



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNN HADDRALL



Navigating a no-dress-code world

Caitlin Mulrone
y of North Inc. helps
tech crowd dress for success
without breaking the bank



Lynn
Haddrall

You might not see the tech industry as a place for fashion icons. Caitlin Mulrone aims to change that perception with the hashtag #what-techlookslike.

“There is still this assumption that it’s 20-year-old white men in hoodies. But I have found that that’s not the case,” Mulrone says. “This is a growing industry and the

assumptions that you have about tech may not necessarily be true.”

The stylish 25-year-old works at North Inc., formerly known as Thalmic Labs. The high-profile local startup recently launched trendy holographic smart glasses called Focals.

Mulrone didn’t plan a tech career. She completed two history degrees at Wilfrid Laurier University, heading to a career in academia, then realized she enjoyed her part-time jobs working with students and families more than research and writing.

This was her “panic moment.”

“So, I just did research, like I always do,

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WINTER TO SPRING

Caitlin Mulrone's style tips for transitioning from winter to spring:

- **Integrate pieces slowly.**

"Sometimes people tend to do the entire wardrobe switch-out, take the winter stuff out, put it away, then move the spring and summer stuff back in." Work slowly instead. "Maybe a brighter floral print toward the end of March and April, still wear it with darker jeans, but then start to weave them in more strongly as the months go on."

- **Have a sturdy pair of waterproof shoes or small boots.**

"You want that sort of transitional shoe that you can wear all the time. When the freezing rain starts in the middle of April, you're prepared for that, because I know people who break out the sandals as soon as it gets hot and then suddenly the freezing rain is back."

- **A great pair of rain boots goes a long way.** Try wearing a patterned pair with

a plainer dress and a transitional duster coat over top.

- **Pair dresses with non-conventional shoes.** "You can mix up your outfit over time and it's still very practical because your feet won't get soaked if it's wet."

- **Invest in a waterproof jacket.**

"It doesn't have to be a rain jacket. There are a lot of anorak-style coats that are waterproof now and they look really great, so if you can mix that up and still be comfortable then all the better."

- **If you have to travel for business, bring four iterations of your work uniform.** For Mulrone this means dark jeans and four different tops.

"Mix and match them all week. And frankly, if you wear the same pair of jeans in the same week, no one will know because I cannot remember a pair of jeans that someone here wore yesterday."



PHOTO BY ADELE ROBERT



PHOTO BY CYNTHIA COULIS

LEFT: Layering is the secret to transitioning from one season to another. A summer dress over a turtleneck and tights introduces a little spring even on a cooler day.

RIGHT: Mulrone suggests layering clothes when transitioning from one season to another. An umbrella and the right footwear also help.

like a good history student," she says. Online she found that Thalmic Labs was seeking a talent acquisition co-ordinator. "Tech wasn't really on the radar. As a history student, that's not an avenue that is ever recommended to you."

She joined the company in 2016 and thoroughly enjoys the innovative environment. Her current role as Talent Operations and Community Engagement Manager involves building relationships between North and the local community. She also oversees a team of talent co-ordinators.

One question she frequently gets in a work-world without dress rules is the same one she asked when she first started.

What should I wear?

"They said the dress code is open. Wear whatever you want," Mulrone recalls.

This was a conundrum because she wanted to convey professionalism.

"I was joining at a very entry-level role, right out of school. I wanted to make a good impression, and the way that I tend to find confidence is through style as an expression of that."

This can be a challenge for new staff and also for people transitioning to tech jobs from other careers.

Mulrone did what she does. She researched, seeking guidance about what to wear when there is no dress code.

"I found basically nothing," she says. There were a few examples out of Silicon Valley, which is its own style, but no Canadian resources.

So the millennial, never a big user of social media, ventured outside her comfort zone. She launched an Instagram account in May 2018. She calls it mytechwardrobe. The goal is to help people get a sense of what fashion looks like in a no-dress-code environment.

Her Instagram account message is simple: "Open dress codes are difficult to navigate in #tech. I'm sharing what I've learned so far," Mulrone says.

"I never had Twitter, I never had Instagram. I never had anything. So this was a leap for me because I'm a naturally private person. But I thought if this can help one student, one person in transition, anyone, I would want to do that."

"I didn't have that, and I was looking for it so desperately. That was another layer of confusion or stress when you're starting a new job."

Mulrone was terrified to post her first photograph taken in Victoria Park. But now she is comfortable asking colleagues and family members to help her take photos daily.

"This area is very walkable, so my wonderful colleagues, whoever is with me at lunchtime, very graciously take my photo whenever I need it. And then for the weekends, my wonderful, long-suffering fiancé is willing to take them."

Mulrone and her fiancé, Billy Armstrong, both completed undergraduate and graduate history degrees at Wilfrid Laurier. He works at Sun Life.

"We met on the third day of the program and we've been together ever since. It's quite a Laurier love story actually," she says, smiling widely. They might even take their engagement photos in the campus hallway where they met.

"I think he's quite open to trying new things because he wants, in much the same way I do, to portray himself in the way that he thinks about himself. He wants to convey that with style," Mulrone says.

She has noticed a shift in his industry and others as dress codes relax.

"The reason that tech really prioritizes open dress codes or casual dress codes is that you want to remove that sort of brain energy that you need to spend on looking exactly right and just spend it on your job; just come to work in what makes you feel comfortable and confident and that allows you to do better work."

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where style advice can help. Mulrone's photos range from flowing dresses paired with unexpected shoes to vibrant red shorts that are work-appropriate and a velvet holiday dress for a business party.

With frequent and artful Instagram images, Mulrone shares what she's learned about navigating so much choice. One of her top tips is to "create your own uniform."

"Make it a little bit easier on yourself, not only when you're looking in your closet for what you'll wear, but when you're shopping."

Her no-fail uniform is dark jeans, a nice shoe (flat or heel boot), and a blousy button-up shirt.

"You can mix and match that combination in 100 ways if you wanted to. If you're working from that structure and you have a work event to go to and the dress code is similar to where you work already, just bring your uniform."

Mulrone, who grew up in Burlington, wore a uniform to her Catholic high school. In her spare time she cooed over classic films.

"My idols were Audrey Hepburn, Kathryn Grayson and Katharine Hepburn. A lot of my style, even now, is really informed by very classic shapes and cuts. I prefer a timeless look because you don't have to buy the most trendy thing in the world."

North Inc. operates out of a repurposed building, the former Schreiter's furniture store in downtown Kitchener. Exposed brick and beam with a colourful exterior give an upbeat vibe. It's not uncommon for strangers to use the bright exterior stairway as a selfie backdrop.

When we meet, Mulrone is in all black with just a pop of colour from her flats. Her black trousers feature a "paper-bag" waist; they were her first purchase at a Simons department store on a trip out east last fall. The black turtleneck is also from Simons.

"I happen to be double Simons today," she jokes. She beams to reveal that the burgundy loafers are from Old Navy: "Three dollars on Boxing Day!"

"That's another thing I always try to recommend, especially to students. Fashion doesn't have to break your bank account. You can shop your own closet and be really creative about what you choose. You don't have to buy something huge for \$100; you can try to find a look-alike if you're looking for a particular style."

Mulrone will splurge on two items: pants and blazers. They can be worn many times and have longevity.

While focusing on style tips, Mulrone also uses her social media to promote local stores and makers, such as Harmony by Earthwinds, Sass Wardrobe Essentials, and Uni+Koncept, all in Uptown Waterloo.

"Part of what I do is highlight local businesses and local makers who are doing brilliant things," says Mulrone. She points out her Luxe.zen ring as an example of quality local work.

"The jewelry scene here is great. I wear it every day and it's important for me to highlight those things because why order something from the States or from overseas when you can get something way better here?"

As local tech continues to expand, Mulrone's tasteful tips could help others feel comfortable where there is no dress code to guide them.

"Maybe they're relocating here and thinking: 'Do I really have a place in this industry?' Hopefully, they can see that lots of women work here and lots of people who all look different. I think that's an important thing to highlight."

She wants people to understand the tech business has opportunities for everyone. Don't stress about the no-dress-code thing.

"Fashion is so much about perception," she says. "But your perception of you should be the only one that matters."

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