

Good Looking CEOs Earn More: Duke Study Finds

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A "corporate beauty contest" staged by Duke University researchers has revealed strong ties between appearance and success in the business world, highlighting that ambition, leadership and competence are not the only driving factors to become CEO.

The study carried out by finance professors John Graham, Campbell Harvey and Manju Puri of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, paired photos of CEOs of large and small companies with photos of non-executives with similar facial features, hairstyles and clothing. The researchers found that CEOs who appear competent earn more money than less competent-looking CEOs, even though appearance is not associated with measurable differences in company profitability.

"Other researchers have found links between attractiveness and workers' pay, and demonstrated that politicians benefit from good looks at election time," Graham said. "We wanted to see whether appearance also plays a role at the corporate executive level."

The researchers staged a variety of online experiments asking nearly 2,000 participants to assess photos of more than 100 CEOs and non-executives.

In one experiment participants were asked to rank the people in each pair of photos according to their attractiveness, competence, trustworthiness and likeability. The CEOs were rated as more competent-looking and more attractive than non-executives. However, CEOs were more frequently rated as less trustworthy and less likable than the non-CEOs with whom their photos were paired.

Similar results were found when participants were asked to rate CEOs of large firms against CEOs of small firms. Large-firm CEOs were rated as more competent 55 percent of the time, while their small-firm counterparts were judged as looking more trustworthy, likeable and attractive.

For the purposes of the experiments, only photos of white male CEOs were used. "It would be fascinating to study the role appearance may play in the careers of women and minorities," said Puri. "However, 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."

The team found that CEOs rated competent just by their appearance tended to have higher income. CEOs who were rated four or above on a five-point scale for competence had an average total compensation 7.5 percent higher than CEOs who scored three out of five on competence.

"I thought appearance would be a factor for politicians winning elections - but for CEOs, no way," said Harvey. "We are told that CEOs are very carefully vetted by boards of directors and professional consultants - as they should be for their multi-million dollar jobs. The fact that our research shows that appearance is unquestionably significant turns my stomach."

"Given there is no relation between appearance and company performance, I hope our research changes the way we select our corporate leaders: 'looks' should not be a factor!"

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