



Workplace Spirituality: Understanding Its Foundations, Current Research Trends, Challenges, and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Workplace spirituality has become essential in organisational research, emphasising the integration of meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness within professional environments. It reflects a shift from purely economic goals to a more holistic approach that nurtures employee well-being, ethical leadership, and organisational commitment. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of workplace spirituality, drawing from key models such as Fry's Spiritual Leadership Theory, Ashmos & Duchon's Workplace Spirituality Framework, and Giacalone & Jurkiewicz's Model. These frameworks highlight core dimensions, including meaningful work, a sense of community, and alignment with organisational values, which enhance employee satisfaction, engagement, and ethical decision-making. The current research on workplace spirituality spans multiple areas, including its impact on job performance, leadership effectiveness, employee well-being, and ethical business practices. Recent studies highlight its role in fostering resilient work cultures, emotional intelligence, and organisational citizenship behaviours, making it increasingly relevant in today's corporate landscape. Despite its significance, workplace spirituality faces several challenges, such as difficulty differentiating it from religious beliefs, the absence of standardised measurement tools, and resistance from traditional corporate structures. However, as organisations move towards value-driven and human-centric models, workplace spirituality continues to gain attraction. This paper concludes by discussing future research directions, emphasising the need for deeper exploration of its impact across industries, cross-cultural perspectives, and integration with emerging workplace trends such as remote work and mindful leadership. By addressing these areas, workplace spirituality can contribute to more ethically responsible, resilient, and purpose-driven organisations.

Keywords: Meaningful work, leadership, organisational values, employee well-being, ethical business practices

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Recent technological advancements, economic instability, and heightened globalisation have resulted in substantial transformations in contemporary work environments, profoundly affecting the individuals involved with them. All these developments have generated a rise in the levels of stress and fatigue, leading to isolation (Karakas, 2010; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009). Individuals have begun to scrutinise the significance of their existence and are now seeking it within their professional endeavours. In response to the increasing concerns of employees, firms have shifted their focus from solely profit-driven and performance-centric measurements to more human-centered ideals, including ethical leadership, employee welfare, and comprehensive personal development (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010).

In these rapidly changing scenarios, workplace spirituality (WPS) has emerged as a significant factor in dealing with these challenges. Within its broader framework, it focuses on the inner experiences of the employees, their search for meaning and purpose in their job, their need to connect with others, and the alignment of individual goals with the broader organisational objectives (Milliman et al., 2003; Neal, 2013). The idea of WPS is completely non-religious and skeptical, promoting honesty, integrity, kindness, and complete engagement with work (Rego & Cunha, 2008; Pawar, 2009). Empirical evidence suggests that workplaces that are spiritually enriched have the potential to enhance employee well-being, ethical decision-making, job satisfaction, and organisational citizenship behaviour (Walt & Klerk, 2014; Garg, 2017). WPS provides solutions rooted in meaning, community, and personal growth for organisations seeking to deal with challenges such as burnout, disengagement, and ethical dilemmas in modern capitalism (Fry, 2003; Benefiel et al., 2014).

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Despite the abundance of research on workplace spirituality, its theoretical development is inconsistent, and its meaning is still unclear. Various fields and cultures define WPS differently, resulting in inconsistent operationalisation and quantification (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010; Saks, 2011). Additionally, much of the current research is highly specific, either concentrating on a particular economic sector or demonstrating Western centrism. According to Garg (2017), this makes it more difficult to apply the results in different organisational settings. This review study aims to examine the challenges by systematically analysing the current literature on WPS from a critical perspective. The primary objectives of this review are:

1. To examine the historical and theoretical underpinnings of WPS.
2. To examine the existing research trends and empirical findings about WPS across diverse domains and industries.
3. To ascertain the methodological constraints and principal conceptual and practical issues related to WPS.
4. To identify prospective pathways in the WPS that can successfully enhance empirical research and organisational practice.

1.3 Methodology

The current study adopts a systematic review methodology to analyse the existing literature on workplace spirituality (WPS). The review encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and empirical studies published between 1999 and 2025. Major academic databases

such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR were searched using the keywords “workplace spirituality,” “spirituality at work,” “meaningful work,” and “spiritual leadership.” Inclusion criteria were limited to studies in which workplace spirituality was treated as a central construct or played a significant role in the research framework. Following a rigorous screening process that involved reviewing titles, abstracts, and full texts, 70 studies were shortlisted for detailed analysis. To ensure analytical depth, the study followed established frameworks for literature reviews (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019), combining thematic analysis and conceptual clustering. Thematic analysis involved identifying and coding recurring concepts and themes across the selected studies. Themes such as spiritual leadership, employee engagement, organisational culture, and meaningful work were derived inductively through repeated reading and comparison of the studies. Following this, conceptual clustering was employed to group studies according to their theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), and organisational contexts (e.g., corporate, healthcare, educational sectors). This phase allowed for the identification of dominant paradigms, emerging trends, and underexplored areas within the field of WPS. Through this structured analytical process, the review aims to offer a comprehensive synthesis of the current state of knowledge on WPS, uncover critical insights into its conceptual evolution, and highlight gaps that warrant further research in organisational settings.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Workplace Spirituality

2.1 Origins and Evolution

The roots of WPS can be traced back to ancient philosophical and religious systems like Vedanta, Taoism, and Confucianism, which emphasised the value of inner purpose, ethical conduct, and the collective good of all (Sukumarakurup & Christopher, 2002; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). In all these traditions, work was not just labour; it was considered a path towards spiritual and personal growth. Furthermore, WPS research in organisations emerged in the late 20th century, caused by growing materialism, unethical business practices, and dehumanisation of work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010). This shift redefined workplace spirituality as a pursuit of meaning, authenticity, and connection, moving beyond its traditional association with religious expression (Neal, 2013). The concept of WPS further advanced significantly with the launch of the Metanexus Institute’s 2003 initiative and the pioneering exploration of spiritual capital by Zohar and Marshall (Yousaf & Dogar, 2022).

Although spirituality and religion frequently intersect, they are considered as different concepts within the framework of WPS. Spirituality is typically viewed as a personal, experiential journey; on the other hand, religion is perceived as more institutionalised and based on formal doctrines (Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Marques et al., 2007). However, the two can coexist, especially in cultural contexts where religious identity significantly depicts one’s spiritual outlook (Bester & Müller, 2017). WPS has gradually drifted away from its faith-based origins towards a broader focus on universal principles such as ethics, mindfulness, and service, enhancing its applicability across various organisational and cultural settings (Koul, 2025).

2.2 Definitions and Core Characteristics of WPS

Workplace Spirituality has garnered increasing attention in organisational research, as scholars explore how employees find meaning, purpose, and connection in their professional lives. Ashmos and Duchon (2000) offered an early definition, viewing WPS as the recognition of an inner life nourished by meaningful work and a sense of community. Expanding on this, Milliman et al., (2003) identified three foundational dimensions: meaningful work, a sense of

community, and alignment with organisational values. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2010) further conceptualised WPS as a set of organisational values promoting transcendence and connectedness, enabling individuals to experience wholeness and integrity at work. Additionally, Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004) conceptualised it through four dimensions: engaging work, mystical experiences, spiritual connection, and a sense of community, and their Spirit at Work Scale has since then become a prominent tool for measuring the construct. Contemporary definitions continue to build on these foundations. Yousaf and Dogar (2022) framed WPS as a holistic concept that fosters human growth through compassion, mindfulness, and alignment with deeper values, independent of religious affiliation. Similarly, Petchsawang and Duchon (2009), from an Eastern perspective, define WPS as mindful awareness in the pursuit of meaningful work that facilitates transcendent experiences. The field has evolved from early conceptualisations focusing primarily on individual spiritual experiences to more comprehensive frameworks that encompass individual, group, and organisational levels (Jena & Pradhan, 2018; Singh, 2025). Contemporary scholars generally agree that WPS is multidimensional and involves both vertical (connection to transcendent) and horizontal (connection to others and meaningful work) dimensions (Rutigliano & Frye, 2015; Schutte, 2016). While conceptualisations vary across domains, most of them converge on key elements: purposeful work, spiritual awareness, a sense of community, and alignment between personal and organisational values. These dimensions mark a broader evolution in organisational thought, from viewing work as purely transactional to recognising it as a space for personal fulfillment, ethical coherence, and collective well-being. Together, these perspectives underscore the multifaceted nature of workplace spirituality, which encompasses personal meaning, ethical awareness, relational depth, and a connection to something greater than oneself.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives

The conceptual foundation of Workplace Spirituality is shaped by several interlinked theoretical perspectives that collectively explain how individuals seek meaning, purpose, and connection through work. Mitroff and Denton's (1999) values framework highlights the desire for alignment between personal and organisational values, positioning spirituality as a values-driven response to ethical gaps in modern workplaces. Complementing this, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) emphasises autonomy, relatedness, and competence as intrinsic motivators that also foster spiritual fulfillment. Frankl's (1984) meaning-making theory adds philosophical depth, suggesting that the workplace can serve as a platform for pursuing existential purpose. Integrating these ideas, Fry's (2003) Spiritual Leadership Theory presents a model based on vision, hope, and altruistic love, linking individual well-being with organisational effectiveness. Furthermore, the holistic development perspective (Marques et al., 2007) broadens this view, advocating for environments that nurture employees' emotional, ethical, and spiritual growth through compassion and mindfulness. Together, these perspectives present WPS as a multidimensional framework that integrates ethics, motivation, meaning, and holistic growth, making it relevant to both individual fulfillment and organisational success.

3. Dimensions and Models of Workplace Spirituality

Workplace spirituality operates as a multidimensional construct across individual, group, and organisational levels. At the individual level, it involves an inner life of self-awareness, personal values, and purpose, as noted by Ashmos and Duchon (2000), with later scholars emphasising mindfulness and compassion as key traits shaping how employees find meaning in their roles (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009; Moreira et al., 2023; Kwahar, 2021). The group

level centres on a sense of community, employee's emotional connectedness, mutual support, and a shared spiritual bond, highlighted by Milliman et al., (2003) and supported by findings from Nasurdin et al., (2013) and Singh (2025), who stress on its role in enhancing collaboration and belonging. Organisationally, spirituality reflects the alignment between personal and corporate values, the presence of an ethical climate, and the opportunity to perform meaningful work. This level, emphasised by Milliman et al., (2003) and Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2010), fosters transcendence and purpose at work, reinforcing both ethical behaviour and employee fulfillment (Tabassum, 2018; Raamkumar & Swamy, 2024). Together, these dimensions create a comprehensive framework for understanding how spirituality can be embedded and expressed in the workplace.

Several models have shaped the conceptual and empirical foundations of workplace spirituality. Ashmos and Duchon's (2000) foundational framework identifies three core dimensions: inner life (hopefulness and self-awareness), meaningful work, and community, emphasising spirituality as the integration of personal purpose within a communal and value-rich workplace. Their model, validated through multi-level analysis, captures individual, team, and organisational spirituality (Moreira et al., 2023; Nasurdin et al., 2013). Building on this, Milliman et al., (2003) proposed a more focused three-dimensional model comprising meaningful work, sense of community, and alignment with organisational values, which has shown strong empirical links with positive work attitudes (Kwahar, 2021; Brini, 2021). Furthermore, Fry's (2003) Spiritual Leadership Theory integrates workplace spirituality with leadership by emphasising vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love as drivers of intrinsic motivation. The model links spiritual survival through calling and membership to enhanced organisational commitment and performance. Additionally, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2010) present an organisational values framework that positions spirituality as a culture-driven experience of transcendence, advocating for values-based policies that promote spiritual integration while respecting diversity (Tabassum, 2018; Raamkumar & Swamy, 2024; Ahmad & Omar, 2016). Finally, Petchsawang and Duchon's (2009) four-factor model, developed in an Asian context, expands the construct by including mindfulness, compassion, transcendence, and meaningful work, highlighting cultural sensitivity in spiritual expression (Dubey et al., 2022; Karthikeyan & Udhayakumar, 2017).

4. Current Research Trends

Contemporary research in the field of WPS has increasingly emphasised its empirical relevance, theoretical refinement, and methodological expansion. Recent systematic reviews have consistently identified WPS as a predictor of positive psychological outcomes at work. The literature recognises that spiritual wellbeing is negatively associated with poor mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and burnout, particularly in helping professionals like teachers and nurses. Conversely, spiritual wellbeing predicts positive psychological outcomes including enhanced self-career management, organisational self-esteem, and ethical behaviour (Chirico et al., 2023). Evidence from multiple sources confirm strong associations between WPS and positive workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction, employee engagement, and psychological well-being (Walt & Klerk, 2014; James, 2021; Mahipalan & S., 2019). For instance, a meta-analysis by Dhir and Singh (2024) established WPS as a significant attitudinal construct in emerging economies, while Wnuk (2024) demonstrated that organisational gratitude mediates the relationship between employee spirituality and reduced work stress, ultimately enhancing life satisfaction among Polish employees. Post-pandemic studies in the hospitality sector further highlight how spiritual resources like meaningful work, value alignment, and communal connectedness remain essential in promoting employee well-being (Srivastava & Gupta, 2022). Concurrently, spiritual leadership has emerged as a pivotal

domain within WPS research. A 2024 bibliometric review mapped the antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes of spiritual leadership, demonstrating its growing academic maturity (Vedula & Agrawal, 2024). Udaheureka et al., (2023) further revealed that spiritual leadership significantly enhances employee's sense of meaningful work through intrinsic motivation, with gender emerging as a notable moderating factor.

In terms of cultural and sectoral contextualisation, recent studies stress upon the importance of regional and industry-specific perspectives. In European contexts such as Poland, gratitude and psychological well-being are central to spiritual climate (Wnuk, 2024), whereas in Indian organisations, spirituality often manifests through dharmic values, remote work flexibility, and resilience-oriented behaviours (Ghobbeh & Atrian, 2024). Education-sector research also emphasises the role of HR practices such as autonomy, recognition, and ethical leadership in cultivating spiritually supportive environments for faculty members (Ramesh & Sinnu, 2024). Methodologically, the field is progressing beyond its earlier reliance on cross-sectional survey designs. Scholars are increasingly embracing meta-analytical techniques, mediation models, and mixed-method approaches to provide richer insights into WPS processes. For instance, Dhir and Singh (2024) exemplify this shift with their meta-analytic framework, while Wnuk's (2024) mediation analysis unpacks the underlying mechanisms linking spirituality, gratitude, and well-being. New intersections with constructs such as technostress, work-family balance, and AI-related stressors are also gaining significant attraction in many researches. Notably, Ghobbeh and Atrian (2024) found that spiritual intelligence reduces technostress in ethically conscious organisational climates, pointing to the evolving relevance of spirituality in digitally transformed workplaces. Together, these emerging trends reflect a more nuanced and integrative understanding of WPS that spans psychological, cultural, and structural dimensions of work life.

5. Challenges and Critiques of Workplace Spirituality

WPS continues to face various conceptual and methodological issues that limit its applicability and generalisability in organisational practice, despite its growing significance. The inconsistency in definitions and the ambiguity are the primary challenges associated with WPS. Many varied and diverse conceptualisations have been proposed by a number of researchers, ranging from fundamental spiritual values and practices in everyday life to their broader applications involving transcendental awareness and existential contemplation. Therefore, establishing a cohesive framework of WPS has been a challenge (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009; Milliman et al., 2003). Furthermore, this has also complicated the development of standardised WPS measurement instruments and research across various contexts as well. Existing measurement tools like the Spirituality at Work Questionnaire (SWQ) (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000) and the Spiritual Assessment and Workplace Scale (SAWS) (Milliman et al., 2003) have been widely employed, yet they face criticisms regarding their psychometric properties, cultural generalisability, and item redundancy. For instance, some scales emphasise communal dimensions over personal experiences, while others lack contextual sensitivity in non-western settings (Pawar, 2016). The lack of standardised and universally accepted tools restricts the comparability and reproducibility of findings across studies. Additionally, the use of only self-report measures results in social desirability bias and subjective responses, thereby questioning the reliability and validity of these measurement tools (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006).

Another critique of WPS is its conceptual overlap with related ideas, including ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), mindfulness (Glomb et al., 2011), emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer), and organisational justice (Greenberg, 1990). Multiple researchers have

argued that WPS often encompasses similar values like honesty, empathy, and purposeful work, which are also common across these concepts (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). This leads to overlapping conceptual insights and creates ambiguities. It also prompts further enquiry into the uniqueness of WPS as a theoretical framework and practical contributions (Rego et al., 2008; Brown & Ryan, 2003). For example, in the case of mindfulness as well as spiritual practices, emphasis is placed on awareness and presence, making it difficult to identify the distinct effects of WPS from these constructs. Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that the boundaries between spiritual and religious constructs are often blurred, resulting in ethical and cultural sensitivities in secular organisational contexts (Pfeffer, 2010).

6. Future Research Directions and Practical Implications

Future research in workplace spirituality (WPS) must expand beyond western-centric models to include diverse cultural and contextual understandings. Studies in Asia highlight values like dharma and collective well-being (Subramaniam & Panchanatham, 2016; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009) that need further exploration. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into workplaces presents new spiritual challenges and opportunities. AI tools may personalise work and align tasks with employee values (Malik & Surbhi, 2024), but also risk depersonalisation and existential detachment in the employees (Milliman et al., 2003). Emerging concepts such as ethical AI governance and digital mindfulness (Brassey et al., 2023; Schaffer et al., 2024) aim to protect human dignity in tech-driven environments. Research should explore spiritually intelligent AI design and “spiritual impact assessments” (Beltramini, 2019; Harari, 2018). The rise of startups and remote work, which is a trend these days, needs further exploration in connection with WPS. Spiritual ecosystems in entrepreneurial cultures and the moderating role of spirituality in remote work well-being (Susanto, 2023) demand attention. Longitudinal studies are also needed to track spiritual well-being in flexible, gig-based work structures. Practically, interventions such as mindfulness programs, virtual community rituals have shown promise in enhancing connection and reducing burnout, laying the background for future similar programs and interventions. Organisations are also forming AI ethics committees and piloting spiritually sensitive tech applications, particularly in human-centered sectors like healthcare (Kim et al., 2023). Overall, research on WPS requires a deeper and more practical and effective outcome-based approach to meet the demands of dynamic workplaces.

7. Conclusion

This review has analysed the foundational theories, contemporary empirical developments, and various evolving debates concerning Workplace Spirituality, highlighting the multidimensional role of WPS in enhancing individual well-being and organisational resilience. As organisations move towards post-pandemic realities, digital chaos and prevailing cultural diversity, WPS offers solutions to integrate individual purpose and goals with organisational objectives, moving beyond the set religious boundaries. Based on this review, the future research in the field of WPS must address three critical gaps: (1) the need for a culturally grounded, non-western spiritual frameworks; (2) integrating spirituality within AI-based and evolving work environments; and (3) operationalisation of spiritual values and components in various organisational aspects such as HR, leadership and policy interventions. There is also a need for robust and longitudinal studies conducted across multiple levels that go beyond cross-sectional reports to derive the lived experiences and causal mechanisms underlying WPS. Organisations must also invest in developing spiritually intelligent leadership, ethical AI governance, and create inclusive workplaces that support meaning-

making, compassion, honesty, and authenticity. By strategically adopting spirituality at workplaces, workplaces can evolve as a place for both performance and human flourishing, offering not only competitive advantages but also existential relevance in this rapidly transforming world.

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