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## Weighing the weight issue

**Does size matter in our competitive job market? Sunday Star discovers that it all depends on the nature of the job, and that there are no specific anti-discrimination laws to protect workers on the heavy side.**

AFTER seven years of employment, model Filippa Hamilton was sacked by fashion house Polo Ralph Lauren Corp for being “too large”.

Although many would be appalled that a 1.8m, 54kg, 22-year-old woman could be considered fat, few would disagree that in the world of fashion, size does matter.

In another profession, however, can the same discrimination be tolerated?

Recently, a local daily reported that a trainee teacher was “shamed” out of her course after a college official allegedly told her that at 110kg, she was too fat to become a teacher.

According to the 29-year-old, she was told to leave and try again after she slimmed down.

Although the authorities have suggested that it was a one-off case and assured that they would look into it, many find the alleged incident inexcusable.

The National Union of the Teaching Profession has reportedly urged the Education Ministry to review the code of ethics for those conducting interviews for prospective teachers.



**Fitting the bill:** If weight is the only difference between two job candidates, who will get the job?

Unfortunately, says Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Shamsuddin Bardan, appearance and image are important factors in any profession.

For certain professions, weight does matter, he opines: “Take receptionists, for example; they are hired to reflect the company’s image so weight can matter.

“Or in the security services, they need to be physically fit because their job requires them to be strong and healthy.”

Similarly, he adds, if you are looking at a worker in the creative industry, the stereotype will be unathletic and not so well-groomed.

And in the food industry, weight could be a valued criterion in line with the adage “Never trust a thin cook”, he quips.

Josephine Lui, managing consultant of Imagine Image Consultancy, concurs.

“The nature of the job does count. If the job is that of a weight trainer, stylist, modelling academy and the like, weight would then become a priority in the job. But his or her competence and behaviour would matter too,” she says.

Shamsuddin highlights that as the job market becomes more competitive and the number of graduates increases, employers tend to look at other factors when filtering through applicants.

This is even more apparent in the current market, he adds.

“It is now an employers’ market, so employers will hire only those who they think can fill the job requirement they have specified. They will go for one who they think will give them 110%, and this usually means not only someone who is qualified but also someone who appears healthy and fit.”

Nevertheless, argues Shamsuddin, the situation needs to be viewed realistically,

“We should try not to be hypocritical but at the same time not practise or encourage discrimination.”

He shares that there have been many cases of personnel from the police force and army being asked to reduce their weight and get fit. “Many accept it as part and parcel of their job,” he says, stressing that job candidates basically need to meet the requirement of the particular job they are applying for.

Still, says Shamsuddin, the case highlights a pertinent underlying issue in Malaysia’s employment sector – there are no specific anti-discrimination laws protecting workers although their right to equality is enshrined in the Federal Constitution. (Article 8 in the Constitution states that there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment..... or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment.)

“Although weight is still not covered by most anti-discrimination and equal opportunity laws in developed countries such as the United States and United Kingdom, they protect their workers against racial, age and disability discrimination. We do not have any specific laws,” he says.

Shamsuddin further notes that while image is paramount for any company, it should not infringe on a worker’s basic rights.

“For example, if you have a dress code, it should not infringe on one’s religious rights,” he points out.

### **Professional image**

More importantly, weight does not reflect one’s professional skills or competency, says Lui, drawing attention to Susan Boyle, a contestant in the recent *Britain’s Got Talent* who proved those critical of her appearance wrong when she blew everyone away with her talent.

“Still, after getting her break, she worked hard to improve her image so that she could succeed in the competition as well as the

industry,” Lui notes.

Image consultant Wendy Lee agrees, saying that while appearance is important in a person’s professional life, weight has no bearing on one’s professional image.

“It is more about how one carries himself or herself,” she says, explaining that a person’s total image encompasses his or her values and beliefs (called Hidden image), experience (Experience image) and reputation (Assumed image).

Weight is only an issue if it affects one’s self esteem or confidence level, adds Lee, the founder of Chapter One Colour, Style and Image Consultancy.

Citing an example of a salesperson she met at one of her image consultancy workshops, Lee says that grooming can make a big difference.

“I know someone who is big-sized but she takes very good care of herself and everything about her is nicely put together. She has a trendy hairstyle and assembles attractive pieces for her dressing. She looks really good, so when you meet her you notice her style, not her size. Mind you she is in sales, so she fully understands the need to sell herself.”

However, she highlights, a big majority of those with weight issues think that whatever they do or wear will look wrong, so they don’t bother trying.

“Once you slack, you’ll get the wrong reaction from the people you meet and then you will start thinking that it is because of your weight. That becomes a vicious cycle.

“If you think that your weight is a problem then automatically you will blame your weight for everything that goes wrong.”

She adds that many people allow their weight issues to affect their confidence and self-esteem.

“At the work place, weight is usually not the main concern. For instance, I will not see if a person is fat or not when I am hiring,” she says, recalling an experience when interviewing someone who was slightly overweight.

“What I noticed was that she had a boogie in her nose, so it was really awkward. I was really worried that it would fall while I was interviewing her, so to distract myself I looked at other things. That was when I noticed her weight and dressing and others,” she recalls with a laugh.

“Worse, it was a bad reflection of her hygiene.”

Fat or thin, Lee stresses, one must always pay more attention to one’s grooming and hygiene.

“Your weight does not impact on whether you look professional or not. For example, if you are scrawny and you wear ill-fitting clothes, you will still look unprofessional. What is more important is that you are not unkempt and that you wear clean, well-structured, fitting clothes.”

Lui agrees, explaining that a person’s professional image entails the overall presentation of one self.

“A good, clean and neat haircut; healthy complexion; natural make-up; body posture; a good dress sense according to body shape; choice of right quality fabrics to accentuate the different body types; and of course one’s conduct and behaviour,” Lui says.

Although the first impression counts, creating a positive impression is more important, she stresses.

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