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LIFE & STYLE

How to Look Professional—From the Waist Up At Least—While Coronavirus Keeps Many Working From Home

Deciding what to wear has become harder; 'I had to do a conference call with no pants on'



Martyn Rothwell, left, works from home in a dress shirt and tie up top and shorts down under, which amuses his wife Amy, right, who has adopted a neat-casual work from home look.

PHOTO: MARTYN AND AMY ROTHWELL

By Ray A. Smith

March 29, 2020 8:00 am ET

To get ready for a work video conference call last Tuesday, Elizabeth DiGeorgio applied a full face of makeup, fixed her hair and put on a nice shirt. But before she joined the call, she had to talk her husband, also working from home, into wearing pants.

“I had to inform him that pants were not optional, and that he could not walk through behind me, people would be able to see him,” said Ms. DiGeorgio, a 53-year-old Jacksonville, Fla., resident who works in real estate, referring to her husband, who was wearing basketball shorts. “It was necessary. The difference between just a conversation and a video call kind of changes some stuff.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What are your fashion do's and don'ts when it comes to online meetings? Join the conversation below.

Deciding what to wear when working from home has become harder than it used to be due to coronavirus-mandated social distancing. Often in the past, at least one participant on the video call was based in an office where some kind of dress code was in effect. But with virtually everyone telecommuting, working from home is now a sartorial Wild West, with no dress code and employees juggling more responsibilities than just work.



Elizabeth DiGeorgio wears a business-on-top, party-on-bottom work from home look for video conference calls. Her husband, John DiGeorgio, likes to wear basketball shorts when working from home.

PHOTO: ELIZABETH AND JOHN DIGEORGIO

“I had to do a conference call with no pants on last week because my toddler fell in a puddle,” said Amy Rothwell, the business development lead at a coaching and consulting firm in Bolton,

England. Shortly before her 11 a.m. video business call on March 20, Ms. Rothwell, 36, took her 18-month-old son out for some fresh air.

“He fell in a puddle, and I had to carry him home and I was covered in mud,” she said. In normal times, grandparents would look after the boy. Now running late for the call, she scrambled to wash her face, wear a clean sweater, fix her hair in a ponytail, and apply some lipstick. But, “I couldn’t find any other jeans, so I had no pants on.”

Ms. Rothwell unintentionally wore a popular work-from-home style with work-appropriate clothes on the visible upper half of the body, while wearing sweats, leggings, shorts, pajama pants or underwear. It is a style her husband, Martyn, an auditor, wears. “He has to wear a shirt and tie for work, so he will wear the shirt and tie with boxers” when on video calls, Ms. Rothwell said, adding the look makes her laugh.



Nicholas De Salvo, top, and Jack Olsen unintentionally showed up on a work video conference call in the same sweatshirt.

PHOTO: MEGAN DE SALVO

Numerous Twitter users have bragged about the subversiveness of conducting video meetings in their underwear or pajama bottoms. “Not gonna lie—I have a meeting today that I have to Skype in for and I’m very excited to do it while wearing a dress shirt and no pants!” tweeted Nick Puschnig, a 37-year-old accountant in Milwaukee, recently.

“I was going to wear a button-down shirt with sport shorts, but unfortunately the meeting got canceled so I didn’t get to do it,” he said in an interview. “So I went back and changed into

sweatpants.”

Mr. Puschnig, who typically wears button-down shirts and dress pants to his business-casual office, said his work-from-home look so far consists of sweatpants, a hooded sweatshirt and a baseball hat, and he’s debating whether to put in more effort. Meanwhile, his girlfriend, a social worker, who lives with him, “has actually gotten up early like usual and gotten dressed like she normally would.”

Of his look, “she hasn’t made a comment yet on it, but I feel it coming,” he said. He plans to wear his dress shirt with shorts for the next scheduled call. “I’m certainly not going to put on dress pants if I don’t have to.”

The disruption also means some people aren’t looking as crisp as usual because they haven’t been able to visit barbers, hairdressers, nail salons, gyms and dry cleaners. But employees generally shouldn’t give off an appearance of slacking off just because they are working from home.

“Everyone should maintain professionalism,” said Aliza Licht, a marketing consultant and author of career-advice book, “Leave Your Mark.” She recommended employees get dressed—at least from the waist up—and put on makeup as if they were going to the office. “I think when you get dressed, you’re more confident, you perform better,” she said. Whether it is with co-workers, on client calls or in external meetings, “You still have to bring it,” she said.

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Emily Reeves Dean says about her work from home style: 'I do several video calls each day, and I just want to make sure I look like I am making an effort for the people that have to see me big on their screens.'

PHOTO: EMILY REEVES DEAN

"I still get up at the same time every morning, take a shower, put on my makeup and get dressed for work, even though I am not leaving the house," said Emily Reeves Dean, a 41-year-old digital marketer in Little Rock, Ark. Her look is usually something professional on top with leggings and slippers. "I do several video calls each day, and I just want to make sure I look like I am making an effort for the people that have to see me big on their screens."

Some employees are making exceptions in the interest of boosting morale during a stressful time.

Tim Gill, a 35-year-old professor at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, woke up from a nap on March 23 to find his wife, Aiola, conducting a lecture for 17 students on videoconferencing platform Zoom wearing a "Friends" T-shirt and purple Mardi Gras beads. "I

just decided to kind of dress casually that day for the class just to kind of normalize the situation and loosen the atmosphere for my students, because I know everyone is scared and anxious,” said Ms. Gill, 35, an academic adviser at the school who teaches freshman seminar classes.

Suzanne Park, whose first novel, “The Perfect Escape,” comes out in April, recently walked in on her husband, Trevor Foucher, a software engineer, participating in a work conference call wearing a safari hat. “I caught glimpses of the call and some of them had on hats,” said Ms. Park, who lives in Los Angeles. There were furry hats, fedoras and even “some Daniel Boone type of hats. I just walked out.” Ms. Park said her husband later told her that at one point someone put on a hat thinking it would be funny “and then it just started cascading.”

For a March 23 videoconference call, Nicholas De Salvo, who runs a digital marketing agency in Portland, Ore., with his wife, Megan, thought wearing a sweatshirt he bought from an employee who designs them would be a mood booster. Then the employee, web designer Jake Olsen, popped up on the call, wearing the same sweatshirt. “It was a fun moment,” Mr. De Salvo said.



Aiola Gill has adopted a more casual business look than she usually wears to teach college students in an effort to relieve stress she and the students are feeling during this time.

PHOTO: TIM GILL

How to Look Your Best on a Video Work Call

Use Jewel Tones: Anne D. Stills, president of the Association of Image Consultants International’s New York tri-state chapter, recommends a polished look—blouses, button-downs or pullover sweaters. Search your closet for jewel tones, which “can make your skin

glow.” Meanwhile, colors that flatter all skin and hair colors include teal, turquoise, true red, navy, periwinkle and blush. Beware of patterns, which “can be distracting and make the viewer dizzy.” Be mindful that the garment fits well.

Ditch The Tie: “It would look odd for someone to show up to a Zoom meeting in a full suit and tie,” said Julie Rath, founder and president of Rath & Co. Men’s Style Consulting. “A neat button-up shirt would be an apt replacement. It’s both realistic and respectful.”

Don’t Be Extra: Now might not be the time to join calls in flashy designer clothing or something over the top. “It’s the fashion equivalent of tone deaf,” said Aliza Licht, a marketing consultant and author of career-advice book, “Leave Your Mark.”

Keep It Professional: “I would say ‘neat casual’ is the WFH dress code right now,” said Ms. Rath. “One thing to be mindful of however is wrinkles, as they can be amplified over video. You don’t have to break out the steamer before you log in, but make sure you aren’t grabbing a crumpled up shirt from the floor.” She’s not a fan of being dressed on top, but not on bottom. “What if you have to jump up from your laptop to let your dog out of the room while on a video call? Your underdressed bottom half may have an unintended reveal.”

Grooming: “If you’re typically clean shaven, a little scruff is fine,” Ms. Rath said. “Overall, use common sense and good judgment based on whom you’re meeting with and what you want to convey. And make sure to take a look in the mirror before you go online.”

Hair and Makeup: “The hair is very important because your face is the focus of your presentation,” said Ms. Stills. With salons closed, she suggests women brush their hair into a ponytail. “For those women who may have short hair, just comb it back and put a lovely headband on it. That gives just a very elegant, clean look.” Makeup is a must, she said. “The camera will definitely make you look washed out. Even for women who don’t wear makeup, I still encourage them to wear simple makeup for the camera.” She also recommends mascara and eyeliner and colored lipstick.

Setting: “If they don’t want people to necessarily see their homes, Zoom has a background feature,” said Ms. Stills. Zoom says the feature works best with a green screen and uniform lighting. Ms. Stills recommends women “wear a color that contrasts well with the background.” Adds Ms. Rath, “It’s also good to avoid wearing the same color as your background. Otherwise, you can blend in and look like a floating head.”

Lighting: “You have to have good lighting and that light is not behind you, the light is in front of you,” said Ms. Stills. Here are some more tips on improving your lighting and background.

Write to Ray A. Smith at ray.smith@wsj.com

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