

Woe to Professionalism: Why Self-expression Deserves a Place to Stay

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On a blisteringly hot, 98-degree day in August of 2018, the coziest place for Amanda Merkle to be was the stuffy back room of a car dealership in New Jersey. One might wonder why she strayed away from her front desk seat, where she worked as a receptionist, just to sit in the ill-light corner of an office and organize files all day. To end the speculation, Merkle felt most comfortable there because she could take her sweatshirt off without being scolded.

Merkle, 24, was required to wear either a jacket or a long-sleeved shirt under her mandated uniform as well as long pants everyday in order to cover her tattoos. Despite the fact that she wore a short-sleeved blouse to her interview, meaning her tattoos were clearly observable, Merkle was not informed of the company's "policy" restricting visible tattoos until months after she was hired. In addition to forcing her to cover her body art, she was reminded constantly to make sure she "looked presentable".

"All of this affected me. It affected my mood at work especially. It seemed unfair that I had to sit there, sweating and uncomfortable, all day, just because I had tattoos. It made me feel like I had to put more makeup on and do my hair more to compensate for my forehead sweat and the fact that I was so bundled up in the summer. Like if I put on more mascara, maybe they wouldn't see how miserable I was," Merkle said.

Where forms of self-expression like makeup and hair styles are meant to provide individuals with personal joy and fulfillment, it is possible for resentment to form as they are made obligatory in order to cater to an outdated image of a model worker. The question becomes this: Do a person's individual choices as they relate to self expression discerningly have an affect on their ability to be successful in the professional world? And if so, why?

A 2013 [study](#) conducted through the University of Tampa surveyed 100 undergraduates and asked them a similar series of questions. Among 23 different majors and multiple gender identities, 86% of those surveyed feared that someone with visible tattoos would face more-than-usual difficulty finding employment. Further, "89.2% indicated they would consider the location on the body with regard to employment when in the process of getting a tattoo".

It is relatively common to think that outward displays of self expression could be frowned upon in the modern workplace as the students interviewed overwhelmingly indicated that awareness of this issue exists. The problem in their eyes, however, is not with how others view their tattoos in a manner of disliking them, but rather the stigma attached to individuals who have tattoos or express themselves more openly in general.

Take Shannon Deuel, for instance. As a Penn State graduate, Deuel, 24, currently works as the full-time Art Director for a medical device company in Pennsylvania. In this position, Deuel said she is allowed the freedom to express herself more than is typically normalized in other

workplaces in the United States. As someone who enjoys dying her hair eccentric colors and experimenting with bright makeup, Deuel said her luck of working in a like minded environment was not acquired immediately. Moreover, she said that even now she is swayed by the ruling element of generalized workplace standards when making personal decisions.

“Over the years I’ve definitely changed with what I’ve felt comfortable wearing to work. Still, I got my septum pierced about a year ago and the reason I got that spot pierced in particular is so I can tuck it up into my nose whenever I need to without it being seen. I guess I got it there because of professionalism in a way. I think work makes you choose sometimes. It makes you consider certain things about your self-image,” Deuel said.

Regardless of an innate impulse to show her personality at work, Deuel said she has consistently wrestled with the influence of professionalism. When making self-image decisions that should purely be based on whether or not they will foster happiness and joy for an individual, people are often focused on how those decisions will impact their current employment status. Even though she had not experienced any form of suppression of her personality in this particular job, Deuel still felt the need to consider how her appearance might affect her work environment.

When asked what advice she might give someone struggling in their current job as it relates to barriers around self-expression, Deuel said, “there are a lot of things in the workplace that you may have to go along with to get along, but too many could mean you’re not working at a place that is really for you.”

As wealth and/ or power are often treated equivalently to success in the U.S., those who distance themselves from the “ideal” employee model of clean, dull, and quiet might be broadly viewed as lesser than their conforming counterparts. Self-expression to an employer has the potential to be interpreted as unfocused on the job at hand, yet this overwhelmingly is not the case. In fact, it can be argued that self-expression is crucial to ensure extended happiness and overall feelings of fulfillment later on in life.

According to a [study](#) for Research on Aging, organized by Neal Krause of the University of Michigan, nurtured self-expression is actually linked to fewer symptoms of depression in old age. Derived from more than 1,000 cases of people aged 65 years or older, the results found that those who were allotted the freedom to discover themselves and cultivate their personalities throughout their lives in turn developed a greater sense of meaning in life and further “are more likely to feel grateful for the things they have received in life.”

Essentially, an environment that fosters self expression rather than attempts to belittle it will benefit a person as it relates to their self-worth, self-image, and overall mental health later in life.

For Catherine Maniscalco of WebFX, she said she is fortunate to work for a company, not unlike Deuel’s, that allows her the privilege of dismissing regret of self-expression, yet still does not remove the hesitation. Working as a Talent Acquisition Manager, Maniscalco is responsible for certain operations ranging from team member happiness to the interview and hiring process of new employees. In this position, she developed the impression that she should come to work

looking however she feels most comfortable. Maniscalco said she feels that she can fully be herself in this way, but has observed the effects of and recognizes this problem elsewhere.

“When I first started here [WebFX], it was empowering to be able to dress how I felt comfortable. I wasn’t used to it. I’m a very firm believer that you’ll do your best work when you are comfortable and it’s nice not having to put that brain power into picking out an appropriate outfit in the morning. It’s nice to find a company that encourages you to be yourself,” Maniscalco said.

In connection with what she and respectively the rest of WebFx look for in new talent, Maniscalco said they are a generally young community hiring entry level positions and seeking individuals who are passionate and harbor important soft skills that will ultimately benefit the company as a whole. She mentioned that passion and dedication to a job have no real relation to a person’s appearance and that it would have been lovely to be part of an organization who valued self expression like this at a young age.

For Amanda Merkle, after tolerating nearly a year of anxiety and frustration surrounding her job’s generally normalized suppression of expressiveness, she decided to seek employment elsewhere. She wound up taking an open server position at a popular restaurant chain known for its spicy wings and orange short shorts, attributing the change to a desire for liberation from personality censorship and long sleeves in heat.

Sadly, this endeavor was met with interchangeable disappointment in regards to her new employers’ limitations on self expression as well. Working in this chain means following a strict “image policy” in which servers are to appear styled and glamorous at all times while adhering to the outlined guide for personal appearance. Servers are to have their hair down and “done”, finger nails painted nude or french, and no visible tattoos, “outrageous” makeup, piercings, or other jewelry that if unfollowed would result in a potential termination. Additionally, alterations to one’s appearance following the hiring process are heavily disfavored, chastised, and often even punished. Regardless of work ethic, self-expression is essentially restricted in order to control the image of the employees.

Sydney Frederick has been a server for more than five years now. When Frederick began working at the same establishment just a few years before Merkle, she was greeted with kindred experiences of self-expression concealment. Frederick is half Black and therefore has naturally curly hair. While she is now able to say that she loves her natural hair unconditionally, if you had asked her a few years ago, her answer may have been slightly different.

Following her 2018 win of the annual, regional beauty pageant held in each of this particular chain’s establishments, Frederick was barred by the corporate office from participating in a social media takeover on the account’s Instagram app. Regardless of the event being a tradition for the winner, Frederick was ineligible as her hair wasn’t naturally colored. At the time of her win, Frederick’s hair was considered two-toned because her brunette roots were beginning to grow beneath her artificially blonde curls. According to an old policy of the restaurant, hair cannot be colored "more than two-shades in variance from a natural color".

“It took a lot out of me to go into work with my curly hair and be repeatedly told I look bad or that someone likes it a different way. I felt like I had to be their version of presentable everywhere. Like I wasn’t going to be valued if I didn’t look a certain way. And normally that meant changing my hairstyle and covering my tattoos to fit in and feel more secure,” Frederick said.

This brings to mind a 2013 [story](#) in which former server Farryn Johnson was awarded \$250,000 following her complaint against this same business franchise for wrongful termination as a consequence of changing her hair style.

To further emphasize the severe lengths of control obtained with policies like this, Frederick described multiple instances in which she witnessed the blatant smothering of an employee’s expressiveness on shift. On one occasion, Frederick saw a girl asked to wipe off her new fuschia lipstick when she came in for her shift because it didn’t “look right”.

Another girl made the decision to shave her head and dye it blue. She was sent home almost immediately. Separately, Frederick observed a coworker be sent home for the color of her nails. The employee had come in for her shift with a bright nail color unbeknown to the managers that she was to be a bridesmaid in a friend’s wedding the following weekend and was asked to pay for her nails to match the bridal party. Upon seeing her manicure, she was asked to leave and not return for another shift until the color was changed or altered to meet the “standards” for the brand.

In every instance discussed above, the employee was scolded or even penalized for having the audacity to reveal their personalities and/or participate in self-expression. Though it is the preferred standard of this particular restaurant that all servers look *presentable*, breaking down that concept means determining what acceptable means at work.

One person’s definition of work-acceptable means hair is down and straight while another is gelled up in a bun, or sectioned in braids, or maybe even shaved bald and painted with flowers. The point is that there is no one definition for what should be acceptable. Limits on self expression only hurt those trying to express themselves and have no real effect on the people setting them.

Nevertheless, perpetuating the image of a “perfect” employee as it relates to an individual’s appearance or style choices has the potential to negatively impact said persons. It is true that employers are basically casting a role when filling a new position, but a map is needed to find the justification to control a person’s image and ability to express themselves merely for company appearance. A person is not their job. A person is not their career. They are just that, people. No job, especially not one that pays minimum wage, should be worth someone's self worth and the loss of their individualism.

References

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