabbath t-shirts at the next board meeting?

Workplace style may seem like a trivial topic but it’s actually an important social and legal issue. Socially-acceptable work attire varies dramatically by geographic region. The surf “board” shorts often found in Southern California offices may not be acceptable in Boston, whereas in California, it is unlikely that a Red Sox cap and vintage game shirt worn to the senior staff meeting will aid the climb up the career ladder. Age, gender, and industry may also play a role in attire choices and in an employee’s comfort level in a workplace with a wide display of “styles.”

What about a company’s position on visible tattoos and piercings? This personal style is a popular choice among the Millennial Generation—the future leaders of corporate America. A strict prohibition policy may mean losing out on exceptional talent. But what if the tattoo is viewed as offensive by other employees? That’s where workplace style can become a legal issue. Based on law, an offensive tattoo must be treated the same way as an offensive poster or slogan on a T-shirt: it needs to be covered up.

Since everyone has different tastes and opinions on style, it is best practice for employers to publish dress code guidelines. Policy should be as specific as possible on what is not acceptable, yet provide some ability for employees to express personal style. For example, policy should document dress code guidelines for attendance at customer meetings or other highly visible gatherings, but leave more flexibility regarding day-to-day business. Most companies prohibit provocative dress in the workplace, including T-shirts with explicit slogans or images, to support a harassment-free environment.

A dress code policy should accommodate worker assignments and personal factors. Safety should always be a prime consideration, such as requiring steel-toed boots in a warehouse or factory. It is equally important to accommodate religious and ethnic differences evident in employee attire. This is usually handled on a case-by-case basis and discussed with the

employee to gain an understanding of the dress choices. This allows the employer to ensure that these choices do not cause a safety issue or a potential harassment or offensive situation for others.

Once the dress code policy is in place, it is important to communicate it and adhere to it! If an employee is out of step with the policy, it is acceptable to discuss the matter with them in private, and if necessary, send them home to change. To bring forward concerns on attire, employees should understand their company's established complaint process. Managers, once aware of any situation, should immediately address the issue to decrease the likelihood of an escalation and possible legal action.

When it comes to a dress code policy, one size does not fit all. Take the time to think what is appropriate and safe in the environment for both employees who work in an office or in the field. And if "Every girl's crazy 'bout a hoodie-wearing dude" is the right style for your company, why not? Create a policy tailor-made to fit your company's culture!