

Determinants of Workplace Spirituality among Academics in Private Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia

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Abstract

Workplace Spirituality has been part of management research for the past few years, but within the private higher education industry in Malaysia, few studies have been conducted, despite the growing trend of new studies seeking to enhance understanding workplace spirituality within developing nations like Egypt, India, and China. Within Malaysian private universities, there is little emphasis on the recognition and practice of workplace spirituality. This may be one of the reasons for the high level of labour turnover and absenteeism among the academic workforce in Malaysian private universities as compared to the aforesaid nations. This conceptual paper discusses some determinants of workplace spirituality such as personal attributes, Human Resource (HR) policies and practices, management styles and organizational commitment. The discussion hopes to contribute to a further empirical study to be conducted among private universities within Malaysia.

Key words: Workplace spirituality, private universities, academic, personal attributes, organizational commitment, human resource polices and systems, management styles

1. Introduction

The Malaysian Government has linked economic development with educational advancement and Malaysia has now become a regional centre for higher education, not just to meet the needs of a local student population but also that of international students from many nations (Morshidi,2006;Nga & Tan, 2010, Kumar 2013). Nik Muhammad *et al.* (2009) highlighted the move of the government to allocate a significant portion of the nation's financial resources to develop the educational infrastructure and exploit the evolution of a market sensitive but global, educational system (Ariokasamy, 2010).

The private higher education industry in Malaysia is characterised by diversity in its size, structure and ownership attributes. The issues of attracting student enrolment may bring a strong market orientation towards building institutional image and reputation, and meeting the needs and expectations of the customers (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

For Malaysia to keep up with the changing economics, it requires highly skilled and experienced workforce. Malaysia's multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial attributes, is acknowledged within the Asia-Pacific region (Gasemy Majid et.al. 2018). This expansion leads Malaysia to become a regional hub in terms of world class education.

1.1 The emerging role of the academic workforce

Expectations within the education industry, for the academic workforce, to hold the requisite educational qualifications and competencies, has significant implications within the private higher educational institutions (Ariokasamy, 2014). Academic work practices involve greater complexity and higher workload, without compromising on quality standards (Leong & Sohail, 2003; Jantan, *et al.*, 2006).

Teaching is considered a very sacred profession and teachers and academicians do play a role in shaping students' personal, professional and social character attributes (Kumar 2013). It is well known that organizational achievement depends on the effectiveness of the performances and the level of motivation of the individuals who shape the human capital (Imrab Shaheen, Mushtaq A.Sajid 2013).

Where HR strategies are well aligned with employee needs, and are channelled through effective communication systems, the resultant increase in employee commitment levels, will influence improved performance related behaviour and reduced labour turnover (Lehtonen, 2005; Rose & Kumar, 2006; Guest & Clinton, 2007; Perkins & White, 2009). A low level of motivation and commitment can have an undesirable effect on the academic staff, which in turn may negatively impact the students' learning outcomes (Imrab Shaheen, Mushtaq A.Sajid 2013).

Due to new technology uptake, changes in lifestyle and changes in personal values and beliefs, the academic faces

pressures to keep up with the pace of development within the Malaysian educational sector (Ariokasamy 2017). Within such a scenario, there is the expectation for universities to consider ways to enhance commitment and enable employees to thrive in a competitive market (Yusoff et al. 2017).

2. Workplace Spirituality

2.1 The Concept of Workplace Spirituality.

Belwalkar et. al. (2018) proposed that recognizing the need of the human mind and soul to find meaning in their jobs within the workplace and connecting with other workplace members would result in beneficial consequences to the individual and the organization. This concept of workplace spirituality considers the recognition of the employees' inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work and takes place in the context of community (Dehaghi et al. 2012).

Over the last two decades, interest in workplace spirituality has grown among scholars and researchers. Workplace spirituality has emerged as a justifiable new area that is considered worthy of future research (Miller, 2007; Charoenarpornwattana et al. 2016; Mohamed & Ruth 2016). It ensures that employees are motivated and experience job satisfaction. Spirituality has yet to reach a common, clear and accepted definition (Karakas 2010 & Robertson 2010), some say spirituality can be defined as inner consciousness. Several scholars say spirituality is the inner force that creates harmony

within one's soul and dwells us (Zoella 2004; Karakas 2010; Robertson2010; Riley 2014).

2.2 Corporate Application of Workplace Spirituality

Organizations such as *Boeing* considered spirituality as a tool to enhance creativity and reduce stress and anxiety. It engaged top managers to listen to poetry and stories as part of their training and development programs (Heinsohn 2012). Research studies on workplace spirituality will therefore hold a greater degree of attention from society and organization (Heinsohn 2012; Mohamed & Ruth 2016). Researchers also believe that within the highly dynamic global environment, connecting with spirituality imprints on work attitude and behaviour among all employees, which in turn enables better corporate sustainability (Heinsohn 2012). Corporate spirituality has become the new topic in leadership and businesses for the past seven years (Ghosh, 2013; Behestifar 2013).

In promoting workplace spirituality, the intention is not to bring religion and it's teaching into workplace, but rather to add value within relationships and sense of belonging and purpose between the employees and the organization (Ghosh, 2013). It is about employees experiencing their lives and work beyond the pay check, and meeting performance targets (Harrington, Preziosi & Gooden 2001: Ghosh 2013). Gogoi (2005) states that companies like Nike, Lotus, Boeing, Cola, and Ford have implemented workplace spirituality into their daily work processes.

Thakur et. al. (2016) identifies companies like NASA, IBM, World Bank, Apple, Google, Microsoft conduct yoga classes, meditation, weekend gateways as ways to deliver workplace spirituality. Successful organizations such as Hewlett-Packard, Ford Motors, the World Bank, DuPont and Apple have organized development programs for their middle managers to connect with themselves and to make them better listeners to their subordinates (Petchasawanga & Duchon 2012).

It is within the job scope of managers to be sensitive to their employee's needs, wants and desires for the following reasons;

- a) The moral responsibility to take care of their employees to guarantee a satisfactory working environment.
- b) The positive impact of spirituality on the overall attitude of employees.
- c) Employees are the one generating profit for the company, thus, the more satisfied the employees are the more they feel connected to the organization goals and strategies (Musa et al. 2012).

This paper discusses some of the factors affecting workplace spirituality among academic staff in private universities in Malaysia. Research studies indicate that some universities are moving towards building workplace spirituality applying an "inside-out" approach (Yusoff et al. 2012 & Ghosh 2013) Past studies indicate differences in the way employees in public sector look to their job as compared to those in private sector. Private sectors employees focus more on salary and benefits, whilst in

public sector it is more about internal satisfaction and job security (Kumar & Koh, 2011; Lynos 2006; Nor A'tikah & Siti Aisyah Panatik 2015).

2.3 Traditional Motivational Theories on Workplace Spirituality

As spirituality has an inevitable relationship with human needs and behaviour at work, motivation theories are best to describe human psychology. Motivational theories have been classified into three categories since 1998; need theory, cognitive theory and reinforcement theory (Islam & Hj. Ismail 2008). Motivational theories can be divided into, content theories and process theories. While a content theory highlights the vital and precise factors that, motivate employees; process theories emphasize the psychological variables that influence motivation levels in employees (Bhatti, Aslam et Sulaiman 2016).

Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is considered as the foundation in content theories, suggesting that all human beings have a set of needs and wants but however, the needs come in levels and satisfying the needs is not a motivator of behavior (Helou & Viitala 2007, Bhatti, Aslam et Sulaiman 2016). Thus, it can be said that within the Maslow's Hierarchy of needs theory, only a need that is unsatisfied can be the motivator to drive responses within human beings. Alderfer transforms Maslow Need's Theory to ERG theory; Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (Islam & Hj. Ismail 2008). McClelland (1985) as another follower of content theories identifies three main factors for motivation; affiliation, power and achievement (Rashidah &

Faisal 2015, Omar et al 2016). Herzberg in (1964) introduced the “Two Factor Theory “in which Herzberg identifies factors that will lead to employee’s dissatisfaction; pay, working conditions, equality of company policy, supervisor-employee relationship and employee- employee relationship (Bhatti, Aslam et Sulaiman 2016). Herzberg characterized factors that created employee satisfaction based on the job itself as “motivators” and factors that brought dissatisfaction to employees based on the working condition of the job as “hygiene factors” (Bhatti, Aslam et Sulaiman (2016).

Davis Skinner (1987), proposed a theory based on learning theories, explaining that behaviours resulting in rewards have a higher chance to be repeated as compared to those that resulted in punishment or lack of rewards. Generally most theories have been derived from the Western prospect, yet few studies have been done on motivation based on religion and other cultures (Bhatti, Aslam et Sulaiman 2016). The reinforcement theory postulates that if individuals are given specific, clear and measurable goals, followed by a reward, levels of motivation of employees increases with subsequent willingness to outperform themselves. (Islam & Hj. Ismail 2008).

Many scholars have agreed upon the fact that people perform effectively and efficiently when their needs are met and satisfied (Paul edabu & et al 2014, Lussier, 2000). An individual’s work takes up a significant portion of time in their lives to shape the economic foundation of their lifestyles’ (Santhappar & Alam 2005). Motivation and job satisfaction are factors that are

considered as complementary to each other. Job satisfaction is considered an attitude, which allows individuals a cognitive evaluation that influences human beliefs, emotions, and behavior (Baloch 2010)

The academic workforce in universities play a critical role in the accomplishments and success of carrying out the mission and vision of the university (Nawi et al 2016). This is the outcome of the Bentley e.t al. (2013) study that the bedrock of any university is the academic staff and therefore, satisfying their needs is crucial for the delivery outstanding academic performance in universities. Noodin & Jousoff (2009) stated that factors like salary promotions, healthy work environment, and encouragement for further research and, internal relationships have an enormous impact on level of staff motivation, and reduction in incidence of employee turnover, which enhances the overall productivity of the university. According to Lucy and Sheehan (1997) workplace environment, governance, administration and research are variables that enable the measurement of satisfaction and internal and external motivation resulting in the practice of workplace spirituality levels among academic staff in universities (Nawi et al 2016).

There have been several studies done in the field of motivation and job satisfaction among academic staff in Malaysian universities. Fauziah Noordin and Kamarizaman Jusoff (2009), Aziri, (2011), David Yong Gun Fie, (2009), and Aida Mehrad, (2011), have suggested that new recruits join an organization with the hope of fulfilling a certain need. For some

it's the need for high income, recognition and career development and for others it might be for social status, recognition, and psychological needs.

2.4 Theoretical dimensions of Workplace Spirituality

Workplace spirituality has been studied at three levels ie individual, group and organizational (Afsar & Rehman, 2015, Hasan et. al. 2016). Workplace spirituality at the individual level reflects on the employee understanding of meaning, purpose and also a sense of community (Duchon & Plowman, 2005). Group level spirituality is defined by adding meaningfulness and, sense of community, validity, and the feeling of giving back to the community (Pandey, Gupta, & Arora, 2009a).

At the organizational level, researchers define spirituality as a symbol of culture that stimulates employees' experience greatness and achievement through work, enabling their sense of connectedness that brings joy and satisfaction to them. In short, it also delivers attributes of creativity, honesty and trust, personal growth and evolution, increased level of commitment and low level of turnover (Sherafati et al 2015).

Spirituality at the workplace can also be defined by three perspectives; human resource perspective which creates a sense of work-life balance leading to employee motivation and satisfaction, the philosophical perspective that gives the employee a feeling of purpose in their life and work, and interpersonal perspective that provides the employees with a

feeling of connection and giving back to the community (Behestifar,2013).

Spirituality comprises two components: horizontal and vertical. The “vertical” factor in this context is the desire for individual self-esteem. The “Horizontal” factor is the desire to help others (Fisher 2011;Dehaghi et al. 2012). Some examples of vertical spirituality are meditation sessions before meetings and stress-free activities. On the other hand, companies that practice horizontal spirituality usually are more socially responsible, have a strong sense of community service and formal CSR practices (Dehaghi et al. 2012).

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) sees knowledge sharing behaviour and workplace spirituality as two components of academic and institutional excellence among non-academic and academic staff (Sabbir et al. 2015). In view of the beneficial outcomes seen in developing workplace spirituality, this paper aims to determine some best practices for Malaysian Universities to integrate spirituality at the workplace. Several studies have been conducted to identify determinants of workplace spirituality and this conceptual paper aims to provide understanding of the ways to combine relevant variables to understand the factors that most influence the building of workplace spirituality.

3. Antecedents of Workplace Spirituality

Following the discussion on the meaning and relevance of workplace spirituality, this paper reviews literature on probable antecedents whose presence may usher the building of spirituality within the workplace. Wan Ahmad & Abdurahman (2015) and Telman and Unsal (2013) presented the view that workplace spirituality is shaped by internal, and external factors. Internal factors are considered as the hidden characteristics of the work itself and the external factors are known as the conditions of the work, promotion, benefits, relationship with managers, policies and structure, relationship with colleagues, and job security.

According to Imrab et.al., (2013), the factors that influence the academic's motivation can be identified as workplace environment, rewards/incentives, emotional intelligence, experience, leadership, organizational culture, workload stress and administrative policies.

Additionally, factors such as organizational commitment, HR polices and systems and management styles affect the internal level of spirituality and balance, that employees seek within their work organizations. According to Choong et al.(2012), and Allen and Meyer (2000), organizational commitment is one very vital outcome that is derived from a sound management style. Employees who are committed to their organizations and believe that they are part of the decision making of the organization , will show a greater desire in achieving job performance goals (Choong et al. 2012) Organizational

commitment delivers extrinsic and intrinsic passion into the daily work responsibilities of an employee (Bencsik et. al. 2016).

3.1 Internal Factors: Personal Attributes: Personality Traits & Job Satisfaction

Primarily, studies supported the humanistic approach, stating that a strong relationship lies between employees' behavior and their inner feelings and experiences, in the long run affects the team (Robbins, 2005; Daniel 2012). An academic's motivation is acknowledged by levels of commitment, hard work, loyalty and level of work satisfaction (Imrab Shaheen, Mushtaq A.Sajid 2013).

Other personal factors, like level of experience, age, gender, knowledge, skills, intelligence (EI) and personal traits play a defining role in the level of employee work process; motivation as well as satisfaction, leading to the practice of a sound workplace spirituality in any given organization. (Wan Ahamd & Abdurahman 2015).

Employee behaviour is a very complex area and much of human behaviour and attitudes goes back to their childhood, and theoretical studies have categorized a range of personality traits, that help managers, and employees to better understand behavioural elements. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, known as MBTI, is used worldwide for assessing personalities, describing 16 personality traits; within the parameters of extraversion vs. introversion; sensing vs. intuitive; thinking vs. feeling and judging vs. perceiving (Robbins & Judge 2018).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is one dimension of a personal attribute that has manifested as one important and valuable factor impacting on employee performance (Shahhosseini 2012). Emotional intelligence as the ability to understand one's own feelings and have empathy for the feelings of others with the consequent regulation of one's emotion in a way that enhances relationships. (Robbins & Judge 2018). This attribute may be more important for personal success than IQ, as unlike IQ, emotional intelligence can be improved, as it is a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking (Ying et al ,2012; Nor A'tikah et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2016).

Job satisfaction as explained by Santhappar & Alam (2005), as a view towards work, that when absent, impacts outcomes like labour turnover, absenteeism, lack of commitment etc. An employee's job satisfaction is considered the main factor leading to recognition, promotion, income, and the willingness to achieve fulfilment that also results in meaningful work, harmony, purpose and acceptability (Kaliski 2007; Tabassi & Bakar 2009, Hasan, et al 2016). Motivation and job satisfaction are factors which complement each other. Job satisfaction is considered an attitude, which allows individuals a cognitive evaluation that influences human beliefs, emotions and behaviour (Baloch 2010).

3.2 External Factors: Management Style

According to Choong et al (2012), and Allen and Meyer (2000), another factor that highly affects work attitude, is management style and decision-making. Within the current workplace where workers prefer being in an environment where management is flexible and stress free, the degree of control that a superior exercises over a subordinate, may lead to dissatisfaction, stress and burnout (Amzat 2012). Decision making and management style are interrelated, and Rowe's and Boulgraide's decision making style theory (Misra et al. 2012) explain the importance of a sound and active process within organizations (Azmat,2012). Rowe and Boulgraide's theory focus on four dimensions of decision making; directive, analytical, conceptual and behavioural in which in every dimension, level of tolerance and social focus is being measured. Having the right management style and decision-making process, enhances managerial performance affecting satisfaction among academic staff (Misra et al. 2012).

Another factor emerging in management style and leadership in organizations is the value given to workplace spirituality. In the 21st Century, pioneers in the business world are understanding that a business needs to create a balance between the interest of employees, the interest of the company and the interest of the community (Abhyt et al 2011). Successful managers or leaders believe that workplace spirituality affects performance in a positive manner (Zoella 2004; East 2005). Fairholm (2000), writes in his paper that leadership

/management lead by spirituality brings creativity, vision, and allows the recognition of both one's own interest as well as that of others (Zoella 2004; East 2005). Despite all these characteristics said about managers and spirituality, one needs to be aware that managers too, are employees of that organization, appointed by those of higher rank and that they must perform tasks and be accountable for the results, to ensure performance and satisfaction of the shareholders who are the legitimate owners and investors who have expectations of a reasonable profit level earned by the organization. Managers are considered the middleman in organization, channelling all rules, policies, strategies and agendas from the Board of Directors to employees throughout the workplace. Thus, managers too need workplace spirituality, satisfaction, motivation, finding purpose and value in their daily workplace interactions.

Although workplace spirituality is a recent topic, it has yet to evolve to all industries and cultures, starting with a manager's awareness of employee's values, and finding ways to nurture their sense of meaning and spirituality that leads to satisfaction and therefore enhanced performance (Pawar 2008). When managers hold the perspective that employees are individuals who come to work to fulfil their inner expectancy as well as their other needs, they are likely to see performance inconsistency, low levels of involvement, high labor turnover, etc., as signs of lack of motivation and lack of employees finding a sense of meaning and value from their work. This consciousness could save companies

millions in terms of investment and sometimes even legal suits (Tripathi & Agarwal, 2013).

Studies have also been conducted on two different approaches towards workplace spirituality within a manager's attitude: an individual focused approach (Pawar 2008, Tripathi & Agarwal, 2013). and a group/organization focused approach (Chakraborty 1993, Tripathi & Agarwal, 2013). The individual focused approach follows the idea that all humans are driven firstly by their emotions, and feelings, and only after that by reason and logic. A wise manager who can see these patterns in the daily activities and attitudes of their employees, will then be able to analyse these actions, with the goal of arriving at 'win-win' that benefits both the individual employee and the organization. On the other hand, the organizational focus approach includes spiritual values within the organization, the HR rules and practices, and business goals and values that is beneficial to both parties (Tripathi & Agarwal, 2013).

A sound management style and commitment is vital for Malaysian private universities, due to the economic transformation program (ETP), and the need for producing a high-quality education system, which ensures the teaching quality as well as the enhancement of foreign student's enrolment in the private institutions.

3.3 External Factors: Organizational Commitment

Researchers state that community enhancement at the workplace through consultations and training, results in workplace spirituality, that is based on trust, proper communication and genuine feelings of trying to make the process of work better and smoother. It therefore becomes important to implement a structure that is aligned with the organizational values, and missions, that allows employee to feel powerful, in charge, and passionate with a sound interaction between these values and the employees (Marschke 2007).

Research indicates the view that managers need to promote, create and maintain organizational commitment as whole and individual performance by enhancing spirituality in the workplace. (Rego & Cunha 2008; Kamoche & Pinnington 2012; Campbell et. al. 2014). There have been studies mentioning that the effect of religion and spirituality on organizational commitment is far greater than factors such as age or income (Heinsohn 2012; Mohamed & Ruth 2016).

Meyer and Allen introduced a model in which commitment was labelled into three styles: affective, continuance and normative. Employees who are committed to their organizations will show great desire in achieving the goals set, leading to overall enhancement of performance (Rego & Cunha 2008; Choong et. al. 2012, Campbell et al 2014).

Affective commitment enables an employee to acknowledge their value and support as an individual and their

work value as an association with the organization (University). Affective commitment is expressed through daily social communications, and social respect (Campbell et al 2014). According to Rego & Cunha (2008); Campbell et al (2014), it was found that affective commitment is mostly influenced by variables such as job clarity, goal clarity, job challenge, personal feedback, personal worth, value, and participation.

Normative commitment is when the staff feels a sense of tangible and/or intangible benefits from the environment that allow staff internalize the values. Continuance commitment is the awareness of the cost and economic value remaining with an organization (Robbins & Judge, 2018), and that is the main reason for employees not to leave the organization, whilst normative commitment it is about loyalty and moral duty. In other words, “employees who are stronger in affective commitment stay with their organization because to simply *want to*, others stronger in continuance commitment stay because they *need to*, lastly, some stay because they are stronger in normative commitment and simply feel they *should stay* within the organization (Heinsohn 2012; Campbell et al 2014).

Therefore, organizational commitment is considered an important variable for the implementation of workplace spirituality in universities, as it allows employees to feel loyal involvement, trust and feeling a meaningful work, that also reduces absenteeism and saves organizations huge financial budgets on employees and re-selecting employees. Hence it is important to study the effect of organizational commitment, management

style and personal attributes on workplace spirituality as they are intertwined leading to overall excellent, efficiency and effectiveness.

3.4 External Factors: Human Resource Policies

Many scholars from all around the world have conducted research on the human resource (HR) function and the impact it delivers on workplace performance, motivation, and satisfaction, yet there has been lesser research on the effect of HR rules and policies on workplace spirituality and its outcomes (Rego & Cunha, 2008; Kamoche & Pinnington, 2012; Campbell et.al., 2014; Charoenarpornwattana et al. 2016).

As more organizations realize the importance of their human capital, the harder the task of HR departments becomes to ensure that companies have the best fit for the right jobs (Chen et al. 2016). HR systems and policies must be considered a vital asset of organization (Musa et al. 2012). If implemented properly, organization activities may lead to competitive advantage. Workplace spirituality has become a foundation to academics. If employees were able to bring along their spiritual aspects to work, their daily level of fulfilment will increase (Charoenarpornwattana et al. 2015). This in turn will lead to lower turnover, and absenteeism (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2008). Spirituality in the workplace is not entirely new to HR related matters like work-life balance, performance setting and evaluating, and rewarding staff for their work and outcomes. In essence, the HR enforces the supportive workplace, where communication is open and fair in expressing

employee needs and their spiritual being as individuals (Charoenarpornwattana et al. 2015).

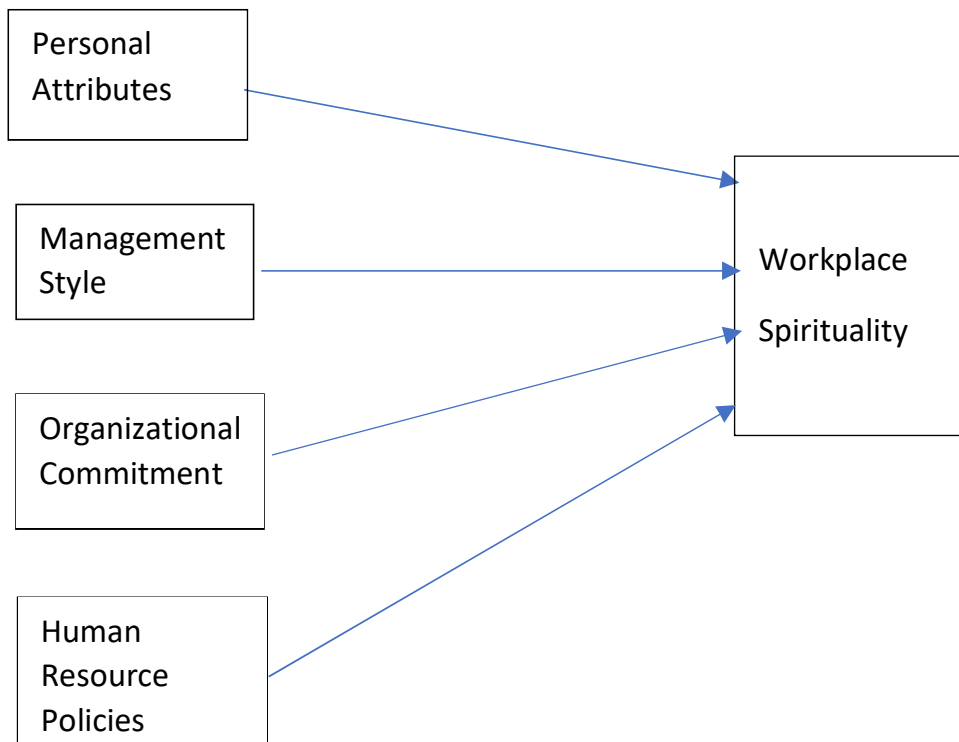
Arustei (2015) categorized HR into three main dimensions: systems, practices and philosophies, and process. HR policies are the strategies and goals set by human resource management (HRM) and HR practices are methods set to carry out HR policies (Arthur and Boyles 2007; Arustei 2015). Some researchers suggest that HRM has two functions; the primary function which is the selecting, hiring and maintaining employees, whilst, the secondary function focuses on management activities, as well as regulating structural organizational change (DeSimone & Werner, 2012; Charoenarpornwattana et. al. 2015).

In view of rapid changes in technology, employee's needs and competitive market trends, implementing human resource policies have become a very critical challenge. While it is the employees of all organizations, universities included, who are the doers of the work, it is the HR department's responsibility to ensure the right work ethics, moral and environmental climate is in place and that the right people are selected to perform the task. Also HRM is responsible for hiring the managers, that follow and transfer the organizational value, culture and goal along the hierarchies and employees (Tabassi & Bakar 2009, Charoenarpornwattana et al. 2016).

4. Conceptual Framework

Based on the review of literature a conceptual framework was developed that considers four independent variables that influence the dependent variable: workplace spirituality.

Figure 1



5. Conclusion and Future Direction

This conceptual paper discussed factors which influence workplace spirituality, focusing on academic staff in private universities. Four main factors, namely personal attributes, management style, organizational commitment and human resource policies were found to have an influence on workplace spirituality. An empirical research is proposed to examine to what extent these factors significantly affect workplace

spirituality among academics in the private universities in Malaysia. The findings will contribute to the body of knowledge, especially among academics as workplace spirituality, and can enhance the academic structure and improve the quality of academics and individuals as teachers of the young generation, both local and international.

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