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CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP

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Becoming “a more perfect” diverse & inclusive nation

In the days leading up to the Fourth of July, when we celebrate America’s evolving history to become “a more perfect” diverse and inclusive nation, it is critical to ensure that American Muslims—like people of all religions and none—feel respected in the United States workforce. Unfortunately, Muslims are all too frequently rejected as part of America’s religious landscape. This phenomenon seems particularly salient this year, as the Fourth of July falls just days before the start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Today, 77% of Muslims living in the U.S. are American citizens, while 35% of them were born in our country. These are important statistics because 47% of Americans believe that “the values of Islam are at odds with American values and way of life.”

The idea that being Muslim is incompatible with being an American still fuels pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. In 2012, the number of anti-Muslim incidents in the United States hit a ten-year high. Sadly, hostile reactions after the Boston Marathon bombings reflected the trend of anti-Muslim incidents and statements making news.

One example was when Glenn Beck publicly proclaimed that “no American citizen blows up random people; that’s a Middle Eastern scene, that’s not an American scene.” Beck ignored the fact that neither of the bombing suspects were from the Middle East, that both had lived in America for years, and that one was an American citizen.

In a similar fashion, commentator Erik Rush sent out tweets blaming Muslims for the Boston attack. On *The 700 Club*, Pat Robertson said of Islam, “Don’t talk to me about religion of peace. No way!” Meanwhile, police reportedly searched a Saudi national’s apartment near Boston; the man, who has since been cleared, had been wounded in the bombing. A Muslim woman wearing hijab also was hit in the shoulder by someone calling her a terrorist.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is also occurring in the workplace. We hear employees recall experiences of blatant bias and ridicule every day. Like the Egyptian corporate recruit, who was introduced to his new fellow workers, and then listened as they were reassured, “Don’t worry when you see him around. He’s not a terrorist.” Or what happened to Naida Hosan, a Christian soldier, who recently wrote about being mocked by her fellow U.S. soldiers for her “Muslim” name. To stop the ridicule, she changed her name to “Naida Christian Nova,” but that only led to more harassment. She reports that when she complained to her supervisors about the anti-Muslim insults she was facing, they responded with reprisals intended to drive her out of the army.

Magnified by recent events and the presence of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States since 9/11, human resources and diversity professionals need to make sure that Muslim employees are being treated respectfully.

There are many people, including some HR professionals, who believe that this issue does not filter into their workplaces – and that this is not a diversity issue, but rather a political one. We beg to differ. Muslims make up less than 2% of the United States population, but in 2009 they filed one quarter of the religious discrimination claims with the



Photo by Timothy K. Hamilton

EEOC. For example, one company was sued for throwing blood, meat, and bones at Muslim immigrants from Somalia, and frequently interrupting them while they prayed. Another company was sued for refusing to hire an eighteen-year-old Muslim woman wearing hijab. **There have been instances of Muslim women being denied the right to wear hijab** while working as police officers, and of teachers in public schools being prevented from wearing religious garb.

Since anti-Muslim sentiment has infiltrated workplaces and affected Muslim employees, it is important that we respond through religiously inclusive policies.

There are a lot of ways to get started, including:

- Recognize that Ramadan is one of the most important observances for Muslims. **Read Tanenbaum's fact sheet to learn more about appropriate accommodations and how to support a productive workplace during Ramadan.**
- Create a "Quiet Room" that allows all employees to practice their daily religious obligations or quietly reflect during the workday. This can be particularly important during Ramadan, when some Muslims increase the practice of their faith and therefore may pray more regularly.
- Each company should look to address religious diversity and anti-Muslim sentiment in a way that suits its diversity strategy. If your workplace supports religious and interfaith employee resource groups, consider leveraging those groups to educate employees about Ramadan's significance. In companies that do not support religion-based groups, consider how an ERG around race could more proactively engage the United States' growing population of African-American Muslims. Religion intersects and interacts with all identifiers; there are countless innovative ways to include religion in your existing initiatives.
- Review your dress code policies so employees who wear hijab or other religious attire are free to do so as part of your organizational policy and culture.
- Provide training for your employees regarding how to respectfully communicate and ask questions about religion and religious differences.

These strategies will not only help combat anti-Muslim sentiment, but will establish your company's international reputation as an inclusive workplace. This is important for global companies, particularly those that work closely with Muslim majority countries. These steps will also help ensure that Muslim employees from overseas offices have a positive experience when visiting your office in the United States.

In spite of the perception that a person cannot be both Muslim and American, **there are many similarities between Muslim Americans and non-Muslim Americans.** Specific indicators include how likely they are to attend college and earn graduate degrees, what kind of income they have, and even how devoted they are to their religion.

Ultimately, many of the same practices that accommodate Muslims' needs in the workplace also lead to a work environment that is respectful and accommodating for all Americans, regardless of the religion they practice or if they practice no religion.

So, as you celebrate the Fourth of July, think about how implementing policies of respect and accommodation in your workplace will help America become "a more perfect" diverse and inclusive nation.



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