

Muscularity in Selection Decisions

Too Much of a good thing?

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Abstract

Within the fields of management and human resource management, the relationship between job candidate attractiveness and employer selection has a long history. This stream of research found its roots in the 1960s when Carlson (1967) posited a relationship between physical attractiveness and employer selection for a sales job. Since that time, studies have become more complex and knowledge on the topic has advanced. The general supposition is people attribute socially desirable traits to attractive people (Beeher and Gilmore, 1982). This demonstrable phenomenon is known as the attractiveness bias (Berscheid and Walster, 1982; Feingold, 1992; Chiu and Babcock 2006). Interviewers responsible for employment selection decisions are not immune to this bias.

Extant research has established that attractive persons are ascribed positive traits while less attractive persons are viewed less favorably. Attractive people have been associated with better social skills, more cooperation, more prestigious jobs, and making more money (Mehrabian and Blum, 1997; Mulford et al., 1998; Shackelford and Larsen, 1999; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Langlois et al., 2000). Further, attractive people are viewed as being more persuasive than unattractive people (Chaiken, 1979). Indeed, in bargaining situations, attractive individuals fared better than their less attractive counterparts (Solnick and Schwietzer, 1999). With the relationship between attractiveness and social desirability established, we will now turn to the outcomes of attractiveness in employment selection decisions.

Physical attractiveness is advantageous to selection, placement, and promotion decisions. Irrespective of interviewer experience or skill, first impressions matter. Even experienced interviewers are subject to fall victim to attractiveness biases (Ilkka, 1995). Candidates deemed attractive by evaluators are perceived as more qualified, recommended for higher levels of compensation, and viewed as possessing more career potential (Dipboye et al., 1977; Jackson, 1983; French, 2002). Stated differently, attractiveness influences the perception of job qualifications (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003). We can conclude from this stream of research that being attractive is good for securing and progressing in a career. With that said, there is a paucity of research that has examined muscularity in employment decisions. This is an increasingly important dimension of attractiveness as developed nations become more concerned with health and fitness.

Research and data suggest that not only are athletes becoming bigger, but stronger as well. According to a research study conducted by Duke University (2009), Olympic swimmers who set world records have grown about 4.5 inches and Olympic runners have grown by about 6.4 inches since 1900. Incidentally, the average human has grown by about 1.9 inches in that same period of time. (Charles, J. 2009). Human growth and increased muscularity is explained by constructural theory (Bejan, 1997) current farther and faster for less unit of useful energy consumed. In other related literature, according to Saint Onge, Krueger, & Rogers (2008), over a 115-year time period (1869 to 1983), U.S. born major league baseball players have gained, on average, approximately 3 inches (7.6cm) in height, and 27 pounds (12.2kg) in weight, which has contributed to a 1.6 – unit increase in their body mass index. The average major league baseball player stands 73.4 inches in height, and 196.4 pounds.

Further, we observe a similar phenomenon within the National Football League. Changes in height, body weight, and body composition in American football players from 1942 to 2011. The results, according to Anzell, Potteiger, Kraemer, and Otieno (2013), show that for all positions combined, from 1942 to 2011, the average weight of an American football player increased between 5.376 to 19.152 ounces, per year, average height increased between .011 to .112 cm. per year, and body fat percentages increased between 0.082 to .142 per year. Amongst all males in the U.S., the average male currently stands 69.5 inches tall and weighs 191 pounds while the average male in 1900 stood 69 inches tall and weighed 160 pounds (NCHS, 2005).

With the observed changes in muscularity, understanding the relationship between muscularity and selection decisions is increasingly important. Established research suggests muscularity is considered to be attractive (Frederick and Haselton, 2007; Dixson et al., 2003; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Maisey, Vale, Cornelissen, & Tovee, 1999; Swami & Tovee, 2005). Based on this alone, one may speculate that muscularity would be associated with positive perceptions in employment decisions. However, we contend that the relationship is more nuanced. In addition to its relationship with attractiveness, muscularity can carry negative perceptions. For example, individuals with higher levels of muscularity have been perceived as more physically dominant, more volatile, and less committed (Frederick and Haselton, 2007), all of which may negatively influence employment decisions. Thus, we propose an inverted-U relationship between muscularity and selection decisions. That is, muscularity will have a positive relationship with selection decisions up to some critical threshold after which increased muscularity will negatively relate to selection decisions. In this relationship, we expect demarcation between a positive relationship and negative relationship to occur when an individual becomes above average in muscularity. At that point, the negative perceptions of muscularity (volatility, lack of commitment, and physically dominant) will outweigh the benefits of additional attractiveness.

To empirically test our proposition, we will use an experimental design. The independent variable in this experiment is muscularity. To manipulate muscularity, a single image of a male will be digitally altered to appear bony, slender, average, built, and brawny. A pilot study will be conducted to ensure that the created images are aligned with the desired categories. The dependent variable for the experiment is the employment selection decision. Respondents will be

asked to evaluate the candidates' qualifications and likelihood of hiring the candidate on a 5-point Likert scale. Candidates of all degrees of muscularity will be described with the same qualifications.

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