

## Muslim Employees: Valuable but Vulnerable

For many U.S. Muslims, the American dream is fading as they endure the fear and suspicion that their religion, race or national origin seems to generate. Yet, to many employers' credit, the sensationalist attitudes reflected in some news reports typically don't carry over to the workplace.

Since long before Sept. 11, 2001, employers have been under government mandates not to discriminate, and many have seen the benefits of cultivating a diverse workforce. For more than a decade, guides to religious practices have been available from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. Still, workplace discrimination complaints have edged up, and discontentment exists among some Muslim employees.

Many progressive employers have worked to reduce tensions among Muslims and other employees; the suggestions below will help you build a culture of inclusion.

### Workplace Alliances

Compared to wholesale anti-German attitudes during World War I and the treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, U.S. citizens who loudly voice anti-Muslim sentiment remain a minority. "What's remarkable is that you've had a serious attack on Americans—acts of sabotage on American soil by people claiming to act on behalf of the Muslim religion—and the country has not acted hysterically," reflects Mark Silk, director of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life in Hartford, Conn.

"When you see something on the news that raises some generalized concerns about Muslims or terrorists, does it mean anything to you when you go to work and see Mohammad, the guy you know and work with?" Silk asks.

At least one survey indicates that U.S. employers may be creating inclusive work environments. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center and Gallup Center for Muslim Studies seems to support Silk's observations: Muslims are as positive about their work environments as workers who are not Muslim. Consider the following responses from several 2008 Gallup surveys that were folded into the study *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait*:

When asked "Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your job or the work you do?," 82 percent of Muslim respondents and 89 percent of the general public answered yes.

When asked "Does your supervisor always create an environment that is trusting and open?," 80 percent of Muslims and 78 percent of the general public answered yes.

### Harsh Reality

But surveys don't capture the whole story. Put yourself in the shoes of U.S. Army Pvt. Zaw oo. On Sept. 11, 2001, the Burmese immigrant was in the motor pool at Fort Hood, Texas. Uncertainty and fear were rampant as soldiers tried to piece together what was happening. Next thing Zaw oo knew, he was in custody, arms shackled. Agents from the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command handcuffed him to a pole and interrogated him for five hours. "One minute I was with my unit, and then, because I am a Muslim, I was being investigated for being a terrorist supporter." Even after he was cleared, Zaw oo received anonymous threats.

Today, Zaw oo is a U.S. citizen, married, working as a corrections officer in Texas. He still encounters workplace discrimination. Co-workers have ridiculed the Quran, and Zaw oo has received a gory video clip from a co-worker with an e-mail warning, "This is what we do to people like you." He is reluctant to pursue religious accommodations for daily prayers, fearing retaliation if he demands his rights. "I can't afford to let that happen. I have a wife, a daughter on the way, and need to finish my education so I can get a better job."

## Islamophobia

Islamophobia is increasing, says John Esposito, founding director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. "If I'm Muslim, there's awareness that because of my skin color, name or mode of dress, people will question whether I have radical thoughts. They see me as different or 'other.' If I'm female and a laborer or a lawyer, do I wear a head scarf and risk standing out?"

Esposito blames Islamophobia on sensational media attention to terrorism: If people have never met a Muslim or know nothing about Muslim beliefs and practices, they are likely to hang on to post-Sept. 11 fear, fanned by the continued coverage of war. In an August 2010 Time magazine survey, 46 percent of 1,000 respondents said that followers of Islam are more likely than followers of other religions to encourage violence against nonbelievers. Twenty-five percent said Muslim Americans are not patriotic.

The views of Joseph Hepp, a retired executive from Battle Creek, Mich., are illustrative. "I would be very cautious about hiring a Muslim. ... We have no way of knowing how many will be supportive of America," he says.

Hepp's opinion may be shared, but seemingly not by many. Consider the role of such rhetoric in the re-election campaign of U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison. The third-term Minnesota Democrat became the first Muslim to be elected to Congress in 2006. Last November, Ellison faced opposition from Lynne Torgerson, an Independent who linked Ellison to "radical Islamists" and gained a following. In the end, Ellison won re-election with 68 percent of the vote. The result suggests that there is a vocal but relatively small cross section of the U.S. population who see Muslims as a threat.

From a Muslim's perspective, however, the undercurrent of mistrust takes a toll. Lobna "Luby" Ismail, president of Connecting Cultures LLC in Silver Spring, Md., serves as a consultant on diversity issues. A practicing Muslim, Ismail grew up in a small Southern community. She is a business owner, a mom and a community leader. Imagine her anguish when a Facebook friend admitted online to "wishing I had a Quran so I could burn it."

"I've always felt proud to be an American, but suddenly I'm in retreat," she says. "I cannot bear to hear the news. It's been a daily drain. I just came back from Egypt, where, as a Muslim, I could breathe. In Egypt, you're in a majority Muslim nation. The very symbols that are under attack in America are being celebrated. Most women are covering their heads; you hear the call for prayer.

"When my friends from Muslim countries visit, I've always seen myself as the ambassador to tell them about America. Now my America is going through challenges at the expense of people who have nothing to do with the terrorist attacks. It's like holding all white Americans responsible for the Klan or Timothy McVeigh. Are we indicting all white Christians for the crimes of that one male?"

Samia Islam, an electrical design engineer at Texas Instruments in Dallas, hears stories from fellow Muslim neighbors. One man scheduled his *hajj*, a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 2010. He arranged it so that his absence would have minimal impact on his workgroup. "When he returned, his manager gave him such a hard time that eventually he left. Now, he's working for a competitor," she says. Others "tell me how when they asked to go and pray, their manager said no. Or that they changed their names so their company wouldn't know they are Muslims."

## U.S. Muslims: Who Are They?

Today, 1.6 billion Muslims represent 23.4 percent of the 6.9 billion world population, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. About 2.6 million Muslims make up 0.8 percent of the U.S. population. Of those, 1.5 million are 18 or older. Gallup researchers estimate that 70 percent, or 1.05 million, of U.S. Muslims are employed full time or part time.

The Muslim population is racially diverse, generally well-educated and financially about as well-off as the rest of the U.S. public:

- 77 percent of U.S. Muslims are American citizens.
- 35 percent were born in the United States; of those, 20 percent are black.

- 65 percent are immigrants; they represent 68 nations.
- 37 percent of the immigrants arrived from Arab regions in the Middle East and North Africa, and another 6 percent from other parts of Africa.
- An additional 27 percent emigrated from South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.
- Another 8 percent come from European countries.
- According to the Pew Forum, U.S. Muslims are a racially diverse religious group:
- 38 percent describe themselves as white.
- 26 percent say they are black.
- 20 percent say they are Asian.
- 16 percent identify themselves as "other" or "mixed race."

## Education

	U.S. Muslims	U.S. General Public
College degree or higher	40%	29%
Some college	23	22
High school or less	37	48

Total does not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait*, Gallup, 2009.

## Household Income

	U.S. Muslims	U.S. General Public
\$100,000-plus	16%	17%
\$75,000-\$99,999	10	11
\$50,000-\$74,999	15	16
\$30,000-\$49,999	24	23
Less than \$30,000	35	33

Source: *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007

## How Are They Doing?

U.S. Muslims are likely to value education and attend college, according to Gallup research. Forty percent have college degrees or higher, compared with 29 percent of the general population. Racially, all but black Muslims earn more on average than the general population. The economic status of black Muslims is less prosperous and parallels the status of black individuals who are not Muslim in the U.S. Overall, 26 percent of Muslims report annual incomes greater than \$75,000, compared with 28 percent of the general population.

In terms of religiosity, about 41 percent of Muslims report attending mosque at least once a week, similar to the frequency of church attendance by U.S. Protestants and Catholics.

In the mosaic of the Muslim community, however, some are untouched. "I have freedoms," observes attorney Adil Khan of Greenberg Traurig LLP in Los Angeles. "I can close my door in my own office and pray, which I do. I can set my schedule so I can go to prayers on Friday. If there's a deadline that I cannot move, I might have to miss" Friday prayers. Khan, a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and Boston College Law School, describes himself as upper middle class. His parents are from India.

"My law firm is no different than other corporate environments," he says. "People are welcoming. I don't feel like a minority and don't make my religion a secret. My conduct might set me apart, like when it comes to socializing or drinking. It's not unusual for people to ask you to drink. Recently, when someone passed around champagne, I said I don't drink because I'm Muslim. It didn't get a second thought."

### **Global Context**

American Muslims, in profile, look more like their countrymen than their Muslim brethren around the world. "They are more assimilated, more satisfied with their lives and quite moderate with their views about things that have been problematic for Muslims in other countries," says Scott Keeter, director of survey research for the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C.

In the United States, 70 percent of Muslims are working, compared with 64 percent of the general U.S. population. In other countries, Muslims who say they have jobs range from 31 percent in Pakistan to 59 percent in Indonesia, Gallup researchers report. Forty-one percent of Muslims in the U.S. describe themselves as "thriving," compared with 23 percent in France and 7 percent in the United Kingdom. "It's striking how well American Muslims are doing by comparison," Keeter reflects.

Within the United States, Islam is more accepted in locations with diverse populations that contribute to the economy, says Sheeva J. Ghassemi-Vanni, an attorney at Fenwick & West LLP in Mountain View, Calif., and general counsel for the San Jose/Silicon Valley chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The more Muslims in a region—in places such as Dearborn, Mich.; Brooklyn, N.Y.; Jersey City, N.J.; Chicago; Minneapolis; and Dallas-Fort Worth, for instance—the greater the comfort level. Esposito agrees. "If your company is in an area with few Muslims, your workers are more likely to view Muslims as foreign and potentially dangerous," he notes. Younger people tend to be more open to differences.

"If this is the first generation having lived around anyone different, there's fear and angst," says Matthew Ladin, internal community manager at Texas Instruments in Plano, Texas. "Where you're into the second or more generations, there's not so much pent-up fear—the mystery is gone."

### **Faith-Friendly**

"The environment should allow you to be who you are," says Terry Howard, Texas Instruments' director of diversity and inclusion, based in Dallas. "Religion can help people get through difficult times. If it helps them to feel engaged, they're more likely to stay."

With this in mind, soon after Sept. 11, 2001, an executive sponsor at Texas Instruments met with about 30 Muslim employees. He told them, "I need to know how you're doing. Are you encountering any barriers?" They said the environment had changed in their neighborhoods and schools, but not at work. "They felt safer here," Howard says.

The meeting led to the establishment of the Muslim Employee Initiative, one of Texas Instruments' 18 employee resource groups. Members understood that for the group to be certified, it could not be exclusive to Muslims and could not serve an advocacy role, Howard says. A policy provision allows the group to provide "perspectives on business issues." The group has an executive sponsor and an HR partner who offers coaching and monitors group activities. Howard helps select the leaders. "We only want our best people running our groups," he says.

Samia Islam co-chaired the group until January of this year. A devout Muslim who dresses in traditional Muslim attire, she is an outgoing spokesperson. "I can't leave my faith at home when I come to work," she says.

The Muslim Employee Initiative's 150 members conduct seminars and co-host panels to discuss Islam. Activities are voluntary, but incentives boost attendance. "We just had a roundtable event for our HR organizations," Islam says. "We explain a little about Islam and our practices, then move on to the workplace discussion about what Muslims do or do not participate in," such as attendance at after-hours parties where liquor is served or participation on teams where men and women work together. Questions "come fast and furious: 'Are Muslims terrorists? Why are 99 percent of the attacks in the United States by Muslims? Does the Quran say that killing is legitimate? Doesn't Islam teach you that you can lie to all non-

Muslims, so that you can tell me you're not a terrorist but it's a lie?' It means they are actually thinking about these things! We go over them one by one. You can't force people to change their beliefs. All you can do is give them accurate information."

The open communication makes Texas Instruments special, says Kent Johnson. The senior counsel and founder of the company's Christian Values Employee Initiative explains that people in the Muslim Employee Initiative "feel accepted, valued—not feared. In our team environment, workers team up with six to 12 colleagues; when that project ends, you're assigned another with a different team. Each time, you share personal experiences. If there's an environment that allows you to express your spirituality, you gain from that."

Johnson claims that Texas Instruments has created a "powerful environment to break down mistrust. You can come up with all these conspiracy theories; the imagination goes wild. But if I know a devout Muslim who will speak out against the obvious things, who will put a personal face on the religion, my perspective changes."

When Howard learned that Muslims were meeting off-site and had no designated places to pray, he helped establish serenity rooms with carpeting and floor tubs for washing one's body as a religious rite. Currently, there are 11 rooms globally. The cost was about \$8,000 for each. They have proved to be a benefit—and a recruitment tool.

"When I interviewed, I asked if they had an empty room where I could pray," Islam recalls. "Instead, they sent me to a serenity room. It helped me choose."

Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey in Newark has a similar 100-strong Muslim affinity group.

Despite these effective practices, other HR professionals are rethinking their commitment to religion-centered groups. "They've had to sunset them; others have put them on hold," Howard says. "Usually, it's because the groups lost focus and began proselytizing or their meetings turned into complaint sessions." Proselytizing is not permitted at Texas Instruments.

### **Faith-Neutral**

In contrast, HR professionals for many employers choose to keep religion in the background, folded into a culture that fosters respect and inclusivity. Employees "expect to work with all kinds of people," says Celeste Bethell, SPHR, a human resources manager at Verizon Wireless in Greenville, S.C., and a member of the Society for Human Resource Management's Workplace Diversity Special Expertise Panel. "Unless there is an accommodation issue, most don't go around inquiring about religious preferences."

Though the diverse Verizon Wireless workforce includes Muslims, Bethell says discrimination has not been an issue and requests for accommodation few.

The Verizon Wireless code of conduct sets behavior requirements for all employees. For instance, it calls for respect, cautions against discrimination and harassment, and describes procedures for addressing complaints.

"People bring their biases to work, and management can't be around all the time as a check," Bethell observes. "Make sure your employees are held accountable to your standards." Supervisors should not be encouraged to resolve accommodation issues without consulting HR professionals, she adds.

Thailia Edwards, former deputy commissioner for administration at the New York City Department of Homeless Services, was responsible for HR from before Sept. 11, 2001, until January 2010. Edwards recalls no incidents involving Muslim discrimination or religious accommodation during that time. At the city agency, religious diversity is respected but not promoted. "Most people think it's an issue they need to work out for themselves, and usually they don't ask for special treatment," she says. "You may learn someone is Muslim by chance, observing them in the bathroom doing their prayers."

Edwards recalls how she learned a staff member in her office was Muslim: "He was an everyday working guy with no visible signs of his faith in dress or appearance. I only became aware when he brought his daughter to work and she was dressed in religious garb. After that, if he had to take off for religious reasons, we worked it out just as other supervisors did with their direct reports."

Oumar Thioubou works as a cleaner at a private college in upstate New York where, he says, an individual's religious practice is considered a personal matter. A practicing Muslim, he finds time to pray on his own without involving his employer. "At work, I've never heard anybody say anything good or bad about my religion or any other. It's like religion doesn't exist—and that's the way it should be."

### Three Employer Paths

Despite the unsettling anecdotal record, some employers such as Texas Instruments and Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey are fostering inclusive cultures that celebrate minority groups, including Muslims and their special needs. Others fold Islam into broader diversity efforts, promoting respect and tolerance for all religions, races and ethnicities. They don't encourage Muslims to come forward to seek accommodation, but, when approached, they comply with federal and state laws. Still others follow a version of the U.S. military's recently changed policy toward gay service members: "Don't ask, don't tell." These employers insist that there is no place for Islam—or any other religion—in the workplace.

Meanwhile, many workers are less concerned about the so-called "Muslim peril" than media coverage implies. But Muslims remain wary as they continue to look for more public acceptance: "The situation has gotten worse in the past two years," reflects Samia Islam. "I thought the climate would have gotten better."

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### Muslim discussion area:

**How has your organization accommodated the needs of Muslim workers? Do you have some examples that you would like to share with your peers?**

Author Bob Grossman identifies three avenues HR professionals may take in accommodating Muslim workers: fostering inclusive cultures, merely providing accommodations when requested and a form of "don't ask, don't tell." What path do you prefer, and why?

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