
Too tattooed to work?

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- Report: 24 percent of Americans ages 18 to 50 have at least one tattoo
- Some companies have policies that require employees to conceal body art
- Curious about a company's policy? Visit the parking lot -- see how they dress

By Michelle Goodman

(LifeWire) -- At Sara Champion's previous job as a project engineer for one of the country's top construction firms, visible tattoos for professional staff were against company policy.

She found this ironic -- not to mention frustrating -- given that her position entailed inspecting job sites filled with tattooed construction workers.

"I was out on site all day, and I wasn't allowed to show any of my tattoos," says the 28-year-old Florida native, whose six large tattoos on her arms and back include a brightly colored sunflower, a marigold and a rendition of a Dia de los Muertos bride and groom on her upper left arm. "Ninety-eight degrees and long sleeves is not so cool when you're in Miami."

After six years with the construction firm, Champion decided to move north and find an employer that wouldn't needle her about her body art.

She found her "perfect job" in Danbury, Connecticut, as a project manager at a design and branding agency.

Now, "I have no problem showing up to meet a big client in a T-shirt and jeans," tattoos in plain view, she says. "I wish more companies were like this." [iReport.com: Share your tattoo stories](#)

The times, they are not a-changing?

According to a 2006 report in the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, 24 percent of Americans ages 18 to 50 have at least one tattoo, and 14 percent have at least one body piercing. Researchers questioned 253 women and 247 men via random telephone survey.

So, does the fact that [body art](#) is as prevalent today as mullets were in the 1980s mean that the tattoo-friendly tide is turning in the workplace?

"That question is best answered by [corporate] culture and by industry," says Jackie Valent, director of human resources in the Milwaukee office of accounting giant Deloitte. "If you look at a company like Google, a very entrepreneurial, Silicon Valley organization, tattoos are more acceptable."

"But if you look at the other end of the spectrum, which is where I happen to [work]," says the 20-year human resources veteran, "the answer is absolutely not. If you have six piercings and a big tattoo, we're going to tell you to cover the tattoos and take out the piercings."

(For the record, a Google spokesperson said that the company does not have a policy on tattoos.)

Amy Derick, a dermatologist from Barrington, Illinois and a co-author of the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology study, isn't surprised that a few companies or industries are still opposed to body art.

"Eight percent of people with tattoos report trouble at work," from being forced to hide them to being restricted from performing certain tasks, Derick says. For example, a grocery store employee with a tattoo on their hand might be asked to perform tasks less likely to bring them into contact with the public, like stocking shelves instead of working a register.

Better safe than cited

What's the solution for body art aficionados who work in one of the more conservative business sectors? Hide your body art or starve?

Pretty much, says Dave Kimelberg, who photographed 15 professionals with large-scale tattoos they conceal at work for the book "INKED Inc." and runs [InkedInc.com](#), a related Web site.

"I think in some ways, it's a 'don't ask, don't tell' understanding," says the 37-year-old Boston lawyer, who works as general counsel for a venture capital firm. "There's kind of this Superman element to it, like this crazy blue and red skin-tight suit underneath my Clark Kent exterior."

Like many of the secretly inked doctors, lawyers, and architects he's met over the years, Kimelberg sticks to tattoos he can easily conceal under clothing at work -- in his case, three-quarter "ink sleeves" that extend from each shoulder to the middle of his forearms but allow him to roll up his shirt sleeves on warm days.

And while the ink's out of the bag now that Kimelberg's published his book, he still keeps his tats under wraps for fear of them being "a

distraction in the workplace."

The same goes for Kasey Broach, a public relations specialist at a Phoenix law firm. To commemorate turning 25 and getting her MBA this year, she got a small omega symbol tattooed at the base of her neck in ultraviolet ink, which can only be seen with a black light.

"No one knows about it unless I show them," she says. "I have to bring the black light out from my high school years."

Where the body art roams

But what if you're not a doctor, lawyer, or accountant, but a creative type determined to find a job where you can bare your body ink?

That's when it's time to play detective, says career coach Janet Scarborough Civitelli.

"Visit the employee parking lot to see how they are dressed and whether many of the employees have visible tattoos," says the psychologist and founder of Bridgeway Career Development, a career counseling firm in Seattle. "Also ask colleagues and friends if they know anyone who works there who can give you some insider info."

"The Web is also a gold mine of information," she says, adding that the Web site ModifiedMind.com, which is dedicated to body art and other modifications, features a database of companies reportedly open to tattoos.

Then again, if a no-tattoo policy is your deal breaker, you could take a gamble like Sara Champion did during the interview for her current position:

"I said, 'Are you tattoo friendly?'"

Fortunately, the answer was yes.

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