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Office blonde jokes no laughing matter

By DAVE MCGINN

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Some fair-haired women use the law to stop discrimination; others just want to prove the stereotypes wrong

Have you heard the one about the boss who liked to make blonde jokes? He's being sued.

As a discrimination lawsuit a Canadian has brought against her former boss in Britain shows, fair-haired women don't always fare so well at work, where they are constantly battling the stereotype that they are ditzy.

"It's so widespread that people, I think, have this perception that it's benign, and it is absolutely not," says Dara Greenwood, an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan.

Earlier this month, Jordan Wimmer, a 29-year-old Canadian financier, brought a lawsuit against her former boss, Mark Lowe, claiming sexual discrimination, among other things. She is seeking more than \$7-million in damages. Mr. Lowe reportedly sent Ms. Wimmer e-mails calling her a "dumb blonde" in jest. The owner of the hedge fund Nomos Capital Partners Ltd. is also alleged to have sent this joke to colleagues, including Ms. Wimmer: "A blonde asks her boyfriend for help assembling a jigsaw puzzle. She struggles for hours to match the pieces to the picture of a rooster on the box. Eventually the boyfriend calms her down and says: 'Let's just put all the cornflakes back in the box.' "

Such jokes are hardly harmless fun, Prof. Greenwood says.

"This is essentially hostile in nature," she says. "Even somebody who laughs at somebody else's joke is contributing to a hostile environment."

In a study of sexist jokes, Prof. Greenwood found that such jokes "map on to sexist attitudes." That is, the more sexist a person is, the more amusing they find such jokes.

When it comes to the workplace, sexist humour can create a culture of tolerance for sexism, says Thomas Ford, a psychology professor at Western Carolina University.

"Even though it's just joking ... it still can legitimize the stereotype," he says.

Mr. Lowe reportedly testified that he could "not conceive" of how his jokes could offend anyone.

"There is a certain societal prejudice in North America related to the 'dumb blonde' label. It evokes images that really are quite unfair," says Blaine Donais, founder and president of the Workplace Fairness Institute in Toronto.

And while that prejudice may be defended as just a joke, several studies have shown that women are perceived differently based on hair colour.

In a study conducted by a psychology professor at the University of Coventry in Britain, 120 men and women assessed photographs of a 21-year-old woman wearing a brown, red, natural blonde or platinum wig. The platinum blonde was rated less intelligent by the participants, particularly by the men.

Amber MacArthur, a Toronto-based technology consultant, was well aware of the dumb blonde stereotype when she first began her career.

"When I first started out in the tech world, I think there was a lot of things going against me, definitely being a woman and definitely being blonde, and I just felt like I had to work extra hard and I had to really know my stuff," she says.

One comment from a superior definitely struck her as a blonde barb. The comment came after Ms. MacArthur received media exposure for being a woman in the technology sector.

"He looked at me and said, 'Oh, next thing I know you'll be on the cover of *Playboy*,' " she says. "In the first five years of my career I got that kind of stuff a lot."

Although Ms. MacArthur simply shrugged off such comments, they could easily land an employer in hot water, Mr. Donais says.

"Calling somebody a dumb blonde is a potential violation of the [Human Rights] Code, so obviously it's taken seriously," he says.

The same goes for e-mailing "dumb blonde" jokes around the office.

"It's a very bad idea. Even if it's just what you might consider to be relatively harmless fun, different people have different ideas of humour," Mr. Donais says. "They most definitely can and will be used against you."

Some women prefer to use the blonde stereotype for their own ends. Susan Snow, owner of Moving Designz, an interior design company in P.E.I., occasionally likes to say that she's "having a blonde moment."

"To me, it's self-deprecating humour, because I find it wins people over," she says. "I'm turning it against itself."

Aubrey Arnason, one of the hosts of the documentary *The Blonde Mystique*, says that being blonde has its advantages.

"It's easier to be a blonde. As much as it's tough on them in terms of, you're behind the eight-ball when it comes to intelligence, I don't find that to be a struggle. It plays to my advantage. I can ask for things, people respond to me faster, you get more attention," the 34-year-old says.

Rather than complain to HR, many women who have encountered the dumb blonde stereotype over the course of their careers simply choose to wave it off.

"I knew at the end of the day that I didn't believe any of the things they were saying," Ms. MacArthur says. "I knew I would prove them wrong."

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