

## **An Investigation of the Religious Accommodation Education Gap: Corporate and Workforce Misconceptions and Ignorance Aboard**

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Today's workforce is becoming more diversified in ethnicity, culture, language, and religion. For most individuals work dominates a large part of their life and it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate one's religious beliefs from the workplace. Organizations are asked to walk the fine line between these conflicting preferences by offering policies which accommodate religious beliefs while maintaining a productive, yet discrimination-free, atmosphere. We investigated the awareness and understanding of religious accommodation policies and the relationship to both employee retention and potential litigation. To achieve these objectives we tapped into the alumni of a regional university with an electronic survey. We found that three fourths of the sample claimed no accommodation policies or were unaware of the existence of such policies. Of those aware of accommodation policies, only half thought the policies worked. Even though accommodation policies are in place in most US firms today, organizations are in jeopardy of increased employee problems (i.e., litigation, loss of employees) when communication is unclear or non-existent concerning these policies.

*Key Words:* Religious accommodation; discrimination; harassment; corporate policy; education

### **Introduction**

With over 1500 religions recognized in the US, the US is the most religiously diverse country in the world. As individuals continue to immigrate to the United States, they bring with them diverse religious faiths and beliefs (King, 2008). The freedom of religion enjoyed by the citizens of the United States of America are limited by the negative impact those freedoms may have on the freedom of others.

The workplace has often been viewed as off-limits to any type of religious demonstration (Morgan, 2004); however, this narrow view is changing as a direct result of the unique combination of people who now make up the American workforce. There are approximately 313.9 million people (United States Census Bureau [USCB], 2013); over 27 million firms (USCB, 2013); and over 80 religious belief systems with over 60,000 members each in the United States (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2010).

Many companies are beginning to fully realize and understand the importance religion plays in the workplace. Religion is not merely the belief in some sort of theology or sacred text; rather it often helps shape and defines personal motivations and behavior in every facet of one's life including work life. This is

obviously an important consideration in business, thus religion is a more than worthy area of special attention and accommodation within the workplace. A better understanding of religion can only help to improve a company's overall performance in relationships with customers, both internally (employees) and externally (marketplace) (King, 2008).

Human resource issues like religious accommodation have become more and more important to not only the management function, but also specific management activities like policy formulation, implementation and adoption by employees. Critical to the success of the overall organization and of individual policies is, "...the extent to which employees have the motivation to implement the strategy, their overall feelings of job satisfaction, and the commitment they feel toward the organization and its goals." (Hartline, Maxham & McKee, 2000) Success in employee selection and training; evaluation and compensation policies; employee motivation, satisfaction, retention, and compensation; and staving off litigation are all impacted positively with effective internal customer promotion of human resource policies like religious accommodation (Glassman & McAfee, 1992; Chawla & Gruda, 2010).

According to a national Gallup Poll, 92 percent of the national population says they believe in God or a universal spirit, and 90 percent say religion is important (The Pew Research Center, 2011). Over the last twenty years, it has become common practice to express one's personal views about religious and spiritual topics and to seek religious accommodation in the workplace (Morgan, 2004). Laws governing religious diversity are unclear and corporate policies regarding religion are varied or absent.

Data compiled by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) indicates the religious discrimination claims against employers have increased from 1,939 in 2000 to 3,790 in 2010. Much like the number of cases, the monetary rewards over this 10 year period have almost doubled as well (EEOC, 2010). "The latest data tell us that, as the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, the Commission's work is far from finished," said EEOC Acting Chairman Stuart J. Ishimaru. "Equal employment opportunity remains elusive for far too many workers and the Commission will continue to fight for their rights. Employers must step up their efforts to foster discrimination-free and inclusive workplaces, or risk enforcement and litigation by the EEOC." (EEOC, 2010) With the EEOC putting businesses on notice that discrimination will not be overlooked, it is important to determine what policies exist and how they are communicated.

### **Literature Review**

According to King (2008), in a survey of the top 21 management journals, only four viable articles were found in a ten year period on the subject of religion accommodation at work. The pairing of research involving management-related disciplines and religion has been sparse for theoretical and empirical studies, and diversity research regarding religion is lacking (King, 2008). Various authors (Hicks, 2002; Grafton, Knowles & Owen, 2004; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000) have conflicting results from their studies of religion in the workplace.

King (2008) posits many scholars avoid studies regarding religion and work because they do not wish to become involved in the socio-political aspects such as religious radicals or religion-affiliated political groups. The few management studies which have been conducted found a positive correlation between religion and employees' satisfaction, performance, and loyalty. Although there is new interest in religion at work, few have investigated the communication of religious accommodation policies or the attitudes and

understanding of employees with these policies. This is our focus.

### **Religious accommodation**

As interpreted by the EEOC, religious accommodation laws, "...require an employer to reasonably accommodate an employee's religious beliefs or practices, unless doing so would cause more than a minimal burden on the operations of the employer's business. This means an employer may be required to make reasonable adjustments to the work environment that will allow an employee to practice his or her religion. Examples of some common religious accommodations include flexible scheduling, voluntary shift substitutions or swaps, job reassignments, and modifications to workplace policies or practices." (EEOC, 2010)

Recently there has been a trend in companies receiving increased requests from employees for various work related religious accommodations such as religious holiday observances, prayer requests, and dress code exceptions for religious belief attire (Von Bergen, 2008). The legislation requires organizations and managers to recognize the importance of accommodating employees' diverse religious beliefs and practices and for hiring managers to be aware of discriminatory practices in regards to a candidate's religious affiliation when considering an applicant for an open position (Duffy, 2006; Ghumman & Jackson, 2008; Von Bergen, 2008).

Employers can and do deny religious accommodation requests, citing an undue hardship. However, these denials must be in accordance with the EEOC's standards and within the law as interpreted by the US Supreme Court. Yet the courts typically find fault with employers who make little or no attempt to accommodate the religious beliefs of their employees or if the employer refuses discussion of religious beliefs in question.

### **Increase in religious accommodation requests**

The increase in the number of religious discrimination claims filed with the EEOC (doubled in the last ten years) reinforces the fact employers are not reacting fast enough when it comes to accommodating religious needs of employees. Some trends in the workplace which seem to be responsible for the increase in the religious accommodation requests and religious discrimination claims are increased employee spirituality, immigrant influx, employees are more knowledgeable of workplace rights, and employee/employer ignorance.

Title 7 of the 1964 Civil Rights Law applies to all companies with fifteen or more employees. Defending a suit can cost over \$100,000 (not counting fines or awards) and take 2-3 years to settle. The courts have generally held that interpretations of the law should err on the side of upholding religious freedom and expression which does not bode well for organizations when suits are filed by employees (Isgur, 2008).

### ***Job satisfaction***

Correlation analysis has shown a strong positive relationship between sales professionals' spirituality at work and job satisfaction. The sales professionals who align their self-concept to their spiritual identity (inner life) express their spiritual identity by meaningful work and by belongingness to the community (Chawla & Gruda, 2010). Thus, there is an alignment between who one is and what one does, resulting in satisfaction. Kolodinsky, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2008) posited the theory of spillover applying to satisfaction. Spillover, when used in this context, is when a person is satisfied with one part or aspect of their life that satisfaction spills over to another part of their life. They found workers who bring strong spiritual values to work will have positively related experiences in work-related matters.

In sum, people want their own religion, their particularity, personal respect, and this is more complicated matter than at first it may appear. Sorrentino (2010) posits that it is essential to understand the importance and complexity of a person's religion in terms of her or his identity.

### ***Retention***

According to Ashmos and Duchon (2000), being able to religiously express oneself can help boost morale and employee loyalty, decreasing employee turnover. Hicks (2002) observed that letting an employee express themselves freely, yet respectfully can be a stepping stone towards open dialogue and help develop creativity. Spiritual leadership encourages employees to want to stay with their company and "go the extra mile" (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007). Duffy (2006) stated that the majority of businesspeople claim their business decisions and career values are strongly influenced by their religious beliefs. A connection between the practice of religious accommodation and performance, retention, and effectiveness was found. A positive relationship between sales professionals' spirituality at work and commitment to the job was reported by Chawla and Gruda (2010). They found a strong negative relationship between sales

professionals' spirituality at work and intentions to leave. When there is belongingness, i.e., the feelings of existing together in the community and when one is happy with the work, then one may not intend to leave the job and the organization. Agle and Weaver (2002) found that a person's religion helps in coping with stress and negative situations, leaving more quality time for performing the job. They reported religiosity being related to a person's overall health, with their research confirming religious involvement as an "epidemiologically protective factor".

### ***Communication***

Internal communication plays a key role in organizations. Effective communication contributes to improved teamwork, safety, innovation and quality of decision-making in organizations. Firms that communicate well are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement and 20% more likely to report lower turnover rates than their peers (Wyatt, 2006). Communication between employees and senior management ranks among the top five "very important" aspects of job satisfaction, as reported by both employees and HR professionals in the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) Survey in 2007. (Society of Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2007)

Research suggests that effective internal communication/promotion is a leading indicator of financial performance. Shareholder returns of companies with effective internal communication strategies have been found to be more than 57% higher than returns of less effective communicators (Watson, 2012). However, trying to pinpoint the benefits of specific internal communication programs can be a difficult task. Effective internal communication/promotion can have a profound impact on minimizing expenses incurred by employee turnover, customer turnover, decreased product quality, sexual harassment and workplace discrimination, among others. If an effective communication program saves the company even 1% to 5% of these costs, it will justify the time and resources required (Sprague & Del Braccio, 2002).

In an age of increased competition for talent, internal communication has become a strategic tool for increasing employee engagement, satisfaction and retention. Through effective internal communication programs, HR professionals can significantly contribute to the success of their organization (SHRM, 2007). Research has shown that satisfaction with communication is critical to job performance,

retention, and overall organizational effectiveness (Campbell, White & Johnson, 2003; Ettore, 1996).

## Methodology

What is happening in the workplace as far as religious accommodation policies and the internal communication/promotion of such policies guided our research. Our research was focused on better understanding the current state of the practice and communication of religious accommodation in the workplace and resulting employee actions.

The participants were alumni from a regional university located in the southeastern U.S. The survey was electronically submitted to all alumni for the time period 1975 through 2008 for which email addresses were available, resulting in a total of 7664 individuals. Of the 1169 alumni who opened the survey, 1041 responded to the initial question: "Does your company have an official written policy regarding religious accommodation?"

The state-of-the-art Religiosity Scale developed by Kurpis, Beqiri, & Helgeson (2008) was utilized when categorizing respondents into 'very religious' and 'not as religious' groupings. Minor changes in the wording of this 5-point Likert type scale were incorporated so the scale would not have the appearance of measuring any specific religion, but rather a general religious orientation. For example, the word "God" was changed to "higher power." The scale utilized consisted of 6 items and is exemplified by items such as, "I consider myself to be religious" and "I believe in a higher power."

## Respondent Profile

Slightly fewer than 55% of the respondents are male. The median age range is between 41 and 50 years. The year of graduation from the institution ranges from 1975 to 2008, with a slightly heavier concentration over the past 10 years from 1998 to 2008. More than 60 percent of the respondents earned a bachelor's degree, while 38.6 percent earned a master's degree from the institution. Majors include the following fields: Accounting, Economics, Finance, Management, Marketing, Technology, Manufacturing Systems Technology, Electronics Technology, Occupational Safety, Emergency Management, Criminal Justice, Social Work, Psychology, Nursing, Communications, Mathematics, Computer Science, Computer Information Systems, Political Science, Geography, and Chemistry.

The vast majority of respondents (86.2%) are employed full-time. Only 7.1 percent indicated that they are self-employed. Whereas 31 states are identified as employment locations of these graduates, as expected, most are employed in Alabama, followed by a distant second in Georgia. Tennessee, Florida, Texas, and Virginia are also indicated with some degree of frequency as employment locations. Over half the respondents indicated that they are employed in a professional occupation, with the next highest response coming from those classified as managers. The largest percentage of respondents (20.8%) is employed in governmental organizations, followed by educational institutions (17.7%), and service organizations (12.8%). The largest group (21.2%) is employed in organizations with more than 5000 employees; however, the number employed in smaller firms, ranging from one employee to 2500, makes up over 70 percent of the respondents. Eighty-seven percent of respondents are Caucasian-American, while only 7.6 percent are African-American. Eighty-nine percent describe their religious affiliation as Christian.

## *Existence/communication of religious accommodation policies*

Of the 1,041 alumni who responded to the initial survey question, "Does your company have an official written policy regarding religious accommodation?", 26 percent indicated their company does have such a policy; 34.6 percent said their company does not have such a policy, and the remaining 39.4 percent indicated they were not sure about such a policy. Seventy-four percent of respondents were either unaware or did not know of a policy. The majority (71.3%) indicated the policy is enforced, while almost a quarter of the respondents indicated they didn't know whether or not the policy was enforced. Sixty-five percent believe their company's policy does work as intended.

Of the 1,022 respondents to the question: "Does your company have a written policy regarding religious discrimination/harassment?", 607 or 59.4 percent indicated that their company does have such a policy. The remaining responses were divided evenly between those who indicated that there was no such policy and those that were not sure whether or not their company had such a policy. Almost two-thirds of those indicating a policy exists believe it to be enforced by company officials. The remaining one-third is not sure, while only 12 individuals or 2 percent indicated the policy was not properly enforced. Over half (53.8%) believe that the policy does work as intended.

Of the 1,022 respondents, the largest number indicated that the means of communicating the organization's religious policies was via a company handbook. The

second most utilized communication method was through orientation sessions with employees. Table 1 provides these responses.

Table 1. Methods Used to Communicate Organization's Religious Policies.

	Number using the method	%
Case by Case	120	11.7
Handbook	368	36.0
Informational Packets	0	0.0
Orientation	215	21.0
Training	187	18.3
Not communicated	135	13.2
Don't know	120	11.7
No religious policies exist	119	11.6
Other:	32	3.1

Other means of communicating the policies include: annual certification of Code of Conduct; annual online required policy compliance review; annual update; Business Practices & Ethics Policy; college intranet; compliance training sessions; contract Book; diversity update training; email and/or website; email reminders; employee portal; incorporated in company policies; internet posts/e-mails; intranet; online corporation policy; policy letter; policy memorandum; policy post harassment; and posted policy memorandums. Other responses included: "We are a religious organization and are very open to religion in the workplace but it is not regulated;" "We have scheduled formal devotional periods;" "When I am asked, I tell them about Jesus Christ;" "We have yearly harassment required test." "It is explained at date of hire that everyone is free to express their religion from their own pulpit." "I work for the government, and it is not allowed." "As a public university, the undertone is not to have any religion at work."

#### **Allowance of Religious Expression by Employees**

The majority (59.8%) believe their company sufficiently accommodates the various religious beliefs of the company's employees. Those most frequently accommodated include: decorating of office space, displaying of religious materials,

allowing employees to wear religious messages on clothing, and offering flexible work schedules to provide for religious observances. Lesser interest is placed on providing designated space for religious reasons and allowing job transfers for religious reasons. Few individuals indicated their employer actually provided them with the means of celebrating their religion.

#### **Work and Personal Views**

Pertaining to questions concerning respondents' religious practices and beliefs and how they believe these play into their employment, only a few showed a significant relationship when looking at their responses regarding how they feel about how well their company accommodates religious diversity. We found those not as religious would seek legal remedies if he/she experienced religious discrimination or harassment at work whereas those more religious were less inclined to do so. However, we found 62 percent of those self-reported as very religious would consider new employment if they had a problem with his/her religion at work. 44.2% of those who did not have strong religious beliefs also would consider new employment if they had a problem with religion at work. This was an interesting observation for us. Note Table 2.

Table 2. Not As Religious vs. Very Religious

	n	Not As Religious %	Very Religious %	X <sup>2</sup>	df	P-value
<i>I would seek legal remedies if I experienced religious discrimination/ harassment at work</i>						
Strongly Disagree	71	10.0	6.9	35.389	4	.000
Disagree	96	13.7	9.2			
Neutral	255	32.8	27.9			
Agree	258	32.3	29.0			
Strongly Agree	163	11.3	27.0			
Total Number	843	409	434			
<i>I would consider new employment if I had problems with my religion at work</i>						
Strongly Disagree	49	8.6	3.2	82.050	4	.000
Disagree	94	14.7	7.8			
Neutral	221	32.4	20.6			
Agree	308	35.6	37.6			
Strongly Agree	168	8.6	30.6			
Total Number	840	407	433			

Pertaining to questions concerning respondents’ religious practices and beliefs and the potential for leaving the company or pursuing litigation against the company, there was no significant difference between how those who believed enough is done by the company to accommodate different religious beliefs and those who did not believe this as related to seeking legal remedies if harassed at work. Also, no significant differences were found between these two groups relative to considering new employment if he/she had

problems with his/her religion at work. Both those who considered enough was done to accommodate religion and those who did not believe enough was done shared in their considering leaving the employer and in seeking legal remedies. 49.6% of those who believe not enough was done to accommodate religion would consider legal remedies and 50.2% of those who do not think enough is done would also consider legal remedies. See Table 3.

Table 3. Enough Is Being Done.

		<i>Q15. In my company, enough is done to accommodate different religious beliefs.</i>					
		n	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	df	p-value
<i>I would seek legal remedies if I experienced religious discrimination/ harassment at work</i>							
Strongly Disagree	71	7.4	9.3	2.492	4	.646	
Disagree	96	12.8	10.7				
Neutral	250	30.3	29.8				
Agree	255	31.8	29.8				
Strongly Agree	161	17.8	20.4				
Total Number	833	337	496				
<i>I would consider new employment if I had problems with my religion at work</i>							
Strongly Disagree	49	5.4	6.3	4.071	4	.396	
Disagree	94	11.3	11.3				
Neutral	216	28.9	24.1				
Agree	303	36.9	36.5				
Strongly Agree	168	17.6	20.2				
Total Number	830	336	494				

Survey responses pertaining to work and personal beliefs were also analyzed based on job satisfaction. Respondents were classified, based on their self-reported responses, as either Not Satisfied or Satisfied, resulting in totals of 302 and 538 respectively. When looking at questions concerning respondents' religious practices and beliefs and how they relate to job satisfaction, most showed a significant relationship between their religious beliefs and degree of job satisfaction. As is indicated in Table 4 below, these results show that those respondents indicating greater job satisfaction were more likely to agree with the following: religion has a positive impact on work, would seek legal remedies if experienced religious discrimination/harassment at work, and would consider new employment if had problems with my

religion at work. Also, those indicating greater job satisfaction were more likely to indicate that a person's religion affects the way they work with that individual.

Regarding whether or not a company has official written policies to do with religious accommodation/discrimination, there were no significant relationships observed between those who indicated satisfaction with their job and those that are not as satisfied. However, those who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to indicate that policies work than those who are less satisfied with their jobs (45% of non-satisfied felt the policies worked whereas 61% of satisfied felt they worked ( $X^2 = 12.596$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.002$ ). Presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Religious Practices and Beliefs Related to Job Satisfaction

	Job Satisfaction					
	n	Not Satisfied %	Satisfied %	X <sup>2</sup>	df*	p-value
<i>Religion has a positive impact on my work</i>						
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	108	35.8	0.0	840.0	4	.000
Neutral	194	64.2	0.0			
Strongly Agree/Agree	538	0.0	100.0			
Total Number	840	302	538			
<i>I would seek legal remedies if I experienced religious discrimination/ harassment at work</i>						
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	166	24.5	17.2	22.351	4	.000
Neutral	253	33.2	28.5			
Strongly Agree/Agree	418	42.2	64.3			
Total Number	837	301	536			
<i>I would consider new employment if I had problems with my religion at work</i>						
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	142	25.3	12.5	58.363	4	.000
Neutral	219	33.4	22.2			
Strongly Agree/Agree	473	41.4	65.3			
Total Number	834	299	535			

\*Note: Chi-Square analyses were performed on 5-point Likert scale. These results were combined for a more efficient presentation in this table.

## Discussion

We investigated the relationship of religious accommodation policies, job satisfaction, and the retention of employees. A major finding of our study is that 75% either reported no policy or not knowing if their company had a religious accommodation policy and 40% reported no policy or that they were not aware of a religious harassment policy. Thirty-two percent did not know if the accommodation policy worked while 44% did not know if the religious harassment policy worked. These results indicate

almost three-fourths of the sample has no organizational direction in regards to how to handle religion in the workplace.

When looking at communication and knowledge of religion accommodation and discrimination policies as related to retention of employees, we found employees from smaller companies reporting fewer policies. This was not surprising because employees in small companies often know one another and accommodation is practiced in a more informal manner. However, employees in larger companies were unaware of the existence of such policies. This is

a very troubling finding. Large companies have sophisticated human resource departments, multiple policies, and training programs. There is a gap between what the HR department is disseminating and what the employees are retaining. When that is combined with unsatisfied employees reporting fewer policies, the ground work is laid for multiple problems and possible litigation. This research benefits managers who must communicate and promote accommodation and discrimination policies to the employees of the firm. The finding of our research evidences the critical nature of employee lack of awareness of religious accommodation and harassment policies.

The two primary means of communication reported were company handbooks (36%) and orientation (21%). A majority of respondents was unaware of a religious accommodation policy or reported no policy at all. Managers should consider other means of communication/promotion or more frequent communication of the policies. Orientation is a stressful time as new employees are introduced to the company. Employees do not always remember what is presented in these orientations. Company handbooks are not always read. Training should focus on helping managers fully understand the company's religious discrimination and harassment policies which create a supportive work environment.

Of real concern is that employees would consider legal remedies and leaving their company if their employer did not have religious accommodation. When employees are unaware of policies, their actions can be determined by their perceptions of their workplace. Effective communication is an integral issue in effective management. In order to be successful, organizations should be as focused and intentional with their internal customer communications/promotions as they are with external customer communications/promotions. Organizations should have comprehensive policies and strategies for communicating with its constituencies (internal customers): employees and stakeholders.

Intuitively, human resource professionals would vote a resounding affirmation that companies have religious accommodation policies; and we would agree with that. However, from this research, it appeared that employees were not knowledgeable of such policies. The more dissatisfied employees were, the more they reported the absence of policies. This is dangerous for the company and could subsequently result in more religious litigation. And finally, companies are in jeopardy of increased employee problems when communication is unclear or non-existent concerning policies.

## Limitations

Exploration of the effects of religion in the workplace will continue to expand as religious diversity increases and becomes more apparent in organizations. As with any study some minor weaknesses were evident. This research was geographically restricted to participants primarily located in what is known as the "Bible belt" (southeast U.S.). However, the responses concerning litigation and retention were the same for both the religious and those not religious. The data collected were self-reported. Caution must be advised as the results are confined to college graduates. Finally, the concepts of religious accommodation examined and the findings of the study do, in essence, replicate some common understandings in the literature.

## Future Research

Despite its limitations, the study results suggest several areas of interest for future research. First, due to the scope of the study, several of the concepts that were not included may provide additional insights. Second, in order to further the understanding of the boundaries and generalizability of this study's findings, new studies should attempt to focus more on human resource managers and their understanding of religious accommodation policies and/or expand sample to include other regions of the US. Finally, consideration must be given to creating a longitudinal study, replicating this study with this same sampling frame in order to follow the impact of immigration, education/training of employees, and dissemination of information concerning religious accommodation. Our investigation of the communication of religious accommodations is a new area that needs additional investigation. Future studies would benefit from investigating the role that religion plays in businesses located across the US as well as internationally.

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