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## **Wearing our work with pride**

**If you've had to endure the humiliation of wearing a deeply unfashionable uniform, you'll appreciate the latest looks for workwear says Stephen Hoare.**

Fleecy jackets made of fibres spun from recycled plastic bottles, stretch-jersey fabric trousers for the women, chinos for men and short and long-sleeve button shirts in easy-care fabrics. It could only be the new look for Body Shop sales assistants. Over at Odeon Cinemas, front-of-house staff are wearing black T-shirts and combat trousers. While at Go, BAs low-fare, no-frills airline, cabin crew look relaxed in unisex charcoalgrey trouser suits.

According to the organisers of the Career and Workwear Show, just about half of us - that is 11 million workers - now wear some form of uniform in the workplace. And it profoundly affects people's attitudes to their job. They can either take pride in their appearance or look ill at ease.

According to the image consultants, customers' perceptions are shaped by the appearance of staff who deal with them. Workwear can be functional and protective but a well-designed uniform helps send the right signals, Ross James, Odeon Cinemas director of marketing, says: "Our mission statement is to be the most dynamic cinema brand in the UK. So we got rid of the false bow ties and all that rubbish and we took a fresh look at our staff and the way they work."

Odeon's new casual uniform is part of a major rebranding, which was launched a year ago. Comfort was a major consideration and the company trialling the clothing



consulted staff. The result is uniforms that are fashionable and fun to wear. Pete Hardy, 22, a supervisor with Odeon Guildford, says: "When I go out on my break, I wear the new uniform. I used to cover the old one up." Customer sales assistant Rosie Holroyd, 21, agrees: "It's comfortable, classical and you don't look conspicuous. It's not something that's going to go out of date quickly."

Of course, a uniform has to be appropriate. Banks, building societies and airlines need to create an air of professionalism. Go has deliberately avoided the image of the ice-cool stewardess in hat, skirt and stocking but neither did it want to go to the other extreme and dress staff in T-shirts. David Magliano, Go marketing director, says: "Cabin staff need to look authoritative, but they work hard and so we designed a uniform that allows ease of movement and comfort on a busy flight."



The downside of corporate wear is that it can smother an employee's individuality. And carrying a discrete - or not so discrete - logo on your work clothes can be embarrassing, as one young woman who had to wear a promotional T-shirt with the catchy phrase Use Me across the chest told me. But Jacqueline de Baer of de Baer Corporate Clothing, designers for Go and Odeon, believes corporate branding is becoming the workwear equivalent of designer labels, "Companies with a strong brand very often use clothing to build their image. As products become more similar, then branding becomes more important."

While workwear can be a great leveller, some sectors of the workplace are holding out. Oona Collins, training director of estate agent Hamptons International, says: "Our ethos is professionalism coupled with dynamism. One of our big strengths is that we employ lots of very individual people." The company encourages suits and ties and would definitely draw the line at informal dress or body piercings. Debt-collection agency Euler Trade Indemnity stipulates smart work clothes but leaves matters of sartorial taste to staff unlike one similar firm in Spain, MD Tony Bushell chuckles. "The Spanish debt collectors have to dress up as funeral directors when they go knocking on doors."

Meanwhile, Body Shop's new uniform by Jennyn Street Designs looks like being a big hit with the staff. Retail manager Sara Carter who works in Anita Roddick's "creative greenhouse" has been testing, out the new clothing. Her verdict: "It's soft, comfortable, easy to wear and easy to look after. It doesn't need ironing and it takes 15 minutes to dry after washing."

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