

Balancing acts: navigating flexible work, religious days and cultural sensitivity in schools

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In this blog, we'll delve into Nazia Aslam's experiences of navigating flexible working to accommodate her religious practices and the importance of promoting cultural understanding across different backgrounds.

As a working mum, how has flexibility at your workplace supported you?

I had a positive flexible working experience in the corporate sector which has been mirrored in the education sector where I work as a School Business Professional, previously in two primary schools and more recently in a secondary school.

Taking the initiative to have a very open and honest discussion with my line managers regarding family commitments for my very young children has allowed me to negotiate flexible working arrangements. It has shown promise that the right balance can be struck in (new) overwhelming roles without compromising family life and/or working commitments.

Whilst working in the primary schools, the office-based role allowed me to work from home during the pandemic and home school my children.

Whilst working in the secondary school, the work life balance required to be able to support the family logistics, in particular childcare arrangements for the children's after-school activities and during school holiday periods, were discussed and agreed at job offer.

Furthermore, they have generated greater goodwill and a more positive work ethic and working morale from myself.

How has workplace flexibility positively impacted your ability to practice your religion?

To observe a fast, you need to awake before sunrise to eat a morning meal and then you are not able to eat or drink anything until sun set. This early rise accompanied with staying up late to partake in additional prayers at night, meant that sleep deprivation and the consumption of less frequent meals would affect productivity. As I knew this was the case for me, I would pre-agree different working hours with my line manager allowing for an early finish. This would allow me to go home early and have a short nap before preparing for the evening meal and/or seeing to the children's evening routines.

Why do you think flexibility is important for both teachers and support staff during religious observances?

Given my experiences to date, I feel as though flexible working arrangements helps generate a more productive workforce, which is more willing to give back and put more time and effort into their working commitments going above and beyond because of the pre-generated goodwill.

For Eid related special leave requests, whilst the staffing implications and continuity of delivery of consistent teaching and learning for the students might be a deterrent for teachers, it is a teacher entitlement and can be accommodated via internal teacher cover or supply.

For support staff on the other hand, this role is less likely to be covered by supply staff and I suppose cover could be arranged by supportive work colleagues.

For both staff types, this is likely to lead to a willingness to work later or cover other staff members for their religious observations and unplanned absences.

Overall, I believe this generates positive team working and flexibility to accommodate, thus contributing to a more cohesive workforce that would be more responsive to ad-hoc change in working patterns.

Being able to practice your religion at work e.g. by being able to take time to pray allows employees to retain their identity (i.e. by being able to practice their faith during their working day) thus contributing to and enhancing their overall well-being in the workplace.

It could also be used as a tool to attract new staff and retain existing staff by way of promoting these initiatives in their wellbeing practices and equality and diversity initiatives.

During the month of Ramadan, for both teachers and support staff, temporary flexi start and end times can be agreed to help support with the sleep deprivation experienced as a result of late night prayers and awaking at sunrise to observe the fast.

How do you think schools can strike a balance between accommodating diverse religious practices and maintaining operational efficiency?

Most religious holidays are known in advance to employees and therefore can be requested and planned proactively.

Operational efficiency can be maintained by planning supply cover for teaching staff to continue the delivery of teaching and learning. For support staff on the other hand, this can be managed by in-house cover by internal staff.

To manage expectations, for example for support staff working in finance generating orders for the wider school staff, a longer SLA/lead time can be communicated and the use of automated out of office replies forewarning when internal/external queries or requests for information will be addressed.

What strategies can schools implement to promote cultural understanding among staff?

If the school has a weekly bulletin or monthly newsletter that is cascaded to staff, then this can be used as an education tool to inform staff of upcoming religious observances or festivals and include a short piece regarding what the religious festival commemorates. This could help generate a culture of respect and appreciation for the employee whom it relates to and a wider understanding with the people they spend most of their time with on a daily basis.

Moreover, it will help positively contribute to wellbeing initiatives currently being fostered in the workplace and create a more holistic and inclusive workforce.

Not only will this play an integral part in the employers' diversity policies, it will also reduce the alienation and isolating impact experienced by those from under-represented (ethnic/cultural) backgrounds.

How do you navigate important school events at work and holidays that align with your or your family's religious observances?

This all goes back to having open, honest and proactive discussions with line managers to inform and educate of upcoming religious festivals/observations. Not only does this manage expectations, it helps generate a greater willingness to respond and adapt to ways of fulfilling impending immovable deadlines and the prioritisation of conflicting requests for completion of tasks.

What would you say to a teacher who feels hesitant about seeking flexible work arrangements during religious observances?

I would remind them of their right as per the recent legislation regarding flexible working requests which must be dealt with by the employer in a reasonable manner.

Furthermore, the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 make it unlawful on the grounds of religion in the employment process. As these provisions extend to setting terms and conditions relating to hours of work, the employee may complain that the requirement to work certain hours is a "neutral provision, criterion or practice" that puts persons of his particular religion at a disadvantage. This could amount to indirect discrimination.

I would also encourage them to have proactive conversations with their immediate line manager of their request and how the teacher themselves would proactively plan and prepare for this change (i.e. mapping out how the planning for the delivery of the student work will be managed so that this task is alleviated from the internal/external cover that may be required).