

## **Spiritual Well-being and Work Performance among Ground-level Employees: Unravelling the Connection**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Extant research shows that spiritual well-being and work performance are directly connected. The connection is theorised to be due to the alignment between what employees are spiritually inclined towards and what they do at work. However, research overemphasises the performative benefits of spiritual pursuits and privilege the leaders' views. These developments, coupled with the prevalent use of quantitative methods, have resulted in one-sided and uncontextualised theorisations that constrict how workplace spirituality is investigated, understood, and converted into action. In response to these gaps, this paper investigates the experiences of ground-level employees to uncover stories of how spiritual well-being may be connected to their work performance. The study uses the qualitative paradigm and narrative inquiry as its methodology to uncover the diverse ways in which spiritual well-being and work outcomes are connected, including ones that diminish or are inconsequential to work performance. There is a need to re-examine accepted knowledge regarding the direct connection between spiritual well-being and work performance and the assumed compatibility of enacting spiritual inclinations in organisational settings. This paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of how spiritual well-being is experienced and the implications these experiences might have on the ground-level employees' work performance. Even as research unravels this relationship further, prescriptions for practice

ought to be qualified, contextualised, tentative, and customised for and by the ground-level employee.

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## INTRODUCTION

The connection between spiritual well-being and work performance has been widely studied empirically across different business disciplines, including leadership (Wu & Lee, 2020), human resource management (Joelle & Coelho, 2019), hospitality and tourism (Milliman et al., 2018), psychology (Moon et al., 2020) and management (Fox et al., 2018; Singh & Chopra, 2018). In the past two decades, empirical studies have also been conducted in different countries, such as in The United States of America (Tejeda, 2015), Portugal (Albuquerque et al., 2014), Canada (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2008), India (Sengupta, 2010); China (Wang et al., 2019), South Korea (Kim & Yeom, 2018), Taiwan (Chen & Yang, 2012), Thailand (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012), Malaysia (Wan Yunan et al., 2018), and Pakistan (Hassan et al., 2016). These studies covered many sectors, including healthcare, energy, retail, finance, manufacturing, accounting, education, and technology services. Despite the diversity in the disciplines, countries, and sectors investigated, the findings of current studies are remarkably consistent—that spiritual well-being and work performance are directly correlated. In large measure, studies theorise that the performance benefits of enhanced spiritual well-being are due to an ‘alignment’—between what people value or are inclined towards and what they do at work.

However, the breadth in this thread of research does not extend to all organisational stakeholders. For example, the leaders’ perspectives or organisations’ interests are

privileged over the ground-level employees’ views. Furthermore, coupled with the primary use of the quantitative over the qualitative paradigm (Vasconcelos, 2018), the intent and scope of current research seem limited to merely confirming the benefits of spiritual well-being for the workplace and work performance. In so doing, criticisms of the (in)compatibility of spiritual pursuits in organisational settings (Robinson & Smith, 2014) and the exploitative and manipulative stances (Case & Gosling, 2010; Tourish & Tourish, 2010, Tzouramani & Karakas, 2016) embedded in the discourse are not accounted for. Collectively, these gaps constrict or possibly even misdirect the way the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance is investigated, understood, and converted into action. It is thus not surprising that the mechanisms in which spiritual well-being influences work performance are still vague (Fox et al., 2018).

In response to these gaps, this paper presents an empirical study that examines the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance from the ground-level employees’ perspectives. The study uses the qualitative paradigm to examine how the need to enact spiritual inclinations interfaces with the need to meet prescribed work goals. The study uncovered un-storied experiences regarding spiritual well-being and work performance and found the connection to be more complex and diverse than currently evidenced. These findings also provided contextual clarity to the nuanced ways spiritual well-being and work performance may be connected.

The following sections discuss the literature on spirituality, on the hypothesised connections that spiritual well-being has with work performance and the accompanying theorisations. Following this, the context of the investigation and the study's use of narrative inquiry are argued for. After that, the analyses are presented, the findings are discussed, the study's implications are raised, and future research is recommended.

### **Spiritual Well-being – A Definition**

The way spirituality is defined within organisational literature is diverse and occasionally disparate (Ottaway, 2003). This study embraces this diversity of perspective. It defines spirituality as five closely interrelated notions: meaning, authenticity, values, connection, and growth. Each notion helps define and lead to the experience of other notions.

Correspondingly, spiritual well-being is the employee's state of being when these notions are experienced at work. This eclectic approach embraces conceptual diversity of definitions and helps reflect the wide range of contextual meanings people associate with spiritual well-being (Swinton & Pattison, 2010). This definition thus enables the study to investigate spiritual inclinations and well-being without the need to be unduly definitive or exhaustive.

Of the five, the notion of meaning appears central to spirituality (Barrett, 2009; Mitroff & Denton, 1999a, 1999b; Reave, 2005). It refers to employees' inclinations to seek work that has a larger, higher, or worthy purpose, or a purpose beyond

merely earning a salary. It implies altruistic tendencies (Mirvis, 1997; Pfeffer, 2003) and subordinates personal gain, and can be embedded in ideas such as in "service to God or their fellow human beings" (Reave, 2005, p. 666), in "making a difference" and contributing to a "greater good" (Kinjerski & Skrypnek 2004, pp. 34-35) and in the idea of a calling (Conklin, 2012).

The notion of authenticity pertains to the honest expression of people's identity or being true to one's self at work (Ashar & Lane-Maher, 2004; van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009). It is premised on the belief that it contradicts human nature to expect people to separate themselves from what they do at work (Pfeffer, 2003). The idea of the employee being aligned with his or her work is evident in this notion of spirituality.

The notion of values can be understood as a set of guiding principles that govern work behaviour (McGhee & Grant, 2008). As a significant aspect of who we are and what we consider important in life (Schwartz, 2012), enacting broad ideals such as "making a contribution to humankind" (Milliman et al., 1999, p. 222) or specific values such as virtue (Cavanagh & Bandsuch, 2002), honesty (Elm, 2003), and benevolence, respect, justice and integrity (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004) in the workplace can thus engender spiritual well-being.

The fourth notion, connection or interconnectedness, can be described as being connected with "something larger than self" (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004, p. 36), other people, humanity or nature (Ashforth

& Pratt, 2003), or to mean that “(e)verything affects and is affected by everything else” (Mitroff & Denton, 1999a, p. 89). Less ethereal definitions include how employees feel aligned with their co-workers (van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009) and a common worthwhile purpose (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000).

The fifth notion, growth, will be discussed alongside exemplifying the interrelatedness of the five notions (as indicated in square brackets). The notion of growth refers to the employee’s tendency to want to develop themselves, professionally as well as via “a realization of one’s aspirations and potential” (Ashforth & Pratt, 2003, p. 94) [meaning] [values]. The inclusion of outward and inner growth in defining spiritual well-being is underpinned by the belief that people are holistic beings; it is impossible to compartmentalise spiritual growth from developing our physical, mental, and emotional selves (Barrett, 2009) [authenticity]. Correspondingly, the ability of employees to experience and deepen their sense of authenticity, meaning, and connection and enact values in their work and at the workplace is indicative of one’s spiritual growth. Rosso et al.’s (2010) review of the meaning of work literature describes values and connection as sources of meaning while authenticity and growth as how work becomes meaningful, lending credence to the interrelatedness in the five notions.

These notions are ideals and allude to what employees may be inclined towards but do not seem to be getting from work. As Swinton and Pattison (2010, p. 231)

argue, the discourse on spiritual well-being points to “absences” – the lack of something. Thus, meaning, authenticity, connection, values, and growth are emphasised because the experience of work satiating such inclinations is absent. In a sense, the interest in spiritual well-being within organisational literature is fuelled by currently unattained ideals.

### **Work Performance Concerning Spiritual Well-being**

Organisational scholarship and practice are generally concerned with improving the work performance of some level or some kind—a substantial portion of spiritual well-being research exhibit a similar interest. On the whole, studies (see next section) suggest that individuals, teams, and organisations that exhibit the qualities of spiritual well-being are more efficient.

According to Lips-Wiersma et al. (2009), substantially more studies explore the potential benefits rather than the possible detriment of spiritual well-being. Dent et al. (2005, p. 639) argued that there are dangers associated with taking this line of inquiry because “increased spirituality would presumably prohibit an individual from certain forms of work”, leading to lower work performance levels. However, this issue has not received much attention in the literature.

For the study that this paper reports, work performance is defined in general terms, i.e., as the enhancement of or improvement in efficiency, productivity, meeting and or exceeding work goals, expectations and

targets, and similar concepts. The definition of work performance specific to the study is described in the subsection on ‘Sampling’.

### **Spiritual Well-being and Work Performance – Evidence and Gaps**

While it may be attractive for advocates to promote ideas of spirituality in the workplace, it is equally, if not more, attractive to link spiritual well-being with improved performance. Quantitative methods are, by far, the prevalent choice used to investigate this connection (Vasconcelos, 2018). The findings from quantitative studies (Afsar & Rehman, 2015; Albuquerque et al., 2014; Garg, 2017; Kolodinsky et al., 2008; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012; Phuong et al., 2018; Rego & Pina e Cunha, 2008; Wu & Lee, 2020) are remarkably consistent in that they show, albeit to varying extents, a statistically significant positive correlation between spiritual well-being and work performance. This consistency displayed in extant research is notable. Studies define spiritual well-being in disparate ways, use different proxy constructs for work performance, and sample a wide range of the working populace. These studies perhaps indicate the extensive influence of spiritual well-being on many facets of performance irrespective of contextual differences across different populations and jobs.

Qualitative studies, though far fewer, also suggest that spiritual well-being and enhanced work performance are related. This is observed at the individual and group levels (Ashar & Lane-Maher, 2004; Kinjerski & Skrypnik, 2008) and the

organisational level (Milliman et al., 1999). For some, this was evidenced by examining real-world success (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Lewin & Regine, 2001), lending support to arguments, such as in Fry and Slocum Jr. (2008), that spiritual well-being contributes positively to the organisations’ bottom line.

Collectively, studies theorise that the performative benefits of increased spiritual well-being as the result of an alignment between the employee’s inclinations and the organisations’ goals. For instance, Lewin and Regine (2001) conclude that the organisations in their study are successful because they enable employees to engage in work that they care about individually and collectively. In another instance, Csikszentmihalyi (2004, p. 150) cites Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, as being in business to “find solutions to a lot of this environmental crisis”. It inevitably led Patagonia to source for organically grown cotton and champion its use in the outdoor apparel industry, which contributed to developing a niche market and the company’s healthy bottom line. As such, Csikszentmihalyi (2004, p. 4) concludes that the leaders he interviewed are high-achieving because they can conduct their work in a way “that is good in both senses: the material and the spiritual”.

Nevertheless, three significant gaps can be observed from the current discourse. Firstly, studies tend to view spirituality in the workplace solely in a positive light (MacDonald, 2011), evading unpopular perspectives such as the conflict that arises from pursuing spiritual ideals in work

environments that are either neutral or antagonistic to these very ideals. Hoffman (2010) cautions that the organisations' and the employees' values may be acutely divergent since organisations serve their interests first. Mitroff and Denton (1999b), who conducted seminal studies in the area, highlights one such conflict:

*“(T)he chairman of a large, important organisation in his industry bemoaned the fact that if he criticized the greed so rampant in corporate America, he would offend some of his biggest clients. This sharply contrasted with his earlier remarks in which he claimed that, as the chairman and founder of his organization, he was exempt from compromising his deepest values. When asked whether there was a contradiction in his responses, he was silent”.* (Mitroff and Denton, 1999b, p. 86)

Secondly, the leaders' views and the organisations' interests are privileged. Largely elicited via survey questionnaires developed for statistical analyses, the voices of ground-level employees are not audible. Theoretical arguments about alignment are expected since it reflects the leaders' and organisations' interests, or duty, to align employees with organisational goals. This has invited criticisms of the subtle exercise of power, instrumentality, control (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009), and coercion exerted

by leaders (Tourish & Tourish, 2010) over their employees.

Thirdly, attempts by predominantly quantitative empirical studies to explain the connection has led to uncontextualised theorisations that exaggerate the linear and mechanistic way people behave, irrespective of countervailing influences, and imply spiritual well-being as a panacea for falling employee performance. For instance, Petchsawang and Duchon (2012, p. 198) speculate that insight meditation (as a way to achieve spiritual well-being) “trains the mind to seek a sense of peace and happiness ... which can then be used to see things clearly and insightfully (and) can be applied to many circumstances ... including the potential of performing better work”.

The study this paper reports (hereon referred to as ‘the study’) attempts to redress the lop-sidedness of current knowledge and theoretical arguments in this area. Specifically, the study used the qualitative paradigm to investigate the ground-level employees' experience of the interface between two forces; the need to enact one's spiritual inclinations in the workplace and the need to meet institutionally prescribed work targets (hereon referred to as ‘the interface’). Examining how these two forces interface among ground-level employees provided a means for this study to uncover novel evidence, including ones that contradict current theorizations, and unravel the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance.

## METHODS

With its ability to develop causal explanations (Maxwell, 2013), the qualitative paradigm was used. It provided the premise to uncover experiences that were likely to be multifaceted and individualised, and contingent upon the work individuals engage with. The qualitative paradigm also enabled the study to shed light on the specific contexts within which the interfaces occur. The choice of methodology for the study was narrative inquiry (NI). It is underpinned by the theory that people make sense of their experiences by telling stories about them (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2008). Specifically, storytelling is viewed as a natural form for people to convey how things happened (White, 1980) and in a manner that is relevant to the narrator (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Stories also represent a window into people's lives, including their identities, personalities (Lieblich et al., 1998), beliefs, desires, theories, and values (Bruner, 1991).

### Sampling

The healthcare sales industry was selected as the study site because it provided two salient features for this investigation. The first is the social values attached to 'healthcare', which may facilitate spiritual well-being. The second feature is the 'sales' part, representing the typical organisation's concern for meeting its bottom-line as a performance measure. Healthcare sales representatives (HSRs) are ground-level employees and were where participants were drawn from.

The HSR's primary role is to achieve its sales targets by selling its products (medical devices and/or pharmaceutical drugs) to doctors, pharmacists, and other healthcare professionals. The study was conducted in Malaysia as it is a multi-religious, multi-cultural country with the likelihood of a spiritually diverse work environment. Furthermore, as a Malaysian who has worked more than a decade in the Malaysian healthcare sales industry, the author had sufficient background of the country's culture and the industry to conduct this study.

This study used the purposive sampling strategy as it enabled the deliberate selection of exemplar cases (Maxwell, 2013). HSRs who were high performers, defined as ones who have met their sales targets for at least three years out of a span of five years, was the exemplar cases the study sought. HSRs were recruited via the recommendation of the HSRs' immediate line managers. In the final tally, 11 HSRs were recruited for the study.

Participants were interviewed twice, resulting in an average of two hours of interview recordings per participant. Their ages ranged from 29 to 43. Of the 11 participants, eight of them have worked in more than one healthcare sales company. Their experience in healthcare sales ranged from five to 19 years. They were from a mix of religious affiliations, namely Buddhism, Catholicism, and Christianity. Table 1 provides the background information of the participants.

Table 1  
Background information of research participants

No	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Medical			Sales representative experience (years)			Total industry experience (years)
						Medical	Pharmaceutical	Industry experience	Pharmaceutical	Industry experience	Sales target achievement	
1	Alan	M	37	Indian	Catholic	6	-	6	-	6	4	13**
2	Chong	F	29	Chinese	Buddhist	5	2	7	2	7	6	7
3	Emily	F	31	Chinese	Catholic	3	3	6	3	6	6	6
4	Susan	F	33	Chinese	Catholic	7	2	9	2	9	8	9
5	Huang	F	43	Chinese	Christian	19	-	19	-	19	14*	19
6	Kenneth	M	40	Chinese	Buddhist	-	16	16	16	16	14	16
7	Lim	M	43	Chinese	Freethinker	-	19	19	19	19	11	19
8	Loh	F	33	Chinese	Buddhist	3	5.5	8.5	5.5	8.5	7	8.5
9	Valerie	F	37	Chinese	Buddhist	6	-	6	-	6	4	10**
10	Yeoh	M	31	Chinese	Buddhist	-	5	5	5	5	4	5
11	Yong	M	30	Chinese	Buddhist	2	3	5	3	5	5	5

Note: M = Male; F = Female

\*Met sales targets for the past six consecutive years

\*\*Total industry experience included positions other than as a sales representative

**Narrative Interview and Narrative Analysis**

Following Mishler (1986) and Riessman (2004), the interview method used in the study was in active response to the participants’ stories and the direction they took rather than to the interview schedule. For participants to develop their stories, the interviewer intervened sparingly throughout the interview (Squire, 2008). In this way, the interviews were minimally structured and designed for exploration rather than confirmation of preconceived types of experiences.

Larger narratives during the early stages of the analysis were subsequently parsed into story segments. Thematically similar segments were then combined. Specific analytical steps include focusing on the contents, structure, and minutiae of the participants’ stories and on contrary cases. The coherence of the participants’ narrated accounts was analysed as part of the attempt at trustworthiness, one of the hallmarks of validity in narrative research (Riessman 2008). The aim was to facilitate uncovering the verisimilitude of the participants’ experiences rather than mere factual evidence.

**ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Initial general impressions of the participants’ stories show that they experienced the interface in two main ways – as ‘compatible’ or ‘incompatible’. Subsequent analyses showed that singular experiences of the interface yielded different findings of the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance. It resulted in four narrative themes (see Table 2).

The four narrative themes are illustrated below. Although each narrative theme was evident in several participants’ stories, only selected participants’ experiences are reproduced in this paper. Although not practical to represent in entire lengthy interview conversations, the following excerpts are of a particular length so that the storytelling is not overly truncated. The aim is to make the participants’ voices more ‘audible’ and the researcher’s interpretations more ‘visible’ for the reader. A guide to the transcription symbols used can be found in Appendix A.

**Narrative Theme 1**

The direct connection between spiritual well-being and work performance brought about by a compatible interface was visible

Table 2  
*Narrative themes based on the interface and the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance*

Narrative theme	The interface between the spiritual inclinations and work targets	The connection between spiritual well-being and work performance
1	Compatible	Direct
2	Compatible	Inconsequential
3	Incompatible	Inverse
4	Incompatible	Inconsequential

in four participants' stories. One of them is Yong, a 30-year-old man with seven years of working experience, the latter five years in healthcare sales. In the excerpt below, he describes a "satisfaction" in medical devices sales that he did not experience while working in the pharmaceutical sales. The story takes place in a government hospital setting where funding for medical devices for late-stage cancer surgeries is not available.

*"I'm actually enjoying what I do right now. I'm actually enjoying because one reason is sometimes over here in medical, comparing in pharma, over here, there is this satisfaction that is not able to be found in pharma, where there were cases where a lot of very, very, poor patients and not able to actually pay for their medical equipment. I am here to actually help them apply for funds through Majlis Kanser Nasional or any non, I mean, those social welfare bodies where we can actually help them apply for all these equipment given the right documentations. So, it's actually through the social welfare, and they're actually quite a tedious process over here. But once you were able to get things across, the satisfaction is only you yourself know how, how, how satisfied you are to actually bring the thing across to that very poor patient to have that surgery on and be successful. (... describes the*

*process of getting the funding in detail ...). So that is, that is one of the extra channels that we able to get some funds besides depending on the conventional funds. Not much, maybe 2000 Ringgit a month, comes to like 24000 a year. So that is an extra 24000 for me in my sales. So, if things, I mean, if I can be luckier, then perhaps it could be 36000 or 48000". (Excerpt 1-1)*

The government hospital did not purchase Yong's products directly because funding was insufficient. However, some patients required his products for their surgeries. Despite the "tedious process", the way he gained sales was something Yong found "satisfaction" in doing. It seems unlikely that Yong would have undertaken this additional workload of securing social welfare funds for poor patients if it did not benefit patients the way it did or if it did not result in sales for him. The more he aided the process of securing the funds, the more sales he would register. This depicts how Yong's inclinations for meaningful work align with the obligation to meet sales targets, directly connecting spiritual well-being and work performance.

Narrative theme 1 provides empirical support for and contextual clarity to extant evidence that suggests a direct relationship between spiritual well-being and work performance, and for theoretical arguments that posit the direct relation to be an influence of the alignment between the employees' spiritual inclinations and their work.

## Narrative Theme 2

A compatible interface was not necessarily accompanied by a direct connection between spiritual well-being and work performance. This was observed from the narratives of five participants. Susan, who has nine years of experience in healthcare sales and met her yearly targets eight times, storied her experience that illustrates this theme. Excerpt 2-1 is Susan storying how her values were compatible with the meaning she derives from work while promoting devices for minimally invasive surgical procedures.

*“Imagine among all the sales job that we have, and we’re in healthcare, and I think our products mmm, we, you can feel they’re a bit different you know, by providing this product, the doctor can do this, and it actually benefit the patient (... expands on the same points ...) Because, example my mother-in-law, she had a hysterectomy. She did (a minimally invasive surgical procedure). And I have an aunt who did (an open surgery) years ago. So, when my auntie visited my mother-in-law, she was so impressed the next day she could already sit up. So, you know, although you know you didn’t, you know, create (minimally invasive procedures), but you know that by every time you’re asking the surgeon to embark on new procedures, there’s a difference in the patient’s recovery. So, I think,*

*at the end of the day, you feel good, you know”.* (Excerpt 2-1)

Shortly after the segment, Susan qualifies the point she wanted to make, revealing how she saw the connection between making a “difference in someone’s life” and meeting her sales targets (see Excerpt 2-2).

*“The first thing I think about I think about hitting my sales target and, and how I need to hit my sales target. So, but yeah, so it’s really, really, very work objective-driven. But the thing that I said why I can last so long, although it’s so much work, so stressful and all because it’s not just a typical sales job. Because at the end of the day, you know that all you’re doing, of course, you have your own achievement, your own recognition that gives you a good life or whatever, but at the end, there is someone benefitting from it, that gives you an extra good feeling I guess, that you’re doing something right, you’re not just pushing sales for the sake of pushing”.* (Excerpt 2-2)

Susan liked that the products she promoted made a difference. It is why she “can last so long” despite the stress that comes with chasing sales. However, the feeling of being able to make a difference was an inevitable outcome of her job rather than something Susan actively sought after. This can be inferred from multiple

references she made about ‘feeling good’ alongside the repeated use of the terms “at the end of the day” and “at the end”. On the other hand, meeting her sales target was a task that Susan saw as a requirement of the job. For Susan, being able to make a difference was more a prerequisite for staying in the job than a motivator for sales achievement. More tellingly and unlike Yong (see narrative theme 1), the overarching narrative of Susan’s stories does not reflect the ‘the more I sell, the more patients I can help’ theme. While the interface is compatible, Susan’s ability to enact her spiritual inclinations in her job did not have any consequential influence on how much she sold.

Narrative theme 2 provides an alternative argument to extant knowledge. Most of survey-statistical research readily assumes that spiritual well-being and enhanced work performance are directly related because they are observed simultaneously. Instead, it suggests that spiritual well-being and the experienced alignment between ground-level employees and their work are inconsequential to work performance levels.

### **Narrative Theme 3**

Narrative theme 3 is visible in two participants’ storytelling, although it is evident in Loh’s stories. For example, in excerpt 3-1, Loh relates her experience promoting immunosuppressant drugs for post-transplant patients to nephrologists. Although ‘life-saving’ in many respects and the work potentially meaningful, a significant portion of her storytelling revealed an incompatible interface.

*“In (Government Hospital A) right, we are trying to convert some of the transplant patients who are on (Competitor X’s drug) to (my Company’s drug). And the doctor actually agreed. And I’m the one who’s really worried. Because, our product (...talks about the high incidence of adverse reactions of her company’s drug ...) So that’s why, that’s the reason why most of the, the nephrologist, right, they wouldn’t, they wouldn’t change their patient, just convert like that, you know. They don’t want to rock the boat if let’s say nothing happen. Because because, it’s very precious, you know, the organ that they got it. It’s very precious. So that’s why mmm (.) mmm. Yeah, my boss actually says that the doctor agreed, you know, to convert that time. I was the one that I’m really not comfortable with it because I’m very worried. I’m not sure what’s going to happen to the patients. (... recounts her conversation with her immediate manager on the strategy to switch ...) So, when I mention patient focus, it’s like, what I mean, you know, I also care for the patient. I don’t want you imagine if that is your relative or anyone that you love. Would you want to switch your father? Your father is already doing well with the current regimen, why would you change? That you don’t see a need to change, you know.*

*I would rather capture the new market instead of getting someone that already doing well, then you convert them. I'm not comfortable, actually (...Loh expands on her reasons to oppose the switch despite the increase in sales...) So, for me it's like, although (I want patients) but I don't want, I don't want these kinds of business". (Excerpt 3-1)*

In the above segment, Loh was more concerned about the patients' well-being than the windfall in sales. Potentially jeopardising patients' health for sales went against her values. The strategy to convert post-organ transplant patients stable on competitor's drugs to her company's drugs, she considered, was morally questionable and something she was "not comfortable" with. In the end, Loh did not pursue the strategy despite being behind her quarterly sales target at that time. That she would forgo potential sales (and sales incentives) lends credibility to her overall narrative that patients' welfare comes first. This shows that Loh's inclinations not to jeopardise patients' well-being were incompatible with the need to meet her sales targets. Owing to her choice to not pursue the drug switch, she recorded lower sales figures. Loh's experience depicts how an incompatible interface led to lower sales achievements.

Narrative theme 3 reveals a new level of complexity to the existing empirical findings. It suggests that enacting one's spiritual inclinations can undermine one's work performance when incompatible with the need to meet work targets. This finding

validates calls for research to move beyond merely affirming the work performance benefits of pursuing spiritual well-being.

#### **Narrative Theme 4**

An incompatible interface did not always mean an inverse relationship between spiritual well-being and work performance. Six of the participants told stories that depicted this theme. The following segments are from Chong, a 29-year-old lady with seven years of experience in healthcare sales. In excerpt 4-1 and excerpt 4-2, Chong described a quality lacking in her time as a pharmaceutical sales representative promoting cardiovascular drugs. In excerpt 4-3, she contrasts the current role of promoting medical devices for minimally invasive procedures with her experience in pharmaceutical sales.

*"In (pharmaceutical company), I was doing well for the first year. And the second year I was doing well also but I feel like the things I learn is the same. There's no way I can learn more things differently (... expands on what was just said ...). You feel like there's not so much room to grow, so I move to (medical device company)". (Excerpt 4-1)*

*"My job scope (while promoting cardiovascular drugs) is literally see surgeon with the detail aid, detail to them, and bring in the sales. Talk to the purchaser, trying to get in the sales. Occasionally you have to run event which the*

*marketing managers are doing everything for you. You just have to reach out to the surgeon, please come, please come, please come. So, to sum it up, it's like, if you do all these well already, that's it".* (Excerpt 4-2)

*So, I always thought that I want to do a job as close to healthcare, as close to doctors as possible. Like in partnership with them, to know exactly what they do to the patients. When I was in (pharmaceutical company), same goes with (medical device company), I suppose now it's still the same but sometimes the busyness get lost in a way that, I want to make a difference, especially in, and selling medicine doesn't help—it's just a drug pusher. But for (medical device company), sometimes, we know what's going on in other countries, in terms of the procedure development. For example, people are already doing key-hole surgery for lung cancer. Malaysia is not. And I have a sense of satisfaction is there when I'm actually trying to introduce this procedure so that it can benefit the people, reach out to more people. And if I'm able to develop the procedure by training surgeons and develop their skills and see them grow and how they do from open surgery to key-hole surgery and the patients get the ultimate*

*benefit, that helps a lot. That makes me feel, wow, you know I'm actually creating some impact. So that is one of the important motivation for me also.* (Excerpt 4-3)

Chong depicted a spiritual void she experienced in pharmaceutical sales by contrasting it with her medical devices sales experience. Chong's inclinations to make a difference to patients could not be enacted while promoting pharmaceutical products. Instead, owing to the nature of the work and business, she found herself merely a 'drug pusher', which means that the job has no other meaning except to coerce her customers to buy the drugs she promoted who otherwise will not. However, it had minimal impact on sales achievements as she met her yearly sales targets while in pharmaceutical sales.

Narrative theme 4 shows another nuanced way spiritual well-being and work performance are connected. Though not entirely novel, it is an important reminder that spiritual well-being is not a prerequisite to work performance. Rather than influencing work performance, the absence of spiritual well-being may increase the chances of attrition.

## DISCUSSION

### Theoretical Implications

What has perhaps crept into the discourse is the presumed unproblematic ways in which spiritual inclinations can be enacted in the workplace and the leader-organisation bias. Commercial firms are not neutral grounds

for spiritual matters since they “by design are instrumental, goal-driven entities with a clear focus on ends” (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009, p. 292), profits representing one such end. Tourish and Tourish (2010, p. 219) take a more critical view and argue that “business organisations are not a suitable forum for exploring [spiritual well-being] issues”. While we ought not to dismiss the possibility of the work place as an avenue to simultaneously satiate spiritual inclinations and meet organisational goals, caution should be exercised with prescriptions that broadly imply workplace spirituality as the panacea for organisational ills.

Beyond presenting evidence of the influence of spiritual well-being on work performance, this study sheds light on other ways they may be connected. The direct connection between spiritual well-being and work performance can be facilitated by the alignment of the employees’ inclinations and their work, provided the following are present: (i) employees are inclined to enact their spiritual inclinations while at work; (ii), there are avenues for employees to experience their jobs as satisfying their spiritual inclinations; and (iii) satisfying spiritual inclinations is mainly compatible with achieving key work targets for the employee. If one of these criteria is absent, the direct connection does not seem possible. This set of criteria form the initial framework for uncovering further the mechanism in which spiritual well-being influences work performance.

What was surprising was that the alignment of spiritual inclinations and work outcomes did not always result in enhanced work performance. That employees can enact their spiritual inclinations while at work sometimes only explains why employees stay on the job and not why employees perform better. Less surprising but an equally important finding is that attempts to pursuing one’s spiritual inclinations in the workplace can lead to diminished work performance levels. This unintended work outcome was observed when the employees’ spiritual inclinations clashed with key work objectives. From an organisation’s perspective, this is the worst-case scenario. However, the opposite—that work performance levels were unaffected despite the clash in spiritual inclinations and work outcomes—was another possible scenario. Largely absent in current empirical literature, these three alternative scenarios deconstruct the assumed singular view of the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance. They also draw attention to inconsequential or less desirable work performance outcomes and challenge implied perspectives of spiritual well-being as vital for work performance.

Interestingly, the role the employees’ leaders occupy in enacting spiritual inclinations was not storied. Conceivably then and contrary to current assumptions, leaders’ role play is not critical, at least not from the ground-level employee’s point of view. The journey to spiritual well-being for the individual employee, if so desired, is perhaps a more personal one.

### **Practical Implications**

This paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of how spiritual well-being may be experienced within different contexts and the implications these might have on how employees engage with work. As these begin to be better understood, prescriptions ought to be clearly qualified, uniquely contextualised, and expressly tentative while practices customised for and by the ground-level employee.

Practitioners are encouraged to adopt an evaluative stance. If desired, both employees and their leaders/organisations must be equally invested in seeing a direct relationship between spiritual well-being and work performance. Work contexts must be malleable or at least not antagonistic to spiritual notions. The leaders' efforts to create a work climate conducive for experiencing spiritual well-being, however possible that might be, maybe misguided if their employees are not similarly inclined. Likewise, helping employees achieve some sense of spiritual well-being may have multiple consequences, some unfavourable for organisational performance.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Empirical work using interpretivist lenses and methodologies that privilege the ground-level employees' voices will undoubtedly enrich the area. It is hoped that this study's findings will initiate more investigative efforts to complement and rectify the lopsided viewpoints inherent in

the discourse. Future studies that uncover how employees engage (or not) spiritual notions and navigate (or not) the different work imperatives around them are needed.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study would be the single method of inquiry and the investigation of employees working in a single industry and a single country. However, this was a deliberate choice as it enabled the study to generate contextually meaningful and rich data for investigation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Workplace spirituality may represent an essential component of a range of efforts that can enhance work performance levels. However, in the fervent interest to find solutions where organisations and their employees may be able to navigate the need to satisfy both spiritual and work goals simultaneously, some blind spots were encountered. This paper contributes to an expanded understanding of spiritual well-being and its connection with work performance among ground-level employees. There is a need to re-examine accepted knowledge regarding the direct connection between spiritual well-being and work performance, and the assumed compatibility of enacting spiritual inclinations in organisational settings. As uncovered in this paper, these issues are more nuanced and complex than initially thought to be.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A

#### *Transcription symbols*

Symbols	Meaning
( <i>words</i> )	Translation from local dialects to the English language/anonymised portion
(... <i>words</i> ...)	Condensed segment of talk
(.)	Clear discernible pause

