

Ramadan: An employer's guide

About Waterhouse Consulting Group

Waterhouse Consulting Group is a multi disciplinary management consultancy that brings together the UK's leading experts to deliver services in equalities & diversity, counter-extremism training, research and executive search and selection.

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the most holy month in which Muslims fast (do not eat or drink) from sunrise until sunset every day for the whole month. This year Ramadan started on 22nd August and will end on 19th September 2009.

Muslims (including those who may not normally practice or pray) take the holy month extremely seriously by:

- **Fasting** (not eating or drinking) from sunrise until sunset
- **praying more during the night** (possibly sleeping for only 3-4 hours)
- **praying more & meditating during the day** (praying five times a day; reading the holy book; abstaining from material pleasures etc)

Muslims do this for three reasons:

- (1) *Connect with humanity*: to experience the reality of the vast majority of people on the planet living below the bread line and starvation to better understand their conditions in order to help them.
- (2) *Connect with themselves*: to get rid of their worst habits – selfishness, greed, envy pride in order to promote love, compassion, peace and equality.
- (3) *Forgiveness from sins*: God promises to forgive all sins in this special holy month

Ramadan is, therefore, not only a period of physical restraint but also mental and emotional re-focus: a detox of the mind, body and soul.

Muslims end the fasting month of Ramadan with the Islamic holiday of *Eid ul-Fitr*. It is a day of thanksgiving in which families and friends visit each other and exchange gifts.

What do employers need to do?

It is good practice to issue information to make the workforce, particularly managers, aware of Ramadan and its impact on their Muslim staff and/or their local Muslim community.

Such an awareness raising campaign can have a positive impact on all staff and reduce the risk of tension or misunderstandings, e.g. not taking offence if a Muslim colleague does not want to go to lunch, refuses a 'goody' from the office biscuit tin or, hesitates to shake hands or kiss on the cheek¹ of the opposite sex.

¹ One of the basic rules of Islam is that men and women who are not intimately related are not allowed to have any form of physical contact. Some Muslims, therefore, do not shake hands with the opposite sex and most would not normally kiss on the cheek of the opposite sex. However, those who do may become more hesitant in the month of Ramadan.

More specifically, managers should:

- make it clear that you are aware that Ramadan is ongoing and you are sensitive to the obligations it presents for some staff. Encourage people to come to you if they need an adjustment to their normal working pattern or need any other support.
- convey (if you wish to) your good wishes for Ramadan to a Muslim colleague or staff by saying: *Ramadan Mubarak*
- be aware that some Muslims who may not be observant during the rest of the year may actually observe Ramadan, because of its significance.
- be aware that Muslims are likely to pray the two afternoon prayers (each of which will last up to five minutes) at their place of work. Be flexible enough to allow them the time and somewhere quiet in which to do this.
- be aware that those fasting may lose some of their energy reserves later in the day, so try not to organise meetings that last past 16.00 and arrange interviews, whether internal, or for external job applicants, to be held as early in the day as possible.
- consider adjustments, such as allowing Muslim staff to start work early, or work lunch breaks so that they can finish early, not just to accommodate prayer times, but in recognition of the fact that they would want to prepare for the breaking of the fast at sunset and for prayers until very late at night.
- try not to have 'working lunches', but if there is no alternative, explain the sensitivity/practicalities of the situation to non-Muslims and if food is served, consider providing a 'lunch box' for Muslims to take with them to enjoy when the fast has ended after sunset.
- if you have a staff restaurant/canteen, which does not stay open past sunset, try and arrange for some meals to be saved for people fasting.
- do not expect Muslims to commit to voluntary evening functions, e.g. a client dinner.
- where a Muslim employee has to work beyond sunset, make allowance for him or her to break their fast (iftar) and pray at sunset.
- subject to your approval (as a manager) and the needs of the business, allow staff to request leave (annual or unpaid) to enable them to celebrate Eid. Be aware that such requests may be at short notice since the actual day that Eid falls on will depend on when the new moon is sighted (this year it could possibly be on Sunday 20th or Monday 21st September 2009).
- convey (if you wish to) your good wishes for Eid to a Muslim colleague or staff by saying: *Eid Mubarak*.

Further information/advice:

- (1) <http://www.ramadan.co.uk>
- (2) <http://www.ramadantimetable.co.uk>
- (3) http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/ramadan_1.shtml
- (4) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/islam/ramadan.shtml>

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