

Studies refute common stereotypes about obese workers

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New research led by a Michigan State University scholar refutes commonly held stereotypes that overweight workers are lazier, more emotionally unstable and harder to get along with than their "normal weight" colleagues.

With the findings, employers are urged to guard against the use of weight-based stereotypes when it comes to hiring, promoting or firing.

Mark Roehling, associate professor of human resource management, and two colleagues studied the relationship between body weight and personality traits for nearly 3,500 adults. Contrary to widely held stereotypes, overweight and obese adults were not found to be significantly less conscientious, less agreeable, less extraverted or less emotionally stable.

The research, done in conjunction with Hope College near Grand Rapids, appears in the current edition of the journal *Group & Organization Management*.

"Previous research has demonstrated that many employers hold negative stereotypes about obese workers, and those beliefs contribute to discrimination against overweight workers at virtually every stage of the employment process, from hiring to promotion to firing," Roehling said.

"This study goes a step further by examining whether there is empirical support for these commonly held negative stereotypes. Are they based

on fact or fiction? Our results suggest that the answer is fiction."

The findings are based on two separate but convergent national studies. Roehling, who's also a lawyer, said the practical implication of the research is that employers should take steps to prevent managers from using weight as a predictor of personality traits when it comes to hiring, promoting or firing. He said such steps could include:

- Adopting a policy that explicitly prohibits the use of applicant or employee weight in employment decisions without a determination that weight is relevant to the job.
- Structuring the interview process to reduce the influence of subjective biases.
- Using validated measures of the specific personality traits that are relevant to the job if personality traits are to be considered in hiring decisions.
- Including weight-based stereotypes as a topic in diversity training for interviewers.

"Employers concerned about the fair and effective management of their work force," Roehling said, "should be proactive in preventing negative stereotypes about overweight workers from influencing employment decisions."

Source: Michigan State University

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