



Toppling a Taboo: Businesses Go 'Faith-Friendly'

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Do your Hindu, Sikh and Jain coworkers need a three-day weekend in November to celebrate Diwali? Have you ever asked Muslim employees to help design products destined for a Southeast Asian market? Did you know one colleague urging another to accept Christ as a personal savior is a legally protected act?

In the world of corporate diversity and inclusion, first there was race, then gender and ethnicity, then sexual orientation. Now religion is knocking at the door, and, according to some experts and practitioners, it isn't likely to go away anytime soon. "The train has not only left the station; it's passing through town," says David Miller, executive director of Yale University's Center for Faith and Culture and author of the 2007 book, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement*. "The question is: Are you going to steer the train or let it run you over?"

Evidence of faith percolating through the workforce abounds. Prayer breakfasts, once confined to Capitol Hill, are now popular among executives in unexpected sectors such as technology and real estate. Companies are hiring corporate chaplains to do everything from performing marriage ceremonies to visiting sick employees and offering drug and alcohol counseling. The Academy of Management's five-year-old interest group on spirituality and religion has attracted nearly 700 members, and a quick trawl through Amazon or your local bookstore reveals enough spirituality-at-work titles to fill a small chapel.

Is this just evangelical Christians flexing their business muscles? Or members of non-Western religions appealing for recognition? It's all that and more, argues Miller. It's a genuine social movement, a confluence of forces including an increase in non-Western immigration, rising religiosity among management-level baby boomers, and a search for meaning prompted by 9/11. This faith-at-work movement, says Miller, will ultimately shape business culture as profoundly as the push for civil rights and equal pay has shaped the environment for minority workers and women.

"The old paradigm of leaving your beliefs behind when you go to work is no longer satisfying," says [Stew Friedman](#), practice professor of management and director of the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project. "More than ever, people want work that fits in with a larger sense of purpose in life. For many people, that includes a concept of God, or something like it."

Do Ask, Do Tell

At Fannie Mae, a leader in the diversity and inclusion field, recognizing religion has been a natural outgrowth of responding to employee needs, according to Emmanuel Bailey, vice-president and chief diversity officer at the Washington, D.C.-based home finance giant. In addition to conducting a biannual employee survey, the diversity office also initiates conversations with its 16 employee network groups, five of which are religiously based.



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"We want a corporate culture that retains employees, so that they value Fannie Mae as a great place to work," says Bailey. "We ask, 'From your own perspective, what could we do to improve the culture here?' We had the Jewish, Muslim and Hindu groups say, 'We always see an acknowledgement of Christmas, but we never see any acknowledgement of Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan or Diwali,'" says Bailey.

The issue came up again recently, when Fannie Mae was rushing to complete its financial restatement following charges that it misstated earnings from 2001 to 2004, among other allegations. "Some of our divisions had to work on a six-day-a-week, 12-hour-a-day schedule," recalls Bailey. "From our employee network groups we learned that this decision cut into certain people's religious observances. That's what led us to the multicultural calendar."

The calendar, available company-wide, notes religious celebrations throughout the year. When holidays approach, says Bailey, employee groups write an article about the holiday's meaning and history, which is then posted on the company intranet; at the bottom is a note directing managers on how to accommodate employees celebrating the holiday.

According to Bailey, the gradual adoption of domestic-partner benefits and other gay-friendly programs by corporations set the stage for the accommodation of religion and spirituality. "The events of the world right now focus on a lot of religious issues, and to be successful, companies have to recognize that and leverage it. If you embrace religion as something that allows people to bring their whole selves to work, rather than see it as a barrier, the better positioned your company will be."

Avoiding Bad Business Decisions

Whether it's prayer breakfasts, study groups or workplace ministries, much of the faith-at-work movement has evolved outside of the church -- in large part because churches in recent decades have been uninterested in, if not hostile towards, the business world, according to Miller, a former senior executive in the financial sector. "Although there are pockets of interest in some churches, it's fair to say that churches, whether evangelical, mainline Protestant or Catholic, have abdicated their theological and pastoral interest in the workplace," Miller says in an interview.

A thriving evangelical culture is gradually reversing this trend, however. David Roth was a vice president for business development and marketing at J.B. Hunt Transport when he attended a leadership conference at his Arkansas megachurch several years ago. When the conference ended, Roth's pastor announced the creation of a new ministry to bridge the gap between faith and work.

"That message penetrated me like a laser beam. I spent 25 years of my career as Christian on Sunday, but come Monday, it was all about success and money," Roth recalls. When the church ministry was spun off to form a separate, non-profit organization called WorkMatters, Roth quit his VP post to become its first president. Today, the organization advises companies large and small on how to integrate religion and spirituality into their corporate values, and provides individual employees with a template for starting faith-based groups at work.

Meanwhile, leveraging employee religious knowledge to assist product design "can help companies avoid a lot of dumb mistakes," such as Liz Claiborne's decision to embroider verses from the Quran on the rear end of its DKNY jeans, says Georgette Bennett, president of the New York City-based Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, a pioneering organization in the field of religious diversity in the workplace. "Cultural competence is a big buzz word right now. But you can't be culturally competent without understanding something about religion, because religion is the largest component of culture. You have to figure out how to tap into your internal diversity resources."

Welcoming faith into a company can also provide unlikely solutions to common business problems. Miller points to Tyson Foods, whose business quadrupled in 2001 when it acquired IBP (formerly known as Iowa Beef Processors). Faced with the task of merging two strong but divergent company cultures, chairman John Tyson "recognized he needed a set of core values that would steer the new Tyson Foods and get people out of their prior identities," says Miller, who advised Tyson in drawing up these new "core values," which state that Tyson Foods is a "faith-friendly company" striving to "honor God and be respectful of each other, our customers and other stakeholders."

Corporate leaders resistant to the idea of being faith-friendly may be persuaded by evidence that religion

and spirituality already exist in their workplace, says Bennett, pointing to a 2005 NBC poll in which nearly 60% of respondents said religious beliefs played some role in making decisions at work, and an even higher number said such beliefs influenced their interactions with co-workers. Similarly, recent figures from the U.S. Census show a dramatic rise in the rate of immigration from non-Western countries; one-third of human resources professionals surveyed in 2001 by the Tanenbaum Center and the Society for Human Resource Management said the number of religions in their company increased in the past five years.

Legal Hot Spots

The workplace is not the only formerly faith-free zone to witness an explosion of interest in religion. Public life and politics are now marked by frequent battles over everything from gay marriage to evolution to stem cell research. This could lead companies to worry that if they bring religion into the workplace, they may be opening themselves up to litigation from non-religious employees or members of non-mainstream religions who feel they are excluded.

Proselytizing in the workplace is one legal hot spot, according to Deborah Weinstein, who teaches employment law for managers in Wharton's legal studies and business ethics department. "Courts across the country have interpreted this issue very differently. In a 2006 case in California, the court said persistent and blatant proselytization is prohibited because it could constitute harassment. But other courts, in Colorado, for example, have said employers need to bend over backwards to accommodate those who [believe they] need to proselytize," says Weinstein, whose Philadelphia-based Weinstein Firm provides legal and consultancy services on workforce issues.

Employers may be surprised to learn the extent of religious expression legally protected in the workplace by the Constitution and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employers from discriminating on religious grounds and requires them to make "reasonable accommodations" for employees' "sincerely held beliefs."

According to an executive action paper from the Conference Board, a business research organization based in New York City, employees can, within limits, wear religious medallions or clothing, argue with one another about religious beliefs and even hand out literature advising co-workers they will burn in hell unless they change their ways. An employer cannot insist that a Muslim woman remove her head-scarf on the presumption that it might make customers uncomfortable.

Another contentious issue right now is what Bennett calls "diversity backlash," in the form of Christian employee affinity groups opposing domestic partner benefits, refusing to sign diversity statements that include homosexuality, or asking management not to recognize Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender (GLBT) affinity groups. While Bennett says these conflicts make some companies "scared to death" of religion in the workplace, Nicole Raeburn, a University of San Francisco sociologist, says many of these disputes have been successfully resolved, sometimes with the help of outside mediators.

"There has been some hand-wringing among companies about the [correct] way to handle this. People have a right to their religious beliefs, but they can't create a hostile work environment because of them. When companies have been very clear about drawing that line, it seems to defuse the tension," says Raeburn, author of the 2004 book, *Changing Corporate America from Inside Out: Lesbian and Gay Workplace Rights*.

"It's a red herring to presume that evangelical Christians are by definition going to be at odds with GLBT groups," says Miller. "Yes, [companies] will stub their toes sometimes. But they need to be realistic: Good outcomes require struggle."

Taking the "Faith-Friendly" Plunge

For managers used to keeping religious belief -- or non-belief -- under wraps from nine to five, talking about religion in terms of company policy can feel as strange as wearing your underwear on top of your slacks. Miller suggests leaders use the term "faith-friendly" to ease into the topic, because it accommodates both popular, general spirituality and more specific, orthodox religion.

Like underwear, faith-at-work is not a one-size-fits-all product: Companies have to choose the

approaches that fit best. The menu of options for meeting religious and spiritual needs is short but growing. Popular picks right now include allowing employees to swap holiday time; modifying cafeteria food to meet religious dietary restrictions; providing spaces for prayer or meditation; and allowing employees to start faith-based affinity groups.

Hiring corporate chaplains, who do everything from conducting weddings to visiting sick or injured employees in the hospital to advising managers on meeting ethical standards, is another possibility. Tyson, for example, has a director of Chaplain Services, a manager of Chaplain Operations and 122 part-time chaplains working throughout the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

Diana Dale, executive director of the Houston-based National Institute of Business and Industrial Chaplains, warns companies interested in corporate chaplains not to accept unqualified applicants who don't meet professional standards. She advises businesses to hire only chaplains who have relevant masters degrees, specific training in drug and alcohol abuse and marriage and family counseling, and membership in a professional chaplaincy organization. Such chaplains may be full-time human resources employees or on-call professionals, usually charging about \$125 an hour as part of Employee Assistance Programs, she says, adding that workplace chaplains are more common in the South. Miller agrees that each company must choose faith-friendly options relevant to their corporate culture and geographic context: "What's suitable in Tuscaloosa may not fly in the Twin Cities," he says.

Becoming "faith-friendly" is "not a formula; it's a mind-set," Miller adds. He encourages companies to make faith-friendliness an explicit part of company policy -- a move that could heighten a company's appeal to potential employees.

To make sense of the faith-at-work movement, Miller breaks it into four motivating factors. Doing the right thing and being socially responsible are driving concerns for many people, while others want to express their faith through evangelizing co-workers. Another category of people is searching for transcendent meaning in their work, and still others hope to improve or deepen themselves through prayer, meditation or scripture study with coworkers. Some enthusiastic individuals encompass all four categories, wanting to integrate faith and work on as many levels as possible, writes Miller in his book.

This model gives employers a window into how religion can benefit the business side, Miller adds. "Three of these four categories are easy for leaders to embrace. If they have employees who are more ethically grounded -- that's good news. If they have employees who view their work as a calling, rather than being cynical Dilberts -- that's a good thing. And if people's faith heals and restores them amidst the challenges of corporate life -- that's a good thing, too." While the other category -- proselytization -- suggests potential conflict, Miller says, most employers lack "an even basic awareness" of the already existing legal structures that govern evangelism in the workplace.

Wharton's Friedman advises companies, when introducing any work/life integration program, to encourage a "grass-roots approach," in which employees take responsibility for asking the company to meet their individual needs. "Let's say you need to pray several times during the work day. How does your being able to pray during the day make the company more effective? If it's something you really care about, you'll find a convincing way to make your case. This inverts the normal antagonistic way of thinking about your company meeting your needs," he says.

And how does one create an environment where employees feel this sense of personal responsibility? "That's the job of a progressive, smart company: motivating people to bring what they've got so it can help both them and you," says Friedman. "Most people want to have more of themselves alive and active in their work. The more they can be a whole person at work, the more energy, focus and motivation they have to offer."

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