

Background

Dress for success

You may have heard about the Silicon Valley programmer who worked nights so he could be naked. Even so, I bet that he turned up to his job interview in more than his birthday suit! And how we look when we go for that job interview is very important. There are those who say, 'It shouldn't matter what I look like, and what I wear as long as I do my job well.' They're right, of course, but this isn't borne out by what happens in real life. People make their minds up about us in the first few seconds of meeting – from seven to fifteen seconds is all it takes. This means that before any words are exchanged, their opinion is already starting to form.

But is it really the case that jobs are won or lost on the basis of how we look? It seems so. The link between appearance and success has been the subject of some serious research. An attractive person is more likely to be offered a job over an unattractive person with similar qualifications and experience. The same rule applies for job promotions. People who are judged attractive make between 7.5% and 15% more than the rest of their ordinary looking peers. People who are better looking benefit from the 'halo effect', are more popular, and receive more chances than the others. The news is bad for unattractive people. They earn on average 10% an hour less than an average looking person. So ugliness can be bad for your wealth.

Height is also a key factor for men. Cynics said that George Washington only became US President because he was the tallest guy in the room. Men over 1m75 get a lot of breaks. They earn more, receive better appraisals, and get promoted more easily. Research has shown that a man who is 1m82 earns almost \$800 a year more than a man who measures 1m65 with

the same qualifications. So the man who is tall and handsome has got it made! For women, being attractive never did any harm – or can it? Being too pretty can work against women who want to get on in a masculine world, as they might well be considered to lack the necessary toughness. Good-looking women who get to the top are said to do so through luck; their less attractive sisters are perceived to have arrived there through ability.

It seems that no matter how hard we try to be fair and impartial, when it comes to recruiting and promoting, we find it hard to shake off our prejudices about appearance. Our appearance and clothes send a message, and for many people they are the outward and visible sign of the purpose and character of the person who wears them. Appearance is often perceived (perhaps sub-consciously) as just another asset like communication skills or a good education.

So remember that old *adage that first impressions count. If you are blessed with good looks, you have an advantage. For the rest of us, we need to make the most of ourselves as much as we can with the right clothing and a positive attitude. Self-confidence helps too, and comes through in the way we carry ourselves and look. The message seems to be that positive body language can make you better looking. There is never a second chance to make a good first impression, and it can take twenty positive meetings to undo the damage of a poor first encounter. Like that naked programmer in Silicon Valley, we may want to be free to look and dress as we please, but the reality is that appearance matters and if we want to succeed we will need to make sure we don't stick out like a sore thumb – at least at the beginning.

Glossary

*adage = a well-known phrase

Exercises

1 Work with a partner. Discuss these questions.

- 1 What do you wear for an interview?
- 2 How important do you think it is to look good at work?
- 3 Do you know anyone who has been unfairly promoted or been given privileges because of how they look?

2 Read the first paragraph of the text and answer these questions.

- 1 Why did the programmer work nights?
- 2 Does the writer think it is right to judge people on the way they dress?
- 3 How long does it take someone to pass a judgement on another person?

3 Read paragraphs 2 and 3 and choose the correct answer from a, b or c.

- 1 Attractive people earn up to ...% more than others.
a 7.5 b 10 c 15
- 2 Unattractive people may earn on average ...% less than their attractive colleagues.
a 10 b 17.5 c 25
- 3 To start receiving an advantage from his height, a man needs to be ...
a 1m65. b 1m75. c 1m82.
- 4 Men who are 1m82 earn about \$... more a year for each extra cm than a man who is 1m65.
a 30 b 40 c 50
- 5 Women who are pretty ...
a always have an advantage. b aren't tough enough. c can be unfairly judged.

4 Read paragraphs 4 and 5 and answer these questions.

- 1 What do some people believe that clothes tell us?
- 2 How can self-confidence affect the way we come across?

5 What kind of being usually has a 'halo'? What do you think it means if someone benefits from the 'halo effect'?

6 Match 1–6 to a–f.

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| 1 If you can't <i>make up your mind</i> , you | a they are given a great opportunity. |
| 2 If someone sticks <i>out like a sore thumb</i> , | b you maximize the way you look. |
| 3 If a person <i>has got it made</i> , | c you have forgotten to get dressed! |
| 4 If someone <i>gets a break</i> , | d can't decide what to do. |
| 5 If you go out in your <i>birthday suit</i> , | e they look completely out of place. |
| 6 If you <i>make the most of yourself</i> , | f they have everything they need to be successful. |

7 Work with a partner. Talk about an occasion when you, or someone you know ...

- 1 couldn't make up his mind.
- 2 stuck out like a sore thumb.
- 3 had it made.
- 4 got a break.
- 5 went out in his birthday suit!
- 6 made the most of himself.

8 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

9 How important do you think it is to make the most of yourself at work?

10 Do you agree that appearance matters and if you want to succeed it is best to conform? Can you think of any instances where this isn't the case?