Physical attractiveness crucial in career success

One’s own physical attractiveness plays a crucial part in career success. PHOTO | FILE

By SCOTT BELLOWS

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In Summary

- Although merit guides progress at workplace, people’s biases determine how far one climbs the corporate ladder.

Adults possess abilities to recall strong memories from childhood. We store positive, neutral, and negative recollections.

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A smell in the air, noticing a particular shade of colour, or hearing a song from our youth can conjure up thoughts and remind us of a time long ago, a person since departed, or a treasured success or disappointing failure.

Particular strong memories exist for many grown-ups about the moment or moments when as a young person they either realised that other people viewed them favourably or unfavourably based on their physical appearance as compared to others.

Now as a working professional, ever wonder why a colleague received a promotion over you while you in reality performed better? Ever pondered why a workplace welfare committee visited one sick employee in the hospital but not others?

Here in Kenya, we often assume that questionable office promotions or workplace bias held corrupt roots, family or tribal ties, or inappropriate relational reasons. But in reality, one’s own physical attractiveness plays a crucial part in career success.

Most people do not desire to live in a world whereby our uncontrollable physical characteristics hold enormous sway over our personal attainment. We endeavour to form societies with rewards based on merits and one’s skill levels.

However, people uniformly bias against each other subconsciously and at times consciously on the basis of physical appearance.

Inasmuch, while society may hope that modern human intellectual thought should dispel arbitrary
decision-criteria formed from meaningless inputs, unfortunately, human interactions exist as more primordial than you might have realised.

Unfortunately, research by Alexander Todorov and his team in 2015 showed that humans do not make decisions based on rationality or probability of likely causes and their corresponding effects through deliberate mental processing.

Ever wonder how we psychologically choose elected political leaders? By now you might have accurately guessed it.

John Antonakis and Olaf Dalgas found in 2009 that children with no knowledge of politics or parental choices can just as accurately predict political winners in elections based solely on facial photos of candidates.

Children pick attractive faces centred on both their society's views on attractiveness communicated down to even the youngest children as well as biological preference for fair, symmetrical, a proportioned faces.

Nathan Bowling and a team of international researchers found statistically significant affects that workers tend to offer social support to each other on the basis physical attractiveness.

Further disturbing studies also show that investors prefer to put their money in startup firms led by young attractive men and teachers rate good looking children as more likely to perform well than average looking pupils.

Even worse, Chiu, Babcock, Ahearne, Marlowe, Jarvis, Olsen and dozens of other researchers regularly conduct in-depth studies that delineate how attractive people receive far more promotions, income, good performance reviews, and interview success than average looking individuals.

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Most men erroneously think that the negative bias on attractiveness only affects women employees. However, men also suffer significant bias from women as well as other men.
The effect is not a primitive medial prefrontal cortex sexual-based preference on opposite gender colleagues, but deeper platonic non-sexual mental processes on both genders by both genders.

The brain becomes more active when we see someone’s face that we view as attractive.

Researcher Knut Kampe studies the biochemical reactions in the brain that occur when perceptions of prettiness in faces. Subconsciously, we equate physical attraction to good leadership, suitability, and competence even though attractiveness holds no correlation with actual abilities.

Why? Evolutionarily we psychologically find beauty or handsomeness to mean someone possesses health, strength, and vigour.

What makes for an attractive face? Multitudes of research uncovered three main attributes. First, the fairness of a face whereby it remains free from any blemishes and displays tight skin pores.

Second, facial symmetry proves critical in facial beauty bias. Third, higher facial-width-to-height ratio is a key facial feature of high performing CEOs whereby boards of directors retained executives with the attribute.

So, if one side of your face looks different than the other side of your face, or you have larger facial skin pores, or your face is narrow or quite wide, you will face arbitrary bias in the workplace for the rest of your life.

As Kenya, an already highly educated society, becomes more and more educated with each generation, the illogical effect will not go away.

Ran Hassin and Yaacov Trope sadly uncovered in their research that the irrational bias towards equating physical attractiveness to someone’s good character exists even in the most educated societies in the world.

So what do we do to promote our own career and abilities on the subconscious level to our bosses and coworkers? Thankfully, overall attractiveness encompasses more than just physical looks.

Attractiveness also incorporates a pleasant personality, humour, perceptions on caring abilities, etc.

But physical attraction does play a pivotal role. So play off of your other strengths and display the positive characteristics that make colleagues want to spend time around you.

Go out of your way with organisation citizenship behaviours by putting in extra effort and helping out even when you are not asked to do so. Act in a pleasant and cheerful manner. Utilise humour to diffuse workplace drama.
These additional attractiveness traits will enhance other people’s perceptions of attractiveness about you even though you cannot control your facial features.

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Managers on the other hand, become aware of why you prefer to promote or work with a specific employee. Write down their qualities. See if their actual abilities and accomplishments can stand on their own.

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Educate yourself on your own psychological biases and realise that those you might psychologically prefer to work with might not actually give you the workplace results that you desire.

Share your history of unfair bias treatment in your workplaces with other Business Daily readers through #KenyaFairness on Twitter.

Professor Scott serves as the director of the New Economy Venture Accelerator (NEVA) and Chair of the Faculty Council at USIU-A, www.ScottProfessor.com, and may be reached on: info@scottprofessor.com or follow on Twitter: @ScottProfessor. In next week’s edition of Business Talk, we explore “Empathy in the Workplace”. Read current and prior Business Talk articles on the Business Daily’s website and http://www.usiu.ac.ke/on-campus/blog.