



Ugly People Need Not Apply?

Two new polls that show how a job candidate's good looks -- or lack thereof -- can affect their job-search process, and the results hardly paint a pretty picture.

By Michael O'Brien

It's no secret that a pretty smile will open many more doors than a frown ever will. And if that smile is from an attractive person, then the door will likely be held open for them as well.

Now, confirmation comes again from a new research by [Newsweek](#) -- in the dual form of a survey of 202 hiring managers and another survey of 964 working Americans: Whether we like it or not, the way a person looks makes a difference when hiring decisions are made.

When hiring managers were asked if a qualified, yet unattractive, candidate will have a harder time getting hired, compared to an attractive candidate, nearly six in 10 (57 percent) said yes.

Furthermore, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of those managers also believe that a candidate's looks will continue to impact the way his or her manager views their performance on the job when annual review time rolls around, according to the poll.

And, among the working Americans polled, about the same percentage (64 percent) said they think good-looking people have an easier path to career advancement.

"Beauty does make a difference in the workplace," says Lizandra Vega, managing partner of New York-based staffing firm Perennial Resources International and author of the new book *The Image of Success: Make a Great Impression and Land the Job You Want*.

"It's human nature to want to surround ourselves with beautiful cars, jewelry, homes and beautiful people -- and employees are included in this," she says.

Vega says the poll results confirm the notion that "you can be attractive by association, even if you don't feel so attractive yourself."

"I have witnessed jobs go to more attractive candidates for over 15 years," she says. "This is especially true in positions that require lots of 'face' time such as: receptionists, client-services representatives, sales staff and, ironically enough, with human resources executives."

But the practice of hiring "attractive" and "young" people is not unlawful, per se, says **Joshua Zuckerberg, a labor and employment attorney with New York law firm Pryor Cashman.**

"However, it could leave the company exposed to claims of age discrimination, especially if the company is focusing on the age of the candidate, as opposed to their looks," he says. "Certain companies have successfully defended practices whereby they hire a certain type of person based on customer preference."

The defense to a claim of discrimination in these cases is usually called BFOQ defenses, which stands for Bona Fide Occupational Qualification, he says.

"However, the courts will carefully scrutinize this defense and the company will have to prove that its hiring of a certain type of person was reasonably necessary to the normal operation of that particular business. The most obvious example would be that an exotic dance club for men is allowed to hire attractive women, to the exclusion of men, most likely without having violated the discrimination statutes."

Meanwhile, Robin Shea, a partner with Atlanta-based labor and employment-law firm Constangy, Brooks & Smith, says getting hiring managers to leave out their biases about appearance when hiring may be the most difficult obstacle to overcome.

"One of the biggest challenges for HR management is to persuade the hiring managers to avoid appearance discrimination," she says. "It may be helpful for HR to review the law in this area, and this should be mandatory in jurisdictions that outlaw appearance discrimination. In addition, the HR professional involved in the hiring process should ensure that the selection was made for legitimate business reasons that can be justified."

This review, says Shea, which should be done before an offer is made, should help to catch decisions that may have been based on inappropriate "appearance" as well as other criteria, and allow for the decision to be revisited and reversed before it is too late.

Another startling survey statistic relates to how hiring managers view obesity: Two thirds of business managers in the survey said they believe some managers would hesitate before hiring a qualified job candidate who was significantly overweight.

Lisa M. Tealer, a board member and director of programs for the Oakland, Calif.-based National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, says she is not surprised by the results of the survey because she herself has been the victim of bias based on body size. NAAFA is a non-profit civil-rights organization dedicated to ending size discrimination in all of its forms, according to its website.

"I definitely believe that number is in the ballpark," Tealer says. "According to some studies, it ranges from 40 to over 50 percent. We heard from people that have contacted us about this issue, [where] hiring managers will be very comfortable in commenting on a person's size, saying 'You don't look the part' or 'Your look isn't in line with the company image.' In other ways, it's more indirect, like 'This job requires travel,' inferring that the individual will have travel challenges because of their size."

Tealer speaks from experience when it comes to the topic of being a victim of appearance bias.

"I was interviewed over the phone for a temp position that I was perfect for," Tealer recalls. "The individual over the phone basically told me that, yet when I arrived for the in person interview her whole disposition toward me changed. She went through the interview, but I could tell I wasn't going to be considered for it. I was basically told the standard line 'We'll call you.' "

She adds that hiring on the basis of looks can be damaging to both candidate and company.

"From a competitive talent-market perspective, if three out of four people are fat, and hiring managers would hesitate hiring a fat person, that is potentially untapped talent that is not fully

utilized," she says. "That is a no-win situation both for the candidate and a company. It also demonstrated the 'deep-rooted' bias and discrimination that fat people are exposed to every day."

Tealer says HR should utilize some of the business-case scenarios in her organization's [Size Diversity toolkit](#) , which includes sections on the job interview, the first day on the job, the promotion discussion and the company-wellness program. She advises bringing hiring managers and leaders together to review and discuss them.

"Sometimes those quick, just-in-time discussions can increase awareness and be applied immediately," she says.

But Vega says there may be only one way for HR departments to truly filter out the impact of looks from the interview process.

"The only thing I can think of that HR managers can do to give all candidates a fair shake, regardless of how attractive or unattractive they are, is to conduct the entire interview process over the phone, without using any other visual aides that can influence their decision one way or another," she says.

But even that method may not work, she acknowledges.

Even then, she says, "potential employers can research and easily obtain photos via social-networking sites or by Googling if they're really curious and want to be proactive about finding out how a particular candidate looks."

And while it may be human nature to want to surround oneself with attractive co-workers, expressly writing certain codes of conduct and expectations of what a person should wear at work can help to alleviate some of the tension between the beautiful people and the not-so-beautiful people, says Alison Vaughn, a Detroit-based image consultant.

"As an HR manager, it is clear to have a company dress code that everyone adheres to. This needs to be posted internally and externally. Many job applicants do research on companies before interviews and go with the notion, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans.' The way a person dresses can play a big role in their professional career," she says.

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