

Muslims, Ramadan and the Workplace – A Guide for HR

Muslims now form one of the largest minority religious groups in Europe and North America. In a decade where great misunderstandings and stereotypes circulate the media and society at large regarding the religion, it is crucial that efforts are made to move beyond stiff stereotypes and ill informed judgements.

The future is culturally diverse and if we are all to have a successful future, then cultural awareness is critical.



Although heightened cross cultural awareness is crucial at all levels, businesses in particular are in a good position to benefit from a greater sense of understanding, tolerance and flexibility towards minorities. Companies are increasingly employing young Muslim men and women. With this comes a

greater need for HR practitioners to be aware of the respective cultural sensitivities. Implementing policies that accommodate different beliefs can only lead to nurturing mutual trust and ultimately leads to higher staff retention, better morale, more effective teams and greater productivity.

The following information contains basic tips and guidelines for HR staff and others on the holy month of Ramadan. Although Muslims as a whole have specific religious boundaries that need to be appreciated, Ramadan is a time when many of these become more acute.

Please note: these are very general guidelines. Muslims differ from generation to generation, culture to culture, some are more devout than others and interpretations and practices of the faith are numerous. It may also be the case that the individual is Muslim by name only and chooses

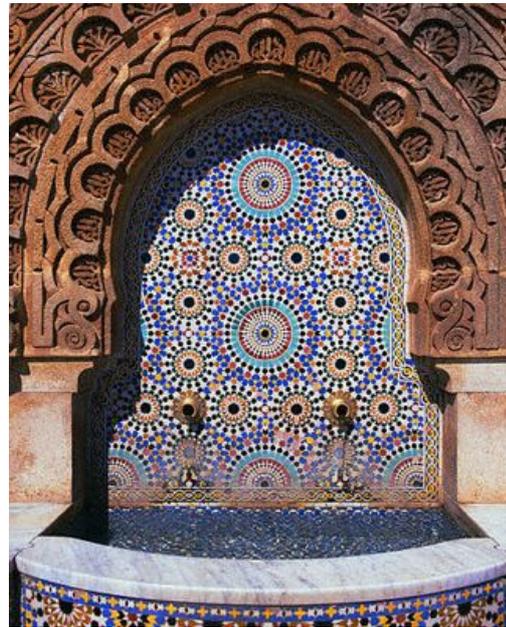
not to practice their religion. Information covered here will be considered applicable to the mainstream of Muslims but not all.

What is Ramadan?

The word 'Ramadan' simply refers to the name of a month, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The month is considered to be the holiest of the twelve as it was in this month that the Prophet Muhammad initially received revelation; it is in this month that believers are asked to fast and perform other additional acts of worship.

To fast in the month of Ramadan is a pillar of Islam meaning it is incumbent on all Muslims to perform it.

The Islamic calendar is calculated according the lunar cycles. Ramadan therefore begins when the new moon is sighted. As a result the start and finish times change from year to year.



What do Muslims do in Ramadan?

The basic requirement is for all Muslims to fast from sunrise to sunset. Fasting means that no food, water, smoke, chewing-gum or anything else can go past the lips. As well as physical things that can break one's fast there are also actions that are considered impermissible while fasting including the telling of a lie, slander, denouncing someone behind their back, a false oath, greed or covetousness.

The fast is broken at sunset with a small meal called *iftar*. Most Muslims will do so with water and dates which is traditional. After sunset they are then able to drink and eat without limitation.

In addition to fasting, Muslims will also spend most of their evenings in a special prayer called *taraweeh* which is performed in congregation at a mosque. The prayer can taken anywhere between one to three hours.

Eid ul Fitr



The end of Ramadan is celebrated with the Eid ul Fitr - *Festival of Fast-breaking*. On the first day Muslims go to the mosque for a special prayer. This is followed by a three day holiday in which families and friends visit each other, exchange gifts and socialize.

Ramadan in the Workplace

The following points should be born in mind by HR personnel and businesses in general to ensure that their Muslim employees are not made to feel uncomfortable or put in embarrassing situations.

1. Establish when Ramadan is approaching.
2. Ensure staff are aware of what fasting entails.
3. Do not allow food and drink (such as a buffet) to be placed next to a fasting person's desk.
4. Try and avoid 'working lunches' as Muslims will not want to sit and watch others eat.
5. Make special allowances for Muslims to take a 10 minute break at sunset to break their fast and pray.
6. See if allowances can be made for people to work lunch breaks in return for an earlier finish.
7. If you have a canteen, try and arrange for some meals to be saved for people fasting.
8. Do not expect people to commit to evening functions.
9. Be prepared for people to take between 1-3 days holiday at the end of Ramadan.
10. Try and use Ramadan as a platform for greater cross cultural communication, i.e. throw an *iftar* for all to join in with.