

Research identifies factors influencing how religious identity interacts with workplace

October 8 2019

Religious beliefs can affect how employees do their jobs. But religious identity in the workplace is often neglected in human resources theory and practice, making it a diversity issue that's prone to tension and conflict. To address gaps in the literature on how employees' religious and work identities interact, a new study reviewed relevant research to help employers support religious identity and reduce conflict in the workplace.

The study, by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Surrey, the London School of Economics, Kingston University London, and the University of Edinburgh, appears in *Human Resource Management*.

"Religious identity is an inherent facet of workforce diversity, one that organizations and managers should be prepared to address," says Denise Rousseau, professor of organizational behavior and [public policy](#) at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College, who took part in the study. "Despite recent attention to the faultlines and conflicts associated with religious identity in the workplace, we conclude that religious identity tends to be a net benefit to an organization and its members."

Researchers analyzed the body of research on this topic, 53 studies in fields such as management, psychology, sociology, and occupational studies to synthesize evidence on the effect of religious identity on decisions and behaviors in the workplace. In their review, they sought to identify situations where religious and occupational identities are

compatible and situations where there is conflict and tension.

Much of the previous research on different kinds of identities has focused on conflict. In this study, researchers found that the degree of agreement between employees' religious identity and their understanding of themselves and their work roles and responsibilities can vary considerably.

The study identified three factors that influence how individuals' religious identities interact with the workplace:

1. Individuals' personal preferences: Conflicts regarding perceptions of religion and judgments about religions or [religious people](#) can influence how people perform at work, individuals' well-being, and the quality of work relationships.
2. Opportunities for individuals to express their religious identity at work: Employees who feel free to express their religious identity at work have greater well-being and are more productive.
3. Characteristics of individual workers' religious belief systems: These characteristics can influence how individual religious identities interact with the workplace. For example, employees whose [religious practices](#) and values are associated with compassion and helping benefit from working in occupations associated with these values, such as the mental and physical health professions.

Based on their findings, the researchers recommend ways management can support workers' expression of religious identity while maintaining a broader climate of inclusion. Because employees' work experiences are more optimal when they feel that workplace requirements, policies, and relationships support their expression of religious [identity](#), human resources offices play a critical role in promoting inclusivity.

Specifically, the authors suggest that organizations:

- Make clear the value of tolerance and respect for clients, customers, and coworkers
- Be aware of differences in religious practice while understanding their legal obligation to accommodate religious expression
- Commit to mutual respect and individual dignity in the [workplace](#), forming organizational practices that allow employees to express elements of themselves without fear of adverse implications
- Resist favoring one religion while accepting the right to religious expression at work and acknowledging that some employees may not have religious values
- Develop a formal program and guidance to help managers learn how to respond appropriately to employees' concerns about religious expression and accommodations
- Address conflicts between personal and organizational values on the job and whether these might be resolved.

The authors acknowledge that their study is limited by the fact that they reviewed only work in English and did not include broader notions of spirituality in the analyses.

"Our study suggests that organizations can enhance the benefit of employees' [religious identity](#) while reducing tension and [conflict](#)," explains YingFei Héliot, a lecturer in organizational behavior at the University of Surrey, who led the study. "Of critical importance is the psychological safety the organization provides all its members, a key factor in workforce well-being and effectiveness."

More information: YingFei Héliot et al, Religious identity in the workplace: A systematic review, research agenda, and practical implications, *Human Resource Management* (2019). [DOI:](#)

[10.1002/hrm.21983](https://phys.org/news/2019-10-factors-religious-identity-interacts-workplace.html)

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

Citation: Research identifies factors influencing how religious identity interacts with workplace (2019, October 8) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-factors-religious-identity-interacts-workplace.html>

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