



Diversity Works
for London

Know your staff

It is not a legal requirement to keep information on the religious make up of employees. However it is a legal requirement to ensure that staff are not discriminated against because of their belief, religion, non-belief or non-religion. Monitoring is good practice as it can help an organisation understand its employees' needs, monitor the use of grievance procedures and ensure that staff turnover does not represent disproportionate numbers of people from specific religions or beliefs. Undertaking monitoring can also be helpful in managing leave requests and planning staffing during peak periods throughout the year. This is particularly true if large numbers of staff hold one set of religious beliefs and are all likely to want time off at the same or similar times of the year. Staff should always be informed as to why such information is being collected and how it will be used.

Facilities

Regulations do not say that employers must provide time and facilities for religious or belief observance in the workplace – this is important for SMEs for whom having a dedicated prayer room is unlikely to be feasible. However, if it is possible to accommodate requests from employees to enable them to meet their religious obligations, without having an adverse impact on the organisation or other employees, then the request should be granted. It does not have to be a dedicated space, but should be a quiet, clean space at work in which they can pray, for example. In large organisations it is reasonable to expect that space can be made available regularly, if not on a permanent basis. Refusing these requests may amount to discriminatory practice.

Where feasible it is good practice to set aside a quiet area for prayer or private contemplation. Organisations should also consider providing separate storage facilities for ceremonial objects. Some religions do not permit individuals to undress/shower in the company of others. Therefore, if an organisation requires staff to change clothes or shower for health and safety reasons, consideration should be given as to how these differing needs can be met.

Holiday and leave

Employers should consider requests for leave in order to celebrate festivals or attend ceremonies where it is reasonable and practical for an employee to be away from work and where they have sufficient holiday entitlement. The leave does not have to be in addition to existing holiday entitlements.

Organisations should have clear procedures for handling requests for leave and

ensure that all staff are aware of the procedures. This is especially important when multiple requests may be made at the same time – in these circumstances the employer does not have to accommodate all requests if doing so is likely to have an adverse impact on the organisation.

However there must be a clear decision making process for how multiple requests are to be handled. Discussion and flexibility between staff and managers usually result in a mutually acceptable compromise. Organisations will also have to take care not to disadvantage those who do not hold any specific belief or religion as failure to do so could be breach of legislation.

Diet

If your organisation has a canteen, offers food at events, or has an area that staff can store food (e.g. a staff kitchen with fridge) it is good practice to consult staff on the subject of dietary requirements. This includes not only what should be offered in staff canteens, but also correct practices regarding how food should be stored or prepared as these vary from religion to religion and can be critical to adhering to religious obligations.

Some religious beliefs involve extended fasting. Employers should think about how they can support their staff through such a period, ensuring that they do not place unnecessary extra burdens on the other workers which may cause conflict or claims of discrimination and that refreshments are available not only during lunchtimes, but also at the end of fasting periods.

Dress

Where organisations adopt a specific dress code, careful thought should be given to the proposed code to ensure that it does not conflict with the dress requirements of some religions. General dress codes which conflict with religious requirements may constitute indirect discrimination unless they can be justified on the grounds of health and safety. Important considerations include whether the uniform is modest in appearance and whether variations of the uniform are available that include head coverings, or allow personal head coverings to be worn. Employers should consult staff, trade unions and other workplace representatives on practical ways in which they can accommodate workers' needs.

Policies on jewellery, facial hair, tattoos and other markings should be flexible and reasonable concerning traditions in line with religious belief. Again unjustifiable or inconsistently applied rules may constitute indirect discrimination.

The religious calendar

When planning and arranging significant events in your organisation, such as recruitment drives or significant organisational meetings, it is important to consider the best date where you can maximise attendance and involvement. Using a religious calendar can help make sure you get the right date. An example can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tools/calendar.