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Friday, December 4, 2009

Generations clash over tattoos, body piercings in the workplace

Denver Business Journal - by [Ed Sealoover](#)

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Company executives are used to worrying about red and black ink.

But now, they have a new ink to fret over —the kind seen in tattoos all over the arms, necks and chests of young professionals applying for jobs.

Nearly 40 percent of adults ages 18 to 40 now have a tattoo or non-earlobe piercing, according

to the **Pew Research Center's** Gen Next Survey. And those visible displays of personal style sometimes clash with company-appearance policies and perceptions of what older bosses expect of younger workers.

More companies are coming up with personal-appearance policies that include rules about tattoos and piercings, such as tongue rings, said Nina Radojevich-Kelley, a professor of management at **Metropolitan State College of Denver**.

Employers who may disapprove of inked-up workers also must learn to accept those who are willing to follow company guidelines and cover up their tattoos — or face a shrinking pool of applicants, she said.

Many companies prohibit visible tattoos. But the increasing number of Generation X and Y workers sporting them could lead to a change in businesses' attitudes toward body art, she said.

"I'm guessing that probably in the long future ... we'll see some shifts as these tattooed employees become executives," Radojevich-Kelley said. "What will be interesting is to see what the dress codes look like in 30 years."

Fifty years ago, tattoos were viewed as rebellious signatures, or as something done on an inebriated whim, Radojevich-Kelley said. Such markings started to become more mainstream due to the tattooed punk movement of the 1980s, and younger generations — even those going through business school and looking to be corporate leaders one day — have ramped it up, she said.

While 97 percent of organizations maintained policies on clothing and 70 percent on footwear, just 36 percent had them for body piercing, according to a 2006 survey by the



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

Katy Raymer, a Metropolitan State College business student with tattoos and piercings, presented information to the Employment and Human Resources Law class about tattoos in the workplace. Raymer holds three jobs, two of which make her cover her tattoos. She also has UV tattoos that go up her neck but can be seen only in blacklight.

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Society for Human Resource Management of Alexandria, Va. And only 22 percent had policies for body art.

That’s changing, said Radojevich-Kelley and Bill Carnes, a visiting assistant professor in Metro State’s management department who has been studying the trend with her.

Companies faced with inked and pierced applicants can demand eyebrow rings or tongue rings be removed and tattoos covered to help project the proper image to customers, Carnes said.

Company perceptions by customers, particularly older ones who dislike tattoos, could be negatively affected, and they may be less likely to do business with it otherwise, he said.

There are some exceptions: Tattoos mandated by religious groups and body art that’s central to certain cultures, such as Pacific Islanders and Celts, are protected under the law, Carnes said. But courts have set precedents, in decisions stemming from lawsuits by tattooed or pierced workers, that companies are allowed to establish codes of appearances for employees, he noted.

“It’s very important to have human resources or the legal department involved when creating a dress-code policy,” Carnes said.

The strongest pushback against visible tattoos and piercings has come from hospitality companies, such as hotels and ski areas, which seek to maintain a professional environment, said Ken Pinnock, former director of the human resources services department with the **Mountain States Employers Council Inc.** (MSEC).

While bars and certain retail stores have been more accepting of open displays of body art, professional-dress environments such as banks aren’t, said Pinnock, new director of the MSEC’s Arizona office. And while job-seekers who have gone through the MSEC have voiced complaints about such policies, the slower economy has made most willing to conform to company policies in order to find employment, he said.

“The employer is concerned about the impression that [body art] would make on their clientele,” Pinnock said. “It has led to conflict at times where employees have felt their personal rights are limited. But really, an employer does have the right to tell an employee to cover up.”

Jo Probbhu, founder and CEO of Long Beach, Calif.-based placement firm 1800JobQuest.com, said she knows of an executive for a Fortune 1000 company who was fired because his visible tattoos made him a poor representative for his business. While smaller businesses are more accepting of body art, large corporations aren’t, she said.

Radojevich-Kelley said she knows of qualified students who have not applied at companies because of personal-appearance rules, and Pinnock said he’s heard similar talk from potential applicants.

Both conceded, however, that while such attitudes could shrink more conservative companies’ applicant pools in better economic times, most inked professionals are likely to go along with such policies, even if reluctantly, during a recession.

Katy Raymer, 26, a senior management major at Metro State, has tattoos adorning her feet, wrists, neck and rib cage, among other areas, and has 14 facial piercings, including five in each ear. When she goes out with friends, the body art is on full display. But as the Littleton resident interviews for jobs in advance of her expected fall 2010 graduation, she understands she must cover up.

Raymer said current laws on the subject skew in favor of employers. A commercial real estate company she used to work for mandated that she cover up her body art just when “high-dollar clients” came around.

Now, she said, tattoos may cost her jobs if employers look down on them. She expects there will be a sea change in attitudes toward tattoos in the next 25 years as her peers begin running more companies, but acknowledges that the coming generation of workers will have to deal with current rules.

“Personally, I think if you’re a good worker, they’ll look over it if the boss is somebody in a younger generation,” Raymer said. “If it’s somebody in an older generation, I don’t know if you’ll get the job.”

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William Simpson 9 months ago

Love the wisdom of this thread. I don't see a future where having flaming skulls on both your forearms or a Super Mario mushroom on the base of your neck is not going to be a giant neon sign that you have no place in the corporate world. It shows poor judgement and attitude issues. There are some people that can pull it off like that 2nd in command guy on Star Trek Voyager had a tribal tat on half his FACE. He still looked like a respectable, self controlled, commanding individual. I've had applicants come in with tongue piercings so big that it slurred their speech and that they clicked almost non-stop on their teeth through the whole interview. (also showed up in dirty t-shirt, shorts, and flip flops!). I don't see corp America getting a soft spot for losers and idiots any time soon. I like good ink, but I don't want to see it in my office or in any office I do business with as a client. There is very little ink work that has any business being show off in a business.

Like

Len Hobbs 9 months ago

Tattoos are 'badges' of disrespect, self-loathing and a gross lack of common sense! I won't/don't hire ANY person with visible tattoos. My reason is that the HIGH probability is that person is not trainable, is not an analytical thinker and not willing to be a student and a servant with an open mind - I.E. 'stupid'!

Like

K L Golden 9 months ago

A word of advice to those who tat up in conspicuous places. It might look like a butterfly now, but as you age and wrinkle (and you will despite what you might think) it will begin to look more like a withered up caterpillar - UGH!

Like

Torrence Abby 9 months ago

I have tattoos, but they are in easily concealed places. I'm all for self-expression and what-not, but you can't expect someone to take you seriously when you show up to work in a bustier, party heels, tattoos, and pink hair. Sorry guys, it's just the way it is. Work is work, it's not a democracy, it's a dictatorship and the one who signs your checks is the king of that island. Deal with it.

Like

R J Richards 9 months ago

If you have pride in your work, you will take pride in how you look.
Basic life skills 101. Business school graduate or not.
Plain and simple.
After hours.....who cares!
If the new applicants cannot follow these rules...move on!

Like

Paris Johnson 9 months ago

Oh and all that aside, I'm surprised no one has mentioned Ms. Raymor's Bustier & party shoes. This woman seems to need a lot of attention...and I'm afraid it's the wrong kind for the work place.

Like

Anonymous 9 months ago

I graduated from college in May. I'm a 22 year old working as a sales manager in the hospitality industry. I got my nose pierced in high school, and a tattoo during my final college semester. I never wore my nose ring to interviews, and do not wear it to work, and I got my tattoo in an easily concealed place. I did all of this because I know the reflection that it could have on me being taken seriously, especially at my age. There are policies in place of work about tattoos and piercings, and I have never brought it to the attention of my superiors that I have either one, and it has never been a problem. I wear my nose ring on weekends, and I would be straightforward if asked. But why should I possibly sacrifice the perception of my abilities in a job interview or with a client over a piercing or tattoo? I don't agree with those in my generation that think it doesn't matter. It's blind to think that if you come into a professional setting looking like someone from "L.A. Ink" that no one will care. It's like coming to work without bathing, ironing your clothes, or brushing your teeth. People notice....and not favorably.

Like

sandy alless 9 months ago

Yes, I agree with everyone's comments and I'm not one to tat, but only 20 years ago, in a typical office setting, a woman was forbidden to wear slacks (I'm not talking about jeans, I mean nice, pressed, dress slacks). At the office that I worked at here in Tampa in 1987 the women were required to wear stockings and no slacks were allowed. Thanks, Mr. C, as if your salaries weren't low enough, you had to do this to us ladies at your law firm, hurting us even more financially.

Like

J. Dellas 9 months ago

I agree with George. I appreciate the foresight of up-and-coming candidates who responsibly chose to avoid easily viewable tattoos and piercings.

Like

daniel wendt 9 months ago

There are millions of people who have tattoos that are easily concealed. For those who seek to make a bigger statement without thinking about their life down the road, you will have to deal with the perceptions and attitudes of those in power. No sympathy from this forty something.

Like

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