

# Standing out: Rocking an alternative look in a mainstream job

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Special to NWjobs

## CAREER ADVICE

A traditional Japanese dragon tattoo wraps around the back of Sandra Magallanes. Characters from the book “Where the Wild Things Are” dance across her bicep.

But to score an accounting position in a property-management company five years ago, Magallanes, 33, knew what she had to do. She covered her tattoos, took out her septum and nose rings, maintained a conventional haircut and sold her skills and abilities to the hiring committee. She got the job.

These days, in the laid-back city that launched grunge, is it still necessary to mainstream your alternative look to start and keep a successful career?

We’re more accepting of body art in the Pacific Northwest, says Arden Clise, a business-etiquette expert and consultant at Clise Etiquette. Nevertheless, when it comes to hiring, “tattoos and piercings are still kind of a big deal for employers,” she says.

Flashing a metal tongue ring or other body art during an interview can distract from an interview’s focus, Clise says. Remove extra piercings beyond one or two in the ears, keep hair color within the natural range of human hues and cover tattoos before the interview, she suggests.

### Body art by the numbers

A 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed changing demographics for body art. More than half (54 percent) of Americans aged 18-25 have a tattoo, have dyed their hair a non-traditional color or had a body piercing in a place other than their earlobe, the survey found. Percentage of Americans who have a tattoo, by age range:

18-25.....36%  
 26-40.....40%  
 41-64.....10%

“You want to cover up without looking too obvious,” Clise says, with a scarf around a neck tattoo or long pants over an ankle imprint.

A little research before an interview can help job seekers target companies with looser policies about employee appearance. Many employers offer a casual dress code, especially in the technology and creative fields. Take a lunchtime stroll in the tech-heavy South Lake Union neighborhood, for example, and you’ll see brightly colored hair, a variety of piercings, and worker-identification lanyards swinging around heavily tattooed necks.

If you work behind the scenes in a phone bank or a programming cubicle, conformity may not be strictly enforced. “If you’re out working with customers or clients, you’ll have less leeway to show off your body art,” Clise says.

At Magallanes’s workplace, her latest boss waived selective parts of the dress code — she was allowed to wear her discreet nose ring, as she didn’t work with the public or clients.

In some customer-oriented positions, tattoos can offer a talking point. Lesley James, 44, a teen services librarian with the Seattle Public Library, added a raven tattoo to her forearm in 2007. “In folklore, ravens bring knowledge to

people,” James says. Since then, she hasn’t experienced any difficulties with her manager or patrons, and says the tattoo might even make her seem more approachable to teens.

Talk to your boss before investing in a showy full-body tattoo or dying your hair blue, Clise suggests. “If it’s going to be something kind of big, run it by your employer first,” she says.

In one edgy move, Magallanes shaved her head. She kept her fringe of bangs, however, creating a thoroughly punk style in the process. For a while she wore a hat — until co-workers encouraged her to remove the cap and rock the hairstyle.

She kept it for nearly 18 months, until her boss suggested that Magallanes “might want to grow her hair out.” Magallanes did so, treasuring her employer and position more than her haircut. “I can give a little if they give a little,” she says.

“My professional attire tends to be suits, slacks, skirts and maybe army boots,” Magallanes says. “I still have my flair.”