

## **Assimilating religious beliefs and sexual orientation in the workplace**

People from diverse cultural backgrounds inevitably find themselves thrown together in the workplace, being compelled to spend upwards of eight hours a day in each others company. They will rely on each other for cooperation, support and inspiration. Their employer will expect them to work together as a cohesive team.

The employer who embraces and accommodates religious and sexual differences will encourage a team environment that is open, integrated and harmonious. The employer who fails to stimulate such an environment risks a divisive atmosphere that benefits neither the organisation nor its employees.

The challenge for the adroit employer is to ensure that employees of all faiths, or of no faith, and of whatever sexual orientation, respect the individual rights of their colleagues. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees are unlikely to be readily accepted by those who believe that any form of non-heterosexual activity is religiously prohibited. How then is an environment of mutual tolerance and respect (if not outright acceptance) to be fostered amongst an organisation's diverse employees?

Far-sighted employers find that a clearly written employee policy, together with appropriate resources and training, is the best solution. Such a policy invariably eases tensions, enables employees to engage more openly and promotes cooperation. The natural result of this is an increase in workplace effectiveness, productivity and, ultimately, loyalty.

Best practices will, of course, vary by organisation. But the elements of an effective employee policy that can be adopted by all employers are:

### **Proactively promote and accommodate employees' rights**

It is essential to avoid resentment of any perceived special treatment whilst promoting a culture where the diverse needs of all employees are met. To further this goal the employee policy needs to identify the singular need to respect colleagues' privacy.

Individuals of whatever religious or sexual orientation must be sensitive to the religious and personal beliefs of others. This means neither flaunting nor attempting to impose individually held beliefs or orientation. The employee policy needs to provide guidelines that encourage civility, sensitivity, understanding and respect, applicable to all and for the benefit of all.

### **Clarify the process**

Where accommodations need to be made there should be a process in place for requesting them. Managers need to be trained to respond sensitively and appropriately and employees need to be reminded that HR is a resource for their benefit; to help and advise them and to ensure their rights in the workplace are upheld.

### **Create a quiet space**

Create a quiet room, available to all employees, where they can pray, meditate or reflect in privacy and comfort. This encourages integration, diminishes marginalisation and enables the employer to maintain control over where employees worship whilst in the workplace.

## **Schedule with sensitivity**

When scheduling important meetings or celebrations, select a date and time when everyone can attend without compromising any religious commitments. Being aware of festivals and observances that are applicable to any of the major religions will avoid any obvious clashes.

## **Handle holidays fairly**

Implementing flexible holiday policies, including holiday-swapping or floating personal days, gives all employees an equal opportunity to observe cultural or religious holidays.

In conclusion a little anticipation, sensitivity and flexibility go a long way in creating a culture of inclusion, mutual respect and religious accommodation. Such an environment cannot help but promote a collaborative team culture and the retention of talented employees.