

Physical appearance a key to management success: U.S. study

BY PHILIP LING, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE APRIL 27, 2010



The study, titled "A Corporate Beauty Contest," asked 2,000 people to study and rate the facial traits of corporate CEOs alongside heads of smaller companies and non-CEOs. The results suggest that looks truly do matter when it comes time to fill that corner office.

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Ambition and leadership are obvious qualities in successful chief executives — as employees, more than ever, rely on their corporate chief to steer the firm in the right direction following the recent global financial crisis.

But according to a study by Duke University in Durham, N.C., CEOs also often require thick eyebrows, a solid jaw line and small, piercing eyes.

The study, titled "A Corporate Beauty Contest," asked 2,000 people to study and rate the facial traits of corporate CEOs alongside heads of smaller companies and non-CEOs. The results suggest that looks truly do matter when it comes time to fill that corner office.

"We find that the maturity of the facial appearance is significantly related to perceptions of competence and likability," say finance professors John Graham, Campbell Harvey and Manju Puri of Duke's Fuqua School of Business, which wrote the study.

The study found that more mature looking individuals are perceived as more competent and less likable, which the researchers say are two traits related to being CEOs.

"For corporate executives, especially CEOs, facial traits leading to the perception of competence seem important," the trio wrote. "Not only are such facial traits a dominant characteristic of CEOs, they also distinguish CEOs who run large companies from small companies."

They found that these "mature-faced" individuals enjoy a clear advantage over "baby-faced" competitors — with such characteristics as large, round eyes, high eyebrows and a small chin — who are judged less competently.

The researchers also found CEOs who rated competent solely by their appearance tended to have higher incomes.

Previous research has found links between beauty and workers' pay — known as a "beauty premium" — and demonstrated that politicians benefit from good looks during elections.

"We wanted to see whether appearance also plays a role at the corporate executive level," Graham said.

The online study of mostly university students included only photos of white males who were taken from a 2004 database of CEOs.

"Because there are fewer female and minority CEOs, including them in our set of photos would have increased the odds of participants recognizing a CEO, which could have inadvertently influenced their rating of the person's characteristics," Puri explained.

Participants were presented with 87 pairs of photos — one CEO and one non-CEO — and asked to note which person was more competent, trustworthy, likable and attractive.

They were also asked to score the faces of the CEOs in terms of whether they appeared to be baby-faced or mature. Those results were then examined with the other traits.

The results are "concerning," the researchers say, because there is no evidence to suggest a CEO's appearance, and people's perception of their competence, relates to a company's success or profitability.

"We are told that CEOs are very carefully vetted by boards of directors and professional consultants — as they should be for their multimillion-dollar jobs," said Graham. "The fact that our research shows that appearance is unquestionably significant turns my stomach."

Paresh Mistry, metro market manager at staffing firm Robert Half International in Mississauga, Ont., says there is some truth to the Duke University study and the adage about "dressing for the position" does affect an employee's advancement prospects.

"Typically, if someone is dressed professionally, that does exude confidence and can lead to greater

poise and credibility," he said. A polished appearance contributes to one's seriousness and overall professional demeanour as well.

He stressed the importance of appearance "especially in a competitive job market where it's important to have a professional image more than ever."

A Canadian expert in human resources, however, cautions aspiring C-level executives that looking mature and competent doesn't always translate to success.

"An appearance of competence may earn a CEO more money but doesn't make him a better CEO in terms of company profitability," said Peter Hausdorf, an associate professor of industrial psychology at the University of Guelph.

"Ultimately, appearance may play a role in someone's career success, but there are many factors that are more important — actually being competent, achieving results, working well with others, and understanding your business, to name a few."

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