

# Aesthetic labour within the united kingdom



Within recent years it has been found emotions play a large part in today's work place, with the same now being said in regards to aesthetic labour. Postrell (2003) even suggests that we are on verge of entering an ' aesthetic economy', bring forth an era of appearance and feel. With the fundamental feature of this economy predominately being employees appearance developing the notion that ' style is strategy', Postrell also suggests that the look of employees can also determine the ambience of a room as much as the furnishings or decor. Aesthetic labour itself is a modern term in regards to recruiting staff whom look the part (Witz et al, 2003). The concept of aesthetic labour was developed based on employer's impression that parts of the service industries were portrayed as the ' style labour market' this includes the following service areas; bars, hotels, events and retailers, who require aesthetic skills in addition to social and technical skills from employees (Nickson et al, 2004, p. 3).

Today's research shows that within the UK, service jobs now accommodate around three-quarters of all jobs, with them predominantly coming from the retail and hospitality sectors. With a 17 percent growth between 1979 and 2003 within these sectors alone it can be seen from current examination of employer's trends that the selections of employees with self presentation skills have a higher preference than experience or technical skills. For example a current survey of one hundred human resource experts within the United States of America accountable for employing hospitality industry employees publicized that their top two criteria's were ' pride in appearance' and a ' good attitude' (Martin and Grove, 2002), the hospitality training foundation (2001) also confirmed that these top criteria's are also shared by

the industries within the UK. Once again both within the UK and USA it has been found that once employees have been employed their appearance continues to influence and help them, with suggestion that service, profession and pay are all subjective to employee's appearance. Within the UK this is most prominent in the service sector however it can be seen in most areas (Harper, 2000). Nick et al (2004, p. 3) argues that aesthetics within interactive service work is also becoming a major input however this trend has not yet been confirmed by policy markers. Other authors also suggest that the aesthetics within interactive service work is extremely significant with trends coming from interrelationships as well as from human and non human elements that are found with the workplace itself. In which aestheticization process can present them through fundamental 'actor network theory', these are transitions of redevelopment identifying how systems come together to act as a whole (Deepdyve Beta 2010).

In particular in many customer facing jobs a large amount of importance is placed on a person's characteristics to a degree in which employers specifically look for people who are 'passionate, stylish, confident, tasty, clever, successful and well travelled' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001, p. 14). It is essentially that all employees portray the 'right image' for the 'company, irrespective of the skills they possess. Grugulis et al (2004) argues that many managers may try to control how their employees feel and look, as well as how they behave, so that they can expose the correct emotions, aesthetics and productivity needed within a specific working environment. Moulding employee's appearance is a very well known process used by employers to maintain a business like image; this includes the use of uniforms and dress

codes. In a recent survey it was found eighty percent of organisations surveyed enforced a uniform policy or dress code, principally to keep up a corporate image. Due to employee appearance and aesthetic appeal being considered an essential part of any companies branding or competitive approach (Grugulis et al, (2004). In addition another survey within the UK based around the retail sector detailed that ninety percent of employers rated appearance as a crucial recruitment and selection process, with sixty one percent of them subsequently offering training in dress sense and style (Nickson et al, 2005). This is also true for emotional labour, Hochschild (1983, p. 7) explains how emotions manages the feelings of employee's to create the right visual appearance from their facial and body expressions. However other authors have observed that image is theoretically becoming stopped due to the lack of up to date research and debate (Witz et al 2003).

It has been thought that aesthetic labour is opening a new kind of discrimination based around people being turned down or employed for different jobs solely because of their looks. Oaff (2003, p. 7) stated ' if your gender and your race haven't kept you off the short list, your physical appearance still might'. Aesthetic labour has also been seen to have neglect on gender, with an acknowledgment of ' body work' within the service industry (Adkins 2000). Adkin reports that there is a large attention placed on gender and sexuality within the origins of the aesthetic components of labour. Many authors feel there is a thin line between sexuality and gender within a job role. For example research has shown within the service industry there is a 63 to 37 percent female to male split and within the hospitality sector there is a 59 to 41 percent female to male split. Kerfoot and Korcznski

(2005, p. 388) identifies that the majority of service jobs have female based employees whose jobs are linked to low wages and less to none job prospects. From this it has also been found when advertising for jobs many companies purposely gender stereotype their adverts to list soft skills that are exclusively feminine based. The gender stereotyping of jobs also links to the thought that customers in particular males prefer the female touch that is brought to the initial meeting.

Aesthetic labour has led to large social changes within the majority of sectors leading to an increase in seasonal, part time and temporary job openings, allowing a high level of younger workers to gain experience especially those within the tourism industry. The main reason for this is younger people are often aesthetically closer to consumers customers. Baum (2008, p. 81) explains this by saying ' the sector seeks to attract employees who..(deliver) aesthetic labour...(so are in) much closer proximity with their customers'. These types of people are known as ' style' workers, they are those who physically and emotionally match their working environment and therefore closely identify with the products, being able to understand their customer's needs and wants. In a previous Singaporean context a process was referred to in which service workers are highly brand conscious, Gurrier et al (1998, p. 34) states ' the modern young Singaporean is disinclined to work in service unless the image of the product accords with their own sense of fashion. Working in Gucci means that the product becomes part of her own accessory range'. Within today's hospitality sector it is easy to see the vast social different between the employee and consumer it is

understandable why employer's employ the correct type of people for their organisations that matches their emotion and the aesthetic requirements.

The term aesthetic labour first appeared in 1999 when Chris Warhurst and a team at the University of Strathclyde compared the term to an older medieval Italian term called sprezzatura. This has since become a fundamentally piece of research in terms of human resource management or hrm. With people such as Mulford et al (1998, p. 1585) making claims that the attractiveness of people is dependent on their opportunities to develop socially and cooperate with others. Making it is easy to see where the pressures of recruitment and retention of employees based on their image has affected hrm. The idea of aesthetic labour may cause conflict within the sense that ethnical problems may arise if someone is employed solely on how they look. This has since developed tension based on what people feel management 'ought' to or 'should' do. The ethics of aesthetic compare this to management viewing us up against a framework allowing them to judge right and wrong. The ethics and morality of aesthetic has been address by many authors for example it is suggested that the business background produces its own unique moral standard (Nash 1990, p. 5). However Fisher and Lovell (2006, p. 42) feel that ethics is based around doing well, in which wrongs are prevented or masked if done. With a variety of different views in the air, for hrm the challenge to retain professionalism is key due to the thought and actions of aesthetics causing pain and worry to their organisations employees.

Emotional labour has a direct link to aesthetics the term emotional labour was first identified by Hochschild in 1983 and is used to depict the actions of  
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service workers that goes beyond their usual physical and mental roles. In which the employees show actual worry for the customer's needs. Examples of this include customer facing roles in which employee's use the term 'service with a smile', they help solve complaints and change the customer's mood. Hochschild (1983) uses the term 'management of feeling to create a publicly facial and bodily display'. The use of emotional labour is a good practice especially used in the face of angry or unhappy customers when employees may need to hide their really emotions. It has been found that organisation have since place a large amount of strategic orientation on this, so that employees know how to handle themselves not only in front of customers but also other employees and internal customers. It is easy to see how emotional skills will also place any potential employee further up the recruitment ladder. Having both emotional and aesthetic skills will help employers complete their aim to have 'oven ready' employees which are ready to go straight into the job with little training. This strategy is extremely useful in minimising costs, but employing these types of people based solely on these particular skills also places knowledge by the employer that the characteristic of the employee cannot be necessarily trained.

Looking directly within the service based sectors the importance of aesthetics as well as self presentation skills is effortlessly demonstrated. However the problems caused is also very noticeable. Although many businesses strive to maintain competitive advantage, the evidence from many forms of research places this dependency on the new 'style driven niche' in which many management's attempts of controlling their employee's expands beyond the usual aspects. Nevertheless the positives

and the potential of aesthetics on an employee to customer based ratio evidently are flourishing, unlike that of the employer to employee ratio within any organisation which is under strain with new forms of discrimination being found. Although academic skills are clearly not a major part of any recruitment or selection processes, the aesthetic skills are now becoming a requirement do help the utilisation of any organisation. Furthermore it can be seen the large difference between aestheticised labour and aesthetic labour, in which employees have preserved certain characteristics and appearance to both maintain and secure their employment. With reference to a employees specific wage being dependent on the employees gender/sexuality or image there is little evidence to completely agree with this however it can be seen that employees do receive other kinds of payback in the form of benefits such free clothing or make over's. It can also be found that the emotional skills work particularly well along side aesthesis, helping organisations gain ' oven ready' customers who will fulfil the companies needs to place the employee straight into the heart of the business. At present self presentation skills is not currently predominant in the learning market, due to the shortage of approval by the policy makers. This may be because of the concerns of moulding employees appearance or because they are unsure how to integrate it into the training agendas. Whichever it may be it is easy to see the impact it will and is already having on organisations human resource management team, as there are so many different points of views on the right and wrong ways to go about aesthetics when recruiting and maintaining employees.