

Employee Relations LAW JOURNAL

From the Editor—
All of Us

Victoria Prussen Spears

Employers' Whole-Self Conundrum: A Closer Look at the Practical and Legal Realities
of Inviting Employees to Bring Their "Whole Self" to Work

Letitia Silas

Is Now the Right Time to Apply for U.S. Citizenship? U.S. Citizenship and
Immigration Services Implements New Policies for "Good Moral Character"
and "Anti-American" Ideologies

*Ted J. Chiappari, M. Alejandra Vargas,
Isabella Castellon Lebron and
Guilherme Massetti*

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Issues New Guidance on Presidential
Proclamation Imposing \$100,000 Fee for Certain H-1B Workers

*Dustin J. O'Quinn and
Juan Steevens*

New Laws Enacted in 2025 Impacting California Employers

*Nina Ngo, Jennifer Wilson, Meg Thering
and Koray J. Bulut*

Philadelphia Strengthens Ban-the-Box Law: Key Updates and
7 Steps for Employers

*Leanne Lane Coyle and
Kelsey E. Schiappacasse*

International Spotlight—Federal Court Decision in *FWO v. Woolworths & Coles*:
What Australian Employers Need to Know About Annualised
Salaries and Set-Off Arrangements

*Nicola Martin, Erin Kidd,
Elisa Blakers and Grace Kim*

Current Developments

Steven A. Meyerowitz

Employee Benefits—Hands On or Hands Off: A Plan Sponsor's Guide to
Picking a Section 3(21) Investment Advisor or Section 3(38)
Investment Manager

Mark E. Bokert and Alan Hahn

ERISA Litigation—Employee Consent Required? U.S. Court of Appeals
for the Ninth Circuit May Provide Some Guidance Related to
Arbitrability of ERISA Claims

*Joseph J. Torres, Hope H. Tone-O'Keefe
and Sriya Chadalavada*



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Employers' Whole-Self Conundrum: A Closer Look at the Practical and Legal Realities of Inviting Employees to Bring Their "Whole Self" to Work

By Letitia Silas

In this article, the author explores the business and legal practical realities and implications of employees bringing their whole selves to work.

In recent years, particularly since the pandemic blurred the lines between personal and professional life, the phrase "bring your whole self to work" has become a popular mantra in the workplace. This idea recognizes that work-life may require some individuals to abandon parts of their personhood to fit within the framework of their employer's organization – in other words, to "fit" in. Therefore, it promises to recognize, respect, and even honor the full spectrum of an individual's personal, cultural, and social identity at work.

This has come to mean also embracing their humanity in its entirety, including the commendable, the flawed, and the indifferent aspects of their personality, not just their professional presentation and accomplishments.

The intention behind this "whole self" approach to employee relations is to foster an inclusive environment where employees feel empowered to express their true selves as one way to encourage open communication and challenge societal biases – those persistent and unlawful "isms" that can infiltrate the workplace. By doing so, it aims to ensure non-discrimination, inclusivity, and equal opportunity.

This article explores the business and legal practical realities and implications of employees bringing their whole selves to work.

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ARRAY OF CHALLENGES

While the noble intention behind the whole self to work initiative is undeniable, it also unveils a complex array of challenges. It causes what I call “employers’ whole-self conundrum” because it presents employers with the unique challenge of maintaining a professional and legally compliant workplace while encouraging open communication, authenticity, inclusion, and acceptance.

While this approach may be laudable on one hand, organizations must carefully weigh the pros and cons of embracing bring your whole self to work as a strategy for building positive employee relations. In doing so, striking a balance between professionalism and personal expression is critical as is determining the boundaries of appropriate expression and information sharing at work.

Employers must ask:

- (1) Does this approach foster true respect, inclusion and collaboration, or does it risk driving internal division, competitiveness, and suspicion?
- (2) Does it unintentionally place managers and leaders in the impossible position of having to triage every expression of concern, personal annoyance, personal wellness, and personal values as a potential legal risk or claim of some sort?
- (3) Does it give employees the misimpression that the workplace is the appropriate place for activism connected to personal or societal matters unrelated to the workplace or employees’ terms and conditions of employment?

BOUNDARIES AND PROFESSIONALISM START AT THE TOP

Healthy employee relations are critical to the success of any organization that relies on people to execute its mission. While inclusivity and authenticity are vital for creating a positive work culture, the reality is that not all aspects of one’s personality, values, or life are appropriate or suitable for cultivating a professional environment. In fact, ensuring truly healthy workplace dynamics may require setting appropriate boundaries and establishing standards of professionalism.

Organizations can establish some standards through workplace civility and workplace conduct policies. However, a better approach may be by demonstrating standards of professionalism through training leadership on how to show up to work. For example, if leadership shows up to work oversharing intimate details of their personal lives or viewpoints

(e.g., issues with children, spouses, relatives, friends, family, political figures, social issues, etc.), that encourages the same from employees, and the outcome may not always be desirable.

This does not mean that leaders must show up as stoic, rule-bound, and impersonable. After all, a key part of effective leadership is employee engagement, which is generally accomplished through personal connections on common issues.

It does mean, however, that leaders may be better off establishing connections with employees through their humanity as it relates to the work, the mission of the organization, and the professional goals and aspirations of employees. By doing so, management is – by word and action – setting healthy boundaries on appropriate workplace communications where “we want to hear from you” is conveyed and understood as “we want to hear from you about work,” and where “bring your whole self to work” is understood as “bring your professional self to work.”

Likewise, if leaders do not set guardrails around how they communicate at work, ensuring that it is always reflective of the organization's brand, then they can expect the same lack of professionalism from employees. For example, a leader whose work conversation is regularly laced with profanity or other expressions not necessarily reflective of the organization's positive values, can expect a similar tone and tenor from employees.

Thus, leaders should remain mindful that work is in fact work, and at work we are all expected to bring our best professional selves, not our whole selves. Work is not a day out with friends, nor is work a “family” occasion no matter how warm and familiar it feels.

This does not mean that leadership communication cannot be authentic. Quite the opposite, it should demonstrate how authenticity and personality can be expressed with professionalism. “Professionalism” is that which best reflects and advances the organization's values, mission, and goals with intentionality and cohesion.

For an organization to thrive, management must have a clear grasp of the mission and brand. More importantly, they need to communicate effectively and regularly not just through words, but through consistent actions. When management embodies the organization's values, it sets a powerful example for employees.

Likewise, when employees feel a sense of ownership and accountability, they are more likely to reflect the organization's brand and values in their interactions with co-workers and clients. This ownership fosters a sense of belonging and responsibility, enhancing the organization's overall performance.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The concept of bringing one's whole self to work may be interpreted differently across generations, largely influenced by differing views on

what is deemed “professional” or workplace “appropriate.” While there is no one-size-fits-all answer for any generational viewpoints, I have noticed that some generational differences are particularly stark in two areas: workplace appearance and professional wellness.

Many Boomers may have experienced a workplace where personal expression was not welcome. Conformity was key, with men in suits and women in dresses and pantyhose, adhering to gendered societal norms. Individuality may have been sacrificed for a uniform professional image. Gen X began relaxing these rigid standards, embracing a slightly more casual and less gendered approach. While suits and pantyhose were no longer mandatory, appearance still needed to align with professional expectations connected to specific roles, organizational culture, and the company's brand.

Millennials, including those adjacent to Gen X, continued to challenge traditional norms, recognizing (although not always agreeing with) professional appearance as a factor in career advancement. They also brought more comfort to discussing personal life issues at work (e.g., family matters, motherhood/fatherhood, hobbies, personal interests). This is coupled with a general expectation of values alignment between themselves and the organizations for which they work. Although they welcome deviations from “tradition,” many still feel a need to fit within the aesthetic or cultural dynamic of their organization or profession.

Gen Z and younger Millennials seem to have largely abandoned these traditional standards, asking “what does how I look have to do with the work.” They prioritize personal experiences and identity, including cultural and sociopolitical beliefs, over organizational conformity and insist that employers focus on their work product and not their professional appearance. Viewing themselves as individual “brands,” they are less willing to compromise their self-expression for the sake of aligning with their employer's brand.

In understanding these generational differences, organizations can better establish standards of professionalism while also valuing personal expression that aligns with their values and brand. One way to achieve this is through offering professional development training that demonstrates to employees how their personal presentation and communication at work not only impacts the organization's brand (which should be prioritized at work), but also how it can positively (or negatively) impact their interactions and influence with colleagues, clients, and customers.

Generations perceive professional wellness quite differently. Boomers, Gen X, and older Millennials often experienced workplaces where they were expected to sacrifice personal wellness and hide work-life impacts. This mindset was partly due to dismissive or suspicious responses from leaders or fears of legal claims, leading to a culture that these generations may perpetuate. However, Gen Z and younger Millennials have rejected this approach, embracing transparency about wellness, particularly mental health. This shift can create tension, as older leaders may fear the

risks or question motives associated with this level of transparency and sharing. Yet, it also presents an opportunity for growth.

Specifically, by learning from Gen Z's compassion and empathy, older leaders can foster environments where wellness is prioritized and appropriate levels of grace are extended, creating a more inclusive workplace for all, while also working collaboratively with HR to ensure legal compliance and risk mitigation.

LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Encouraging employees to bring their "whole selves" to work can foster a diverse and inclusive environment, but it also carries operational and legal risks. Welcoming all forms of personal and political expressions at work may inadvertently create division rather than unity, potentially leading to disputes and violations of workplace civility or anti-discrimination policies.

In extreme cases, such expressions could implicate equal employment opportunity or human rights laws, which protect against discrimination based on race, gender, national origin, religion, gender identity, personal appearance, and more. Moreover, remote workers might experience disengagement or social isolation if their beliefs differ from those of their colleagues, posing additional challenges.

Additionally, the "whole-self" approach could cause employees to view the private workplace as an appropriate platform for activism or protests unrelated to workplace issues or terms and conditions of employment. This misunderstanding could disrupt operations and incur legal costs if employees also believe such non-work-related activity is protected by law, such as the First Amendment, the National Labor Relations Act, and other laws.

To minimize disruptions and potential legal issues, employers should consider implementing clear guidelines on sociopolitical expressions at work. By balancing self-expression with professionalism, organizations can maintain a harmonious and legally compliant workplace.

CONCLUSION

Inclusivity and authenticity are cornerstones of a positive work culture, yet not all aspects of personal identity are conducive to a professional environment. It is essential to celebrate individual contributions within the framework of teamwork, equal opportunity, and fairness as opposed to open-ended invitations to employees to bring the full panoply of their personal beliefs and life details to work. By doing so, organizations can ensure that personal expression does not overshadow the collective goal of furthering the organization's mission.

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