

Hey good lookin'

Julia Yates, senior lecturer in organisational psychology at City, University of London and Tristram Hooley, senior consultant at The Careers & Enterprise Company, provide an insight into the impact of image in careers advice and graduate recruitment

Many would agree that good looks and personal attractiveness are advantageous – most of us can dredge up an anecdote or two about how issues of appearance and attractiveness have influenced our careers or those of someone we know. There is a wealth of empirical evidence showing that these incidents are not isolated cases.

Graduates often ask questions about what to wear for an interview or for their first day at work, but issues associated with appearance and image go much deeper. Given the impact that image and attractiveness have on career success, it could be argued that career practitioners should engage with these topics in their practice. But how far should we go and how can we ensure that our interventions are both ethical and effective?

The importance of career image

Here we report on a strand of research that we've been conducting that explores the issue of career image (Hooley & Yates, 2015; Yates, Hooley & Bagri, 2016; Yates & Hooley, 2017) and how this impacts on graduate transitions to the workplace (Cutts, Hooley & Yates, 2015).

Our research builds on a substantial literature demonstrating that a range of aspects of image influences individuals' careers. We have coined the term 'career image' to summarise the findings of this literature and argue that they can be divided into three main aspects.

The first aspect of career image is beauty. This refers to physical good looks and includes a beautiful face and a good figure. This is subjective and culturally determined to some extent, but there are elements of beauty, such as symmetrical facial features, where there is cross-cultural agreement. The second aspect of career image is self-presentation. This is what you do with what you've got, and covers choices of clothing, accessories, make-up and facial hair. The final aspect of career image concerns interpersonal skills, which includes handshake, eye contact and charm.

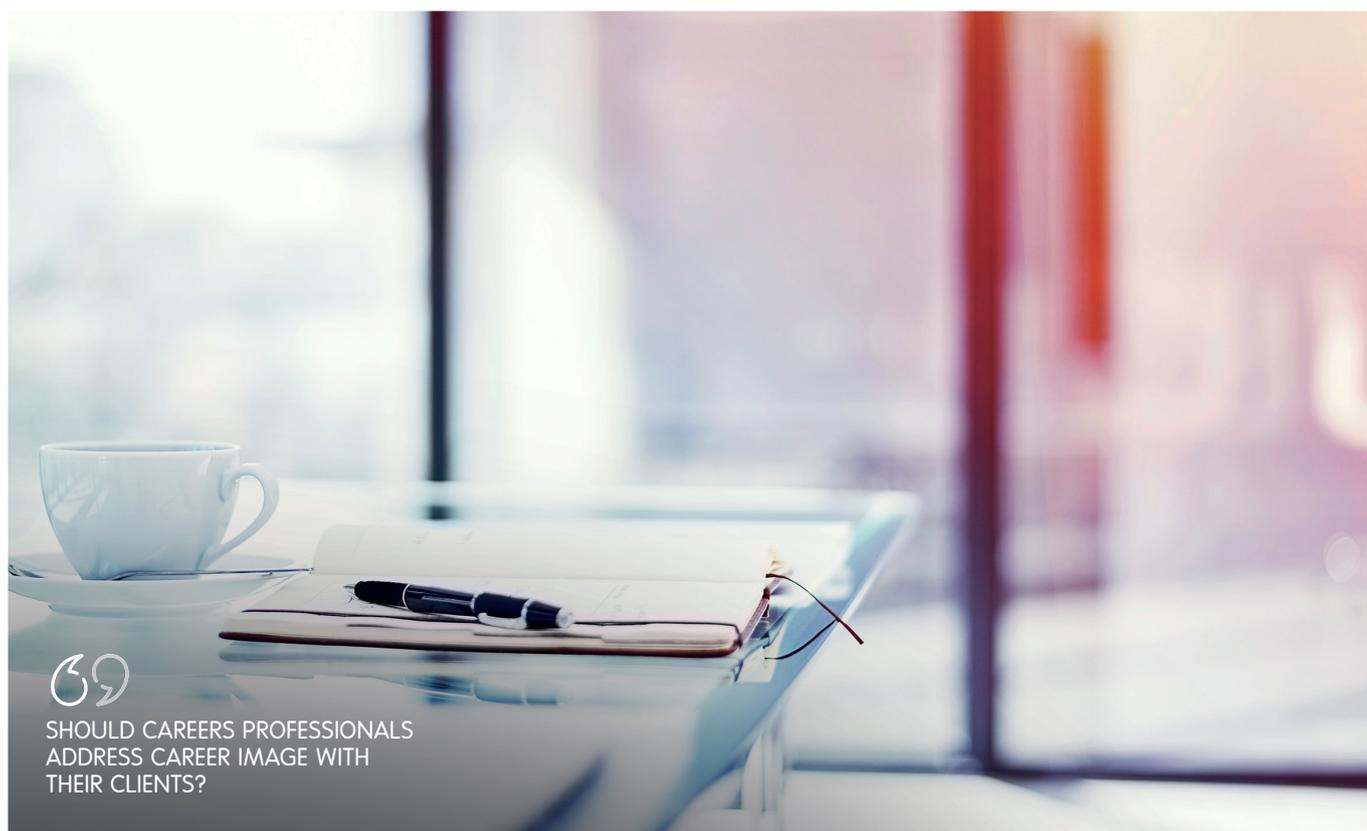
Evidence shows us that each of these aspects of career image has an impact on your chances of career success. There are some complexities as some people, particularly women, report that there can be penalties for being too attractive, but in general the better your career image, the better your career chances.

The beauty premium

Fairness is a value that is at the heart of the careers profession so the idea that image rather than skills and abilities confers an advantage is troubling. Our discomfort lies in the understanding that these kinds of qualities have little bearing on people's ability to do a job. Our professional instincts suggest that the accident of birth that makes one person's eyes just a fraction bluer than another's should have no place in a job interview.

This sense of the unfairness of the 'beauty premium' is then compounded when we consider the ways in which aspects of career image tie in with other demographic factors. An appealing career image is linked to age, class, race and disability, and a work culture that rewards young, able-bodied, middle class, white people means that groups who are already facing disadvantage and discrimination have yet another barrier to contend with (Cavico, Muffler & Mujtaba, 2012).

The picture is somewhat further complicated by the findings of another strand of research examining the impact that some of the qualities identified above have on work performance.



SHOULD CAREERS PROFESSIONALS
ADDRESS CAREER IMAGE WITH
THEIR CLIENTS?

Counter-intuitive (and disturbing) though this may be, there is some good evidence that those blessed with good looks and a winning smile actually add particular value to their organisations: attractive sales assistants sell more, attractive politicians get more votes, attractive CEOs lead to increased share prices, additional media coverage and greater growth (Ahearne, Gruen & Jarvis, 1999; Fetscherin, 2015; Milazzo & Mattes, 2016).

This can be explained by the 'beauty is good' myth, which describes the halo effect surrounding attractive people. Subconsciously we link good looks with a host of other favourable characteristics, such as integrity, intelligence and confidence (Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972).

This halo effect may unconsciously bias graduate recruiters into believing that the more attractive graduates will add more value to their organisation than their plainer rivals. Once these good looking graduates start work they may find that their colleagues and clients enjoy being around them and treat them particularly well, and that this results in improved performance. What status then should appearance have in job selection? If an attractive and charming candidate is likely to outperform a less attractive counterpart, could this not constitute a legitimate competency to recruit to? How does attractiveness differ from other qualities such as intelligence, which are also, to a large degree, an accident of birth, and which are routinely used to screen out unsuitable candidates?

One could argue that the clear impact that career image has on career success means that graduates should engage with these issues before they embark on their job search. But should careers professionals address career image with their clients? How can we ensure that our well-intentioned interventions don't damage our clients' self-esteem? How do we manage the ethics and politics of talking about career image? Are we just encouraging our clients to conform to social norms and perhaps perpetuating an unjust society?

What the practitioners say

We asked more than 400 career practitioners in the UK and overseas to complete a questionnaire telling us what they think and how they address career image in their practice.

The first and clearest of the findings was that career image, appearance and attractiveness are topics that the overwhelming majority (96%) of careers practitioners discuss with their clients. Those who avoid discussing career image were split between those who were morally opposed to it, feeling that they wanted no part in perpetuating this kind of social injustice, and those who felt that they did not have the knowledge or skills to make the conversations effective. But the overwhelming majority of participants felt that these issues do matter.

Despite their conviction that career image has a part to play within career development, practitioners did not relish these conversations. Some raised career image reluctantly, resenting a society that demands people conform and that confers career benefits on a lucky few. Many reported that the conversations could make them feel quite uncomfortable. Conversations about aspects of image such as handshakes or interview outfits – issues that weren't particularly personal and could be quite straightforward to change – were generally thought to be easier. More personal topics such as weight and personal hygiene were considered much harder to manage.

Practitioners were thoughtful and sensitive to their clients, and used a range of strategies to make sure that the discussions would be well received and to ensure that their well-intentioned interventions did not damage their clients' self-esteem or spoil their relationships with their clients.

Many practitioners felt that the conversations were most effective when they used client-centred or coaching techniques in which they encouraged clients to explore their own feelings and views, and reach their own conclusions. Some found it useful to draw on information from third parties, quoting employers or highlighting research findings, and others felt that the topic worked better in a group context, where it would inevitably feel less personal. Some practitioners used the issue of image as a way in to discussions about career choice, focusing on how their clients would feel about either changing their image to fit in, or being an outlier in their future career field.

Conclusion

Overall, we were impressed by the sophisticated responses of the career professionals in our research, many of whom were struggling with these challenging issues. We wondered if there was more that could be done to support professionals in feeling more confident about a number of issues. First, where to draw the line? There seemed to be some consensus that a discussion about what to wear at an interview is ok, but suggesting someone should lose weight is not. Between these two clear points there were shades of grey. Some guidelines, backed by well theorised justifications, could help practitioners to feel more confident about their choices.

Second, which techniques are most effective? Practitioners used a wide range of approaches in these difficult conversations, and a shared resource that pools all the strategies might be helpful both to experienced practitioners and trainees. Finally, there seemed to be an ethical tension which needs to be explored further. While the practitioners felt that issues of appearance were an important part of their remit, there was a clear sense of discomfort about the status quo, as one participant commented, 'it shouldn't matter but we live in the real world, and it does'.

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SUBCONSCIOUSLY WE LINK GOOD LOOKS WITH A HOST OF OTHER FAVOURABLE CHARACTERISTICS, SUCH AS INTEGRITY, INTELLIGENCE AND CONFIDENCE