

Is It Time to Rethink Our

Perceptions About

BODY

ART?

BY JOHN GREENE

Corporate America is comfortable working with red and black ink when it comes to putting entries into a financial ledger. But when that red and black ink conveys the image of the Grim Reaper running up the side of an employee's neck, that comfort level often takes a back seat.

And it's a scenario that is particularly true when it comes to chauffeurs, an occupation where they often have to put their best face forward by half the time showing clients the back of their head. And what that client sees from the back seat, or notices on the hands holding the steering wheel, can often make the difference between keeping and losing a key account. Our clients are judging our chauffeurs on a slew of things, including appearance.

But is that what's happening? Younger people are joining our companies not only as chauffeurs, but also as managers and office staff. New, younger owners have different perceptions of the limits on what can be considered professional. Chances are, some of your corporate clients have their own body art and don't see it as an impediment. Tattoos sported by white collar workers has been a trend that has been steadily gaining steam over the last two decades. In August 2003, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece called "The Tattooed Executive" in which it said: "Tattoos started their migration from the biceps of sailors to celebrity belly buttons and collegiate female midribs about a decade ago without much of an uproar. Now they are finding acceptance in a more unlikely environment: the workplace." In a recent article in *Forbes*, nearly half of those between 26 and 40 (40 percent) and 36 percent of those between 18-25 have tattoos, while 22 percent and 30 percent, respectively, have at least one body piercing, according to the Pew Research Center.

When I started my first company back in the early 1980s, body art on chauffeurs wasn't an issue. At that

time most large, visible tattoos were relegated to bikers and guys just back from inebriated visits to Tijuana. Sure, the fad was starting to creep into the mainstream with the advent of heavy metal bands and the punk music movement, but it was never a big enough issue that we had to suddenly run out and rewrite our employee handbook.

But today, as the previous statistics bear out, might be a different story. These forms of personal expression are being accepted in other professions, so it's only a matter of time before we are confronted with it as well.

As business owners in the chauffeured ground transportation industry, we have to be fully cognizant of the fact that there are federal laws making it illegal to discriminate against employees on a number of levels, particularly in the areas of sex or gender, race, national origin, or religious beliefs. But those same laws do allow us to set grooming and appearance rules for our employees, particularly if there's a reasonable belief tattoos hurt the company's image or public relations. Which means you can hold your ground unless you are bothered by the fact that your chauffeur has a small shamrock tattooed behind his left knee. Draw a line in the sand there and it's likely the discrimination police will bury you under it. Further, would you be writing off an employee who could be an asset to your company? It depends on many factors.



At my company and because of the clientele we serve, I tend to lean toward having a chauffeur covering up a visible tattoo while working. If he refuses to abide by my guidelines for grooming, it appears I am within my rights



WHAT YOU THINK?

According to a poll on our website and of operators at our recent Chauffeur Driven Show, your opinions lean toward keeping it clean (or at least covered):

72% said they should never be visible on any area of the body

18% said it's OK if small, mostly hidden, and not obscene

9% said it's OK anywhere on the body (excluding the face and neck) as long as it wasn't obscene

Only **1%** said that anything goes

to let him go. According to an article in *Small Business*, "Your chosen occupation makes a difference whether you can show your tattoos or piercings. If you work in a factory as a laborer tattoos are perfectly acceptable. However, if your job entails managing others or working with the public, cover the tattoo. You can sue for discrimination if a company fired you or didn't hire you due to a tattoo. However, you probably would lose."

My advice is not to take too much comfort in the law always falling your way when it comes to regulating body art in the workplace. Put it in writing. Make sure that the rules are clear, concise, and right up front both in the employee handbook and on your website. One limousine company in California puts it front and center on its website, stating, "A sharp, well-dressed individual creates a positive first impression. Facial hair should be kept to a minimum, and also neatly trimmed. Visible tattoos and piercings must be covered or removed."

The ground transportation industry isn't an island when it comes to regulating tattoos among its employees.



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It might have seemed cool back in the day when Robert Mitchum had L-O-V-E and H-A-T-E inked on the back of his fingers in the film "The Night of the Hunter," but it is unlikely that the perceptions have changed enough that the Four Seasons Hotel wants to have the same message on the fingers of its concierge. According to Ken Pinnock, former director of the human resources services department with the Mountain States Employers Council, "The employer is concerned about the impression that [body art] would make on its clientele. It has led to conflict at times where employees have felt their personal rights are limited. But really, an employer does have the right to tell an employee to cover up."

Most HR experts agree that policies that prohibit tattoos should not reflect value judgments about them or the people who get them. In fact many employers, they assert, would likely be surprised to find out how many current employees already have them and simply cover them up at work. So negative assumptions about what

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tattoos say about the people who have them are very often misplaced. Issues raised by body art can get more complicated when it comes to gender and religion. As business owners, we need to be aware of these issues before writing and enforcing policies that prohibit visible tattoos at work, lest we find ourselves cascading wildly out of control down an extremely slippery slope.

As previously mentioned, be sure everything is spelled out clearly before the hiring process even takes place. And once an employee is hired, have a written policy that employees are required to read and sign, and then enforce that policy. That way, employees are not able to claim that the policy was applied differently to them, a drama that can easily get played out in the media. For example, a worker was fired from a Walgreens in Warwick, R.I., because he reportedly had too many tattoos. The 26-year-old Warwick man says he was hired with tattoos showing, received great performance reviews, and was even promoted to shift manager without any problems until the store fired him after one customer complained.

There's no way around the fact that tattoos are becoming more and more the norm, and that opinions are most often divided along generational lines. And there is no doubt that the times they are a-changing, albeit slowly when it comes to the chauffeured ground transportation industry and even some areas of the hospitality and corporate worlds. For that very reason I would agree with the HR director who told *Forbes* that in today's precarious job market, job applicants shouldn't want to give an employer any reason to reject them. "You won't get fired for having a visible tattoo, but it likely means you won't get hired."

In a recent interview in the *Denver Business Journal*, Nina Radojevich-Kelley, a professor of management at Metropolitan State College of Denver, said, "I'm guessing that probably in the future we'll see some shifts as these tattooed employees become executives. What will be interesting is to see what the dress codes look like in 30 years."

This means we need to be ready to adapt as an industry when down the road the day comes that the CEO of a Fortune 500 company riding in the back of our car has more tattoos than your favorite NBA player. **(CD)**

JOHN GREENE IS THE PRESIDENT AND CEO OF ETS INTERNATIONAL IN RANDOLPH, MASS. HE CAN BE REACHED AT JGREENE@ETSINTL.NET.

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