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Unlock the Editor's Digest for free

Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

In a light-filled kitchen in south-west London, Natalie James considers my face before declaring my blusher too pink and eyebrows too pale. Her prescription: a bit of pomade to provide an “espresso shot” to the face — she’s too polite to say I look knackered — and a warmer tone for my cheeks.

James is not readying me for a party but overhauling my make-up bag to rejuvenate and professionalise my work style. The self-billed “executive groomer” is one of a number of beauty experts hired by

professionals and entrepreneurs ahead of photoshoots for social media and press releases, as well as presentations and keynote speeches. She also provides personal consultations for corporate grooming.

Over the past 18 months, beauty booking app Ruuby has seen an increase in bookings for professional make-up services, with the biggest volumes in pre-work appointments at 6am and 7am. Founder Venetia Archer says the slots tend to be taken by professionals preparing for work and media events. The proliferation of beauty tutorials on social media — and the longevity of photos posted online — is setting a higher standard, and while “younger audiences have been inspired to do it themselves” older clients are less confident and seek professional services.

Online working has also opened a new area in which to feel insecure about our appearance: video calls, and the ever-present reverse camera, leading some to identify Zoom dysmorphia. “The way we show up in our workplaces has been heavily influenced by the rise of digital media,” says James. However, a [study](#) by WFH Research, an academic survey project, this year found 47 per cent of white-collar workers put make-up on when they go to the office, compared with only 31 per cent when working from home.

The topic of make-up in a professional context might make some recoil in horror. Viv Groskop, *How to Own the Room* author and podcaster, says she tends to avoid the issue as “it feels like such a

1980s thing to talk about”. However, she adds many women are “incredibly relieved” to discuss pressures to look a certain way at work. “A lot of us secretly worry we’ve got it wrong . . . our insecurities are still ripe for exploitation.”

Rules, Groskop adds, are subjective. Hillary Clinton received constant feedback on blow dries and make-up, until her team realised the responses were neither consistent nor useful. “People just wanted to judge.” Scarlett Gray, chief executive and founder of mobile beauty service Glow & Dry, agrees: “You can’t win. If you’re too done up [people will criticise], if you’re not, people will think you haven’t made an effort.”

Professional style has relaxed, however, since the padded shoulder looks of the 1980s. While women previously felt under pressure to dial down femininity, James now detects “the rise of the empowered feminine”. One entrepreneur reflects that, in her career as a banker, she never wore make-up because she wanted to be “taken seriously”. But grooming and skincare have since become more important, and she recently paid for a make-up consultation. “We’re all on video now.”

Attitudes are generational. Groskop believes “over 50s expect grooming to be important”; Cyler D, a New York-based make-up artist who works with executives, says young professional women “tend to be a bit more playful in their make-up.” But having “too

much . . . can be seen as frivolous or trying too hard.”

They may be right to be mindful of the impact of a full face. A University of Colorado paper found that among female scientists “seemingly trivial details such as wearing make-up or styling one’s hair can lead to even lower inferences about one’s science-worthiness”. Other [research](#), however, has found professionally applied make-up can make women appear more trustworthy. When James prepares executives for presentations, powder is key for men and women. “If somebody looks shiny on stage and they’re talking about numbers, you think they’re nervous.”

Cyler D says the top request before a presentation is, “Don’t make me look crazy, don’t make me look painted. Please don’t make me look like a clown, please don’t make me look like a drag queen.” The key is skincare prep beforehand, he says, particularly when high-quality video and auditorium projections leave make-up or imperfections with nowhere to hide. “If you have perfect skin, everything falls into place.”

Groskop’s best advice, however, is confidence in one’s own judgment. “It’s consistency that matters most — look the way you want to look — whether with or without interventions — and stick to it.” Gray concurs: when a client is in her chair, she wants to reflect their personality. “If she wants to wear a red lip, they should go for it.”