

# The Tattooed Professional | Comstock's magazine



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Chris Forsyth has a ritual: every time he finishes working on a campaign, he treats himself to a new tattoo. Having worked in the state Capitol for nearly 20 years, the heavily tattooed chief of staff to Senator Jim Beall (D-San Jose) estimates that about 15 percent of state lawmakers have at least one tattoo.

“There is a sense of kinship. As disparate as our life experiences may be, we share [tattoos],” says the 53-year-old about his inked up colleagues. “Once they realize I’m not passing judgment on them and we actually have something in common, it helps when having a conversation about the things we disagree on,” he says.

His wife’s portrait is etched on his shoulder, her initials wrap around his ring finger and her name is woven in barbwire around his bicep. The couple enjoys horseback riding, and Forsyth says his next tattoo will memorialize that hobby. A cross on his back commemorates his deceased father, and an angel on his shoulder honors grandma. “She was my angel,” he says.



As for workplace policies that prohibit tattoos, “I would like to think we’ve moved beyond that stuff,” says Forsyth. “Everyone is judgmental, but we should spend more time judging ourselves.”

The American public’s embrace of body art is at an all-time high, but a stigma lives on within corporate culture. Over the course of half a century, a former trademark of social outcasts has surged into what some tattoo artists believe is an unsustainable fad. There are more than 200 tattoo shops in the Capital Region alone.

Feeding the trend, tattoos have become standard on pop megastars like Justin Bieber, who reportedly has 11. They adorn the arms of Super Bowl quarterbacks and celebrity judges on American Idol. Bring up the tattoo phenomenon at any dinner party and watch as older conservatives tinker with the concept of why, while across the table, their kids or grandkids are often wondering what should I get?

Among millennials, tattoos are about as common as Facebooking on company time and voting for President Obama. In fact, 18-to-29 year olds with tattoos are more likely to have supported the president, according to a 2010 [study](#) from PEW Research. Four in 10 millennials have a tattoo, though 70 percent hide them under clothing. The white-collar professionals who happily display their artwork carry a ‘my body, my choice’ attitude.

“My knowledge, my skills are so much bigger than my appearance. And that’s what I’m selling,” says Leidhra Johnson, 24, a social media manager for Sacramento-based Uptown Studios. That said, Johnson acknowledges that the ink extending down her arms creates a hurdle in the corporate atmosphere, and she does occasionally become self-aware, if only momentarily.

“There would be times when I walked into a meeting and, great, I’m the only young person, I’m the only

female, and let's top it off — I'm covered in tattoos," she says. "It's hard not to feel the heat, but I also have to remind myself that there's a very good chance that's all in my head ... And let them stare. I have beautiful artwork."

Employees who bare their ink bring discomfort to some business owners. Policies that prohibit visible tattoos are still common, and employers admit that while they may not have a company policy in place, a visible tattoo does impact their perception of an individual worker. But when asked why exactly, numerous employers declined to share their views for this article. Some cited the importance of maintaining a professional appearance, while others simply want to steer away from controversy.

Dr. Jim Wendling, a Fair Oaks-based corporate psychologist, provided one interpretation into the source of the aversion. Tattoos reflect inwardly focused values, he says, "a personal decision that a person makes to satisfy their own lack of self-esteem. ... 'I'm going to brand myself, I'm making a conscious decision based on my own self-concept, and I'll just have to let other people know they have to deal with that.' Well that's a little bit selfish," says Wendling, who is 63.

Furthermore, he says, those who refer to tattoo prohibition policies as discriminatory are taking the "path of least resistance." Companies can still legally ban visible tattoos, he notes, citing a [U.S. Supreme Court](#) ruling.

"Corporate America is dictated by government in almost every area, but they can still assemble a group of likeminded people. Self-expression is not high on the list. The greater common good takes precedent," he says.

As of this printing, a Facebook group called 'Tattoo acceptance in the workplace' has 1.6 million supporters (the site operators declined comment for this story). But the activists have a long way to go: 31 percent of employers say a visible tattoo is the main reason they would be less likely to grant a promotion, according to a 2011 [survey](#) of about 3,000 hiring managers by careerbuilder.com.

That might have something to do with the fact that tattooed people are generally regarded as "rougher" and "less educated," according to a 2007 survey of about 500 employees across the nation by vault.com. Curiously, 42 percent of those surveyed admitted to having a tattoo or body piercing.

The rise in tattoo fashion has led to a subsequent rise in tattoo removal surgeries, which jumped a remarkable 32 percent from 2011 to 2012, according to a nationwide poll conducted by [The Patient's Guide](#). Survey respondents said 'employment reasons' were the most common motivator for removing a tattoo.

The Laser and Skin Surgery Center in Sacramento used to do two to three tattoo removal procedures per day, but in the past five years that daily frequency has grown to five or six. Applying for a new job is a common reason for removing a tattoo, as well as other personal transitions like a new relationship, marriage or child, says director Suzanne Kilmer. Those who undergo the procedure for employment are

often in politics, law or the medical field, she says. But more commonly, Sacramentans remove their tattoos because they matured past them.

Medical staff in Kilmer's office are not allowed to display personal tattoos, and some employees have even had their tattoos removed at work. Kilmer says that most medical offices prohibit visible tattoos in order to maintain the perception of a "squeaky clean" atmosphere.

Her patients have included a well-known politician who wanted a tattoo on his bicep removed before running for higher office. One lawyer had an allergic reaction to the ink and attempted to remove his tattoo with a kitchen knife, which did not work. Another young man came in to remove a swastika from his forehead. The patient admitted his initial reasoning for the swastika was poor, though Kilmer still characterized the man as a "complete idiot."

There's another reason people don't like tattoos: They have been used for centuries to brand unsavory characters. But just like today, tattoos were once a way to signal induction into a community or done as a therapeutic practice.

In 1991, two German tourists uncovered a 5,200-year-old corpse while hiking along a glacier on the Italian-Austria border. Otzi the Iceman was heralded as the oldest mummy ever discovered in Europe. He also earned another distinction: Researchers found dots and crosses chiseled down Otzi's lower spine and right knee, the first tattoo on record, presumably some sort of ancient remedy for joint pain. Tattoo patterns are prevalent in mummies across Asia and Africa. For ancient Iranians, they were a mark of nobility. The Greeks used them to brand criminals, and the Romans tattooed their slaves.

More recent biases about body art can be traced back to 1769, when British explorer James Cook landed in Tahiti. The islanders referred to their epidermal markings as 'tattaus,' meaning to strike. Along with a new term, a fashion was reborn as European sailors began adorning their forearms with anchors and other images commemorating the risk of their profession. Sailors, who represented a life of freedom to the North American working class, popularized tattoos in the West, according to [randomhistory.com](http://randomhistory.com). In the early 20th century, tattooed third-world natives on display in U.S. carnivals were gradually replaced by tattooed American freaks. After WWII, the oddity stigma grew as tattoos became the bailiwick of bikers, criminals and other societal rejects.

But in the 1970s and 80s, American sailor Jerry Collins helped reintroduce the Japanese style of intricate, artful tattooing, and tattoo pioneer Lyle Tuttle popularized designs for the American middle class. By 1982, then-Gov. Jerry Brown proclaimed that body ink had "re-emerged as a fine art attracting highly trained and skilled practitioners." If Jack Kerouac had come of age at the time, it isn't hard to imagine the beat writer with a portrait of his shiny Hudson sedan etched along his right shoulder blade.

It was in this wild child spirit that Madeline Journey-Lynn went in to Back Door Studios on Del Paso Boulevard in 1986 to get a small seahorse on her back.

“I wanted to do something different. Something that nobody I knew at the time had been doing. And also, I just really like seahorses,” says the 56-year-old retiree, who now has more than 30 tattoos. Tattoos can be an enriching form of self-expression, she says. “I think that the more people can express themselves, the better off they are emotionally, spiritually, whatever.”

Journey-Lynn has worked at the career center at Sac State and on hiring panels for numerous state agencies. She has always covered her ink for job interviews, and recommends that others do the same.

“You go in looking as clean as you possibly can for an interview, partly as a sign of respect, but as partly saying, ‘hey look, I’m just like everyone else,’” she says, adding that she thinks company tattoo bans are discriminatory. But then again, she admits that she personally makes snap judgments about people with tattoos, depending on the image. “You cannot help it. It’s the weirdest thing,” she says.

Opinions about body art have grown as diverse as the images themselves. From snowflakes to swastikas, some people see self-absorption where others see self-empowerment. And others don’t burden themselves with what it all means — they simply wanted their dead dog immortalized on their thigh. People with tattoos interviewed for this article said they wished society was less prejudiced about them. At the same time, the abnormality can be part of the allure.

Dave O’Connor, the 43-year-old owner of Sacramento Tattoo and Piercing, has stars tattooed on his forehead and full ink sleeves adorning his arms. When he reflects on Justin Bieber, the teen heartthrob with 11 tattoos, it makes O’Connor wish he didn’t have any. It’s getting harder to set oneself apart from the herd. That might explain why more young people who only have minimal ink on their arms and torso are going in for face and hand tattoos, says O’Connor. There’s even a name for it: the California Suit. And in the greater genre of body modification, trends are also becoming more explicit.

Consider the counterculture Japanese fashion of [injecting silicon into the forehead](#) to inflate the epidermis until it looks like a bagel is protruding from under the skin. In 20 years, Americans who are young today probably won’t undergo the ‘bagelhead’ procedure, says O’Connor, “But a bunch of kids will, and we’ll all be like, ‘You stupid kids.’”

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Tattoos in the Workplace:

Anonymous Employers React

**“We’re in the business of serving customers;** not entertaining them or having them believe everyday is Halloween around here.”

**“If two people were equally qualified and one was tatted up,** I would probably hire the other. I believe in expressing yourself in less self-indulgent ways.”

**“I feel it is good for people to express themselves.** When I interview someone with body modifications, I

feel they do not represent me and my business image. Nothing bad to say about their choice.”

“**People automatically think that tattooed people don’t know anything** and that they are simply rebels. That isn’t true though. You can’t judge someone by how they look. You need to get to know them. People have no right to judge.”

“**You eat to please yourself**, you dress to please others.”

“**For many older people, [tattoos] create an initial bad impression.** Once you get to know the person — if you get to know the person — they don’t matter. I don’t like to wear ties unless I am going to court. This habit of mine also creates an initial bad impression among many older people.”

“**If you are a business owner considering prohibiting or restricting piercings and tattoos,** make sure you have a valid reason and always consider the thoughts, interests and opinions of your employees. Micromanaging them may lead to resentment, management/employee tension and more.”

“**Freedom of expression and professionalism collide** at the intersection of your world viewpoint and your self image at the expense of others. In other words, it’s not all about you.”