

# 13 Ways to Battle Islamophobia in Canadian Workplaces



In January of 2017, an act of terror took the lives of six people at the Grand Mosque in Québec City and seriously injured 19 others. Their deaths were heartbreaking for their loved ones, for Muslim communities around the world and Canadians in general.

Canadians at large, after seeing incidents in Christchurch and throughout the United States have often thought of ourselves to be above the fray of racial violence and terror; but the truth is – we aren't.

Anti-Islamic racism or “Islamophobia” is real, and many faithful Muslims live in fear daily.

## **Where Does the Government Stand?**

The federal government has designated January 29th as a National Day of Remembrance of the Québec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia. A day after Canadian lawmakers passed a motion to convene an emergency summit on Islamophobia, the Ontario government echoed the move by condemning Islamophobia on Saturday, June 12th.

The actions by both levels of the federal and provincial government were spurred by the horrific murder of four members of a Muslim family in London, Ontario, a city of 400,000 southwest of Toronto. The four died when a pickup truck drove into them in what police said was a premeditated hate crime in which they were targeted because of their religion.

According to the Canadian Security & Intelligence Agency (CSIS) “since 2014, Canadians motivated in whole or in part by their extremist ideological views have killed 21 people and wounded 40 others on Canadian soil.”

*“We must admit that as a society, we have failed to take on Islamophobia, and we have not treated it with the urgency that is required... Canada properly voiced their outrage, their sorrow, and their support for our Muslim neighbours. But there is more to be done – and this is the time to do it. Taking lasting action is the best way to remember and honour the victims.”* – **Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) in**

## What Does the Research Show?

In a 2018 [study](#), Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme of the University of Waterloo estimated that 37 percent of Canadians had significantly more negative feelings toward Muslims than other racial minorities. She cited that one in five Muslim Canadians said they had experienced discrimination due to their religion, ethnicity, or culture at least once in the past five years. This proportion was higher than for members of all other religious groups.

In a report this year to the UN Human Rights Council, a UN expert concluded that, globally, anti-Muslim hatred has reached “[epidemic proportions](#)” with Muslims often targeted based on visible characteristics such as “names, skin colour and clothing.”

A Carnegie Mellon study found that Muslim job candidates experienced more discrimination than Christian job candidates during the hiring process. There was a 13 percent lower callback rate for Muslim job candidates compared to Christian candidates.

Professor Jacqueline Stevenson of Sheffield Hallam University conducted [research](#) that concluded “Muslims are excluded, discriminated against, or failed, at all stages of their transition from education to employment. Taken together, these contributory factors have profound implications for social mobility.” According to her report, some of these barriers include:

- Stereotyping and low expectations from teachers.
- Minority ethnic-sounding names reducing the likelihood of being offered an interview.
- Young Muslims fearing becoming targets of bullying and harassment.
- Women wearing headscarves facing discrimination once entering the workplace.

Researchers for her report also found that every time there was a terror attack, Muslims felt a need to apologize and explain themselves and their religion, even at work. From casual comments to in-depth interrogations by their colleagues, many Muslim employees felt as if they were under the spotlight whenever Islam or Muslims hit the headlines.

Of course, hate speech is prohibited in Canada, but the legislation needs to be strengthened and modernized to be applied consistently online, where, in large part, Islamophobic comments spread virally through social media and promote misconceptions and utter falsehoods of the Muslim faith, conflating it with terror, radicalization and extremist violence.

## How Do You Recognize Islamophobia in the Workplace?

It’s important for HR Managers to understand that legal claims can arise from employees engaging in what they consider ‘banter’. For example, attempts to solicit a Muslim colleague’s views on issues such as Palestine or Afghanistan, continually questioning why a colleague wears a headscarf, or even the more overt examples that have included referring to a Muslim as a ‘terrorist’.

But it can be difficult to distinguish between a conversation of genuine interest and what could amount to ridiculing someone’s religion.

*(HR Managers shouldn’t assume that employees understand what type of ‘banter’ is inappropriate or offensive. You should be aware that an employer can be vicariously*

*liable for discrimination by its workers – whether or not the employer knew about or approved of the conduct. However, an employer will not be held legally responsible for acts of discrimination or harassment by one of its workers if it can show that it took all reasonable steps to prevent the worker from acting unlawfully.)*

The legal definition of harassment can sometimes pose difficulties for employers. So let's be clear, harassment occurs where a person engages in unwanted conduct related to someone's religion, which has the intended or unintended purpose or effect of either violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, or offensive work environment.

It's critical to understand that for discrimination to occur, the offence doesn't have to be intended and the determination of a hostile work environment is in part based on the perception of the recipient of such conduct.

Sometimes Islamophobia is easy to recognize (unfortunately so), but sometimes discrimination is in part due to an unconscious bias, the premise that people find it easy to connect with people like themselves., and as such, it can be much more difficult to recognize. In fact, the Women and Equalities Select Committee found that Muslim women were significantly disadvantaged when it came to securing work. This may be because they, especially those who wear headscarves, are easily identifiable as Muslim, and given the negative media portrayal of Muslims and misperceptions on the whole, candidates from a Muslim background are far more likely to be perceived as 'different' and unlikely to fit in.

Religious discrimination, by law, includes, but is not limited to:

- Dismissing an employee or candidate because of their religion – does not have to be intended.
- Advertising for job applicants of one religion only, or making a job ad less accommodating for someone of a certain religion without a bona fide reason.
- Requiring employees to dress in a certain way, for example, requiring all women to wear a short skirt or not allowing headscarves. This would not be acceptable for women of several different religions.
- Requiring employees not to wear sacred items. For example, a Sikh man might be required to remove their Kara (symbolic bracelet). However, if the employer can justify this on health and safety grounds, this wouldn't count as discrimination.
- Making employees work at times that they cannot work because of their religion.
- Victimization
- Bullying/harassment at work because of an employee's religion.

## **What Should HR Managers Do to Stop Islamophobia?**

While you can't control everything, your employees talk about or do, you can definitely take corrective actions to reduce the risk and promote a more tolerant workplace.

### **1. Audit Your HR Policies & Practices**

Conduct a full-scale audit of your personnel policies to ensure that they are non-discriminatory. Leave no stone unturned—look at all aspects of employment including recruitment, hiring, training, supervision, job assignments, scheduling, transfers, promotions, compensation, discipline, and termination. While it's exceedingly difficult to control what hiring managers and recruiters do in their own time, you may want to institute policies that prohibit hiring managers and recruiters from searching candidates on social networking sites like LinkedIn, prior to meeting them.

This may lower the unconscious bias that can occur when viewing a candidate's profile during the hiring process.

## **2. Implement an Anti-Harassment Policy**

Make sure you have and consistently enforce a written policy banning religious harassment that includes, at a minimum:

- An explanation of what religious harassment is.
- A procedure employees can use to bring harassment complaints.
- A procedure for investigating such complaints; and
- Assurances that employees who submit complaints won't suffer retaliation.

## **3. Implement an Accommodations Policy**

Remember that human rights laws require employers to not only prevent adverse and differential treatment that constitutes religious discrimination but make accommodations for employees' religious preferences up to the point of undue hardship. (Go to [10 Things to Put in Your Religious Accommodations Policy](#) to find out what your policy needs.)

## **4. Implement an Accommodations Procedure**

Exactly what accommodations are and are not required? The only blanket rule is **that there are no blanket rules**. Accommodations must be based on the employee's individual needs and unique circumstances of the situation. Accommodations must be determined based on the employee's individual needs and unique circumstances of the situation. What's required, then, is not just a set of principles but a procedure for submitting and responding to accommodation requests in accordance with those principles.

## **5. Be Prepared to Adjust Work Schedules**

Accommodation of religion involves adjusting work schedules so that employees can observe religious holidays and practices, e.g., not requiring Orthodox Jewish employees to work on the Sabbath or letting Muslim employees go on extended leave during Ramadan or for religious pilgrimage. So, you should be aware of the major religious holidays and be flexible in your scheduling and leave practices.

## **6. Be Prepared to Accommodate Daily Prayer**

Muslims pray five times per day. And Islam is hardly the only religion that requires daily prayer and meditation. Make sure that being at work doesn't force employees to sacrifice these duties. Possible accommodations include prayer breaks and dedicating space for employees to pray.

## **7. Don't Compel Prayer or Proselytize**

Be very careful about prayer. Although employers must accommodate employees who want to pray, they may not encourage or compel them to do so. As the new Ontario Human Rights Commission guidance cautions, mandatory prayer sessions or Bible classes, starting business meetings with prayers and similar "creed compelling" activities are a form of religious discrimination.

## **8. Be Prepared to Loosen Dress Code & Personal Grooming Restrictions**

Make efforts to accommodate employees who want to wear skull caps, head dresses, turbans, and other religious garb. But remember that accommodations aren't required if they impose undue hardship. Accordingly, you can enforce dress requirements to the

extent they're essential for health or safety, such as mandatory hardhats for workers exposed to falling objects at construction sites or a no facial hair policy for workers who use respirators to the extent that beards significantly compromise the device's effectiveness.

### **9. Be Prepared to Accommodate Dietary Restrictions**

Be aware of and prepared to accommodate employees' dietary restrictions, especially if you have cafeteria facilities or hold social events that are catered.

### **10. Be Open-Minded & Inclusive**

Above all, make sure that management, supervisors, and employees at levels of your organization are tolerant and sensitive about religious differences and understand their responsibilities in avoiding stereotypes and providing a diverse and inclusive work environment.

### **11. Open the Doors for Communication**

Your staff should feel like they can approach you about any concerns they have in the workplace. Make sure your door's always open so that if anyone experiences discrimination, they can come to you knowing that you'll listen and you'll take the appropriate action.

### **12. Discipline**

If you receive any complaints or even witness any potentially discriminatory behaviour from an employee, address it immediately before it has an opportunity to escalate into an investigation. Don't ever write it off as an innocent personality quirk or "crazy uncle" comment, and don't assume that your employees have a good understanding of what type of 'banter' is inappropriate or offensive. You and your company can be held liable.

### **13. Educate, educate, educate**

Education is critical to reducing Islamophobia. Most of the anti-Muslim sentiments in the world stem from the misinformation and misunderstanding of the religion. Studies have shown that individuals with Islamophobic views are also the least likely to actually know a Muslim person. Bringing speakers in to educate employees about Islam, as well as other associated religions, can be impactful. It can also be a great team building exercise. I've seen some organizations hold themed lunches as a way to educate employees of cultural and religious diversity in the workplace with a very high engagement level. Bringing in speakers and having open conversations where employees can candidly ask questions can reduce harmful misconceptions.

## **Conclusion**

We all know that discrimination claims can cause reputational damage to a company, but it can also end up costing your business tens of thousands in legal fees and even more if the claim succeeds.

Research shows that human beings need to be presented with six facts/examples/truths to change their perspective/mind/behaviour, but only 1 to reinforce it. Worse, we have a bias to orient ourselves to confirming statements, even if they are false. However, that same research has shown that statements from respected sources carry more influence in changing a person's perspective/mind/behaviour – changing the ratio from 6:1 to 2.5:1. Believe it or not, the most respected sources, as identified in

the study, were religious leaders and employers. Which means, Canadian companies are one of the most powerful forces in combatting Islamophobia, and discrimination in general, by implementing and promoting the right workplace culture.