

# The Rising Interest in Workplace Spirituality: Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives

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## Abstract

This paper explores the reasons for emergence of the work-place spirituality from micro(individual employee level), meso (organizational level) and macro (societal level)perspective of human aggregation. At the micro or individual employee level increased job insecurity due to business process reengineering, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, and outsourcing has motivated employees to search for the deeper meaning in life and work. The demise of traditional neighborhood and improved socio-economic conditions amongst younger employees has also led to contemplation on purpose of life and work at the individual employee level. Scholars argue that the organizational leaders need to create organisational climate to facilitate employees' experiences of spirituality at work. They suggest that spiritual climate build around core spiritual values would result in deeper employee engagement and thus, it will increase organizational strength and competitive energy. The interest in workplace spirituality at societal level could be attributed to the deteriorating ecological conditions and social problems due to rapid industrial growth.The paper also discusses the challenges in wider adoption of workplace spirituality in the commercial organisations and how it could be addressed.

**Keywords:** *Higher purpose, Sense of Community, Organizational Spirituality, Workplace spirituality*

## Introduction

The roots of workplace spirituality or spirituality at work can be traced to torrent of thought-provoking books in the popular media. These books called for the need for more consciousness in the business leadership. Books such as, *Reawakening the Spirit in Work: The Power of Dharmic Management* (Hawley & Hawley, 1993), *The Soul of Business: Managing for Profit and Common Good* (Chappell, 1993), *New traditions in business: Spirit and leadership in the 21st century* (Renesch & Harman, 1992), *Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit*, (Bolman & Deal, 1995) exhorted business leaders to search for larger purposes in their lives. Organizational consultants played an important role in rising interest in workplace spirituality. Human resource consultants recommended meditation, prayer and guided imagery to business leaders as a means of enhanced decision making capability and better interpersonal skills that lead to an effective leadership (Biberman, Whitty & Robbins, 1999; Butts, 1999). Interest in meditation and prayers could have motivated some of the leaders to explore deeper meaning of life.

The scholarly interest in workplace spirituality is also on rise (Garg, 2018; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014) since 1990s. In 1999, Academy of Management (AOM) formally recognized workplace spirituality as a field of inquiry with the creation of an interest group named “management, spirituality, and religion”

(Tevichapong, 2012). Also, journals such as *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *Journal of Management Education*, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Human Resource Management Review* and *Journal of Organizational Change Management* published special sections or issues on the subject (Cunha, Armenio & Teresa, 2006). There are at least three (mainstream) journals devoted exclusively to workplace spirituality – *Spirit at Work*, *Business Spirit*, and *The Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*. Professional journals, such as *Personnel Journal and Training*, have published research papers on business and spirituality; also, business magazines such as *Fortune* and *Business Week* have published articles on workplace and spirituality (Cavanagh, 1999). Empirical research in spirituality at workplace has gained momentum as scholarly researches conducted in different countries have been published in different periodicals. Asmush and Duchon (2000), Duchon and Plowman (2005) and, Milliman, Czaplewski and Ferguson (2003) from US; Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004, 2006a,b,c) from Canada; Komala and Ganesh (2007) and Pawar (2009) from India; Rego and Cunha (2008) from Portugal; Petchsawang and Duchon (2012) and Tevichapong (2012) from Thailand; Campbell and Yen (2014) from Malaysia; Karakas (2010) from United Kingdom, Noor and Arif (2011) and, Khan and Chowdhary (2015) from Pakistan; Fernando and Chowdhury (2010) from Australia have contributed to scientific understanding of workplace spirituality, its causes and implications. Therefore, workplace spirituality is now a field of vibrant academic and business interest in different countries with its roots in North America.

Thus at this juncture, it is important to understand the reasons for increasing interest in workplace spirituality and their continued relevance to different levels of human aggregation. This paper

reviews extant literature to identify reasons for the recent interest in spirituality at workplace from individual employee, organizational and societal perspectives. The paper also explores the expected outcomes of workplace spirituality from employees' and organizational leaders' perspective. The synergy in workplace spirituality outcomes from these two perspectives will determine its relevance in organisations. Workplace spirituality will remain relevant if there is symbiotic relationship amongst these expected outcomes from the two different perspectives. Identification of reasons for rising interest among employees can help an organisation develop necessary changes in leadership development programs, organizational structures, processes and systems. It will also help employees identify the organisational characteristics which can help them realize spirituality while at work. The paper also explores the challenges for wider acceptance of workplace spirituality amongst commercial organisations and possible steps to address these challenges.

### **Reasons for Recent Interest in Workplace Spirituality**

The rise in interest in workplace spirituality in the West may be noticed through an increase in literature on spirituality in popular media, conferences and scholastic journals in the area of management. Present interest in workplace spirituality may be traced to the United States of America. Books on the role of spirituality started emerging in popular media in early 1990s (Garcia-Zamor, 2003). According to some scholars, the interest in workplace spirituality may be viewed as a countervailing force to the widely prevalent modernistic or mechanistic paradigm of management for most of the twentieth century, which focused only on rational or utilitarian approach to management while completely ignoring the subjective needs and dispositions of

employees (Biberman & Whitty, 1997; Burac, 1999; Waddock, 1999). The focus of this paradigm has been on the shareholder wealth maximization (Waddock, 1999) even at the expense of the other stakeholders. According to Waddock (1999), “only thing that really matters (in this view) is self-interest and personal gain” (p.332). According to Cavanagh (1999), the sole focus on self-interest and wealth maximization resulted in many maladies for individual employees, society and even the organisations themselves. The investigation of reasons for rise of this new phenomenon at different levels of human aggregation will help understand the relevance of workplace spirituality and its sustainability in future.

### Individual Perspective

At the individual level, it is important to understand the reasons that motivate employees towards workplace spirituality. In addition, it is also important to understand the meaning of workplace spirituality from individual employee's perspective. It is also important to explore socio-economic conditions that may lead to development of the desire to experience spirituality at the workplace.

Literature suggests that organisations have dramatically changed in response to rapid globalization and increased competition (Carwright & Holmes, 2006; Burack, 1999; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006a). Many organisations have resorted to downsizing, business process reengineering, mergers and acquisitions, and outsourcing, to successfully compete in such an environment (Burack, 1999; Cash & Gray, 2000). According to Cartwright and Holmes (2006), “such forms of restructuring invariably have a negative impact on employees in terms of job losses, job uncertainty, ambiguity and heightened anxiety” (p.199). The resulting lay-offs

of employees due to restructuring were invariably characterized as inhuman in majority of firms, as employees were not informed in time to prepare themselves for the consequences of lay-offs in their lives (Freeman, 2009). Many employees were laid off by firms to reduce their cost of operations while the top executives continued to draw substantial salaries and bonuses. Employees who survived the lay-offs were expected to work for longer hours and they were frightened due to increased job insecurity in their organisations (Biberman & Whitty, 1997; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004). The resulting increase in distrust towards leaders and management made the employees feel frustrated, frightened, angrier and demoralized (Ashmosh & Duchon, 2000; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; Pfeffer, 2003). The distrust on leaders among employees made them feel that they have been treated just as an expendable resource or means of productions by their organisations (Cash & Gray, 2000; Giacalone & Jurckiewicz, 2003; Lips-Wiersma, 2002) rather than human beings. The employees were dismayed that their organisations consider them as costs rather than valuing them as organizational assets (Mishra, Spreitzer & Mishra, 1998). According to Giacalone and Jurckiewicz (2003), “This diminishing view of self and work exacerbates feelings of social alienation and fear, compelling the employee to search for deeper meaning in life” (p.3). Cavanagh (1999) supported the above mentioned idea of Giacalone and Jurckiewicz by stating that “downsizing and employers demand for long hours in workplace have also triggered reflection. Today people no longer have secure jobs, and that is unsettling and encourages self-examination” (p.187). It has been observed that individuals turn to spirituality when they face deep crisis in their life such as loss of job, life-threatening disease, divorce etc. (Neal & Biberman, 2004; Yogananda, 2003). Many individuals turned to Eastern spiritual practices such as Zen, Yoga etc. as a way of coping with the

increased stress at work (Biberman & Whitty, 1997) and in the personal lives. According to Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003), the increased interest in the Eastern philosophies and spiritual practices in the West may partly be attributed to interest in other cultures and an increase in internationalization of corporations. The internationalization of corporations has encouraged leaders to integrate the Eastern and Western managerial practices that are likely to be more acceptable while working in Eastern cultures. Whatever may be the reason behind increased interest in Eastern spiritual practices, one thing is certain that the Eastern spiritual practices emphasize on integration of all aspects of a person's life (Cash & Gray, 2000; Cavanagh, 1999).

According to Waddock (1999); many individuals, especially more educated employees, realized that beyond a certain point mere money did not augment their quality of life. In such cases individuals reflected on higher needs of affiliation and integration into something meaningful (Tischler, 1999) rather than focusing exclusively on material gains. These feelings were also accentuated by the realization that survival was assured even if they lost their jobs (Tischler, 1999; Waddock, 1999). Tischler (1999) observed that many employees strived to fulfill higher order needs of affiliation and esteem while some even strived to fulfill their self-actualization needs. The desire to fulfill higher order needs prompted employees to work for organisations, which have higher purpose and where employees had a sense of community at workplace. As neighborhood and community have lost its relevance in bigger cities, employees desire that their workplace should provide them a sense of community and deeper meaning in work. Kinjerski & Skrypnek (2006a) defined workplace spirituality at employee level as spirit at work that has been subsequently been termed as individual spirit at work (I-SAW) and it

refers to employee's *experiences* of meaning in work, mystical experiences, spiritual connection and sense of community in a given organizational context (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006a). The dimensions of meaningful work and interconnectedness (or sense of community) have been found as important constituents of spirituality at work from individual employee perspective (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Fry, 2003; Miliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson, 2003)

Therefore, it is observed that uncertain job environment, continuous changes in work environment, crisis in personal life, demise of traditional neighborhood and, to some extent improved socio-economic condition, have led to contemplation on purpose of life and work at individual employee level. Also, coaches and consultants have offered meditation and spiritual assistance to individuals to overcome the stress due to the challenging work and social environment. These practices could have led some individuals to search for deeper meaning in life and work. Therefore, these different factors have prompted individuals to explore the meaning of life and work; and ignited a desire to experience interconnectedness with other human beings and society in general. Since employees spend major part of their waking time at workplace; therefore, they seek to find higher purpose and sense of interconnectedness with others at workplace itself. Thus, some employees seek to work for organisations such as, South-West Airlines and Body-Shop; that seem to have a higher purpose and that also provide a sense of community at workplace to their employees (Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett & Condemi, 1999; Mitroff, 1999).

### **Organizational Perspective**

This section explores the reasons for interest in workplace spirituality amongst business leaders. It

also discusses the meaning of workplace spirituality from an organizational perspective. According to Biberman and Whitty (1997), organisations and their executives are showing interest in workplace spirituality in response to call for imbibing spiritual values at workplace. Organizational writers have articulated positive effect of spirituality, on organizational learning and creative thinking (Biberman & Whitty, 1997); on intuition, innovation and employee enthusiasm through a compelling vision (Cavanagh, 1999; Neck & Milliman, 1994); on employee motivation, commitment and adaptability (Jurckiewicz & Giacalone, 2004); on high employee satisfaction and productivity (Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett & Condemni, 1999). These possibilities encouraged organizational leaders to send their employees for spirituality development training programs based on meditation and guided imagery (Butts, 1999; Neck & Milliman, 1994) so as to develop a better understanding of their own-selves and people working with them (Cavanagh, 1999). These training programs prompted executives to define their personal purposes, mission and values (Lip-Wiersma, 2002); consequently, it may have led them to question the higher purpose of their organisations' existence. According to Cavanagh (1999), many organisations responded to these questions by including "a new question in their search for vision, 'what is our higher purpose'" (p.194). Butts (1999) suggested that when employees believe that they are contributing to something beyond economic means; they are able to completely immerse themselves in their work, and work is an enjoyable experience for them. This unleashes the creativity of employees and results in a sense of contentment – a deep satisfaction with their work, their organisation and most importantly with their own existence. Collective creative energy of employees is likely to lead to an enhanced organizational performance. According to Collins and Poras (1994), a higher purpose that focuses on something beyond profits is one of the

most important characteristics of all successful organisations that were explored in their research. According to Cartwright and Holmes (2006), mergers and acquisitions did not deliver anticipated benefits of rise of increased profits or rise in stock prices to the organisations. Mishra, Spreitzer and Mishra (1998) suggested that, "perhaps the most prominent reason that the expected benefits of downsizing are not achieved is the survivors' poor morale" (p.84). Generally, downsizing results in loss of trust between management and employees, between departments and amongst employees. The loss of trust breeds suspicion and hinders the informal organizational communication, which is crucial for faster decision-making process and competitiveness of organisations. Also, these downsized organisations need more committed employees who can fill-in the gaps due to wipe out of hierarchies as a result of downsizing (Mishra, Spreitzer & Mishra, 1998). These flatter organisations necessitate increasingly empowered and collaborative relationships in organisations (Burack, 1999). The organizational leaders realized that the older ways of control and command need to change; they need to engage employees, empower them and need to build trust across organisation to boost organizational performance. However, the past rhetoric of empowerment and participative management has resulted in little change in command and control method of management, creating distrust amongst employees about the real intentions of management (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Therefore, organizational leaders needed to engage employees by developing shared vision and core values for their organisation, which emphasizes contribution to society and developing respect for each employee. The leaders would be required to create an environment where employees value their relationships with their colleagues, and experience a sense of community through shared organizational vision and core organizational values. Leaders need to ensure that

the shared vision and core values are the guiding principles in day-to-day decision making.

Also, the basis of competition in 21<sup>st</sup> century would be 'human capital' of an organisation. Therefore, organisations are looking for innovative ways to attract and retain their best employees to gain a competitive edge over their competitors (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006a). The new organisations would be required to compete with each other for the new talent in a global marketplace. The more educated younger generation which is entering the workforce is not only concerned about the economic rewards of a job but also looks for meaningfulness in the work (Tischler, 1999). Organisations need to respond to the demands of these younger employees and demonstrate them how working in their organisation would create a deeper meaning for them. Many organisations offer projects which are aimed at uplifting the underprivileged sections of society while others offer fully paid leaves for community work. Some organisations, e.g. Ben and Jerry, have designed their product development process meticulously to ensure that the raw-materials for their products are sourced from poorer farmers (Mitroff, 1999). However, number of such organisations which have integrated idea of contribution to others in their organizational operations is rather small. These organisations such as, South-West Airlines continue to attract a large number of prospective employees, and help these organisations develop superior human capital as compared to their competitors (Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett & Condemi, 1999; Mitroff, 1999).

According to Biberman and Whitty (1997), the past business paradigm where individuals and different departments competed with each other for resources needs to give way to team development and employee empowerment to face rapidly evolving business conditions (Freshman, 1999). Biberman and Whitty (1997) observed that an empowered employee enhances the organizational

competitive strength that is necessary for hyper-competitive global markets and greatest empowerment comes from the realization that the purpose of life and work is material as well as spiritual.

Thus, organisations' interest in workplace spirituality seems to stem from the fact that it could help organisations enhance their competitiveness in the global marketplace. Workplace spirituality can help organisations to attract new talent and thus, positively influence the organizational performance. Workplace spirituality from an organizational perspective may mean that an organisation need to identify a higher purpose for its existence and create an organizational culture around core values such as employee empowerment.

### **Societal Perspective**

According to Renesch (1992), "Business has operated for decades 'as if there were no tomorrow', and all of the society has started experiencing the cost of this short sightedness" (p.4). According to Harman (1992), this unabated pursuit of wealth maximization has beset the planet with host of problems – environmental degradation, climate change, toxic concentration, chronic hunger and poverty, species extinction to name a few (p.12). According to Cochran (2007), social movements in 1970s started in response to these problems in US and Europe. These movements led to legislations and formation of social groups to establish safety, quality and environmental standards (Tischler, 1999); however, these problems have only grown in their magnitude. Most of these problems are inter-connected and need immediate attention for survival of this planet (Harman, 1992).

Moreover, the industrial revolution has resulted in widespread migration from villages and towns to

cities. People moved from living in small, self-sufficient communities with strong human bonds to creating large societies with weak human relationships (Tischler, 1999). As people shifted to newer places and spent longer hours at their workplace, the traditional systems of neighborhood, extended families and communities got weakened (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Duchon & Plowman, 2005). Values of caring and sharing which were common in smaller self-sufficient communities were conspicuously missing in these bigger societies, leading to the need for national level government safety net and responsibility programs (Tischler, 1999). Individuals and organisations are the building blocks of any society. Today the society expects from businesses to take initiative in the transformation since global multinational firms are one of the most capable entities of doing so. Society expects businesses to go beyond only profit maximization and also act as a catalyst in solving some of serious problems facing human race. According to Kourie (2006) contemporary spirituality affects all the areas of society, including the business world. Some of major institutions such as educational institutions and healthcare organisations have shown receptivity to the idea of workplace spirituality. This receptivity is evident in increasing number of researches on workplace spirituality in the healthcare sector and the increasing academic research on workplace spirituality. The wider acceptance of workplace spirituality amongst commercial organisations would ensure greater well-being of planet and people. However, few businesses are convinced that the policies which are good for people and planet will also be good for profits.

The interest in workplace spirituality at societal level could be attributed to the deteriorating ecological conditions and social problems due to rapid industrial growth. The civil groups hope that organisations with higher purpose can provide

solutions to the ecological and social problems.

### **Synergy between Expectations at the Individual Level and Organisational Level**

From preceding discussions, it may be observed that expectations from workplace spirituality vary substantially across the different levels: individual employee, organizational leaders and society. At the individual level, employees' yearn for meaning or purpose at work and sense of inter-connectedness with others at their workplace; while the organizational leader's interest in workplace spirituality is likely to hinge on its ability to influence the organization's bottom-line. Society expects that adoption of spirituality in different spheres of life, including the commercial organizations will enhance human well-being leading to an equitable and more sustainable society. Wide spread acceptance of workplace spirituality in organizations is likely to yield benefits to the society.

Even though workplace spirituality holds promise for micro, meso and macro level of human aggregation, yet the interest in workplace spirituality still remains academic in nature with organizational leaders showing little interest in the concept. This may be attributed to the fact that research scholars have primarily focused their efforts on the micro level i.e. individual employee's experiences of spirituality at workplace (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Milliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson 2003; Kinjerski & Skrypnik, 2006a) and its influence on employees. Meaningful work and sense of community at work have been two of the common dimensions of individual employee experiences of workplace spirituality. There are numerous studies that explore the relationship between these two dimensions and employee's work related attitudes. Studies have shown that employees' experiences of spirituality at work has positive effect on the organizational members.

Milliman, Czaplewski and Ferguson (2003) found that two dimensions of: meaningful work and sense of community were related to employee work attitudes of intrinsic work satisfaction, job involvement and organisation based self-esteem. Researchers have also demonstrated that these dimensions are positively related to job satisfaction (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Tevichapong, 2012), work satisfaction (Choerudin, 2014), job commitment (Chawla & Guda, 2010), organizational identification (Tevichapong, 2012), psychological well-being (Golparvar & Abedini, 2014b; Tevichapong, 2012) and job happiness (Golparvar & Abedini, 2014a, b). From this discussion it can be surmised that there is some evidence that employees' spirituality related experiences have positive outcomes for employees. Theoretically, it may be concluded that these positive outcomes for employees are likely to lead to higher level of job involvement and thus, higher productivity for organisations. However, the organizational leaders seem not convinced about the efficacy of workplace spirituality for their organizations. Following section discusses the challenges in adoption of workplace spirituality in commercial organisations.

### **Challenges in Adoption of Workplace Spirituality**

Scholars suggest that empirical demonstrations of positive influence of workplace spirituality on the organizational performance could lead to its acceptability in the business world (Krahnke, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Milliman, Czaplewski and Ferguson, 2003). If the empirical researches could demonstrate to the business leaders that organizations with higher spiritual climate (workplace spirituality at organisational level) perform better than organizations with lower level of spiritual climate, it would definitely lead to adoption of workplace spirituality in commercial organizations. Past studies have expressed spiritual

climate in organizations in terms of organizational values (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006a). According to Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2004), there are many measures that assess workplace spirituality at the individual employee level; however, there is a need for an objective measure to assess spiritual climate or workplace spirituality at organizational level. There are a few studies that measured organisational level workplace spirituality by adapting personal spirituality scale (Kolodinsky, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2008; Pawar, 2009). However, the authors identified such an adoption as a limitation of their study (Kolodinsky, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2008). Therefore, there is a need for measure of workplace spirituality at organizational level that has been developed in the work-setting and that identifies different leadership values and organizational values.

Also, the research on workplace spirituality has been criticized for lack of rigorous scientific research (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) emphasized on the need for scientific investigation of workplace spirituality and its outcomes. Organizational level workplace spirituality has been proposed as a constellation of organizational spiritual values (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006b). Now, the growth of the field of workplace spirituality may be accentuated by identifying the organizational spiritual climate values that are conducive for creating employees' experiences of spirituality at workplace. Some researchers have proposed organizational spiritual values that may be conducive for creating such experiences for employees (Fry, 2003; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006 b; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006 c; Pawar, 2009). However, there is a dearth of empirical researches exploring the possible relationships between organizational spiritual values and employees' experiences. This is primarily due to lack of an



appropriate measure to assess organizational values that are conducive to create I-SAW experiences for employees.

## Conclusion

The reasons for rise of workplace spirituality at micro, meso and macro level demonstrate that the workplace spirituality has relevance for all the levels of human aggregation. Individual employees can benefit from the experiences of meaning in work and sense of community at work that enhance their self-esteem. Organisations can benefit from the energized efforts and creativity of employees that may be an important competitive strength in the era of hyper-competition. Workplace spirituality at individual employee level means a desire to find meaning in work and experience a sense of inter-connectedness with others. While at organizational level workplace spirituality refers to shared organizational values that are part of its day-to-day culture. Therefore, workplace spirituality holds promise for different level human aggregation; however, it has a long way to go before workplace spirituality can significantly affect the employees, future workplace and society. Adoption of workplace spirituality on a larger scale could only be facilitated through empirical demonstration of efficacy of workplace spirituality at the organizational level. Therefore, there is a need for measure of workplace spirituality at the organizational level. This will also help leaders understand their role on promoting organizational values that will be conducive for creating employees' experiences of spirituality at work. Academic institutions will also need to develop new theories of leadership that will prepare future leaders to create a suitable organizational climate for employees' experiences of spirituality at work.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

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