
Engineering Fashions

Does the engineer make the clothes, or do the clothes make the engineer?

BRIAN BRENNER

When I walked into the office the other day, someone casually commented to me, "Nice tie." At first, I thought she was referring to the clever patterns and evocative geometry on my tie. Then I realized it was a comment about fashion, as in "nice tie" meaning that I was wearing an aesthetically pleasing tie. I hadn't received a compliment about clothes at work before, so at first I wasn't sure what to make of it. Engineers have great abilities and can be many things, but being a fashion plate is not usually on the list of their abilities. Scott Adams, creator of *Dilbert*, has made millions with this observation, among others. For example, Dilbert's tie curls up, which happens when you keep a tie well beyond its expiration date. (How do I know this? Let's just say I have empirical evidence.)

Real engineers look for clothing that is functional and covers those areas that should not be exposed in public. Using this definition, a shirt can last many years even if it's frayed and stained. The concept of matching clothes is a bit advanced for engineers and outside of our baseline definition of how to dress. Many

engineers, myself included, don't have the greatest sense of how to match clothes. Therefore, we rely on a simplified, rule-based criteria. In my case, there are two fashion seasons: corduroy and khaki. During the cord season, everything must be gray or black, with red or maroon ties and appropriate solid sweaters. During the khaki season, all shirts are some shade of blue. At first, I only wore light blue shirts, but then I became really daring and invested in some darker blues. All of the ties for khaki season are blue-themed and also reasonably match everything else. (I know this because I asked someone who knew better and confirmed it.) Rounding out the wardrobe are the two pairs of dress shoes — black for cord season and maroon for khaki season. Imelda Marcos, I'm not.

Such is my simplified fashion life. In the morning I grab something very quickly and can't go wrong. Although I must admit that one time I grabbed a right maroon shoe and a left black shoe and left the house that way. Wearing mismatched shoes is a fashion faux pas that generally should be avoided. Sometimes I think there should be the equivalent of "Geranimals" for engineers. ("Geranimals" is a line of children's clothing where kids match tops and bottoms by picking the same animal — a "bunny" top goes with a "bunny" bottom.) For engineers, we could have a system of matching engineering parts: the I-beam tie goes with the I-beam shirt, the concrete batch plant shoes goes with the concrete batch plant pants, and so on. This system could

introduce some exciting variety into the engineer's wardrobe while still providing rule-based criteria that can be easily applied.

Change is purported to be good, but when it comes to clothing, I believe that change is usually not so good. This opinion again is based on the engineering baseline criterion for clothing, which states that unless there is an ice age or some other climatic shift, the old policies should still apply. But when management decided to invent something called "casual dress," we had to adapt. We received this memo:

I am pleased to announce that we will have a business casual dress policy from Memorial Day through Labor Day. As a reminder, business casual attire means employees can dress casually in a manner that is acceptable in a professional services environment. This policy is at the election of the cost center managers and they are responsible for its proper administration.

To assist in implementing this policy the following guidelines apply:

- Attire must be neat, clean, tasteful and professional looking.
- Acceptable business casual attire includes slacks, casual shoes and socks, collared shirts (long and short sleeved) and cotton chino pants.
- Unacceptable attire includes, but is not limited to: t-shirts, tank tops, halter tops, denim jeans, jogging suits, sweat suits, spandex, beachwear of any kind, sneakers, flip flops and excessively revealing attire of any nature.
- Modesty and discretion must be exercised at all times.

Notice right off the bat that the memo is written in engineer-friendly terms — that is, it features specific, clear criteria on what's what and what's not. Considering these criteria, I have some comments: Who would wear spandex to the office, or for that matter, beachwear? Does this guideline need to be pointed out? Are there some engineers that have spandex bathing suits and have they considered wearing them to work? Fortunately (or unfor-

tunately depending on your perspective), this policy will nip the developing spandex beachwear fashion trend in the bud. Also note that this list of musts provides descriptive rules that engineers can understand and apply. Clothing must be neat, clean and so on. The requirement that attire must be "fashionable" is not listed, and it's just as well. Otherwise, who would understand it?

When "Casual Friday" was first announced on the Central Artery/Tunnel Project many years ago, it was in the design phase and on those first Fridays everyone dressed fairly formally. There were more suits and clothing that required dry cleaning. The concept was confusing to me and I wasn't sure what to do. At first, I wore my business suit but took the tie off. That seemed casual, but looked pretty awkward (during the project's design phase, my wardrobe featured two seasons of suits: dark gray for winter and tan/blue blazer for summer, and all shirts were white). After a few months of exposure to casual dress, I was finally dressing in blue jeans. Now that the project is in its construction phase and most of the people in the rest of the business world dress pretty casually to begin with, it feels comfortable to not put on the tie.

I ride the train with my close friend who works for Lotus. He is an engineer's engineer, and he wears a t-shirt and jeans to work every day. He is in a space that is pretty much beyond fashion, so this discussion must be pretty amusing to him. As I'm fidgeting with my tie for non-casual days, he looks pretty comfortable in his scruffy attire. He won't end up on the red carpet at the Academy Awards, like that woman a few years ago wearing the green dress that seemed like it was going to fall off. But with his focus elsewhere, I'm sure that he will develop some spectacular software and perhaps save humanity — and that's probably better.

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