

Being Overweight and Career Progression

Section 6 of the Employment Equity Act (EEA) prohibits unfair discrimination against an employee on arbitrary grounds, including race, sex, disability, age and many others, including physical appearance. However, the type of discrimination associated with overweight employees is often a lot less overt and specifically identifiable.

According to 2011 research by Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital, people assess your competence and trustworthiness in a quarter of a second (250 milliseconds)—based solely on how you look. In the study, 21% of executives said being overweight looks bad for a woman and 17% said it hurts a man. Those numbers more than doubled when it came to obesity (45% and 43%, respectively).

In her book *The Beauty Bias*, Deborah Rhode outlines several studies that link extra weight with negative stereotypes like low self-confidence, lack of discipline and emotional volatility. Additionally, several executives interviewed said that being in good physical shape implies you know how to take care of yourself and, by extension, important projects—regardless of whether it's true or not. Thus, overweight individuals may well be passed up for a position or promotion or not progress in their careers because of biased perceptions regardless of their ability to perform on the job. Research does show however, that the bias effect becomes less pronounced with an increase in tenure.

But it's not just biased perceptions overweight employees have against them. Few would argue that being overweight has major health implications, including a heightened propensity to develop life threatening illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers amongst others all of which have the potential to limit an individual's capability to perform at their best. The health issues may also be considered cumbersome by organizations. It seems the bottom line is – both for your own wellbeing and career growth, it may well be time to hit the treadmill!