

SPIRITUALITY AT WORK: A STUDY OF INDIAN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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Spirituality at Work:

A Study of Indian Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract

Spirituality at work (SAW) is an emerging research area in organization studies. It is being considered as a significant construct to deal with a number of issues resulting from increased dynamism in the business context and the resulting stresses and strains at organizational and individual level.

However, a review of literature in the area reveals that considerable challenges need to be overcome before these enthusiastic expectations can be realized.

Other than issues relating to the antecedents and consequences of SAW, major disagreements are the norm even in defining SAW. Scholars claim that innate ineffability of the construct makes it impossible to define SAW accurately. However, others equally emphatically assert that theoretical consolidation and advancement shall come about only after an agreed-upon definition emerges in the area. Further, panacea-like treatment of SAW disregards the contextual factors in the current SAW literature.

Based on literature review, this study argues that three features could be considered as central to defining SAW: Integrity/Wholeness, Meaningful Work, and Being Larger than Oneself. Further, this study proposed that the person-organization fit perspective from organizational behavior research could throw light on the under-theorized contextual focus in SAW research by providing a stronger link with SAW consequences.

Based on literature review, a conceptual framework for studying SAW was proposed. The framework linked individual SAW needs and organizational SAW supplies to emerge with a P-O fit on Spirituality at work. The individual SAW needs, organizational SAW supplies and SAW P-O fit were related to outcomes of Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment. In particular, the study examined the following questions:

1. What are the reasons for organizational employees to take up spirituality at work?
2. How is spirituality at work understood in Indian nonprofit organizations?
3. How is spirituality at work manifested and expressed in Indian nonprofit organizations?
4. Would a better alignment of individual SAW needs and individual perceptions of organizational SAW supplies be related to improved outcomes?
5. Does the organizational context mediate the phenomenon of spirituality at work and, if yes, how is the mediation effected?

The study used a mixed method strategy to enquire into the above research questions. The survey sample consisted of 179 respondents from six organizations (three each from the explicitly-spiritual sector and three nonprofits that did not have an explicit spiritual focus). Three survey instruments were used for data collection: self-designed P-O fit instrument on SAW, a modified version of Spector's Job Satisfaction Survey instrument, and a modified version of Meyer and Allen's Organizational Commitment instrument.

Further, a semi-structured interview protocol was also utilized to address the research questions. In all, 114 respondents agreed to be interviewed for this study.

Statistical data were analyzed with SPSS 13.0 using descriptive, correlational, regression, ANOVA and MANOVA analysis procedures. One hundred and fourteen interview transcripts were analyzed using theory elaboration procedures.

Some of the significant findings of the study are given below:

Regarding the antecedents, the respondents did not agree with the position that the changed socio-economic conditions prompt the search for SAW. Instead, the influence of early childhood and family in inculcating appropriate values was seen as a greater force in motivating individuals to look for spirituality in later life. However, spiritually-disengaging influences in earlier organizations did prompt many to look for better opportunity structures for practicing spirituality at work.

The distinction between religion and spirituality that forms the basis for defining SAW for scholars did not find support in this study. This finding was linked to the cultural context where religion is more a way of life than a set of commandments to be followed. Further, the three-way conceptualization of SAW in terms of Integrity/Wholeness, Meaningful work, and Larger than oneself was supported in the study. Additionally, the respondents argued for including the practice component to the definition of SAW to focus on the need to engage in activities to sustain one's aspiration. That spirituality can not be demarcated in neat boundaries of personal and professional space was another strong finding from the study.

The study provides further proof that organizations need not necessarily constrain the expression of spirituality and may even provide facilitating conditions for its practice. At the individual level, the focus on self-transformation through work and progressive movement towards perfection could be taken as expression of SAW. At the organizational level, spirituality would be reflected in the underlying organizational philosophy which would be invoked to provide justification for each organizational activity.

The influence on outcome variables grew progressively stronger in this order: individual SAW needs, P-O fit on SAW, and organizational SAW supplies. Against the traditional focus on the individual to explain SAW processes and consequences, this study provides the first empirical proof of the interactive effects of individual and workplace spirituality on outcomes of interest to organizational scholars.

The study did not support the position that organizations could be neatly divided into "spiritual" and "not-spiritual" categories and instead suggested that organizations may be placed on a continuum of spiritual opportunity structures. Nonetheless, the explicitly spiritual organizations did overcome the spiritual practice versus performance focus by elevating ("Divinizing"?) the regular work done. Further, both in individual SAW needs and

organizational SAW supplies scores the explicitly spiritual nonprofits significantly outscored their counterparts from the other category.

In terms of consequences, this study found that higher SAW scores were linked with higher scores of Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment. Qualitative data analysis suggested that individuals were able to overcome the material versus spiritual outcomes focus by linking the regular activities with an orientation that supported their higher aspirations.

The limitations of this study and implications for future research are discussed.

Spirituality at work (SAW hereafter) appears to be an idea whose time has come. Since the late 1990's when the idea first started being mentioned in academic circles, the last few years have seen increasing academic interest in a concept that was hitherto relegated to the personal or religious domains. Not only has spirituality been vigorously discussed in popular literature, more and more academic journals and books are exploring a phenomenon that has apparently captured public imagination. In the next section the reasons for growing attention to spirituality at work are explored.

1.1 The Growing Relevance of Spirituality at Work

In this section the forces and conditions that have contributed to the emergence of SAW in academic literature shall be examined.

A number of changes in the environment over the last few decades have altered the way business management works today. Increasing globalization with the associated focus on off-shoring, de-regulation of markets and the allied advent of common markets, advances in technology, changing demographic profile, intensified competition, shift of focus towards the service sector—all these factors operate at many different levels and give rise to significant challenges for the management of organizations (Baker & Cooper, 2004). Emphasis on knowledge-work in growing sectors of the economy, a salient feature of the new organizational context, places the employee at the heart of the organization. At another level, sharply accentuated mobility in labor markets and enhanced employment options have made the employee attraction and retention issues challenging for management. The situation has not been helped by the frequent re-engineering, de-layering and downsizing in organizations that has led to a trust deficit in the organizational climate. The erstwhile employment contract, which promised employee loyalty and commitment in lieu of job security, too does not appear to work any longer. Corresponding lack of employment security and heightened uncertainty has led to decreased morale, increased anxiety and an elevated stress response in the workforce today. Not surprisingly, the employees who constantly battle the fear of being laid off