

Chapter 94

Reducing Lookism in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Lookism issues have been studied in the fields of economics, social science, physiology, and business. Studies have shown that physical appearance affects employers' judgment about the quality of an employee. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the effects of lookism on career development in organizations. In addition, this chapter discusses the strategies for reducing lookism in the workplace from a human resource development perspective and provides four strategies for reducing lookism. First, legislation should include and address issues of physical attractiveness. Second, diversity education and training should be provided to students, employees, and employers. Third, diversity management should be practiced in the workplace. Fourth, appropriate employment processes should be adopted. Future research should study lookism over a wider range of occupations across different cultures. In addition, future studies should develop theories and conceptual frameworks to support and explain current issues of lookism in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Yes, we should not judge a person only according to appearance. But you know, if companies prefer pretty, tall and thin girls, what can I do? I have to put my “studio portrait” on my resume. Sometimes some companies even ask me to write my weight and height on my resume. This is reality!... There are some pretty girls in my class and every year they can easily find part-time jobs because of their appearance. I used to think I could never be one of them. But last year, when I came back after summer vacation, I

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found that [the] faces of two of my classmates had changed. Their eyes had become bigger, faces thinner, and noses smaller and higher. One of them has already signed a preliminary contract with a media company, at which I also got an interview. I didn't get the job, but she did. My academic record is much better than hers, and I'm sure I performed better than her in the interview. It's just so unfair that they chose her instead of me! The only explanation is that she is taller than me and also prettier than me with the help of the scalpel...I don't think that a pretty face is everything. But it definitely brings advantages. It's a key to opening the door. (Wen, 2009, p. 98)

Lookism refers to physical appearance discrimination or physical attractiveness bias (Chae, 2019; DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011), by which preferential treatment is given to those who are deemed attractive in a way that discriminates against those who have less physical charm (Sims, 2015). The value has been attached to certain characteristics such as “height, weight, body size, facial features (including eye color and nose size), hair color/texture, skin color, one's attire and hairstyles” (Sims, 2019, p. 1). Beautism has already been acknowledged by social and evolutionary psychologists (Gehrsitz, 2014), and they consider physical appearance to be an important determiner of whether other people like them (Buss, 1989). Nevertheless, the effect of physical appearance is not negligible considering the impact on employment decisions (Gehrsitz, 2014). It is obvious that lookism exists among job hunting because managers prefer applicants whose physical appearance is more socially attractive. Hamermesh (2013) states that lookism exists in the workplace and attractiveness is deemed a social productive quality. Women have paid more attention to body image, styles in clothes, haircuts, and cosmetics as economic growth is increasing (Wen, 2009). Moreover, attractive appearance is viewed as a form of capital that can provide applicants an advantage on the job market.

According to a report from *the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* (2017), the total surgical procedures increased by 4% in 2017 compared to 2016. The statistics indicate that there is an excessive concern with physical appearance, and there is a significant tendency for people to undergo surgical procedures to enhance their appearance. It also demonstrates that beauty matters in people's daily lives. It is universally acknowledged that men and women benefit from their attractiveness when applying for most jobs, considering the employment suitability (Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, & Gibbons, 2010). Individuals with a perceived attractive appearance are more likely to be interviewed and hired, and they are often offered a higher salary than those who are less perceived attractive (Chelcea & Ivan, 2016; Niu, 2018). In addition, perceived attractive employees are more likely to be promoted to leadership positions (Ling, Luo, & She, 2019).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the effects of lookism on career development in organizations. In addition, this chapter discusses strategies for reducing lookism in the workplace from a human resource development (HRD) perspective. This chapter would increase the awareness of lookism and attract scholars' attentions to raise more effective strategies.

BACKGROUND

Many studies have focused on lookism issues since the 1950s, and it became more common during the 1970s-1980s. The implicit personality theory has been studied since the 1950s by many researchers (Ashmore, 1981; Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954). Blau and Duncan (1967) have analyzed the American occupational structure. The social identity theory was defined by Tajfel (1972). In the social psychology

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