Employers should stop sticking it to workers with tattoos and piercings

by Michael_Kinsman

It wasn't too many years ago that a young man had to shave his mustache or cut his long hair just to get an entry-level job at Disneyland.

Those days are past, right?

Uh, well, almost.

You see, social acceptability is very slow to change. And, it seems things change even slower in the workplace.

Disney has relaxed its grooming standards for employees at its theme parks over the past couple of decades, and you rarely hear of any company today insisting that workers shave facial hair before they begin work.

Yet, the same people who were responsible for pushing for reform a generation ago are now sometimes in the role of requiring members of the younger generation to conform to different standards.

We no longer worry much about hair length or mustaches, but we certainly seem uneasy with tattoos and piercings in the workplace.

Over the past two decades, body art and piercings have become commonplace among younger Americans. A study last year by the University of Chicago and Northwestern University reported that nearly 50 percent of Americans between 21 and 32 have at least one tattoo or a piercing other than in an ear.

Frankly, that number seems low by my personal observations, but that might say more about the region of the country I live in.

But it certainly doesn't mitigate the fact that a large number of people - particularly younger adults - have chosen to follow this style or make a personal statement with a tattoo or two and piercings.

So, who cares about this?

Most older Americans don't really care. They might think body art is strange or they might not understand why someone would want 10 piercings, but they clearly are not easily offended by people who have them.

Leave it to employers to carry the torch for bias against tattoos and piercings on the job.

In its most subtle form, some employers simply don't hire people with visible body art, but they will never admit to that discriminatory practice. Other companies ask their workers to cover up tattoos or remove visible piercings during work hours.

None of this makes sense. Employers want to hire the best workers they can find, and if they are eliminating part of the labor pool for young workers by this bias, they are silly.

Is the clash over piercings and tattoos any different than the dispute 30 years ago over long hair and facial hair in the workplace?

Not at all.

You can look back and see we all managed to live just fine by letting workers have long hair and mustaches. Our companies did not tumble over the side of the flat earth and customers did not quit buying groceries because one of the store clerks had a mustache.

We survived it and we accepted it.

It's time for us to take that same perspective whenever we hear about someone being asked to cover up their tattoos at work, or someone who was denied a job because they have an unusual piercing.

Times change. So should companies.

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