Tattoos: Tradition, Modernity, Perception In The Workplace

Today, many people are making the decision to have artwork permanently tattooed onto their bodies. Although tattoos have been around for centuries and have great historical context, they are sometimes. looked down upon and stigmatized. Because of this, many professional environments have been unwilling to accept tattoos in the workplace. However, tattoos are becoming more acceptable in the workplace as the widespread popularity of body art increases. There are arguments against tattoos at work, but the level of acceptance varies from field to field and office to office. Often, the rule is that if the tattoo can be covered, then there is no problem. Many employees or potential employees are outraged by the intolerance of the body art and feel that tattoos should be accepted.

Throughout history, different groups of people have been known to tattoo their bodies. Egyptians mummies have been found with remnants of tattoos on their bodies, and many pre-Christian European tribes tattooed their bodies as well. Evidence for this comes from Julius Caesar's writing of the Gallic Wars. China and India have also been historically known for their tattooing practices, although in China they were often considered to be barbaric. American sailors were also known for their tattoos in the early days after the American Revolution; indeed, many were often identified using descriptions of the tattoos on their bodies. Clearly, tattoos have some historical significance. Still, they are most popular in modern culture.

The popularity of tattoos in modern society is highly influenced by the celebrities of the day. As the younger generation finds their role models in these celebrities, the people they idolize are frequently tattooed, and these tattoos are usually visible. These young people then desire to get their own tattoos, to emulate their favorite celebrities. Sian Morgan said that "tattoos are becoming more frequent in the younger generation mainly because of what is seen by famous athletes and artists" (Morgan, 2014). Morgan also advises that these people should be more conscious of the placement of their tattoos, in order to avoid potential conflicts for future employment.

Depending upon the field of interest, employer's views on tattoos in the workplace vary greatly. Typically, corporate offices are stricter about their tattoo policies, as the body art tends to distract from the business proceedings. In a business setting, employees are expected to carry themselves in a professional manner, and visible tattoos tend to retract form the overall message that the employee gives off. Morgan reiterates that well-paying professions tend to restrict tattoos but mentions that those who are self-employed need not worry about it, because they have no superior to answer to.

Tattoos tend to be looked down upon in the work environment because unfortunately they carry with them a negative connotation. The stigmas surrounding tattoos include such images as bikers, convicts, rappers/rock stars, and general wrong doers who are not overly concerned with living a professional life. This is especially true for those who have tattoos on the face and neck; it is not a good image to portray and leads to an unfair judgment of the potential employee (Hein, 2014). These stigmas come from years of media publicizing such people, and are not necessarily true, valid, or applicable to the employee. Many people choose to get a tattoo because it is a symbol of something that holds great meaning for the individual. Some look at

tattooing as artwork that, rather than being hung on a wall, goes on their skin. Still, employers consider these tattoos to be distracting and unprofessional when visible. Also, some tattoos may contain content that is inappropriate for the workplace, which creates conflict because employers can hardly restrict only one kind of tattoo; they have to create a sort of blanket ban on all body art.

The solution for many professional offices is to accept tattoos so long as they can be covered and are not always visible. This means that tattoos that are not on the hands, neck, or face are widely accepted, as a long shirt and pants can cover them. Women encounter different obstacles than men in this regard, as their legs and feet are often showed when they wear skirts and heels. This means that women are slightly more restricted in the areas they can tattoo and still cover to be work-appropriate. Morgan referred to the fact that covered tattoos are acceptable in his work, and Megan Hein also said that a person must be able to cover their tattoos in order to avoid lessening their chances for hire (Hein, 2014).

Of the professions that frequently employ a dress code in regard to tattoos, hospitals and (other medical care providers) are one such field. Many of these employers feel that visible tattoos are a hindrance to their business, as the tattoos can turn away potential business interests (MacPherson, 2013). Many hospitals, such as the one in Ottawa, Canada, choose to completely ban their employees from showing tattoos and even body piercings (MacPherson, 2013). As previously mentioned, most corporate offices share similar attitudes and regulations as these hospitals do. This decision comes from the employer’s desire for their customers to feel comfortable around any employee (Haddaway, 2014). Many employers in these fields feel that the visibility of tattoos can put customers on edge and affect their business interactions with the facility. For this reason, employers enact dress codes to prevent tattoos from showing in the workplace, if they hire those with tattoos at all.

Many employees and potential employees feel that these dress codes are unreasonable and that the restrictions should be removed. These people regard their tattoos as part of their body, and that they are being discriminated against for one of their physical characteristics (kehoe, 2011). These people feel that their potential is being overlooked because of something so simple as their skin, and what they have to offer the business never gets the opportunity to be shown because they are immediately disregarded as a result of having tattoos. One of the most commonly called upon rights of US citizens is freedom of speech, and tattoos are a way for people to express themselves. For those who are looked down upon and discriminated against for having body ink, they feel that their rights are being infringed upon and they see nothing wrong with their lifestyle or their bodies. Those who are tattooed only want the opportunity to show their skills in their desired field, without being discriminated against because of their tattoos. Regarding the employer’s worry about customer comfort, it seems that seeing employees who all look diverse and different would allow the customer to feel more at ease than if everyone looked the same. By covering tattoos, employers are forcing their employees to conform to a similar appearance, and the tattooed feel that they should be allowed to express themselves through the art on their bodies; if art on the walls is acceptable, then why is art on the skin not? For these reasons, they feel that dress codes that require tattoos to be hidden should be lifted.

With the growing popularity of tattoos, it seems only fitting that they should be accepted in the workplace. Tattoos are no longer a sign of gangs or bikers or delinquents. Rather, all different types of people are more and more often seen to have tattoos; businessmen, doctors, social

workers, teachers…all professions can be found to have tattoos. If this is true, then it makes no sense to require so many people to hide the artwork on their bodies. This ink is not only a sign on individuality and uniqueness, but it shows the diversity within the workplace. By allowing professionals to show their tattoos while at work, it would further diminish the negative stigmas that are associated with tattoos.

Although tattooing has not always had a good connotation associated with historically, the rising popularity of body art in modern culture is helping to take away these stigmas. Still, tattoos are frequently prohibited from being shown in a professional environment, and some people have trouble finding work due to their tattoos. The prohibition of tattoos varies from field to field, but body art is slowly becoming more widely accepted across all professional fields. Even so, potential employees are warned to be careful of where they get tattoos, so, avoid any future problems in their job search. This is especially true for the younger generation, as they tend to make rushed decisions to get tattoos without thinking of the future repercussions.