



A guide for employers working with Muslim employees

With the numbers of Muslims increasing in Ireland it is important for employers to know what it means to be a Muslim for their Muslim employees. Employers have a responsibility to make sure that people who work with you are treated fairly and with respect. This can require flexibility to accommodate people of different religions and beliefs. This resource is intended to increase understanding of Muslim practices and offer advice on how to treat Muslim employees fairly.

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Do you manage or work with Muslims?

This guide provides tips and things to think about when working with Muslim employees. It explains some common Islamic practices such as daily prayers, observance of Ramadan, wearing the hijab, beards, and halal dietary requirements.

A better understanding of different religions and cultures can help you to meet your legal obligations and attract and retain the best possible staff – whatever their religion or belief.

This is general information only. It's important to bear in mind that people practice their faith in different ways and you shouldn't assume that every Muslim's behaviour is influenced by their religion. It's best not to make assumptions about what people need or do. Take an open approach and let your employees know you are happy to talk about any needs they have.

What is discrimination?

The employment Equality Act 1998, which came into operation in October 1999, protects people from discrimination in a variety of areas of public life. Discrimination is treating, or proposing to treat, someone unfavourably because of a personal characteristic protected by the law, such as:

- Gender
- Family status
- Marital status
- Age
- Disability
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Race
- Membership of the traveller community.

Discrimination is against the law in areas of public life including employment, which covers full-time, part-time, casual and contract work.

The scope of the legislation is comprehensive and covers discrimination in relation to:

- access to employment
- advertising
- conditions of employment
- equal pay for work of equal value
- promotion
- collective agreements
- training
- work experience.

The Equal Status Act 2000, which came into operation in October 2000, compliments the Employment Equality Act 1998. Under the Act, it is illegal to discriminate on the grounds of gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the traveller community in:

- the provision of goods, facilities and services available to the public generally
- schools and other educational establishments
- the provision of accommodation
- relation to membership of private registered clubs.

The Act prohibits discrimination, sexual harassment and harassment.

The Equal Status Act 2000 has introduced a positive duty requiring all organisations covered by the law – including employers – to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation

Instead of allowing organisations to simply react to complaints of discrimination when they happen, the Act requires people to be proactive and take steps to prevent discriminatory practices.

The information below explains some common Islamic practices that may be relevant to the workplace. Accommodating these practices will help you meet your obligations under The Equal Status Act 2000 and Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2011:

Common Islamic Practices that may be relevant to the workplace

1) Prayer

Praying at work

It is common for Muslims to pray five times a day, the first just before sunrise and last around two hours after sunset, each prayer taking about five minutes.

In a normal workday (9am to 5pm), Muslims generally pray twice at work, at lunch time (1pm) and late afternoon (4pm). Before prayer, Muslims must wash their faces, hands and feet with clean water. Worship may be performed in any quiet, dry, clean place.

Friday congregational prayer (Jumah)

Friday is the day for congregational worship, called Jumah. Prayer takes place at a mosque during the noontime prayer and includes an address or sermon, and lasts a total of 45–60 minutes. A Muslim employee can usually attend Friday prayers in an extended lunch break. Work time may be made up by either coming in earlier, staying late, or another agreed arrangement.

Examples of religious discrimination

A Muslim employee working for a large company asks for time off at specific times to observe her daily prayers. The company has the staff to cover for her during these times. The employer refuses this request ‘because she shouldn’t be given special treatment and extra breaks’. This refusal could amount to indirect discrimination which is not reasonable in the circumstances.

A company sets job interviews on a Friday afternoon. This could indirectly discriminate against Muslims who need to attend Friday congregational prayers and who may not be able attend the interview.

2) Dress and appearance

Islam requires that men and women wear modest clothing. However, there is no set ‘Islamic clothing’ and practices vary in different traditions.

Some Muslim women may cover their hair with a veil called the hijab. Some Muslim men may wear a beard for religious reasons.

Employers can ask Muslim workers to adhere to reasonable standards of dress, but reasonable modifications should be adopted (for example, a hijab can be in the same colour and worn as part of the organisation’s uniform or a man with a beard might be asked to wear a hair net or mask to follow health and safety rules).

Example of discrimination because of dress and appearance

A company introduces a uniform which does not permit head coverings and requires female employees to wear knee-length skirts. This applies to all employees but disadvantages female Muslim employees who may choose to wear the hijab and/or long skirts. This is indirect discrimination.

3) Touch and personal space

Islam encourages both men and women to act with modesty. For some people, this will mean that direct eye contact and touching (including shaking hands), is avoided between men and women who are not related. If you are unsure about this, you can usually take your prompt from the other person, eg wait and see whether they offer their hand to shake.

Example of discrimination because of physical contact

An organisation arranges for employees to attend a compulsory team-building course including group exercises. The tasks require physical contact between men and women. This may indirectly discriminate against Muslims or individuals of other religious groups, whose religions do not permit such physical contact between the sexes.

4) Important religious events

Ramadan

Muslims may observe Ramadan (fasting) for a month each year.

During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink from dawn to sunset, breaking their fast with a meal at sunset. Employers and co-workers can help by understanding the significance of Ramadan and showing a willingness to make minor allowances for its physical demands. Special consideration can be given to such things as requests for vacation time and flexible morning or evening work schedules.

7 Quick Tips for employers in Ramadan:

- Establish when Ramadan is approaching.
- Try to avoid “working lunches”
- Make allowances for Muslim staff to work a shorter lunch break in return for an earlier finish.
- If you have a canteen, try and arrange for it (or another space) to be available for people wishing to break their fast with others at sunset
- Do not ask Muslim staff to commit to evening functions or to go travel away from home for business.
- Be prepared for people to take between 1-3 holidays at the end of Ramadan
- It is recommended that employers send a Ramadan message and Eid Message to their employees (see examples below)

Ramadan Message example:

“Ramadan Mubarak to all our Muslim employees. Best wishes to you and your family for this the holy month of Ramadan. We hope that you find joy, peace and happiness and achieve all your objectives for the month.”

Eid Message example:

“Eid-ul-Fitr Mubarak to all our Muslim employees. Best wishes to you and your family. We hope that you find joy, peace and happiness”

Muslim holidays

Eid-ul-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan. It is a day of rejoicing, with prayers in the morning, a festive meal and visiting family, friends, neighbours, the sick, and elderly. The other important religious holiday is Eid-ul-Adha, which marks the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and is two months after Eid-ul-Fitr.

Pilgrimage

Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, is one of the ‘five pillars’ of Islam. It is generally expected that every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to will make this pilgrimage at least once in their life-time.

The ritual of pilgrimage may last five days, but considerable variations exist in trip arrangements, and group travel may take 10–14 days.

5) Understanding Halal

Halal is an Arabic word meaning lawful or permitted. It is the standard of conduct for Muslims, prescribed in the Qur'an (Muslim scripture). The opposite of halal is haram, meaning unlawful or prohibited. Halal and haram apply to all facets of life. They are commonly used to describe cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, food products, ingredients and food preparation materials. Alcohol is prohibited, as is any pork produce. Halal meat is meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic practice.

Example of reasonable accommodation of dietary requirements

An organisation often has breakfast meetings where meat products are available. A Muslim employee is unable to eat the meat as it is not halal. After talking with the employee, the organisation provides a vegetarian alternative for breakfast.

Some tips when working with Muslim employees

- Let your employees know you are happy to accommodate different faiths and talk to them about their needs.
- Provide a clean and quiet room that can operate as a prayer room.
- Personal modesty is important for Muslims. Some Muslims might be reluctant to shake hands with an unrelated person of the opposite sex, as a sign of personal modesty.
- Where possible, source halal food. If this is not possible, employees should be given choices that meet Muslim dietary requirements (such as vegetables, eggs, milk and fish).
- Some Muslims may be reluctant to take part in social gatherings where alcohol is served. This should not be interpreted as bad manners or unfriendliness.
- Don't ask Muslim employees to serve or sell haram products, such as alcoholic beverages.
- Ask when Ramadan starts and finishes, and avoid working lunches during this time. Allow Muslims to take a break at sunset to break their fast and pray and, if possible, enable Muslim staff to take a shorter lunch break in return for an earlier finish.
- During Ramadan try to schedule meetings with Muslim staff in the morning or early afternoon.
- Don't assume every Muslim's behaviour is influenced by their religion or that everyone will practice their religion in the same way. How devout a person is, their national origin, culture, upbringing and personal choices all play a part.

About the Irish Muslim Peace & Integration Council (IMPIC)

Irish Muslim Peace & Integration Council is an independent national representative Muslim body, established to provide a forum where the Irish Muslim Community can speak as one recognised voice on matters relating to their well-being in Ireland, and help promote ways of integrating effectively in the community and promote the true teachings of Islam.

It is a broad-based, representative organisation of Muslims in Ireland, accommodating and reflecting the variety of social and cultural backgrounds and outlook of the community.

Irish Muslim Peace & Integration Council is pledged to work for the common good of society as a whole; encouraging individual Muslims and Muslim organisations to play a full and participatory role in Irish public life.

Need more information?

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Irish Muslim
Peace & Integration Council
Bridging Communities, Building Peace

Disclaimer:

This information is provided as a guide only. It is not a substitute for legal advice. This information has been prepared to support employers to meet their obligations under the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2011. There may be other laws that also apply to your workplace. We recommend that you seek further advice.