



Dress For Success Measurement

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INTRODUCTION

Does the way a person dress affect their job performance? At General Motors, Bic, PepsiCo, and American Express, among others, a more casual dress code has been adopted (Lilly, 2003). Other firms, such as Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, J.P. Morgan, and Goldman Sachs have instituted full-time casual dress policies (News.Com, 2003). These companies believe that coming to work dressed comfortably will improve creativity, increase morale, enhance communication, and improve productivity. Other companies believe that casual dress in the workplace leads to an increase in tardiness and absenteeism (Motivational Manager, 2002). The Men's Apparel Alliance conducted a survey, reporting that casual attire has led to relaxed attitudes and behaviors, which has hurt productivity (Men's Apparel Alliance, 2003).

At least one report claims that the clothing industry has been a major influence in the casual trend (Lilly, 2003). In an effort to promote casual clothing, the Levi Strauss Corporation sent a "Guide to Casual Business Wear" to 30,000 human resource managers across the nation. Now that many have adopted a casual dress policy, the clothing industry may be poised to launch a dress-up campaign in order to promote sales.

But what is the effect of casual or more formal dress in the work setting? Much of the information published to date provides anecdotal data about morale, creativity, and feelings of comfort. The effects that dress has on the critical behaviors that are measures of productivity are generally not reported.

The purpose of the current study was to determine if dress attire or more casual attire is a relevant variable in productivity in the workplace. Specifically, the current study compared the productivity of hospital transcriptionists dressed in more formal business attire and those dressed in casual attire. The hypothesis predicted that transcriptionist productivity would not significantly differ as a function of style of dress.

METHOD

Participants

Four full-time employees of a medical-records transcription department in a small, rural Midwestern hospital volunteered to participate in this investigation.

Equipment

The participants used Dictaphone® transcription system and Microsoft Word® processing for transcription activities throughout the study, the same system that was in use prior to this study. The system records the amount of time necessary to type each line of transcription for each participant.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable under investigation was the number of lines typed per minute by each participant.

Independent Variable

The independent variable for this study was the style of dress, either casual or more formal dress.

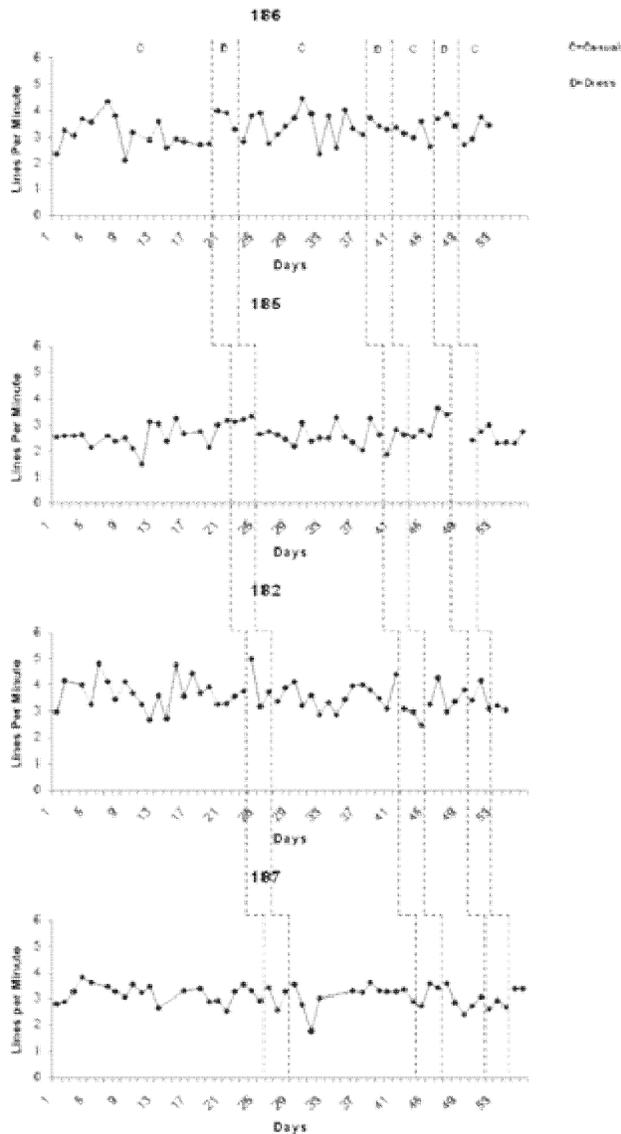
Procedure

A cover story was presented to the participants explaining that this investigation was designed to determine what effect, if any, style of dress had on coworker perception of professional appearance and if there were any difference in the way that coworkers interacted with them. Each participant read and signed a consent form, agreeing to participate in the investigation. Each participant executed daily duties as they had prior to the investigation. Casual and dress attire was defined for the participants. Casual attire included the wearing of sweat shirts, sweat pants, blue jeans, sandals, and tennis shoes. Dress attire was limited to a more traditional business style.

Participants alternated between two different phases throughout the course of the study. During the first phase of the investigation, all participants wore casual attire during several work days. During the second phase, starting at staggered intervals, each participant dressed in a more formal fashion for a session lasting three consecutive work days. Each participant completed three dress-up sessions (9 total work days) over the course of the study, retuning to the casual dress phase between each dress-up session. The investigation was conducted during 56 consecutive work days.

At the conclusion of the investigation, a debriefing meeting was conducted with the participants. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the purpose of the study, to discuss any reactions from other coworkers as to why they were dressing up, and to review the results of the study.

RESULTS



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Figure 1. Number of lines typed for each participant for each type of session.

Figure 1 displays the results for each participant over the course of the investigation. Each data point represents the mean number of lines typed per minute for each shift during casual (C) periods and dress (D) periods. The numbers appearing above each graph, 186, 185, etc., are an identification number that was used for each participant. Participant 186 had an initial improvement in number of lines typed during the first day of each dress phase. Participant 182 also had an initial improvement in the first dress session but not in subsequent dress sessions. Participants 182, 185, and 187 each had at least one dress phase where their performance dropped for the first session of the

phase. Visual inspection of figure 1 reveals no strong pattern of performance for dress or casual phases.

Participant	Casual Attire	Dress Attire
1	3,233	3,617
2	2,647	2,776
3	3,599	3,442
4	3,127	3,007

Figure 2. Mean number of lines typed per minute for each participant.

Figure 2 displays the mean number of lines typed for each participant over the course of the investigation. Wearing casual attire resulted in a very slight improvement for two of the participants and wearing dress attire resulted in a very slight improvement for the other two participants. The differences were not statistically significant.

During the debriefing session, the participants were told the true nature of the investigation. The participants addressed the cover story by reporting that the manner in which they dressed (dress or casual attire) resulted in only a few comments from coworkers. Before the results were presented, they were asked whether they thought that casual or dress attire had any impact on their productivity. All four of the participants predicted that there were no significant changes in their transcription rates. Individual results were then shared with each participant. General group results were presented in such a way as to keep individual results confidential.

CONCLUSION

The results of this investigation indicate that the way a person dresses does not affect job performance, at least in a transcription department of a small rural hospital. The participants reported that the way they dressed had no impact on their morale or their levels of creativity. They did report that casual attire was generally more comfortable, but that it had very little impact on their productivity.

These results indicate that decisions about dress or casual attire in the workplace should be based less on anecdotal information and the influences of the fashion industry and more on actual productivity information and other factors that are relevant to the company. Future studies could compare style of dress on how it affects measurable accomplishments or products in a variety of settings.

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About the Author

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