

# Covid-19 global pandemic, workplace spirituality and the rise of spirituality-driven organisations in the post-digital era

Spirituality-driven organisations

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite the growing importance of workplace spirituality, organisations have been reluctant to integrate spirituality into their workplaces; this paper discusses how to integrate spirituality into the workplace.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a theoretical paper that builds its arguments on the synthesis of workplace spirituality and contemporary management paradigms.

**Findings** – The study argues that workplace spirituality is an extremely important driving force for the sustainable and healthy growth of any organisation; however, infusing workplace spirituality into companies in the industrial and digital eras would be a futile effort, as industrial organisations are built on an ethos highly incongruent with spiritual principles. Therefore, in the post-digital era, spirituality-driven organisations (SDOs) will emerge, marking the beginning of a true “spiritual paradigm” for business and human society at large. The study also elaborates on the characteristics of the post-digital era and the nature of SDOs.

**Originality/value** – Workplace spirituality has been a research topic for years but has never gained sufficient momentum. The Covid-19 global pandemic has made workplace spirituality a more pertinent issue on corporate agendas. Therefore, this paper provides the theoretical foundation to embed workplace spirituality in contemporary management thoughts and practices.

**Keywords** Global pandemic, Covid-19, Workplace spirituality, Interconnectedness, Transcendence, Symbiotic organisation, Spirituality-driven organisation

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Starting in late-2019, the Covid-19 global pandemic has been impacting the world. It has so far infected around 240 million people and caused more than 4.8 million deaths across almost 200 countries (BBC, 2021). The economic fallout from this pandemic is equally devastating. Based on an IMF estimate, the global economy shrank by 4.4% in 2020 due to Covid-19, and in the US alone, the unemployment rate hit a yearly total of 8.9%. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has also led many companies all over the world, including high profile ones such as Hertz, JCPenney, GNC, Debenhams and Virgin Atlantic, into bankruptcy.

For surviving businesses, this global pandemic has resulted in at least three long-lasting impacts. First, it has placed organisational resilience building front and centre on the corporate agenda, as companies have come to realise that only resilient organisations can thrive or even survive during crises of this nature. In the past, companies have focused on efficiency,



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innovation and speed to succeed in highly competitive global markets. Yet as the global environment becomes more turbulent and uncertain, as evidenced by Covid-19, companies' ability to develop and strengthen their resilience has become a critical organisational capability.

Second, the pandemic has fundamentally and probably permanently shifted the way in which people work. More than half of the global workforce is now working remotely, as decades of 9-to-5, office-centric practice is now giving way to a home-based mode of working. Consequently, organisations are making rapid transitions to a hybrid-workforce model and building virtual-first enterprises. Remote work in a digital workplace appears to have become the new normal. But without face-to-face engagement, employees, especially younger ones, feel isolated and demotivated in solitary working conditions ([Pew Research Center, 2020](#)). They quickly lose focus and commitment. Therefore, managers and researchers may ask how employees can be aided in maintaining a feeling of connection and sense of belonging to an organisation in a highly virtual environment where physical contact is largely replaced by video conferencing and instant messaging. Such connection is vital in defining an organisation's culture and its collective identity and hence fosters employee loyalty, motivation and commitment to work, which are the very basis of organisational resilience. Therefore, establishing a strong sense of community within virtualised organisations is becoming an increasingly pertinent yet highly challenging issue.

Third, the jolt caused by the global pandemic represents a massive shock to the system. The uncertainty, insecurity and even anxiety creeping into people's minds have caused them to reassess the role work plays in their lives and the meaning of life in general. Moreover, the shift to working from home has also stripped away some of the things that constitute the meaning of work and revealed the bare bones of people's jobs. Hence, meaningful work or the notion of working for a higher cause is becoming more important and will remain important after the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, the trend towards more purpose-driven jobs was well underway before Covid-19 due to the rising social conscience of millennials, and it has only accelerated since the crisis began. Injecting deeper meaning into its employees' work and lives in general is thus an urgent matter for any organisation.

What complicates the matter further is the fact that well before Covid-19, economic slowdown, corporate scandals, job insecurity and workplace inequality have combined to demoralise employers and organisations ([Ashmos and Duchon, 2000](#)). Fear, frustration and isolation, which have been experienced by many workers, have made them lose trust in businesses and even lose their anchor in life ([Cash and Gray, 2000](#)). The absence of any connection between their jobs and larger purpose in life and the lack of organisational concern about this disconnection are major reasons why these problems occur ([Mirvis, 1997](#)). The global pandemic has only further exacerbated these long-standing problems. For this reason, establishing deep connections between employees and their organisations and injecting meaning and a higher purpose in the workplace have never been more important: these actions are essential for organisations to build necessary resilience and ensure sustainable growth in an increasingly turbulent global business environment.

This is the realm where workplace spirituality can play a central role. The reasons are threefold: first, workplace spirituality offers employees a new yet powerful way to connect to their colleagues and employers. If an employee is spiritually attached to an organisation, he or she will see work as a vocation or a calling and hence will become more dedicated to the organisation. Such dedication is a powerful driver of organisational resilience. Second, because spirituality is an intensively personal and individual experience that does not necessarily rely on frequent physical interactions or contacts with others or the outside world, spiritual connection to an organisation will allow employees to derive a strong sense of belonging and feel much more connected to their colleagues and employers even in a virtual environment. Third, since the very essence of workplace spirituality is meaning and higher purpose, the endorsement of workplace spirituality at the organisational level inevitably injects meaning

and purpose into employees' work and the workplace. Such deep meaning will energise workers to achieve their highest potential and will therefore drive exceptional organisational performance.

Despite this growing importance of workplace spirituality, however, organisations have been reluctant to integrate spirituality into their workplaces (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003). The primary obstacles to the broad endorsement of workplace spirituality lie in four issues: first, there is little consensus on its definition. Second, measurement tools for workplace spirituality are inadequate. Third, there is no valid empirical evidence indicating its practical utility, that is, whether workplace spirituality leads to better organisational performance. Fourth, research on workplace spirituality lacks a theoretical foundation, and it is not clear how it is related to key organisational variables.

These problems should not hinder the wide endorsement of workplace spirituality as a central notion in organisational theories and management, just like they have not hindered the adoption of core competence, dynamic capability, leadership, creativity, diversity, inclusion and other crucial concepts that dominate contemporary management thoughts and practices. Only if its importance is established will workplace spirituality be able to draw sufficient effort from top scholars in management fields to resolve the above-mentioned research issues.

That is the purpose of this study. We first discuss the existing definitions of spirituality and workplace spirituality, and then we elaborate on the characteristics of spirituality-driven organisations (SDOs). Subsequently, we illustrate the importance of establishing SDOs in the post-digital era, which represents a vastly different form of commercial civilisation from the industrial era. Finally, we conclude the paper with implications and directions for future research.

## Understanding workplace spirituality

Kurth (2003) states that many people are experiencing a lack of meaning and higher purpose in their lives, and their fundamental needs for connection and contribution are realised less in the context of families, the civic communities and religious organisations than in the context of workplaces (Conger, 1994). Therefore, there is a growing desire for employees to merge their personal and professional values (Block, 1993), viewing their career as an avenue through which to express themselves and make a positive difference in the world (Neal, 1998). Consequently, there is a widespread interest in integrating spirituality and work (Neal *et al.*, 1999). The Covid-19 global pandemic has significantly expedited this emerging trend.

To establish resilience and achieve sustainable growth in such a turbulent time, organisations today need to meet their members' needs for meaning. Advocates of workplace spirituality believe that it is the starting point of a new paradigm and that spirituality in the workplace will become the core competitive advantage (Mitroff and Denton, 1999a). This is especially true for organisations in the emerging post-digital era where collaboration, sharing, mutual nurturing and co-evolution are the norms of business operation. In other words, organisations of the industrial era will need to shift from traditional product- or efficiency-driven mindsets and practices towards spirituality-driven ones. The wide adoption of this new school of thought by both business and academic worlds critically depends on a clear definition of workplace spirituality. We next examine this issue.

### *Existing definitions of workplace spirituality*

Simply put, workplace spirituality is spirituality in the workplace. Individual spirituality centres on three key dimensions: 1) higher meaning and purpose (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Tepper, 2003), 2) transcendence and 3) interconnectedness

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and wholeness (Ashforth and Pratt, 2003; Eisler and Montuoir, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999a, b). Although much effort has been made to examine spirituality in various contexts, the conceptualisation of workplace spirituality has been developing rather slowly despite the fact that researchers have called for such efforts (Dehler and Welsh, 2003).

The small group of existing definitions of workplace spirituality emphasises the meaning of work (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Sheep, 2003), community and connection (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003), transcendence (Ashforth and Pratt, 2003; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003) and holism and integration (Ashforth and Pratt, 2003; Sheep, 2003). These definitions clearly indicate that individual spirituality and workplace spirituality are intimately connected, but they do represent two different concepts. We next elaborate on their similarities and differences.

#### *Relationship between individual spirituality and workplace spirituality*

First, each organisation has its own identity, personality and spirit. Workplace spirituality therefore has two elements, which are deeply intertwined with each other: individual members' spirituality and that of the organisation. The former collectively feeds into the organisational psyche and constitutes part of the organisational spirituality, which is then the result of a complicated interaction of individual and organisational spirituality.

Second, the two pillars of spirituality – transcendence and interconnectedness – carry somewhat different meaning in the organisational context. Organisational transcendence refers to the progress towards a higher stage of organisational consciousness, in which the organisation overcomes its selfness and narrowly defined mission and perceives service to a broadly defined society as its higher meaning and purpose. Likewise, organisational interconnectedness refers to a sense of being connected with all other members of a broadly defined society, not just with an organisation's direct stakeholders. Since workplace spirituality contains two forms of spirituality – individual and organisational – its definition needs to reflect both elements.

#### *Our definition of workplace spirituality*

Previous studies have made laudable efforts in defining workplace spirituality. They have shown that transcendence is the central notion of spirituality, and workplace spirituality reflects the willingness and ability of an organisation to help its members achieve this goal through the work process, that is, enabling them to feel a sense of connection (e.g. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003). However, existing definitions suffer from two limitations. First, they adopt key words such as “transcendence” but provide no clear explanation of their meanings (e.g. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Sheep 2003); second, they only emphasise the employee's transcendence in the context of an organisation without addressing transcendence at the organisational level. Hence, these definitions do not appear to sufficiently differentiate the notion of workplace spirituality from that of individual spirituality, and therefore fail to capture the essence of the former (e.g. Ashforth and Pratt 2003; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003). We try here to develop a more accurate and concise working definition of workplace spirituality.

First, transcendence lies at the heart of spirituality (Dehler and Welsh, 2003; Emmons, 2000; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003), and it unifies other key aspects of spirituality such as meaning and higher purpose and interconnectedness and wholeness. It can be argued that yearning for higher meaning and purpose is the precondition or catalyst for transcendence, while interconnectedness or wholeness is the outcome of transcendence.

Therefore, transcendence contains at least two dimensions: first, it implies a transformation of a person from being egocentric or ethnocentric to egoless and world-centric; second, it implies a transformation of a person's conscious mind from a lower stage, that is, divisional worldview,

to a higher and eventually the ultimate stage, that is, non-dualistic worldview. The so-called “peak experience” (Elkins *et al.*, 1988; Maslow, 1970) can be experienced by people at all stages of spiritual development, and it is not necessarily a sign or outcome of such transcendence (Wilber, 2000).

Second, besides enabling employees to achieve personal transcendence, workplace spirituality must reflect an organisation’s willingness and ability to transcend itself. In other words, a spiritual organisation should be able to transcend from a self-centred state of consciousness to a higher one in which working for the betterment of a broadly defined society or global community is considered as its central meaning and purpose.

Based on the above discussion, we define workplace spirituality as follows: workplace spirituality reflects an organisation’s willingness and capability to pursue organisational transcendence through promoting and facilitating its members’ spiritual growth via the work process. Moreover, such willingness and ability are reflected by the presence of a spirituality-driven organisational culture, structure and processes, which ensure the successful spiritual growth and transcendence of its members and the organisation itself.

### Characteristics of spirituality-driven organisations

Many organisations have crumbled in the face of the Covid-19 global pandemic. As a result, more and more firms are now considering the establishment of organisational resilience as one of their key strategic issues. Organisational resilience, defined as the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions such that the organisation emerges from those conditions as strengthened and more resourceful (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2007), is closely related to the notion of workplace spirituality, which promotes the search for meaning and higher purpose by employees at work.

Research indicates that meaningful work and alignment of values are key drivers for organisational resilience through fostering adaptability and robustness (Esiebo *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, organisations that infuse deep meaning into the work of their employees tend to be highly resilient (Seligman, 2011). Meaning in work fuels strong optimism, which is key to employees’ resilience (Coutu, 2002), and resilient individuals build resilient organisations (Biggs *et al.*, 2012; Mallak, 1998). Moreover, workplace spirituality also encourages members to pursue mindful organising, which enables organisations to effectively detect emerging threats and creates a capability to swiftly act in response to these potential risks (Weick *et al.*, 1999).

Workplace spirituality has therefore become far more important for organisations, especially during a precarious time such as the Covid-19 global pandemic, as it significantly strengthens organisational resilience. In other words, to survive and thrive in times of trouble, companies need to endorse and practise workplace spirituality to become truly SDOs. But what is a spirituality-driven organisation?

#### *The six Cs of spirituality-driven organisations*

Spirituality and workplace spirituality focus on the notion of personal and organisational transcendence. Therefore, a truly spirituality-driven organisation (SDO) must possess a culture, processes and capabilities that promote and even expedite personal and organisational spiritual growth through achieving transcendence from being self-centred to we-centred or world-centred. To initiate and facilitate such individual and organisational transformation, an SDO should be characterised by the following six Cs: common mission and compassion, community and connectedness, and collaboration and co-evolution.

*Common mission and compassion:* SDOs must have an inspiring mission that aims to serve the larger society and to work for the betterment of the entire world. Such a mission offers deep meaning, which motivates the entire organisation and all employees to pursue transcendence

from the limiting and almost illusory concept of “self” to the all-embracing “all”. The basis for such a mission and transcendence is compassion towards humanity, which breeds passion for work.

*Community and connectedness:* SDOs have a tightly integrated community among co-workers and between employees and the rest of the larger society, as transcendence cannot be led by mission alone. An emotionally bonding community that is built on a shared mission, belief, values, trust and mutual dependence is vital. Such a community provides each employee a much-needed sense of belonging and connectedness which helps them learn to expand the boundary of self. In fact, personal and organisational transcendence can only take place in a gradual manner in which the strongly held concept of self at both individual and organisational levels first merges into a larger self or community of more intimate contacts, such as colleagues within the same organisation. The concept is then incorporated into an even greater self, including a wider community with a lesser degree of connectedness, followed by society at large and the global community as a whole.

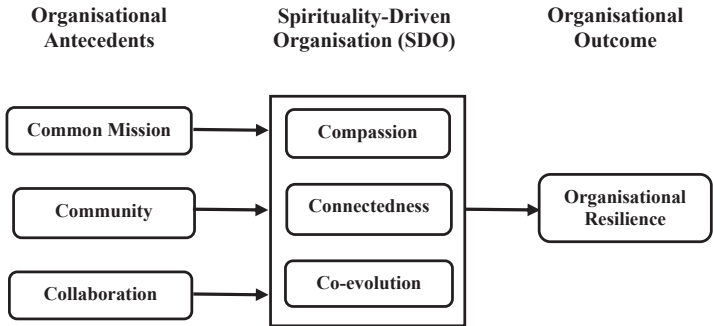
*Collaboration and co-evolution:* The gradually expanding sense of self can only be further dissolved through intense, frequent and active interactions and collaboration across members of the entire community. Through such collaboration, the self exchanges information, knowledge and energy with others and is further embedded into a larger “us” due to a shared future and destiny. Deep collaboration also produces real benefits for each participating member, enabling him or her to achieve far greater things than what the individual self can possibly imagine. Such all-benefitting co-evolution serves as a strong impetus for personal growth and transcendence.

In sum, dissolving or expanding the narrowly defined and spirituality-hindering notion of self requires not only a community that provides a real sense of connectedness but also a community in which all members function together as an integrated whole. Organisational culture, structure, process and capabilities should therefore be designed to support and promote such spiritual growth (Craigie, 1999). Through this self-expanding process, both individual and organisational transcendence can be gradually achieved. The result of such transcendence is organisational resilience that ensures the continuous growth of an SDO even in turbulent times such as the Covid-19 global pandemic (see Figure 1).

*Differences between spirituality-driven and purpose-driven organisations*

On the surface, SDOS appear to share many similarities with purpose-driven organisations (PDOs), but they are fundamentally different in the following ways.

First, their organisational goals are different. A PDO’s primary goal is still to maximise profit, that is, “*producing profitable solutions to the problems of people and planet, and not profiting from creating problems*” (the British Academy, 2021). However, an SDO’s goal is to



**Figure 1.**  
The determinants and organisational outcome of SDOs



maximise the spiritual growth of both individual employees and the organisation. In other words, PDOs are a benevolent version of the self-centred firms of the industrial era, while SDOs are an enlightened form of corporations that have completely different reasons for existence. Therefore, for PDOs, “purpose” is an add-on word to an existing corporate mandate or remit, but for SDOs, workplace spirituality lies at the very heart of the entire organisation.

Second, their business models are different. Even though some PDOs are either the leaders of or participants in business ecosystems, they are still established, operated and managed as independent entities with clear corporate boundaries and self-determined objectives, that is, maximising profit, albeit responsibly. However, an SDO is just a member of an extended network of stakeholder organisations that share a common mission, strategies and resources. In other words, SDOs are members of a community with a shared future and destiny. In this sense, an SDO-based community functions like a “symbiotic organisation” or a “communal organisation” in which members are deeply interdependent and nurture each other’s growth under a common goal.

Third, their corporate structure and governance are different. PDOs have the power and leadership in the hands of the board of directors, which delegates “command-and-control” authority to the C-suites, which subsequently delegate power and responsibilities to various levels of management. In this way, PDOs still follow an industrial-era pyramid structure that emphasises hierarchy, control and efficiency. However, SDOs are team- or project-based flat organisations without leaders but with leadership. That is to say, they follow a rotating leadership practice in which a temporary leader is democratically elected based on the tasks at hand, similar to the approach outlined in a study describing collaboration within high-tech industries (Davis and Eisenhardt, 2011). When the specific project is completed, teams disband, and the leadership moves to the next person or unit. Moreover, SDOs tend to be governed by group leadership, which is based on domain expertise and moral authority.

In sum, while PDOs claim to have a higher purpose beyond profit, they are still fundamentally self-centred. Not surprisingly, some so-called PDOs do not genuinely live by their ostensible purpose and use the term practically as a marketing gimmick. For PDOs, purposeful profit is the focal point of business, and the “purpose” is almost a means to an end, while SDOs aim to transcend to an all-centred state of being. Business growth and commercial gain therefore become a means to the end, which is spiritual growth. In other words, SDOs help employees find a higher meaning and purpose in life and to transcend themselves via the platform provided by their work. In this process, the potential of each person can be fully cultivated.

Obviously, SDOs are at odds with current business ethos and practices. Viewing SDOs through the lens of the industrial era during which global capitalism has truly flourished, they appear to be completely unrealistic as no organisations, even religious establishments, can survive and thrive without certain emphasis on the financial implications of their operations. However, SDOs will emerge as a mainstream form of organisation in the post-digital era. The rise of SDOs will mark the beginning of a “spiritual paradigm” in human society (Wagner-Marsh and Conley, 1999).

### **Rise of spirituality-driven organisations in the post-digital era**

Can organisations survive and thrive on workplace spirituality alone? In the industrial era, the answer is a resounding no. However, in the post-digital era, SDOs will be a major driving force in the business world, as this new era represents a radically new form of commercial civilisation in which industry structure, business purpose, operating logic, corporate business model and process are fundamentally different from those defining the industrial era. The commercial world and human society will then shift from a “closeness and control” model to a “connection and collaboration” model where the rules and regulations governing

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individual and corporate behaviour will be replaced by spiritual principles that centre on shared mission, growth, prosperity and destiny.

In this sense, SDOs represent a new breed of organisation emerging from the post-digital era. They cannot be created through organisational transformation or even the transmutation (e.g. [Gull and Doh, 2004](#)) of existing companies that are built on industrial-era logic and DNA. The primary objective of SDOs is not to create material wealth or goods, but meaning, purpose, thought, ideology and belief that serve as the north star for their participating members. Hence, the workplace is no longer a place only for work, but also for spiritual practice and growth as it provides a vital community built around a shared deep meaning for its members.

If SDOs represent a prominent form of organisation in the post-digital era, what is the post-digital era? How is it different from the preceding industrial and digital eras? Why are SDOs the new breed in such an era or indigenous to it? We elaborate on these issues below.

### *Conjecture on the post-digital era*

The post-digital era is still in its embryonic stage, and discussion of it remains conjectural at present. Based on the research by leading management consulting firms, the post-digital era is no longer about digital transformation, which defines the digital era, but digital application in powerful new ways to create a competitive advantage ([Accenture, 2019](#)). The differences between the post-digital era and the industrial era, which emphasise self-interest, control, hierarchy, efficiency and linearity, are even more startling. In general, it is postulated that the post-digital era possesses the following distinctive characteristics.

*Fully connected:* In the post-digital era, with the help of advanced technologies such as distributed ledger technology, artificial intelligence, extended reality and quantum computing (DARQ) and the internet of things (IoT), customers will be able for the first time to obtain a highly immersive, deeply individualised, interactive and AI-driven intelligent digital experience (i.e., the 4I experience), which stems from a seamless integration of the physical and virtual worlds. Customers will also be served instantaneously by deeply customised products, services and even surroundings whenever their needs arise ([Accenture, 2019](#)).

To capture and deliver on context-based momentary markets and respond to people's needs in the moment, many firms will need to form tightly integrated, deeply interconnected and highly coordinated ecosystems operated under a customer-to-business (C2B) model. In such an extremely agile, flexible and fast ecosystem, every participating firm works as a node of equal status within a wider network. They share resources and information to maximise the overall success of the entire network. Power, authority and capabilities are decentralised and distributed with rotating leadership.

Each node achieves its highest potential through nurturing and being nurtured by other members in truly beneficial symbiotic relationships. The ultra-strong bonding force among nodes cannot be generated by commercial interest alone. It has to be a higher purpose that unifies these firms to form a community of shared mission, growth and destiny. Therefore, workplace spirituality will become the very foundation for such a community consisting of fully connected member organisations.

*Meaning-based:* Value or wealth creation in the post-digital era will be primarily undertaken by AI-enabled automation systems and robotics, for example, autonomous plants ([McKinsey, 2020](#)). At the same time, development in nanotechnologies, synthetic biology, 4D printing, 3D bioprinting and so on will eliminate the problem of resource scarcity that has plagued global human society since its inception. Material abundance will make competition for resources or goods an irrelevant issue for both customers and organisations. Therefore, consumer value will take on a completely different form, so it is largely defined by the content and more specifically by the meaning embedded in the goods and services provided in the physical and an ever-growing metaverse.



In such a content-heavy new world, goods-producing organisations inevitably evolve into meaning-creating entities. Moreover, their meaning creation capabilities are also driven by their ability to engage millions of customers in co-creation and co-consumption in their respective individualised or shared realities. In this era, market domination is driven by the quality of content and meaning instead of the quality of goods, and in a highly virtualised world, consumers' desire for content and meaning is far greater than in any moment in human history. For organisations, workplace spirituality is then no longer just an organisational principle but the very engine for value creation.

*Trust-centred:* A fully connected world will generate an immense amount of data from every customer along every moment of their journeys across all contexts. These data are essential for companies to create and deliver the 4I experience for customers, yet they also reveal almost every detail about individuals' lives, which are practically transparent. Therefore, business in the post-digital era must be a completely reliable and trusted partner in order to gain full access to customers' data and confidence. It is an era where the trust-centred relationships an organisation manages to establish with all stakeholders determine its very survival and success.

Even though a "trust architecture" based on the use of distributed ledgers such as blockchain can significantly lower the risk of breaches (McKinsey, 2020), a business built on strong moral and spiritual principles such as selflessness, taking responsibility for the betterment of all of humanity, total equality and inclusiveness, complete transparency and higher purpose will gain the genuine trust of all stakeholders. In fact, in the post-digital era, spirituality, morality and ethics will be the basis for legitimacy in business, replacing the various forms of accreditation widely adopted for such a purpose in the industrial era.

### *The anatomy of SDOs*

As discussed above, SDOs differ from PDOs in at least three important aspects: organisational goals, business model and corporate structure and governance. We here elaborate in greater detail what an SDO looks like along several vital organisational dimensions.

*Organisational purpose:* An SDO's primary objective is not to create goods and wealth but to promote the spiritual growth of all its members. However, it is different from religious organisations, as SDOs achieve organisational and individual spiritual growth through the process of serving the holistic needs of customers in the context of a highly effective organisational platform. More specifically, unlike religious organisations that centre on the worship of revered figures, such as deities, people or canonical scriptures (Brummans *et al.*, 2013), SDOs emphasise the cultivation of one's true nature, or the "original face" in the words of Wilber (2000), and facilitate members' exploration into deep layers of reality and consciousness.

*Organisational form:* An SDO is a hybrid organisation in at least two respects. First, it combines both physical and virtual presence. Second, it is an individual entity but also constitutes part of a collective entity or a node in a distributed network, that is, the super platform. In other words, it is simultaneously a self and part of a whole. Therefore, its own organisational goals and growth are also the goals and growth of the collective entity or community.

*Organisational leadership:* An SDO's leadership is a form of spiritual leadership at both the organisational and individual levels. That is to say, decision-making authority and capabilities rest on one's spiritual intelligence. However, this leadership role rotates based on specific tasks at hand both within an organisation and within the entire network of firms. It is a form of rotational and distributed leadership that focuses on guidance and mentorship instead of self-glorification, hierarchy and control.

*Value proposition:* SDOs, as a super platform, provide a total solution and total immersive experience that cater to individual customers' holistic needs across body, mind and soul.

At the same time, with the help of AI and other advanced technologies, SDOs have the on-demand capabilities to serve customer needs at a moment's notice in a deeply customised way across customers' entire daily journeys. That is to say, the value proposition provided by SDOs is fully embedded into every moment and context in customers' lives in an "anywhere, anytime", omnipresent and all-encompassing manner.

*Organisational practices:* SDOs practise both mindful organising (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007) and organisational mindfulness (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012). They are fully aware of the distinguishing details of their environment in every aspect and at the same time, that is, mindful organising; at the same time, they are aware of the impermanence of individual and organisational experience and existence and avoid attachment to a false sense of an independent and isolated self, that is, organisational mindfulness. Companies such as Google, Twitter, Wipro and Tata Tea have already embraced meditation as a way to boost their employees' productivity. However, SDOs do not consider such spiritual practices as an extra perk for employees in an attempt to make them work better, but as an integral part of the work process facilitating employees' spiritual growth. Hence, the workplace is no longer conceptualised as a place to "get the job done" but as a communal centre to foster social and spiritual interactions, interconnectedness, creativity, service to others and mutual support.

*Sector focus:* SDOs focus on the betterment of global society and the overall spiritual awakening of all humanity via highly efficient and effective organisational platforms. When AI, automation and robotics are fully capable of creating the materials necessary for human life, SDOs will place greater emphasis on providing the "human touch" in areas such as psychological counselling, education, pastoral care, orphan care, elderly care, hospice care, spiritual guidance, personal growth and addiction treatment, that is, the compassion business. Furthermore, as the post-digital era will be largely shaped by the ever-growing and powerful metaverse, one key objective of SDOs is to provide a deep meaning and purpose for this highly immersive experience, which can easily become addictive. At the same time, SDOs will also focus on enabling addicted members of society to regain self-control through shattering the illusion inflicted upon them by ill-intentioned global enterprises.

In sum, SDOs represent a completely novel form of organisation. They cannot be created through transforming companies of the industrial or digital eras, as they possess radically different DNA. The rise of SDOs in the post-digital era is largely due to the fact that the culture of this new era, which is collaborative, open, sharing, transparent, co-evolving and symbiotic, is highly congruent with the principles of spirituality and workplace spirituality. Hence, this culture provides the most nurturing environment for such a new organisational form to take shape. In this sense, the post-digital era is the true spiritual paradigm that marks the beginning of a highly advanced stage of human civilisation, which is no longer defined by mechanisation, isolation, competition and self-interest but by harmony, unity, spirituality and shared destiny.

## Conclusions and implications

The ongoing global turbulence caused by the Covid-19 global pandemic has paralysed many companies, especially those in the retail and hospitality business. Business executives across industries have come to realise the critical importance of building organisational resilience in tackling current and future external shocks such as Covid-19. Workplace spirituality, which is believed to provide employees a strong sense of purpose and belonging and therefore to boost morale and work commitment, has become a pertinent issue on the corporate agenda.

However, due to ambiguity in its definition, measurement and managerial implications, workplace spirituality has so far failed to attract the consensus that it needs in order to be practically useful. More importantly, workplace spirituality is built on principles such as

sharing, openness and co-evolution, which are almost the opposite of those defining the industrial era, which is centred on control, competition and self-interest.

In other words, traditional organisations do not have the right soil for the seed of workplace spirituality to grow and bear fruit. In fact, in the industrial and digital eras, any efforts to infuse spirituality into the workplace will remain futile. We need a completely new organisational platform, that is, SDOs, to bring workplace spirituality to life. Yet such new organisations can only thrive in the post-digital era in which spiritual principles become the norm in the business world and in human society at large.

There are several important managerial implications to be drawn from this study. First, organisations are not machines. They are living things that need breath and spirit (Marler and Hadaway, 2002). This is the case even for organisations in the industrial and digital eras. Therefore, even a full infusion of workplace spirituality remains impractical at this stage, since the spirit of an organisation first needs to be nurtured and cultivated through purpose-driven business practices. Otherwise, organisations cannot remain ethical and profitable over the long haul (Mitroff and Denton, 1999a, b).

Second, understanding workplace spirituality is the first step in harnessing immense spiritual energies, that is, latent human capital. It is a known fact that human resources are an especially important source of sustained competitive advantage (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Pfeffer, 1994), and the winning companies are those that are best able to attract, retain and motivate their people (Pfeffer, 2003). The true driver of an individual's genuine motivation and commitment is the higher meaning and purpose in his or her life and his or her need to transcend. Therefore, spirituality management should become a relevant topic in corporate human resource management. Organisations that take the lead in examining this important field will be much better prepared for the advent of the post-digital era and the new spiritual paradigm.

Third, workplace spirituality hinges on leadership spirituality. If the leadership of an organisation does not encourage its members to search for higher meaning and purpose, or if it ignores their need to transcend, workplace spirituality will remain a corporate taboo. Forward-looking business executives should take the initiative to embark on a personal spiritual journey to elevate spiritual awareness and reduce excessive ego. Such a journey should be able to stimulate passion, compassion and empathy within that individual leader and subsequently inspire the rest of the organisation to follow suit. At least in the current era, any progress towards the practice of workplace spirituality needs to follow a top-down approach driven by powerful and inspiring leaders.

There are also a few caveats about spirituality management for organisations that are more daring and willing to experiment and lead the pack. First, managing workplace spirituality may involve a fundamental change of the organisation's culture and business philosophy. It requires an organisation to redefine its business to focus on people and on decision-making based on values like integrity, respect, intuition and creativity (Hadaway *et al.*, 1998). This dramatic shift in business orientation presents management with a new set of challenges, and the organisation's ability to deal with these challenges determines whether it can manage workplace spirituality successfully.

Second, the first difficulty in managing workplace spirituality is the diversity of spiritual traditions and spiritual experiences individuals bring to the workplace (McCormick, 1994). Organisations are likely to encounter strong resistance to any attempt to change employees' belief systems. Therefore, the organisation must make sure that its members understand what behaviours and beliefs are congruent with the spirituality of the organisation (Konz and Ryan, 1999). Moreover, the organisation also needs to educate its members to ensure that they agree upon a widely endorsed set of universal spiritual values.

A few important issues related to this topic suggest avenues for future research. First, theoretical work is needed to investigate the mechanism through which workplace spirituality

affects organisational performance. This effort will provide a theoretical foundation for better understanding the rise of SDOs in the future. Second, it is important to demonstrate the practical utility of workplace spirituality via vigorous empirical studies based on a solid theoretical framework in a small set of more enlightened contemporary organisations. Even though we believe that practising organisational spirituality is an end in itself, to make it a legitimate research and management issue, it is necessary to provide a strong testament to its value by relating it to tangible outcomes such as increased productivity, reduced turnover and enhanced recruiting-and-retention success with a spiritually centred organisational culture (Klein and Izzo, 1996). Finally, understanding how to manage workplace spirituality in practice is also critical. It is therefore vital for researchers in this area to develop initiatives that can be directly implemented by organisations.

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