

BBC Learning English
6 minute English
Mr Smith or John?



Jackie: Hello, this is 6 minute English. I'm Jackie Dalton and with me today is Neil Edgeller. Hello, sir!

Neil: Sir! Very unusual, you don't usually call me 'sir', Jackie!

Jackie: I don't, usually - I usually call you Neil, don't I?

Neil: Yes, you do.

Jackie: And that's because we're colleagues and the way we interact in the office is pretty informal really – it's quite relaxed, we're just use each others' first names. And the reason I called you 'sir' is because the topic of today's programme is formality, or lack of formality at work. So, do you work somewhere where you can behave in a relaxed way around colleagues, or do you have to be very polite and maybe a bit distant? Is there a dress code?

Neil: Yes a dress-code is the rules for what you should wear in a certain situation. So if a restaurant has a 'no jeans' policy, or dress-code, it means you have to wear smart trousers, you're not allowed in if you wear jeans.

Jackie: Well in a moment, we'll be talking a bit about how things have changed here. First, I have a question for you. A survey was carried out in Britain into dress-codes at work. And I'd like you guess what

percentage of people said they'd prefer to be given a precise dress-code – in other words, would prefer to be told what kind of clothes they should wear.

- a) 5%
- b) 23%
- c) 85 %

Neil: I'm going to say 5%.

Jackie: Well, we'll find out at the end of the programme whether your answer was correct. Would you say the BBC World Service is a fairly formal place to work?

(discuss)

they're on first-name terms – they call each other by their first names
casual – relaxed, informal

Jackie: Well it wasn't always so. Carrie has been around at the BBC for nearly 30 years and things used to be quite different when she joined. How would she have to address her boss?

Carrie

Well when I started in the BBC, my boss was very formal. He wore a suit and tie everyday to work and you had to call him 'Mr', so he was 'Mr Bowman'. I wouldn't have dreamt of calling him Eric, which was his first name. On the other hand, he didn't actually call us 'Miss or Mrs', we were called by our first name because we were his underlings, we were his staff, but the boss was always called 'Mr' or 'Mrs'. But, actually, on most occasions, it would have been a 'Mr'.

Jackie: Did you get that? She had to call her boss 'Mr'. They certainly weren't on first name terms. Well, Carrie also had to face even stricter rules after that. What did she have to do?

Carrie

A couple of years after I started at the BBC, I moved to a different department and there was a lady in that department who ran an office with about six or seven staff in it and the staff had to ask permission if they wanted to go to the toilet. They weren't allowed to just leave the office. And in fact, she timed them sometimes too and decided if they were too long in the toilet.

Jackie: Carrie had to ask permission to go to the toilet.

Neil: ask permission – to ask if you can do something.

Both: (discuss)

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Jackie: We're quite lucky, sitting here in our jeans, or corduroys. There was a time when that would have been out of the question. What did newsreaders at the BBC used to have to wear while they were presenting?

Carrie

Long, long before I joined, the newsreaders, which at that stage would have been on radio rather than on television had to wear dinner jackets to read the news, even though nobody could see them, other than other people in the studio.

Both: (discuss)
dinner jacket – formal suit usually worn for a special event

dress-down Fridays – an arrangement where you can wear casual clothes at work on Fridays, but dress more formally for the rest of the week.

Jackie: So a quick reminder of some of the vocabulary we've looked at:

casual/informal

formal

first name terms

dress code

dress-down Fridays

dinner jacket

to ask permission

Jackie: And finally, the answer to this week's tricky question...

85 per cent would prefer a precise dress code

What would you prefer Neil?

(discuss)

That's all for this week, join us again soon for more 6 minute English.