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TANENBAUM CENTER FOR INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING • APRIL 2014

Intersecting Identities: Disability and Religion

At Tanenbaum, we understand how busy Diversity & Inclusion and Human Resources practitioners are. That's why we focus on providing concrete and practical solutions for addressing religious diversity. Our approach ranges from writing clear policies that provide religious accommodations, to conducting trainings, to helping companies address specific challenges like establishing faith-based employee resource groups designed to benefit both the company and the employees who participate.

To continue advancing the field and practice of Diversity & Inclusion, however, we also believe it is important to have critical conversations about related subjects that may not always be top of mind: for example, the intersections of different identities and the ways these intersections can affect the workplace.

NEW FEDERAL REGULATIONS

The intersection of religion and disability is especially important to keep in mind as [new federal regulations around disability](#) took effect on March 24. These regulations strengthen preexisting anti-discrimination provisions for people with disabilities and apply to companies that are federal contractors or subcontractors. The regulations are meant to clarify and aid these companies in their efforts to recruit and hire individuals with disabilities, and to improve job opportunities for these individuals.

In particular, the new regulations require employers to invite job applicants and current employees with disabilities to self-identify on a voluntary basis. The companies are required to do this during both the pre-offer and post-offer stage of the application process, and to invite their current employees every five years to self-identify. This provision is intended to ensure that employers' outreach and recruitment

efforts are reaching people with disabilities. We expect that this requirement will make it easier for employees with disabilities to request and receive necessary accommodations. If employees share such information and employers know which of their employees require accommodation, employers may be better able to take proactive steps to help these individuals succeed and ensure that they feel welcomed, included, and respected.



Photo: Keith Ellison

Given Tanenbaum's work with religious differences, this raises the question: how do the new disability regulations impact our work in proactively addressing religious diversity?

To be clear, these new regulations in no way directly address or apply to religious diversity and identity at work. However, there are many ways that the religious beliefs and practices of individuals and communities are related to people with disabilities.

For one thing, religion and disability represent the only protected categories that require

accommodations in the workplace in certain circumstances (under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). However, in order to be provided with the accommodations they need, employees must feel comfortable disclosing their more sensitive identities, and also requesting the accommodations themselves. Sadly, this is not always the case.



Photo: NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

For instance, if an employee is uncomfortable disclosing his identity as a Muslim, how can he be expected to ask for the space and time he needs to pray throughout the day? This can become a challenge for an employer, because the result is often a demotivated employee. Employers can also face similar obstacles when employees do not feel comfortable disclosing disabilities. After all, not every disability is visible and many employees prefer to keep them private. But when the goal is to attract and retain the best talent, companies do better when they find ways to overcome such barriers and to adopt an accommodation mindset. The result will create opportunities for people of all backgrounds.

There are other ways in which religion and disability intersect. We acknowledge that there is a history of stigma toward people with disabilities within some religious communities. For instance, there are people from certain faiths and religious practices who may believe that disabilities are:

- a curse or a punishment for sin;
- a sign that the person with the disability has insufficient faith; or
- an opportunity for God to heal.

These beliefs, if acted upon at work, may make people with disabilities feel marginalized—and this can affect the choices they make in the workplace. Religious stigma (or fear of it) may keep people with disabilities from self-identifying and getting needed accommodations – just as real and perceived stigma around any identifier can potentially make people from any background feel uncomfortable being “themselves” at work. This discomfort, more generally, can inhibit efforts to create safe and inclusive work cultures that are talent magnets.

Engaging people of faith and people with disabilities about their identities can benefit corporate cultures and, ultimately, the bottom line. For one thing, addressing the intersections and alignments of these identities can establish a corporate culture of respect that accommodates employees whenever possible. In addition, for employees whose religious perspective could stigmatize people with disabilities, it is important to clarify that, while the workplace will not challenge their views, such beliefs are not to be acted upon at work. And finally, educating employees on these issues may encourage people with disabilities to take advantage of the new regulations and self-identify. Getting proactive will help ensure that all people—regardless of religious identity or disability status—feel included and respected in the workplace.



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A Conversation with Deb Dagit



We recently spoke with [Deb Dagit](#), a diversity consultant and former Chief Diversity Officer at Merck who has a visible disability, to discuss her thoughts on the intersection of religion and disability:

Q: What have your experiences been around disability and religion?

A: Personally, I have had people wonder if I've been "saved." This has been in the context of concerns about my health and mortality. My feelings about these conversations are informed by experiences when I was young (between the ages of 11 and 16) and received orthopedic care from Shriners hospitals in San Francisco, California and Portland, Oregon. At the time, these hospitals regularly encouraged representatives from various Christian churches to come to the hospital and say prayers, sing hymns, and distribute Bibles.

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On my nightstand were at least 10 Bibles that had been given to me by different churches. There was definitely a sense that people receiving medical care needed faith support, and that the need for ongoing medical care was the result of sin or of being inattentive to these churches' activities. It felt very

different from choosing a faith tradition by yourself or with your family. This seemed like proselytizing and like I had no choice in the matter. Now, people of faith sometimes tell me after presentations that I'm doing the Lord's work. They are almost in tears—this is not how they react to presenters without disabilities. My discomfort with those kinds of comments are influenced by my experiences with religion when I was younger.

Q: How can religious beliefs and practices both positively and negatively impact the experiences of people with disabilities?

A: A negative example is a time when my husband and I were trying to catch a cab. The hotel called one for us, and when the driver (who was Muslim) saw us with our service dog, he said he wouldn't drive us. He considered our service dog to be "unclean."

A positive example is when I was in Thailand. We were taking a tour of Buddhist temples, which have an altar step that people are supposed to step over; it is considered disrespectful to touch the step. I would have had a difficult time with this, but one of the Buddhist men who was with me lifted me over the step. Normally, being picked up without my permission would make me very uncomfortable, but this was done with complete respect and I felt at ease with it. Afterward, I found out that the Buddhist tradition encourages generosity toward others as a way of developing positive karma. I experienced that respect and generosity when I was in Thailand, and it came from a very authentic place.

Q: What advice do you have around religion and disability in light of the new disability regulations?

A: I would recommend bringing in respected faith leaders to the workplace to talk about their positions on disability and provide guidance for employees. I advise recording this event and making



it available to all employees. It is important to talk about the intersections of religion and disability, and also race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identifiers. People who do not identify with a religious tradition should also be included as presenters in this event.

If a company already has an interfaith ERG, I would recommend helping that ERG to collaborate with other ERGs within the company to hold conversations about disability, inclusion and self-identification.

Finally, I recommend looking at accommodation policies and procedures for religion and disability to see if there are intersections between the two that can be spelled out in more detail. We're still in the beginning stages of these conversations. Right now it is important to make sure there is space to actually have these conversations.

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When thinking about religion and disability, diversity practitioners should keep a few themes in mind. First of all, no identity can be siloed. People of faith and people with disabilities are not mutually exclusive categories. It is also important to remember that while the new disability regulations specifically impact disability, self-identification, and compliance, these issues will also touch on issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and others, as well as religion.

For more resources on the intersection of religion and disability, you can visit Deb Dagit's website to find out more about [the VOICE Program](#), which encourages colleagues of people with disabilities to identify themselves as allies. You can also review this [article](#) from the Disability Studies Quarterly on intersections between religion and disability. And, if you have further questions, Tanenbaum is always here to help.



Photo: bpsusf

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