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# GQ Talk



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ILLUSTRATION JOE WILSON.

## CAREER ADVICE

# JUST SIT THERE AND LOOK BEAUTIFUL

By Nigel Bowen

WANT TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS WITHOUT REALLY TRYING? JUST MAKE SURE YOU LOOK SEXY.

**A**s the working year clicks into gear, you're no doubt nutting out strategies to shimmy a little higher up the greasy pole. Putting in more unpaid overtime. Enrolling in an MBA. Arranging for bestiality porn to be discovered on your supervisor's computer. If you've gone so far as to have visited the self-help corridor of shame in your local bookstore, you may even be contemplating adopting the seven habits of highly effective people, not sweating the small stuff or investigating who moved your cheese. Well, good luck with all that but before coming up with an a big list of personal KPIs for 2012, you might want to consider that success in your chosen profession (and, indeed, even your choice of profession) comes down to something you've probably never given much thought to: whether recruiters, managers and your co-workers want to have sex with you.

In the middle of last year, iconoclastic British academic Dr Catherine Hakim enraged the sisterhood by releasing a book, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital* (Allen Lane, \$30), which argued that (a) attractive people receive favourable treatment in the workplace and (b) those in possession of 'erotic capital' should shamelessly exploit it. Briefly, Hakim's thesis is this: when it comes to analysing workplace dynamics, everyone gets caught up on human capital (what people know) and social capital (who they know) while pretending that erotic capital (how keen others are to nail them) somehow doesn't exist.

No doubt some of the violent reaction to Hakim's book resulted from her highlighting a truth everyone's aware of but no-one is comfortable acknowledging: that stunners get special treatment. There are uni libraries full of research showing attractive individuals are better cared for by their parents, get higher grades from their teachers, and are more popular with their peer group. It would be incredible if they weren't also enjoying the effects of what's commonly referred to as the 'beauty premium' in the workplace.

The possession of erotic capital has always been recognised as being important in certain professions — the world's oldest one being an obvious example — but the economic and social changes of the last couple of decades mean a much larger proportion of the workforce is required to provide what HR types refer to as 'aesthetic labour'. In First World countries, the kind of grunt jobs where erotic capital is largely irrelevant have been disappearing, replaced by white-collar and pink-collar positions. Nowadays, jobs are much more likely to involve interacting with human beings than tilling fields or tightening bolts. And while people will typically swear blind they aren't 'lookist', especially when it comes to making important business decisions about hiring and promoting others, all the available evidence suggests they most definitely are.

None of which is likely to come as any great surprise to women, who've had limited access to any form of capital other than the erotic type up until relatively recently, and who are used to being judged on their looks, even in contexts where they should be immaterial. But when have you ever heard a male colleague bemoaning the career-crimping impact of his big nose or prominent man boobs?

“HANDSOME LAWYERS EARN MORE THAN UNATTRACTIVE ONES. ATTRACTIVENESS IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS QUALIFICATIONS FOR SUCCESS.”

“After my book came out, *BILANZ*, a Swiss business magazine, did a story on it, running the photos of the CEOs of the top 10 finance companies in Switzerland,” Hakim tells *GQ*. “The majority of them were above average in looks and style, and some were film-star good looking. Clearly, CEOs are appointed on the basis of things such as experience, qualifications and business strategy. However, it seems that good looks are an important additional advantage in the competition for the very top jobs. After all, CEOs are often the public face of their companies; their photos are printed constantly in the media. The same effect is also happening, less visibly, lower down the occupational ladder. Handsome lawyers earn more than unattractive ones, for example. Attractiveness is just as important as qualifications for success in adult life. And men get an even higher earnings return on attractiveness than women: on average, +17 per cent compared to +12 per cent for females.”

Hakim's referring to a 1998 study by Biddle and Hammermesh, which found more fetching lawyers tend to end up in the (higher-paying) private sector while plain ones tend to work

for the government. Interestingly, even if attractive lawyers start out in the public service and unattractive ones in a law firm, within around five years they are likely to have swapped around, evidence of labour-market forces pushing workers in particular directions based on their appearance. (Private practice requires lawyers to sell themselves, and lawyers' clients — like everyone else — prefer to give their business to good-looking people whenever possible.)

Victoria University's Dr Sally Weller has spent decades studying how Australia's labour market functions. She disagrees with Hakim's viewpoint, pointing out that sexual attractiveness isn't some sort of tradable commodity that can be separated from the person who possesses it. Weller also worries that the sexualisation of workplaces is likely to disadvantage those at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy (even if they are hot). Nonetheless, she concedes that businesses have become increasingly adept at recruiting staff who epitomise the values of their brand. “Most people would probably agree that at workplaces where physical attractiveness has an economic benefit — fashion stores, for example — 'lookism' very much exists.

But it's more complicated than it just being a matter of good looks. If the brand is outdoorsy, it'll recruit staff who look outdoorsy. If it's a brand, such as Bunnings, that is budget and family orientated, there may actually be a preference for homely employees.”

The truly frightening thing about Hakim's theory of erotic capital is that, once you're aware of it, you start noticing the aesthetic apartheid that's apparent across the workforce and secretly wondering where your own job places you on the spectrum of desirability. And whether your own looks are sufficiently Clooneyesque to provide any realistic hope of making it to the corner office.

It's a fear Sydney plastic surgeon Dr Warwick Nettle is familiar with. “The number of men coming to see me has tripled over the last 15 years,” he reports. “Most of them are in managerial roles. They'll say, 'I'm running this business, giving lots of presentations and I need to look good — what can you do for me?' Sometimes these are men who still want career advancement, sometimes it's men who have made it to the top and want to stay there. All the studies show — and people are very



conscious of this — that good-looking and more youthful-looking people tend to get promoted over those who look more ordinary.”

If at this point your less-than-perfect bone structure is causing you to contemplate taking a job flogging hammers, take heart. Hakim is at pains to point out erotic capital is relatively “democratic”. While you can’t change your IQ or what social class you were born into, you can take action to boost your stock of erotic capital and enjoy the benefits — entry into glamour professions, faster career progression, higher pay — that flow to those who are easy on the eye.

And it doesn’t even have to involve a visit to the likes of Dr Nettle. When it comes to cultivating erotic capital, Hakim gives the same advice to men as she does to women: “The most important factors are staying slim, keeping fit with a good body, and a good haircut that suits your face. Don’t overlook the value of smiles — almost everyone looks more attractive when they smile. Also, have good manners — rude people never seem attractive.” ☞

Buxton calls this the “long nose” theory of innovation: Big ideas poke their noses into the world very slowly, easing gradually into view.

Can this actually be true? Buxton points to exhibit A, the pinch-and-zoom gesture that Apple introduced on the iPhone. It seemed like a bolt out of the blue, but as Buxton notes, computer designer Myron Krueger pioneered the pinch gesture on his experimental Video Place system in 1983. Other engineers began experimenting with it, and companies such as Wacom introduced tablets that let designers use a pen and a puck simultaneously to manipulate images onscreen. By the time the iPhone rolled around, “pinch” was a robust, well-understood concept.

A more recent example is the Microsoft Kinect. Sure, the idea of controlling software just by waving your body seems wild and new. But as Buxton says, engineers have long been perfecting motion-sensing for alarm systems and automatic doors. We’ve been controlling software with our bodies for years, just in a different domain.

This is why truly billion-dollar breakthrough ideas have what Buxton calls surprising obviousness. They feel at once fresh and familiar. It’s this combination that lets a new gizmo take off quickly and dominate.

The iPhone was designed by Apple engineers who had already learnt plenty from the PDA/handheld organiser market, including of course, their own ill-fated Newton. By the time they added those pinch gestures, they’d made the obvious fairly surprising.

If you want to spot the next thing, Buxton argues, you need just to go “prospecting and mining” — looking for concepts that are already successful in one field so you can bring them to another. He particularly recommends prospecting the music world, because musicians invent gadgets and interfaces that are robust yet creatively cool — like guitar pedals. When a team led by Buxton developed the interface for Maya, a 3D design tool, he plundered music hardware and software. (“There’s normal spec, there’s military spec, and there’s rock spec,” he jokes.)

OK: If it’s so easy to spy the future, what are Buxton’s predictions? He thinks tablet computers, pen-based interfaces, and omnipresent e-ink are going to dominate the next decade. Those inventions have been slowly stress-tested for 20 years now, and they’re finally ready.

Using a “long nose” analysis, I have a prediction of my own. I bet electric vehicles are going to become huge — specifically, electric bicycles. Battery technology has been improving for decades, and the planet is urbanising rapidly. The nose is already poking out: Electric bikes are incredibly popular in China and becoming common in the US among those delivering food to homes, who haul them inside their restaurants every night to plug them in. (Cents per charge, and no complicated rewiring of the grid necessary.) I predict a design firm will introduce the iPhone of electric bikes and *whoa*: It’ll seem revolutionary.

But it won’t be. Evolution trumps revolution, and things happen slowly. The nose knows. ☞

“ANYTHING THAT’S GOING TO HAVE AN IMPACT OVER THE NEXT DECADE HAS ALREADY BEEN AROUND FOR 10 YEARS.”

## INNOVATION

# THE FUTURE IS ALREADY HERE

By Clive Thompson

MOST RADICAL NEW TECHNOLOGIES HAVE BEEN PERCOLATING IN PLAIN SIGHT FOR YEARS.

**T**ech people love stories about breakthrough innovations — gadgets or technologies that emerge suddenly and take over, like the iPhone or Twitter. Indeed, there’s a whole industry of pundits, investors, and websites trying to predict the Next Big Thing. The assumption is that breakthroughs are inherently surprising, so it takes special genius to spot one coming.

But that’s not how innovation really works, if you ask Bill Buxton. A pioneer in computer graphics who is now a principal researcher at Microsoft, he thinks paradigm-busting inventions are easy to see coming because they’re already lying there, close at hand. “Anything that’s going to have an impact over the next decade — that’s going to be a billion-dollar industry — has always already been around for 10 years,” he says.

**IMMINENT INVENTIONS:** When it comes to tech breakthroughs, the next big thing is staring us in the face.

