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WHITE COLLAR INK: Can you be CEO when you look like you're on parole?



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San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick has sparked a major debate over tattoos on people in the public eye. Picture: AAP

BUSINESS and community leaders are expected to present a clean-cut image of the organisations they represent. But will our next generation of CEOs be covered in tattoos?

In the next five to 10 years the "body art" generation will start moving up into leadership positions.

Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers American football team, sparked wild debate in the US about the body image of people in public leadership positions. He's covered in highly visible tattoos.

David Whitley, a prominent sports columnist, wrote of Kaepernick's role as the face of his franchise: "NFL quarterback is the ultimate position of influence and responsibility."

"He is the CEO of a high-profile organisation, and you don't want your CEO to look like he just got paroled.

"When the Panthers interviewed Cam Newton, owner Jerry Richardson popped the question: 'do you have any tattoos?'. 'No, sir, I don't have any,' Newton said. 'We want to keep it that way,' Richardson said.

"Newton would be the face, arms and legs of the franchise. The boss didn't want them covered in ink lines."

American sports teams are big businesses and, particularly in football, the leader of those teams – the quarterback, a position traditionally occupied by clean-cut, mostly white college graduates with first names like Brady and Colt – are the faces of the organisations for whom they play.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Do you think tattoos make it harder to climb the corporate ladder?

Yes

No

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Kaepernick doesn't fit the bill. He's a pure athlete of mixed European and African descent, and his heavily inked arms quote bible verses. A prominent columnist wrote of Kaepernick's role, ie, as the face of his franchise:

"NFL quarterback is the ultimate position of influence and responsibility," wrote David Whitley. "He is the CEO of a high-profile organisation, and you don't want your CEO to look like he just got paroled."

This isn't a discussion about tattooed sports stars as it is about the acceptable corporate image of future leaders.

And it's an issue that is becoming more relevant in Australian workplaces, with around one in four Australians aged 20-29 (22.3 per cent of men and 29.4 per cent of women) sporting tattoos according to La Trobe University research released earlier this year.

Corporate image consultant Cosimina Nesci says the stigma attached to tattoos is not as strong amongst young people.

"Tattoos are becoming more of the norm with the younger generation and we have to remember eventually the next generation are going to be the next leaders," Ms Nesci said.

"I do think companies will be forced to relook at the rules and dress code in terms of what's accepted and not accepted."

Ms Nesci said it is unlikely the executives of major banks and law firms will be covered in tattoos in five years time, but the possibility "can't be crossed out".

"If you think Generation Z has just finished [school] this year and they're 18, in 20 years a lot of them will have tattoos and what's stopping them being CEOs?" she said.

Think before you ink

But image consultant Annalisa Armitage warned that corporate Australia is still "very, very conservative".

"It will be many, many years until they're ready for very visible tattoos," Ms Armitage said. "When you think about the roots of tattoos, you think of biker gangs, it comes from that sort of place."

Ms Armitage said people with tattoos had to work harder to prove their ability and skills.

"If bosses have an opinion that someone is flighty, not serious, or a rebel, a person with a tattoo would have to work ten times harder to demonstrate that's not true," she said.

"You can overcome negative impressions, of course you can... but I think you'd be taking a big, big risk."

But Ms Armitage said some tattoos were less inappropriate than others.

"The tiny little butterfly on the ankle versus the full sleeve of dragons, there's a difference around that as well," she said.

"My advice would be play it safe, if you really want one get it somewhere where no one's every going to see it when you're at work."

John, a 27-year-old Brisbane businessman, says he'd find it more challenging to land a big leadership role if he had prominent tattoos.

"If in any reasonable business context your tattoo was visible, it would be a negative thing I think," he told news.com.au.

"I think the cut-off, it's a little pragmatic, is the forearm. If you end up rolling up your sleeves at work and it's visible it'd be a hindrance.

"Anything on the neck or face would have to be an immediate deal-breaker. I'm probably a little more liberal on that though."

** Note: Chris Paine, the co-author of this article, has three tattoos.*