

# Workplace spirituality as a mediator between organizational trust and thriving at work

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## Abstract

This study examines workplace spirituality as a mediator between organizational trust and thriving at work. Using a survey research design, data was collected from 157 employees across three hotel companies operating in the tourism and hospitality management sector in Turkey and was then analyzed with structural equation modelling. The results suggest that workplace spirituality plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work. We discuss how workplace spirituality can support an environment where employees trust their organization and can thrive at work. Practitioners can support a spiritual workplace by developing a set of foundational attributes that convey a purpose-driven and meaning-based culture where both openness and trust are supported. The findings contribute to the workplace spirituality literature and have several important implications. Limitations and future research directions are outlined.

**Keywords:** workplace spirituality; organizational trust; thriving at work; hospitality management.

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## **Introduction**

Workplace spirituality has received much attention over recent years, gaining the interest of both practitioners and scholars (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008). Scholarly attention to workplace spirituality has progressed from a primary focus on definitional and theoretical aspects to the development of valid and reliable measures, with more studies now focusing empirically on the beneficial outcomes. These outcomes include job satisfaction, organizational commitment (Neal, 2018; Vasconcelos, 2018) and employee wellbeing (Pawar, 2016) and performance (Geigle, 2012; Osman Gani et al., 2013). Overall, much progress has been made in the conceptual and theoretical development of workplace spirituality (Houghton, et al., 2016).

However, despite the recent progress, there is still a rich ground of potential beneficial outcomes and an acknowledgment that many possible moderators and mediators remain to be explored (Houghton et al., 2016). In this study, we examine workplace spirituality as a potential mediator of the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work. In doing so we respond to the call by Houghton et al (2016) for further exploration and contribute to the growing theoretical foundation of workplace spirituality.

### ***Workplace spirituality, organizational trust and thriving at work***

Scholars have argued conceptually that organizational trust plays a critical role for workplace spirituality (Burack, 1999) as a theme that is vital for a spiritual workplace (Marques et al., 2007) and as an organizational value in organizations that adopt workplace spirituality (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004). Indeed, trust is encouraged within spiritually developed organizations (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Empirically, however, studies of the relationship between organizational trust and workplace spirituality are limited, but with promising results. For example, Hassan et al. (2016) examined trust as a moderator between workplace spirituality and work satisfaction. The results showed that workplace spirituality and trust were positively related and that trust was a significant mediator of the relationship between workplace spirituality and job satisfaction.

However, the relation between workplace spirituality and thriving at work has not been thoroughly examined, although one study, Van der Walt (2018), reported a positive relationship between workplace spirituality and thriving at work and found that workplace spirituality acted as a mediator between work engagement and thriving at work. Van der Walt (2018) concluded that organizations that espouse a spiritual workplace can enhance engagement and thriving at work through an established climate of trust.

Taken together, the relationship between workplace spirituality, organizational trust and thriving at work has not been studied extensively, and the role that workplace spirituality might play in the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work is therefore not clear. This is unfortunate, as both trust and thriving at work have recently been understood as important organizational exemplars insofar as they promote positive functioning at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Examining workplace spirituality as a potential mediator of the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work would help further the theoretical development of workplace spirituality as one of the many potential mediators that remain to be examined (Houghton et al., 2016).

### ***The present study***

The purpose of this study is to examine the mediating effects of workplace spirituality on the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work. Given the relative lack of studies on workplace spirituality as a mediator (Houghton et al., 2016), our work extends the workplace spirituality literature. A further contribution is that the context of our study is the hospitality industry in Turkey. Little research has examined workplace spirituality in the hospitality industry (Haldorai et al., 2020) and little, to date, in the context of Turkey (Vasconcelos, 2018).

## **Literature review and hypothesis development**

### ***Organizational trust and thriving at work***

Organizational trust has been defined in a number of ways, for example, as a “psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395) and as expectations, assumptions or beliefs that another person’s future actions will be positive relative to one’s own interests (Robinson, 1996). Our concept of organizational trust in the present study is that organizational trust is interactional between an individual’s personality and their organization (Luhmann, 1979). Within that interaction, a critical feature of trust and subsequent behaviour is the relationship between the employee and the supervisor/manager. Accordingly, we examine trust using the organizational trust inventory, which measures trust in both the manager and the organization (Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997).

In general, organizational trust can result in a number of positive outcomes, such as a positive attitude and higher levels of cooperation and performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Trust at work can also lead to enhanced feelings of efficacy and capability (Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999), allowing greater engagement in proactive and risk-taking behaviours (Mayer et al., 1995). A climate of trust can also increase the extent to which employees are immersed

in their work and feel energized (Kahn, 1990), making trust a vital forerunner of vitality (Terry et al., 2000), and will ultimately encourage thriving at work (Kleine et al., 2019).

Several studies have begun investigating the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work. Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009), for example, examined how trust, connectivity and thriving may drive innovative behaviours in the workplace and found an indirect relationship between trust and thriving through connectivity. Koçak (2016) examined organizational trust and its impact on thriving at work and found a strong positive relationship. Jaiswal and Dhar (2017) examined how trust in the leader, servant leadership, and thriving at work may drive employee creativity. Thriving at work was found to act as a moderator that influenced the relationship between trust in the leader and employee creativity: Thriving employees who trusted their leader showed higher levels of creative behaviour. Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize:

*H<sub>1</sub>*: Organizational trust is positively related to thriving at work.

### ***Organizational trust and workplace spirituality***

Workplace spirituality has been defined at both the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, workplace spirituality is related to how personal values can promote experiences of transcendence through work and facilitate a perceived sense of connection to others as well as feelings of completeness and joy. At the organizational level, workplace spirituality relates to how the organizational culture and values can promote experiences of organizational transcendence through work, connectedness to others and feelings of completeness and joy (Hill et al., 2013). In general, the field of workplace spirituality has developed around three dimensions: the inner life, meaningful and purposeful work and a sense of community (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Houghton et al., 2016; Neal, 2018). Our concept of workplace spirituality is examined through these three dimensions as measured by the spirit at work scale (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006), which we use to operationalize workplace spirituality in the present study. It is clear from the preceding discussion that workplace spirituality is an inner, subjective experience and one which can be enhanced through the context of the workplace.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between organizational trust and workplace spirituality. Seyyar (2009) argued that the presence of spiritual emotions can reinforce a climate of trust, create peace within the organization, enhance the personal happiness of employees and contribute to organizational performance. Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) proposed several benefits of encouraging workplace spirituality, including honesty and trust. Marques et al. (2007) and Vasconcelos (2013) examined workplace

spirituality and identified trust as being crucial to a spiritual workplace. Daniel (2010) examined workplace spirituality and team effectiveness and also suggested that trust plays an important role. Hassan et al. (2016) examined workplace spirituality and work satisfaction using trust as a mediator. They uncovered a positive relationship between workplace spirituality and trust and found that trust significantly mediates the impact of workplace spirituality on job satisfaction. Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize:

***H<sub>2</sub>***: Organizational trust is positively related to workplace spirituality.

### ***Workplace spirituality and thriving at work***

Thriving at work is defined as a “positive psychological state characterized by a joint sense of vitality and learning” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 538). As a positive psychological state, thriving at work is temporary in nature. Vitality refers to feelings of being energized and alive and indicates positive emotions accompanied by energy and interest, while learning refers to a sense of continually acquiring and applying knowledge (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Vitality and learning go hand in hand as two central components of thriving at work, and in the absence of one of these, thriving does not help sustain performance (Spreitzer et al., 2012). Thus, thriving is deemed a two-dimensional construct with vitality denoting the affective side of individuals and learning denoting their cognitive side (Porath et al., 2012; Van der Walt, 2018).

The concepts of spirituality and thriving also have some commonalities. Both the inner subjective world of the individual as a dimension of spirituality and the components learning and vitality of thriving at work are psychological states that accrue subjective experiences. Workplace spirituality has been defined as a mystical or unitive experience, depicted by a positive state of energy or vitality (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006), and vitality is a central component of thriving at work. In a different context, spirituality has been shown to act as a mediator for thriving among adolescents (Dowling et al., 2004). However, research on workplace spirituality and its impact on thriving at work has generally been limited to few studies. For example, Van der Walt (2018) examined the relationship between thriving at work, work engagement and workplace spirituality. A moderately positive relationship was found between thriving at work and workplace spirituality; however, workplace spirituality influenced work engagement to a greater degree than it did thriving at work. Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize:

***H<sub>3</sub>***: Workplace spirituality is positively related to thriving at work.

### **Workplace spirituality as a mediator between organizational trust and thriving at work**

We propose that organizational trust can directly impact thriving at work (Koçak, 2016) and can be mediated by other contextual factors such as workplace spirituality. Sadykova and Tutar (2014) suggested that workplace spirituality can play a mediating role in the relationship between organizational trust and employee outcomes. Previous studies have also noted that workplace spirituality is associated with trust, but additionally with openness, where employees can operate at their highest potential and satisfy their deepest needs for growth, a key element of thriving (Palframan & Lancaster, 2019). Moreover, spiritual workplaces can enhance work engagement and thriving through an established climate of trust (Van der Walt, 2018). The conditions for a sense of community in workplace spirituality require trust, and in such a community, individuals can satisfy their need to belong and experience growth (Parboteeah & Cullen, 2003), and ultimately thrive. Similarly, meaningful work can go beyond the physical and intellectual dimensions of the work experience and connote what is important and energizing about work (Parboteeah & Cullen, 2003), with the latter feeling being closely associated with vitality and individuals who are thriving.

Based on the preceding discussion about possible interrelationships among the variables workplace spirituality, trust and thriving at work, we developed our final hypothesis to examine the mediating effects of workplace spirituality on the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work:

***H<sub>4</sub>***: Workplace spirituality mediates the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work.

To summarize, the main purpose of our research is to examine the mediating effects of workplace spirituality on organizational trust and thriving at work. Our conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1:

[Insert Figure 1 here]

## **Methods**

### ***Sample and data collection***

Using a cross-sectional survey strategy, we collected data from three hotel companies operating in the tourism and hospitality sector in the Isparta province in southwestern Turkey. We contacted the three sample organizations to ascertain their willingness to participate, and upon their consent, a total of 210 questionnaires were distributed. Subsequently, 167 questionnaires were returned ( $N = 167$ ), yielding a response rate of 78.5% (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, no identifying information was sought on the questionnaire. The respondents participated voluntarily and did not receive any compensation for their contribution. The questionnaires were standardized for all participants.

During the data analysis, ten questionnaires were excluded due to a high proportion of missing answers. Therefore, in total, 157 respondents' questionnaires were processed. 47.9% of the participants were female, and 52.1% were male. 64.4% of the participants were married, and 39.6% were not married. 37.3% of the participants had a secondary education, 37.3% were high school graduates, 9.2% held associate degrees and 16.2% held bachelor's degrees. The average organizational tenure was  $4.82 \pm 4.74$  years. The workers ranged in age from 21 to 59 years, and the mean age of the participants was  $35.55 \pm 10.02$ . Although we collected data from different sources, there was still a need to test for common method bias using Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Our analysis indicated that no single general factor accounted for the majority of the covariance among the latent factors, with factor 1 accounting for only 41.6% of the variance. As a result, common method bias was unlikely to be an issue in this study (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

## **Measures**

### ***The thriving at work scale***

We measured thriving at work with eight items from the thriving at work scale (Porath et al., 2012), which was translated and adapted to Turkish by Koçak (2017). The scale is composed of two dimensions (vitality and learning) and designed as a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*). First-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results confirmed the two dimensions, and second-order CFA was applied. The goodness of fit ( $\chi^2/SD = 1.31, p < .00, GFI = .96, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04$ ) validated the one-dimensional structure. Sample items include '*I continue to learn more and more as time goes by*' and '*I feel alive and vital*'.

### ***The organizational trust inventory***

We measured organizational trust with 12 items from the organizational trust inventory (Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997), which was translated and adapted to Turkish by Demircan (2003). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Totally disagree* to 5 = *Totally agree*) and were used to measure organizational trust. Our main reason for choosing this scale is that it measures trust in both the manager and the organization: The first eight questions measure trust in the manager, and the following four questions measure trust in the organization. The goodness of fit obtained through CFA ( $\chi^2/SD = 2.09, p < .00, GFI = .92, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .07$ ) validated the one-dimensional structure. Sample items include '*My supervisor actively seeks input from employees on most decisions about change*' and '*Employees in this organization participate in planning and decision-making during the change process*'.

### ***The spirit at work scale***

We measured workplace spirituality with 18 items from the spirit at work scale (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006). The items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Completely untrue* to 6 = *Completely true*). Ünal and Turgut (2015) also used a Turkish version of the scale consisting of 18 items. The goodness of fit obtained through CFA ( $\chi^2/SD = 2.04$ ,  $p < .00$ , GFI = .90, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07) confirmed the one-dimensional structure. Sample items include '*I am able to find meaning or purpose at work*', '*I am passionate about my work*' and '*I feel grateful to be involved in work like mine*'.

### **Results**

Table 1 presents the mean values, standard deviations, skewness/kurtosis values and Pearson correlation values of the variables included in the study. According to Morgan et al. (2004), skewness and kurtosis coefficients in the range of  $\pm 1$  show normal distribution. The skewness coefficients in this study fall within this range.

[Insert Table 1 here]

We found significant correlations between organizational trust and workplace spirituality ( $r = .59$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [.47, .68]), organizational trust and thriving at work ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [.39, .62]) and workplace spirituality and thriving at work ( $r = .65$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [.55, .73]).

The results report the mean values of organizational trust as  $4.02 \pm 0.72$ , workplace spirituality as  $3.73 \pm 0.71$  and thriving at work as highest at  $4.43 \pm 0.85$ . Positive and significant relationships were found between all variables at the  $p < 0.01$  level. We used bootstrap regression analysis and the confidence intervals obtained by the bootstrap technique to test the mediating role of workplace spirituality (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007; MacKinnon et al., 2002; Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

After validation of the measurement model, the hypotheses were tested using latent variable structural equation modeling. Organizational trust was associated with thriving at work ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting **H1**. Organizational trust was associated with workplace spirituality ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting **H2**. Workplace spirituality was associated with thriving at work ( $\beta = 0.73$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting **H3**. Organizational trust together with workplace spirituality accounted for 45% of the change in thriving at work. To assess the reverse model, we tested whether trust mediates the relationship between spirituality and thriving. The reverse model of mediation had a poorer fit, and the relationship was not found



to be statistically significant in this model ( $\beta = .005$ , 95% BCA CI [-.03, .18]). *Workplace Spirituality* → *Organizational Trust* → *Thriving at Work* was therefore not supported.

In summary, our data suggest that workplace spirituality mediates the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work. This relationship was found to be statistically significant in the model ( $\beta = .320$ , 95% BCA CI [.195, .461]). **H4** (*Organizational Trust* → *Workplace Spirituality* → *Thriving at Work*) was therefore supported. No significant differences between different groups in terms of sex, age, education status, civil status or organizational tenure were found for any of the scales.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to examine the possible mediating effect of workplace spirituality on the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work. The central findings suggest that workplace spirituality plays a mediating role for this relationship. Further, a positive relationship was found between organizational trust and thriving at work, which is consistent with a number of other studies (Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017). Our findings substantiate the notion that organizational trust and thriving at work are positively related, and crucially, that workplace spirituality positively mediates the relationship between organizational trust and thriving at work: Employee thriving was .320 higher compared to the unmediated relationship.

These findings further support the idea that higher levels of workplace spirituality may relate to higher levels of trust and thriving at work, so that there appear to be other potential benefits that accrue through workplace spirituality. Higher levels of trust may be explained by employees feeling a sense of community through the feeling of being connected to others and a common purpose (Kinjerski, 2013) and illustrate how trust can be encouraged within a spiritually enriched organization (Kriger & Hanson, 1999). However, higher levels of thriving could also be explained by the mystical element of workplace spirituality by which employees feel energized or vitalized (Kinjerski, 2013), and we note that vitality is a central element of thriving at work.

Taken together, we believe that the central features of workplace spirituality that foster both trust and thriving are openness and a supportive culture (Palframan & Lancaster, 2019). Specifically, openness and a supportive culture can support trust and help create a thriving environment where individuals can reach their full potential through self-expression (Palframan & Lancaster, 2019).

### ***Theoretical implications***

Our data provide empirical support for the argument that workplace spirituality can enhance trust among employees and the thriving of employees. The interactions of workplace spirituality, organizational trust and thriving at work have not previously been thoroughly investigated in the management and organization field; thus, the present study expands our current understanding of workplace spirituality and its effects on organizational trust and thriving at work. Also, to date, little empirical research on workplace spirituality has been conducted in Turkey (Vasconcelos, 2018), and the results of the present study add to the growing body of evidence examining workplace spirituality in other cultural and religious contexts, such as Turkey.

### ***Practical implications***

The findings of this study have important implications for practitioners. First, workplace spirituality can support an environment of trust and thriving at work. Practitioners can support a spiritual workplace by developing a set of foundational attributes that convey a purpose-driven and meaning-based culture in which both openness and trust are supported, through relational leadership which emphasizes deep listening and being fully present in an environment where staff members can speak the truth and thrive, and by supporting management practices and decisions based on spiritual values such as trust (Palframan & Lancaster, 2019).

Second, despite the individual and organizational benefits of workplace spirituality mentioned in the present study, we note that the extant literature focuses on the ways in which workplace spirituality can be misused or misappropriated, particularly for managerial control and instrumentality purposes aimed at the increased financial gain of the organization. In contrast, our study shows that, rather than being used as a managerial tool to control and manipulate, workplace spirituality is a phenomenon and trend that managers and the business world should foster (Schutte, 2016). That is, while avoiding institutionalization and abuse of spirituality, managers should sustain universality, tolerance, diversity, democracy, inclusiveness and freedom to express employees' spirituality (Karakas, 2010; Milliman et al.,

2003; Mirvis, 1997). This expression of spirituality can be facilitated by adopting the spiritual freedom model (Houghton et al., 2016), in which one outcome includes trust.

### ***Limitations***

This study has several limitations that deserve mention. First, our study was conducted in the low-tourism season, and the high-tourism season may affect the results (e.g., employee engagement and motivation levels) and as such deserves to be comparatively examined. Second, we acknowledge that personal spirituality and thriving are highly dynamic concepts; they are both subjective, psychological states that can vary from person to person (Niessen et al., 2012; Palframan & Lancaster, 2019). Accordingly, our results should be treated with caution. Third, our sample is solely based on the tourism sector of employees, which limits the generalizability of our results.

### ***Future research directions***

First, further research investigating workplace spirituality, trust and thriving at work should be carried out with a larger sample size and in different sectors where spiritual values might be prioritized. Second, given the dynamic and multidimensional natures of workplace spirituality and thriving at work, we recommend that future research utilize a longitudinal research design based on a mixed methods approach. Monitoring workplace spirituality over time, both objectively and subjectively, would meet the need for more temporal research in this field and answer the call to combine methods in workplace spirituality research (Sheep, 2006). Third, there is a surprising lack of empirical studies conducted outside of the US, and more research based on the European and Asian continents is needed (Vasconcelos, 2018). We believe that Turkey could offer a fruitful ground to bridge this research deficit and could be integrated with an Islamic dimension—not as a religion per se, but as a way of life and doing business—which could contribute to the international literature on Islamic workplace spirituality (Adawiyah & Pramuka, 2017; Kamil et al., 2011). Fourth, notwithstanding the present study, more research that examines other possible mediating or moderating effects of workplace spirituality is needed. Potential areas of further investigation might include empathy and gratitude (Houghton et al., 2016). Finally, our research focused on the beneficial outcomes of workplace spirituality, and building on the growing critical literature, it would be valuable to study both the positive and negative potentials of workplace spirituality (Karakas & Sarıgöllu, 2019).

In conclusion, the present study advances our understanding of the role of workplace spirituality in the relationship between trust and thriving at work. The data demonstrate that

workplace spirituality plays a mediating role between organizational trust and thriving at work.

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**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics and relationships between variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<b>Skew.</b>	<b>Kurt.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Organizational Trust</b>	4.02	0.72	-.491	-.402	<b>(.94)</b>		
<b>2. Workplace Spirituality</b>	3.73	0.71	-.275	-.560	.59**	<b>(.94)</b>	
<b>3. Thriving at Work</b>	4.43	0.85	-.686	-.028	.52**	.65**	<b>(.95)</b>

*Note.* \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; Cronbach alphas are shown in parentheses.