

## **The December Dilemma - Celebrating the Holidays**

*By Nancy A. Haas*

Although the calendar says it is only September, it is time to start thinking about December. If you are a manager, you know all too well that year-end comes much too soon. And along with accounting reconciliations, budget discussions and resource planning, you also have to address your organization's end-of-year celebrations. Throughout the year organizations set aside days for celebrating federal, state, religious and cultural holidays. But when year-end comes around - businesses panic about being 'politically correct'.

Years ago the 'holidays' celebrated during those last few weeks of December were often based on the religious beliefs of the CEO. Today we are faced with the 'December Dilemma', that time of year when it is easier to do nothing rather than celebrate anything specific. Some organizations have even gone so far as to eliminate holiday celebrations completely so as not to 'offend' any employees. That is a bit extreme, and only tends to alienate employees and negatively affect co-worker relationships.

Did you know there are over 1,500 different religious bodies in the United States alone? Religion in the workplace is no longer a taboo issue and has become a popular topic in the main stream news. The dilemma for an employer during this time of year is how to acknowledge the religious beliefs of a diverse workforce without preference to any one group. So, how should you manage the 'December Dilemma'? As an employer, you cannot possibly celebrate every holiday, but there is something you can do to acknowledge a diverse workforce representing so many cultures and religions. You can celebrate the holidays that are important to your employees. It's actually quite simple to do. Open up a space in your company where most employees visit – cafeteria, lobby, or general meeting space. In this space, offer employees the opportunity to educate the entire workforce on cultural and religious holidays by setting up displays for the enjoyment of all. (You will want to represent as many groups as possible, so if your space is limited, obtain employee input during the selection process.) There are several advantages to this approach: as an employer you are taking an interest in your employees and what is important to them; a centralized location eliminates the 'clutter' and 'disagreements' over office displays that favor one celebration over the other; and, your employees have an opportunity to share with the entire workforce the origin, traditions, and true meaning of these celebrations, fostering understanding among co-workers. Some employers have even had their cafeterias develop specific cultural menus to coincide with the displays. And, as an employer, you also have the opportunity to control 'over the top' displays by setting up parameters and keeping them centralized. It becomes a win-win situation for both employers and employees.

But something that is often missed when preparing for the 'December Dilemma' is that it actually starts in October and runs through January. In fact there are some 25 religious, national and cultural holidays that start with the Jewish New Year of Rosh Hashanah on October 4<sup>th</sup> and end on January 31 with the Islamic New Year Hijra. Listed below for your reference are only a few of these celebrations (you can view full descriptions and additional dates at [www.haasconsultingservices.com](http://www.haasconsultingservices.com)):



October 4: Rosh Hashanah ((Jewish)  
October 4 – November 3: Ramadan (Islam)  
October 13: Yom Kippur (Jewish)  
November 1: All Saints' Day (Christian/Catholic)  
                Diwali (Hindu)  
December 8: Bodhi Day (Buddhist)  
December 12: Our Lady of Guadalupe (Christian; Mexico)  
December 15-January 6: Navidades (Christian; Puerto Rico)  
December 25: Christmas (Christian)  
December 26 – January 1: Kwanzaa (African American; United States)  
December 26-January 2: Hanukkah (Jewish)  
January 6: Epiphany (Christian)  
                Christmas (Eastern Orthodox Christian)  
January 29: Chinese New Year (Confucian/Daoist/Buddhist)  
January 31: Hijra (New Year) (Islam)

As an employer you want to stay away from just doing what is politically correct, and concentrate on what is appropriate and respectful of employees as the times for celebration approach. You can also go one step further and include a brief paragraph about key holidays on your intranet web site throughout the year, extending the celebration of diversity beyond January, and making it a year-round process.

Happy Holidays!

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