

# Building eQuality in the Workplace

## DRESS AND APPEARANCE IN THE WORKPLACE



## What the law says

It is against the law to discriminate against an employee by treating them less favourably than someone else because of their dress or appearance. Employers are also liable for the behaviour of their staff so if a staff member discriminates, a complaint can be made against them and the organisation.

However, an employer can create and maintain an image for their organisation that best suits their industry and their clients' needs by setting reasonable standards of dress, appearance and behaviour.

Discrimination against workers for their dress or appearance includes:

- sacking or demotion
- denying or limiting access to promotion, transfer, performance bonus pay, training or any other benefits
- unreasonable workplace policies, practices and procedures that they cannot comply with compared with other employees.

In employment equal opportunity laws apply to:

- all stages of employment, including recruitment, dismissal and retrenchment
- full-time, part-time, casual, temporary workers, probationary workers, contract workers, those on commission, or job applicants.

## Tips for setting a reasonable dress code

Consider:

- ✓ The industry. Different dress standards apply to people working in a bank compared to a construction site.
- ✓ The nature of the job. A position that has a high degree of customer contact may require a different dress standard to someone involved in research.
- ✓ Health and safety issues. Will jewellery or cultural dress, such as a flowing sari, pose a safety risk when operating machinery?
- ✓ Competitive positioning. A five star hotel will have a more rigorous appearance code than a backpacker inn.
- ✓ The impact on the employee. Asking a Sikh to remove a turban has a greater impact than asking someone to remove a fashion accessory.

**For more information on employers' general rights and obligations, case studies and tips on avoiding discrimination in the workplace visit our website**

**[www.eoc.vic.gov.au](http://www.eoc.vic.gov.au)**



## Common concerns

### Collars and ties for men, or skirts for women

Asking men to wear a collar and tie, or women to wear skirts and dresses, may discriminate on the basis of sex. Instead, ask all employees to wear 'standard business attire'.

### Hair

Insisting on a clean shaven look or a particular hairstyle may discriminate on the basis of physical features or religious beliefs. Workers can be told to tie their hair back or cover it up for health and safety reasons if involved in food preparation or operating machinery.

### Height and weight

It is against the law to discriminate against employees on the basis of height or weight, unless such physical features are needed for a job.

### Tattoos

Some workers may have tattoos for religious or cultural reasons.

### Earrings

Rules on earrings and other jewellery should apply equally to both sexes. Restrictions can be imposed for health and safety reasons. For example, long earrings can be banned if they may get caught in machinery or pulled out by patients.

### CASE STUDY

*A poker dealer at a casino is dismissed for breaching the casino's grooming policy by refusing to remove a tongue stud. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission finds it is reasonable for the appearance policy to ban tongue studs in line with the casino's five-star competitive positioning and the job requirement of clear speech.*

### CASE STUDY

*A petrol station owner is found to have unlawfully discriminated against an employee by dismissing him for refusing to remove a nose stud. The Tribunal determines the nose stud is not a safety hazard and does not interfere with the employee's role as a console operator. It finds the employer has discriminated on the basis of sex because women are not subjected to the same requirement.*

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## Tips for developing a non-discriminatory dress code

Consult with staff and ensure the code:

- ✓ relates to the job and has reasonable requirements.
- ✓ does not differentiate between the sexes.
- ✓ Allows workers to comply with religious and cultural beliefs.
- ✓ Treats people fairly on the basis of physical features such as hair, facial hair and tattoos.
- ✓ is fair to people with disabilities.

## More information

The Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria offers education, training and support in equal opportunity policies and practices. Training can be delivered on-site throughout Victoria or at our training centre in Melbourne.

Please telephone (03) 9281 7122 for more information.

The Commission also offers a free advice telephone service on (03) 9281 7100.



**Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria**  
3/380 Lonsdale Street  
Melbourne Victoria 3000

Advice Line: (03) 9281 7100  
Phone: (03) 9281 7111  
Fax: (03) 9281 7171  
TOLL FREE: 1800 134 142 (country callers)  
TTY: (03) 9281 7110  
Email: [complaints@eoc.vic.gov.au](mailto:complaints@eoc.vic.gov.au)  
Website: [www.eoc.vic.gov.au](http://www.eoc.vic.gov.au)

Free interpreters available on request

Authorised by the Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria, 3/380 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3000.

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### Disclaimer

This information is intended as a guide only. It is not a substitute for legal advice.