

## THE DECEMBER DILEMMA — EMERGING ISSUES

### *Tips for tackling the challenges when holidays collide*

### Religious Discrimination in American Workplaces



More than **1/2** of workers feel that Muslims experience discrimination.

**50%** of non-Christians say employers ignore their religious needs.

**48%** of white evangelical Christians report experiencing or witnessing religious bias.

Nearly **6-in-10** atheists agree that people look down on their beliefs.

*From What American Workers Really Think About Religion: Tanenbaum's 2013 Survey of American Workers and Religion.*

As we transition into fall and winter, many companies are already bracing themselves for the December Dilemma, a time of year when multiple holidays collide and tensions bubble up. A season of festivities for many, this is also a time of year when H.R. managers face real struggles in maintaining inclusive work environments.

Annually, we hear from companies tasked with accommodating diverse employee populations, and trying to balance increasingly complex conflicts around such issues as scheduling, time-off and holiday celebrations. And to complicate matters, Tanenbaum's recently released *2013 Survey of American Workers and Religion* points to an emerging, under-recognized issue that adds new complexities to managing the holiday season: the experience of many Christians of being overlooked.

Our recent survey confirmed many of our expectations around the experience of discrimination for religious minority groups. But some of its findings were more surprising. For instance, we learned that 48% of white evangelical Protestants report seeing or personally experiencing religious mistreatment and non-accommodation at work. This statistic makes white evangelicals the second most likely group to report

that their beliefs are not being accommodated in the workplace, just after members of minority religious traditions in the United States. (49%).

Some people have already tried to dismiss these findings as a misperception on the part of America's white evangelical Protestants, or consider it evidence of a backlash to America's growing diversity. However, dismissing white evangelical Christians' experience of discrimination would be a serious mistake. Their pain and anxiety presents a real challenge to those committed to diversity and inclusion. It is a problem that must be addressed.

When considering the implications of our survey's findings, there is a tendency to focus on issues of unwelcome proselytizing, harassment and conflict. Companies often ask us how they can accommodate individuals who are so closely

associated with sharing or, worse, “forcing” their beliefs on others – even if it is done out of a commitment to bring something of value to others. The answer is quite simple: while the issue of proselytizing is real, it is not the source of white evangelicals’ experience of bias at work. Thirty-nine percent of white evangelicals report that they or their coworkers were required to work on their Sabbath or on a religious holiday. This is an issue that can be addressed by, in part, reinforcing flexible time-off policies for all employees, regardless of their religious associations. Proselytizing is a different issue, which is best approached with a policy that addresses inappropriate sharing of any religious or non-religious beliefs at work.

In addition to their experiences of religious bias at work, white evangelical Protestants perceive a great deal of religious discrimination in society at large:

- Nearly 6-in-10 (59%) white evangelical Protestants agree that today, discrimination against Christians has become as big a problem as discrimination against other religious minorities.
- Forty percent of white evangelical Protestants believe that they face a lot of discrimination.
- Significantly, white evangelical Protestant workers are twice as likely to say that they themselves experience a lot of discrimination as they are to say that African-Americans experience a lot of discrimination.
- And finally, 60% of white evangelical Protestants see the mass media as hostile toward their moral and spiritual values.

In our work with companies over the last 15 years, we have seen these sentiments surface in the workplace, especially closer to Christmas:

- We’ve seen Christians become upset when an office holds a Diwali party but labels the celebration in December a “Holiday Party;”
- Some Christians are troubled that they are never wished “Merry Christmas,” when they have quite happily learned to wish their Muslim colleagues “Eid Mubarak;”
- And Human Resource professionals become exhausted, and even ostracized, by patrolling their employees’ work stations during the holidays to enforce strict vanilla “no religious decorations” policies.

Our survey data show how important it is for companies to get ahead of these issues and manage them before conflicts emerge. When addressing religion from a diversity perspective, however, companies must move beyond labels such as “minority” and “majority.” Companies must recognize that the experience of religious bias is not limited to minority groups. Even groups perceived as culturally dominant must be “included” in the workplace because all employees deserve to feel respected and included.

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## The December Dilemma

Tanenbaum’s [December Dilemma Tip Sheet](#) provides advice for employees on how to handle the December Dilemma. Small steps like encouraging employees to ask colleagues how they prefer to be greeted during the holiday season can help employees of all faiths – and those of no faith – to feel welcome.

But there is even more that executive leaders and human resource professionals can do to promote an inclusive environment, in December and throughout the year:

**Institute and enforce flexible time-off policies.** Flexible personal day policies and holiday swapping options make it easier for employees to observe their holy and significant days. It is particularly important for these flexible policies to be inclusive of all employees – of majority faiths, minority faiths and for employees of no faith. For instance, an atheist should be able to request a floating holiday generally intended for religious use without having to explain that using the day is to participate in a family event or observe the death of a parent. It’s important for company policies (and the enforcement of those policies) to take these nuances into account.

**Helpful Tip:** Our survey found that only 21% of employees reported that their company allowed them to swap holidays by working on one holiday in exchange for another. It is important for more companies to consider adopting such policies because they closely correlate to worker satisfaction. Workers at companies without flexible hours for religious observance are more than twice as likely to not look forward to coming to work as their counterparts in companies with such policies.

**Educate your employees.** Holidays are an excellent opportunity to educate each other about religious beliefs and practices. Consider circulating an informational email or plan an educational diversity panel of employees. This provides employees with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their colleagues' traditions, and can decrease the tensions caused by misunderstandings. Also ensure that these initiatives are inclusive of all employees and customers.

**Review your practices on acknowledging holidays to the public.** Companies have publically acknowledged holidays to reach new markets and reinforce their reputation as leaders in diversity and inclusion. If your company is considering this, be sure the acknowledgement is respectful of all groups (not just the particular market you are approaching), that the information it contains is accurate and that other religious groups are treated with the same inclusive attitude and respect year-round. You may receive some push-back in response to efforts like this, so always clearly align your initiatives with the company's overall diversity and inclusion objectives.

**Consider your customers and clients.** Your efforts to positively impact your workplace can also extend into cultivation of your client base. More and more companies are successfully leveraging their internal religious diversity to inform product development. For instance, American Express taps into its faith-based employee resource groups to create, design and market gift cards during the holiday gift-giving seasons.

**Regularly reevaluate long-standing company traditions.** Ensure that all of your company traditions align with your stance on diversity and inclusion. Every year, evaluate whether or not your diversity initiatives are adding value to your company's ability to attract talent, employee morale, retention or customer relations. If not, consider making some changes.

**Use anonymous online surveys.** Anonymous surveys provide your employees with a way to give feedback on your company's policies and practices, without compromising their career goals and co-worker relationships.



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