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Jill Haney

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Tattoos, piercings in the workplace? Well, it depends ...

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CAN YOU ADDRESS the appropriateness of facial piercing and tattoos in the workplace today? Do I need to hide my tattoos?

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Back in the old days, the 1970s and '80s, when only 1 percent of Americans had tattoos, it was widely believed that tattoos were acceptable only for sailors, prison inmates and bikers. But times have changed, and corporate America is slowly accepting that there are many qualified employees who like body art.

According to a 2006 study by the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, 25 percent of adults in the U.S. ages 18-50 have tattoos. It is also believed that more than 40 million Americans have body piercings in places other than their earlobes.

In my corporate consulting, this question comes up often. As the weather heats up and clothes become more revealing, employers are concerned that visible tattoos may deter from the corporate image.

The acceptability of tattoos and piercings in the workplace will vary from industry to industry and from company to company. More conservative industries such as finance and law will most likely have stricter policies against body art. More creative industries, such as graphic design, advertising and marketing, might have more lenient policies.

Many companies have policies in place that do not allow facial tattoos and piercing, especially for employees who deal directly with the clients. Employers are well within their right to do so as long as there is no discrimination regarding a person's race, religion, gender, or age.

My recommendation is to cover all tattoos and remove facial and tongue piercings while at work.

Is it more important to fit into the corporate culture or to have freedom of expression? Even though times are changing, the reality is that stigmas and biases still exist, and tattoos and piercing make an impression. What kind of

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impression depends on the industry you work in.

Roberta Fiore-Kittell, a partner in OptimaHR, a human resources consulting firm, confirms that biases exist. "Customers are not always as tolerant," she said. "They can choose to go elsewhere."

It would make good business sense when interviewing or meeting a client for the first time to cover up all body art and remove facial and tongue piercings until you have a better gauge of the client's attitude.

If you want to express yourself, feel free. Be mindful, however, that stigmas and biases exist, and if you want to work in a professional setting, be willing to adapt to those professional norms.

Jill Haney, founder of JH Image Consulting, is a certified image consultant. Reach her at 513-505-2732, jill@jhimage.net or <http://www.jhimage.net>

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