

## **The Effect of Spirituality on the Psychological Contract: Towards the Relational**

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*An aging phenomenon entitled the Second Adulthood has confronted society's perception of workplace spirituality and its relation to psychological contracts. As a result, organizations are now faced with developing psychological contracts that are increasingly relational with a refocus on employee development and a broader scope that includes the spiritual needs of employees. In this article, propositions are developed to assert the need for more relational aspects of psychological contracts to bolster workplace spirituality, and ultimately, help satisfy the spiritual needs of employees. Recommendations for transitioning from transactional psychological contracts to more relational and spiritual psychological contracts are provided.*

Noted author Gail Sheehy is widely recognized for her contribution to the study of the human life-cycle. Her compelling research, conducted for her book *New Passages*, reveals an aging phenomenon which has paralleled the newest generations' entrance into the realm of adulthood. Sheehy notes that a person's age has typically served "as a uniform criterion for normalizing the roles and responsibilities that individuals assume over a life-time" (Sheehy, 1995, p.3). In the past, "the ages of 21 and 60 or 65 came to define the lower and upper boundaries of participation in the adult world" (Sheehy, 1995, p.3). Within the ages of 21 to 65, most individuals typically partake of adult-type activities such as graduating from college, having a full-time job, getting married, having children, starting retirement, etc. This newest generation of adult workers, however, is challenging those previously accepted criterion. More specifically, they are challenging society's preconception that middle age begins at the age of forty.

Entitled the Endangered Generation, those individual's born between 1966 and 1980 have inadvertently created what Sheehy refers to as the Second Adulthood (beginning between the ages of 45 to 65). This era of Second Adulthood is presenting unique challenges for companies and corporations who attempt to employ and retain this generation of workers. Fueled by progress in medical technology and pharmaceutical research, many people today are easily reaching the age of 80. Research has shown that "a woman who reaches age fifty today – and remains free of cancer and heart disease – can expect to see her ninety-second birthday" (Sheehy, 1995, p.5). This is a sharp contrast to the preponderance of human history whereby only one in ten people lived to the age of 65 (Sheehy, 1995). The fact remains that people today are not only living longer but are also choosing to remain employed longer.

Complicating the issue further, the newest generation has also managed to postpone, for approximately ten years, most of the previously accepted timeframes for partaking in critical adult-type

activities. This voluntary postponement of critical adult-type activities (i.e. finding full-time employment, marriage, having children, and retirement) has had a drastic impact on today's working professionals. It is recognized that this voluntary postponement usually begins in a person's early twenties.

According to Sheehy, most young people today do not leave home (pull-up roots) until their mid-twenties. Instead, they remain in what Sheehy refers to as the stage of Provisional Adulthood until their early thirties. The simple delay of leaving home, or pulling-up roots, consequentially "[moves] all the other stages [of adulthood] off by up to ten years" (Sheehy, 1995, p.48). Middle age for the newest generation does not even begin until they are well into their fifties.

Another unique aging phenomenon of this Endangered Generation happens when they reach the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-two. There is a noticeable pattern during this time whereby a small crisis or breaking point happens in their life. This breaking point, as Sheehy refers to it, causes the individual to begin to search for life's purpose. This external search subsequently turns internal as they attempt to create meaning and value in their own existence. The apathetic attitude of their twenties transcends into the desire to '*stand for something more*'.

The workforce today is forced to reconcile the disparity between the Endangered Generation's search for meaning and well-being in their life contrasted against the graying of their existing employee base. This era of Second Adulthood is being flooded with workers who want to remain gainfully employed in meaningful jobs well into their sixties and beyond. Organizations, however, are seeing this phenomenon come to pass in the search for highly relational psychological contracts. The search for meaning in life and the desire to '*stand for something more*' is often first sought out in an individual's career choice (i.e. workplace spirituality). The youngest of Sheehy's Endangered Generation is currently in their early thirties, and they are searching for careers that offer them more than just a monthly paycheck.

Our literature review attempted to find information on psychological contracts and spirituality, but none were found. Therefore, this research is exploratory and the purpose of the article is to use theoretical development to construct a conceptual framework detailing how workplace spirituality (i.e. meaning in life) affects the psychological contract.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT**

### **Transactional and Relational Psychological Contracts**

Psychological contracts are subjective individual beliefs concerning the specific provisions of the employment exchange relationship between the individual and employer (Grimmer & Oddy, 2007, p. 154). According to Rousseau and McLean Parks (1993) and Rousseau (1995), psychological contracts are composed of transactional and relational components that are diametrically opposed on a psychological contract continuum. According to Millward and Herriot (2000), however, psychological contracts contain varying degrees of transactional and relational aspects while on this contract continuum. The relational contract is characterized by "beliefs about obligations based on exchanges of socio-emotional factors (e.g. loyalty and support) rather than purely monetary issues" (Gimmer & Oddy, 2007, p. 155). Transactional contracts differ from relational contracts in so much that transactional contracts "describe obligations that are economic and extrinsic" rather than obligations that are "emotional and intrinsic in nature" (Grimmer & Oddy, 2007, p. 155). The psychological contract continuum is comprised of seven main constructs, however, transactional and relational contracts differ on only five constructs: focus, time-frame, stability, scope, and tangibility (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993) (see figure 1). In this article we develop a theoretical link between three facets of workplace spirituality (self-work immersion, meaning from work, and interconnectedness) and the five constructs of the psychological contract and the positioning of those psychological contracts on the transactional and relational continuum.



definition of ‘spirituality’ is used throughout and is used to reference each of the three aspects of workplace spirituality, unless otherwise indicated.

### **Importance of Spirituality**

Workplace spirituality is a growing concern for many organizations. While the effect of high levels of organizational spirituality is still being researched, there is some preliminary evidence of its benefits. For example, there is evidence that organizations with higher degrees of workplace spirituality can outperform organizations with little or no workplace spirituality (Lloyd, 1990). Moore and Casper (2006) found evidence that increased workplace spirituality reduces turnover intentions. Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2004) suggest that organizations that embrace workplace spirituality can grow faster, more efficiently, with higher rates of return in comparison with organizations that do not foster workplace spirituality. Evidence of employees’ increased health levels, personal growth, and augmented levels of self-esteem were some outcomes of workplace spirituality suggested by Krahnke, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2003).

One part of an organization that is of particular importance to the notion of a psychological contract is the organization’s culture. Konz & Ryan (1999) assert that an organization’s mission, vision, policies, and procedures flow directly from the internal spirituality of founders and top management teams. These, in turn, comprise the organizational culture. Thus, if an organization’s culture is spiritual it is a result of the influence of the spirituality of top management (Konz & Ryan, 1999). Simply stated, top management spirituality is “enunciated” within the firm’s culture (Konz & Ryan, 1999).

### **Interconnectedness**

Interconnectedness is one of the more accepted dimensions of workplace spirituality, and is commonly defined as feeling part of a larger united whole. Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 83) defined interconnectedness as “the basic feeling of being connected with one’s complete self, others, and the entire universe”. In fact, Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 83) go so far as to say “if a single word best captures the meaning of spirituality and the vital role that it plays in people’s lives, that word is interconnectedness”. Moore and Casper (2006) used affective organizational commitment as a proxy measure of interconnectedness. This is because affective organizational commitment is characterized by an individual’s submersion into an organization at such a level where they can be identified by their involvement or membership in the organization (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Researchers Bell and Taylor (2001) purport that work organizations have become people’s most significant context for relationships, surpassing institutions such as faith communities.

Interconnectedness is the feeling of belonging and relationship with others where the sum of the group is larger than the individual. Many researchers such as Mitroff and Denton (1999), King and Nicol (1999), and Burack (1999) assert that spirituality transcends peoples’ differences. For example, Mitroff and Denton (1999a, p. 23-25) discuss spirituality as “universal and timeless”, “the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose”, “the sacredness of everything”, and “the deep feeling of interconnectedness of everything”. Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2004), describe interconnectedness as a relationship to others that provides positive feelings, while trust is described as an integral part of interconnectedness by Burack (1999). Simply put, an individual’s spirituality is a deep-level characteristic that unites rather than divides. Therefore, as employees in a highly spiritual firm spend time with one another at work and develop relationships their spirituality unites them together and increases their cohesion or sense of interconnectedness. Therefore, although the workforce may be comprised of diverse employees, in a firm that embraces workplace spirituality the employees are united through the common bond of spirituality, which yields interconnectedness.

### **Self-Work Immersion**

Self-work immersion, as it is labeled in this manuscript, is a fairly nebulous concept. Some researchers discuss this concept in terms of “holism” and “wholeness” of individuals (Bell & Taylor, 2001). Wagner-Marsh and Conley, (1999) describe this concept as the ability to express the inner

substance called spirituality. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) researched what has been termed as “flow”. This “flow” is purported to be work that is done with every fiber of an individual’s being. At the heart of this research is an individual who can engage their spiritual self into their work. Often, organizations develop cultures that stifle an individual’s ability to pull from deep within to accomplish their work. Thompson (2000) equates a spiritual workplace with one that supports the development of employees’ spiritual attributes. Ashmos and Duchon (2000) assert that high levels of organizational support require the acknowledgement that employees have an inner life that is just as important as their work lives. “Employees have an inner life related to the soul and accessed through practices such as meditation, self-reflection and prayer” (Bell & Taylor, 2001, p. 2). Therefore, the definition of self-work immersion in this manuscript is the convergence of deeply held spiritual aspects of individualism including mind, body, soul, and an individual’s work.

According to Rousseau and Schalk (2000, p. 252), individualism is “associated with attempts to actively master one’s environment rather than passive acceptance”. Self-work immersion is where an individual engages their deep-level characteristics into work efforts. Individualism is associated with the “freedom to follow one’s personal preferences and beliefs” (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000, p. 253).

Although most discussion of individualism conjures ideas of Machiavellianism, narcissism, greed, and self-centeredness, to name a few, in its purest form it is about outcomes related to individual accomplishment. Therefore, while highly spiritual firms promote unity and interconnectedness, they must also support the development of the individual. Only through individual development and contributions does the organization benefit as a whole. Burack (1999, p. 281) proclaims, “it is people who now will make the difference” in organizations and their work outcomes.

### **Meaning from Work**

Meaning from work is an important component of workplace spirituality. Many researchers borrow from Abraham Maslow’s (1943) work on motivation and use the term “self-actualization” to describe meaning from work. Maslow (1943) conceptualized self-actualization as a point where an individual began to fulfill their purpose and derive meaning through work. Self-actualization is the highest level of motivation where all your lower level needs are met, and an individual is growing and developing into all they can be through the process of work. This is the point where individuals enjoy their careers because it is full of meaning and fulfillment. For example, the artist that begins to paint his or her masterpiece for the love of artistic expression, rather than for ego gratification, financial rewards, or some lower level need. During this process the artist is said to be self-actualizing. Burack (1999) discussed this process as a point where the mind and spirit mesh together through work. Milliman, Czaplewski, and Ferguson (2003) use terms like achievement, personal reward, and growth to describe this process. Human growth and development at the highest level is how Butts (1999) describes this level of work. Thus, in this manuscript meaning from work is defined as the fulfillment of an individual’s need to have meaning in and through their occupation (i.e. self-actualization).

### **Workplace Spirituality and the Constructs of the Psychological Contract Continuum**

Focus is the extent to which a psychological contract contains transactional and relational elements. Transactional contracts are focused on “economic terms, have a specific duration, are static, narrow in scope, and are easily observable” (Uen, Chien, & Yen, 2009, p. 216). Thus, organizations that view employees as commodity like resources, as opposed to a spiritual organization that views employees as a source of competitive advantage (Moore, 2010), generally focus on the transactional or non-developmental aspects of the psychological contract.

Contrary to the transactional organization view, a spiritual organization focuses on the developmental aspects of employees through its formal human resource policies and or its culture (Moore, 2010). As a result, a highly spiritual organization’s psychological contract focus would be on more relational or emotional and spiritual aspects of work, rather than economic exchange. There does remain, however, a need for organizations to include transactional aspects of the psychological contract even when they are a spiritual organization. For instance, an organization can be spiritual while preferring an outcome based

compensation system. As a result, firms may need to broaden the focus of their psychological contract to encompass aspects of both the transactional and the relational. As a result, the following proposition is developed:

*Proposition 1: Organizations with increasingly spiritual paradigms will have psychological contracts focusing on increasingly relational elements*

Time Frame of a psychological contract refers to “the perceived duration of the employment relationship” (Sels et al., 2004, p. 267). The time frame can range from a transactional length that is specific and definite, to a relational length that is open-ended and indefinite. Thus, a transaction oriented organization would have a more definite time frame in employment relationships because the organization would not view an employee as a long-term investment to be developed over time.

For an organization to be a highly spiritual organization it would imply a psychological contract that is relational in nature because of the focus on long-term development of employees through the nurturing of spiritual aspects of the workplace (Burack, 1999; Milliman et al., 2003; Karakas, 2009; Moore, 2010). This long-term focus is often operationalized through the promotion of meaning from work.

Self-actualization is the term generally used to describe the process of deriving meaning from work. In an organization that supports self-actualization or meaning from work; two important aspects of the time frame become evident.

First, the second level of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs can be succinctly stated as motivation due to fear of being without basic needs that, in today’s society, come from being employed (e.g. shelter, clothing, etc.). According to Laabs (1995), removing fear from an organization reduces employee boundaries allowing for employee growth, and ultimately meaning from work or self-actualization. One major way in which organizations can remove fear is to develop a more relational psychological contract that is open-ended or has an indefinite time frame. Although this may or may not equate to employment for life, it can reduce the fear of losing one’s employment.

Second, deriving meaning from work is a process, not a final destination. According to Freud, every individual develops what he called an “ego-ideal”. An individual’s ego ideal is purported to be some paragon that is as unique and diverse as human beings. When individuals begin to self-actualize they are working towards becoming all that they can be (Maslow, 1943). As individuals become closer to being all they can be, (i.e. their ego-ideal), the model of perfection for that individual changes and causes them to continue to strive for their more advanced ego-ideal. Therefore, a psychological contract that leans towards being more relational, which is to say more indefinite or open-ended, allows for individuals to continually develop and reach for higher and higher goal attainment. Thus, proposition 2 is developed:

*Proposition 2: Organizations with increasingly spiritual paradigms will have psychological contracts with an increasingly relational time frame*

Stability of a psychological contract is “the degree to which the psychological contract is limited in terms of its ability to evolve and change without an implied renegotiation of the terms” (Sels et al., 2004, p. 467). Rousseau (1995) discusses the case of Inland Oil and their “era of no guarantees”. In this case, management of Inland Oil drastically changed the psychological contract with employees without any renegotiation due to plummeting oil prices in the late 1980’s. As a result of the downswing in the oil industry, management responded with a typical slash and burn strategy characterized by downsizing, reducing benefits, freezing promotion opportunities, etc. The psychological contract changed and employees felt as though their careers were halted, with no advancement opportunities, more work for less pay, and little or no career or employee development. Therefore, the changes in the psychological contract were perceived as very negative because they stunted the development of employees without the benefit of renegotiation.

Changes to the psychological contract, can however, be viewed as positive events if the purpose of the changes are to augment the development of employees. As discussed previously, as individuals derive

meaning from their work and begin to self-actualize their goals become loftier. Consequently, the psychological contract must be stable enough to provide some security, but dynamic enough to keep up with the changing developmental needs of employees. Therefore, spiritual organizations continually provide development opportunities to employees (Thompson, 2000), which translates into a more dynamic psychological contract. Thus, the following proposition is developed:

*Proposition 3: Organizations with increasingly spiritual paradigms will have psychological contracts that are increasingly relational and dynamic*

Scope is generally described as the dimension of the psychological contract that refers to the division between an individual's work and personal life (Sels et al., 2004, p466). If the scope is broad, the division between work and personal life is not well delineated, and if the scope is narrow the division is distinctly delineated. Thus, a broad scope is more relational while a narrow scope is more transactional.

As a result of today's organizations demanding more commitment, efficiency, and greater production from employees at all levels, many employees are spending "a majority of their lives in the work setting" (Moore, 2010, p. 63). Likewise, employees are looking for their work arrangements to fulfill more than just economic needs because work organizations now have "meanings beyond the 'nine-to-five' working hours; it is even becoming the cradle of meaning in modern knowledge society" (Karakas, 2010, p. 93). As a result, organizations must begin to care for the "whole" person (Bell & Taylor, 2001). Several researchers have found evidence that employees' individual life outcomes, and not just increased performance at work, are augmented when employed by organizations with programs designed to increase employee spirituality in the workplace (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Fry, 2003; Reave, 2005). Thus, organizations that ascribe to nurturing spirituality in the workplace should have a broader scope in their psychological contracts than organizations that do not ascribe to nurturing spirituality in the workplace. This is because spiritual organizations attempt to care for the 'whole' person and not just the worker. Therefore, we posit the following proposition:

*Proposition 4: Organizations with increasingly spiritual paradigms will have psychological contracts with an increasingly relational and broadening scope*

Tangibility is generally defined as the extent to which the psychological contract terms are "unambiguously defined, explicitly specified and clearly observable for third parties" (Sels, Janssens, & Van den Brande, 2004, p. 466). Tangibility is directly related to the degree to which an organization controls employees through formal policies, procedures, and specific formal agreements. A spiritual workplace would of course have some control mechanisms, however, a spiritual workplace would also allow employees the latitude to develop and express their spirituality in a climate of trust (Burack, 1999). In fact, some researchers warn that a potential downfall of the spirituality at work movement is an attempt by some to use spirituality as a new management control mechanism (Brown, 2003; Milliman et al., 2003; Karakas, 2010).

Therefore, spiritual organizations will continue to have many highly tangible elements of the psychological contract; however, highly spiritual organizations will also have many intangible elements of the psychological contract such as "trust, honesty, integrity and other virtuous elements" (Moore, 2010, p. 62), or anything that will "make a larger contribution than the typical company to the welfare of employees, customers, and society" (Milliman et al., 2003, p. 430). The more tangible elements of the psychological contract in highly spiritual firms should not intrude upon the intangible elements that support the development and free and open expression of employee spirituality because "a culture based on mutual respect and worth of each employee" (Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999, p. 297) is the basis of the spiritual organization. Thus, the following proposition is developed:

*Proposition 5: Organizations with increasingly spiritual paradigms will have increasingly more elements of the psychological contract that are intangible.*

## Synthesis

Robinson, Kraatz, and Rousseau (1994) found evidence indicating that as employees perceived their place of employment as becoming a less relational workplace; employees recognized a shift in their psychological contract towards a more transactional contract. The transactional psychological contract can be characterized by organizations with little or no investment in their employees' spiritual development where employees are considered to be a resource with a specific commodity level value and potential, rather than an invaluable rare resource with unlimited potential. Firms with outdated management processes that treat employees as expendable resources or at a minimum replaceable or interchangeable instead of as sources of competitive advantage (Moore, 2010) could be associated with increasingly transactional psychological contracts.

The relational psychological contract is characterized by organizations that embrace the spirituality movement by viewing employees as sources of competitive advantage (Moore, 2010) and promoting management processes with more employee centered approaches (Burack, 1999). Increasingly spiritual organizations make considerable investment into the development of employees' "search for simplicity, meaning, self-expression, and interconnectedness to something higher" (Karakas, 2009, p. 90). Thus, we posit the following proposition:

*Proposition 6: Organizations with increasingly spiritual paradigms will have psychological contracts that are increasingly relational while organizations with increasingly anti-spiritual paradigms will have psychological contracts that are increasingly transactional.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As previously suggested by Gail Sheehy, workplace spirituality is a growing concern for many organizations and employees alike. Many reasons for this rising concern has been purported by spirituality researchers, including: the "graying" of the workforce, postponing pulling-up roots in early adulthood, employee disenchantment with top management teams, increased hours spent at work, and backlash from downsizing and job elimination policies. As a result, spiritual work environments are becoming important and often sought after characteristics of job seekers. According to Mitroff and Denton (1999), spirituality has become a major firm characteristic that potential employees look for, especially with members of the Endangered Generation. Therefore, it stands to reason that job seekers are looking for organizations that offer a greater mix of relational components in the psychological contract which can signal the existence of spirituality in a particular workplace.

The main difference between highly transactional and highly relational psychological contracts is how employees are viewed by the organization. As discussed previously, organizations that prefer transactional contracts view employees as commodities with limited value and potential that can be replaced or interchanged for other resources. This is contrast to spiritual organizations with more relational psychological contracts which view each employee as an invaluable rare resource with unlimited potential. It is this latter evaluation of employees that job seekers, and more specifically the Endangered Generation, are increasingly searching for. As organizations embrace a more spiritual culture their psychological contract offering becomes more palatable for job seekers searching for meaning in life. Consequently, organizations can expect to begin to reap the many benefits that come from a spiritual workplace.

Therefore, the following recommendations are beginning points extended to organizations to help them transition from a transactional to a more relational psychological contract while increasing their workplace spirituality. As stated previously, much of the workforce has an increasing desire to increase their level of spiritual fulfillment through their work organizations, in part, because of the extended time and ever increasing demands placed on them by those organizations. As a result, organizations that want to have more relational psychological contracts and increased workplace spirituality need to refocus their

culture on the developmental of employees as a source of competitive advantage by expanding their scope to consider the needs of the whole employee.

One way for organizations to refocus and expand their scope, and ultimately become more spiritual and have more relational psychological contracts, is to begin communicating a message of inclusiveness and long term vision that includes current employees. This communication will help make current employees view the psychological contract construct of time frame as more open ended, and thus, more relational. In addition, any recruitment and hiring communication should also include this new message of inclusiveness and long term vision. This will, as a result, signal to new employees a more relational psychological contract, and ultimately workplace spirituality, from the beginning of their employment.

The second recommendation for organizations to refocus and broaden their scope is to begin offering sustained and multifaceted development opportunities for employees at all organizational levels and lengths of tenure. An organization's support of the continual progression of employee development opportunities would help create a more dynamic and relational psychological contract. In addition, an increase in the spirituality of the organization would ensue by providing the tools employees need to self-actualize and find meaning from work.

Next, organizations should develop new policies or refine existing policies to be formal but somewhat open and flexible. If the policies are developed carefully they can communicate the needed amount of stability to ensure current and future employees that the organization supports their continued growth. These policies can also communicate the organizational flexibility needed to enact the support of continued growth for employees.

Finally, formal policies should also be carefully crafted as discussed above; however, control mechanisms in those policies should be used judiciously in order to have the right mix of tangible and intangible elements. For example, a tuition reimbursement policy could be structured in such a way as to allow employees the opportunity to expand their education without being overly restrictive. The policy could allow employees to decide upon the educational opportunities they want to pursue while trusting the employees to make the justification of why and how their continuing education augments their development and ultimately adds to the organization, instead of restricting the educational opportunities to a select curriculum.

In conclusion, one of the growing trends in today's workplace is a demand for more work with fewer employees. As a result, most individuals are working a greater number of hours every week. Since so much time is being spent at work many employees are turning to the workplace for many social, relational, growth, and developmental needs, i.e. spirituality. In return for fulfilling these needs and often augmenting the emotional and mental health of employees, many individuals are giving back to their organizations in the form of decreased turnover intentions, increased performance, greater efficiencies, and increased creativity and innovation. Organizations may soon find that it is the highly relational psychological contracts and their overt emphasis on workplace spirituality which will reconcile the disparity between the newest generation's searches for purpose and meaning juxtaposed against the graying of their existing employee base.

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