

The role religion plays in workplace behavior

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Dr Rahizah Sulaiman. Credit: Massey University

Understanding the relationship between religion and ethical decision-making is important for organizations with diverse workforces. While there is considerable research from a Christian perspective, the same is not true for Islamic traditions, says Massey University Ph.D. graduate Rahizah Sulaiman.

Dr. Sulaiman researched the ethical decision-making of Muslim employees in Malaysia and found there are both similarities and differences in the values of Muslim and Christian staff.

"Much of the research and conceptual frameworks around ethical decision-making come from Judeo-Christian traditions, so I wanted to test how well these applied to Islam," she says.

"There are many values that different religions share, including being honest in your everyday dealings with others. But the outlook on life, and therefore the attitude to work, can be different for Muslims because work is considered a form of worship."

Understanding Muslim employees

Dr. Sulaiman says her thesis has business implications for organizations with Muslim staff as it showed a positive relationship between [religious beliefs](#) and ethical behavior.

"Religion is a part of many people's lives and neglecting its role in organizational life creates an incomplete picture," she says. "The connection between the level of religious practice and belief and ethical behavior is the person's conscience.

"Therefore, a good understanding of Islam and what it prescribes is important, and revisiting and galvanizing this knowledge in the workplace can encourage [ethical decision-making](#)."

Dr. Sulaiman says simple reminders can also be effective, including religious symbols or quotes in the workplace, or organizing congregational prayers and the breaking of fasts.

Learnings for New Zealand

She acknowledges that New Zealand workplaces, where Muslim workers are in the minority, are different to those in Malaysia, where her data collection took place.

"The belief in God is the first of the five national principles in Malaysia and religion plays a prominent role in society," she says. "Islam is practiced by more than half the population there, while the external environment—from national holidays to the judiciary—are more heavily inclined towards Islamic interpretations."

New Zealand is a completely different society and Muslims in New Zealand also come from very diverse backgrounds and countries, she says, so it is difficult to make direct comparisons between the two countries.

"But the underlying insight of my research is the importance of emotion. When it comes to ethical decision-making, religion affects emotion, rather than cognition. The conscience, or the anticipated feeling of guilt about consequences, is what modifies behavior."

Provided by Massey University

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