

Employers adjust to Muslim customs

Ignorance, not prejudice cited in cases

By Salima Khan
USA TODAY

Taxi driver Farhad Nezami rolls out his prayer rug, removes his shoes and raises his hands to begin the early afternoon prayer.

Nezami's not worshipping in a mosque. He's standing in a lot near the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport that about 300 Muslim cab drivers turn in to a makeshift prayer hall several times a day.

They pray there in rain, snow and sleet because Metropolitan Airports Commission has repeatedly denied their request for a room for four years.

Nezami is one of an estimated 6 million Muslims in America — a growing number of whom are demanding flexibility to practice their faith in the workplace.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in America and expected to soon command the largest following in the country after Christianity.

"There are a lot of Muslims in this country, and they need to be recognized," Nezami says.

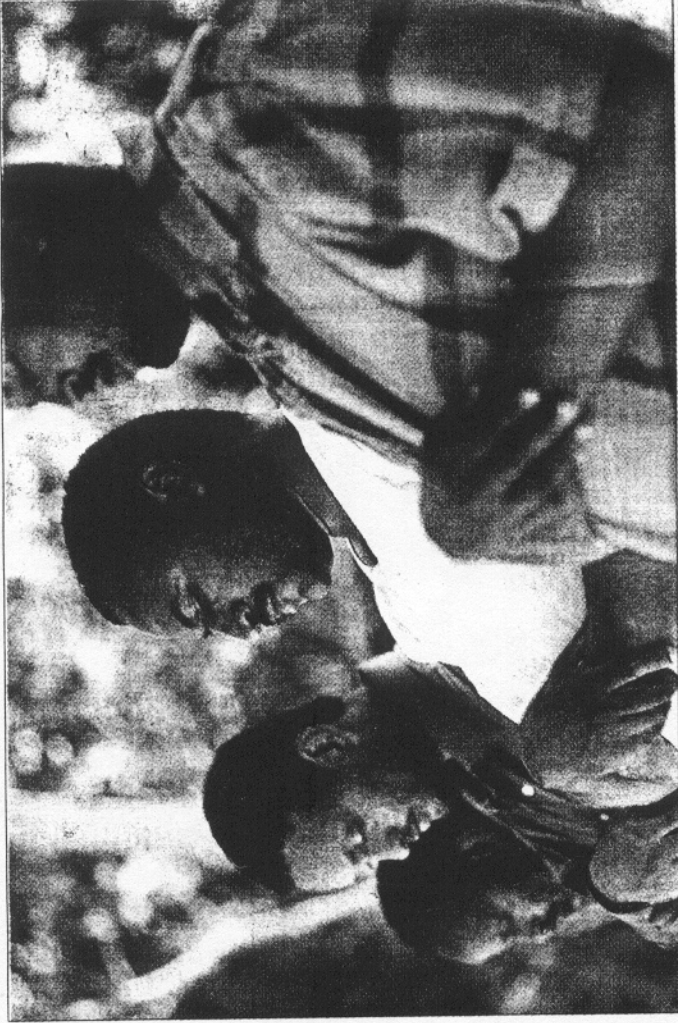
Many employers are unfamiliar with Islam, which is practiced by 1.2 billion people worldwide, and often don't know how to handle Muslims' requests.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Muslim rights advocacy group, says it received 135 workplace discrimination complaints for the year ended March 1999, up 13% from the same period last year.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and its affiliates received 440 complaints from Muslims in 1998, up 42% from 1994.

"Our biggest obstacle has been ignorance on the part of employers — not prejudice," says CAIR's Ibrahim Hooper.

While many employers accommodate Muslim workers on a case-by-case basis after they learn more about the religion, CAIR says companies should adopt detailed religious accommodation codes.



Gathering together: Muslim taxi drivers pray at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. About 300 join in a prayer ceremony daily, whatever the weather.



By John Zehn for USA TODAY

Office work: Nadia Saleem wears a scarf while working at a law firm.

Changes in management often bring the same complaints about the same companies. Some religious customs of Muslims include:

Many Muslim women wear the religiously mandated headscarf or hijab, which serves as a symbol of their modesty.

"She's to be treated in a way that considers her mind above all else," says Sharifa Alkhatib, vice president of the North American Council for Muslim Women.

Seven Muslim security workers at Dulles International Airport near Washington are back at work after filing an EEOC complaint alleging they were fired because they refused to remove their hijabs.

The complaint said the demand to remove the scarves violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which requires employers to reasonably accommodate employees' religious practices.

Argenbright Security, which employs the women, says the women misunderstood their supervisor and were never fired.

Not all companies protest their employees' choice to don

beards for religious reasons. Companies that have altered their policies to allow Muslim men to keep facial hair include Coca-Cola and Adirondack Transit Lines.

Discrimination lawyer Kamran Memon says Muslims are suing employers as they learn about their rights.

"More Muslims are willing to come forward because they are feeling more at home in America," says Memon, who's an American-born son of Pakistani immigrants.

Muslim civil rights advocacy groups and lectures by Muslim lawyers at mosques also are propelling changes in the workplace, Memon says.

CAIR provides sensitivity training to businesses and has distributed 15,000 copies of its *Employer's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices* since 1997.

The recent upswing in Muslim refugees from Bosnia, Somalia and now Kosovo also is changing the face of the U.S. workplace.



By Steve Weverka for USA TODAY

In preparation: A Muslim taxi driver washes from a water bottle before praying at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

Facts, figures about Islam

► **Islam:** One of the three biggest religions worldwide
► **Followers:** 1.2 billion

► **Beliefs:** One God, called Allah in Arabic; prophets (including Adam, Noah, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed); holy books revealed to prophets; angels; day of judgment; life after death — hell and heaven; and predestination

► **Five Pillars of Islam:**
1. Belief that there is only one God, and prophet Mohammed was the last prophet of God

2. Pray five times a day

3. Purifying contribution: To give 2.5% of one's net wealth to the poor and needy

4. Fasting: No food, liquid or sex from sunrise to sunset in the month of Ramadan

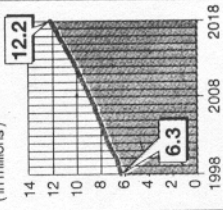
5. Pilgrimage: To Mecca, Saudi Arabia, if affordable

► **Holy book:** Koran — word of God revealed to prophet Mohammed through angel Gabriel

► **Place of worship:** Mosque

Muslim future

Projected Muslim population in the USA (in millions)



Source: A Report on Muslim Population in the United States of America
Dave Merrill, USA TODAY

Accommodating religious differences also makes good business sense, says Anne McMahon, a professor of management and member of Partners for Workplace Diversity in Youngstown, Ohio.

"Employers have to accommodate religious and cultural values if they want to take advantage of all the talents, contacts and networking opportunities people have to offer," McMahon says.

A meatpacking plant in Minneapolis set aside a storage area for prayer after a large group of Somalians threatened to quit if they couldn't pray on the job.

Rep. David Bonior, D-Mich., says he will introduce a resolution next month supporting religious tolerance toward followers of Islam because "too often, Muslims have been discriminated against simply because of their faith."