Work Daze: Nothing says 'idle' like the unemployment beard

by Bob_Goldman

Today, we focus on the growth of men growing beards during a period of economic uncertainty that can only be described as "hairy."

According to Christina Binkley, the style columnist for The Wall Street Journal, growing a beard is "one of those tiny luxuries unleashed by unemployment, a time when people are briefly released from workaday habits and may wish to take stock of their lives before setting out anew."

The unemployment beard can also be a camouflage device. Remember Al Gore? The former vice president grew a beard when he suffered a job loss in the 2000 election. You can understand why a former poster boy would want to hide behind a beard. In the end, maybe the gambit did work for Al. He lost the election, but he won the Nobel Peace Prize â€” a sign that the Swedish judges not only do not mind beards, but are also major ZZ Top fans.

That's not so farfetched. According to Binkley, the influence of the music business can be seen in the increase in the bearded population. At Rudy's Barbershop, in trendy West Hollywood, Calif., clients are arriving for their appointments with photos of bearded musicians from the Foo Fighters and the Kings of Leon.

Given the difficulties of today's job market, one can understand why an unemployed, middle-aged, middle manager would rather see the face of a groovy, macho Foo Fighter in the mirror every morning before he packs his sandwich of surplus cheese and heads out for a day at the unemployment office

Also not to be discounted in understanding the sprouting of so many beards is the wimp factor. Salon owner Suki Duggin says hers her clients often associate facial hair with power and rugged masculinity, Binkley reports. "They joke with me about it â€” 'I feel like a real man,' Duggin says with a cackle."

You can understand the feeling. First, your manager treats you like you are inadequate. Then, you are jettisoned from the work force, a loser on the loose. You could spend your unemployment check on steroids and start spending your days in the gym, pumping up your muscles and your ego, but let's face it â€” that takes work. It's so much easier to simply stop shaving. And think of all the money you'll save on Barbasol!

Of course, there are certain professions in which having a beard is not only accepted, but also expected. For example, university professors are almost required to have beards, even if their students are encouraged to be clean-shaven. Kelly Lynn Anders, the associate dean of the Washburn University School of Law, tells students to avoid facial hair. Yet fully one-third of the male faculty members have facial hair, among them "two goatees, a mustache and two full beards."

The hirsute teaching staff at Washburn U. does raise an interesting question for everyone in or out of the job market. Once you decide to hide behind a curtain of hair, what style of beard do you adopt?

If you want to convince people that you are an innovative, out-of-the-box thinker, I recommend the goatee. This devilish little beard says that you are not afraid of anything, including making yourself look ridiculous. A long, full beard suggests that you have the tenacity to start a major project and keep at it. You are a keep-a-going, keep-a-growing individual. Either that, or you're Amish.

The well-trimmed stubble look says that you love your work, almost as much as you love yourself. The fact that it takes more time and effort to keep your stubble mowed than actually shaving the darn thing tells potential employers that you are not afraid to sweat the details, no matter how futile the task. (This advice does not apply if the job for which you are applying is the male lead of a television cop show, or are Brad Pitt.)

Finally, we come to the "soul patch," the tiny dot of hair worn below the lower lip by jazz musicians, poets, and anyone in the IT department with enough testosterone to pull it off. This sorry excuse for a beard says that you are hip and with-it, though it says it better if you avoid the cream of mushroom soup in the company cafeteria.

So, what kind of beard do I suggest for today's job seeker? I'd go with the full Abe Lincoln, sideburns and all. It says that you are honest, hardworking, and could someday have your face on the penny.

Bob Goldman has been an advertising executive at a Fortune 500 company in the San Francisco Bay Area. He offers a virtual shoulder to cry on at bob@funnybusiness.com.

Copyright 2009 Creators Syndicate Inc.

Work Daze: Nothing says 'idle' like the unemployment beard by Bob_Goldman