

# Tattoos not taboo

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For some people, tattoos are skeletons out of the closet - rambunctious rites of passage that hover and haunt with each passing year.

Others make the leap into body art as adults and actively engage in the design process, rather than select a symbol that they hope means something profound.

But no matter the time, place or circumstance upon which the decision is made to rat-a-tat-too, few people pause to consider whether there are professional consequences.

In fact, if they have any reason to pause, it would be because the commitment is far more indelible than any signed document on the job.

Reckless behaviour and gang iconography hardly define an exemplary employee, yet I'm going to go out on an ink-covered limb and say that tattoos need not come at the expense of competence.

So how do frosted tips get the cold shoulder, but "tramp stamps" (which span the lower back and unfurl over low-rise jeans) get a thumbs up?

The simple answer is that they can be hidden, whereas highlighted hair makes a deliberate first impression.

Mind you, before I give my sweet-hearted seal of approval, there are some caveats.

I'm aware that some human-resources personnel may be up in arms, worried that tattoos create tension between people from different demographic and cultural backgrounds who all have varied references.

But age has nothing to do with opinion.

Cindy Truong, a 24-year-old Toronto image consultant who just started her own business, Image Innovations, is unequivocal.

"[They] should be kept out of the office at all times; you can show them off on your own time. You're representing the company," she says, her sole disclaimer being that people working in more creative fields have greater liberty to show off such personal and permanent statements.

"Tattoos are seen as rebellious and they send the wrong message to older generations," Ms. Truong says.

Meanwhile, Anne Sowden, who describes herself as "50ish," points out that there are up to four generations of co-workers in a typical office, making for a less anti-tattoo environment. "They have become more accepted," she says.

As the immediate past president of the Association of Image Consultants International, Ms. Sowden recommends that anyone considering getting a tattoo for the first time should make sure it's discreet. If higher-ups take issue, long sleeves can cover up filigreed forearms and

hosiery will sheath ankle art.

She mentions working with one client who has a tattoo on her hand, and recounts that colleagues didn't say anything although she sensed it always caught their attention.

Using a concealing cosmetic is an option if you find the tattoo is too obvious, dark or distracting. Glo Minerals Camouflage is Ms. Sowden's top pick, although the irony-free line Make Up For Ever (available at Sephora) offers a full-coverage waterproof product in 10 skin tones.

Here's another thought: The more people who succeed in the workplace and take their jobs seriously in spite of being inked out, the less taboo tattooing will seem.

Zark Fatah is among Toronto's top nightlife impresarios, but he spends his days meeting with heads of major companies and establishing a reputation as a serious businessman.

With a lion and a tiger that each run along his upper arms to his shoulders, and a lion's head across his back, Mr. Fatah does not need to wear much at night to make a statement, but insists on a buttoned-down dress shirt whenever he needs to make a professional impression.

"They don't affect me at all," he says. "I know who I am meeting with and what I should be wearing."

A slick and sleek image also applies to tattoo parlours such as Toronto's Black Line Studio, which as a result draws junior executive hipsters as frequently as body-art aficionados.

Owner Ion Nicolae cites one middle-aged woman who came in recently requesting a tattoo in white ink so that it would be less visible.

Mr. Nicolae's best advice, though, is to ensure that customers get exactly what they want and don't make concessions because they are worried about size or colour.

"Once you start doing something smaller, or changing it too much from the original design, the tattoo won't look the same and people will regret them," he says.

Indeed, one of the key considerations is whether you will still think a tattoo represents who you are 20 years later.

I have read that some people voluntarily brand themselves with corporate logos. To each their own. But if the company goes out of business, that will really hurt.

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