

# **Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News**

November 24, 2003, Monday

## **As Holidays Arrive, Job Sites Should Include Everyone, Minneapolis Group Says**

By Kathy Gurchiek

Decking the office halls with Christmas trees and other outward signs of the Christian holiday can pose a December dilemma, given the growing religious and cultural diversity in the workplace.

The job site may include those who observe Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh and American Indian traditions or Jehovah's Witnesses whose religion prohibits gift-giving and parties. While about 82 percent of Americans are Christian, there are more American Muslims than American Episcopalians or American Jews, says the Minneapolis-based ProGroup Inc., which works with Fortune 500 companies on workplace and marketplace diversity issues.

"The underlining message is not to assume everybody is Christian and everybody celebrates Dec. 25 in the same way," ProGroup Inc. President Myrna Marofsky says.

She tells the story in an upcoming newsletter of a company that took pains to plan a December party that was inclusive. There would be seasonal instead of Christmas music. Decorations would be winter, not holiday, related. Hanukkah started the night of the party, so a menorah would be included alongside a tiny Christmas tree in the corner.

Santa, of course, was to make an appearance until the company president, who was Jewish, pointed out to a stunned party committee that as a Christian icon, Santa Claus -- also known as St. Nicholas -- was not a symbol of religious diversity sitting unobtrusively in a corner. Santa stayed home.

Fraser Nelson, executive director for the Disability Law Center in Salt Lake City, would agree with that decision.

"It's completely inappropriate to celebrate any religious holiday in the workplace," Nelson says. Under her direction over the past seven years, the center has scrubbed itself clean of any sanctioned holiday activity.

You won't hear Christmas carols or see Secret Santa gifts exchanged. You won't find stockings hung with care around cubicles and certainly no Christmas tree or menorah. For someone who is not a Christian, a Christmas tree is the same as a cross in its symbolism, says Nelson, who is Jewish.

"When I walk in the door of the Utah State Capitol and I see a Christmas tree in the rotunda, I am personally offended . . . It doesn't belong in the workplace and it doesn't belong in public buildings."

Because seasonal holidays are so embedded in our culture, doing away with them is not the answer, ProGroup Inc.'s Marofsky says.

"Celebrations are really important in workplaces, but if you link it to a year coming to a close or celebrate a success or celebrating [your] company, that sends a much more inclusive message because [otherwise] whose holiday are you celebrating?" she says.

Talk to employees about how to make the holiday party more inclusive, she advises.

"The people who are Jewish or Muslim feel like Scrooge because they get blamed for taking away Christmas," Marofsky notes. "It's really just raising the level of consciousness that there could be people who are different or who may feel excluded" otherwise.

ProGroup Inc. will celebrate the end of the year with an Italian dinner. Disability Law Center employees will gather for a holiday -- not a Christmas -- party after business hours and off business premises and donate toys to a shelter.

Being sensitive to differences in the workplace extends to customers.

"If you become a retailer who really welcomes all customers of all backgrounds and you have that image and that reputation, then you'll get more customers and have more business," Marofsky says. That extends to holiday music and being sensitive to small things such as wishing customers a merry Christmas, she says, noting that some religions, such as Eastern Orthodox, don't celebrate Christmas until January.

Nelson thinks that unless the business or organization has an obvious religious slant, such as a Christian bookstore, showing preference for one religious holiday sends the wrong message.

"We don't do anything [at the center] that would make anyone who comes to the door of a public institution, especially one that is charged with upholding the Constitution, feel in any way we have any preference for any belief system other than our belief in justice," she says. "We accept funding from all kinds of people and we provide services to all kinds of people. We're not here to play Santa games or get caught up in the holiday spirit to the detriment of work."