

# Lip Rings and Tramp Stamps: Body Art in the Workplace

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By Steve Taylor

The growing visibility of body art on U.S. college campuses, reality TV shows and sports broadcasts might lead some to conclude that such adornments are acceptable in the workplace. But that's not necessarily true, experts say.

Nearly 40 percent of workers younger than 30—known as the Millennial generation—have tattoos, and usually more than one, according to a 2010 study from the Pew Research Center. Almost 25 percent have a piercing somewhere other than their earlobes.

The prevalence of tattoos and piercings among the slightly older members of Generation X are lower, at 32 percent and 9 percent, respectively, according to Pew, and the numbers drop even more for the Baby Boomer generation. The oldest generation of workers is least likely to report having body art and piercings.

Yet those from the two oldest generations are most likely to be the ones in charge of the businesses that Millennials look to for employment.

Are such managers accepting the younger trendsetters? Or do neck tattoos and pierced tongues look like bad judgment to them, misguided self-mutilations that the kids will regret only after they damage their careers and drive away customers?

"I struggle with that answer," said Jill Haney, founder of JH Image Consulting in Cincinnati, "but my theory is that, in corporate America, here in the good old Midwest ... I feel that prejudices still exist with tattoos and piercings.

"People doing the hiring are at least in their late 30s, and, for people in that generation and older still, it carries a stigma," she said.

## Safety and Image

In some industries, notably health care, hospitality and manufacturing, HR professionals enforce restrictions on body art based on workplace safety and the fear of negative customer reaction.

"People who come to a hospital are nervous to begin with," said Stephen Mordecai, HR director for Griffin Hospital in Derby, Conn. "[It] may be my personal bias, but if I see someone coming to take care of me with a skull and crossbones tattoo, I'm not going to be comfortable."

Mordecai said the hospital's appearance policy, as approved by the president of Griffin Health Services, forbids any visible tattoo: "It could show the flag, your mom, 'Patients Are Our No. 1 Priority.' It doesn't matter. You've got to cover it up." Mordecai added that "excessive" piercings must be removed or concealed; that generally includes "any that are not in your ears."

Until recently, Mariana Andrade-Bejarano of Falls Church, Va., was a shift supervisor at a local Starbucks, which required that piercings and tattoos be removed or concealed "so that sanitation would not be questioned. One of my baristas had many tattoos, one of them being on her forearm. She had to wear a bandage to conceal it, because it might worry some of the clientele."

In certain kinds of jobs and industries, such as manufacturing and construction, tattoos might be acceptable but piercings are not. Steve Novak, president of PPR Management Services in Honolulu and Boise, Idaho, has a client company where, "for the laborers, there seems to be little concern

about tattoos, but piercing depends on safety.”

Piercings cause similar concerns far from machinery. Casey Rives of Haymarket, Va., removes her lip rings when she goes to work for a nearby veterinary hospital because “If you have a dog with its legs flying through the air, it rips them out.”

Cori Maedel, CEO of Jouta Performance Group, HR consultants in Vancouver, British Columbia, said a restaurateur client bans piercings as a safety hazard. “In the back of the house where the cooks are,” she said, “if they wear piercings, one of them could fall in the soup.”

## **Stereotyping**

Yet even when there are no such logical reasons for a restriction on body art, employees usually accept it if they need work. Alexis Kibbie of Woodbridge, Va., has two tattoos on her shoulders and one on her left wrist, “which is obviously very visible. When I apply for jobs and reach the interview stage, I self-consciously wear a bracelet, watch or long-sleeve shirt to cover the tattoo,” she said.

Some refuse to make such concessions. Britt Warner said she displays her tattoos to protect herself “against getting hired by a stuffy, stifling establishment.” Warner, a singer-songwriter and an account executive for Anthony Mora Communications in Los Angeles, added, “Establishments that have no qualms about hiring inked-up characters tend to be more laid-back and, well ... human.”

Equally strong views may be found on the “qualms” side. James McQueeney, president of the Newark, N.J., communications group Winning Strategies, said tattoos and piercings among corporate employees in the public eye create “an impression you never want to make.” Asked what the impression is, he replied, “Trailer trash.”

HR consultant Maedel acknowledged, “Right or wrong, that stereotype still exists.” Image consultant Haney admitted to feeling it herself: “It’s not rational, but I don’t want my nice son bringing home a girl with a ‘tramp stamp’ on her back.”

## **Lawsuits and Accommodations**

McQueeney said there are managers who hold disapproving views of body art but show employees more tolerance than they feel. “HR issues can become so litigious so fast, so unexpectedly, that many people look at [tattoos and piercings] as one of those issues. So they all want to walk quietly around the big bad tattoos and facial piercings,” he said.

When legal squabbles arise, often the employee claims a violation of freedom of expression. Sometimes the expression is characterized as religious or cultural, and the restriction as discriminatory.

“Generally speaking, an employer has leeway over what kind of policies to set regarding tattoos and piercings,” said Marc Scheiner, an employment lawyer at the Duane Morris firm’s Philadelphia office. “When the reasons behind [appearance] codes are ‘company image,’ those are the grayest areas.” Decisions will usually turn on the facts of the specific case, but Scheiner said courts want to see both sides be flexible. “The employee has to work with the employer to find reasonable accommodations,” he explained.

Among sources consulted for this article, there was realism on both sides. Warner said, “It is the right of the business owner to present their company in any way they see fit, and that extends to whom they choose to represent their company’s image.”

Mordecai said that at Griffin Hospital, “We have allowed a small stud-type piercing for religious purposes, a small diamond stud in the nose.”

McQueeney cited a common accommodation for tattooed and pierced employees: Employers “find

great new positions for them, inside the building.”

Rives said she knows “people look down” on her lip rings. “I don’t think that it should be the way it is, [but] I don’t think there’s a way to change that right now.”

*Steve Taylor is a freelance writer based in Arlington, Va.*

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