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Bringing God to Work: The Benefits of Embracing Religious Diversity in the Workplace

Brian Grim

It often seems that corporations welcome and encourage diversity in every dimension except religion. In this article, a global leader on religious freedom in the business sector analyses data on US Fortune 100 companies and makes a business case for welcoming expressions of faith.

In the United States, under laws enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), it is illegal for employers to discriminate against applicants or employees on numerous traits or characteristics, including religion. Moreover, employers are required to reasonably accommodate employees' religious beliefs or practices, unless doing so would cause difficulty or expense for the employer.

This means that an employer may have to make reasonable adjustments at work that allow an employee to practice his or her religion, such as allowing the employee to voluntarily swap shifts with a co-worker so that he or she can attend religious services.

Laws concerning accommodation of religion, freedom of speech and protection against oppressive work environments have informed companies' minimum requirements for accommodating religion in the US and elsewhere. However, as corporate America has become increasingly focused on creating environments where people can bring their whole selves to work regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, some companies are embracing diversity practices that go beyond the minimum legal requirements for accommodation.

This focus on diversity comes in the wake of overwhelming research and evidence showing that a company's bottom line improves when the company values each employee's uniqueness and equitably includes diverse perspectives in the workplace. Most of America's Fortune 100 companies have well-developed diversity, equity and inclusion programs, sometimes headed by a senior executive-level director. Many also have company-sponsored employee resource groups (ERGs) that support people from these protected categories.

However, of the various identities protected by the EEOC, religion stands out as being significantly under-addressed by America's largest companies.

Brian Grim (PhD, Penn State University) is founding president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation and a leading expert on how faith and business can build a better world. He was previously a senior researcher in religion and world affairs at the Pew Research Center.

Our content analysis of the main diversity and inclusion landing pages of Fortune 100 companies' web pages (Figure 1) shows that religion receives less attention than all the other major identity categories. However, our research also indicates that corporate America is at a tipping point towards giving religion similar attention to that afforded to the other major diversity categories, especially as the US becomes more religiously diverse with no denomination holding a majority. Indeed, including religion can be considered a litmus test of whether a company fully embraces diversity, equity and inclusion.

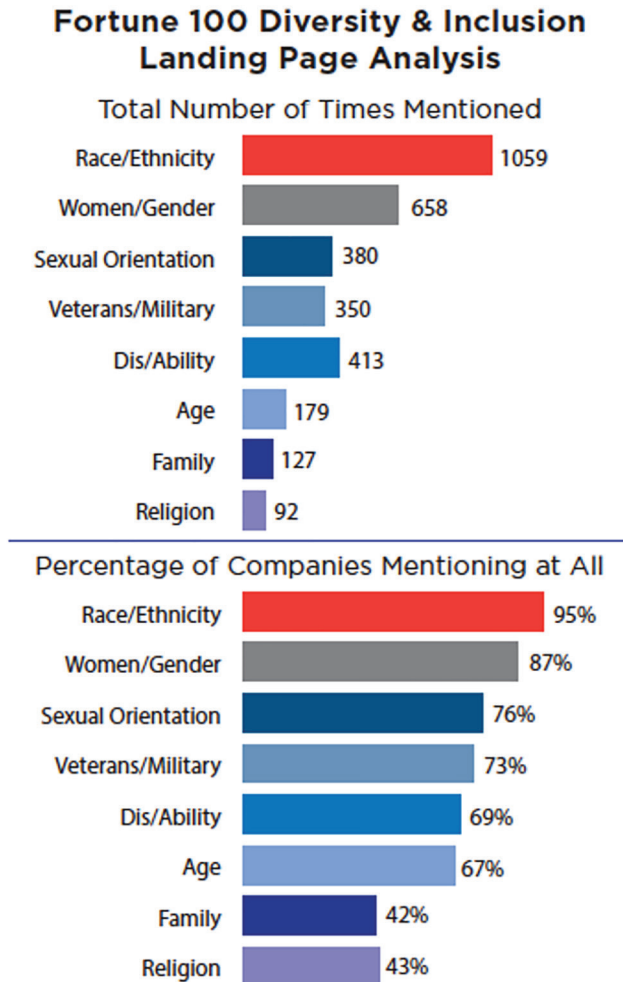


Figure 1: Content analysis of Fortune 100 diversity and inclusion landing pages.

Notes: Religion includes terms such as spirituality, faith/interfaith and religions. Sexual orientation includes terms related to LGBTQ. Women/Gender includes mention of gender or women separate from sexual orientation.

Dis/Ability refers primarily to disabilities that might require accommodations.

Companies of all sizes and industries take great pride in their range of diversity and inclusion initiatives designed to ensure that employees work in environments where they feel they are treated with respect. After all, equitable treatment in the workplace is not only the right thing to do, it's the law. An employee's gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other characteristics are part of who they are, and those aspects of themselves should not be demeaned on the job.

For many people, religious beliefs are as significant a component of their identity. Recently, a senior executive at a top insurance company lamented that at every milestone, she was lauded for breaking through another glass ceiling. She believed, however, that her faith was truly behind her success and wished that this aspect of her life could have been recognized too. Indeed, faith has long been left outside when people come to work. But that situation is beginning to change, with some surprising brands at the vanguard of the effort achieving remarkable results.

Misguided reluctance

Our research shows that most of the Fortune 100 fail to even mention religion or belief as part of their diversity initiatives on their public websites. References to religion or belief as part of these corporate policy statements pale in comparison to mentions of other categories, which cumulatively outnumber the religious mentions by 3,166 to 92, or a 34-to-1 margin.

This reticence is fuelled by several factors. First, some assume that religion is declining to such a degree that it may not warrant recognition. But this is not true in the global marketplace where the world's largest companies operate. An international data project developed by the Pew Research Center estimates that our planet will have 2.3 billion more religiously affiliated people by 2050, compared with just 100 million more religiously unaffiliated people. By their estimate, religious populations worldwide will outnumber the religiously unaffiliated by a factor of 23-to-1 by 2050.

Religion is not only on the increase but is also shifting. By 2050, the top economies will shift from being majority-Christian to include greater participation by Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and the unaffiliated. That means the world and its main marketplaces are becoming not only more religious, but also more religiously diverse.

Misperceptions about the intersection of business and faith have also been created by the prominent attention paid by the media to controversies involving Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A. In such cases, corporate leaders' opposition to abortion or support for traditional marriage has been framed so as to portray faith in the workplace as exclusionary and fuel for confrontation.

However, according to the 2020 Corporate Religious Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI) Index (described further below), companies that include faith-oriented components as part of their employee programming create a more accepting environment overall. The index shows that those faith-friendly workplaces are actually more inclusive of all diversity categories, including the LGBT community, rather than the other way around.

Major companies on the Index's top ten, including Google, American

Airlines, Intel, American Express and Tyson Foods, are taking a wide variety of approaches to this issue. All are proving the concept that fostering faith-oriented groups and interfaith activities leads to stronger work environments.

At Tyson Foods, ninety-eight chaplains provide on-call spiritual assistance to people of all religions or no religion. Google's Inter-Belief Network of ERGs helps the company understand the sensitivities of religious groups when creating new products.

The world's largest retailer, Walmart, launched its first faith-oriented ERG last year, playing a bit of catch-up with Target. The taboo about faith at work is even fading in the financial industry, with American Express having active groups called SALT (Christian), CHAI (Jewish) and PEACE (Muslim).

Texas Instruments, a pioneer in the movement, has been at this for more than 20 years. Others, like Salesforce's Faithforce, are only a few years old but growing quickly. Faithforce, which works to cultivate a culture of respect and belonging for all people, today has more than three thousand members in 13 regional offices across five continents and is the fastest-growing ERG in company history.

PayPal recently launched its first faith-oriented ERG. Apple's Diversity Network Associations include faith-focused groups. Dell's Interfaith ERG is part of a larger network that regularly engages executives to share ideas for product development.

At American Airlines, when Greg McBrayer, an Anglican priest, isn't working as a chief flight dispatcher at Dallas–Fort Worth Airport, he's serving as director of the airport's chaplaincy. American Airlines offers faith-oriented groups for Muslims, Jews and Hindus as well as Christians, along with programmes that foster inter-faith understanding.

The examples go far beyond these, making religion and faith at work perhaps one of the next big trends in corporate management and human resources. This is not just a feel-good initiative, it's good for the bottom line—improving retention, market understanding, employee cooperation and brand warmth.

Just as with any newcomer to the office environment, bringing God to work will require a learning curve, understanding, exploration and time for adjustment. In the end, greater emphasis on faith in the workplace might just mean more religious tolerance, more effective diversity programming and employees who are more fulfilled in their work.

Companies high on religious equity also score better in all other diversity areas

As part of the initial launch of the Corporate Religious Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI) Index, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (RFBF) analysed the level of attention that Fortune 100 companies pay not only to religion, but also to seven other categories (Figure 2). RFBF calculated scores for each category by counting the mentions of each topic on the companies' diversity and inclusion pages and by awarding a weighted score for the number and diversity of ERGs related to each category.

We then calculated the average score for each category for the 48 companies

that do not acknowledge religion on their diversity and inclusion or ERG landing pages, as well as for the 53 companies that have some acknowledgement of religion (including images or videos) on these pages. (The sample contained 101 company websites because one Fortune 100 firm was the result of a recent merger.) This allows us to calculate a ‘religion dividend’ (an indication of the positive association between acknowledging religion and the company’s commitment to the other diversity categories) by subtracting the average category score for the companies not acknowledging religion from the average for those that do acknowledge religion.

The range of diversity category scores reflects the amount of attention companies pay to each topic. Therefore, the best gauge of the religion dividend is the percentage increase in the category score.

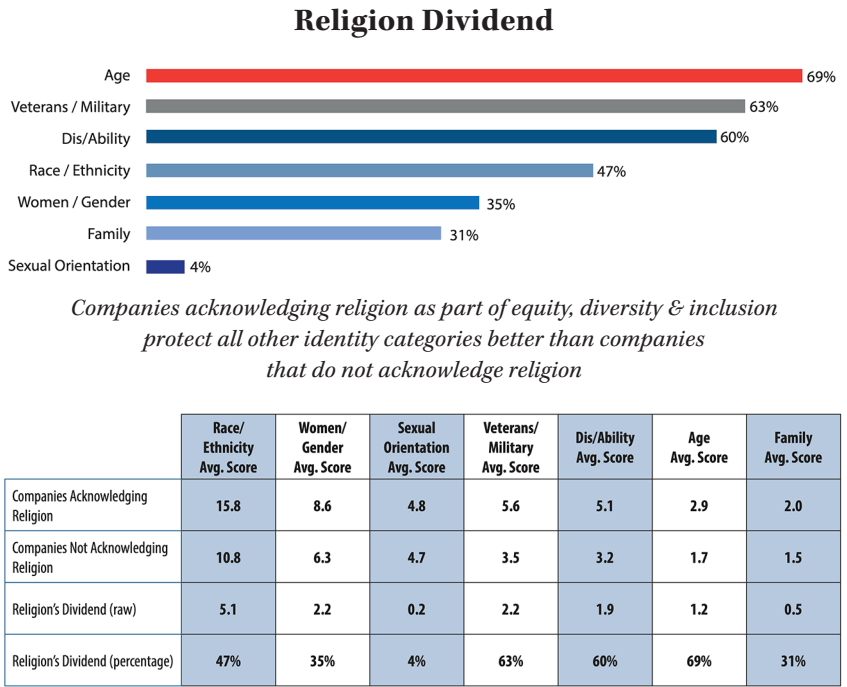


Figure 2: The ‘religion dividend’, defined as the statistically greater likelihood, amongst companies that acknowledge religion as a matter of inclusion, of recognizing other diversity categories relative to those that do not

The results show that the degree of focus placed on each of the seven diversity categories other than religion is higher amongst companies that acknowledge religion than among those that do not. In other words, in all diversity areas, there is a religion dividend.

For example, companies focusing on religion score 69% higher on age inclusion, 63% higher on veteran and military inclusion, 60% higher on (dis)ability inclusion, and 47% higher on race/ethnicity inclusion. Sizable religion dividends are also present for women/gender inclusion (35%) and family inclusion (31%).

The smallest religion dividend is in the area of sexual orientation (scoring 4% higher), but it is still notable that the relationship is positive. This finding coincides with global RFBF research showing that religious freedom fosters a positive environment for LGBT people, and that LGBT rights are increasing in countries with higher levels of religious freedom.

The business case for faith

These data offer promising signs that, while still on the fringes of most corporate inclusion programmes, faith-friendly workplaces are poised to make significant gains in the years ahead. Moreover, according to RFBF's research, companies that include religion in their initiatives on equity and inclusion are stronger in all other inclusion categories mentioned above. Faith inclusion is therefore an important indicator of a more welcoming workplace environment overall.

The drivers behind a greater corporate focus on faith are increasingly clear and make good business sense for companies in a global marketplace. They should not be ignored. When faith-friendly initiatives are implemented equitably, corporations are more appealing from a recruitment and retention standpoint. They increase morale, reduce religious bias, and foster greater collaboration, creativity, productivity, commitment and innovation.

Faith is already an important part of people's lives and the marketplace, so to be religiously tone-deaf is a strategic liability. Faith-friendly workplaces enable employees to help companies successfully navigate a more religious and religiously diverse planet.

The research on religion and the workplace summarized in this article provides a foundation not only for assessment but also for driving positive change, to ensure that the global business community is at the vanguard of efforts to provide work experiences where employees can reach their true potential. That means stronger, more resilient businesses and a better quality of life for people of all faiths and beliefs around the world.