

Tattoos in the workplace

Ink blots

Body art is growing more popular, though few employers are keen

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IN THE North Star tattoo parlour in downtown Manhattan, Brittany shows off her ink: a Banksy-inspired tableau covering both feet. Now a student at New York University, she hopes to be a lawyer one day. “That’s why I got the tattoo on my feet,” she says. “It’s easy to hide.”



Shame about the tie

Once the preserve of prisoners, sailors and circus freaks, tattoos have become a benign rite of passage for many Americans. One in five adults has one, and two in five thirty-somethings. These days women with tattoos outnumber men. But what happens when these people look for work? Alas, not everyone is as savvy as Brittany.

Though increasingly mainstream, tattoos still signal a certain rebelliousness that works against jobseekers, says Andrew Timming of the University of St Andrews in Scotland. In a forthcoming study, Mr Timming and colleagues asked participants to assess job candidates based on their pictures, some of which were altered to add a neck tattoo. Inked candidates consistently ranked lower, despite being equally qualified. In a separate study Mr Timming found that many service-sector managers were squeamish about conspicuous ink, particularly when filling jobs that involve dealing with customers.

Designs of flowers or butterflies were deemed comparatively acceptable. And some workplaces are more open-minded: a prison-services manager explained that having tattoos made it easier to bond with inmates. Firms with a younger clientele are also more tattoo-friendly. But by and large the more visible the tattoo, the more “unsavoury” a candidate seemed—even if the boss had one.

Such prejudice may seem anachronistic, but it is not unfounded. Empirical studies have long linked tattoos with deviant behaviour. People with inked skin are more likely to carry weapons, use illegal drugs and get arrested. The association is stronger for bigger tattoos, or when there are several, says Jerome Koch, a sociologist at Texas Tech University.

This may help explain the army's recent decision to reinstate old grooming standards. These restrict the size and number of tattoos, ban ink from the neck, head and hands, and bar body art that might be seen as racist, sexist or otherwise inappropriate. The change is intended to promote discipline and professionalism. But it is making it harder to recruit to the army, says Major Tyler Stewart, who handles recruitment in Arizona. His battalion is turning away 50 tattooed people a week.

Some aspiring soldiers and other jobseekers are solving the problem by getting their ink removed. Tattoo-removal has surged 440% in the past decade, according to IBISWorld, a market-research firm. At the North Star, where Brittany's friend is getting a question-mark inked on her wrist, the prospect of such buyer's remorse seems remote. "I don't think it will help her job prospects," observes Brittany, "but hopefully it won't hurt, either."

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