



HR Broadcast –

Tattoos

I appreciate that I am not in the first flow of youth and that my approach to tattoos may be seen by some of today's society as a bit old fashioned. For this reason I often have some difficulty when asked the question about the acceptability of tattoos. I have been asked a few times what an employer can do when an employee turns up for work showing off a large, highly visible tattoo. Some employers take the view that this presents an unprofessional image whereas others see this as an expression of body art. Some employers have suggested that since the tattoo cannot be washed off, that this might give grounds for dismissal?

I know that tattoos are becoming increasingly popular, especially those that cover a large area. Whilst this form of art isn't my cup of tea I do appreciate that they represent a high level of skill by the tattoo artist. Having said that, body art isn't always welcome in the workplace, especially in a professional office environment. Indeed, it is pretty common for dress and appearance policies to state that, for those employees whose job duties bring them into contact with the public, clients, customers, etc., then tattoos must be covered up

So, then, what do you do if an employee turns up for work with a new, highly visible tattoo, such as an ink sleeve running down their entire arm. What are your options? I would suggest one of the following;

1. Do nothing at all. However this will set a dangerous precedent, not just as to

what this employee might do in the future but in how you can tackle similar problems presented by other employees.

2. Take disciplinary action. If this is your desired approach then you must have a dress and appearance policy in place that sets out the rules of your workplace **AND** states that any breach will be deemed a disciplinary offence and may result in disciplinary action being taken against the employee.
3. You could consider dismissal provided that the employee has less than 2 years of continuous employment.
4. Try and find a mutually agreeable solution such as having the offending body art covered up at all times when bringing the employee into contact with the public, clients, customers, etc

If you decide on Option 2, you must be able to show that you acted reasonably in all the circumstances, especially if you ultimately decide to dismiss the employee because of their tattoo. In this instance not only must your policy on visible tattoos be reasonable, e.g. the employee has a public-facing role, you must be able to fully justify why your strict standards are necessary, e.g. due to its nature, your business and its employees must present a professional image at all times.



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You can't dismiss an employee simply because you dislike their tattoo or think that it looks unprofessional, so that deals with any opinions that I may have!

You must be able to prove why it is unacceptable in your workplace. If you can't, any dismissal will be unfair. An example here could be an employee who works in a warehouse and never sees the public; in that situation the body art won't reflect badly on your business if it is only visible to other employees, regardless of what your own views may be.

However even if disciplinary action seems appropriate it is always best to try and find a mutually agreeable solution as in Option 4. If that is your plan then meet with the employee, explain the problem and ask the employee to find a discreet solution such as wearing long-sleeved tops.

Above all, if you could be faced with this issue, please consider having a dress and appearance policy included within your handbook.

Having after all of this, I am aware that attitudes change over time and I can envisage a time, probably in the not too distant future, when tattoos will be accepted for any role in the workplace.