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THE BOTTOM LINE; WEIGHT AT WORK; Obesity Has Become a National Problem. That Means it Has Become a National Business Problem.

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LAST IN A FIVE-PART SERIES

Tomecia Weaver still winces when she recalls being passed over for a sales rep job at a pharmaceutical company early in her career.

She was one of two finalists: Her competitor had a weaker academic record and no background in sales. "They told me I didn't have enough sales experience," said Weaver. But someone involved in the selection process later confided she had been deemed too heavy for the job.

"That hurt," said Weaver, now a diversity specialist at American Express Financial Advisors in Minneapolis.

When it comes to girth in the workplace, there's plenty of pain to go around. With 64 percent of American adults now overweight or obese, businesses are shouldering billions of dollars in weight-related medical claims and lost productivity.

At the same time, some heavier workers say they're tired of insensitivity and discrimination on the job. As feelings about fitness and fairness collide at work, "sizeism" is emerging as the latest diversity frontier.

Recent medical research has grim implications for employers. Obesity is a greater trigger for chronic illness than smoking, alcoholism or poverty, according to a 2002 study by the RAND Corp., a think tank based in Santa Monica, Calif. As a result, health care costs are higher for obese people than for any other group studied, except the elderly.

The price tag for American businesses is heavy _ \$12.7 billion a year, according to the Washington Business Group on Health, a national nonprofit organization with 170 corporate members working on health issues.

Given current trends, that cost is expected to continue climbing: This week RAND reported that the ranks of the severely obese quadrupled between 1986 and 2000.

Meanwhile, in today's competitive job market, bias against overweight people is commonplace, obesity-rights advocates say. The overweight are slighted in the areas of hiring, promotion, compensation and layoffs, according to Mark Roehling, an assistant professor at Michigan State University, who reviewed 49 studies on the subject.

Roehling has interviewed dozens of heavy people about their job-hunting experiences. One woman told him that she sat at a job interview and watched in horror as her interviewer wrote in big letters across the top of her resume: "TOO FAT."

Discrimination is especially acute in workplaces where a premium is placed on personal appearance, such as executive-level positions, sales, public relations and other areas where client contact is key, said Mary Story, a University of Minnesota professor who studies obesity.

In a 1990 study of several hundred people by University of Vermont professor Esther Rothblum, the heaviest were most likely to report they'd been denied benefits including health insurance because of their size. Many said they had been fired or threatened with dismissal for weight reasons.

Women suffer the greatest unfairness, she said. "They don't have to weigh very much for employment discrimination to kick in."

Rothblum once showed a set of identical resumes to a group of students. Half the resumes stated that the fictitious female job seeker was 120 pounds. The other half put her weight at 180 pounds. She asked the students to rate the woman's professional competence and suggest her appropriate salary range.

The 180-pound woman scored dramatically lower. "The amazing thing about that experiment," Rothblum said, "is that, actually, 180 pounds is not that heavy. Imagine what larger people experience. I think fat people underestimate how much of their daily encounters are different because of their weight."

Scant legal protection

But legal protections for overweight workers who feel they were discriminated against are scant. State and local disability law varies widely when it comes to the overweight.

"It's a patchwork," said Sondra Solovay, an Oakland, Calif., attorney and author of the book, "Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination" (Prometheus Books; \$19).

The only places in America with laws explicitly barring size discrimination are Michigan; Washington, D.C.; San Francisco, and Santa Cruz, Calif. In the late 1990s Champaign-Urbana, Ill., and Madison, Wis., passed appearance discrimination laws that potentially could extend to cover weight-based cases.

If you live outside those places and you are not obese enough to be covered under the Americans With Disabilities Act, however, your chances of winning a weight discrimination suit are "slim to none," according to Minneapolis employment attorney Marshall Tanick.

To be covered by the act, a person must be 100 percent above their ideal weight or able to prove that their weight problem is caused by a physiological condition.

Under a complex part of the act, if an employer holds an unfounded perception that a person is physically incapable of doing certain work because of his weight and

withholds a job or promotion, the overweight person might have a viable discrimination claim.

In another approach, weight discrimination sometimes can be fought when it goes hand in hand with other kinds of prohibited discrimination, said Solovay. For example, a worker could challenge an employer who holds women to a stricter weight standard than men. Many such cases are settled out of court, she said.

Battling fat

Rather than fight discrimination, many do battle with fat.

The desire for career advancement brings more clients than ever to Minneapolis Plastic Surgery Ltd. in Golden Valley, where doctors Richard H. Tholen and Douglas L. Gervais perform about 1,500 liposuction, tummy tucks, thigh lifts and other trimming and sculpting procedures a year.

Some patients are only mildly out of shape at the outset; others have already undergone gastric bypass or stomach stapling operations.

"We see it all, whether it's a TV anchorperson, or someone in sales, a junior vice president at an insurance company or a real estate agent," Tholen said. "The patient feels pressure if they are not getting advanced. They say, 'If I want it, I've got to look like it.'"

From such trim CEOs as Wells Fargo's Richard Kovacevich and General Mills' Steve Sanger to President George Bush _ a fit 7-minute miler _ America's image of success on the job seems tied to slenderness.

Next to these figures, "heavy people are often perceived as lazy or disheveled," said Ed Rivera, network administrator and diversity team chair at Ceridian Corp. in Bloomington.

Such notions have no basis in empirical evidence, said Roehling, of Michigan State. But they persist nevertheless. "People think of heavier people as sloppy and unable to get along with others," he said.

Size awareness

Busting such perceptions is Ann Johnston's job.

As a vice president of the Minneapolis-based international diversity consulting firm ProGroup Inc., Johnston has led size-awareness workshops at more than a dozen corporate sites and conferences nationwide over the past year. Local size-sensitivity clients have included HealthPartners and Regions Hospital.

"For some people, I'm speaking about something they've been silent about," said Johnston. "It's something that 'nice people' don't talk about. So it's a relief for them."

Johnston addresses common notions about body size, the impact of media on people's perception of appearance, and how those beliefs and messages affect productivity in the workplace.

Workshop participants break into small groups and answer questions designed to probe attitudes. For example: How do your assumptions about body size affect your daily

interactions with colleagues and clients? How does that affect your business's bottom line?

Some negative perceptions of size bias drawn out in recent workshops include: lost sales, missed recruitment opportunities, poor retention and _ a big one _ squandered human capital.

"If I'm an incredibly talented person and you pass me over for a promotion because you think that because of my size I don't have the energy or the discipline to do the work, then you are underutilizing what could be a key resource person," Johnston said.

Passed over often enough, some overweight people leave their jobs. Just as common is when a person will "quit and stay" _ too discouraged to seek work elsewhere, but too hurt to put any more heart into their job, said Johnston's ProGroup colleague Diana Vaicius.

OBESE WORKERS: A sizable minority

The percent of U.S. adults classified as obese grew 74 percent from 1991 to 2001.

- Earn less than nonobese people.
- Are viewed as lazy, sloppy, less conscientious, less competent, disagreeable and lacking in discipline.
- Have less chance of promotion.
- Live in a culture where bias against obese people has become an acceptable form of discrimination.

Source: "Bias, Discrimination and Obesity," a paper by Kelly D. Brownell and Rebecca Puhl of Yale University.

"Over time, being treated unfairly can lead to 'internalized oppression,' in which heavy people blame themselves for the unprofessional treatment they receive," said Miriam Berg, president of the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, based in Mount Marion, N.Y.

The suffering of heavy people in the workplace might go unnoticed, said Weaver, at American Express. From her perspective as an African-American, "Sizeism is like racism, in that people are biased and insensitive, but it's based more in ignorance than in hate."

At Weaver's invitation, ProGroup recently conducted a size awareness workshop for American Express' staff. The event drew a standing-room-only crowd.

Rebecca Puhl applauds the effort. As co-author of a 2001 Yale University paper reviewing existing literature on size discrimination, she watches media coverage of the overweight epidemic with concern, hoping that discrimination, insensitivity and even hostility toward overweight workers will not rise as a result.

"We need to fight obesity and not obese people," she said.