

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING ON PERFORMANCE OF VIRTUAL STUDENT TEAMS

Introduction

A virtual team has become the basic unit for many organisations in the digital era. Only a few years ago, 40% of the employees spent at least half of their time at working virtually [Hoch, Dulebohn, 2017] and 85% of the corporation employees work in virtual teams [Hacker et al., 2019]. Virtual teams have emerged as a dominant structure in the contemporary business environment, creating business value [Chatfield et al., 2014]. Today, the number of organizations working virtually and the number of teams working remotely have increased dynamically.

Virtual work has obvious benefits for organizations like diverse knowledge resources, time, cost savings, and more affordable opportunities for collaboration [Gibson, Gibbs, 2006], it also comes with many management challenges [Jimenez et al., 2017; Lukić, Vračar, 2018]. Being a leader in virtual teams has now become a part of almost every leaders' daily work. Leaders will face the challenge of how to lead the team virtually and how to influence the meaning of work. Virtual work will require different means of engaging the remote workforce. It has revealed new challenges for the leaders regarding ways of caring for themselves, employees, and organisations [Yawson, 2020] and approaches to leading them under stressful and uncertain conditions. A remedy for these challenges can be taking care about spiritual well-being.

Employee well-being is a multidimensional construct, which is usually defined as subjective well-being, employees' state of happiness, sense of flourishing in life, happiness, quality of life, life satisfaction, sense of meaning and self-realization

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[Hills, Argyle, 2002; Diener et al., 2010]. According to the developing concept of spirituality since the 1990 s [Samul, 2020], spiritual well-being has emerged as a new conceptualisation of employee well-being [Fry, 2003]. Spiritual well-being is a sense of engagement in a work community, a sense of connectedness, and a sense of meaning of work [Milliman et al., 2003].

This study examined the need of paying attention to spiritual well-being at work in a virtual team. Taking into consideration the characteristics of virtual teams, it seems that there is nothing about spirituality in the context of virtual work. Thus, it is important to determine whether spiritual well-being can influence team members during virtual work. Secondly, this study explored the relationship between calling, membership and performance when working in a virtual team.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a characteristic of a virtual team and review of spiritual well-being and team performance. Hypotheses and theoretical model are then developed under this section. The next section describes the research methods and results that were used to support the field study. The remaining part of the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, limitations, and directions for further research for spiritual leadership theory development in the context of virtual teams.

1. Theoretical background

Virtual team is defined as “a group of geographically, organisationally, and/or time-dispersed workers brought together by information technology to accomplish one or more organisation tasks” [Powell et al., 2004: 7] and is characterised by temporary lifespan and membership [Purvanova, Bono, 2009]. This definition provides several challenges related to managing such a team – the lack of face-to-face relationships and a limited period of collaboration may weaken ties among members, reduce commitment, and decrease a sense of the importance of collective working, and hinder the leader’s influence on the team and on an individual member. Several studies confirm a negative impact of virtual work on relationship of virtual employees with leaders [Van Veldhoven et al., 2020]. This can limit the impact of leaders on team members’ attitudes such as motivation and commitment, which are difficult to maintain in virtual teams [Samul, Petre, 2019] “without the benefit of informal coffee, lunch, or corridor chats” [Agrawal et al., 2020: 2]. The lack of social connections makes bonding with colleagues and organisational community difficult [Graves, Karabayeva, 2020], and it is hard to maintain team’s identity [Maznevski et al., 2006]. A sense of membership can be disrupted in that situation. Thus, the requirements for creating successful virtual teams include building relationships that can enhance team performance [Zigurs, 2003]. Leaders in virtual teams are responsible for building

trust, norms and shared meanings; and establishing a group identity [Pearlson et al., 2016]. Leader should not only be leader but “results catalyst”, a business analyser, or even a coach, but also a living example [Rezgui, 2007].

A number of studies shows how teams become inspired by spirituality [Dalcher, 2016; Nandana et al., 2019]. Spirituality influences spiritual climate and team-level innovative behaviours [Pandey et al., 2019]; team productivity and life satisfaction [Jeon et al., 2013]; it adds to the number of high-performing teams [Ritter, 2014; Yang et al., 2019]. Therefore, we can expect that spiritual dimension like spiritual well-being may be significant also in a virtual team.

Spirituality at work is commonly characterised by: a sense of transcendence, calling or being called and a need for social connection or membership [Maddock, Fulton, 1998]; inner life, meaningful work, and belonging to the community [Dehler et al., 2003; Ashmos, Duchon, 2000]; a feeling of the meaning of work, a sense of interconnection with others, and mutually aligned individual and organisational values [van Saane, 2019; Ashmos, Duchon, 2000; Milliman et al., 2003]; or meaningfulness and meditative experience at work, sense of community, authenticity and working with a concern for larger social and natural environment [Pandey et al., 2019]. For the purpose of the analysis, three dimensions of spiritual well-being were chosen: calling and membership as the important dimensions for virtual team, and performance as team effectiveness. These dimensions seem to be crucial for a virtual environment that tends to reduce the feeling of calling, membership and performance [Van Veldhoven et al., 2020; Graves, Karabayeva, 2020]. The more detailed significance of these dimensions is presented below.

Calling

Analysing the existing dimensions of spirituality, it is noticed that all authors have agreed that meaning or calling are significant for creating spirituality at work. Calling refers to the “experience of transcendence or how one makes a difference through service to others and, in doing so, derives meaning and purpose in life” [Fry, 2016]. In the context of organisation calling, it is a sense of meaning and purpose of work. A sense of calling makes a professional believe his/her profession is valuable, and he/she is proud of being a member of it. This can cause one to find his/her own work’s purpose and meaning.

Membership

When a leader causes the employees to feel that their job and lives are special and meaningful, it results in membership [Chen, Li, 2013]. Membership involves establishing an organisational culture based on altruistic love whereby leaders and

followers have genuine care, concern, and appreciation for both self and others, thereby producing a sense of membership that is understood and appreciated [Fry, 2003: 695]. Appreciation may help employees feel valued, unleashing their intrinsic motivation and desire to excel [Fagley, 2012]. Having a sense of being understood and appreciated is largely a matter of interrelationship and connection through social interaction and thus membership [Fry, 2016]. People with membership have an awareness of being a part of a community and are connected to others at work.

Performance

A high degree of spirituality at work is essential to organisational performance [Fry, Matherly, 2006]. By improving spirituality at work, leaders can promote calling and membership and, thus, individual and organisational performance. Research concerning this reported that membership has an impact on team productivity [Jeon et al., 2013], and spiritual leadership is positively related to team performance through a meaningfulness climate [Yang et al., 2019]. To remain competitive and grow high-performing teams in this fast-paced business climate, organisations may need to look beyond conventional strategies to expand business profitability and workforce productivity [Ritter, 2014].

This leads us to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Calling can positively influence performance in a virtual team.

Hypothesis 2: A sense of membership can positively influence performance in a virtual team.

2. Research Method

Participants and procedure

Participants included university students of Faculty of Management. The students had to work online from March 12 to June 21 of 2020 due to COVID-19 situation. The participants that took part in the survey worked in small (4–5 persons) virtual teams. The students formed teams themselves. The participants worked only virtually and had to find a solution to certain management problems described in the case study – the same for each team. The survey was conducted with 185 students. Characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Three parts of questionnaire about spiritual leadership [Fry, 2008] were adopted in the study:

- Calling with 4 questions about a sense of work meaning in a team;

- Membership with 4 questions about the sense that a team member is understood and appreciated in a team;
- Performance with 4 questions about efficiency in producing results and outcomes in a team.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

	Respondents [n=185]	
	n	%
Gender		
Female	104	56.3
Male	81	43.7
Education		
Master	57	30.8
Bachelor	128	69.2

Source: own study.

The question of this study was slightly changed in comparison to the original questions, for example: “In my department everyone gives his/her best efforts” (original) to “In my team everyone gives his/her best efforts”; or “I feel my organisation appreciates me and my work” (original) to “I feel my team appreciates me and my work”.

The questionnaire was translated into Polish and coded so that they could be matched for further analysis. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree) was also used in this questionnaire. The questionnaire was filled by the participants after working in virtual teams (at the end of the semester). Three responses from one team are a sufficient number for data aggregation at the team level [Richardson, Vandenberg, 2005; Tracey, Tews, 2005].

3. Results

The descriptive statistics – mean, standard deviation, and correlations of calling, membership and performance in virtual teams, as well as Cronbach’s coefficient alpha are shown in Table 2. The reliability analysis indicated acceptable internal consistency (i.e., alpha = 0.70 or above) for all constructs and subscales [Hussain et al., 2019; Nunnally, Bernstein, 2010]. The reliability is acceptable for three dimensions; these values range from 0.77 to 0.89. The correlations between three constructs are positive and significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation

	Mean	Stand. deviat.	Cronb. alpha	1	2	3
1. Calling	2.90	0.89	0.77	-		
2. Membership	2.89	0.98	0.89	0.81	-	
3. Performance	2.96	0.79	0.74	0.78	0.73	-

$p < 0.05$

Source: own study.

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) as a common adopted method [Qing et al., 2019] was employed with the most important fit indices including chi-square value (χ^2), degrees of freedom (df), RMSEA, GFI, AGFI, NFI. The baseline model of the study provides the most appropriate fit indices: RMSEA < 0.05 ; GFI, NFI > 0.95 ; AGFI > 0.9 (Table 3).

The model was further analysed by using the path coefficients (β coefficients and significance). The results are given in Table 4. H1 of the study was “calling can positively influence performance in a virtual team”. The evidence from Table 4 proves H1 ($\beta = 0.396$; $t = 7.252$; $p < 0.01$). Similarly, H2 demonstrates the influence of membership on performance in a virtual team ($\beta = 0.310$; $t = 5.208$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Model fit indices

	χ^2	df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI
Baseline model	30.63	13	0.011	0.957	0.908	0.961

Source: own study.

Table 4. The path coefficients for hypotheses for the model

Hypotheses: path	β	Stand. error	t-statistics	p
H1: calling-performance	0.396	0.055	7.252	0.000
H2: membership-performance	0.310	0.060	5.208	0.000

Source: own study.

The results of the study support the tested hypothesis 1 and 2 that demonstrated a positive correlation between the constructs. The findings confirm that the calling has a positive impact on performance of a virtual student team, as well as membership. Firstly, this means that the dimensions of spiritual well-being such as: calling, membership, and outcomes such as performance are important in a virtual team. Although it could seem that spirituality in virtual work does not matter, the findings of this study have shown that spirituality is important for a team member working virtually. Secondly, the results mean that spiritual leadership strongly influences

not only the “soft” and “spiritual” side of teamwork like a sense of calling and membership, but also the “hard” aspects like performance. Thirdly, the findings showed that not all dimensions of spiritual leadership have the same significance. Particular dimensions of well-being can have different levels of influence on outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper reduces the gaps in the literature in the context of spirituality in virtual teams through indicating the correlation between calling and membership and performance. This study addresses the issue of spiritual well-being in a virtual team and has contributed to team literature development. The findings of this study showed that spiritual well-being should be considered as a concept that sheds light on the meaning of spirituality in the virtual workplace. The spiritual well-being concept promises to contribute significantly to the growth of spirituality in virtual organisations or real life organisations, where people work not only conventionally, but also virtually. In the context of a growing number of this kind of organizations and teams, spirituality may be a critical factor for creating and maintaining a sustainable workplace and a necessary condition for organisations to be successful in today’s internet-driven environment.

Next, this study has a contribution in leaders’ approaches to employees. Leaders need to be aware of the spiritual side of the members of the team. Understanding the existence of spiritual needs, such as a sense of calling, membership and desire for efforts of members, is a key task for leaders in today’s organisational environment. Paying attention to spiritual values and practising them in the context of a virtual workplace can induce feelings of belonging, being appreciated, being understood by an individual, and can improve efficiency and effectiveness of a team. The challenge for the leaders is to develop a sense of calling and membership in their employees that will affect their performance. The results obtained highlight the need to develop a spiritual leadership theory that incorporates spirituality in a virtual team and provides a better understanding of the need to meet the spiritual needs of team members by leaders.

The current study has certain limitations. The most important limitation is the small number of participants and teams. However, the classes gave the opportunity to conduct a survey that could be very difficult to carry out in the “natural” field. The second limitation is a sample of students. The business context of virtual work might be different from student context. Although, the results cannot be generalised, the study might be a very good starting point for in-depth research into the topic of spiritual well-being in virtual teams. As a further direction of research, it would be worth conducting the survey on a larger scale with a representative sample.

The next limitation is the application of only three constructs of the spiritual leadership concept in the context of a virtual team. It seems that these three dimensions are the most important according to the literature reviewed. Calling and membership as dimensions of spirituality are the most commonly mentioned in the literature, as well as performance as a positive result of teamwork. However, the characteristics and challenges of managing a virtual team are very highly specific. This, in turn, leads to the need to consider new and better dimensions of “teamwork spirituality” that can be adapted to the specific work of a virtual team. It would be worth studying all dimensions to determine the most and less important dimensions for virtual teams, or even propose other dimensions of “teamwork spirituality”. Thus, a tool for measuring “teamwork and spirituality” should be further developed.

In conclusion, this study has taken a step towards recognising the significance of spiritual well-being in a virtual team, and this can inspire further development of spiritual leadership theory in the context of teamwork.

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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING ON PERFORMANCE OF VIRTUAL STUDENT TEAMS

Abstract

Virtual teams are the basic functional units in many organisations. Worldwide pandemic situation gave additional fuel to their fast development. The aim of the study was to explore the impact of spiritual well-being understood as calling and membership on performance of virtual teams. It seems that spiritual aspects of meaningful work environment are now more important for employees than ever before. The study was based on the survey conducted among 185 students working in the virtual teams. Research findings indicate a strong positive correlation between the spiritual well-being and performance of virtual teams. This study provides insights on spirituality in the context of virtual teamwork and can be considered as a starting point for developing further research.

KEYWORDS: WELL-BEING, CALLING, MEMBERSHIP, PERFORMANCE, VIRTUAL TEAM, TEAMWORK

JEL CLASSIFICATION CODES: M12, L20

WPŁYW DUCHOWEGO DOBROSTANU NA WYNIKI WIRTUALNYCH ZESPOŁÓW STUDENTÓW

Streszczenie

Wirtualne zespoły stanowią obecnie podstawową jednostkę funkcjonalną w wielu organizacjach. Ich szybki rozwój został dodatkowo wymuszony przez globalną pandemię. Celem niniejszego badania jest określenie wpływu duchowego dobrostanu rozumianego jako powołanie i członkostwo na wyniki wirtualnych zespołów. Badania przeprowadzono wśród 185 studentów pracujących w wirtualnych zespołach z wykorzystaniem kwestionariusza ankietowego. Wyniki badań wskazują, że istnieje pozytywna korelacja między dobrostanem duchowym a wynikami zespołów wirtualnych. Niniejsze badanie może stanowić punkt wyjścia do rozważań aspektów duchowości w kontekście wirtualnej pracy zespołowej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: DOBRE SAMOPOCZUCIE, POWOŁANIE, CZŁONKOSTWO, WYNIKI, WIRTUALNY ZESPÓŁ, PRACA ZESPOŁOWA

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