

## The Experience of Workplace Spirituality: Do Age and Educational Attainment Matter?

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### Abstract

We examined the experience of workplace spirituality with respect to its three dimensions namely, meaningful work (sense of purpose in work), sense of community (sense of relationship with others at work), and value alignment (match between employee and organization's values). We also compare the experience of spirituality among younger and older employees and among those with different levels of educational attainment. Using self-administered survey questionnaires, we collected data from 274 Malaysian public service employees involved in poverty alleviation programs in the rural sector. The experience of workplace spirituality is considerably high for all the three dimensions, especially so for meaningful work. Workplace spirituality did not differ significantly by employee age but differed significantly by employee educational attainment. The experience of workplace spirituality for all the three dimensions were greater among employees with college and university education than their counterparts with high school education. Implications for human resource development and future research are presented.

**Keywords:** Workplace spirituality, age, educational attainment, public service, Malaysia

### 1. Introduction

Workplace spirituality, according to Ashmos and Duchon (2000), is the acknowledgment that workers have an internal life that nurtures and is nurtured by meaningful work that happens in the work community. Employees allocate as much significance between the pursuit of paychecks and the attainment of meaningful work, thus enabling a holistic fulfillment as an individual who is connected to others and to the transcendent (Hudson, 2014). Milliman et al. (2003) articulated the components of spirituality as "meaningful work", "sense of community" and "alignment with organizational values". Current thoughts in management recognize workplace spirituality as a potential resource that can be nurtured to impact employee performance (James et al., 2011). Other positive impacts of spirituality on employee performance include productivity growth, better problem solving and decision

making abilities, with enhanced perceptive and creative capabilities, as well as higher efficiency in resource use (Weitz et al., 2012). Spirituality serves as one of the strategies that could enhance work motivation (Hamjah et al. 2012). In the review of empirical studies, evidence were found showing the potential of workplace spirituality in influencing employee motivation towards engaging in organizational citizenship behaviour (Ahmad & Omar, 2015) as well as reducing deviant behaviour (Ahmad & Omar, 2014). Considering the positive impacts and increasing interest in spirituality at work, gaps remain in the analysis of differences at the individual level and absence of theory which lead Moore (2008) to highlight the idea to examine basic demographics as an initiation. The researchers of this study acknowledge the possible implications of individual experiences that may potentially benefit the design of employee training and development programs. Thus, this study serves to explore differences in workplace spirituality experiences within two employee demographics: (i) age (the younger and older groups), and (ii) educational attainment (tertiary and high school education).

**1.2 Workplace spirituality:** The main concepts of associated with workplace spirituality have been transcendental experience, a sense of connectedness with peers, including a joyful and fulfilling work experience (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Employees display a positive behavior that demonstrates a sense of belonging, fulfillment, creative energy and empowerment, characterized by the conduct of sharing, caring and respectfulness. (Adams & Csiernik, 2002). Despite the many workplace spirituality definitions, a consensus remains elusive among scholars and researchers. In the review of literature on definitions, Duchon and Plowman (2005) conclude that workplace spirituality is centred on meaningfulness, purpose, and connectedness. Our study focuses on three core components -- meaningful work, sense of connectedness or community and value alignment – which are consistent with most definitions.

Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) in their definition emphasized workers' experience of transcendence at work, and their feeling of being associated with others in a way that brings sentiments of fulfillment and satisfaction. Adams and Csiernik's (2002) definition includes values such as care and respect, and acknowledgment of workers' talents and energies in such a way that they are able to be creative and have a sense of belongingness and satisfaction, and are able to take possession of their destiny. Although a consensus on an appropriate definition remains elusive among researchers, a review of literature by Duchon and Plowman (2005) revealed the recurrent dimensions were meaningfulness, purpose and connectedness. In addition to these, Milliman et al. (2003) identified another generally held dimension known as alignment of values. Based on the literature, we examine workplace spirituality in terms of meaningful work, sense of connectedness or community, as well as alignment of values.

**1.21 Meaningful work:** In essence, when a spiritual employee views quality work as an inner expression that is part of broad life goals, there exists the motivation towards searching for deeper meaning and purpose in their chosen work to make a difference in other's lives (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). The employees' experience of meaningfulness is associated with the feeling of worthiness, usefulness and being valued, and their existence is of importance (Kahn, 1990). Employees view as much significance to the attainment of meaningful work as to the pursuit of paychecks (Hudson, 2014), and may even view meaningful work to be most vital in broad life goals (Mitroff, 2003). Therefore, work is not only viewed as forms of

character-building stimulants and challenges, but regarded as a platform through which an individual attains meaningfulness and builds identity at work (Duchon & Ashmos, 2005)

**1.22 Sense of community:** At group level, a significant workplace spirituality dimension is sense of community where the spiritual employee has a deeply connected relationship with colleagues. (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). It involves a sense of being nested within the work community, yet engaging in an interdependence relationship with fellow members (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Miller (1992) further describes the spiritual employee as one who believes that people are connected beings, between one's inner self and others. Sense of community allows employees to benefit from empowerment, endearing support, and sincerity of colleagues (Munda, 2015).

**1.23 Alignment of values:** As the third dimension, alignment of values involves employees' interaction with the organization's existence as defined by its mission and purpose (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). This dimension, according to Milliman (2003), describes the extent to which an employee's values fit the mission and goals of the organization. It means that employees have confidence in organization's ethical values and sense of social responsibility where employees' welfare is one of the organization's core concerns to its existence (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Saks (2011) further describes this dimension as an aligned relationship that is realized when organizational values promoted are supported by employees who deeply identify with those values. Given this symbiotic relationship prevalent among value-based and value-driven organizations, employers are capable of engaging not only the minds but also the hearts of their employees (Pfeffer, 2010).

**1.3 Workplace spirituality, age and education:** Studies on the relationship between workplace spirituality and demographics have been growing yet results are at variance. A North American study of employees from differing industries had shown that spirituality correlated positively with employee age (Roof, 2015). Similarly, a study employing the U.S. 2004 General Social Survey data, reported a positive relationship between workplace spirituality and employee age (Sprung et al., 2012). In contrast, Debats' (1999) study on meaning in life, in the context of spirituality, found non-significant relationship with employee age and education. The researcher defended that the search for meaning in life stems from the idea that this human and universal drive is independent of demographics. Correspondingly, Rego et al.'s (2008) investigation on employees from various organizations, did not show significant relationship between workplace spirituality dimensions and employee age, where the said dimensions were opportunities for inner life, sense of community, enjoyment at work, value alignment, and sense of contribution. A study by Edwards (2012) on a sample consisting of 11 different ethnic origins found that workplace spirituality did not differ by age. Given inconclusive findings of differing workplace spirituality experiences with respect to employee age, as well as insufficient studies of its association with education demographics, there is therefore a need for further investigation.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This section presents the study participants and the selection criteria for participants. Data gathering procedure, measures of study variables and data analysis are also presented.

**2.1 Participants and procedure:** The participants consisted of 274 employees who are involved in poverty eradication programs of four rural development public organizations in Malaysia. The selection criteria of employee work experience is a minimum of three years, which we considered an adequate duration of time for an employee to experience a sense of workplace spirituality. We collected data using self-administered survey questionnaires.

**2.2 Measures:** Workplace spirituality was measured using twenty-one items from Milliman et al.'s (2003) Spirituality of Work scale. The measuring scale has three dimensions: meaningful work (6 items), value alignment (8 items) and employee sense of community (7 items). A sample of item or statement for measuring meaningful work is "My work is connected to what I think is important in life"; employee sense of community is "I believe employees genuinely care about each other"; and value alignment is "I feel positive about the values of the organization". To measure employees' agreement level to the statements, a seven-point rating scale was provided ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree". We computed the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the scale and subscales and obtained acceptable values for the overall scale (.95), meaningful work (.94), sense of community (.85) and alignment of values (.91).

**2.3 Data analysis:** We computed means and standard deviations to describe the sample and variables. Independent sample t-test analyses were conducted to examine the differences in means of the workplace spirituality dimensions according to employee age and education.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Out of 274 employees who participated, 38.7% were males and the rest females. With regard to age, there were a considerable proportion (60.2%) of younger employees (aged below 40). The mean age of the employees was 38.66 (SD = 10.87). Approximately half (50.3%) of them had tertiary (college or university) education while the rest high school education.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of workplace spirituality dimensions. Overall, the experience of workplace spirituality reported was considerably high (M = 5.76; SD = .80). The mean for meaningful work was the highest and that for value alignment was the lowest.

Table 1:

*Means and standard deviations of workplace spirituality dimensions*

Variable	M	SD
Meaningful work	6.00	.74
Sense of community	5.74	.77
Alignment of values	5.70	.80
Overall workplace spirituality	5.76	.80

The high levels of mean reported for the first two dimensions, namely meaningful work and sense of community, had results compatible with Houston and Cartwright's (2007) study, indicating that employees involved in poverty alleviation programs in the rural sector consider themselves as spiritual individuals. Houston and Cartwright (2007) further state that the public service has the pull factor towards these spiritual individuals who have a sense of service to fulfill other's needs which in turn fulfill their own needs, and looks at meaningful work as a means of self-development.

Our results are comparable with those of Milliman et al. (2003) on a mixed sample of for-profit and non-profit organizations in the United States, and similar dimensions of spirituality used in their study have been used in our study. In another study on Malaysian community service employees who served the poor, the needy young and elderly, the disabled, and vulnerable groups, Ahmad and Omar (2016) found that overall the spirituality experienced was reasonably high, with the experience of meaningful work having greater mean than the other two dimensions. Rego and Cunha (2007) found similar results in their study on employees from various organizations in Portugal.

With regard to meaningful work, employees in this study found significant meaning in their work within an organization that serves public interests and needs, particularly with a focus on poverty alleviation. The field staff, especially, as well as the administrative and support staff tend to have more satisfying experiences in servicing clients. This is more pronounced among employees who believe the underserved rural poor will benefit from the extension of services, and therein the realization of the relationship between the provision of tasks and the social good it generates for this community. This giver-and-receiver interaction culminates in deep meaning and satisfaction, and ultimately joy in vocation. Out of the three spirituality components, the experience of meaningful was most pronounced.

Another probable rationale behind the moderately high score for meaningful work could be that in government departments, as noted by Lowery (2005), spirituality is seen as a means via which employees discover meaning at work. Moreover, Tummers and Knies (2013) in their study have demonstrated that government department heads tend to assume an imperative part in attempting to make tasks at work more meaningful and this could possibly be a causal agent for the experience of meaningful work. However, van der Wal et al. (2008) found that self-fulfillment (firmly identified with meaningful work) is viewed as less critical by heads of government departments in their study.

In examining sense of community, we hope to understand the extent to which an employee encounters a profound feeling of association with their co-workers and feels part of the community at work. Additionally, we intend to know whether the employee can associate him/herself with the community's common purpose. The findings demonstrate that feeling of togetherness among employees is considerably high. In any case, contrary to expectation, van der Wal et al. (2008) found that in the government agencies examined, "serviceability" as well as "responsiveness" were less regarded by administrative employees as essential. The researchers recognized that the findings may differ in the event that they had studied government workers who were in direct client contact, rather than administrators who are more detached from their clients. Our results may be explained by the make-up of the employees studied where nearly half (47.8%) of them are in direct interaction with the community more frequently. It is expected that these employees have a tendency to be more community-friendly and socially responsive. For the most part public service employees have a tendency to be more people-oriented and subsequently their propensity to relate to co-workers is greater than those whose main responsibility is to provide administrative or support service within the office.

For alignment of values, we intend to know the extent to which an employee's values are in congruence with the organization's values and goals. Our results demonstrate that in the government organizations there is a considerable congruence between employee and organizational values and goals. Recognizing the main goal of the organizations is to help the rural poor and improve its well-being, the employees appear to have positive attitude toward the goal and feel associated with the goal.

Table 2 shows the pairwise comparisons of the spirituality dimensions according to age. Each of the means for experience of meaningful work, sense of community and alignment of values for younger (< 40 years) employees was not significantly different from than the older employees ( $\geq 40$  years).

Table 2:

*Comparisons of workplace spirituality dimensions by age*

Variable	Age	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Meaningful work	< 40	165	5.90	.86	1.58	.12
	$\geq 40$	109	6.06	.68		
Sense of community	< 40	165	5.69	.89	.00	.99
	$\geq 40$	109	5.69	.82		
Alignment of values	< 40	165	5.71	.89	1.75	.08
	$\geq 40$	109	5.52	.88		

The t-test results for the comparisons in the experience of workplace spirituality according to education are shown in Table 3. Each of the means for experience of meaningful work, sense of community and alignment of values for younger (< 40 years) employees was significantly different from than the older employees ( $\geq 40$  years). The employees with college and university education experience greater levels of all the three spirituality dimensions.

Table 3:

*Comparisons of workplace spirituality dimensions by education*

Variable	Education	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Meaningful work	High School	136	5.84	.81	2.68	.01
	College/University	138	6.09			
Sense of community	High School	136	5.45	.88	4.66	.00
	College/University	138	5.92			
Alignment of values	High School	136	5.43	.90	3.92	.00
	College/University	138	5.84			

Table 4: Comparisons of overall workplace spirituality by age and education

Variable	Category	N	Mean	S.D	t	p
Age	Below 40	165	5.77	.83	.12	.90
	40 and above	109	5.76	.75		
Education	High School	136	5.57	.80	4.01	.00
	College/University	138	5.95	.76		

With respect to the experience of spirituality among employees in two age groups, our results show that overall, both the younger and older employees experience similar levels of spirituality at work (Table 4). The results are congruent with those of Debatts (1999) as well as Rego et al. (2008) who found no difference in the experience of spirituality according to age. However, the results are contrary to those of Sprung et al. (2012) and Roof (2015). Despite the non-significant difference in spirituality according to age, the spirituality of the employees in this study seems to be shaped by their educational attainment, whereby employees with higher education (tertiary or college and university education) experienced significantly greater spirituality than their counterparts with lower education (high school education) ( $t = 4.01, p < .001$ ) (Table 4). Education reflects the nature of work performed by

the employees since the nature of work changes with the level of education as do the monetary rewards gained from work. This suggests that it is possible that as the monetary or extrinsic needs are fulfilled among those with higher educational attainment, there is more space for spiritual experience than among those with lower educational attainment who may be more occupied with the fulfillment of extrinsic rewards of work. However, this is not in line with Debatt's (1999) study whereby the experience of spirituality do not differ significantly according to education.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study revealed that the spirituality of the employees could be shaped by educational attainment, whereby employees with higher education experienced significantly greater spirituality than their counterparts with lower education. However, the younger and older employees experienced similar levels of spirituality at work. To conclude, irrespective of age, the experience of spirituality differed by employee educational attainment whereby the spirituality experience is greater among those with higher than lower educational attainment. This difference has significant implications for the human resource division when planning training and development programs for employees. There is a need for more customized spiritual development training activities, taking into consideration the different levels of educational attainment. The training objectives should revolved around meaningfulness of work, sense of relatedness with colleagues, and alignment of employee's values with the mission and goals of the organization, with the hope that employee performance could be improved. In terms of research, it is pertinent to further examine differences in the experience of workplace spirituality according to demographics since this present study serves only as an initial attempt to explore such differences. Further, when investigating factors contributing to the experience of workplace spirituality, researchers may need to consider the possibility that education may interact with such factors to influence employees' experience of spirituality.

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