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Competence is skin-deep in the corporate world

In a world where iPads and Manolo Blahniks reign supreme, image is king. From day one we learn to judge on looks, and those skills ultimately help determine who gets to sit in the world's most prestigious boardrooms.

"Looking good and dressing well is a necessity. Having a purpose in life is not."

Such was one of the proclamations of the late and great Oscar Wilde, and if the recent findings by a team at Duke University in North Carolina are anything to go by, he was onto something - at least in part.

The three economists, John Graham, Campbell Harvey and Manju Puri, from the university's Fuqua Business School conducted an online survey entitled "A Corporate Beauty Contest" to try and ascertain the link between appearance and high-ranking corporate success. They wanted to establish whether looks still matter when a handful of highly qualified and experienced people are contending for a top job.

And their evidence, they say, was conclusive. Attractive and competent-looking people stand a much better chance of making it to the management floor than those with likeable and trusting faces.

Harsh but true, and perfectly logical, according to management coach Christoph Uhl.

"Managers need to be competent," Uhl told Deutsche Welle. "They need to reach goals and in order to do that, they need to have a tough streak, to be able to control situations and that doesn't necessarily make them likeable."

No more Mr Nice Guy

The experimental study asked some 2,000 people to look at dozens of pairs of photographs -- one of a CEO and one of a non-CEO -- and evaluate their facial attributes for beauty, competence, trustworthiness and likeability.

They found that 54 percent of participants identified the CEO as more competent than the non-manager depicted in the counter photograph. From these results, they conclude that candidates who appear competent are not only more likely to land the top jobs, but more specifically, top jobs in major companies.

Furthermore, they established that those attractive, can-do looking managers are also likely to go home with fatter checks than their kindly-faced counterparts.

So looks, it would seem, count even in the upper echelons of the business world. But given that we are born looking the way we look, that hardly seems fair. Surgery is of course one option, and while there are increasing counts of men opting to go under the knife in the name of narcissism, it is not everyone's preferred method of doing business.

Nips and tucks aside, Uhl says there is a lot that can be done with the right attitude. He believes that a positive stance towards work and the world lends people the air of competence that appears to be a

pre-requisite for heavy-weight jobs.

"We know from practical experience that mindset is reflected in posture and that it has an effect on our facial expressions and our gestures," he said, adding that approach is always his starting point with new clients.

"Different behavior creates different effects in different situations, and it affects the way people look."

Looks aren't everything

The Duke University economists also found that there is no place for the perceived incompetence of baby-faces at the board table. On the contrary, what participants equated with CEO types was maturity, the kind of features that had seen something in life. And indeed the team found that baby-faces genuinely are a rarity in top level management.

Perhaps the most critical point in the findings of the corporate beauty contest, is that after having gone to all the trouble of hiring the competent, attractive looking, adequately mature man or woman for the job, companies should not expect an enhanced performance. Because they won't be getting one.

So if all these good looks and qualities aren't of any actual benefit to a business, why does appearance even figure in the selection process?

Wera Aretz, Dean of Business Psychology at the Fresenius University of Applied Sciences says we are simply conditioned to stereotype. "When people are deemed attractive, they are often also seen as happy, strong and satisfied," Aretz told Deutsche Welle.

She says there is evidence to prove that if a person is happy with their own appearance, they are likely to have a more positive effect on those around them. That said, the psychologist is not convinced that looks are the making of managers.

"It's a bit of a chicken and an egg situation," Aretz said. "Do they get the job because they are good looking or do they look good because they have the job?"

Whichever way round, it's fairly safe to assume that even if good looks open doors for people at some stage of their careers, no amount of prettiness can keep them open unless it is accompanied by a healthy dose of competence.

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