

WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY FOR IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
svyas-doorgapersad@uj.ac.za

ABSTRACT

There are a very few studies available to gain insight into the impact of yoga and alternative therapies¹ on stress management, conflict resolution and work productivity. In previous studies the focus fell on the gendered perspective, exploring the impact of spiritual modalities on the physical and mental wellness of male and female employees. Spiritual practices such as yoga and other alternative therapies have been found to be significant to enhance work productivity, hence be part of organisational wellness programmes. However, this aspect is not fully implemented due to various reasons including a lack of spiritual understanding, religious preferences and organisational cultures. The aim of this article is to expand upon and enhance this analysis by aligning spiritual practices to workplace productivity. Books, journal articles, dissertations, and conference proceedings dealing with spirituality at the workplace were reviewed. Based on the literature available, two hypotheses are explored, namely (a) that workplace spirituality enhances employee wellness and has a positive impact on improved productivity; and (b) that workplace spirituality impacts differently on male and female employees (gendered perspective) and leads to improved productivity. The article formulates a model called Workplace Spirituality for Gender-based Productivity (WSG-bP) for consideration under the umbrella of existing Employee Work Wellness programmes

Key Words: gender, spirituality, workplace spirituality, productivity, employee wellness.

JEL Classification: Z00

1. INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is defined by Myers, Sweeney and Witmer (2000: 265) as “personal and private beliefs that transcend the material aspects of life and give a deep sense of

wholeness, connectedness, and openness to the infinite”. In the work situation there is horizontal spirituality which is the desire to be of service to other people and is demonstrated by service orientation and a deep concern for one’s fellow workers (Ajala, 2013: 3). Consideration towards others (showing concern) and the existence of high quality interpersonal working relationships lead to high levels of job satisfaction, low staff turnover, and enhanced group cohesion, group performance and group efficiency (Ajala, 2013: 3). Ultimately, these circumstances increase productivity. Spirituality at the workplace, according to Petchsawange and Duchan (2012 in Ajala, 2013: 3) has a positive effect on human activity and enhances “personal development, compassion, meaningfulness and joy at work” simultaneously promoting “honesty, trust, job commitment, and wellbeing of employees”. Spirituality in the workplace can be called spiritual work wellness and is often included as one of the dimensions of employee wellness programmes identified as spiritual wellness. However, a literature review reveals that studies of this nature are not widely available and there is a marked lack of qualitative and quantitative data in this regard.

Watson (2007: 5) stresses that it is important not to underestimate the role of diversity in spiritual wellness programmes/interventions, but warns that especially in pluralistic societies which are “characterised by a multitude of cultures (with different underlying values and norms), languages, religions and faith systems”, the introduction of a spiritual wellness programme that is only concerned with the particular organisation’s culture “may lead to disillusionment for many employees” who may well adhere to other values and norms. Organisational culture merely reflects mainstream culture, so it is crucial to consider the range of individual cultures that may also contribute to the culture of the organisation. With this in mind this article aims to develop an awareness of the use of workplace spirituality on work productivity from a gendered perspective.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term gender, according to Phillips (2005: 2) “refers to the roles and expectations attributed to men and women in a given society. However, it stands to reason that such roles are subject to change over time, place, and life stage”. In a workplace, gender is typically comprised of interdependent groups of individuals who are able to self-regulate their behaviour in the accomplishment of “relatively whole tasks” (Cohen & Gerald, 1994: 13). These gendering processes “produce and reproduce a ‘gender sub-structure’” (Acker, 1992: 252-254) in any given organisation. Acker (1992: 252-254) explains that these processes include, but are

not confined to the production of what he calls *gendered divisions*, such as “patterning of jobs, wages, hierarchies, power, and subordination”. They also create “*symbols*, images, and metaphors that justify (or oppose) organisational gender divisions” and lead to “*interactions* between men and women, among men, and among women” that include the “concrete work of the organization” and may “create alliances and exclusions”. Gendering processes are also involved in the internal *mental work of individuals* because they impact upon their understanding of the organisation’s “gendered structure of work and opportunity and the demands for gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes”. Individuals in the workplace thus gain an understanding of how to create and negotiate their “correct gendered persona” so that they are able to survive in the organisation (Acker, 1992: 252-254).

Although there is a dearth of literature on gender differences in perceptions of workplace spirituality, it is reasonable to expect that there are differences based on gender socialisation theory. As highlighted by Smith and Rogers (2000 cited in Kumar, 2016: 3), the gender socialisation theory claims that males and females regard their work environments with different attitudes and expectations. Similarly, Ngo, Foley, Wong and Loi (2003: 229) maintain that men and women perceive things differently because their socialisation leads them to do so. They are expected to behave in accordance with socially defined gender roles and may experience negative outcomes if they deviate from them (Eagly, Karau & Makhijani, 1995). As already shown, the performance and productivity of an organisation as a whole, as far as ‘helping behaviour’ is concerned, is often based on differential traits stereotypically attached to men and women (Nasurdin, Nejati & Mei, 2013: 63-64).

The current article is the outcome of a desktop study (literature review and secondary data) in which a qualitative approach was employed to explore the spiritual work wellness/workplace spirituality and its impact on work productivity, utilising a gendered perspective. Qualitative research (a phenomenological enquiry) “seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings” (Hoepfl, 1997: 2). A detailed literature study was initially undertaken to investigate the influence of workplace spirituality on work productivity. The literature review included a survey of books, scholarly journal articles and other sources of relevance to this particular area of research. This review was then refined to provide a critical evaluation of these works in relation to the specific research problem in accordance with prescriptions laid down by Labaree (2009: 1). Based on this information and insight, the article proposes a model that aligns workplace spirituality/spiritual wellness with employee and organisational wellness.

3. THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL MODALITIES ON WORKPLACE WELLNESS

This section incorporates relevant literature and research studies that support the hypothesis (a) that workplace spirituality enhances employee wellness and has a positive impact on improved productivity. Due to the growing demand for increased performance and enhanced productivity, with emphasis on the achievement of key performance areas, indicators, targets, and outcomes, employees suffer high levels of stress. In turn, rising levels of stress lead to negative outcomes such as conflict, depression, frustration, increasing absenteeism (often disguised as sick leave) and burnout, to name but a few workplace woes. In order to cope with the stress, organisations try to incorporate spiritual work wellness programmes, most of which cover the three perspectives, stated below in Table 1.

Table 1: Three Perspectives on the Benefits of Spirituality for Employees and Organisations

	Human Resources Perspective	Philosophical Perspective	Interpersonal Perspective
The focus is on developing employees' ...	Wellbeing	Purpose and meaning	Community involvement and connectedness
Focus on the problem of so-called "barren workplaces"	Emotionally barren Workplaces	Spiritually barren workplaces	Socially barren Workplaces
Focus on main problems/ gaps/ necessities that are evident	Stress, burnout, workaholism, absenteeism, low morale and commitment, evincing as "lethargy"	Excessive materialism; loss of meaning and depth; low level of fulfilment, joy, and creativity, evincing as "atrophy"	Self-centeredness, greed and egoism; isolation from colleagues; low cohesion and sense of belonging; and lack of social support, evincing as "entropy".

Source: Karakas, 2009: 25 (summarised information).

Table 1 provides an understanding of the wellness concept which Myers, Sweeney and Witmer (2000: 252) describe as a "way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being". The authors further explain that this is as a "holistic approach in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated ... in a purposeful manner with a goal

of living life more fully”. They identify six elements of wellness – physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, occupational and social. Each of these aspects is important and all are interconnected (Yukon Government, 2014). Similarly, Dr. Bill Hettler, co-founder of the National Wellness Institute (NWI) describes a six-dimension wellness model that includes occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual and emotional wellness (National Wellness Institute, 1976). His model shows how an individual is able to contribute to his or her environment and community, and how to build better living spaces and social networks. Hettler describes how life can be enriched through work, and its “interconnectedness to living and playing; the development of belief systems, values, and creating a world-view”. Also embraced in the model are the “benefits of regular physical activity, healthy eating habits, strength and vitality, as well as personal responsibility, self-care and [an awareness of] when to seek medical attention”. In addition, personal self-esteem and self-control are developed, as are creative and stimulating mental activities and [the joy of] sharing these gifts with others (National Wellness Institute, 1976). This model can be significant in a diverse workplace where people from different races and cultures work together. It can also be aligned with diversity management approaches in the workplace to promote collectiveness and meet team-spirit objectives.

Dalton (1998) introduced a grouping incorporating SPIRIT, HEART, MIND and BODY that resonates with the components of spiritual wellness. The impact of this grouping on employees is reflected in Table 2.

Table 2: Spiritual wellness and employee wellness attributes

Be capable	SPIRIT, HEART, MIND, management ‘potential’, temperament, cognitive ability
Be willing	SPIRIT, personal motivation, desire
Be able	Organisational context; interconnection with others

Source: Dalton, 1998: 359-360.

Improved employee attributes can have a positive impact on overall organisational wellness, as reflected in Table 3.

Table 3: The Soul of an Organisation

GROUPING	COMPONENT	COMMENT
SPIRIT	PERSONA	Corporate identity Company ethos/culture/ability to build an ‘employee community’ Organisational values
HEART	ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS	Ability to build constructive relations/alliances/decentralisation Tolerance/acquisitiveness Mergers/job mobility and social propagations
MIND	LEARNING	Economic success and learning/rapid external change requires rapid internal responses Scenario planning/inventing the future Decision making as a learning activity
BODY	SELF-MANAGEMENT	Financial conservatism Money governs company evolution Effective distribution of power

Source: Dalton, 1998: 364; Vyas-Doorgapersad and Simmonds, 2011: 63.

In modern times, the generic activities stated above are imperative for improved productivity, hence spiritual wellness or workplace spirituality calls upon organisations to train managers with collective decision-making, and life management skills. Researchers such as Lysonski and Gaidis; Meredith; and Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (cited in Setyabudi, Yajid, Lingga & Ega, 2012: 3) found that male and female employees in the workplace have varying “sensitivity, expressive behaviors and motivational responses”. In order to align employee wellness with organisational wellness, it is therefore important to understand the masculine (the yang) and feminine (the yin) aspects of employees and this means that a spiritual leadership programme should be introduced to train institutional decision-makers.

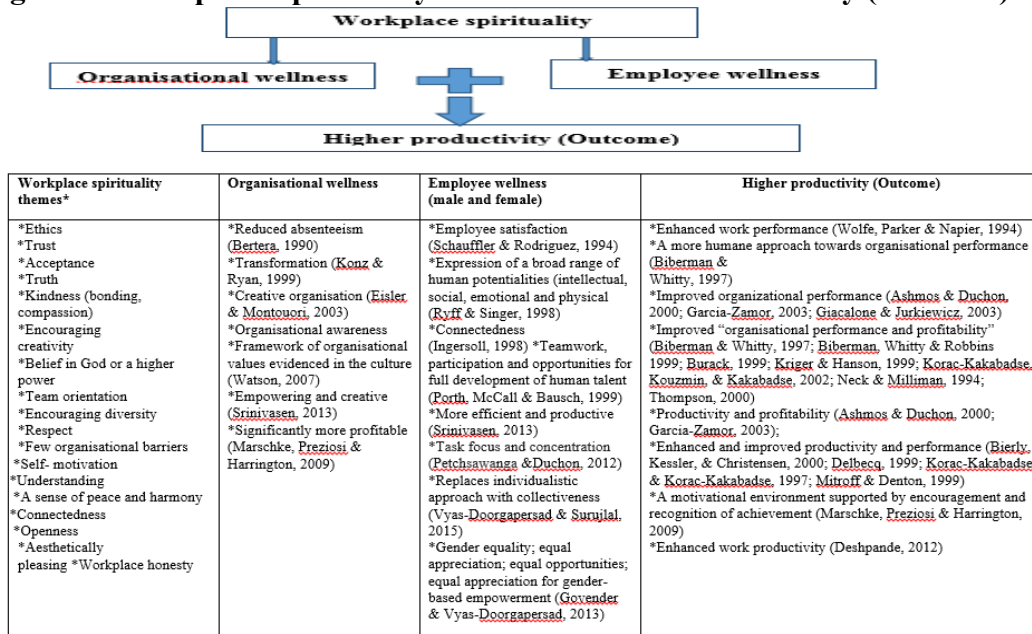
The spiritual paradigm cited by Petchsawanga and Duchon (2012: 190-191) “recognizes that people work not only with their hands, but also their hearts or spirit” (Petchsawanga & Duchon, 2009: 459); and (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). When people work with a committed spirit they develop meaning and purpose, along with a measure of fulfilment. The workplace is then a site where people are able to express their entire selves (Petchsawanga & Duchon, 2012: 191); and Krahnke, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz. 2003). Karakas (2010: 26) posits that the expression of human experience at its “deepest, most spiritual level may not only reduce stress, conflict, and absenteeism, but enhance work performance, employee

well-being, and quality of life”. Mackenzie and Servant (2011: 5) note that Karakas (2010) reviewed close to 140 workplace spirituality (WS) articles, specifically seeking insight on whether WS supports enhanced performance in the workplace. The findings suggest that WS “helps the employee find meaning and purpose at work, and offers the employee a feeling of being connected to a community”. The culture of any organisation has a “primary influence on the employee’s perception of community, connectedness, and spirituality”. In addition, spirituality in the workplace may well “create a different organisational culture in which the employee would be more satisfied and would have an improved performance” (Daniel, 2010: 445), hence support the hypothesis (a).

4. THE WAY FORWARD

Based on the findings of relevant studies and the literature review, a model is formulated called Workplace Spirituality for Gender-based Productivity (WSG-bP). It outlines the benefits of workplace spirituality on employee and organisational wellness, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Workplace Spirituality for Gender-based Productivity (WSG-bP)



Source: Author’s compilation.

Note: * Marques and Dhiman (2005 cited in Marschke, Preziosi & Harrington, 2009: 38).

The suggested Workplace Spirituality for Gender-based Productivity (WSG-bP) model outlined above is substantiated by research findings which correlate workplace spirituality and its positive impact on work productivity. Petchsawanga and Duchon (2012: 198-199) found that the practice of meditation was associated with workplace spirituality. In other words, meditation is associated with a “sense of engagement (meaningful work), care and support of co-workers (compassion), task focus and concentration (mindfulness), and enjoyment and energy (transcendence)”. Thus, it is reasonable to predict that employees with higher spirituality scores will be evaluated by their supervisors as “more disciplined, more enthusiastic, better problem solvers, and more concerned about work quality” than those employees with lower scores on spirituality – probably because they are “more present, more aware, and more focused on the task at hand”.

Another research project, this time undertaken by the University of Southern California’s Marshall Graduate School of Business, under the direction of Professor Ian Mitroff (see Marschke, Preziosi & Harrington, 2009: 37) indicates that those organisations which identify themselves as “spiritual” tend to have “employees who: 1) are less fearful of their organizations; 2) are less likely to compromise their basic beliefs and values in the workplace; 3) perceive their organizations as being significantly more profitable; and, 4) report that they can bring significantly more of their complete selves to work, especially their creativity and intelligence”. In addition, the findings indicated that work performance is related to “meaningful work, compassion, mindfulness, and transcendence” and that addressing such issues can have a positive effect on creating a more productive work environment. In turn, being involved in meaningful work helps employees reach their full potential (Petchsawanga & Duchon, 2012: 204). Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (cited in Van der Walt & De Klerk, Undated: 382) affirm these findings, noting that “aspects of the workplace and the organisation promote individual feelings of satisfaction through transcendence” and in this way “spiritual values in the organisation facilitate an employee’s sense of well-being, joy and completeness”. Exploring the gendered perspective in the area of work spirituality and productivity, Bansal (2015: 3) deduced that in the twentieth century, “business was dominated by men” and added that, “men are more inclined towards left-brain thinking”. This being so, at the time, corporate houses focused almost exclusively on left-brain perspectives such as “strategic planning, performance management, reasoning, analytical thinking, total quality management, financial results, and profits”. However, this situation has changed over time and currently many women play key roles in the corporate world, bringing with them “compassion, spirituality, love, empathy and

all the aspects of the right-brain perspectives” which are associated with women. It is becoming increasingly clear that the advent of the so-called “new women” many of whom have risen to great heights in the corporate world is leading to a “more balanced and spiritual workplace” (Bansal, 2015: 3).

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the available literature, earlier research done in the field and the current study, this article supports the hypothesis (a) that workplace spirituality enhances employee wellness and has a positive impact on work productivity. Various studies have been conducted by academics and practitioners in this field and these substantiate the significance of spirituality in the workplace and its positive influence on employees and the organisation as a whole. There is limited information (data, literature and empirical studies) available on the gendered aspect of workplace spirituality. The author, therefore, faced some limitations in exploring the hypothesis (b) that workplace spirituality impacts differently on male and female employees (gendered perspective) and leads to improved productivity. The author of this article aims to expand the scope of her investigation by ongoing and worldwide exploration of the relevant literature.

Note

- ¹. Alternative therapies include meditation, ti chi, reiki, chakra balancing, energy healing, mindfulness, to name but a few.

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