

Religious work environment – Benefit or Challenge?

A qualitative study on motivation at work in a religiously affiliated hospital

Abstract

Due to global competition, skills shortage and high turnover rates, it is more important than ever to understand and promote employees' motivation to work in order to ensure efficient quality deliverables. In this context, workplace spirituality and faith are important and emerging trends in business that should receive managers' attention. This qualitative paper examines the particular work environment of a faith-based hospital and its effects on employees' motivation, work ethics and their intention to be loyal to the company. A further aim is to figure out if any such organization attracts a special type of employee, with a special set of values and attitudes. The study asks whether a religious work environment provides a beneficial or challenging situation for a company or organization.

Introduction

The existence of the religious added value that can be found in faith-based organizations (Seemann et al., 2015) provides the basis for this research. A growing interest in the role of religious dimensions and factors in business life cannot be denied (Longenecker et al., 2004). Currently, people spend a large proportion of their life at work. Their social inclusion and recognition are being considerably influenced by their job choice, their work environment and their co-workers. On this basis, people seek value, support and meaning at work (Cash and Gray, 2000, Garcia-Zamor, 2003, Duchon and Plowman, 2005) and in their life. They want their work environment to be a place where they can reveal and express their entire selves instead of leaving parts of who they are in front of organizational doors. As described by Miller and Ewest (2013), more and more employees in all types of organizations begin to integrate their faith and spirituality in the workplace and their daily working routine wherever it is feasible and reasonable. An increase in prayer groups for business people, for example, can be observed (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002). Understanding the distinctive characteristics of a faith-based organization and the resulting effects on employees is supposed to help secular organizations accommodate this desire by providing a type of spiritual and religious work environment for their employees. For non-religious organizations, this suggestion opens up the chance to take advantage of the beneficial effect without being exposed to the challenges a faith-based organization has to address.

Few qualitative and quantitative studies explore the phenomenon of a religious work environment on employees' motivation to work, their job satisfaction, their organizational commitment and organizational performance (Ibrahim and Angelidis, 2005, Seemann et al., 2015). Therefore, this study fills a research gap by answering the following questions:

RQ 1: To what extent does the religious affiliation of an organization affect organizational and employees' performance?

RQ2: Does a religious work environment represent a benefit or a challenge for both employees and management?

The paper is structured as follows: First, literature on the key concepts of general motivation to work and on religious and spiritual work environments are outlined. The methods section explains the

study approach, the participant interview method used in this research and the social background of this study. I then present the results of this study, including study participants' most significant answers. The concluding section discusses the results, limitations, and wider applicability of this research, and identifies areas for further exploration.

Theoretical Background

Motivation to work and the antecedents of organizational outcomes have been issues of great interest for the past few decades and are still of high importance. Currently, in the uncertain economic environment, most organizations feel the pressure to operate more efficiently while reducing costs at the same time. Motivational theories provide information on how job performance and efficiency can be increased. Even against the background of a lack of skilled employees, motivation at work plays an important role. The situation especially prevails to a large extent in the healthcare sector. Nursing shortage is a problem that occurs worldwide. Low recruitment and high turnover rates are a well-known problem (Chan et al., 2013). Due to enlargements of the European Union, for example, a significant movement of nurses between EU countries is observable (Zander et al., 2013). The US is experiencing an undoubted nursing shortage (Janiszewski, 2003), and so are China (Yun et al., 2010) and other Asian countries. The need for taking action to retain skilled labour is clearly evident.

One of the reasons for the shortage of skilled labour can be found in demographic reasons. Trends that change and shape the current work force include, amongst others, single parents, part-time and temporary workers, double-income households and second career chances. Another important influential factor is the ethical working climate of an organization (Silén et al., 2012). Wuthnow (2003) indicates the emergence of a post-materialist era, with the consequence that people are no longer satisfied by only money and belongings but grasp at new individual values of autonomy, personal fulfilment and self-expression. Giving employees the possibility to find purpose, meaning, fulfilment and satisfaction in the work they do can help to reduce turnover rates and keep people motivated. Work motivation can be defined as "(...) a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual's being, to initiate work-related behaviour and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration" (Pinder, 2014, S.11). Thus, providing a motivating and stimulating working environment is an important and challenging role for any manager (Mann, 2006).

One motivating factor can be found in transcendental approaches and faith. Religion and spirituality are often taboo in America and overall in the corporate environment. However, as already mentioned, many employees seek special meaning at work (Garcia-Zamor 2003). Pargament et al. (2005) emphasize the strong influence religion has on factors such as personality, health, emotions and virtue, and therefore on the motivation to perform. Spirituality, whether religious or non-religious, is recognized as giving meaning to a person and the world (Delbecq, 1999, Neil, 2013). According to the study of Milliman et al. (2003), workplace spirituality has a significant positive effect on factors, such as intrinsic work satisfaction and organizational commitment. Additionally, Garcia-Zamor (2003) finds that a spiritual workplace leads to an environment that supports happiness and increased performance. Longenecker et al. (2004) assume an influence of religious beliefs on handling ethical issues in business, because believers follow certain principles. Therefore, it can be considered an essential factor in ethical business decision-making. Hence, I assume that a religious working environment provides a fruitful basis for a satisfying and highly efficient working climate that enables a loyal commitment to the organization.

Another worthwhile subject to explore arises from the question of whether a religious work environment attracts a certain type of employee with particularly high ethical standards and social

values. Numerous studies over the past few decades have presented evidence that an increased motive to serve the public good is prevalent in the public sector workforce (Bøgh and Serritzlew, 2012, Bozeman and Su, 2014, Dur and Zoutenbier, 2014). The influence of public service motivation on job satisfaction, turnover rates, organizational commitment and performance was examined and explained with varying degrees. Wright and Grant (2010) summarize that people with higher public service motivation are more likely to work for public organizations because they obtain satisfaction through providing public service, which results in an overall better job performance. This finding derives from an intrinsic motivation and the feeling that the type of work is intrinsically rewarding. In his study, Light (2002) indicated stronger motivation and higher satisfaction linked to meaningfulness of the work for employees in the nonprofit sector as well, even though they have to contend with less payment compared to private and often excessive workloads. Thus, I consider the public service motivation concept to be applicable or even intensified for faith-based organizations, as faith is supposed to function as an additional motivator.

Faith-based organizations range from small local companies to powerful and influential corporate groups. Especially in the healthcare and nursing sector, they became an indispensable part of the work. Religiously affiliated nonprofit hospitals play an important role in Europe, e.g., in Germany, where 85% of all nonprofit hospitals have a religious background. Even more important are faith-based hospitals in the US where they support the healthcare of millions of Americans and provide a type of safety net for the poor and vulnerable (Chou et al., 2012, Metcalfe, 2002). They are committed to the concept of social welfare, as they have to follow their moral concepts and mission, but they must also be competitive and keep their business viable (White and Dandi, 2009), which results in an often conflicting situation.

The religious background of an organization can be understood as a multidimensional construct including specific beliefs, behaviours, rituals and rules (Koenig, 2012). Therefore, a basic distinction among daily routine is observable when comparing a faith-based and a non-faith-based organization. Berger (2013, S. 16) describes religious organizations as a “unique hybrid of religious beliefs and sociopolitical activism”. For this reason, a religiously affiliated hospital was chosen as the social background for this study.

Methods

Study area

The interviews were conducted among employees in a nonprofit hospital belonging to Adventist Health Systems in the southeast USA in December 2013. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a Protestant Christian denomination distinguished by its observance of Saturday. Their members believe in the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Adventist Health System owns and manages hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies, health care systems and an array of other services. With 45 hospitals located across the USA, the Adventist Health System is the largest not-for-profit Protestant hospital system in the country. It is a faith-based health-care organization with more than 74,000 employees maintaining a tradition of caring for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of every patient (AdventistHealthSystem, 2015). Their mission is to “*Extend the healing ministry of Christ*”. They state that, “*We exist to serve the needs of our communities in harmony with Christ's healing ministry and incorporate Christian values at every level of service*”.

The aim of the study was to explore the views of a range of Human Resources (HR) professionals and employees on the overall working climate, the motivation to work and possible challenges in a faith-based environment. As I assumed an influencing effect of a religiously affiliated workspace on the type of employee it attracts, it is timely and relevant to talk to both groups. Therefore, individual interviews with 5 HR professionals and 5 nurses were conducted to find out their individual

perspectives regarding motivation to work in a nonprofit faith-based environment. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored but also allow the interviewer to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Gill et al., 2008). The informants were selected based on their area of operation. The hospital chaplain facilitated the selection of participants, and each participant was given a choice to either participate or not. An interview guide was used during the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Variable		N
Occupational area	Nurse	5
	HR	5
Sex	Female	7
	Male	3
Denomination	Adventist	3
	Other	7
Work experience	Median	22 years
Worked in secular environment		8

Data analysis

Data were analysed according to areas covered. The audio-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim following predefined rules and analysed thematically for the identification of central issues using MAXQDA 11 software. Therefore, a double coding was used to minimize subjective bias. The transcript codings were compared and discrepancies between the coders discussed. The coding scheme included code name and definition, text examples and coding rules. The analytical approach was based on a mixture of deductive and inductive methods (Burla et al., 2008).

Results

Depending on the situation, the general consensus of the interviewees was that the religious work environment is promoting a healthy climate where it is very pleasant to work. There are several factors worth mentioning that were influenced by the religious affiliation of the observed hospital, either in a good way or in a less favourable way. As motivating positive factors such as spiritual nourishment that arose from the religious work environment, the overall warm and familiar working climate, humble and dedicated co-workers, benefits and securities for the staff, and the feeling that the human is the focal point instead of the business, were mentioned. Participants also indicated that management, patients and employees have higher expectations to themselves, their work and their behaviour due to the religious affiliation. This idea is assumed to result in a more effective way of working. However, certain challenges were also noted with respect to a faith-based working environment. Some of the informants mentioned that management is too compassionate and is therefore incapable of holding employees accountable for possible missteps. Additionally the feeling that employees of the same faith, here Adventist, prefer to be promoted did not support a satisfying working climate. The findings are discussed in detail as follows.

Who is attracted by a faith-based nonprofit hospital?

Based on the public service motivation theory, the literature confirms that people who are working in the public or nonprofit sector have to be driven by an intrinsic motivation instead of extrinsic incentives. This is because performance assessment in these sectors is mostly poor and materialistic incentive systems are often insufficient or inexistent (Dur and Zoutenbier, 2014). People with distinctive public service motivation grow in their community based work as they get the chance to do something meaningful and make their full contribution to society (Wright and Grant, 2010). The existence of this intrinsically rewarding feeling was confirmed by several participants in varying degrees. Following are answers from nurses regarding the question of what their motivation is to come and do their job:

"What is my motivation? Probably helping people. Caring for people. Knowing that you can make their burden a little bit lighter, the pain a little bit less. That's number one."

"The most important factor of motivation... I just think the reason I do this job is because I care about people. And I want to help them feel better, do better. If they are not feeling better I at least walked the journey with them. Helped as much as I can. That's probably the biggest motivator."

Interestingly, the lower payment compared to a position in a for-profit hospital or other corporate environment was not necessarily perceived as negative.

"So I think that our staff ...overall, not always but overall I think they understand why we are here and they chose to work here because it is a Christian organization. And not because we pay them the most or because some other reason. But they enjoy working in a faith-based organization."

"...I think you have to recognize that the payment may not be comparable to what you receive in a secular workplace. However, you receive so much more. You receive more satisfaction..."

"When they come here, I think you have to recognize that the payment may not be comparable to what you receive in a secular workplace. However, you receive so much more. You receive more satisfaction and I think you have more peace within work versus a secular."

Religious pluralism is also not a problem. Despite the sometimes occurring public opinion that one has to be Adventist to work or be treated in the hospital, all cultures and religions are welcome. Indeed, there is a broad variety of religions among the employees of the hospital. Nonetheless, everybody has to feel comfortable working in a religious environment.

"All staff has to be comfortable working in a Christian organization. Meaning when we talk about our patients, and when we talk about things going on in the hospital, it's often if not always tied back to the mission. So, for someone to work here, they have to be ok with that. They have to understand what Christ's mission was, what his reason for being here was, and why we are extending that on a daily basis."

Participants also confirmed that there are people looking exactly for that type of organization to work in, because for them, the benefits of working in a faith-based environment outweigh, for example, lower payment. However, it was mentioned and emphasized repeatedly that you do not have to be of any particular religion or a believer to be a part of this hospital.

"Oh yes, I definitely feel like that's true and there's lots of people that work here because they want to work in a Christian facility."

"The faith-based makes the difference in the people that you encounter, because you can work here if you are not a believer. But you can't work in this environment and be not surrounded by individuals who are believers and not be impacted by it."

Overall, I can assume that comparable to public sector motivational theories, a religious affiliated nonprofit sector attracts a special type of employee with a specific mindset and values. It is worth noting that people who are not intrinsically motivated are not motivated by the faith-based surrounding. However, for people who are already motivated by what they do, they experience boosting effects in their motivation, support and encouragement to do their best.

Benefits of a religious work environment

Spiritual nourishment

It is important to distinguish religion, which refers to a set of beliefs and rituals, and spirituality, which is associated with the desire for meaning, deeper values (Duchon and Plowman, 2005), a sense of wholeness and connectedness (Milliman et al., 2003). Nonetheless, spiritual nourishment can arise from a religious background (Milliman et al., 2003), as the boundaries between these two are sometimes blurred. Religion, with its beliefs and prayers, can be a means through which one can explore one's spirituality, and it is supposed to provide spirituality with more depth and discipline (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002). According to Duchon and Plowman (2005), religion offers a context through which individuals can pursue their spirituality. In general, research shows that there are attempts to figure out whether spirituality is or is not significantly related to organizational performance (Hill and Smith, 2003, Duchon and Plowman, 2005). Workplace spirituality is considered to have a positive effect on employees' performance, motivation and satisfaction (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002, Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002). Moreover, workplace spirituality leads to increased honesty and trust within the organization (Wagner-Marsh and Conley, 1999, Seemann et al., 2015). In line with the research, all participants of the study express themselves to be very delighted about working in a religious environment and perceived the climate as very motivating and satisfying. An interviewee from the HR department stated when asked if there was any impact on employees' job motivation due to the religious affiliation of the hospital: c

"Yes! I definitely! Their faith motivates them to create an atmosphere or create... just positivity!"

Burack (1999) indicates that workplace spirituality leads to an increased sense of personal fulfilment of employees and positive effects on the perceived stress level can be noticed (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002). One of the nurses answered the question regarding the overall impact of the religious environment:

"But the fact that this organization provides so much positivity and so much effort on doing better and growing, keeping that in the back of your mind, when things do get rough and hard for you, than things are going to be alright. And that is part of being a faith-based organization. Things do get better."

Berger (2003) revealed one important characteristic of religiously affiliated organizations is that the intrinsic motivation is often based on faith. By analysing several mission statements she concludes that a divine source of guidance provides a basis and template for individual development and motivation. Some interviewees indicated, very clearly, that their faith and the possibility to bring and live their faith at work supports their motivation and urges them to do better and achieve more. The following statement was an answer when asking for the most important personal motivating factor:

"Faith! Us being a faith-based organization. That gives everybody that works here in this hospital the motivation they need to carry out their jobs."

Consequently, it has to be noted, the religious and spiritual environment and the employee's own faith provide a fruitful source of inspiration and motivation for these employees to perform outstandingly, achieve excellent results for themselves and their patients, and experience positivity in their daily routine at work.

High expectations

It was mentioned remarkably often that expectations on performance are very high in this hospital not only managements' expectations but also employees' expectations to themselves. Again, this finding goes back to the religious background of the organization, as it has to accomplish its mission. Research shows that the core values of these organizations are their explicit religious mission statement, including their vision and values (Vanderwoerd, 2004).

"Because when you have a mission statement that says to extend the Healing Ministry of Christ, you are holding yourself way above just any mission statement that is given by any company."

"And it goes to customer service, you know, it goes to their willingness to help someone, it may not necessarily be their patient, it may not be necessarily their department, but the expectation it is that high-level customer service expectation. But it's because we're a Christian organization. You know, that's the overarching theme, with the expectation."

Advantages over secular hospitals

Most of the participants had worked for a few years in non-religious corporate environments. Three participants also had professional experience outside of the healthcare sector. According to the participants, the most important difference when comparing a religiously affiliated hospital to a secular organization is the warmer atmosphere. This result is in line with the findings of Seemann et al. (2015). These authors indicate that patients perceive nonprofit hospitals to be warmer than their for-profit counterparts. Nonprofit hospitals with a religious affiliation are perceived as even warmer. During the interviews, the informant stated that employees in a faith-based organization are more tolerant, humble and dedicated, which makes it pleasant and easy to get along and work with them. Furthermore, the conversation appears to be much more pleasant and there is less profanity. One of the participants explained when asked for the most important differences:

"You know, the Chaplin, prayer services...they just offer a warm environment. A friendly environment. And you get the impression that they care for you. So that's important to me."

Another important thing that was frequently mentioned was prayer and prayer services in the hospital. It was stated that all meetings, at least the important ones, start with prayer. This leads to a certain community feeling and provides a special, peaceful atmosphere and awareness. The effects of prayer are often associated with those of meditation. It helps people to focus on what is important (Czech et al., 2004)

"I just think that... because of the emphasis on religion, it creates a better atmosphere here, a warm atmosphere. It is very engaging, (...) all of our meetings here start with prayer, it is very positive. It's a very positive environment here and I enjoy it a lot."

"You know not all of our meetings begin in prayer, it's the larger ones but it reminds you of what our core values are on a continual basis. You know it reminds you that you are supposed to be forgiving and that we need to treat each other much kinder and tolerant than you would in a corporate environment. "

Challenges of a religious work environment

The two main areas that emerged in the analysis were a lack of accountability and managers who are too compassionate.

Lack of accountability

Ebrahim and Weisband (2007) identify transparency, answerability or justification, compliance, and enforcement or sanctions as the core elements of accountability, including the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions, products, decisions, and policies. Strong leadership and adept management are important considerations for employees' motivation and engagement.

Six out of nine informants indicated that there is a problem with the lack of accountability.

"The one downside of this organization, the faith-based, is sometimes they're so busy focused on "let's be kind and let's try to do what's best" that they forget that there still has to be accountability. We are still a business. We still have to make enough money to keep our doors open. People like me "coming in from the private sector, think "yeah we want this great and positive environment" but in the end we still have to be held accountable for our actions and our jobs. And sometimes people don't do this and this is very frustrating."

On the other hand, some interviewees described that they feel more comfortable to admit their failures due to the warmer environment and the familiar atmosphere. Thus, it can be summarized that holding people accountable provides a basis for a viable organization but must be carefully distinguished from blaming somebody.

Compassion

Compassion is widely described as feeling sympathy and sorrow with somebody who is affected by unfavourable circumstances. According to McCormick (1994), compassion can lead to an inner or moral conflict when a manager feels the need to reveal compassion while the organizational pressure forces him or her to make tough business decision. Pursuant to the participants, a faith-based environment is associated with a good-natured, understanding and forgiving working climate. It is acknowledged that everybody makes mistakes from time to time and the prevailing opinion is to be supportive and give everybody a second chance. This attitude can be obstructive and provides a challenging situation in regard to having to make critical business decisions.

"When the manager is too compassionate, we have to pull back and say "hey, these are the rules" we have to follow our rules."

"There are expectations on how we do business because of the fact that we are a Christian organization. So I think that can be challenging when you are making tough business decisions that may not be necessarily understood by everyone across all levels of the facility."

It is evident that religion and spirituality can also promote distrust and accusations of preferential treatment (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002). One of the participants stated that one could get the impression that only people of the same faith, here Adventist, are promoted and suggested for higher positions. In an organization that is open to all denominations, such perceived behaviour undermines the trust and loyalty of employees.

Discussion

The paper highlights issues pertaining to the benefits and challenges of a religious work environment, based on the example of an Adventist hospital in the US.

It turned out that a religious work environment attracts a special type of employee with a certain pre-existing work ethic. They are mostly self-motivated and driven by the desire to help and support other members of the community. Some of the participants noted that they are motivated by faith, social and religious cohesion, and warm and sincere working relations. The high expectations to themselves that are characterized by the religious affiliation help to keep standards above average. The respectful, friendly and helpful treatment of colleagues amongst each other is one of the biggest differences when compared to non-faith-based organizations. Participants mentioned teamwork and compassion, spiritual nourishment and an overall good feeling when coming to work. The chance to support patients, both medical and spiritual, gives the work a special meaning. This results in a fruitful and caring work environment, which leads to a stronger commitment to the organization and motivation to work.

As assumed, besides the positive aspects of the religious work environment, there are also certain challenges and disadvantages in a religious-affiliated organization that have to be taken into consideration. The demotivating factors are mostly related to management. Management that is too compassionate and a lack of accountability were observed as challenges and repeatedly by several staff members. They indicated exaggerated compassion and low accountability as a typical problem of a religious work environment, which results in dissatisfaction and incomprehension among staff members.

Conclusion

It is evident that overall, we are moving to a more open, more diverse and more value-expressive environment. This phenomenon is not going to stop in front of organizations' gates. People are obtaining a part of their social identity from work, and therefore, there is clearly a need to meet employees' requirements for a more meaningful workplace and added work values. The study of Ibrahim and Angelidis (2005) confirms the positive impact of a religious background on organizational performance based on the positive relationship with the staff and stakeholders. Thus, understanding the special features of a religiously affiliated organization and the effects on employees might help secular organizations provide a spiritual work environment for their employees to take advantage of the beneficial effects, without having to address the identified weaknesses. Based on these findings the following recommendations are made:

An idea that is easy for secular organizations to implement is to begin a meeting with a recurring ritual comparable to prayer. This could be a short meditation exercise, for example, that helps people to calm down and focus on the things that are important. Detached from religion, companies can offer meditation or yoga courses, teaching relaxation techniques and providing relaxation rooms. This is assumed to help employees redefine their values and mission and find their selves (Cash and Gray, 2000).

The work ethic, the working climate and the high demands on oneself that arise from the faith-supporting environment provide not only a chance for religious organizations but also the possibility to achieve growth in motivation in secular organizations if there is a chance for employees to practice and show their faith. This tolerant and supportive approach can help employees combine their private and professional lives and find the special meaning they are looking for. Even reflection on moral values without referring to a certain religion might help motivate people at work.

Defining and promoting a mission statement that illustrates the vision and values of the organization, similar to a religious mission statement, can help employees' identify more closely with the company and therefore be more loyal and set higher personal standards.

It should also be mentioned, that mixing business with religion is walking a fine line. Employees cannot be forced to engage in certain actions, such as prayer before meetings, common bible studies or community work (Garcia-Zamor 2003). According to this study, there was an increase in complaints concerning religious bias over the years. However, employees might feel ruled out when not joining a religious event and therefore find themselves forced to participate. For management, it is indispensable to limit compassion in regard to tough decisions that have to be made. In addition, management has to prevent religious preferences, as they result in distrust and divisiveness (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. There was a failure to collect data from other health facilities, several other industries and denominations. Certainly, the religious significance in the US, especially in the Bible Belt, is much higher than is the case in Germany or France, for example. Therefore, it might be interesting to collect more data in an area where religious traditions are not as deeply rooted in daily life. However, this study helps to explain the motivating and demoting factors amongst staff, as well as the challenges for HR management in an Adventist Health facility.

Future research could first try to generalize the findings to other non-Adventist religious affiliations. As already mentioned, a further study in countries with a different religious mind-set would also provide a scientific benefit. Second, the findings should be verified for a non-healthcare setting. According to Duchon and Plowman (2005) healthcare employees already have high social values and standards and are therefore more open to their spiritual and religious needs.

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