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LEADERSHIP CONTRIBUTION FOR SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING OF REMOTE WORKERS POST PANDEMIC

Faik Sabri Çavuşoğlu (a)*, Jamaliah Said (b), Naila Erum (c)
* Corresponding Author

- (a) Istanbul Medipol University, Istanbul, Türkiye, faik.cavusoglu@std.medipol.edu.tr
(b) Accounting Research Institute (HICoE), University Teknologi MARA (UiTM), jamaliah533@uitm.edu.my
(c) Accounting Research Institute (HICoE), University Teknologi MARA (UiTM), naila@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

People have certain internal expectations in addition to the material elements they hope to gain while living their daily lives. They also want to meet this spiritual fulfillment in the workplace where they spend most of their time. Employees expect their spiritual needs to be met in the work they do and the work environment they are in. The meaningfulness and value added by their work, doing it for a higher purpose, and being accepted and appreciated in the environment they are in are the reflections of this spiritual need. Employees who feel that their spiritual needs are met have higher levels of spiritual well-being. There are many factors that affect the level of spiritual well-being. The remote work system, which started with the Covid-19 pandemic, has an impact on the spiritual well-being levels of employees. Although remote work has been discussed and talked about in the business world since the late 90s, it started as a necessity during the pandemic and continues to this day. Remote work, which increases working hours and disrupts work-life balance, increases stress and anxiety in employees, thereby reducing their levels of spiritual well-being. Employees with reduced spiritual well-being also experience negative effects on their performance and productivity. Managers can try to increase employees' perception of spiritual well-being through various leadership practices. When the research in the literature is examined, it is understood that spiritual leadership is the most suitable leadership style to enhance the perception of spiritual well-being.

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1. Introduction

This study was prepared to propose a leadership suggestion to address the deteriorating perception of spiritual well-being among remote workers after the pandemic. Although spirituality has been primarily studied in the field of religious psychology, it has also become a topic of great interest among management science researchers in recent years. In this context, concepts such as workplace spirituality, spiritual well-being, and spiritual leadership have gained prominence. Spiritual well-being briefly refers to individuals' levels of spiritual satisfaction.

One of the other concepts in the study, spiritual leadership, emerges as a form of leadership that encompasses vision and inspiration. Spiritual leadership also focuses on the employee's inner world and spiritual development. In this way, spiritual leaders direct and inspire employees towards a higher purpose.

The study consists of four sections. The first section will discuss the nature of the remote work system and its current state after the pandemic. The second section will provide information about spirituality and its importance in the workplace, as well as an introduction to the concept of spiritual well-being. The third section will present literature information on what spiritual leadership entails. The fourth section is the conclusion, where the study addresses how the remote work system has changed employees' perception of spiritual well-being and proposes suggestions on how this changed well-being perception can be rectified through the form of spiritual leadership.

2. Remote Work and Pandemic Effect

The flexible working model, which emerged with the use of information technologies in the workplace, has resulted in the significant outcome of remote work. Remote work refers to the execution of tasks outside the traditional office environment, either partially or entirely, using information technologies in a home setting (Kavi & Koçak, 2010). The subject of remote work and related research started in the late twentieth century. Although remote work was referred to as the future work style in the early 1990s, it was not widely adopted by many company managers in the following years (Illegems et al., 2001). The reasons for the lack of widespread adoption of remote work in the business world include concerns about digital security, increased information technology costs, blurring of work and life boundaries, loss of control over work-related matters, confusion between work and family, and working during vacation time (Tuna & Türkmendağ, 2020).

In recent years, the remote work system has gained importance and has become a frequently researched topic by scholars. After the Covid-19 pandemic, the topic of remote work has become even more significant and has become a subject of interest for management researchers. However, some researchers point out that the pre-pandemic concept of remote work is distinct from the concept of remote work that emerged during the pandemic (Allen et al., 2015). Prior to the pandemic, remote work referred to working from home for shorter periods, while post-pandemic remote work has come to mean working full-time away from the office. This difference implies that previous studies on what working from home entails may be inadequate, and therefore, post-pandemic remote work research brings a new perspective to the subject.

The Covid-19 virus, which first emerged in December 2019 in China, quickly spread to all countries. Therefore, in March 2020, the World Health Organization declared it a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Following the declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic, governments implemented various restrictions to prevent the spread of the disease, affecting all aspects of social life. These restrictions led to significant changes in the business world. Many sectors had to undergo transformations in their work styles due to the impact of pandemic conditions. While transportation, logistics, tourism, restaurants, various trades and crafts, artistic activities, and fuel retailing faced disruptions, sectors such as retail, software, information technology, medical equipment production, and supply gained advantages (Akça & Tepe Küçükoğlu, 2020; Deloitte, 2020).

The pandemic conditions deeply affected people's working styles. Many organizations had to rapidly transition to remote work to comply with social distancing restrictions and keep their employees safe. As the world is now moving past the pandemic, the remote work method is still widely used, and management researchers continue to discuss what post-pandemic work models should be. Remote work, which businesses used during the pandemic as a necessity due to health concerns rather than for the purpose of flexibility or efficiency, continues to be used due to the benefits it provides for employees and employers (Sullivan, 2020; Yu, 2010).

While the remote work method offers several advantages for employers and employees, it also brings along some disadvantages. One significant advantage of remote work is the reduction of certain costs. Eliminating the need for a physical office space allows for cost savings, and employees can save on expenses and time spent on commuting. Additionally, the flexibility provided by remote work, allowing employees to work when and where they choose, supports them in achieving work-life balance and coping with stress.

Covid-19 pandemic research has shown that there was an increase in employee job satisfaction and performance during the short-term implementation of the remote work model, but a decrease was observed as the duration extended (Hallin, 2020). However, considering that the long-term remote working model was implemented under pandemic conditions where employees had to work from home for weeks without leaving, it can be said that such a result is likely to be countered. In a study conducted under normal conditions after the pandemic, it was found that remote work has a positive impact on job satisfaction (Çakan, 2021).

In addition to its advantages, remote work also presents some challenges for employees and employers. One of the main challenges of remote work is maintaining effective communication among team members. Companies should establish clear communication channels and protocols to ensure that remote workers feel connected. Remote work can be isolating, and remote employees may feel disconnected from their colleagues and the organization as a whole. This can have a negative impact on employee motivation. While remote work can reduce distractions and other disruptions in the workplace, it can also introduce new distractions such as household chores or family members.

3. Spiritual Well-Being

Spiritual well-being, a relatively new concept in the field of management science, has gained attention in recent years, although its history as a research subject does not date back even to the previous

century. Researchers have developed definitions in two separate themes, often referring to God or the individual's inner world. Particularly in the field of religious psychology, the concept of spirituality is defined as feelings, thoughts, and behaviors arising from the search for the sacred (Sheep, 2006). The term sacred in this definition is characterized as the perceived divine entity and ultimate truth (Hill et al., 2000). Spirituality is a continuous quest for the meaning and purpose of life, awareness of its deep value, the dimension of the world, the existing natural powers, and the individual ethical system (Javanmard, 2012). Fairholm (1996) defines spirituality as an energy datum that integrates our identity, values, memories, inner wisdom, and guiding principles related to authority.

While definitions related to spirituality that refers to God fall within the scope of religious sciences, metaphysical meaning is involved in definitions based on the human spiritual world. Therefore, there are concerns that measurement tools for spirituality may be inadequate for management sciences. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) mention some fundamental weaknesses in the scientific study of workplace spirituality. In a study conducted in 1999 with human resource managers, most participants perceived the concepts of religion and spirituality separately (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). The research participants found spirituality suitable for the workplace, considering it as an open-ended concept, but they expressed that religion was inappropriate for the workplace.

The consideration of spiritual well-being by management science researchers emerged with the development of workplace spirituality studies. The workplace spirituality movement emerged in the 1980s as a response to business practices resulting in alienated employees (Bekiş, 2013; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). The first experimental study related to workplace spirituality was conducted in 1999 by Mitroff and Denton with nonprofit American company managers.

The aim of workplace spirituality is to contribute to individuals realizing their full potential in their own spiritual world, developing positive attitudes, and establishing positive relationships with their environment (Narcıkara, 2017). Organizational spirituality as employees feeling "at home" in the organization in their book "Spirituality in the Workplace" (Çakıroğlu, 2017). In today's conditions, the workplace has become the center of life for people. It is difficult for employees who spend most of their day within the framework of work and work-related relationships to think of work and the workplace as separate from their spiritual world. The fact that a significant portion of time is spent in the workplace has led to the perception of the workplace as a social space, necessitating the acceptance of previously considered individual thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors in the social sphere and giving meaning to the work environment (Konz & Ryan, 1999; Narcıkara, 2017). In this context, the workplace has become the place where people seek meaning in life. Work life has transformed from being merely a place for meeting material needs to a place where spiritual satisfaction is also sought. According to Ashmos and Duchon (2000), two important factors for spirituality in the workplace are individuals' desire to find meaning in the work environment and to have positive relationships with their colleagues.

Spiritual well-being is a concept that has emerged as a result of individuals' desire to find meaning in the workplace. Individuals' perceptions of the quality of their spiritual lives represent spiritual well-being (Paloutzian et al., 2012). Spiritual well-being is defined as the level of perception and comprehension of the individual's sense of purpose and direction (Fry et al., 2005) and the degree of satisfaction derived from the spiritual domain of life (Lee et al., 2003).

Spiritual well-being is as important as physical health. Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of spiritual well-being on social life and personal health (French et al., 2008). If spiritual well-being is not achieved, an individual's biological, physiological, and psychological health cannot reach full capacity, leading to problems such as dissatisfaction, inefficiency, and unhappiness in various aspects of life. In such cases, employees who cannot attain spiritual well-being may also face similar problems in the workplace. An individual who achieves spiritual well-being is satisfied with life and feels self-fulfilled (Korkut & Owen, 2016).

When looking at the concept of spiritual well-being from the perspective of management science, it is not sufficient to separate it from the concept of spiritual leadership alone. Louis Fry, one of the most prominent researchers in spiritual leadership studies, explains the concept of spiritual well-being under two dimensions: calling/purpose and membership (Fry & Slocum, 2008). The calling dimension refers to the emergence of meaning and purpose in life through serving others, while the membership dimension refers to being accepted and appreciated by the social context in which one is involved (Fry, 2003). Employees who are driven by the motivation to serve others find meaning in their work, which leads to spiritual satisfaction. Similarly, individuals who expect to be accepted within their social structure seek to fulfill this need in the workplace, where they spend a significant portion of their day. The acceptance, recognition, and sense of belonging that employees receive from their colleagues in the workplace are another dimension that contributes to their spiritual well-being.

4. Spiritual Leadership

The leadership studies have started to revolve around inspiring leadership styles such as visionary leadership, charismatic leadership, and transformational leadership in the post-modern era (Narcikara, 2017). Spiritual leadership has also focused on creating a vision that fosters continuous development and progress. From a strategic perspective, this leadership model assumes that the leader creates a persuasive vision that motivates employees' sense of meaning and purpose in the workplace, makes them feel understood and appreciated, and establishes social influence and shared values between the leader and followers (Hunsaker & Jeong, 2020). Spiritual leadership encompasses the values, attitudes, and behaviors that leaders need to motivate themselves and their followers (Fry, 2003). By focusing on establishing values that are aligned with the vision, spiritual leadership transforms the organization into a learning organization, resulting in productivity and employee commitment (Fry et al., 2005).

On one hand, leadership involves influencing and directing employees towards a common purpose (Yukl, 2010), and on the other hand, it involves meeting the needs of employees. Spiritual leadership also emphasizes the fulfillment of employees' spiritual needs (Bozkuş & Gündüz, 2016). Spiritual leaders gain the trust of their followers by intrinsically motivating them and ensuring their commitment to the organization, thereby fulfilling employee needs and improving organizational performance (Fry, 2003). In this context, spiritual leadership can be described as leaders who embrace transformative, visionary, and servant leadership styles that respond to employees' spiritual quest for meaning.

Spiritual leadership establishes a balance and unity between work and the needs of employees. While meeting the needs of employees, it aims to enhance organizational performance. Spiritual leaders not only address the concrete material needs of employees but also their spiritual aspects, such as their

inner world and emotions (Narcıkara, 2017). In addition to the traditional concepts of leadership, it is a leadership approach that focuses on the individual's inner world and spiritual development. This approach requires leaders to be sensitive, committed, and selfless towards others, in addition to their own personal growth. This style of leadership can strengthen employees' spiritual well-being and improve job performance, thus creating a better working environment. Spiritual leadership also requires dedication and commitment. The leader invests time and effort in developing both themselves and their followers, while being attentive to the needs of employees and striving for their happiness and satisfaction.

5. Leadership Contributing To Spiritual Well-Being

In recent years, excessive stress has emerged in the workplace, along with the advancement of information technology and increased mechanization, causing a change in employees' needs. Work life and consequently the workplace have become the center of life for individuals. For most people who spend the majority of their daily routines in work and work-related social activities, it is difficult to separate work life from other activities. As a result, work life has become the source of social value creation for individuals. The organizational organization in which one works has become the most significant social space for individuals and the place where many employees seek the meaning of life. Work life, which is of critical importance for a person's economic well-being, has ceased to be merely a factor that meets material needs. Studies have shown that employees expect to gain more than just financial benefits in the workplace (Fairholm, 1996). Researchers in management science have emphasized in recent years that the spiritual well-being of employees should be taken into account for work performance and productivity (Duchon & Plowman, 2005). The lengthening of working hours, the imbalance in the work environment, and increased work stress reduce employees' trust in organizations (Fry, 2003).

Following the emergence of the Covid-19 virus as a global pandemic, one of the measures taken in the workplace was remote work. Remote work refers to employees performing their job responsibilities through information systems without physically going to the workplace. Accordingly, employees perform their work online from any location without physically gathering in any place, using the internet and information technologies.

During this period, businesses had the opportunity to experience and test the consequences of remote work. The effects of this type of work, both advantages and disadvantages, on business performance continue to be examined. As the impact of the Covid-19 virus diminishes and restrictions are lifted, society has returned to normal, but some practices and habits that emerged during the pandemic continue to be used in the workplace. Even after physical reopening of workplaces, many businesses, especially those with adequate information technology infrastructure and developed IT systems, continue to implement remote work. The various advantages provided by remote work have been influential in its continuation.

When considering the advantages of remote work, it has been found that it saves costs associated with commuting, reduces unnecessary meetings in the workplace, eliminates distractions in the office, and increases productivity as a result (Ozimek, 2020). The main challenges in remote work generally

stem from technological problems. Additionally, distractions at home, lack of team spirit, and communication difficulties have been factors that negatively impact productivity (Ozimek, 2020).

While this is the situation from a business perspective, remote work has also had effects on employees. The reduction of time wasted and physical exhaustion from commuting, as well as the disappearance of routine in the workplace, are seen as advantages. However, remote work has also resulted in some negative consequences for employees, primarily affecting their mental well-being. While the physical challenges of commuting are overcome through remote work, certain internal needs that employees expect from the workplace cannot be fulfilled. Increased loneliness, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety have been observed among remote workers (Iqbal et al., 2020). Remote work has eliminated the traditional boundaries of office hours (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014). With the introduction of remote work during the pandemic, working hours have become unofficially extended (Chen et al., 2023). While studies on pre-pandemic remote work practices suggested a decrease in employees' stress levels (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), the increased necessity and duration of remote work post-pandemic, along with the disruption of work-life balance, have increased work-related stress among employees (Galanti et al., 2021).

The increase in stress and the emergence of these mental issues also have negative effects on employees' perception of spiritual well-being. Employees' spiritual well-being is influenced by factors such as stress, role ambiguity, and organizational culture (Prasad et al., 2020). The increased stress and role ambiguity in remote work also negatively affect employees' spiritual well-being. Furthermore, the disruption of work relationships and work-life balance are factors that negatively impact employees' spiritual well-being (Juchnowicz & Kinowska, 2021). It is known that high perception of workplace spirituality positively affects employees' spiritual well-being, job satisfaction, and performance (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012). To achieve spiritual satisfaction, employees seek meaningful work, recognition and appreciation in their work environment, and a sense of belonging to a community (Milliman et al., 2003). Remote work, by keeping employees apart from the work environment, gradually distances them from concepts such as community, acceptance, and belonging. This, in turn, has a negative impact on employees' spiritual well-being. There are several factors in remote work that negatively affect employees' mental well-being and reduce their level of spiritual well-being. The decrease in spiritual well-being also lowers job performance and productivity (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). Businesses can try to mitigate these negative effects by employing appropriate leadership styles. By employing spiritual leadership, organizations can increase employees' level of spiritual well-being.

6. Conclusion

Pandemic and the resulting remote work have been a transformative factor that forced businesses to adapt rapidly. This change may require organizations to implement different leadership styles. In order to mitigate the negative impact of remote work on spiritual well-being, the most suitable leadership style in terms of spirituality, which is spiritual leadership, can be employed. According to Fry (2003), spiritual leadership is the most meaningful leadership style for creating change and learning organizations. (Narcikara, 2017) Spiritual leaders earn the trust of their followers, motivate them intrinsically, increase organizational commitment, thereby enhancing both organizational performance and meeting employees'

spiritual needs. According to Fry (2003), long working hours, role ambiguity, and workplace imbalance reduce employees' trust and commitment to the organization. In the post-pandemic remote work system, working hours have extended, role confusion has increased, and the concept of the workplace has vanished. These negative aspects of work life have diminished employees' sense of meaning and purpose, reducing their spiritual fulfillment. Spiritual leadership can serve as a means to elevate the level of spiritual well-being.

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