

Weight Prejudice in the Workplace in the United States

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Abstract. *In our globalized world today, more interaction among people from diverse cultures and backgrounds are required; and diversity issues are now deemed important and projected to become even more significant in the future given the increasing differences in the U.S. population (Green, López, Wysocki & Kepner, 2002). With the focus on weight discrimination in the workplace, an important diversity issue nowadays, this paper will describe and analyze the situation in the United States and present the possible solutions of this issue with the aim of promoting workplace diversity. The first section of the paper briefly introduces the background of workplace discrimination and the article structure while the second part describes the situation in the United States by displaying some vivid examples. The author will analyze the causes of weight discrimination and displays the cases in other countries as a comparison. The fourth part proposes some practical solutions; and in the conclusion, a summary of the article and suggestions for further research will be found.*

KEYWORDS: *Weight discrimination, Weight prejudice, Workplace, Employment, Workplace diversity, Obese discrimination*

1. Weight Discrimination in the Workplace in the United States

A study by Andreyeva, Puhl and Brownell (2008) found out that there has been a 66% increase in weight bias in the past decade in America. According to another research by Puhl, Andreyeva and Brownell (2008), the prevalence of weight/height discrimination ranked as the fourth most prevalent cause of perceived discrimination among all US adults: on average, 10.3% of women reported daily or lifetime discrimination due to weight/height while men were half as likely to report such experiences (4.9%).

In recent years, reports about overweight people being treated unequally in work are frequently seen in newspapers, magazines and TV programs. As AARP (Cadrain, 2011) observed:

Tom Ferraro, a New Jerseyan who carries 270 pounds on his 5-foot-10-inch frame, got a job cleaning crypts for Carrier Mausoleum in the town of Mahwah. But soon he was back on the street-and he believes it's because of his weight. In his telling, company owner Serge Carrier walked into the room where Ferraro was working and, with two coworkers listening, declaring him "too fat". Ferraro is now suing Carrier, claiming discrimination based on weight. The company "unequivocally denies" the allegations.

Also, Fox News (2012) reported that a Texas hospital had instituted a hiring policy barring potential employees who are obese, which requires potential employees to have a body mass index of less than 35. The hospital's chief executive used the "expectations of the patients" regarding personal appearance of hospital staff to explain this policy.

Some companies have realized that workplace diversity not only benefits teamwork among co-workers, but also brings solid business reputation and satisfied diverse customer base to their business (Saharconsulting, 2010). Therefore, they have adopted various policies and practices of managing diversity. For example, Hewlett-Packard or HP (n.d.), the US multinational information technology corporation, has a commitment to diversity, inclusion and nondiscrimination, aiming at maintaining a work environment free from discrimination and providing equal employment opportunity for all employees. Besides, there is also a grievance policy, which stipulates that employees could contact the Ethics and Compliance office to discuss a possible violation.

However, as an important bias issue, obese discrimination is missing in many American companies' diversity statements. As a matter of fact, all of the top 10 American companies by revenue (Bloomberg, 2013;) have expressed zero-tolerance attitudes towards such traditional discrimination issues as race, sex, religion, etc. in their statements of ethics or diversity policies, but failed to mention weight bias explicitly. This shows that workplace discrimination against overweight people has not received enough attention in America.

2. Discussion

In this part, the author will explore the possible causes of workplace weight bias, the implications for the wider cultural context and explain how this issue is handled in other countries.

2.1 Causes

Firstly, there's a deficiency in law concerning this issue. While most forms of discrimination are banned in America, weight bias largely isn't; and Michigan is the only state where such discrimination is specifically outlawed at work (Sanburn, 2012). Therefore, overweight people are not protected and cannot seek legal aid when they are discriminated at work. Even if they have excellent work performance, their employers can still find a legitimate business reason to fire them, as is the case with an overweight boiler plant operator: he got fired because the employer said he was too fat to perform some aspects of his job should an emergency arise and unable to climb some ladders due to the weight capacity. Again, when it went to the court, the judge agreed with the employer and said the reason to fire him is the inability he demonstrated to perform central functions of his tasks.

A second possibility could be the societal attitudes of "beauty" (Maranto and Stenoien, 2000). People are told that being thin is attractive and being fat is not, which can be attributed to the media (Schwartz, 2013): so much of what people find attractive is determined by the newspapers, magazines and advertisements, and they have presented a very particular definition of beauty, part of which is thinness. Since some researches have already found out that beautiful people tend to be more successful in companies (Burney, n.d.), overweight employees, who are not deemed as "beauties", may face more difficulties in their work, one of which is discrimination.

2.2 Implications for the Wider Cultural Context

Overweight people not only face discrimination because of their size in the workplace, but also prejudice and bias in other occasions as well.

As consumers, "large people are systematically denied health insurance and life insurance, or they are forced to pay higher premiums than those of average weight", which is the finding of the Council on Size & Weight Discrimination (n.d.). The council (n.d.) also found out that landlords and real estate agents tend to reject the apartment-seeking requests of overweight people or show them only inferior locations just to keep them out of the neighborhood.

Besides, the ridicule from other people could seriously damage their self-esteem. They are blamed "for having no self-control, for refusing to follow a diet, and for wanting to be healthy" (Brecher, 2014); and this could be related to the aforementioned personal responsibility for obesity. The unfair teasing of patients with obesity is a form of weight discrimination that cannot be overlooked: "many obese individuals report being treated with less respect or courtesy than thinner people and being called names or insults because of their weight" (Puhl, n.d.).

2.3 What is the Situation Like in Other Countries?

Apparently, workplace obese discrimination in America has attracted the attention of many researchers: most of the reports or papers about this issue the author found are about the situation within the country. One possible reason of this could be the high proportion of obese people there: according to OECD's obesity report (2014; More than one in three adults in America is obese. However, America is definitely not alone in such kind of discrimination. Workplace obese discrimination has been reported in other countries around the world as well.

In terms of law and regulations against overweight discrimination, EU law did not prohibit discrimination specifically on the grounds of obesity, but it does conclude that very severe obesity-classified as a body mass index of more than 40-could be considered as disability (Bowcott, 2014). Therefore, only if the obesity affects the employees' participation in professional life can it be classified as a disability. Also, UK courts have not yet recognized obesity as a disability (Bowcott, 2014).

Nonetheless, no article or report has provided the percentage of European, African or Asian obese individuals being discriminated, which demonstrates the lack of research attention of this issue outside America. Therefore, it is fair to believe that, compared to its counterparts around the world, US is much more aware of this problem and willing to tackle it.

3. Possible Solutions

Comprehensive solutions need to be taken to combat the discrimination against overweight people in the workplace in America, including protection from the law, raising the awareness of the public, which serves as a complementary measure, demonstration effects.

1). policy and legislation should be put in place to protect the rights of all the citizens independent of the size of their bodies (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, n.d.). “In the absence of protection specifically geared toward weight discrimination, the obese must continue to try to fit their claims into the uncomfortable structure of disability statutes” (Hartnett & Rutgers, 1992). According to Kristen’s research (2002), a more straightforward approach to combating this issue is to prohibit it through state or local antidiscrimination laws—currently, only the jurisdictions of the State of Michigan and the cities of Santa Cruz and San Francisco, California provide explicit statutory protection for fat bias.

2). The media should play a more positive role in combating workplace overweight discrimination. They need to stop portraying overweight people as irresponsible since in many cases, obesity is caused by genetics, medical reasons or psychiatric illness (Bleich, Cutler, Murray & Adams, 2007). The awareness of obesity as a special medical condition can be raised through noncommercial ads, documentary films, etc.

3). In order to provide equal opportunities and treatment for obese individuals in the workplace, the government sector and well-known multinational corporations shall take the lead in creating a truly diverse working environment, with the consideration for the special needs of overweight employees. For instance, in terms of employment setting, they could assign the tasks requiring no significant physical activity (Maranto & Stenoien, 2000) or less physical flexibility to these employees. If these two sectors manage to care more about obese employees with effective and practical measures, the other companies would follow suit in no time.

4. Conclusion

With the focus on workplace discrimination towards overweight individuals, the paper gives an overview of the situation in America from the angle of the diversity policies of various American companies. According to the analysis, the deficiency in law, the media and some negative stereotypes shall be the potential sources of the discrimination. The author also talks about the prevalence of fat discrimination outside workplace—business, education and daily life, as well as the relevant cases and laws in other countries as a comparison. Three possible solutions of this issue are proposed by the paper, which require comprehensive action from three different levels—laws, media and companies.

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