

ALL HAIL THE NEW FASHION UNIFORM

(or, how three women streamlined their wardrobe and saved time and money)

In all the progress women have made in the workplace, one aspect still separates the men from the women. Men are regarded as being appropriately dressed for most jobs in a suit. Whether or not they add a tie provides more than enough excitement to fuel newspaper headlines for weeks – as evidenced by TV’s Robert Peston. But for women, the rules are different. We feel a need to showcase a variety of new looks on a daily basis. That can be fun – sometimes – but it’s also exhausting and expensive... So is it really necessary?

Last Summer, we challenged GH Features Editor Jackie Brown to wear just one outfit for a whole month. Amazingly, her choice (picked with the help of our Fashion team) worked for every eventuality. Her article about it caused a surge of excitement, with Jackie appearing on ITV’s This Morning to discuss her experiment. And even after the month was over, Jackie found she preferred to dress for work from a severely edited selection of outfits.

Her new philosophy inspired other GH staff to simplify and pare back their workwear. But what would it be like in the real world? Step forward three readers with very different lifestyles to face the challenge – and change the way you think about what you wear each day.

'I was amazed no one spotted what I was up to!'

With a job in marketing, Alice Oliver, 38, wanted an outfit she felt comfortable wearing at meetings and also with her two young sons

My style

I've got to get my two young boys out of the door early so I can be at my desk for 8am. I put out my clothes the night before, so I just have to step into them. My job in marketing at the University of Derby is very varied. I can be on my knees building displays, sitting at a desk or standing outside for three hours with a film crew. I need to be dressed for all eventualities. I'm normally quite smart – cropped lightweight trousers in Summer and dresses with tights in Winter.

Alice's uniform

For the month, I chose to wear a dress rather than separates, and

I wanted a black or blue one that was very simple and could be dressed up or down. I tried on about 10 different styles before settling on this knee-length navy dress from the John Lewis range. I liked it best and it was also the cheapest one I tried on – I bought three to get me through the week.

How I wore it

The dress was just right, and the elegant cut forced me to wear smarter jackets and shoes than usual. I noticed that it even changed the way I walk, with the tighter skirt turning my long strides into a dainty totter. I often don't have time to change between getting home to the boys and their bedtime, but the dark material and stretchy fabric meant the dress coped well. As it was machine washable, I'd have one in the wash and one drying on a hanger while I wore the other. When you wear the same thing every day you have to get creative with styling, and I found I could use belts to change the length and shape of the dress [CONTINUED OVER PAGE]



DRESS STYLED WITH
Jacket, £120, 8-22,
Linea at House of Fraser.
Bag, £285, Carlo Pazolini
(carlopazolini.com/uk).
Boots, £225, 3-8,
LK Bennett. Necklace,
Alice's own

Alice Oliver

DRESS: £69

*'I enjoyed being
polished and
having a dress
on every day'*



FEATURE **NATASHA LAVENDER**
PHOTOGRAPHY **KATIE THOMPSON**
FASHION **JO ATKINSON**

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] when I got a bit tired of it. I usually spend about £250 a month on clothes, but during the experiment I just bought a few necklaces and scarves, so I saved quite a bit.

And the verdict

By the second week I was tired of wearing the same thing, but this wore off and I found new ways to update it. I enjoyed being polished and having a dress on every day. People were complimenting me on my outfits, which never happened before – on one particularly good day, I was called smart, well put-together and chic! However, while people would say they liked my cardigan, jackets or shoes, no one spotted that I was wearing the same dress. Even a fashion-conscious colleague I was sure would notice didn't realise that I wore the same thing to a lunch date two weeks in a row. At first I was amazed, and then I wondered if I would have noticed either. It made me realise that no one is that interested in what you wear from one day to the next, which I find quite reassuring. I've learnt that it's good to have some of the choice taken away from you. Going forward, I'll have a capsule wardrobe with a few trusted outfits to wear to work.

Alice in meetings



'I was complimented as looking smart, well put-together and chic!'



Tonia Harvey

**TOP: £55
TROUSERS: £59**

STYLED WITH
Necklace, £25,
Autograph at
Marks &
Spencer.
Bangle, £55,
Lola Rose
(lolarose.co.uk).
Shoes, £195,
3-8, Russell &
Bromley. Bag,
£199, Modalu
(modalu.com)

'This has been my best fashion experiment ever'

As a project manager, Tonia Harvey, 54, needed an office-friendly look that could be smartened up for visitors

My style

I've experimented with my look quite a lot in the past few years. In 2011 I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, which meant giving up my beloved high heels. I love shoes, and this had a huge impact on what I felt I could wear. It took me three years before I could take all my heels to the charity shop. That was when I realised I needed to get over it and develop a new style that worked with flat shoes. I wanted my work uniform to be comfortable, age appropriate and something I could dress up for important meetings. I can be called into a client meeting or to see the top management at short notice so, while some colleagues wear jeans, I try to look smart every day.

Tonia's uniform

We decided on smart trousers and a top for the month, and I tried on a lot of combinations before finding the right outfit – cropped black trousers and a light blue top, both from Cos. I tried a few white shirts, but they all looked a bit ordinary with the trousers and I felt good in the blue one straightaway. It's such a flattering colour and has a twisted detail on the front, which gives it a bit of individuality and is very me. I bought three, so I had enough to have a clean one every day, and two pairs of trousers.

How I wore it

At first I was worried the distinctive blue top would be limiting, but I soon learnt to complement it with scarves

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: LINDSEY POOLE AND CAROLINE PIASECKI; ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD RICHARDS
DESK CHAIR AND STOOL: HABITAT; MUGS, ANTHROPOLOGIE; RED BOWL, TOAST; VASES, HABITAT

and layers. Normally I take longer to decide what to wear when I have a big day ahead, but I only had to choose the accessories. I could dress it up or down, and it never felt out of place, even in high-powered situations. Standing in for my boss at an important meeting, I felt confident when I added a smart black jacket. A few weeks later I even wore it out to a gig, adding a denim jacket and a co-ordinating scarf. Looking through my wardrobe for a certain cardigan, my eyes would flicker to the other items I enjoy wearing, but I never found myself longing to put them on.

And the verdict

None of my colleagues noticed, and when I mentioned it to my boss, she laughed and said, 'How boring!' But it's been good fun. Normally I wouldn't bother to add accessories to an outfit, but I've enjoyed the challenge of using them to make the clothes look different, and I will wear them more. I've built up quite an impressive collection of scarves! I never got fed up with it. Of all my recent fashion experiments since giving up heels, this has been the most positive - and is something I will continue.



Tonia at work

'I've built up an impressive collection of scarves!'

Wendi Roberts TOP: £89 CULOTTES: £69

'When the novelty wore off I felt frumpy'



STYLED WITH
Necklace, £19.50,
Marks & Spencer.
Cuff, £15, Dorothy
Perkins. Shoes,
£185, LK Bennett.
Bag, £229, Radley
(radley.co.uk)

'After a month I needed liberating!'

Primary school teacher Wendi Roberts, 46, usually wears eye-catching clothes that her pupils will notice, so she wondered what they would make of her own school uniform

My style

I normally like to wear clothes that appeal to children. I'll pick out a dress with a bright animal print and wear a pair of fun shoes. During the wardrobe challenge I would be covering some of the Deputy Head's responsibilities and have important meetings, so I decided to try something a bit smarter.

Wendi's uniform

Usually I favour skirts for work, but eventually I opted for black cropped culottes from Cos. They are very on-trend, but also practical as they are easy to move about in. The top took longer to choose, but I knew the dusky pink of the Jigsaw silky top would be easy to match up with jackets and accessories I had at home.

How I wore it

For my first look I added a black jacket and fancy heels. I had that excited first day of school feeling, and a couple of colleagues complimented me on my outfit. I was with people who'd be seeing me several times a week, and this made me more aware of my accessories, as I tried to make myself look different in case they noticed. I had two pairs of culottes

and three shirts. The culottes were very easy to clean, but the silky fabric of the top creased easily. Although not having to decide what to wear made getting dressed much quicker, I was still having to iron in the morning.

And the verdict

As time wore on I became more self-conscious, and by week three the novelty had faded and I felt frumpy. It didn't feel like putting on a smart outfit, just a dull uniform. I noticed the top had snagged and didn't look as pristine as in the first week. Friends who knew what I was doing assured me I still looked smart, but I was surprised that nobody else commented. The kids are forthright about what I wear but, while they would spot my quirky shoes, they didn't mention anything about my clothes.

In the first couple of weeks I was quite creative with accessories, but it tailed off as time passed. A new colleague who met me towards the end admired my culottes, but I still felt fed up and bored. Having a staple wardrobe with a few different options is convenient, but I had good days and bad days. I couldn't wait until it was finished - being able to wear something else again was liberating!



Shirt, £39.95, 8-18,
TM Lewin
(tmlewin.co.uk)



Skirt, £36,
8-16, Oasis

2 KEEP IT SIMPLE

You may be tempted to pick something elaborate for your uniform, but a lot of detail will make it more memorable – and noticeable when you wear it nearly every day.

3 STYLE TO YOUR STRENGTHS

A dress is an obvious choice, as it means you only need to buy and style one item, but comfort is most important. Choose staples that fit well and make you feel confident. If they don't, you'll tire of them quickly.



Scarf, £18, Sugarhill Boutique
(sugarhillboutique.com)

1 START SAFE

Begin building your basic work outfit with one safe, classic, neutral element that you can dress up or down. A well-fitted white shirt looks chic tucked into a pencil skirt, and you can also pair it with printed cropped trousers and heels.

4 GET PERSONAL

Getting creative with your accessories is the best way to mix up your look and break up the neutral basics. Add personality with a favourite scarf or bright belt, or use patterned or coloured tights as a fun yet smart touch in cooler weather.

GOLDEN RULES OF UNIFORM DRESSING

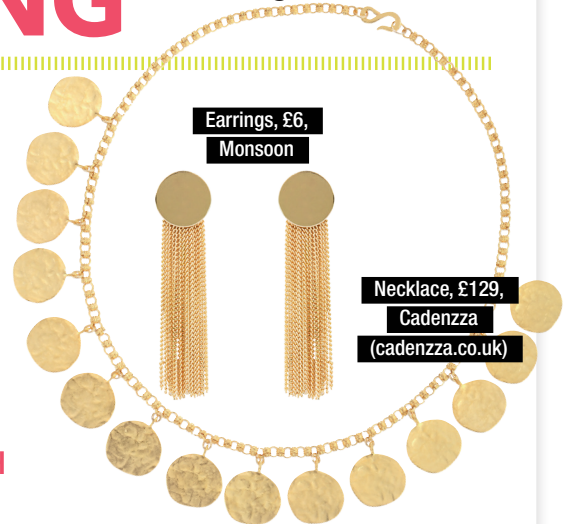
Follow these steps to revolutionise your working wardrobe

5 BE PREPARED TO INVEST

Good-quality pieces will save you money in the long run, so treat your basic outfit as an investment. Inexpensive fabrics often stretch, shrink and fade if you wear them every day. If you have a high street budget, stick with navy, black, white or grey, which will look more expensive.

6 BLING IT ON

Experiment with statement jewellery. Finish a shift dress with an oversized necklace, or try the latest look of layering smaller chains. Tassel earrings – whether dainty and dangling or large and look-at-me – are a hot pick this season.



Earrings, £6,
Monsoon

Necklace, £129,
Cadenzza
(cadenzza.co.uk)



Brogues, £60,
3-8, Clarks

Shoes, £210,
3-8, LK Bennett

7 HAVE FUN WITH FOOTWEAR

Shoes are an excellent way to add detail and charm. Statement heels or a black patent pump are instant winners, or experiment with trendy flats, preppy brogues, bold colours, abstract prints and metal buckles. To look instantly smarter, go for a pointed toe.

8 THINK PRACTICAL

You'll be wearing and washing this outfit at least once a week, so choose a material that can cope. Thick crepe is flattering, and easy to care for as it won't crease. Avoid fabrics that need dry cleaning, as this can be hectic and expensive to build into your routine.

ROCKING THEIR OWN STYLE

A capsule wardrobe isn't just practical for the office – these high-profile women are known for their signature styles...

KATE MIDDLETON

The public recognises that Kate's look works well, which is why you can guarantee that anything she is spotted in will sell out within days. Favourites include a grey and yellow dress by go-to designer Jenny Packham, a blue M-Missoni coat, and LK Bennett nude heels.

Right Royal in neutral heels



NICOLA STURGEON

The SNP leader has become a style icon since adopting strong outfits for her public appearances. Her brightly coloured fitted suits and heels grab attention and help her stand out from the crowd.



CARRIE MATHISON

Having TV characters repeat outfits makes them seem more realistic, and *Homeland's* Carrie (Claire Danes) is far too busy to go shopping. She wears her beige mac, grey suit and battered bag across her body throughout the show: a uniform that helps her stay inconspicuous. □

★ Find more fashion advice, details and opinions about work uniforms at goodhousekeeping.co.uk/workwear-challenge

HILLARY CLINTON

Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary is a self-proclaimed 'pantsuit aficionado'. Her first Instagram post was a photo of a rack displaying three sets of trousers and jackets in red, white and blue, with the caption 'Hard Choices', after her autobiography.



ANNA WINTOUR

Vogue's Editor in Chief has the final say on the latest trends, but she's not about to abandon her staples. Her sharp bob and oversized black sunglasses are instantly recognisable, and she often wears items more than once, particularly her crystal necklaces, Prada dresses and Manolo Blahnik heels.

Adapting trends to fit her image