

Engineering Fashions



When I walked into the office the other day, a colleague casually said, “Nice tie.” At first, I thought she was referring to the clever patterns and evocative geometry. Then I realized it was a comment about fashion, as in I was wearing a fashionable, nice-looking tie. I hadn’t received a compliment about clothes before, so I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Engineers have great abilities, but fashion usually isn’t on the list. Scott Adams, creator of the cartoon *Dilbert*, has made millions with this observation, among others. For example, Dilbert’s tie curls up, and this really happens when you keep the tie beyond its expiration date. You may ask, how do I know this? Let’s just say I have empirical evidence.

Male engineers look for clothing that is functional and covers those areas that need 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 advanced and outside of the baseline definition. Many men, myself included, don’t have the greatest sense of how to match clothes, and we rely on simplified, rule-based criteria. Consider the following example. In my case, there are two seasons: corduroys and khakis. 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 daring and got darker blue and navy. All ties for khaki season are blue-themed and 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 should be avoided. Sometimes I think there should be the equivalent of Garanimals for engineers. Garanimals 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 go with the concrete batch plant pants, and so on. This would introduce some exciting variety into the engineer's wardrobe while still sticking with 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 not so good. This opinion again is based on the engineering baseline criteria for clothing, which assumes that unless there is an ice age or some other climatic shift, the old policies still apply. When Management invented something called “casual day,” we engineers had to adapt. We received a 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:

1. Attire must be neat, clean, tasteful, and professional looking.
2. Acceptable business casual attire includes slacks, casual shoes and socks, collared shirts (long- and short-sleeved), and cotton chino pants.
3. 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.

4. 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. I offer some commentary on the criteria: concerning item 3, who would wear spandex to the office, or for that matter, beachwear? Does this need to be pointed out? Are there some engineers that have spandex bathing suits, and have they considered wearing them to work? Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your perspective), this policy will nip the developing spandex beachwear fashion trend in the bud. Also, I note that on the lists of "musts" in item 1, each are 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 my project many years ago, we were in the design phase, and everyone dressed formally in suits and clothing that required dry cleaning. The concept of Casual Friday confused me, and I wasn't sure what to do. (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.) At first, I wore my business suit but took the tie off. That seemed casual, but looked pretty stupid. After a few months of exposure to casual dress, I was in blue jeans. Once the project moved to the construction phase and most people dressed pretty casually anyway, it was casual enough to not put on the tie.

Around this time, I rode the train with my computer programmer friend. He is an engineer's engineer's engineer, and he wore a T-shirt and jeans to work everyday. He was in a space that was pretty much beyond fashion, so my fashion dilemmas must have been pretty amusing to him. On non-Casual days when I fidgeted with my tie, he looked 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 a green dress that was about to fall off. But with his focus elsewhere, he will develop some spectacular software and perhaps save humanity, and that's probably better.