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Feature:
Body of Work

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As tattoos and piercings become more popular, companies and employees look to cover themselves.

By Rita Pyrellis
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Public relations executive Joe Chernov knows how to dress for success. He favors the crisp architectural lines of Dries Van Noten suits and shops at Barneys New York for the latest menswear. But his most dramatic fashion statement lies hidden beneath his designer clothes. Chernov's arms are inked from wrists to biceps with Asian-themed tattoos. Lotus flowers and a bird in flight encircle his lower left arm, and a kimono-clad geisha and fluttering butterflies cover his right. Like many professionals with a fondness for body art, Chernov keeps his tattoos under wraps at work, exposing them only when he feels it's appropriate.

"I'm going to be on a panel with a lot of chief marketing officers at a fairly buttoned-up event, and I'm already thinking about what I'm going to wear that will cover my tattoos," says Chernov, the 40-year-old director of content for Eloqua Corp., a marketing automation firm based in Vienna, Virginia. "In certain settings, like a client meeting or being on stage speaking, I'm concerned about how I'm being perceived." When he interviewed last year for a highly sought-after job at a conservative company, he chose a shirt with extra long cuffs that covered the flowers and breaking waves on his wrists. "It's my 'In case of emergency break glass shirt,'" he says. "I don't wear it often, but I did that day." Nevertheless, he didn't get that position, but did eventually land the job at Eloqua.

Although the tattoos don't seem to have limited his job opportunities, Chernov isn't so sure. "Has it affected my career? Maybe," he says. "I don't know if I'd be in a different position if I didn't have them."

Figuring out how much ink and body metal, if any, are acceptable to display at work is not only a challenge for the growing number of tattooed and pierced professionals, but also for their employers. Establishing guidelines for body art in the workplace will be increasingly important as the millennial generation floods into the workplace.

By 2014, millennials are expected to account for about 36 percent of the U.S. workforce, according to government projections. And they clearly like to express their individuality through body art. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center study, 12 percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed have at least one tattoo and 26 percent sport two or more. About 7 percent have six or more tattoos. Generation X is fond of body ink, too. About one-third of

those between 30 and 45 said they have at least one tattoo. Only 15 percent of baby boomers between 46 and 64 have one.

When it comes to body piercings, however, the generation gap widens considerably. Nearly one-fourth of millennials surveyed have piercings other than on their earlobes compared with just 9 percent of Gen-Xers and 1 percent of baby boomers. Maria Hicks, who is 28 years old, sports an array of body bling. The Albuquerque, New Mexico-based copywriter has her septum and lower lip pierced, and she wears three little diamond studs on her upper chest. Her earlobes are stretched with large metal plugs known as “gauges,” and her upper ear is skewered with a small metal bar.

Tattoos cover her left arm and upper back. She sees her body art as a professional asset. “I’m in a creative field, and this is an expression of my creativity,” she says. Hicks recently left a bartending career to break into advertising and was nervous about the transition. She says her mother, who works in public health, worried that her daughter would never find a job—that is, until she started noticing the number of physicians and nurses with tattoos.

(To enlarge the view, click on the image below. *Adobe Acrobat Reader is required.*)

WHERE THE TATS ARE AT
While only about a quarter of the population has tattoos, according to a survey of 2,020 adults, the millennial generation is the most likely to be sporting ink.

Generation	Birth years	Percentage
Millennials	1980-2001	38%
Generation X	1965-1979	32
Baby boomers	1946-1964	15
All		23

Source: Pew Research Center

“My mom realized that there’s a whole culture around body art, and it’s not the stigma it used to be,” Hicks says. “I think more employers are seeing that, too.” Still, when interviewing at the agency she now works for, Hicks covered up for the initial meeting.

When she got the second interview she dressed conservatively but decided to expose her arms. “I didn’t want to represent myself in a false light,” she says. “This is who I am.” Acceptance in the workplace is what Justin Johnson, owner of an artistic management firm in Phoenix hopes his newly formed Alliance of Tattooed or Pierced Professionals, or ATOPP, will help bring about. The group assists the pierced and tattooed find employment at “compassionate companies that support this freedom of individuality and don’t judge their employees based on their tattoos, piercings or hair but on the quality of experience and skill you can bring to their team,” according to its website. Johnson, 24 years old, got the idea for ATOPP after working as a Web designer for a company where he was asked to remove his piercings and cover up his tattoos. “It really seemed to take away from the importance of being myself and expressing who I am,” he says, “especially since I never had to deal with customers.”

Individuality

Chicago psychologist Daniela Schreier says body art has evolved from stigma to fashion

statement and that younger employees see tattoos and piercings as modes of self-expression rather than rebellion. "Modern body art came out of the prisons and from the gang world," says Schreier, who teaches at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology and specializes in workplace issues. "Corporate leaders most likely didn't grow up seeing body art that didn't have a negative connotation. But young people want to express their individuality, and this is how they choose to do that."

Despite the growing number of employees with body art, many companies do not have specific policies addressing the issue and many simply leave it to the discretion of supervisors and employees. An exception is the global accounting firm KPMG. The company has clear guidelines on what's appropriate and advises employees with piercings other than in their ears to "please leave the metal at home," according to an article in its college recruiting magazine.

Other forms of body art aren't addressed, but KPMG gives a detailed description of suitable blouses, shirts, skirts, shoes and accessories. Like many companies contacted, KPMG declined to discuss in detail its dress code and the issue of body art, as did American Express Co. Representatives for Bank of America Corp. and Boeing Co. said they don't have policies addressing body art, but declined further comment. And several other companies, including Hewlett-Packard Co., Starbucks Corp. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc., didn't respond to telephone calls and e-mails.

Sally Davenport, a spokeswoman for FedEx Corp., says in most cases, "tattoos must be covered if you are in a customer-facing position, but there's no hard and fast rule." Company policy states: "Visible tattoos and body piercings, except for an earring in one or both ears, are usually prohibited in customer contact positions when wearing an appropriate company-issued uniform. However, management has discretion to allow visible tattoos when they're not offensive, vulgar, sexual, have gang-related content or are disruptive, distracting or otherwise inappropriate." In the end, Davenport says, "Basically, we trust our managers' judgment."

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—*Daniela Schreier, Chicago psychologist*

Ford Motor Co. has a dress code policy but it doesn't include body art, according to spokeswoman Kimberly Harry. The company leaves the choice up to employees and their supervisors. "It does provide that dress must be suitable to the circumstances of the work assignment and requires employees to utilize good judgment in determining what is appropriate and respectful," she says in a written statement. Similarly, online retailer Zappos.com leaves the issue up to employees. "We just have a general rule of 'use good judgment' that is expected of everyone, and that applies to hair, clothes, tattoos, piercings—

pretty much anything,” says Zappos human resource director Rebecca Henry. “We trust our employees to make good decisions and that’s always been the case for us.”

Myrna Armstrong, professor emeritus at the School of Nursing at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, based in Lubbock, has studied body art for nearly two decades. She finds “a loosening of attitudes in the corporate world,” as evidenced by the growing number of tattooed and pierced workers she observes in the workplace. “I’m seeing more waiters and waitresses, salespeople, bank tellers, people dealing with customers every day who have tattoos and piercings.” She says that rather than prohibit body art, employers should develop HR policies “that talk about tastefulness, nonoffensiveness, neatness. After all, I’d rather have someone look neat and clean and have a tattoo and piercings than have an employee who looks cruddy but doesn’t have any.”

Debbie Salerno, chief financial officer and human resources director for Peppercom Inc., says the public relations agency in New York City hasn’t adopted an official policy and would decide cases of questionable tattoos or piercings on an individual basis. Several of Peppercom’s 70 employees have tattoos, but most keep them hidden, including Salerno whose small tattoo is placed discreetly on her left breast. “I don’t know how I’d react if someone came in with a ton of piercings on their face,” she says. “It’s hard to see past that.” It’s like selling a house: You “don’t want too much of your personal style showing.”

At some retailers, almost anything goes as long as it’s not deemed offensive. At Borders Group Inc. bookstores, where pink-haired and tattooed sales associates abound, employees are allowed to display body art “as long as they’re not in excess” and their clothing and manner are professional, says spokeswoman Mary Davis. “Our associates like to be able to express themselves but in a way that customers don’t find offensive.”

(To enlarge the view, click on the image below. *Adobe Acrobat Reader is required.*)



Some public employers, especially fire and police departments, have become more restrictive than companies in recent years. The Los Angeles Fire Department, which issued a controversial “no show” policy in 2008, requires firefighters to cover up all visible tattoos while on duty. There also are restrictions in the military, where the tattooing craze arguably began when sailors started collecting tattoos as souvenirs from various ports of call. Last year, however, the U.S. Air Force lifted a ban on tattoos on the saluting arms of recruits after only a week because of intense backlash. In 2005, after failing to meet its recruiting quota, the Army loosened its restrictions on tattoos allowing them on soldiers’ hands and neck as long as they are not offensive. But the head and face must remain tattoo-free.

Employment lawyer Kevin Troutman, a partner at Fisher & Phillips in Houston, has seen a surge in the number of companies seeking his guidance on body art in the workplace in the past five years. "It's a question that will continue to face employers again and again," he says. "If a guy has a tattoo on his arm or a woman has one on her back and it doesn't show or affect their job performance, does the employer have any right to tell them you can't have one? The answer is 'no.' But if it's visible and violates dress codes and policies and if the employer can show an anti-discriminatory reason for prohibiting it, then the employer should be fine."

Stephen Hirschfeld, CEO of the Employment Law Alliance, a global network of employment and labor law specialists, says companies generally can avoid legal problems if they tie body art restrictions to business impact, such as the potentially damaging effect of tattoos and piercings on the corporate image. Even so, he advises employers to take a common-sense approach. "It's an issue of supply and demand," he says. "As you have more people coming into the workplace with piercings and tattoos, companies will have to start making compromises. I honestly don't think you need to have a policy to address this. It's a balancing act that should be decided on a case-by-case basis." Consistency is critical, he adds, so HR departments must be the clearinghouse for such cases.

New York City attorney and tattoo enthusiast Marisa Kakoulas is working on a book called *Tattoo Law*, about legal issues affecting the tattooing world. She cautions that companies that ban body art must be careful that their policies don't discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin, which is a violation of Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964. She points to two highly publicized 2005 cases involving a Costco Wholesale Corp. cashier with an eyebrow piercing and a Red Robin Gourmet Burgers Inc. waiter with religious tattoos on his wrists.

In the first case, the cashier was asked to remove her piercing after Costco banned all facial jewelry except earrings. She claimed religious discrimination, arguing that as a member of the Church of Body Modification, a group that promotes spiritual growth through tattooing and piercing, her jewelry must be visible at all times. Costco won the case in large part because it offered a reasonable accommodation—wearing a clear plastic stud, which the cashier refused to do. In the Red Robin case, the company paid \$150,000, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, to settle the lawsuit with the waiter who was fired when he refused to cover his tattoos and claimed that doing so would be a sin based on his religion. Costco declined to comment and Red Robin didn't respond to phone calls.

Although body art is more commonplace and some companies try to accommodate it, many people are still leery of flaunting a tattoo or piercing. A 2007 survey of 468 employees in various industries by Vault.com, a career management website, found that 85 percent thought body piercings and tattoos could be an impediment to getting a job. Indeed, Chicagoan Erin Colley, who had several piercings at the time and still sports an ankle tattoo, remembers landing a temporary receptionist's job a few years ago that she hoped to parlay into full-time work. On her first day, the HR director told her to remove her piercings or look for another job. "I had a choice," she says. "I could sit at home and play Scrabble and have a nose ring, or I could take it out and pay my bills. I took mine out. I understood that I was the first person clients saw. I got it. And I ended up getting the job."

"If a guy has a tattoo on his arm or a woman has one on her back and it doesn't show or affect their job performance, does the employer have any right to tell them you can't have one?"
—Kevin Troutman, employment lawyer

Kakoulas, whose arms and back are heavily tattooed, says many professionals are afraid of being seen as rebellious or anti-establishment. The best way to combat potential prejudices, she says, is to be willing to cover up. Early in her career when she was hired at a corporate law firm in Brussels, she used bandages and stage makeup to conceal her tattoos. After she had been on the job a few months, one of the firm's partners asked her how she had injured her hand. She hesitated before telling him that she had tattoos. When she finally unwrapped her hand, the partner told her the tattoos looked much better than bandages and she kept them off.

"But would I have even gotten the job if I had showed up that way to the interview? Probably not," she says. "But once I proved myself and was making a lot of money for the firm, it wasn't an issue. So I tell young people to cover up because it should be about you and your accomplishments, not your tattoo."

Career advisers at universities alert students to the possible risks of letting recruiters see their body art. Stacey Rudnick, director of MBA career services at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas in Austin, advises students to be aware of how their choices are perceived by recruiters, whether they involve body art, hair style or religious and political affiliations. "It's not my job to tell a student what to do, just to advise them on what to expect," she says. Recruiters may judge applicants on their "body art or a goatee or long hair. My best advice is: Be who you are—once you get the job." The Internet may provide job seekers with some guidance. Marcus Cota, a 31-year-old body piercer at Tailor Made Tattoo and Body Modification in Madison, Wisconsin, recently launched YoungModifiedProfessionals.com to survey pierced employees about their experiences in the workplace. He hopes to establish a database of companies that are accommodating to body art. Cota notes that most of his clientele is professional. "We rarely get a bum or a junkie."

(To enlarge the view, click on the image below. *Adobe Acrobat Reader is required.*)

PIERCINGS PRESENT?
When it comes to piercings in places other than the earlobe, millennials lead the pack, according to a survey of 2,020 adults.

Generation	Percentage
Millennials	23%
Generation X	9
Baby boomers	1
All	8

Source: The National Career

David Ores, a heavily tattooed New York City physician, isn't surprised by the mix of clients. "Tattoos are expensive and doctors have money," says Ores who offers free tattoo removal services to former gang members and convicts. He has removed tattoos from professionals but says most are getting rid of smaller tattoos to make room for bigger ones.

"Doctors have to conform with a lot of rules—state, corporate, ethical rules on what to wear, what you can and can't say," he notes. "It's a pressure cooker of obedience. Tattoos can be your sneaky way of rebelling." In addition to his extensive body art, Ores rides a Harley-Davidson, adding to his rebellious image and alarming the occasional hospital security guard. He is frequently stopped and asked for identification. "If you have tattoos, they make an instant impression," he says, "but once you start a conversation with someone and you're civil and polite, the alarm quickly goes down to DEFCON 1."

For Chernov, the PR executive, body art can sometimes be an asset. "It offsets the misconceptions about being older," he says. When he interviewed with startup companies where employees tend to be much younger, his tattoos upped his cool quotient considerably. My tattoos showed that "I can play the old guy if I need to and I can hang with the kids," he says.

While having tattoos can be an issue in some business circles, Chernov likes to point to the growing numbers of respected professionals who are getting them: "My tattoo artist says his two biggest clients are doctors at number one and then lawyers. Of course he didn't count the unemployed."

So far, Chernov has not joined those ranks, but as the artist's promotional T-shirt points out, the inked and pierced employee can never be sure. It reads: "ArtFreek Tattoo: Creating Tomorrow's Unemployed Today."