

## Your Looks and Your Job: Does Appearance Affect Advancement?

**How your appearance may affect getting hired, getting promoted, and making more money**

By Robin Madell

**W**e'd all like to believe that career success is strictly a result of talent, drive, and skill set. But have you ever wondered whether factors unrelated to your work performance, such as personal appearance, influence your chances for advancement?

We have—and to find answers to this compelling question, career-intelligence.com sought the opinions and advice of a number of workplace experts, as well as women themselves in various industries. Do looks affect getting hired, getting promoted, and making more money? And if so, what can you do about it? Read on.

### Behind the Scenes

Research gives us a few clues into how a woman's appearance may influence her advancement ability. A seminal study conducted by NYU sociologist Dalton Conley and NYU graduate student Rebecca Glauber found that women's weight gain results in a decrease in both their income level and job prestige. By contrast, men experience no such negative effects.

A more recent study designed and executed by researchers at Harvard University, Boston University, and

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**Maggie Jessup**, co-founder of Platform Strategy and author of *Fame 101* (Sutton-Hart Press)

the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute found that women wearing more makeup were judged to be more competent than those wearing less makeup or no makeup. Makeup was found to increase people's perceptions of a woman's likeability and trustworthiness as well.

Despite these research implications, many are reluctant to admit that a woman's personal appearance

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influences decisions around hiring and promotion, according to Steve Stroum, president of Venmark International. Stroum explains a key reason for this is that personal appearance falls into the subliminal judgment part of the brain. He likens the situation to the automotive industry placing bright red convertibles in their showrooms, only to sell white sedans. “In the same sense, a woman’s personal appearance is a hidden persuader,” says Stroum. “Nobody will admit that something as trivial will impact their decision-making process... but it does.”

Marc L. Resnick, Ph.D., professor of human factors at Bentley University College of Business, reinforces this position. “My research finds that when making decisions, people are influenced by a variety of factors that are explicitly conscious, tacitly conscious, and unconscious,” says Resnick. “So even for a hiring manager that knows of this tendency and forces him/herself to suppress it, it is still an influence.”

### **In the Trenches**

Regardless of whether looks are a hidden persuader or a more overt one, many women are aware of being judged by them in the workplace. If you want to know whether women think their looks are important at work, ask a dermatologist. Debra Jaliman, a board-certified dermatologist and author of *Skin Rules: Trade Secrets from a Top New York Dermatologist*, says that many of her patients spend substantial sums of time and money to try to look younger and better, specifically because they believe it affects their

chances for job advancement.

“Just recently I had a woman come into my office and tell me that she was fired and given a great severance package after 17 years of work because she didn’t look young enough,” says Jaliman. “She is 50. She said that she would spend some of this money on anti-aging treatments so that she could reenter the work force.” A number of New York-based plastic surgeons echoed Jaliman’s observation of women’s concerns about appearance in the workplace.

Another peek behind the scenes comes from Margaret J. King, Ph.D., director of the Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis, a think tank that studies human behavior, including gender and appearance issues. King says she hears from employers constantly that candidates don’t spend enough time thinking about how they are coming across in interviews or later, if they get the job, how appearance affects them in the workplace.

“Appearance is always a factor in primate hierarchy—how we approach others and think of them in our internal mind mapping of people and prestige,” says King.

“There are a number of human factors involved in people perception: age, gender, status, context, grooming, aesthetics, wardrobe, accessories. They all go to defining personal style and how people think they are being perceived.”

### **The Other Side of “Pretty”**

Though women may be trying to change their looks through plastic surgery in hopes of positively

influencing their careers, being perceived as especially good looking doesn’t always work in women’s favor at work. “Absolutely your looks can also be used against you,” says author and entrepreneur Laurel House. “Being very attractive can especially make it difficult when it comes to co-workers who might have assumptions as to how you got your job, which means that you have to work even harder to prove yourself. And even then you might be hard to accept—a beautiful and smart co-worker can definitely appear to be a threat.”

Patti Johnson, CEO of PeopleResults and former senior executive at Accenture, has advised many leaders on promotion, advancement, and salary decisions. “I find that this question of personal appearance is a double-edged sword for women—if women are too attractive it can work against them and they are sometimes not taken seriously, by men and women,” says Johnson. “But women who are attractive (as long as not too much) do get an edge in my experience.”

Johnson points out that while research shows that attractiveness gives a more positive impression in work settings, she has found this to especially be true for women. “In my role as an executive coach, I have seen women deal with both sides of this coin,” says Johnson. “But bottom line—attractive, but not too attractive.”

Priya Sharma, marketing head of Recruiterbox, attributes this edge of the sword to what she terms “work-life jealousy.” Sharma says she has seen many women who

express jealousy and envy toward other women based on their appearance. Based on this jealousy, some women use their authority and influence to suppress other women in the workplace rather than helping them to advance.

As an example, Sharma recalls working for a growing company that was in hiring mode. Yet out of 250 employees hired, she was surprised to see that only 10 to 15 were women. Sharma, who had been asked to conduct interviews for her department, explains the scenario: “I had shortlisted at least 5 females and most of them were intelligent, experienced, and good looking. I was told none of them were joining us quoting various reasons. It was then I noticed that this was happening with every other team in the company.”

Upon speaking with colleagues, the consensus was that the female HR manager in charge of the final hiring decisions was insecure about bringing aboard attractive, smart women. “She did not want any woman to grab the attention of other male employees,” says Sharma. “She would put the company’s growth at stake for a long time because of this discrimination.”

As a younger woman, advertising photographer Hannah Ross has found it necessary to modify her looks “in reverse” when meeting with new clients. Instead of trying to maximize her youthful looks, Ross tries to downplay her looks to make herself appear older. “I’ll pull my hair into a tight bun and wear no makeup, or accentuate any kind of bags under my eyes and crows feet,” says Ross. “Appearing as pretty does

not help in any way because it supposes youth and inexperience.” Ross says that although it’s frustrating to have to “misrepresent herself” in this manner, she feels it is necessary to be taken seriously in her industry.

### **Strategic Levelers**

Laurence Stybel, executive in residence at Suffolk University’s Sawyer Business School and president of Stybel, Peabody & Associates, provides an employer perspective on the importance of women’s personal appearance in the job market—and using tact in how you present yourself professionally: “A woman applied to my company for an associate role using a gmail address. I was reading her email on my gmail and it showed a photo of her in a tight red dress holding a glass of champagne and winking at the camera. That’s as far as her application went!”

Stybel says the moral of the story is that although we like to believe in the illusion that we can separate our private lives from our public lives, that’s no longer realistic or possible. “Ask any star who has ever gone to the grocery store without makeup and met with Papparazzi!” says Stybel. “Now everybody has the problem of the rich and famous: public and private lives cannot be kept separate. We have one brand and that brand needs to be consistent.”

To help create that consistent brand while avoiding both blades of the attractiveness “double-edged sword,” women need to be strategic. Maggie Jessup, author of *Fame 101: Powerful Personal Branding and Publicity for Amazing Success*, says that at the managerial/executive

level, in contrast to administrative positions, personal appearance becomes a powerful factor in hiring, promotions, and earnings. Yet it’s not all about physical beauty, which as noted previously can itself sometimes be a negative in those areas—it’s about presenting yourself strategically.

“A strategically presented woman has an immense advantage over their simply average or disheveled colleagues,” says Jessup. “If by manner, dress, and education (including continuing) she conveys power and several other factors, she will be the one who catapults past her male competitors into a corner office and becomes unbeatable once there.” Raquel A. Castillo, media director at Growththink, agrees that how you present yourself can trump looks alone. “It’s more than just physical appearance,” says Castillo. “It’s about looking the part and the basic knowledge our parents taught us: dress for the job you want. I add a little flare to that old concept: I say dress and act for the job you want.”

Deborah Sweeney, CEO of MyCorporation, adds that while she believes looking put together and being presentable is important, she doesn’t think a woman needs to be a super model to gain a promotion. “I think overall attractiveness does play a role in life and in business, but it is more about the package—dressing appropriately, having a great attitude, and having a strong work ethic all relate to a woman’s ‘appearance’ and perception in the workplace,” says Sweeney. “When you have the right combination, you’re most likely to get a promotion and be more successful financially.” ■