

Planet Labor

Article number 8838 from 22.01.2015

Germany: religion in the workplace in the aftermath of the Pegida movement

by Marion Leo

Regardless of the future that the anti-islam movement Pegida might have, it has instigated a major debate in Germany with regard to the opportunities and the issues around immigration, the place of Islam in German society and how to live together in a country with many different religions and different lifestyles. As a reaction, the President of the Federation of German Employers BDA Ingo Kramer, stressed that Germany needed immigration to face the shortage of labour. German companies that are at the heart of German society are also feeling the pinch of this debate. Even if generally speaking the people responsible for diversity are hesitant to tackle the topic, a change is noticeable and an increasing number of companies are starting to take into account the religious need of their employees.

A taboo subject. "The question of religion is a very hot topic", states Petra Köppel, manager at Synergy Consult (Consultancy firm specializing in diversity in companies and located near Munich). Religion and especially Islam has become a major issue for German society and has been bitterly discussed throughout the country. However companies are afraid to debate conflict type situations. "It is an enormous taboo subject that is best avoided. Business talks about cultural diversity, international management and even touch on integrating immigrant workers. But questions on religion come right at the bottom of the pile of diversity managers' priorities, far behind equal opportunities, demographic issues and sexual orientation," explained the consultant who regularly organizes seminars on the issue of religion at work. The seminars attract only tepid interest from the HR departments. She believes that this reticence is based in fear, "It is a difficult situation. Businesses are afraid of not being able to find the right words or of generating conflict amongst the personnel. Religion is also a private issue and many believe that it has no place in the workplace." Fear is evident on both sides. "Employees are also afraid of expressing their needs because they think they will be seen as radical", explained Petra Köppel. According to her, the current situation may well re-enforce their fears.

Yet the religion issue does have a real impact on life in the workplace. Employees who respect the month of Ramadan do not have the same work capacity their non-practising colleagues. Calendars cater for all the major Christian festivals in the form of public holidays and Sunday working is largely prohibited, but public holidays are not awarded for other religious feast days. Jewish and Muslim dietary rituals also influence the role of the company cafeteria/canteen.

Pragmatic solutions. For Aletta Gräfin von Hardenberg, director of the 'Diversity Charter' association ([c.f. article No. 8427](#)) diversity heads hesitate to openly discuss the question of religion at work. However in the actual workplace real changes are occurring in a growing number of companies that cater for employees' religious needs (and also the needs of their clients). This is especially true in the health sector (hospitals) and in companies employing a large number of immigrant workers (for example the automobile sector) the most cited example is that of Fraport, a company that runs Frankfurt airport. The company employs more than 20,700 from 70 different countries and sees almost 58 million passengers a year. It offers this community of passengers and employees no less than ten areas dedicated to Christians, Christian Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews. The company also organizes an annual 'Abraham feast day' that is open to Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. It aims to promote dialogue between religions and to reduce fear and prejudice. Fraport also celebrates the 'IFTAR festival' where during Ramadan, Muslim passengers and employees are invited to eat halal meals in the evening ([c.f. article No. 120062](#)). Deutsche Bank has opened 'All-Faith-Rooms' that are set up to allow all followers of the major monotheistic religions to pray.

According to Aletta Gräfin von Hardenberg, former head of diversity at Deutsche Bank, employees at the bank who wish to celebrate a non-Christian religion must take holiday leave but their request for this holiday leave must also be taken as a priority. Most large businesses respect their employees' dietary rituals. In both Daimler and Ford, Turkish employee networks were quickly put in place to facilitate their integration. "However to my knowledge there is no Muslim employee network as yet established", explains Petra Köppel.

An opportunity for businesses? According to the consultant, German HR departments should cater for their employees' religious needs. "The question of religion at work should not be seen as a source of conflict but rather as an opportunity. By respecting employees' religious sensibilities and for example showing that a female worker wearing the veil can have a successful career, businesses can bolster their attractiveness and raise feelings of belonging and also raise employee motivation," argues Petra Köppel. Aletta Gräfin von Hardenberg goes even further: "German companies do not have a choice. Labor shortages means that businesses cannot say "you are one of our best talents but you do not have the right to pray on the company premises." This echoes the words of the President of the German employers' federation the BDA, Ingo Kramer, who recalled that Germany needed immigrant labor and that the Pegida movement risked tainting Germany's image on the world stage.

Nonetheless taking into account religious needs can prove perilous for businesses. It risks strengthening sectarianism, generating jealousies, and dividing employees rather than bringing them together. According to Petra Köppel, HR departments are faced with significant challenges and are under scrutiny. She argues that businesses should cater for their employees' religious needs as well as the needs of their atheist employees and they should also establish dialogue. This should become a "subject for everyone."