Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Analyze and discuss legitimate health and economic consequences of obesity.
2. Compare and contrast beauty prejudice and other forms of discrimination.
3. Evaluate laws that are relevant to weight and appearance discrimination.
4. Devise a plan to minimize discrimination in the workplace.

Written Lecture

Weight Discrimination

“Common,” “serious,” and “costly” are words that are frequently associated with obesity (Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), n.d.). Obesity is, arguably, a growing problem in the United States—some consider it a national epidemic. The leading cause of death in the U.S. is heart disease, and obesity is one of the top six leading risk factors for heart disease and stroke (“Heart Disease,” 2012). To combat this issue, collaborative efforts among many different stakeholders are needed to help create a culture of healthy living.

According to a study conducted at Cornell University, obesity is responsible for almost 21% of healthcare costs in America (“Obesity Now Accounts,” 2012). With the increased emphasis on cutting health care costs that are associated with obesity, many obese individuals have become the target of weight discrimination (Bell, 2012). Many private employers have resorted to extreme measures to reduce costs by implementing policies that penalize individuals for being overweight.

For example, some companies charge higher insurance premiums for obese individuals. According to the Wall Street Journal, in 2007, a bank based in Geneva, Indiana reportedly raised deductibles from $500 to $2,500 for...
overweight individuals and gave a $500 credit to employees who passed various health-related screenings (“From Incentives,” 2008). Similarly, some organizations have gone so far as to deny employees healthcare insurance if their body mass index exceeds a certain level. The most bizarre suggested remedy is to use weight as a criterion to determine students’ grades in public schools.

Each of these so-called remedies is disheartening and disconcerting, to say the least. Although each of the scenarios listed above appear to be illegal, obesity is not protected under federal law.

Given the amendments made to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 2008, obese individuals may have some legal recourse. The EEOC has filed and won several lawsuits on the basis of weight discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA).

Basically, obesity is considered a disability if it can be shown that one’s weight is the symptom of some other underlying medical condition (Bell, 2012). The Civil Rights Act of 1991 could be another form of redress for obese individuals. If an employment decision adversely affects a disproportionate number of people in a particular group, a claim of disparate impact could be used.

**Beauty Prejudice**

Should a book be judged by its cover? For most people, the response would be an unequivocal “no.”

However, more and more people are judged in the workplace by their outer appearance rather than their credentials. Discrimination on these grounds is referred to as beauty prejudice, or lookism. Individuals who are considered to be attractive receive a beauty premium, while their less attractive counterparts encounter the ugliness penalty.

According to research, being attractive is an advantage for a woman in the lower levels of an organization, but good looks are a disadvantage when trying to advance. (Calliopejen1, 2011)

Research suggests that this form of discrimination is just as harsh as racism and sexism. More attractive individuals receive advantages in income and employment opportunities. For women, attractiveness is advantageous in the lower levels of the organization, but as they progress, attractiveness deprives them of advancement because they are generally viewed as less competent (Bell, 2012).

It is difficult to erase all forms of discrimination in the workplace; however, organizations should take aggressive measures to ensure that they have a
qualified pool of candidates to choose from when hiring new employees, regardless of candidates' appearance. Consider the following scenario: if people such as Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln and computer geniuses Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates were judged purely on their appearance, the United States might have missed out on the opportunity to benefit from their accomplishments, which really made a difference in our society.

Anti-discrimination laws are designed to protect people based on race, gender, age, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, marital status, or disabilities. In the workplace, anti-discrimination laws are intended to guarantee everyone equal opportunities in hiring, pay, and promotions. The basic rule of thumb is that the most accomplished and qualified employees earn the promotions. From the readings, it is quite transparent that discrimination violates that rule. The goal of equality has proven difficult to achieve.

References


From incentives to penalties: How far should employers go to reduce workplace obesity?. (2008). Retrieved from http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1876


Supplemental Reading
Learn more about this unit’s topics by researching in the databases of the CSU Online Library. The following are examples of what you can find in the Business Source Complete database:


This article discusses research concerning the advantages and disadvantages of being attractive. Sometimes, it is not beneficial to be beautiful.

This article provides the British viewpoint of attractiveness and employment, Tall, short, fat, thin—how will your appearance affect your employability and earnings?

**Suggested Further Reading**


**Learning Activities (Non-Graded)**

**Are You Obese? Calculate Your BMI**

Using Feature 15.1, “Calculating Your Body Mass Index,” on page 462 of the textbook, uses the formula to calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI) based on your height and weight. After determining your BMI, write a minimum one-page paper discussing whether obesity should be considered a protected class. Please substantiate your position.

Use proper APA formatting when writing your paper.

**Do TV Shows Promote Discrimination?**

On two nights, watch television for thirty minutes to one hour each night. Document the programs you watch, the types of commercials you see, and the numbers of overweight/obese or physically unattractive characters you see on the programs and commercials. What race, ethnicity, and gender were those characters/actors? What role does the media play in perpetuating discrimination based on weight and appearance?

Write a minimum two-page paper on your viewing and what you learned, based on the above directions and questions.

**Selective Hiring**

Read Organizational Feature 15.1, “Multiple Diversity Concerns at Abercrombie & Fitch,” on pages 480-481 of the textbook. Answer the questions at the end of the section. Think about your friends and family. Have any of them been passed over for a job because of their appearance? If so, write a paper telling their story and what you have learned in this chapter.

Use APA formatting when writing your paper, including in-text citations. If you have any difficulty with any concepts, contact your instructor for discussion and explanation.

**Notice:** These are all non-graded Learning Activities, so you do not have to submit them. If you experience difficulty in mastering any of the concepts, contact your instructor for additional information and guidance.