

Islam (Muslims) in the American Workplace

By Stan Kimer



Expert Forum



Many devout Muslims attend weekly services at their mosques on Fridays around noon.

When I wrote my blog last month, [“Islamophobia – a Growing US Diversity Issue,”](#) I promised to follow up with blogs about Islam in the workplace and the intersection of LGBT issues with Islam. So here is the workplace blog

With over 2.5 million Muslims now living in the United States, including many who were born in this country, it is very likely that you will have Muslim coworkers, customers, managers and / or employees. So it is important to understand some of the items which may come up in the workplace with this aspect of religious and multicultural diversity.

Here are just three items to consider:

1) The Muslim religious obligation. For the devout Muslim, the most holy time when many Muslims go to their mosque to worship is Friday at noon. Many Muslims would appreciate having an extended lunch hour to attend services. I once had a devout Muslim working for me, and I made sure to never schedule a department meeting around noon on Fridays nor expected him to attend key meetings around the time.

2) Interaction with women. The devout Muslim woman is not allowed to have physical contact except with her husband or close male relative. This may be important to consider when a female Muslim work associate is being introduced to a male. Often our custom is to shake hands when introduced, but this may not be feasible in this case. If you know you are being introduced to a Muslim woman, simply nod your head in acknowledgement and say “very glad to meet you.” If you are unaware that the woman is Muslim and she does not extend her hand back to you, please do not be offended. I would hope that the Muslim woman would be gracious and say something like “my religion does not permit me to touch a male, but I am very glad to be here and to meet you.”

World Champion fencer Ibtihaj Muhammed will make history this summer as the first American to wear the traditional Muslim hijab while competing at the Olympics

3) Traditional dress. Wearing a hijab, or headscarf, is for many Muslim women a visible expression of the faith, piety or modesty. There have already been several cases brought to the EEOC (Employment Equal Opportunity Commission) from employers who felt this dress violated corporate dress codes, especially in customer-facing roles, and in most cases, the EEOC sides with the employee. One

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of the most visible cases was the clothing store Abercrombie and Fitch's refusal to hire Samantha Elauf, a Muslim, because of her religious practice of wearing a hijab. (See [EEOC press release](#) about this case.)

Here is an [excellent resource available from the EEOC](#) which goes in more depth on some these issues and additional ones.

Overall, these are simple and reasonable “religious accommodations” as with working with other people of faith in the workplace. It makes good business sense to provide a little flexibility and respect to build a workplace climate where everyone feels included, can be themselves, and bring the very best of their talent to the job.