

How to Perfect the Art of a Work Uniform

By Brian Moylan

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My closet looks exactly like Donald Duck's: two dozen identical white shirts all in a row.

About three years ago I decided to start wearing a uniform to the office, so I went to J. Crew and ordered three of the same suit in the same fabric and a score of white oxford shirts with button-down collars. My uniform, I thought, would free me from the daily anxiety of standing in front of my closet wondering, "Does this match?" or "Am I wearing this sweater too often?"

At first, I had ~~STARTER~~ swapped one ~~The New York Times~~ ~~Would~~ people think I was lazy or boring for wearing a uniform? But as I eased into my new uniform lifestyle, I started to feel better at work because I knew I would look good and I would be dressed perfectly for almost any occasion. Simply put, the decision to go all uniform all the time is one of the best I've ever made. I had joined the ranks of very successful people who dress the same every day — Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Barack Obama — and I appreciated that I could so easily communicate who I am.

"The whole idea of uniformity and adopting a uniform for yourself, it keeps things very simple," said the fashion designer Thom Browne, who wears one of his signature "shrunken" gray suits every day.

“I think there’s something refreshing when you see someone who has a true sense of their own style,” Mr. Browne said, joking that his uniform is so consistent he could probably get dressed in the dark.

“There is a real confidence in being able to project that image,” he added. “I hope that’s what people see as well.”

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Research supports that correlation between self-confidence and the way we present ourselves. In one study from 2012, people were given a coat and told it was either a doctor’s coat or an artist’s smock. Researchers found that the subjects paid more attention to certain tasks when they thought they were wearing a doctor’s coat, but that there was no improvement in performance when they thought it was an artist’s smock.

Dr. Adam Galinsky, who ran the study and is a psychologist and professor at Columbia Business School, calls this “enclothed cognition.” When we wear certain clothes, particularly uniforms, we take on the characteristics associated with those uniforms.

“The clothes or uniforms that we wear affect our basic processes,” Dr. Galinsky said.

For this to work, a person has to understand the symbolism associated with a given outfit. So, if a person begins to conflate their work uniform with a certain persona, they will start to embody that person. It’s kind of like Dumbo’s magic feather, but hopefully covering a lot more skin.

Dr. Galinsky added that when a person starts to embody that persona in the office, co-workers will recognize it, reinforcing that persona in the wearer's mind. This creates an endless feedback loop between how a person wants to be perceived and how they are perceived.

Basically, this is the psychological justification for the “dress for the job you want, not the job you have” speech your mother gave you when she bought you your first interview suit after you graduated from college.

So what should shoppers do when looking to start a uniform?

“The key question you're asking is, What behavior do we want to produce and what impression do we want to portray?” Dr. Galinsky said. “You work backward from that into that uniform.”

Dawnn Karen, a fashion psychologist who teaches at the Fashion Institute of Technology, added that people should look to dress appropriately for their specific office.

“You don't want to be in a tutu when everyone else is wearing a suit,” she said, adding that it goes both ways. For those at a tech firm, a few pairs of the same jeans and two dozen of the most comfortable T-shirts and hoodies are going to get you a lot further than a closet full of stuffy suits.

Rather than creating a uniform, Lauren A. Rothman, a stylist who lives in Washington, and wrote the book “Style Bible: What to Wear to Work,” practices “capsule dressing” with her clients, which is curating a small set of clothing that can be mixed or matched together. She suggests four capsules, one for each season. She added that people generally wore only about 25 percent of what was in their closets, so start by finding that 25 percent and replicating it.

“The problem with variety is that it is unpredictable and can be unsuccessful,” Ms. Rothman said. “A uniform does communicate who you are. It is great if you have consistent messaging every day about who you are, and what you wear will show that.”

When you are buying a uniform, take comfort into account, but also body type, physique and what will make you look and feel good, Ms. Rothman said. And while budget is always a consideration, it does not mean a solid collection can't be found inexpensively.

“A great capsule can be created at Kohl's and Bonobos as it can at Neimans or Nordstorm,” Ms. Rothman said.

Mr. Browne suggests people stick with high-quality goods, things that will last a long time through repeated wearing, and to consider tailoring when possible.

And don't forget you can still customize the details. Dawnn Karen got a client out of her all-black clothing rut by incorporating more jewelry into the client's everyday attire. For men, consider a rotation of lapel pins, colorful socks and shiny shoes to mix things up.

One admittedly clichéd sentiment worth remembering: Less is more. That is certainly a philosophy that Donald Duck, my uniform *bête-noire*, subscribes to as well.

After all, he never even bothered to buy pants.