Today's Most Expensive Job Requirement: Getting Hot

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Being hot is now a job requirement

In the age of Ozempic and microlifts, the pretty privilege gap is growing.
By Amanda Hoover
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Emily Reynolds runs a PR company, and with that responsibility comes the pressure to look young, she tells me.

She's 44 but often passes as younger, and that's by design. Reynolds has tried Botox, filler, laser facials, hydrofacials, and invests in expensive skincare products. She has a Peloton and does intense workouts a la Barry's Bootcamp. She's walking the precarious line, she tells me, between looking mature enough to show she's an experienced professional who can run and mentor a team, and young enough to be relevant.

Even as she thinks critically about beauty standards imposed on women, Reynolds worries what would happen to her business and professional reputation if she abandoned her rituals and routines — and what's going to happen as she continues to age. "How long will I be quote-unquote publicly perceived as attractive?" Reynolds says. "And when I'm not, what happens to me professionally? That's the thing I think about daily."

While talking about looks in the corporate world remains taboo, years of research show attractive people tend to gain more trust than their plainer-looking counterparts, and that pretty and thin people tend to land jobs and advance up the career ladder to earn more money than others. Now, thanks to filters, Facetune, modern shapewear, high-end gyms, and a revolution in skincare products, corporate workers can be their own glam teams. GLP-1s lure people with a seemingly simpler path to thinness than diet fads and Weight Watchers menu items. And because conventional beauty has never been more accessible, the expectation that the average worker attains it has perhaps never been higher.

These beauty secret regimens aren't secrets — no longer treatments just for those with pretty people jobs like modeling and acting, but touted by regular people with 9 to 5s all over TikTok, where office workers sit before the camera and show themselves doing multi-step skincare routines and complex makeup and morning routines. You, too, can have a perfect, poreless face like the people on your Instagram feed, if you're willing to invest.

And in a precarious job market notoriously frosty to older workers, what better to justify that investment than thinking being hot can advance your career?

The rise of remote work let workers trade pinching shoes and tailored pants for slippers and sweats worn out of frame, but it also forced desk workers' faces in front of unforgiving cameras daily.

That meant confronting a mirror of their own image and imperfections while trying to focus on meetings. A study published in the Aesthetic Surgery Journal in 2021 found that more than one-third of participants in Australia started to negatively judge parts of their appearance after spending more time on video calls during the height of the pandemic. A survey of dermatologists published in 2021 in International Journal of Women's Dermatology found that more than half of practitioners reported an increase in cosmetic consultations, with more than 80% of patients citing concerns with their appearance on video calls. Data from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) shows that cosmetic surgery procedures increased by 19% from 2019 to 2022, and have continued to climb at a slower rate since.

> “As conventional beauty has never been more accessible, the expectation that the average worker attains it has risen.”

Beyond COVID, age-old ageism and workplace pressure also drive people toward cosmetic procedures, C. Bob Basu, president of ASPS, tells me in an email. "Many patients tell us they want to look 'less tired,' 'more energetic,' or 'more alert' — especially in leadership roles, client-facing environments, or fast-paced industries where confidence and presence matter," Basu says. These people often focus on their faces and necks, engaging in procedures that lessen under-eye bags, lift eyelids, or lead to sharper jaw lines, Basu says. While the workplace is "rarely the sole driver" behind a cosmetic procedure, he says do weigh it in their choice, and that many patients cite watching themselves on video calls as the inciting incident.

Alanna Barry, a 30-year-old working in public relations, says that after staring at herself on screen for months, she became fixated on her teeth. Sometimes, when she smiled, the light in the room would hit them in a way she felt accented their imperfections. She's looking to pay out of pocket for Invisalign to get the smile she wants — to feel more confident herself, and so that energy comes off when speaking to clients. But she also feels that having a perfect smile could make her more memorable. "My confidence is just completely shot," Barry tells me. "I do feel like there's a stigma that if you present yourself a certain way and you're more polished or you have less flaws that are visible, you tend to get better opportunities than someone who's maybe not looking their very best."

LinkedIn has made looks a part of even the job seeking process by showing recruiters your face for roles that, in theory, shouldn't rely on looks at all. Now there are several companies offering ways to use real photos to generate well-lit, flawless AI professional headshots — a glowing professional image previously only in reach for those who could pay photographers with good equipment and good lighting. With AI initially evaluating so many profiles for jobs it's become fitting for more to rely on AI to boost their online persona.

But with the mass adoption of AI as an image editor, people might start looking the same. AI editing "tries to neutralize literally everything, and in that homogenization, what we get is a loss of individuality, and a loss of cultural diversity," says Gretchen Andrew, an artist who uses AI and oil painting in her pieces that comment on the highly filtered beauty standards. Bill Cava, who runs AI consulting firm Generative Labs, tells me he experimented with an AI version of himself. It created a more polished look — smoother skin, no gray hairs. But he says he learned from his clients' reactions that showing up deeply human and authentic was the better move. "I was like, 'hey, that looks wonderful,'" Cava tells me about seeing the AI version of himself. "But my clients were like: "No, please don't do that.'" He realized that "it seems to violate the trust" he had with people.

Similar to minor dental work, it's some of the least invasive, low-lift cosmetic procedures that are growing in popularity. The ASPS says lip augmentation procedures have increased steadily year-over-year, growing from 1.38 million in 2022 to 1.45 million in 2024. The number of people using injectables like Botox has nearly doubled between 2019 and 2024, from just over 5 million to nearly 10 million. The global beauty industry, currently valued at $450 billion, is expected to reach a $590 billion valuation by 2030, according to a 2025 analysis from McKinsey, with skincare making up some 40% of the market.

Even people who oppose the role looks play in the workplace find themselves drawn to manipulating their image. Maureen Wiley Clough, who hosts the podcast "It Gets Late Early" about ageism in white-collar America, tells me she got Botox for the first time after watching herself on a screen and obsessing over lines on her face she hadn't noticed much before. She quit Botox about a year ago, after she became worried about possible long-term effects. Wiley Clough is an advocate for breaking down age-based barriers in the workforce, yet still found herself judging lines on her face. "Aging is something that you think happens to other people," she says. "I wasn't ready for it."

The workplace benefits of pretty aren't just a perception — there's data to show more attractive workers earn more. A study published in 2023 that found attractive MBA holders earn 2.4% more than other MBA graduates, and that the prettiest people can earn $5,500 more annually. The study used machine learning models trained to evaluate the attractiveness, and found that the benefit of good looks persists throughout a career, not just for young interviewees. "It's not that they are only benefiting right in the beginning, in the quick interview with their MBA program, but the benefit actually persists five years, 10 years, into their career as well," Nikhil Malik, a marketing professor at the University of Southern California and lead author of the study, tells me. Another surprising finding: "It matters as much for men as it does for women."

> “I have to reverse age to stay here. Why is the window so short to be professionally relevant?”*Emily Reynolds, PR executive*

High-powered men in tech are increasingly getting facelifts. Men now make up 7% of plastic surgery patients, according to ASPS. "While certainly less controversial or stigmatized thanks to social media and other trends, men's pursuit of cosmetic surgery may be a way to get a leg up in

an uncertain economy," the society's 2024 report says. "An increasingly competitive job market may be fueling renewed interest for men in aesthetic health because it offers an opportunity for men to improve their confidence."

The boom in GLP-1 use for weight loss (some 12% of Americans say they are currently using the drugs, according to health research firm KFF) has only furthered perceptions that people can and should be thin, says Ally Duvall, senior program development lead at Equip, a startup focused on eating disorder treatment. The Society for Human Resource Management surveyed about 1,000 human resource professionals in 2023 and found that about a quarter said obese employees are more likely to be perceived as unmotivated and lazy than slimmer workers. And fear of missing out on your job due to your size is realistic — weight-based discrimination is legal in much of the US. While workplaces celebrate diversity of race, sexuality, or religion, they rarely touch on body size. Duvall says weight stigma may seem justified at work, because some people inaccurately link thinness with health.

"If you aren't doing things about it, then you're morally wrong, or you're a bad person, or you're not taking your life seriously, or you're not doing the things that you should in order to achieve this most successful life out there," Duvall says people may think about larger workers to justify their bias.

Work isn't the sole motivator for many who want to control their appearance. Reynolds tells me it's not just for her PR firm — wants to look good and feel good for herself. She's confident about her abilities, and proud of the hard work she did to get to a place of expertise. Despite her accomplishments, it feels like her work could slip away. "Now, I have to reverse age to stay here," Reynolds tells me. "Why is the window so short to be professionally relevant?"

Ageism, weight stigma, and pretty privilege are some of the hardest biases to dismantle; doing so requires unraveling the conscious and subconscious ways we've come to value and interpret beauty over a lifetime, and also confronting aging and mortality without fear. We're typically our own harshest critics, but there's enough evidence to wonder if others are critiquing our looks alongside our resumes, too.

"If people think that they can get further in their career by throwing some Botox in their forehead, they're going to keep doing it," says Wiley Clough. "The sad part is, in many ways, I think they're probably not wrong."

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