

Visible Tattoos and Other Corporate No-Nos

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By Larissa Faw

Corporate dress code policies have swung to the extreme in recent years. Companies either maintain no guidelines at all or establish such rigid policies that they almost appear to be elaborate pranks. American Apparel's infamous corporate policy, for instance, forbids shiny lip-gloss, bangs, and notes that "blow-drying hair excessively could cause heat damage." Similarly, financial bank UBS dictates women "may wear no more than seven jewels" and "scarves are compulsory, and must be tied with 'authorized knots.'"

And then there's the issue of tattoos and piercings. For the past few decades, it's likely that coffeehouse baristas and graphic designers would be adorned with tattoos or piercings, but now, it's just as likely that the kindergarten teacher, bank manager, or real estate agent is sporting ink or a nose ring.

Nearly half of 26-40-year-olds (40%) and 36% of 18-25-year-olds have tattoos, and 22% of 26-40-year-olds and 30% of 18-25-year-olds have at least one body piercing, according to the Pew Research Center.

There are differences in opinions of men versus women having tattoos. Men are allowed to be a little rebellious and punk rock (both men and women have some admiration for a "bad boy"), whereas, women, not so much. While societal norms are shifting, it's happening slowly. Women can be wild in private but should still be ladylike in public, and visible tattoos make that impossible in some people's eyes.

Despite the widespread prevalence of workers with these adornments, there's no consensus among employers on how to address them. "I think it depends on the location of the tattoo and how easily it can be covered up. Girls with neck tattoos can just wear their hair down," says Ellan Tong of media agency 26 Dot Two.

Most corporations and small businesses have no formal policies towards tattoos or piercings. Among those with guidelines: Geico Insurance, U.S. Postal Service, Starwood Hotels and Denny's won't hire those with visible tattoos. Allstate Insurance, Bank of America, and the ad agency Wieden-Kennedy have no reservations about hiring those with tattoos or piercings.

Yet most HR managers also concede that all things being equal, they will hire the more clean-cut employee. In fact, piercings (37%) are the top physical attribute that may limit an employee's career potential, according to CareerBuilder.com, followed by bad breath (34%) and visible tattoos (31%).

For those— especially women — entering the workforce, any thought that their careers may be hindered by a butterfly tattoo seems laughable. Today's young professionals view these enhancements as an accessory or extension of their personalities.

"How many really great potential employees are these companies losing out on simply because they don't project the image that these companies want?" asks BlogHer's Elisa Camahort Page.

At the same time, young employees also realize that in today's precarious job market, they don't want to give an employer any reason to reject them. As one HR director says, "You won't get fired for having a visible tattoo, but it likely means you won't get hired."

Top Personal Reasons You're Not Getting That Promotion

Top personal attributes that make employees less likely to receive a promotion, according to hiring managers:

- Piercings: 37%
- Bad Breath: 34%
- Visible Tattoo: 31%
- Wrinkled Clothes: 31%
- Messy Hair: 29%