Spirituality in organizations and professional stress during Covid-19
Espiritualidade nas organizações e stress profissional durante a Covid-19

Derson da S. Lopes-Jr.[1]
Doutor em Administração – Unicamp
Coordenador de Pós-Graduação, Pesquisa e Extensão – FAAMA
VP de Pesquisa e Desenvolvimento – Aspectum Business School

Cristina Zukowsky-Tavares[2]
Doutora em Educação
Docente no Mestrado em Promoção da Saúde – Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo

Thiago Gusmão Cardoso[3]
Doutor em Psicologia
Docente no Mestrado em Promoção da Saúde – Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo

Marco A F Milani[4]
Doutor em Ciências Contábeis – FEA/USP
Docente Pesquisador – PPGA/FCA – Unicamp

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze whether an organization's level of spirituality can mitigate professional stress. An online questionnaire was developed based on the following measures: A job stress scale and an organization's spirituality inventory, both were consolidated assessment applied in previous studies. This questionnaire was applied through a digital survey, strongly shared in social media and other channels, which obtained a total of 996 respondents from all over the country and with diverse demographic and professional characteristics. The data were standardized, coded and run on *Stata* IC v.15. in the multiple linear regression method. This study sought to enrich the knowledge on spirituality as a strategy for organizations, especially in crises situations, as Covid-19 pandemic. The results showed that the level of spirituality enhances the chance for organizations to take actions to deal with crises

[1] Brasil. E-mail: dersonlopes@me.com
[2] Brasil. E-mail: cristina.tavares@unasp.edu.br
[3] Brasil. E-mail: thiagocardoso@unasp.edu.br
[4] Brasil. E-mail: marcomilani@fca.unicamp.br

and reduces the professional stress in the context of uncertainties, as it is a benefit for mental health and well-being. This article could make important contributions presenting a quantitative analysis for a not usual subject in organization strategy: spirituality. It can bring new insights in people management studies, concluding that a company with greater spirituality is more likely to attract and retain people with the best talent.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, organizational spirituality, professional stress.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objetivo analisar se o nível de espiritualidade de uma organização pode atenuar o estresse profissional. Foi desenvolvido um questionário unificado on-line a partir das seguintes medidas: job stress scale e inventário de espiritualidade na organização, ambos validados e consolidados em estudos anteriores. O questionário foi aplicado por meio de uma pesquisa digital amplamente divulgada por redes sociais e outros canais, que obteve um total de 996 respondentes por todo o país, com características demográficas e profissionais diversas. Os dados foram padronizados, codificados e rodados no Stata IC v.15. no método de regressão linear múltipla. Este estudo buscou enriquecer o conhecimento sobre a espiritualidade como estratégia para as organizações, principalmente em situações de crise, como na pandemia da Covid-19. Os resultados demonstraram que o nível de espiritualidade potencializa a chance de que as organizações tomem medidas de enfrentamento a crises e reduz o estresse profissional percebido pelos colaboradores em um contexto de incertezas, dado ser um benefício para a saúde mental e o bem-estar. Este artigo pode trazer contribuições importantes ao apresentar uma análise quantitativa de um assunto pouco usual em estratégia organizacional: espiritualidade. Ele pode trazer novos insights nos estudos de gestão de pessoas, concluindo que uma empresa com maior espiritualidade tem mais chances de atrair e reter pessoas com os melhores talentos.

Palavras-chave: *Covid-19, pandemia, espiritualidade organizacional, estresse profissional.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public policies of social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic have substantially changed working conditions. Thousands of people suffered profound impacts in the professional field, such as job loss, forced vacations, reduced working hours, reduced wages, moving to home office, anticipating holidays, changing appointments, adjusting goals etc. All these changes, added to family impacts and tensions caused by the risk of the disease itself, brought a great potential for stress at work. Studies about Covid-19 are important and relevant for management theory (Falaster, Martins, Storópoli & Ramos, 2020).

Spirituality in organizations has become an accepted focus for academic research. The construct of spirituality in the workplace has become an important research topic in organizational behavior in the recent past (Benefiel, Fry, & Geigle, 2014; Dreyer & Hermans, 2014). Although the workplace spirituality movement started in the early 1920s, it gained momentum in the late 1990s with the spread of a growing desire among employees to have meaning and purpose at work, not just money. The spiritual approach to work recognizes this fact; in addition to considering that the soul and spirit of an employee at work are as involved as the hands and the mind (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000), the promotion of spirituality in the workplace was welcomed with open arms by leaders from around the world (Pandey, 2017). Organizations that actively encourage spirituality in the workplace have reported its positive impact on employee well-being (Hawley & Hawley, 1993) on unit performance (Duchon & Plowman, 2005), and on organizational performance (Fry & Matherly, 2006; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012).

Given its development, the topic raised special issues in several journals, many of which dedicated a special number or exclusive volume to study spirituality (Poole, 2009). The theme has been addressed mainly in the United States (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Brown, 2003; Freshman, 1999; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Discussions by Ashmos & Duchon (2000), Duchon & Plowman (2005), and Milliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson (2003) help to structure a possible definition that supports this investigation, bringing spirituality as the possibility of carrying out meaningful work within organizations.

Given that, this research aims to analyze the challenges faced by employees during this hard moment for all companies and people, searching for the spiritual sight and analyzing how spirituality can help organizations and people to face hard moments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A recent study investigated the psychological repercussions and psychiatric symptoms of the Chinese workforce associated with the Covid-19 pandemic (Tan *et al*., 2020). From 673 respondents of that research, 10.8% met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after returning to work; besides that, 12.0% revealed moderate to severe concerns about their physical health. In general, low prevalence of anxiety (3.8%), depression (3.7%), stress (1.5%), and insomnia (2.3%) were found. There were also no significant differences in psychiatric symptoms among technicians, executives/managers. Stress in professional activities results from the individual's perception of not being able to meet work demands, with consequent psychological suffering, behavioral changes, negative attitudes towards work, and increased cardiovascular risk (Quick & Henderson, 2016). The restructuring processes of professional activities due to the pandemic have led to significant changes in how manage the work activities. ILO monitoring studies (2020) on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on work report that, in this moment, four out of five people (81%) in the 3.3 billion global workforce are affected by the total or partial closure of workplaces, with an estimated reduction of 6.7% in the working hours, which is equivalent to 195 million full-time workers. Moreover, estimates from Global Workplace Analytics (2020) indicate that 25% to 30% of the workforce will be working from home several days a week until the end of 2021 because of Covid-19.

An explanatory model of occupational stress, called Karasek's demand-control model (Karasek, 1979), argues that workers whose jobs are classified as high demand and low control (measured by the latitude of decisions) have significantly more exhaustion at work.

From this approach that focuses on the occupational stress risk assessment in the way work is organized, it can be investigated the repercussions of changes in work organization as a result of an event, such as Covid-19. Currently, little is known about how changes in the world of work due to the pandemic can affect workers in different sectors including the health sector (Tan *et al*., 2020).

Although spirituality movement at workplaces started in the early 1920s, it gained momentum in the late 1990s with the spread of a growing desire among employees to have meaning and purpose at work, not just money. As the spiritual approach in work recognizes this fact, considering that an employee's soul and spirit at work are as involved as hands and mind (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000), the promotion of spirituality in the workplace was welcomed with open arms by leaders around the world (Pandey, 2017). Organizations that actively encourage spirituality in the workplace have reported its positive impact on employee well-being (Hawley

29

& Hawley, 1993), work performance (Duchon & Plowman, 2005), and organizational performance (Fry & Matherly, 2006; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012). Besides that, spirituality and, in some cases, religion, can impact leaders' decisions and management style (Bartoli, 2007; Bertero, 2007). The definitions of spirituality receive different emphasis according to the theoretical perspective and studies that are intended to be done. The definition by Koenig *et al.* (2001) has been one of the most accepted, when conceptualizing spirituality as a personal search for understanding related to larger existential issues (for example, the meaning of life, death) and its relationship with the sacred and/or transcendent. This concept of spirituality can lead to a development of religious practices or religious communities, but not necessarily.

Chawla and Guda (2010) comment that the contribution of spirituality in the workplace, when accepted by employees, results in job satisfaction and encourages them to demonstrate behaviors that go beyond the regular demands (Fry, 2003). Milliman *et al.* (2003) reported the encouraging role of spirituality in the workplace brings unity in the organization, which leads to greater adherence to teamwork, collaboration, and reduction of absenteeism and employee turnover occurrences. Milliman *et al.* (ibidem) proposed a three-dimensional structure to encapsulate the building of spirituality in the workplace in three levels. The three dimensions of spirituality in the workplace, listed by Milliman *et al.* (ibidem) are meaningful work (individual level), sense of community (team level), and alignment with organizational values (organizational level).

With the increasing complexities at work, including advances in technology and globalization, many workers may feel the necessity to grow professionally and personally, finding meaningful, sustainable, and satisfying work activity. Work can help individuals to define themselves. The improvement factors associated with meaningful and rewarding work can increase job satisfaction. All these topics become more latent when intentionally developed in an environment of spirituality (Pandey, Gupta & Gupta, 2017). When people with similar understanding, desires and aspirations meet, they can join forces to reach a higher level of goal achievement, implementing known tools such as division of labor, delegation, and empowerment, as well as engaging in improvements and innovations. This effort, which results in synergy of action, is strengthened and stimulated by spirituality (Rego, Cunha & Souto, 2007; Rupcic, 2017).

Cavanagh and Bandsuch (2002) argue that spirituality is related to the positive result that the spiritualized individual promotes within the organizational environment. Apparently, spiritualized individuals are able to make life and work meaningful by considering that they

30

need to go through certain situations as part of a larger purpose, a life mission. Therefore, if there is spirituality constituting human beings and they seek to give meaning and purpose to their work through this dimension, organizations that do not seek to insert this theme in their contexts can be damaged.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a theoretical framework and data analysis from field research to obtain its objectives. As a research project, this work can be classified as applied research; according to Roesch (2013, p. 62), this research modality seeks to "understand the nature and source of human problems, addressing issues considered important by society." This concept fits the research, as it seeks to analyze a relevant and current issue for the development of individuals and organizations.

Bearing in mind that the research sought to analyze professional challenges in the home office in the context of social isolation caused by the pandemic of Covid-19, the profile for the survey respondents was defined for people over the age of 18 and with professional experience of at least one year, so that the respondents were able to assess work-related challenges. The research used a survey form with demographic and socioeconomic questions to determine the profile of the sample and also to analyze these factors in the respondents' perception. Assertions were inserted to measure the level of spirituality of the organization (Milliman *et al*., 2003) and the stress level of the respondents (Alves *et al*., 2004; Hökerberg *et al*., 2014), in addition to some questions about measures adopted related to Covid-19. The assertions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Statements adapted for the study.

Statements for Spirituality (about the job)	Statements for Stress/Covid Measures
It makes me experience joy	Work demands too much
Energizes the spirit	I have enough time to complete the work tasks
It's linked to what I think is important in life	My work tends to present contradictory or discordant demands
I look forward to starting work	I have the possibility to learn new things in my work
I see connection between work and social well-being	My job requires a lot of skills or specialized knowledge
I understand what brings me meaning in my job	My job requires me to take some initiative
People support each other in my workplace	I have to repeat the same tasks many times at work
I feel free to express my opinions at work	I can choose HOW to do my job
I think everyone at work is linked to a common goal	I can choose WHAT to do in my job
My job brings me a feeling of being part of a family	My organization offers me psychological support during Covid-19
I feel good about the organization's values	My organization has been understandable with my difficulties and particularities
The organization cares for the poor	My Organization has taken clear steps to stop Covid-19
I am connected with the mission of the organization	
I know it clearly and I am connected to the goals of the organization	
The organization is concerned with energizing my spirit (my values and inner motivation)	

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The study used the quantitative approach, applying the statistical technique called multivariate data analysis, which allows the simultaneous analysis of multiple measures in individuals under investigation (Hair *et al*., 2017). The work used multiple linear regression. According to Fávero *et al*. (2009), the Multiple Linear Regression technique aims to study the relationship between two or more explanatory variables that are presented in a linear way and a dependent metric variable. In general, it can be said that multiple linear regression seeks to identify how a dependent variable called Y is influenced by a series of independent variables called X.

Although there are discussions about the use of Multiple Linear Regression for data collected using the Likert scale, this technique is recognized as an option in theoretical studies on the subject (Boone Jr. & Boone, 2012). Norman (2010) states that, although some authors criticize the use of multivariate analysis with a Likert scale, there is a conceptual basis for

applying the method with the type of questionnaire. The form was developed on a Likert scale (1 to 5) and was applied digitally, using Microsoft Forms, widely disseminated on social networks (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn) and via e-mail between 05/21/20 and 05/28/20. 996 people were reached.

The dependent variables were Stress, created with the sum of the statements of the job stress scale, and referring to the measures taken against Covid-19. The independent variable Spirituality in Organizations was obtained by adding the answers to the questions of Milliman *et al*. (2003).

In order to verify the study quantitatively, a Multiple Linear Regression model was developed and run for each dependent variable, as shown below:

$$E(Y|X) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Id + \beta_2 S + \beta_3 EC + \beta_4 Fl + \beta_5 GI + \beta_6 EP + \beta_7 PE + \beta_8 LD + \beta_9 EO + \beta_{10} APP + \beta_{11} Comp + \beta_{12} RD + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Labeled as:

$E(Y|X)$ – dependent variable

β_0 – constant

β_1 to β_{12} – independent variables: Id (Age), S (Sex), EC (Marital Status), FI (Has School-Age Children), GI (Degree of Education), EP (Professional Experience), PE (Company Size), LD (Occupies a Leadership Position), EO (Spirituality in the Organization), APP (Psychological Support), Comp (Understanding the Limitations During the Pandemic), RD (Income).

ε – error term

After the collection and previous analysis, the data were organized and standardized in Microsoft Excel software, the variables were properly adjusted and coded, and finally all data were treated in the *Stata* Software version 15.0, generating the descriptive statistics and the remainder of the multiple linear regression, which will be presented and discussed in the next session.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis shows the demographic characterization of the sample and the respondents' opinions, and subsequently explore the information in the multivariate analysis. Table 2 provides a summary of the descriptive.

Table 2. Summarized socio-demographic data.

	Observations → *n*	996 (100)
Variables		
Average Age		39 years
Women		66%
Married		56%
Has School-Age Children		36%
Occupies a Leadership Position		37%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The variables Income, Degree of Education and Professional Experience were measured by a scale and analyzed by calculating Trend. The income of most respondents was between R$ 3,601, and R$ 6,000.00. The Degree of Education of the sample is a prominent factor. The trend was 5, Higher Education Completed. In general, 75.78% have completed higher education or higher levels—in particular, 28.56% have *stricto sensu*. As for the item referring to Professional Experience, the trend of the scale points to 4, above 5 years. In the percentage distribution, 80.15% of the participants have more than 5 years of experience.

Considering the social and economic impacts of Covid-19, 19.4% of the sample lost their jobs. Some organizations have opted for salary reduction policies. Among the respondents, 22.17% had some kind of reduction in their income due to the impact of the pandemic crisis of Covid-19, with or without reduced working hours. Analyzing only companies with a significant spirituality index, these numbers are a little less dramatic. None of the respondents from organizations with spirituality were dismissed, and the percentage of people with reduced wages was lower, reaching 15.1%.

The data were standardized, coded and run on *Stata* IC v.15. The validation tests for multiple linear regression were run and considered satisfactory. Table 3 shows the results obtained and the specifications tests.

34

Table 3. Multiple linear regression results.

Variables	Company actions due to Covid-19	VIF	Occupational Stress	VIF
Age	0.0006	1.26	-0.0280	1.24
Women	0.0703	1.07	-0.2480	1.08
Married	0.0014	1.59	-0.3835	1.62
Has School-Age Children	0.0705	1.10	-0.2494	1.09
Degree of Education	0.0162	1.30	-0.0761	1.28
Professional Experience	-0.0575	1.36	0.1601	1.35
Company Size	0.0207*	1.16	0.5068***	1.16
Occupies Leadership Position	-0.0448	1.16	0.0861	1.15
Spirituality in the Org.	0.0199***	1.58	-0.1714***	1.60
Psychological Support at Covid-19	0.1313***	1.85	-0.1105	1.86
Understanding the Limitations During the Pandemic	0.3217***	1.92	-1.1466***	1.92
Income	0.0571**	1.59	-0.2698*	1.56
_cons	0.7638		37.0709	
N	638		658	
R2	0.439		0.313	
Prob>f	0.002		0.000	
Breusch-Pagan – chi2	70.72		3.83	
– Prob > chi2	0.0000		0.0504	

Source: Elaborated by the authors.
Subtitle: *Statistically significant at 10%; **Statistically significant at 5%; *** Statistically significant at 1%.

The actions to fight Covid-19 was measured in the first model. The significant variables were Company Size, Spirituality in the Organization, Psychological Support and Understanding the Limitations During the Pandemic, and Income, all with a positive coefficient. It is clear then that larger companies had more actions against Covid-19 than smaller companies. This information can be associated with different perspectives, such as training of decision makers, technical preparation and also the economic and financial conditions of the company, as organizations with more cash are more likely to react to a pandemic, unlike smaller companies that may be struggling for their survival.

The level of spirituality—the focus variable of this study—was highly significant, that is, higher the level of spirituality in the organization, greater the finding of measures taken to face the pandemic. As the inventory of this research used measures as the personal meaning found in the company, sense of community, and alignment of values, it can be concluded that companies with these characteristics tend to be more empathetic and concerned with people,

35

thus being more willing to act in defense of society. The variables on psychological support offered and the understanding of limitations during the pandemic confrontation demonstrate the respondents' perception of receiving support from the organization, so it is natural that these variables are associated with measures taken by organizations. Finally, the Income variable showed that higher income increases the likelihood of measures taken by the company. This result may be related to the size of the companies, which consequently pay higher salaries, and also to the respondent's higher hierarchical level, which may be associated with more comprehensive perceptions about the company's actions.

In the second model, occupational stress during the pandemic was analyzed. The only statistically significant and positive variable was the size of the company, that is, the larger the company, the greater the respondent's occupational stress. It is well known that large companies generally have systems more focused on goals and with greater pressure for results, which can contribute to greater stress at work. Besides that, the fear of mass layoffs in large companies may also have influenced with occupational stress. The other significant variables were negative, namely: Age, Spirituality in the Organization, Being Understandable during the Pandemic and Income. The presence of these items reduces the participant's occupational stress. The variable related to Being Understandable during the Covid-19 crisis acting as a stress reliever is quite logical in its composition, since this behavior leaves employees feeling more secure and welcoming by their organizations.

Once again, the variable related to the level of spirituality in the organization obtained a high degree of significance. This fact reinforces the role of spirituality in companies related to greater care for employees and their well-being, as well as increased the sense of meaning and improved mental and physical health (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Cavanagh & Bandsuch, 2002; Chawla & Guda, 2010; Milliman *et al*, 2003; Pandey, Gupta & Gupta, 2017; Pawar, 2009; Gupta, Kumnar & Singh, 2014; Rego, Cunha & Souto, 2007; Rupcic, 2017), items that are certainly related to the ability to deal with problems and changes in the company and consequently will present less occupational stress. For this reason, the significance of the Income variable may be associated with a higher hierarchical level and, consequently, greater adaptability to tensions and pressures caused by work.

36

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5. CONCLUSION

The changes made in the corporate environment during the pandemic demonstrate that people were not prepared to deal with this new work model. Several researches have been developed in an attempt to better understand the effects of these sudden changes in the organizational environment, the health and well-being of the employees.

This research analyzes the relationship between the organization's level of spirituality and Covid-19's coping measures, in addition to the occupational stress analyzed in the context of the limitations imposed in this period of social isolation forced by the pandemic. Further on the other relevant variables discussed in the result section, the variable referring to the organization's spirituality was statistically relevant in two models used in this research, that is, the higher the company's level of spirituality, the greater the chance that this company has taken measures of confronting Covid-19 perceived by their employees, and also decreases their perception of employees regarding their level of occupational stress.

As the limitation of this paper, the fact that this research was carried out at the beginning of the pandemic should be highlighted, and it is likely that professional stress has been better managed in its continuity. Although the definition of spirituality was explored in the forms, the range of the topic may have skewed the understanding of the results.

This article brings contributions to management theory by exploring the theme of spirituality in the context of a crisis that directly affected the world of work. This topic is still little studied (spirituality at work) and the Covid-19 crisis was a very particular event in the recent history of humanity, so this study can bring deep reflections and adaptations for the future of leaders and organizations.

This paper also makes important contributions to individuals and corporations in their managerial practice. For individuals, the research shows that looking for an organization with a higher level of spirituality can bring a more pleasant work environment, greater well-being, and more willingness to face the demands and challenges of their job, reducing their occupational stress. For organizations, the study demonstrates that the effort to be concerned with level of spirituality in organizations can help the company to improve the quality of life and emotional control of its employees, facing crises and the pressures resulting from intense work. It can be concluded that a company with greater spirituality is more likely to attract and retain people with the best talent. It is suggested for new researches an evaluation in which the respondent is also evaluated by other people, not only for their perception in each item of the organization's spirituality inventory.

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