

# Does your personality and how you look affect how you're treated at work?

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Is it a coincidence that the least attractive people in your office are the butt of all the jokes? A study just published in the journal *Human Performance* would suggest that it's not.

Brent A. Scott and Timothy A. Judge wanted to learn more about counterproductive work behaviour (CWB), understood as "behavior intended to hurt the organization or other members of the organization". In particular, they wanted to know what made certain employees a target of [workplace abuse](#), [aggression](#) or anti-social activity.

The pair tested a model suggesting that being on the receiving end of CWB is related to an employee's personality, his or her appearance, and negative emotions felt toward them by co-workers. Scott and Judge identified employee characteristics likely to encourage emotion in their co-workers and to be associated (or not) with receiving abuse: neuroticism (the tendency to experience [negative emotions](#) such as anger, hostility and anxiety), [agreeableness](#) (the tendency to be altruistic, warm and considerate), and physical attractiveness (as rated by others).

The authors discovered that disagreeable and physically unattractive employees received more abuse from their co-workers, and that co-workers felt more negatively about them, leading, again, to abuse.

While it's no surprise that 'neurotic' co-workers might get a rougher ride in the canteen than the 'agreeable' ones, the notion of beauty shielding workers from harmful banter is more complicated. Scott and Judge refer

to previous studies for some explanations. They note that physically attractive people are judged by others as friendlier, more likeable, and more socially appealing than physically unattractive people; they're also treated better by others than unattractive individuals, even at work.

Emotions play a big part in predicting who might suffer abuse in the office, and beauty, a "socially desirable characteristic", can certainly bring them out. As Scott and Judge explain, "Attractive people may be aesthetically pleasant to others, eliciting positive emotion, while unattractive people may be aesthetically unpleasant to others, eliciting negative emotion."

What do the results of this Human Performance study mean for office politics? Scott and Judge suggest that if managers know who might become targets of abuse, it might help them to prevent them becoming victims in the first place, or to provide support if they do.

As for the rest of us, "Although it is difficult to alter one's physical attractiveness and, presumably, one's level of agreeableness," they write, "employees should realize that, whether fair or unfair, appearances and personality matter in the workplace."

While you might've been told as a child that it's "what's on the inside" that counts, it's now very clear that "what's on the outside" counts just as much, at least around the water cooler.

**More information:** Scott, B. and Judge, T. Human Performance.  
[www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08959285.2013.765876](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08959285.2013.765876)

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