

Religious Accommodation

By Annemarie Shrouder

Over the last few years, some companies have begun setting aside a room in their offices for quiet reflection or prayer. This gesture allows a place for some employees to fulfill their religious observances, away from the possible arched eyebrows and curious stares of their colleagues. Within the context of a diverse workforce, a room for quiet reflection or prayer captures the essence of the intention while being inclusive to different beliefs.

The need for such spaces is often questioned. Time and productivity can come up and I marvel how quickly some jump to this argument while no one questions the need to travel several floors away from their desk, donning coat, hat and scarf in the winter, to huddle outside of the building to smoke. We may shake our heads, but we seem to recognize smoking as the smokers' choice, trusting them to get their work done. Why is taking the time to pray often met with less understanding?

The recent celebration of Ramaddan may have provided you with another opportunity to consider the diverse needs of your multicultural, multi-faith staff. While the rest of your staff were eating lunch in the cafeteria or the lunch room – or even at their desk – some of your staff were fasting from sunrise to sundown. While fasting is a choice, some employers who are sensitive to the diverse needs of their staff have created a designated food-free lunchroom where Muslim employees can choose to spend their lunch hour while everyone else is eating. It's not an exercise in exclusion, but an opportunity to be cognizant of a different need and reality, and provide a respectful choice.

While no one expects business as usual to halt while someone is fasting, social committees can take note of the time and schedule social events around Ramaddan – if they know it is happening. Herein lies the importance of awareness. The more we know about and acknowledge the diverse realities of our colleagues, the more inclusive the workplace can become.

Far from the fear that time spent praying or reflecting at work equals less productivity, the effort made to create an environment for employees to bring all of who they are to work pays off in significant ways. These includes increased job satisfaction and greater participation - provided, of course, that the designated room is part of a larger commitment to diversity and inclusion.

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