

MOST OF US HAVE HEARD THE STORY OF Debrahlee Lorenzana, the 33-year-old Queens, N.Y., woman who sued Citibank last month, claiming that, in pencil skirts, turtlenecks, and peep-toe stilettos, she was fired from her desk job for being "too hot." We've also watched Lorenzana's credibility come into question, as vintage clips of her appearance on a reality-TV show about plastic surgery portray a rambling, attention-obsessed twit, stuffed to the brim with implants and collagen. ("I love plastic surgery," she coos. "I think it's the best thing that ever happened.") Creepy, yes. But for all the talk about this woman's motives—and whether or not she was indeed fired for her looks—there's one question nobody seems to want to ask: isn't it possible Lorenzana's looks got her the job in the first place?

Not all employers are that shallow—but it's no secret we are a culture consumed by image. Economists have long recognized what's been dubbed the "beauty premium"—the idea that pretty people, whatever their aspirations, tend to do better in, well, almost everything. Handsome men earn, on average, 5 percent more than their less-attractive counterparts (good-looking women earn 4 percent more); pretty people get more attention from teachers, bosses, and mentors; even babies stare longer at good-looking faces (and we stare longer at good-looking babies). A couple of decades ago, when the economy was thriving—and it was a makeup-less Kate Moss, not a plastic-surgery-plumped Paris Hilton, who was considered the beauty ideal—we might have brushed off those statistics as superficial. But in 2010, when Heidi Montag's bloated lips plaster every magazine in town, when little girls lust after an airbrushed, unattainable body ideal, there's a growing bundle of research to show that our bias against the unattractive—our "beauty bias," as a new book calls it—is more pervasive than ever. And when it comes to the workplace, it's looks, not merit, that all too often rule.

Consider the following: over his career, a good-looking man will make some \$250,000 more than his least-attractive counterpart, according to economist Daniel Hamermesh; 13 percent of women, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (and 10 percent of men,

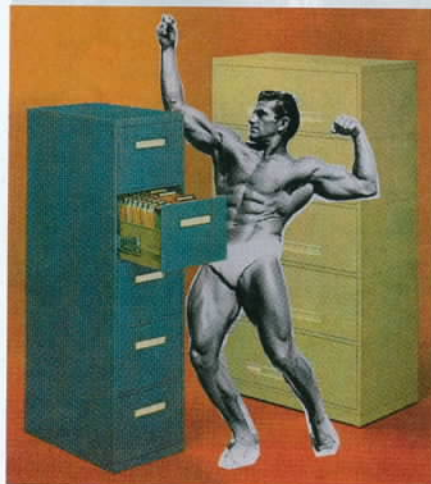
according to a new NEWSWEEK survey), say they'd consider cosmetic surgery if it made them more competitive at work. Both points are disturbing, certainly. But in the current economy, when employers have more hiring options than ever, looks, it seems, aren't just important; they're critical. NEWSWEEK surveyed 202 corporate hiring managers, from human-resources staff to senior-level vice presidents, as well as 964 members of the public, only to confirm what no qualified (or unqualified) employee wants to admit: from hiring to office politics to promotions, even, looking good is no longer something we can dismiss as frivolous or vain.

Fifty-seven percent of hiring managers told NEWSWEEK that qualified but unattractive candidates are likely to have a harder time landing a job, while more than half advised spending as much time and money on "making sure they look attractive" as on perfecting a résumé. When it comes to women, apparently, flaunting our assets works: 61 percent of

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managers (the majority of them men) said it would be an advantage for a woman to wear clothing showing off her figure at work. (Ouch.) Asked to rank employee attributes in order of importance, meanwhile, managers placed looks above education: of nine character traits, it came in third, below experience (No. 1) and confidence (No. 2) but above "where a candidate went to school" (No. 4). Does that mean you should drop out of Harvard and invest in a nose job? Probably not. But a state school might be just as marketable. "This is the new reality of the job market," says one New York recruiter, who asked to have her name withheld because she advises job candidates for a living. "It's better to be average and good-looking than brilliant and unattractive."

Remember the story about the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate? It goes to show our beauty bias is nothing novel. At the time, radio listeners thought Nixon had won, but those watching Kennedy's tanned, chiseled face on TV, next to a worn-down, 5 o'clock-shadowed Nixon, were sure it was the junior senator. There are various explanations for some of this. Plato wrote of the "golden proportions," which dubbed the width of an ideal face an exact two thirds its length, a nose no longer than the distance between the eyes. Biologically speaking, humans are attracted to symmetrical faces and curvy women for a reason: it's those shapes that are believed to produce the healthiest offspring. As the thinking goes, symmetrical faces are then deemed beautiful; beauty is linked to confidence;



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 and it's a combination of looks and confidence that we often equate with smarts. Perhaps there's some evidence to that: if handsome kids get more attention from teachers, then, sure, maybe they do better in school and, ultimately, at work. But the more likely scenario is what scientists dub the "halo effect"—that, like a pack of untrained puppies, we are mesmerized by beauty, blindly ascribing intelligent traits to go along with it.