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## Want to Be a CEO? It Helps to Look the Part

New research suggests having a 'look' of competence is important in becoming a CEO



Looking competent isn't the same thing as general attractiveness, one researcher notes. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

By **ALINA DIZIK**

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If you want to be a chief executive officer, it helps to look the part.

So suggests research from a trio of Duke University professors who asked more than 2,000 study participants to look at photos of faces and rate the images based on how competent the person depicted appeared to be.

Study participants were shown pairs of photos, one of a CEO and one of a non-CEO of the same race, age and gender. Despite not knowing which of the pair was the CEO and having no other biographical knowledge, the online survey takers (mostly students at Duke University) rated the CEOs as looking more competent than the non-CEOs, based on facial characteristics.

In a separate experiment, survey takers labeled large-company CEOs as looking more competent than their counterparts at smaller firms.

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“The basic idea is that looks do matter for a CEO,” says John Graham, a professor of finance at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business and one of the authors of the research, which has been accepted for publication in the journal *Management Science*.

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Dr. Graham notes that looking competent isn’t the same thing as general attractiveness. The faces rated as competent-looking typically had square jaws, overall sharper features and appeared more mature. (Results focused on male CEOs because there weren’t enough female chief executives in the sample, he says).

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Want to Be CEO? Study Suggests Looks Matter



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“Don’t be thinking handsome,” Dr. Graham says. It’s more like “the opposite of baby-faced.” Indeed, a look of competence was prized more than attractiveness in the leaders, he says.

In addition to finding that there often is a certain look associated with being a CEO, it also is linked to higher compensation, the research found. That especially held true with outside hires, where first impressions typically play a bigger role. In short, “you are more likely to be a CEO and more likely to be paid more when you look competent,” Dr. Graham says.

The idea that top company executives could be chosen even partially based on looks was surprising given that boards pick CEOs by examining their records and experience, says Dr. Graham. “You’d think that all the other influences would overwhelm anything having to do with looks,” he says.

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But even CEOs who had been in their jobs for a long time were identified as being more competent-looking, which was surprising given that their performances could be analyzed easily by company boards.

Understanding these subconscious behavioral biases is important because there is no evidence that looking competent leads to better business decisions, according to the researchers.

“The look of competence isn’t correlated with superior performance,” Dr. Graham says.

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