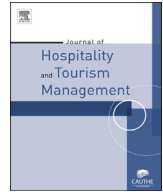




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# The effect of workplace spirituality on hospitality employee engagement, intention to stay, and service delivery

John Milliman <sup>a,\*</sup>, Anthony Gatling <sup>b,1</sup>, Jungsun (Sunny) Kim <sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Management, College of Business, University of Colorado Colorado Springs, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs, CO 80918, USA<sup>b</sup> William F. Harrah College of Hospitality Administration, University of Nevada Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 456021, Las Vegas, NV 89154-6021, USA<sup>c</sup> William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 456013, BEH 557, Las Vegas, NV 89154-6023, USA

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## ABSTRACT

A key challenge facing hospitality organizations is how to retain and engage frontline employees who play an important role in influencing customer satisfaction. Although engagement has recently received considerable attention from scholars, much still remains to be learned about its intrinsic motivation and work meaning antecedents. Workplace spirituality has been conceptualized as offering new insights into how individuals experience a deeper level of intrinsic work motivation and engagement. This study found that workplace spirituality has a direct effect on employee engagement and intention to stay in a study of 292 employees in a U.S. hospitality organization. Engagement was found to be related to employees' service delivery, but not to their intention to stay. In doing so, this study provides new insights into the intrinsic work motivation antecedents of engagement and is the first investigation to empirically assess the joint effects of workplace spirituality and engagement on employee service delivery and intention to stay.

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## 1. Introduction

Frontline employees play a pivotal role in hospitality customers' service experience (Kim, Gazzoli, Qu, & Kim, 2016). One important way that organizations can improve service delivery is by more effectively engaging their employees (Hughes & Rog, 2008). Engagement has emerged as an important organizational behavior variable that contributes significantly to employee productivity and in turn to customer satisfaction and organizational performance (i.e. Saks, 2006, 2011). While a considerable number of studies have been conducted on employee engagement, much still remains to be learned about its antecedents (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). This includes the need to better understand the underlying intrinsic motivation basis for employee engagement (Meyer & Gagne, 2008) and how the level of engagement is impacted by work meaningfulness (Hughes & Rog, 2008).

Workplace spirituality is a construct of increasing interest to scholars who see it as providing new insights into work meaning (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010), and employee work attitudes (Benefiel, Fry, & Geigle, 2014; Milliman, Gatling, & Bradley-Geist,

2017), including engagement (Saks, 2011). This study seeks to build on two previous empirical workplace spirituality-engagement studies (Petchsawang & McLean, 2017; Sharma & Hussain, 2012), by examining three dimensions of workplace spirituality which are conceptually similar to key sources of work meaning as observed in Rosso et al.'s (2010) review of the meaning of work literature. In contrast to prior research, the current study also includes a more recently developed operationalization of engagement by Rich et al. (2010) to avoid potential confounding of this construct with the meaningful work dimension of workplace spirituality. In addition, this is the first investigation to empirically determine the joint effects of workplace spirituality and engagement on employee work attitudes (e.g. involving employee intention to stay and service delivery). In doing so, this study seeks to provide new insights into the antecedents and outcomes of engagement (Wollard & Shuck, 2011; Yeh, 2013) as well as address the need for more empirical research on how workplace spirituality theory can influence organizational behavior variables and performance (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Employee engagement

Employee engagement has been subject to a number of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jmillima@uccs.edu](mailto:jmillima@uccs.edu) (J. Milliman), [anthony.gatling@unlv.edu](mailto:anthony.gatling@unlv.edu) (A. Gatling), [sunny.kim@unlv.edu](mailto:sunny.kim@unlv.edu) (J. Kim).<sup>1</sup> [unlv.edu/people/anthony-gatling](http://unlv.edu/people/anthony-gatling).

definitions. The construct was first defined by Kahn (1990) as involving one's "preferred self" and as "...the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). Engagement has also been viewed by Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) as involving an individual's full identification with his or her work, encompassing aspects such as (1) vigor (high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and resilience), (2) dedication (in-depth association with one's job involving significance, motivation, and challenge), and (3) absorption (being fully involved with one's work tasks). Engaged employees are seen as providing their full effort toward both their (1) main job tasks and responsibilities and (2) extra-role behaviors. Engagement is seen as a distinct construct in relation to other organizational behavior variables, in part because it involves one's full self in the experience of work and it impacts the performance of actual work tasks directly, rather than just work attitudes related to performance (Saks, 2011).

## 2.2. Workplace spirituality

Similar to engagement, research on workplace spirituality has increased significantly in the past two decades (Joelle & Coelho, 2017). Like engagement, a number of perspectives have been offered on the definition of workplace spirituality (Saks, 2011), although two recent reviews of the literature (Benefiel et al., 2014; Houghton, Neck, & Krishnakumar, 2016) indicate there has been an increasing convergence on its conceptualization. As noted by Houghton et al. (2016), a commonly cited definition in the literature is by Ashmos and Duchon (2000) who defined workplace spirituality as "... the recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community" (p. 137).

Workplace spirituality shares a commonality with the emerging positive organizational scholarship field in focusing more explicitly on the humanistic aspect of work (Lavine, Bright, Powley, & Cameron, 2014) by seeking to more fully understand the human experience, including the drive for self-actualization (Joelle & Coelho, 2017), self-development, and more complete self-expression at work (Pawar, 2009). Workplace spirituality is seen as a multi-faceted construct influencing an individual's intrinsic motivation (Sharma & Hussain, 2012) and as involving one's "inner consciousness" and search for meaning (Houghton et al., 2016). A key theme of the literature on workplace spirituality is that people desire to not just be competent in their work, but also to have some other kind of personally meaningful experience at work. This type of experience can involve a variety of aspects such as a sense of transcendence, meaningful and purposeful work, a connection to others or to a higher power, the experience of one's "authentic" self, being of service to others or to humanity, and belonging to a good and ethical organization (Milliman et al., 2017). Benefiel et al. (2014) observed that workplace spirituality is seen as providing new insights into employee work attitudes and that a full understanding of organizational reality is incomplete without considering people's spiritual nature.

## 2.3. Employee intention to stay

It is widely acknowledged that there is high employee turnover in the hospitality sector and that it is important for hospitality organizations to take proactive steps to positively influence employee retention (Hughes & Rog, 2008). Intention to stay is conceptualized as an individual's intention to remain with his or her present employer on a long-term basis and is considered to be the opposite of intention to leave (e.g. Johari, Yean, Adnan, Yahya, & Ahmad,

2012). Intention to stay is seen as a critical determinant of actual turnover behavior (Tett & Meyer, 1993) and is influenced by numerous employee work attitudes, including organization commitment and job satisfaction, which have been linked to engagement and workplace spirituality (Saks, 2011).

## 2.4. Employee service delivery

Frontline employees represent the face of their organization to customers and play a key role in shaping customer perceptions of service quality (Boshoff & Meis, 1995). One key aspect of frontline worker interaction with customers involves service oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Employee service oriented OCBs are seen as involving the following dimensions: (1) participation (providing input or suggestions to one's company), (2) loyalty (promoting one's company to customers and others), and (3) service delivery (the extent to which employees follow customer service guidelines and respond to customers in a timely and courteous manner). These dimensions have been measured by employees' perceptions (Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter, 2001) and are based on the premise that individuals in frontline jobs are able to assess the type of the service they provide to customers and are aware of problems that occur when they interact with customers (Boshoff & Meis, 1995).

## 3. Hypotheses development

Meyer and Gagne (2008) called for more research to identify and explain the underlying human intrinsic motivation needs that lead to higher levels of engagement. Similarly, other researchers contend that greater attention should be given to the study of how employee engagement is influenced by the fulfillment of an individual's inner needs (Havener, 1999) and through the experience of work meaning (Jung & Yoon, 2016) and work meaningfulness (Ahmed, Halim, & Majkd, 2016; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Shuck & Rose, 2013). Work meaning is defined as how an individual makes sense of and interprets what his or her work means within the overall context of one's life and needs (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). This construct refers to the sources of the work environment that influence one's sense of work meaning (e.g. job, coworkers, leaders, the organization's mission, etc.) (Rosso et al., 2010). Work meaningfulness is a related term that defines the amount of significance an aspect of work holds for a person (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), including elements of work that involve intrinsic motivation (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

Consistent with Rosso et al.'s (2010) observation that a person's sense of spirituality can influence his/her sense of work meaningfulness and purpose, we postulate that workplace spirituality influences an individual's level of engagement. This view is supported by Saks (2011) and Izak (2012) who proposed that an individual's sense of spirituality at work can influence their meaningfulness at work, resulting in higher levels of engagement. Similarly, other scholars contend that the pursuit of a spiritual experience at work leads individuals to seek their full potential and experience a greater sense of intrinsic motivation (Osman-Gani, Junaidah, & Ismail, 2013) and self-fulfillment (Pawar, 2009), which lead to increased engagement.

Sharma and Hussain (2012) conducted the first empirical study of the relationship of engagement to workplace spirituality which was operationalized by three dimensions involving meaningful work, community, and alignment of organizational values. These dimensions are based on the research of Ashmos and Duchon (2000) and operationalized by Milliman, Czaplewski, and Ferguson (2003) involving an individual's perception of workplace spirituality at the following three levels: (1) the individual

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