

There are various forces to blame for much of this, from an economy that allows pickiness to a plastic-surgery industry that encourages superficial notions of beauty. In reality, it's a confluence of cultural forces that has left us clutching, desperately, to an ever-evolving beauty ideal. Today's young workers were reared on the kind of reality TV and pop culture that screams, again and again, that everything is a candidate for upgrade. We've watched bodies transformed on *Extreme Makeover*; faces taken apart and pieced back together on *I Want a Famous Face*. We compare ourselves with the airbrushed images in advertisements and maga-



ABOUT 60 PERCENT OF OVERWEIGHT WOMEN AND 40 PERCENT OF OVERWEIGHT MEN SAID THEY'VE EXPERIENCED EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION.

zines, and read surveys—like this one—that confirm our worst fears. We are a culture more sexualized than ever (*Mad Men* notwithstanding), with technology that's made it easier than ever to "better" ourselves, warping our standards for what's normal. Plastic surgery used to be for the rich and famous; today we've leveled the playing field with cheap boob

jobs, tummy tucks, and outpatient procedures you can get on your lunch break. Where that leads us is running to stand still: taught that good looks are no longer a gift but a ceaseless pursuit.

Deborah Rhode, a Stanford law professor and author of *The Beauty Bias*, is herself an interesting case study. During her term as chair of the American Bar Association's commission on working women, she was struck by how often the nation's most powerful females were stranded in cab lines and late for meetings because, in heels, walking any distance was out of the question. These were working, powerful, leading women, she writes. Why did they insist on wearing heels? Sure, some women just *like* heels (and still others probably know their bosses like them). But there is also the reality that however hard men have it—and, from an economic perspective, their "beauty premium" is higher, say economists—women will always face a double bind, expected

59%  
 59 PERCENT OF HIRING MANAGERS SAID THEY'D ADVISE JOB CANDIDATES TO SPEND AS MUCH MONEY ON LOOKS AS ON THEIR RÉSUMÉ.

to conform to the beauty standards of the day, yet simultaneously condemned for doing so. Recruiters may think women like Lorenzana can get ahead for showing off their looks, but 47 percent also believe it's possible for a woman to be penalized for being "too good-looking." Whether or not any of it pays off, there's something terribly wrong when 6-year-olds are using makeup, while their mothers spend the equivalent of a college education just keeping their faces intact. "All of this is happening against a backdrop of more women in the workplace, in all kinds of jobs, striving toward wage equality," says Harvard psychologist Nancy Etcoff. "So we're surprised—but we shouldn't be—how this [beauty curse] continues to haunt us."

Forty years ago, when feminists threw

their bras into the "Freedom Trash Can" outside the 1968 Miss America pageant (no, they didn't really burn them!), it was to protest the idea that women had become "enslaved by ludicrous beauty standards," as the organizers put it. At the time, women still made up just a fraction of the workforce, and yet they were rejecting the notion that, in work or play, they had to be confined to the role of busty secretary—a mere office toy. A decade later, as women entered the workforce in droves, it was boxy suits, not bustiers, that defined their dress. But today's working women have achieved "equality" (or so we're led to believe): they dominate the workforce, they are household breadwinners, and so they balk at having to subvert their sexuality, whether in the boardroom or on the beach. Yet while the outside-work milieu might accept the empowered yet feminine ideal, the workplace surely doesn't. Studies show that unattractive women remain at a disadvantage in low-level positions like secretary, while in upper-level fields that are historically male-dominated, good-looking women can suffer a so-called bimbo effect. They are viewed as too feminine, less intelligent, and, ultimately, less competent—not only by men but also by their female peers.

To add an extra layer of complexity, there's the conundrum of aging in a culture where younger workers are more tech-savvy, cheaper, and, well, nicer on the eyes. Eighty-four percent of managers told NEWSWEEK they believe a qualified but visibly older candidate would make some employers hesitate, and while ageism affects men, too, it's particularly tough for women. As Rhode puts it, silver hair and furrowed brows may make aging men look "distinguished," but aging women risk marginalization or ridicule for their efforts to pass as young. "This double standard," Rhode writes, "leaves women not only perpetually worried about their appearance—but also worried about worrying."

The quest for beauty may be a centuries-old obsession, but in the present day the reality is ugly. Beauty has more influence than ever—not just over *who* we work with, but whether we work at all. □

FROM TOP: MICHAEL AUSTIN/GETTY IMAGES; CHANGING BEAUTY IDEALS