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## Human resource professionals' competencies for pluralistic workplaces



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### A B S T R A C T

The United States has concurrently experienced changing religious demographics, an increase in religious discrimination charges, and a growing interest by scholars in the role of spirituality and faith in the workplace. Yet there is little empirical research to inform management educators about the competencies HR professionals (HRPs) need to work in religiously and spiritually diverse organizations. HRPs are likely to be at the frontline of organizations' attempts to respond and adapt to these trends. In this exploratory study, a panel identified future scenarios relevant to HRPs working in religiously and spiritually diverse US workplaces as well as the competencies needed to address the scenarios. Three rounds of qualitative data from an expert panel and an iterative analysis process yielded: 1) likely scenarios and challenges HRPs will face related to spiritual and religious diversity and expression in the workplace; and 2) competencies needed by HRPs in response to these challenges. The results provide guidance to management educators on curricular choices. In addition, approaches to including these competencies in management education courses and programs are presented.

### 1. Introduction

The United States has become more religiously diverse over recent decades (Pew Research Center, 2015). Lipka and Geceqicz (2017) report a decreasing number of Christians and increases in the religiously unaffiliated, including those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Tension among religious groups is heightened by reports of religiously-motivated terrorist attacks as well as antagonism to other religions by fundamentalists in the US and around the world (Hicks, 2009). In this potentially tense environment, human resource professionals (HRPs) are responsible for creating healthy and productive workplaces for people of many religious and non-religious affiliations. Stone and Deadrick (2015) discuss several forces that contribute to the challenges HRPs face, including the multicultural international context of many organizations and “growing domestic diversity” (p. 142). These trends towards greater religious diversity result in increased encounters with religiously different *others* in the workplace. In this context, it is not surprising that the US experienced a two-fold surge in religious discrimination charges against employers between 1997 and 2016 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016), with a marked increase following the events of 9/11 (Durrani, 2012). Evidence also suggests that education of managers and leaders in the US only nominally addresses religious diversity (Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM, 2008; Williams & Allen, 2014).

Several management scholars have noted workers' desire to experience spirituality at work, which is expressed through finding

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meaning or purpose, transcendence of oneself and one's circumstances, appreciation of one's inner life, and experience of social membership or community at work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Benefiel, Fry, & Geigle, 2014; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Kolodinsky, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2008) suggest “workers’ need for connectedness, meaning, purpose, altruism, virtue, nurturance, and hope in one's work and at one's workplace likely is also at an all-time high” (p. 465). Religion and spirituality are separate but related concepts (Fry, 2003), and interest in both religion and spirituality in the workplace have been more greatly recognized in the last two decades (Benefiel et al., 2014; Karakas, 2010; Miller, 2006). Mitroff and Denton's (1999) workplace survey, described in their influential book *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*, was one of the first empirical studies to report this rising interest: “most people felt somewhat strongly that spirituality was relevant as a topic in the workplace” (p. 87). More recently Allen and Williams (2015) report that 78.7% of a sample of US graduate management students considered themselves spiritual and 63.3% thought that spiritual topics should be included in their coursework.

In reviewing workplace spirituality literature, Benefiel et al. (2014) and Karakas (2010) report on a growing interest among North American management practitioners and scholars in spirituality at work, with Karakas describing this interest as a paradigm shift. Especially notable are the growth of the Management Spirituality and Religion interest group at the Academy of Management, along with the emergence of the *Journal of Management, Religion, and Spirituality* (Tourish & Tourish, 2010). Several scholars attribute renewed interest in spirituality to the turmoil of modern business and social life, imbalances between materialism and life's spiritual aspects, a growing social consciousness (e.g., sustainability, corporate social responsibility), rejection of outdated bureaucratic paradigms, and American interest in Eastern philosophies (Chen & Sheng, 2013; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Similarly, Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012) report a growth of interest in spirituality and religion in American higher education.

An organization's ability to respond to employees' religious diversity and interest in spirituality at work depends on its HRP's competence in recognizing and addressing socio-cultural issues that are important to employees and stakeholders (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholtz, & Younger, 2008). HRP's include leaders, managers, and professionals inside and outside of formal HR departments who exercise HRM policies and practices (Luthans, 1988; Ulrich et al., 2008). Some organizations have implemented organizational development initiatives such as quality of work-life programs and HRM programs to attract candidates seeking resonance between personal spiritual or religious values and their employer's values and mission (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Karakas, 2010; Lund Dean & Safranski, 2008; Miller & Ewest, 2015).

A pertinent research question follows: What knowledge and skills must management educators develop in human resource professionals (HRPs) to effectively respond to religious diversity and interest in spirituality at work? While many efforts to develop competency models focus on past or present descriptions of performance, Athey and Orth (1999) encourage future-oriented competency development to address emerging workplace needs. In this paper we describe a qualitative study completed with a panel of HRM experts to examine the challenges that future HRP's may face as a result of changes in religious diversity and increased recognition of employees' interest in spirituality at work. The study resulted in a list of competencies needed to address these challenges. Our goal in addressing this question was to provide insights for the ongoing development of HRP and management education program curricula.

## 2. Review

The following sections review foundational concepts related to spirituality and religion at work, the HRP's role in addressing religious and spiritual issues, the inclusion of spirituality and religion in management curricula, and competency concepts and research as they apply to HRP's.

### 2.1. Spirituality at work and workplace spirituality

Mitroff and Denton's (1999) study is frequently acknowledged as a milestone in spirituality at work research, documenting the interest in spirituality in the American workplace, although numerous authors were already writing about the topic (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 1995; Fairholm, 1996; Lee & Zemke, 1993; McCormick, 1994; Neck & Milliman, 1994). Tanyi (2002) defines spirituality as, “A personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life” (p. 506). The spirituality at work movement has emphasized the importance of the employees' inner or spiritual lives, given the many hours spent in the workplace. Spiritual well-being, manifested in experiences such as joy, hope, and transcendence, are described as outcomes of the experience of spirituality at work (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). Hicks (2003) and Miller (2006) argue that for many people, spirituality and religion are intertwined. For this study, we applied a both-and approach (Marx, Neal, Manz, & Manz, 2008) to be inclusive of religious and spiritual diversity challenges and needs that HRP's may encounter.

Workplace spirituality, as a collective experience of spirituality in the workplace, is defined by Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) as, “a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (p. 13). Research has provided evidence of positive relationships between workplace spirituality and performance at the unit level, reductions in turnover and absenteeism, and increased satisfaction, productivity, and organizational commitment (Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Fry & Cohen, 2009; Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Saks, 2011; Shankar Pawar, 2009). While many North American management authors have embraced the potential of workplace spirituality (Karakas, 2010), Tourish and Tourish (2010) provide a post-structuralist critique suggesting that the spirituality at work agenda may allow management to gain more control and to extract more from workers by tapping into their values and beliefs.

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