

Workplace tattoo taboos fading

BURLINGTON, Vt. -- Hints of a tattoo peeked from beneath the sleeve of a plaid button-down shirt – casual work attire for Richard Bailey, 45. He's been employed with the City of Burlington for 15 years, recently having taken on the job of facilities and events coordinator.

Bailey has worked in diverse capacities, including with kids in an after-school program at a teen center. The bicep tattoos that extend on both sides to his chest have never been cause for concern in his profession, he said.

As tattoos grow in popularity they are gaining acceptance in the workplace. But there are still some employers with rules against visible tattoos, and professions that frown on the trend even though there are no explicit bans. The result: Some workers show off their tats and others never get them or have them removed to avoid anything that could ding a job search or career.

Bailey has lived with his ink for two decades, as have many like him. Whatever the reason a person decides to get a tattoo, the art will remain embedded in the skin through life -- and job -- changes. Will an image beloved at the age of 20 stand the test of time?

About 73 percent of people get their first tattoo between 18 and 22 years of age, and an estimated 40 percent of Millennials have a tattoo, according to a Pew Research Center report.

Starbucks may lift workers' visible tattoo ban

The Millennial Generation, also known as Generation Y, follows Bailey's Generation X. Gen X-ers were born from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Millennials were born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s.

Burlington is an open-minded place and culturally progressive, Bailey said. In the past two decades there has been a huge cultural shift as far as accepting tattoos. Having them doesn't necessarily impede career success, he's found.

Twenty years ago Bailey worked in the social services sector. If he wore a tattoo-revealing, short-sleeved shirt back then, he admits people would give him an odd look or two.

"There was more prejudice toward it back then," Bailey said. "Now there is really none of that here in Vermont anymore. Today half the people in the department have tattoos." Bailey's work with the city is based on interactions, not appearances, he said. "It has been organic," he said. "Having tattoos and being an old punk rock musician is part of that."

In a Careerbuilder.com survey, 31 percent of human resource managers said visible tattoos could have a negative impact on their decision whether to hire someone, but bad breath weighed even heavier in the survey. Employees with chewed fingernails and dark suntans were offered fewer promotions, the survey said.

"For centuries most businesses have vigorously defended their traditional right to set and enforce dress and appearance standards for employees," said Joseph O'Grady, professor of business at Burlington's Champlain College. "But, the 21st century has brought lots of changes in social norms."

For example, journalist and former executive editor of The New York Times, Jill Abramson, has a New York Times-style "T" tattoo, among other visible body art. During a recent Out Magazine interview she wore a sleeveless ensemble and sported tats on each bicep.

Tattoos and all, Abramson was the first female executive editor in the Times' 160-year history, and in 2012, she was ranked number five on the Forbes list of most powerful women.

O'Grady said the issue of tattoos on the job is an interesting example of how business traditions, new social norms, and legal issues collide in the modern workplace.

In most cases employers can legally refuse to hire people with visible tattoos, O'Grady said. "Or they can require, as a condition of employment, that they be covered while at work."

Which is exactly what Shan Reil, 44, does. He is an accounts receivable process specialist for Fletcher Allen Health Care who wears a suit and tie every day, which keeps the tattoos on his arms, back, and chest covered.

His tattoos have never been an issue in his career at the hospital, Reil said.

Some companies more tat-tolerant than others

Vermont enjoys a fairly relaxed business climate, O'Grady said. "I am not aware of any employers with blanket policies banning visible tattoos," he said. "Our business culture tends to be more accepting of differences than many other states. And our traditionally low unemployment rate and competitive job market means employers try to avoid setting unnecessary barriers for applicants."

There are three underlying concerns employers have with hiring people with body art, O'Grady said. They are:

- the belief that an employee will not be taken seriously by tradition-minded clients;
- the concern that the organization's brand or image might be compromised by outlandish tattoos;
- and the concern that one person's body art could be perceived as offensive or hostile to a co-worker or customer.

O'Grady's advice is to "feel out" prospective employers' preferences before applying – to visit the workplace and scout out the dress and appearance practices and look up some current employees on LinkedIn. Simple observations can indicate whether individual expression is encouraged in that workplace or not, he said.

Stephanie Shohet, 42, has full sleeve tattoos that cover her arms from wrist to neck. She is office manager at North End Studios in Burlington, and a popular fitness instructor there. She's also worked part-time in the Burlington School district for a decade.

Most of Shohet's tattoos carry meaning, from images of ivy and butterflies that remind her of her teenage daughters, to musical notes of a "Fiddler on the Roof" song for her parents, to a commemoration of running her first marathon.

Shohet began getting body art at 18 years of age. She has no regrets. "People know me," she said. "I am front and center here, and it's not a problem for anyone."

Tattoo regret can be expensive

While Shohet has no regrets, Di Moda Salon owner Ellie Trono, 44, has a few. She is in the process of having a sun tattoo removed. She likes the art, but is not happy with its placement on her back. "Half of it peeks out of my shirt," she said. "My thought was that it would only be seen if I wanted it to. Wrong."

Other tattoos Trono is thinking of having removed have been on her body for more than twenty years. "I'm over them, and I don't want them anymore," Trono said.

Unregulated rise of medical alert tattoos stirs debate

The cost of removal is much higher than having a tattoo inked. A \$100 tattoo costs \$1,000 to remove, Trono said.

Trono often visits Don Baker, owner of Laser Tattoo Removal of Vermont in South Burlington. Baker sees a number of people who simply outgrow their body art.

"We mature and change," Baker said.

The bulk of his business comes from professional women in their 30s and 40s. They might be role models in their communities now, for their children, and they don't want their children getting tattoos. Or sometimes it's just because the artwork isn't that great, Baker said.

Of the 45 million U.S. residents with tattoos in 2013, about 17 percent regret getting them, according to a Pew Research Center survey.

Most people love their tattoos, Baker said. But some things that happen in Vegas come home to Vermont and have to be removed. Names of past loves, and ring tattoo removals are big in his business.

Baker also sees a steady stream of medical students. "If your tattoo gets in the way of food, clothing, and shelter, it's gone," he said. "These folks just want to be taken seriously and appear more professional."

Young men and women who want to join the military are also part of Baker's clientele.

Vermont National Guard State Public Affairs Officer Maj. Chris Gookin said tattoos are not allowed on the face, head, neck or hands, and sleeve tattoos on the arms or legs are not authorized in the Guard.

Mary Alger, 46, of Fletcher has some advice for Millennials thinking of getting ink. "What seems like a great idea now might not be one later."

Alger has six tattoos and regrets many of them. She's a production supervisor at a coffee company. "I don't think they affect what I do, but if I wanted something more at the company, it might matter," she said.