

# Opinion of Headhunters about the Ability of Strabismic Subjects to Obtain Employment

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## Key Words

Strabismus · Psychosocial aspects · Job application · Telephone interview

## Abstract

**Background:** Through the opinion of Swiss headhunters, we wanted to determine the influence of strabismus on the ability to obtain employment. **Methods:** Out of 31 randomly selected Swiss headhunters, 20 could be interviewed using a validated questionnaire. **Results:** Forty-seven percent of the headhunters judged that strabismic subjects have more difficulties in obtaining a job. Gender has no influence on discrimination ( $p > 0.1$ ). Asked about six facial disfigurements, strabismus was found to have the second largest negative impact on employment directly after acne. Strabismus was estimated to decrease the attractiveness of job applicants ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and to have a negative impact on the overall judgment of a potential employer ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Conclusions:** Visible strabismus influences negatively the ability to obtain a job. Because of its impact on the employability of a person, we believe that strabismus surgery in adults cannot be considered to be only a beautifying procedure.

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## Introduction

The aim of strabismus surgery is to realign the visual axes to provide a normal facial appearance, to eliminate diplopia, to reduce a torticollis, to improve binocular vision, and/or, in esotropia, to expand the binocular visual field [1, 2]. Former studies show that an abnormal facial appearance secondary to a clearly visible strabismus generally interferes with normal socialization and influences negatively the ability to obtain an employment [3–5]. Satterfield et al. [3] interviewed 43 strabismic subjects older than 14 years about several psychosocial aspects of strabismus using the Hopkins symptom checklist. Eighty-four percent of the teenagers and 85% of the adults reported to have problems related to strabismus during school, work, play, or sports. The effect of strabismus on work was not assessed separately from the other daily activities. In their study, esotropic and exotropic subjects did not differ in the amount of psychosocial impairment. Olitsky et al. [5] interviewed 212 college students showing photographs of the same male subject being once orthotropic, once strongly esotropic, and once strongly exotropic. Overall rating of the strabismic photographs was significantly lower compared to orthotropia. The effect of esotropia was worse than that of exotropia. Esotropia had a negative influence on the following personality traits: attentiveness, competency, emotional stability, in-

**Table 1.** Weighted personality traits and their perception in persons with strabismus by potential employers

Personality trait	Weight <sup>a</sup>		Perception of personality trait in persons with strabismus			Weighted average score (weight × perception)		p value of weighted average score
	mean	95% CI	more	same	less	mean	95% CI	
Reliability	9.1	8.46–9.74	1	16	2	-0.37	-2.14–1.40	0.66
Honesty	9.05	8.45–9.65	1	17	1	0	-1.60–1.61	1
Attractiveness	5.25	4.09–6.41	1	4	14	-4.05	-5.55 to -2.56	0.000021
Sympathy	8.3	7.60–9.00	1	13	5	-2	-4.31–0.31	0.07
Intelligence	7.05	6.31–7.80	1	14	4	-1.16	-2.94–0.63	0.19
Competency	8.6	7.90–9.30	1	17	1	-0.05	-1.58–1.48	0.94
Efficiency	8.1	7.34–8.86	1	16	2	-0.26	-1.81–1.28	0.73
Stress tolerance	8.15	7.42–8.88	1	16	2	-0.47	-1.71–0.76	0.43
Optimism	7.2	6.53–7.87	4	12	3	0.58	-1.44–2.60	0.55
Friendliness	9.25	8.82–9.68	3	15	1	1	-1.16–3.161	0.34
Open-mindedness	8.05	7.40–8.70	1	14	4	-1.42	-3.40–0.56	0.15
Team ability	8.75	8.07–9.43	0	17	2	-0.68	-1.70–0.33	0.17
Total						-8.89	-16.64 to -1.14	0.03

More = +1; same = 0; less = -1.

<sup>a</sup> Scale ranging from 1 (completely unimportant) to 10 (extremely important).

telligence, leadership ability, communication, and organizational skills. Exotropia was associated with less sincerity. Coats et al. [4] asked 79 marketing managers to rate 2 male and 2 female job applicants based on similarly qualified job résumés and digitally altered photographs. Each applicant was shown with normally aligned eyes, with a large angle esotropia, or with a large angle exotropia. They found that strabismic women were less likely to be hired. However, no such discrimination was found for men.

In this study, we wanted to determine the influence of strabismus on the ability to obtain an employment by interviewing Swiss headhunters representing the opinion of several employers. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study on this subject performed in Europe.

## Subjects and Methods

### Subjects

Using the Swiss online telephone directory tel.search.ch [6] 255 addresses of Swiss German headhunters were retrieved on July 5th, 2005. A random sample of 31 of them was selected. Twenty (65%) of the selected headhunters could be reached and interviewed by telephone using a questionnaire.

### Interview Technique

The interview consisted of 6 closed-ended questions about strabismus and employment and one open-ended question about the professions in which discrimination might be most likely. In

a first part of the interview, we aimed to determine how frequently a photograph is included in a job application, if strabismus leads to a negative discrimination and, if so, if this discrimination differs by gender or occupational group. In a second part, we wanted to find out if potential employers judge 12 personality traits of persons with and without strabismus differently. In order to assess the employability of people, each personality trait was first weighted by the headhunter, based on its importance for a job application. The weighting scale ranged from 1 (completely unimportant) to 10 (extremely important). In a further step, the headhunter had to determine if strabismus has a negative, a positive or no influence on the perception of some personality traits by a potential employer. The analyzed personality traits are: reliability, honesty, attractiveness, sympathy, intelligence, competency, efficiency, stress tolerance, optimism, friendliness, open-mindedness, and team ability. In order to calculate a total influence of strabismus for each trait, the weight was multiplied by -1 (negative influence of strabismus), 0 (no influence) or 1 (positive influence). In a third part of the interview, the influence of strabismus and of 5 other facial disfigurements on employability was measured with the help of a scale ranging from 1 (employability not diminished) to 10 (employability very strongly diminished). The questions were validated using focus groups and by interviewing 12 subjects not involved in health care. The aim of these 12 interviews was to ensure that the closed-ended questions were unambiguous and to train the interviewers [7]. Each telephone interview with the selected headhunters lasted between 8 and 15 min.

### Statistical Analysis

Confidence intervals and probabilities were calculated with the two-tailed t test. Statistical analysis was performed with R.

**Table 2.** Opinion of headhunters about the impact of six facial disfigurements on employability

Facial disfigurement	Influence on employability <sup>a</sup>		Rank of influence on employability
	mean	95% CI	
Strong acne	5.00	3.83–6.17	1
Large strabismus	4.68	3.58–5.79	2
Large facial scar	4.21	3.16–5.26	3
Visible missing tooth	3.74	2.66–4.81	4
Strongly protruding ears	3.47	2.34–4.60	5
Very large nose	2.95	1.86–4.03	6

<sup>a</sup> Scale ranging from 1 (employability is not diminished) to 10 (employability is very strongly diminished).

## Results

Twenty (11 women and 9 men) randomly selected Swiss headhunters (mean age 32.2 years, 95% CI: 27.5–36.8) participated in the telephone interview. They estimated that a photograph is included in 59% (CI: 45.7–72.1) of all job applications in Switzerland. Nine (47%) of all headhunters judged that subjects with a large strabismus have more difficulties in obtaining a job. Six (32%) of them answered that they do not believe that such discrimination exists, and 4 (21%) were uncertain. Out of the 47% of headhunters believing that discrimination exists, 56% thought that gender has no influence, 22% that men, and 22% that women were more frequently discriminated. Therefore, gender had a nonsignificant influence on discrimination ( $p > 0.1$ ).

Table 1 shows the results of the weighting of the 12 analyzed personality traits of a job applicant and the opinion of the headhunters concerning the influence of a large strabismus on the perception of the personality traits by a potential employer. The influence could be negative (–1), positive (+1), or inexistent (0). The total scores obtained by multiplying the weight with the influence show that strabismic subjects have a significantly reduced attractiveness ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and a lower overall judgment of potential employers ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Regarding six facial disfigurements, only having strong acne was judged to have a stronger negative influence on employability than large strabismus (table 2). A large facial scar, a visible missing tooth, strongly protruding ears, and a very large nose had a less strong influence on employability.

Persons with large strabismus were judged to be particularly discriminated in the following categories of professions: persons representing an institution ( $n = 14$ , e.g. receptionists, salespersons, persons working in hotels or

restaurants), precision workers ( $n = 5$ , e.g. electricians, computer scientists, architects, engineers), persons with commercial/banking professions ( $n = 3$ , e.g. commercialists, bankers), and health professionals ( $n = 2$ , e.g. ophthalmologists).

## Discussion

Telephone interviews performed with Swiss headhunters using a validated questionnaire show that a large, visible strabismus has a negative impact on the employability of a person. Strabismus influenced negatively the overall judgment as well as the attractiveness of a job applicant. Out of six facial disfigurements, strabismus was found to have the second most negative impact on employability. No influence of gender was found. The headhunters estimated that applicant's photographs are included in more than half of job applications in Switzerland. Photographs are thought to have a great influence on the first selection process since, on average, many human resource managers spend only few minutes per job application in order to determine which applicants shall be further considered. Therefore, discrimination might already occur before an applicant is interviewed personally. This indicates that strabismic subjects, who include their photograph in the job application, should get professional portraits minimizing visibility of the squint or consider strabismus surgery. Two previous studies [4, 5] also found an influence of strabismus on employment opportunity. In a third study only indirect evidence was found since the effect of strabismus on work was not assessed separately from difficulties with school, play, or sports [3].

Since the face is central to how we are judged, it is not surprising that also subjects with hemifacial microsomia

[8], orbital hypertelorism [8], traumatic eye disfigurement [9], cleft lip [9], facial scarring [9], or droopy eye [9] were found to have less chances of being hired. Also the applicant's general health status has been found to influence hiring decisions. Obese and diabetic applicants were found to have poorer work habits and were rated as more likely to have absences [10]. Strabismus surgery may not only eliminate double vision, reduce a torticollis, improve binocular vision, and expand the binocular visual field. It also improves psychosocial functioning and the opportunity for employment and economic success. The results of this study may also be helpful in case of reimbursement problems by health care insurances in Europe. The argument often raised by them that the scientific evidence about the impact of strabismus on job application is only based on two studies performed in the USA [4, 5], a country that may not represent European behaviors, is no longer valid.

This study has some limitations. Since the interviews have been performed in Switzerland, the results may not be valid for other countries. Also, the limited number of headhunters that have been interviewed limits the power and, therefore, some smaller effects of strabismus could have been missed. A further limitation is the fact that

during the telephone interviews no photographs of strabismic and facially disfigured subjects could be shown. Therefore, these comparisons were influenced by the headhunter's individual imagination of the conditions.

We conclude that (1) in Switzerland strabismic job applicants have a considerable risk of being discriminated against, (2) job applicant's photograph is frequently included in a job application, (3) a strabismic subject wishing to include a photograph should get professional portraits minimizing visibility of the squint, (4) strabismus surgery restores a formal or normal condition and cannot be considered to be a beautifying procedure, and (5) that it therefore should be reimbursed by health insurances in order not to discriminate against strabismic individuals that cannot afford this surgical procedure.

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