

WHY FOOD MATTERS AT WORK

We often associate food with family and friendship—but food can also become an effective means of showing acceptance and inclusion toward employees of diverse backgrounds in the workplace. For people with religious dietary restrictions, it's all too common to attend company functions and find that there's no food that they can eat. In addition to missing a meal, being the only one at a work event who isn't eating can sometimes draw unwanted attention and can make employees feel that they are not valued.

Religious bias can manifest in subtle ways. Tanenbaum's 2013 *Survey of American Workers and Religion*, released in August, asked American workers about nine kinds of religious bias, or in simpler terms, "non-accommodation." The survey found that 13% of American workers have attended company functions without kosher, halal, or vegetarian options. This makes issues around diet the second most common type of religious bias experienced by American workers.

While this issue may seem like a minor inconvenience compared to more threatening examples of religious harassment at work, not offering employees appropriate food options can have serious implications for employee morale. Imagine being a Muslim employee who is told by a cafeteria worker that a hot dog is beef, and finding out later that it was actually made of pork, which is forbidden by Islam. Or imagine being a Jewish employee at a work event without any kosher food options, and being told by a coworker to eat something anyway because "God will forgive you." We're not making this up!



The cafeteria worker and the coworker in these stories did not intend to be disrespectful, but a lack of understanding can easily make an employee feel disrespected in the workplace. Employees may not be aware of different religions' dietary needs and how strictly some people observe. For many who are religious, being kosher, halal or vegetarian is not like being on a weight loss diet where you can occasionally sneak a treat. Rather, religious dietary restrictions should be thought of more like a mandate—employees who have indicated that they have a religious dietary restriction cannot break that restriction, period.

Ignoring religious dietary restrictions can also have a big impact on business. [A McDonald's in Dearborn, Michigan](#)—an area with a large Muslim population—advertised its food as halal. A Muslim customer discovered that the chicken sandwich he'd purchased was not actually halal, and sued. McDonald's had to pay \$700,000 to settle the allegations.

Fortunately, there are some simple ways to avoid these tensions, misunderstandings and marketing mistakes around diet in the workplace:

- Any time there is a meeting where food gets served, the person organizing the meeting should send invited employees an email asking if they have any dietary restrictions. Human Resources and Diversity & Inclusion teams should make sure that all managers and administrators know how important it is to send these emails. This should not be a matter of individual practice—it should be company policy.

- Companies should identify vendors that offer kosher, halal and vegetarian food so they know where to turn when an employee does make a dietary request. Vetting these vendors prior to a request saves everyone time, and often eases tensions between employees.
- Train your employees in respectful communication to encourage a work culture in which conversations about accommodations are on-going. Due to the diversity within religious traditions and the fluidity of religious identity, it's critical that employees continue to ask respectful questions – even if they think they know everything about how their colleague practices.
- All food at work functions should be given the appropriate label (kosher, halal, vegetarian, dairy-free, gluten-free, etc.) so that employees with all kinds of dietary restrictions know what food they can eat.
- If your company provides a product such as food or medication to its customers, it is important to do your homework and ensure that your product fits into the dietary restrictions of the company's customer population. *Religion at Work*, your online resource as part of your membership, can help HR managers [learn more about different religions](#)' dietary practices and how to best accommodate these restrictions in the workplace.
- Companies can leverage religion as part of their business strategy—by offering kosher or halal options to Jewish or Muslim populations, companies may differentiate themselves from their competitors and improve recruitment and retention.



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These better practices in religious accommodations help companies to accommodate employees' needs, regardless of how they identify. Sending out emails asking employees about dietary restrictions and labeling foods not only creates a culture of ease and inclusion for employees who keep kosher or halal, but also supports employees who are vegetarian or vegan, or those who have a food allergy. Taking into account dietary restrictions will help make employees of diverse backgrounds feel included, respected and well fed.



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