

This Meeting in a Box is designed to help you understand other religious traditions, shape a calendar and time off policies that are more inclusive and create a workplace environment where employees feel comfortable being themselves.



The Holidays You May Not Know

The month of April often means Easter celebrations and spring festivals. For different faiths, this is an important time of renewal and celebration as well, but the federal calendar does not guarantee time off for people with different religious traditions the way it often does for Christian traditions.



Editors Note

While Christianity may currently be the predominant religion in the U.S., around 5% of the population identifies with a non-Christian religion, according to the Public Religion Research Institute. That equates to more than 16 million people across the country whose traditions may not be reflected on the corporate calendar. To create truly inclusive workplaces and cultures, companies should look to accommodate the needs of different faiths and cultural traditions.

It's important to understand as you read this that ethnicity and religion may be intertwined at times, but they are not the same thing. Around the world, there are Latino Jews, Black Buddhists and Asian Christians. It's important not to make assumptions about one's faith based on their ethnicity and provide a safe space where they feel the practice of their religion doesn't interfere with or isn't interfered with by their work. There are numerous religious faiths and sects to consider when looking at the demographics of your workforce, particularly if you're operating on a global scale.

While there are different sects of every religion and several less populated faiths, we will narrow our focus to four religious faiths that the majority of the global population of people who identify with a religion will fall into. Even when simplifying this view, there are still a great many factors to consider. While there are varying Christian traditions, for the purposes of this piece we will focus primarily on non-Christian traditions.

It's worth noting that these traditions often do not go by the typical 12-month calendar as they were formed before its creation or have their own calendars. Therefore, it will require HR and diversity teams to engage with these cultures on a regular basis to keep their own calendars up to date.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but a view into the variety of holidays that one may need to consider to be truly inclusive of employees from other cultures and countries. Some of these holidays may require employees of non-Christian faiths to dig into their paid time off if the company does not allow them to observe their holidays as part of their benefits, having a negative impact on a culture of inclusion.

More research into complete calendars should be done before consulting with employees on times they will need off, should they identify a desire or need to do so.

Judaism

While many are well acquainted with Hannukah and some of the traditions that come along with that, other Jewish holidays often go unnoticed. For example, Purim is a holiday that celebrates the defeat of the Persian emperor Haman's plot to kill all the Jews within his empire, a story depicted in the book of Esther. The observance lasts only for one day, but traditionally requires Jewish people to avoid doing any work. This year, Purim began on a Wednesday night and ended the following evening.

Other Jewish holidays where work is traditionally not permitted include:

- **Passover** – celebrates the freeing of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt (work permitted on certain days with restrictions).
- **Shavuot** – marks the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.
- **Rosh Hashanah** – celebration of the Jewish New Year.
- **Sukkot** – celebrates God sheltering the Jews on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. This period lasts for seven days.
- **Shemini Atzeret & Simchat Torah** – marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of weekly Torah reading and the beginning of a new cycle.
- **Hannukah** – marks the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem following the Maccabean revolt.
- **Yom Kippur** – a day of atonement and one of the holiest days of the year in the Jewish tradition.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion based on teachings from Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as the Buddha. The faith was formed by the Buddha more than 2,500 years ago and has nearly 470 million followers today.

Some Common Buddhist holidays include:

- **Vesak (Buddha Day)** – a festival that celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death Siddhartha Gautama and offers a time to reflect on his teachings. This year, it occurs on May 6.
- **Dharma Day** – one of the most important holidays in the Theravada Buddhist (the dominant sect throughout much of southeast Asia) tradition, this holiday celebrates Buddha's first sermon.
- **Mahāyāna and Theravada New Year** – Mahāyāna is the prevalent form of Buddhism in Northeast Asia and has absorbed many of the local customs. Mahāyāna New Year is different in each country, with some celebrating it in line with the traditional new year and others at different times. Theravada Buddhism is more prevalent in Southeast Asia and celebrates its new year in April.
- **Nirvana Day** – a celebration of the death of Buddha when he reached Nirvana at the age of 80. It is celebrated in early to mid-February with the actual date varying by which tradition is observing it.
- **Bodhi Day** – a celebration of the day that Buddha experienced enlightenment, this holiday is celebrated in December and involves additional meditation, chanting of Buddhist texts and performing kind acts toward others for those who observe it.
- **Obon** – also known simply as "Bon" and specific to Japan, this two-day period in August is observed to honor one's ancestors and has evolved into a time for family reunions in some places.
- **Kathina** – occurring at the end of rainy season in the Theravada tradition, Kathina is a month-long celebration ending on a full moon that marks a period in which Buddhist monks and nuns are given new robes. Common observers may visit temples and give offerings of cloth used to make the robes. This year, Kathina starts on October 9 and ends on November 9.



“Pre-pandemic, around 2 million Muslims performed the Hajj each year. During the pandemic, Saudi Arabia had to limit participation to 1,000 in 2020 and to 60,000 in 2021 to ensure a socially distanced observance.

Islam

A sometimes maligned and often misunderstood religion, Islam's traditions are not represented well in Western popular culture. Islam, however, has been a tradition that has contributed significantly to the arts, sciences and innovation throughout history and its traditions are rich, stemming back centuries and reaching into all corners of human civilization.

You may be familiar with a holiday such as Ramadan, although unfamiliar with the practices that accompany it. For Ramadan specifically, which begins in April and ends in May this year, it does not require Muslims to abstain from work as it lasts for the entire 30 days of the ninth month in the Islamic calendar. However, Muslims observing Ramadan may fast from sunrise to sunset, meaning they may desire to change their work hours to times where they are more likely to feel productive. Lunch meetings are something to reconsider and it's worth understanding the intention of the holy month, which is to provide an opportunity to reduce consumption, reflect on improvements a person can make in their life and appreciate the little things in life.

Let's look at a few other Muslim holidays and traditions that require followers of this faith to observe certain practices or perform acts that may impact their ability to work and should be accommodated or supported by companies looking to be more inclusive of this community. It's worth noting that due to different traditions and interpretations, the actual day of an event may vary from one practitioner to another.

- **Lailat al-Miraj** – celebrates the prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem where he ascended into the heavens.
- **Lailat al-Bara'ah** – called the night of forgiveness or night of destiny, it is believed that this is the night the prophet writes a person's destiny for the year to come. Some Muslims observe it by staying up all night in prayer, while others fast, give to charity or celebrate in their own ways.
- **Laylat al-Qadr** – translated to the “Night of Power,” this holiday celebrates the night that God revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad.
- **Eid al-Adha – Hajj** – this day marks the beginning of the Hajj (pilgrimage) and is typically noted as a work restricted holiday.
- **Waqf al Arafa – Hajj** – one of the most famous Muslim holidays, this translates to the “Day of Standing” and occurs on the second day of the Hajj. For those performing the traditional Hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca), something all able Muslims are expected to do in their lifetime, they must “stand before God” from around noon until sunset. For those not making the pilgrimage, fasting is encouraged. It is the holiest day of the Islamic lunar New Year .
- **Hijri** – recognized as the Islamic New Year or the Arabic New Year, this day celebrates the journey of the prophet and his followers from Mecca to Medina.
- **Milad-un-Nabi** – this translates to “the birth of the prophet.” It is celebrated by people wearing green as a symbol of Islam and paradise, consuming communal meals in mosques and in some cases accompanied by festivals and all-night prayers.

Hinduism

A rich and eclectic religion and culture, Hinduism has a large number of holidays across the four major denominations of Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. They vary in the Gods they view as supreme, their scriptures, saints, ideologies and teachings.

While some holidays include work restrictions, observance of this is often not universal and employees should be consulted to help shape flexible work and time off policies that best suit their needs. Here are some of the key holidays celebrated by many Hindu people regardless of where they are in the world.

- **Makar Sankranti** – the first Hindu holiday of the year on a Western calendar is a celebration of the days becoming longer.
- **Maha Shivaratri** – a celebration of Shiva, the destroyer of the universe, this holiday occurs on the day and night before a new moon, typically in March.
- **Rama Navami** – taking place in April, this holiday celebrates the birth of the Lord Rama. Observers decorate their homes with fruits and flowers and the youngest girl in a family leads them in a prayer known as “puja”.
- **Holi** – known as the “festival of colors,” “festival of love” and “festival of spring,” this holiday celebrates the divine love of the god Krishna and typically takes place in March.
- **Krishna Janmashtami** – a two-day celebration of the birth of Krishna, one of the most commonly worshipped Hindu gods. Many do not sleep for these two days and will fast for the first day.

■ **Diwali** – a five-day celebration of good harvests, the triumph of good over evil and the goddess of wealth, Diwali is perhaps the most well-known Hindu and Sikh holiday. Over the course of five days, observers will eat a variety of sweets, set off fireworks and decorate using lights.

