

# Forsøk å be noen som ser stygge ut om å ta en ansiktsløfting (You try telling someone who is ugly to get a facelift)

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## Introduction

When you go for a job interview you probably spend a time learning about the company and thinking about what you can offer them. However, the blog [That Working Life](#) argues that how we look matters at least as much as what we say. So perhaps you should be combining your interview preparation with time shopping and styling. [That Working Life](#) devotes itself to helping people to manage these tricky issues of appearance by offering advice like.

*The elevator is an amazing place to steal a couple more minutes to pull yourself together. I've found that it gives me just enough time to swipe on some lipstick, pull my hair back and stab in some pearl studs.*

Over the last couple of years my colleague [Julia Yates](#) and I have become intrigued by the issue of appearance and attractiveness. Does it really make a difference to your career? If so what can you do about it? And perhaps most interesting of all, what do careers professionals think about this and what should they think?

## Career image

We investigated [the research](#) on career and attractiveness and found that attractive people have lots of career advantages. Attractive people are more likely to get hired and to get promoted. Attractive sales assistants sell more products, and it even seems to be the case that attractive politicians get more votes. How you look clearly matters for your career. We called this 'career image'.

Career image is made up of three interconnected elements.

- **Beauty.** Physically attractive people have higher self-esteem and get treated better by their colleagues. This translates into having a better chance of securing a job interview, being offered a job, starting work on a higher salary, negotiating a salary increase, receiving a positive performance evaluation and getting promoted.
- **Aesthetic presentation.** What you wear, how you style your hair, use make up and wear jewellery all make a difference to how others treat you. Some of the ways in which we present ourselves to others are about making the most of our beauty. For example one blog offers advice on the [best job interview outfits for your body shape](#). However, this isn't the only thing going on when we pick an outfit in the morning. We are also signalling (often sub-consciously) a whole host of things about who we are, what our background is and what we value. We also use our clothes to fit into a workplace and to show that we understand its values and expectations.

- **Interpersonal skills.** How socially skilled, charming and able to build a network you are also makes a difference to your career prospects. A strong handshake and an ability to make eye contact are all attributes which employers look for.

### Graduate dress code

We talked about these issues with [current university students](#). They told us that they believed that their career image was going to be important in their transition from university to work.

*It is the first thing that they [interviewers] judge you on. What you look like and what you're wearing.*

They expected that employers would be judging them on various aspects of their appearance and particularly highlighted tattoos, make-up, hair and facial hair as things that they needed to be very careful about.

The students in our study also talked about changing their appearance to fit in with what employers wanted and to make connections with their new colleagues. However, they expressed regret that they would have to change their appearance. They felt that they used the way that they dressed to communicate important information about themselves, who they are and what they value. They were concerned that conforming to a corporate dress code would make them feel less like themselves and inhibit their ability to make deep friendships.

The female students also talked about how some of these issues were much more difficult for them than they were for their male colleagues. They perceived that the dress codes were simpler for men. While women have a variety of options as to what to wear. They felt that this meant that there were more ways to get it wrong.

*We can wear skirts, we can wear trousers, we can wear flats, we can wear heels.  
You can have smart within anything now can't you.*

They also felt that achieving a professional appearance required women to be very careful. You needed to be feminine, but authoritative, attractive, but not too sexy, to appear that you are making an effort, but not like you are trying too hard. It was clear that many female students found defining a professional appearance difficult.

### What can careers professionals do?

In our [next study](#) we talked to careers professionals to find out what they thought about these issues. Most careers professionals thought that career image was important to career success and that it was something that they needed to talk about with clients. They felt that they could have these conversations, although they were often uncomfortable when discussing them. Image is a sensitive issue. As one practitioner pointed out: *'you try telling someone who's ugly to get a facelift'*. It is also an issue which they were morally uncomfortable talking about and which they felt shouldn't matter as much as it did. But, because they believed that it was important to talk about career image with their clients they continued to have these difficult conversations.

Our participants told us that they thought carefully about when to raise issues related to career image. They were more likely to raise it when it was something that they thought the client could change easily and much less likely when it was something like weight loss that would require a major long term change. They were also more willing to discuss these issues with younger clients and with clients who they thought would be receptive and who would get a lot of benefit from these conversations.

When talking about issues of career image the careers professionals that we talked to had a number of strategies that they used to have these conversations. These included: depersonalising the subject matter, for example by talking about the issue of appearance in general or discussing what employers wanted rather than commenting on the individual's appearance; building a strong relationship with the client before raising these issues and then employing empathy and sensitivity when discussing them; and allowing the client to raise the issue and then using nondirective techniques like questioning and reflecting ideas back to the client to help them to come to conclusions about their career image.

### Should we even be discussing these issues?

One way to think about the role of careers professionals is that they are there to help every individual to do as well as possible in their career. If career image is important to individual's careers it then follows that careers professionals should help people to navigate these difficult issues. However, the students that we spoke to highlighted how issues of race and gender intersected with questions of career image. Similarly, the careers professionals expressed discomfort about the ethics of advising on career image.

Careers professionals are there to help individuals, but they also have some responsibility to society as a whole. Is it wrong to encourage a culture that values appearance over substance, one which judges us on what we look like rather than what we know or can do? Even worse, does a focus on appearance just compound inequality? Research suggests that we tend to view white and able-bodied people as more attractive and to judge those from higher social classes as having better taste in clothes? The gender politics of attractiveness also tend to benefit men more than women. Women are more likely to find themselves being judged, than doing the judging. With all of these concerns should we try and ignore these issues of appearance and attractiveness and encourage our clients to focus on their skills, knowledge and integrity.

Our research doesn't allow us to offer any definitive answers to these questions. Indeed answering many of them is as much about what you think the role of career guidance is in society as what you think about career image. What I think is that career image is very important to individual's career success and to the way in which power and opportunity is distributed in society. Given this it seems difficult for us to avoid the subject in conversations with clients. However, I don't think that this just means that we have to spend our time encouraging people to buy more clothes and spend more time in the hair salon. Talking openly about career image is about talking about what is fair and unfair in our society and what we can do about it. It opens up conversations about class, gender, race, power and politics.

Ultimately career professionals should help individuals to make good decisions about their career. Thinking about your career image is an important part of this. But, career professionals should also be helping people to think about how career works and asking questions about why looking a certain way is so important. This kind of critical pragmatism lies at the heart of really powerful career guidance practice. We should help people to understand the world, for all its unfairness, and help them to formulate their response to it.

Of course we may decide that we want to do all of this while looking fabulous...