



# Cultural Accommodation in the Workplace: Tips and Practices

## Ramadan and the Workplace

In Canada, less than nine per cent of the population was Muslim in 2006; this percentage is expected to rise to more than 16 per cent by 2031. For observant Muslims, Ramadan is a special time of the year — a time of devotion, reflection and sacrifice through daily fasting and nightly prayer. Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk and also refrain from drinking and smoking during this time.

The change in eating and sleeping routines can create challenges in a Muslim's work life, but with a few simple accommodations by the employer, practising Muslims and other employees can remain highly productive and engaged.

### Accommodations can include:

- flexible scheduling that allows employees to begin the workday early (i.e., closer to their pre-dawn breakfast), which also enables them to complete the more difficult part of the daily fast away from the pressures of the work environment or for particular events, such as Eid prayers and festivities at the end of Ramadan;
- providing a quiet place for employees to pray;
- being sensitive about holding working lunches; and
- scheduling meetings earlier in the day when employees have more energy.
- Dates may vary depending on moon sighting and location.

We all know that Canada's population is becoming more diverse — and a large number of institutions and firms are leading the way in promoting cultural awareness and accommodation. Beyond the legal requirements under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, it's also good business sense. Employers who accommodate all cultures and faiths in their workplace are able to maintain and can even enhance productivity, reduce turnover and attract the best skilled talent possible.

Export Development Canada (EDC) is one federal institution that believes diversity is key to its business success. With this goal in mind, EDC encourages flexible work arrangements and telework opportunities so that its employees across Canada can have the flexibility they need. An annual Multiculturalism Day celebration and diversity maps help to raise awareness of cultural and language differences in the workplace. As well, EDC provides floater days, modified work hours, personal leaves and other arrangements so that employees can observe their faith. EDC was named one of Canada's top 100 employers for the ninth consecutive year and was recognized this year as one of the top 35 best employers for new Canadians.

Even smaller-sized employers are creating welcoming and inclusive environments. At GEM Health Care Services Inc., employees who observe religious days can adapt their schedules accordingly. Other arrangements include: Friday sundown; no shift that day for people with religious commitments that day (for example, Seventh Day Adventist); staff breaks for those who need to complete their prayer rituals; and preparing food menus according to the tastes and backgrounds of those in attendance. GEM is a recipient of Hire Immigrants Ottawa's 2008 Employer Excellence Award, which recognizes local employers for their promising practices in

the recruitment and integration of skilled immigrants into their organizations.

According to the Conference Board of Canada's November 2009 report *Immigrant-Friendly Businesses: Effective Practices for Attracting, Integrating and Retaining Immigrants in Canadian Workplaces*, "A company's success in retaining immigrant talent depends on its ability to develop an organizational culture that respects and encourages cultural and other forms of diversity."

Indeed, "the most effective approach to cultural diversity is not to 'uphold the Canadian standard,' but to focus on increasing the cultural literacy of all employees regardless of their ethnic background so that they can begin to understand and appreciate their own culture and those of their co-workers."

## The Power of Education

To make this happen, education is critical, according to Nancy Mark, a cross-cultural trainer for the last 25 years, who conducts regular cross-cultural competency sessions for Hire Immigrants Ottawa. \*

"New Canadians want their faiths to be understood," says Ms. Mark. "If people understand the backbone of a faith, they will understand the behaviours, traditions and practices of their fellow employees." Indeed, according to a recent Statistics Canada report, while only 25 per cent of the population had a non-Christian religious heritage in 2006, that number is expected to rise to 33 per cent by 2031.

Employers can foster employees' knowledge and appreciation of different cultures in a number of ways. Here are some ideas:

- Organize collective meals where employees can learn about one another's cultures by sharing ethnic food, wearing

traditional clothing and showcasing music and art.

- Create Intranet-based multicultural calendars to avoid scheduling important meetings on major cultural holidays.
- Permit flexible schedules so that employees who observe special religious practices can arrange their schedules around those beliefs (see sidebar).
- Acknowledge all the faiths within your workplace (instead of dropping the Christmas tree, add some recognition of other staff holidays).
- Hang a world map in the hallway and have each employee pinpoint their place of birth; count the number of languages spoken in the office and post next to the map.
- Hold a focus group for your diverse staff to discover how they have adapted to the work culture and use their feedback to improve your integration practices.

- Canada's net labour force growth will soon depend entirely on immigration, and as the population becomes more diverse, it will be more important than ever for businesses to accommodate the diverse religious and cultural beliefs of their employees. Accommodation leads to mutual trust, higher staff retention, better morale, more effective working teams and greater productivity. ■

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\* Visit [www.hireimmigrantsottawa.ca](http://www.hireimmigrantsottawa.ca) for complimentary employer-focussed resources and tools to enhance your organization's readiness to recruit and integrate internationally educated professionals. The Hire Immigrants Ottawa initiative is funded by the Government of Ontario and Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

## Diversity Calendar

August 11–September 8

— Ramadan (Islam)

September 9

— Rosh Hashanah (Judaism)

September 18

— Yom Kippur (Judaism)

September 10

— Eid-ul Fitr (Islam)

November 5

— Diwali (Hinduism, Sikhism)

November 16

— Eid-ul Adha (Islam)

December 2

— Hannukkah (Judaism)

December 25

— Christmas (Christianity)

February 3

— Chinese New Year (Chinese)

For a full diversity calendar, please visit [www.malkam.com](http://www.malkam.com).



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