

## **SPIRITUALITY, MEANING IN LIFE, AND WORK WELLNESS: A RESEARCH AGENDA**

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*The role of spirituality in the organization is a rapidly growing area of interest in management literature and conferences. This resulted in a call for more scientific inquiry into workplace spirituality. However, progress with empirical research on spirituality in organizations seems to be hampered by a lack of construct clarity. Whilst the construct of workplace spirituality is being clarified, spirituality can be approximated and operationalized through one of its major elements, meaning in life. Much knowledge and insights can be gained in the role and relationships of spirituality in organizations through this approach. One such postulated relationship with spirituality (meaning in life) is wellness. This postulation is based mainly on the results from research studies that consistently show relationships between meaning in life and psychological well-being. As work is also an element of wellness, potential relationships between meaning in life and various aspects of work wellness are explored and conceptualized. This paper explores work-wellness from a spiritual framework through the construct of meaning in life by focusing on the contribution that a person's sense of meaning in life can play to improve work-wellness and wellness in general. A research agenda is developed of postulated relationships of meaning in life with various work wellness related constructs. Thirteen research propositions are proposed to provide direction for the empirical inquiry into workplace spirituality.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Meaning, Wellness

"Yesterday's motto was lean and mean. Today's business motto is 'lean and meaningful'" (*HR Magazine*, August 1998, p. 46).

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The increasing interest in the topic of spirituality in organizations cannot be ignored any more as authors demonstrated the importance of workplace spirituality in many publications in popular literature and scholarly journals. This development also gained acceptance at top tier conferences and from respected institutions. For instance, the Academy of Management established a special interest group on the topic and allocated a separate track to spirituality and religion at the Academy of Management annual meetings.

Despite its apparent importance and growth in popularity and attention, spirituality in the workplace has received little empirical attention from scholars. The general thrust of contributions published and papers presented on workplace spirituality focused on the rising spiritual awareness of employees, assertions on the important role of spirituality in organizations and motivations on the need to study spirituality in the workplace.

With all this attention bestowed on it, workplace spirituality is clearly not a notion whose importance needs to be motivated any more, but rather a subject that calls for better understanding by engaging with it through objectivistic research. As theory conceptualization appears to be stronger than empirical evidence at this stage, strengthening of theory regarding spirituality in the workplace should rely heavily on empirical studies in future. In fact, the conceptual approach towards workplace spirituality resulted in a corresponding call from Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) for more scientific and empirical inquiry into workplace spirituality.

So what is the cause of the inertia that seems to hold back more scientific and empirical attention to spirituality in organizations? The reason is probably not rooted in a modernist view that spirituality is a nonmaterialistic concept which has no direct practical implications for the workplace as suggested by some (e.g., Sanders, Hopkins, & Geroy, 2004). The overwhelming interest in workplace spirituality in scholarly journals and respected institutions defies such allegations. The reason for the lack of empirical attention to workplace spirituality must rather be sought elsewhere. Firstly, it can be found in the lack of construct clarity; and secondly it can be found in the lack of specific conceptual relationships between spirituality and work related constructs. Clarification of the definition of workplace spirituality and having a research agenda of specific relationships to investigate can promote more empirical research into workplace spirituality.

### **Spirituality and Construct Clarity**

It is difficult to understand and research a phenomenon until one can clearly define exactly what the construct is. Construct clarity is lacking for workplace spirituality. Although several definitions of workplace spirituality have been proposed in the large number of articles on workplace spirituality, the many different definitions are inconclusive and vague (Chalofsky, 2003; Kolodinsky, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2004). Spirituality has been described to include a broad range of concepts and values such as transcendence, balance, sacredness, altruism, meaning in life, living with a deep connectedness to the universe, and the awareness of something or someone greater than oneself (God, or an energy force) that provides

energy and wisdom that transcends the material aspects of life (e.g., Cash, 2000; Kolodinsky et al., 2004; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Stanard, Sandhu, & Painter, 2000). Workplace spirituality remains an amorphous and elusive construct that remains to be defined conclusively to enable empirical research on the construct. From the multiple definitions of spirituality, three main themes seem to be prevalent in the definition of spirituality; most definitions relate spirituality to meaning in life, a sense of unity with the universe and the awareness of a "life force." These themes appear to represent the main elements contained in the construct of spirituality.

Rather than adding another definition of spirituality to the many already published, I rather suggest researching the construct of spirituality through one of its main elements, meaning in life. There is agreement in literature on the importance of meaning in life as an essential element of spirituality (e.g., Cash, 2000; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Stanard et al., 2000). In fact, spirituality is often described as a desire to find ultimate purpose in life, and the search for meaning in life is a part of one's journey towards spiritual awareness (Cavanagh, 1999; Frankl, 2000). Meaning in life appears to be the dominant element of spirituality.

In contrast to the encompassing construct of spirituality, meaning in life has been defined clearly and researched empirically for more than 40 years in the fields of clinical psychology and psychiatry. Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) were the first researchers to adopt a psychometric approach to measure meaning in life, with their Purpose in Life Test (PIL); later revised and updated by Crumbaugh (1968). Subsequently, several improved instruments followed such as Battista and Almond's (1973) Life Regard Index (LRI) and Antonovsky's (1983) Sense of Coherence scale and Reker and Peacock's (1981) Life Attitude Profile (LAP). In addition to these better known and more frequently used instruments, at least three other scales have been developed and are being used in empirical studies. Empirical support for the psychometric soundness of these instruments is well documented (e.g., Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Debats, Van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993; Debats & Drost, 1995; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Results from these studies support the existence of a meaning in life dimension which can be measured scientifically and confirm the important role that a sense of meaning plays in a person's life in general.

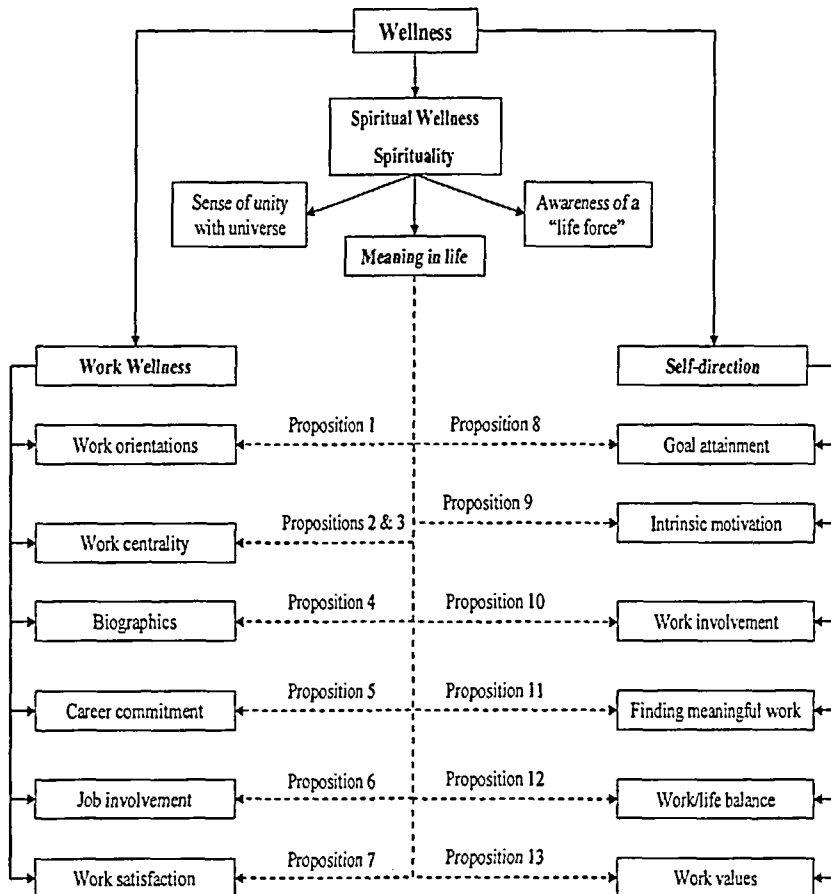
Reducing spirituality to one of its main elements, meaning in life, is not an exact representation of the construct and as such do not provide comprehensive cover to the full richness entrenched in the construct of spirituality. Such an approach is thus not the final solution towards researching workplace spirituality. Nevertheless, meaning in life appears to represent much of the content ascribed to the construct of spirituality. By examining the role of meaning in life at the workplace, much insight can be gained in understanding the outcomes, correlations and relationships of workplace spirituality. Whilst the definition and measurement of spirituality in the workplace is being clarified, this approach can provide the needed direction for empirical inquiry that Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) called for.

With some exceptions (e.g., Kolodinsky et al., 2004; Sanders et al., 2004), most contributions on workplace spirituality assert the importance of studying

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spirituality in organizations rather than providing insight on a research agenda. The question of *what* aspects and relationships researchers must specifically inquire into remains an open question that needs to be answered. In this paper I suggest a research agenda of postulated relationships of spirituality with various wellness related constructs. Thirteen research propositions are proposed to provide direction for the empirical inquiry into workplace spirituality. The outline of the research agenda is presented in Figure 1. The solid lines indicate empirically and conceptually defined relationships and the dotted lines indicate the 13 suggested research propositions.

**Figure 1**  
**Proposed Research Agenda Outline**



The answer to the question of *what* aspects and relationships researchers must specifically inquire into can be found partly in literature on wellness and in research studies from the fields of psychiatry and clinical psychology on the relationships between meaning in life and psychological well-being. Integrating such knowledge with knowledge from the field of organizational behavior enables specific conceptualizations, scientifically based rather than mere assertions, of potential relationships between meaning in life and work related constructs.

The relationship between spirituality and wellness is a consistent message from not only theoretical conceptualizations, but also a relationship which existence has consistently been shown in empirical research. Definitions of wellness clearly associate spirituality as an essential element of wellness. Wellness is about an optimum state of living that each individual is capable of achieving, including physical, mental and spiritual well-being (Ellison, 1983; Palombi, 1992). Wellness can be defined as a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated to live more fully within the human and natural community (Myers et al., 2000; Sweeney & Wittmer, 1991; Westgate, 1996). Wicken (2000) describe the dimensions of wellness as social, spiritual, physical, occupational, emotional and intellectual. Wellness is also about living a life that has significance, a will to meaning and a striving for life that has a purpose (Frankl, 1984). This yearning for a life that has meaning and purpose is not only about wellness, but a defining characteristic of being human. For the purpose of this paper, wellness is explored through Myers et al.'s. (2000) first three life tasks—spirituality (meaning in life), work, and self-direction.

Empirical research that investigated the relationship(s) between meaning in life and people's psychological health provides support for these assertions. Research studies have consistently shown there are correlations between meaning in life and concepts such as social participation (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988), internal locus of control (Phillips, 1980), self-esteem and self-concept (Chamberlain & Zika; 1988), positive life experiences and well-being (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Scannell, Allen, & Burton, 2002), successful life changes (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994), resistance to stress (Moomal, 1999) and successful aging and acceptance of death (Debats & Drost, 1995). These studies confirm with overwhelming consistency that meaning in life correlates with almost every aspect of psychological well-being. Having a sense of meaning in life appears to be one of the usual properties of wellness and of normal functioning, although not necessarily a prerequisite for normal functioning. The direction of this relationship seems to be in both ways—Debats (1999) found well-being to be a source of meaning in a person's life.

By contrast, a lack of meaning (meaninglessness) has consistently been shown to correlate with a lack of psychological well-being and the presence of psychopathologies. For instance, meaninglessness has been shown to be related to anxiety (Pearson & Sheffield, 1974; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), uncontrollable stress and burnout (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), depression (Pearson & Sheffield, 1974; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992; Scannell et al., 2002), suicidal ideations (Harlow et al., 1986), alcoholism and substance abuse (Debats, 1999), neuroticism (Pearson & Sheffield, 1974) and other psychopathologies (Moomal,

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1999). Meaninglessness therefore correlates consistently with unwellness and the absence of psychological well-being.

A business serves as a location where human beings interpret life's meanings. People create businesses and are created by them. The positive relationships between meaning in life and psychological wellness are thus expected to continue in organizations. In fact, one of few studies that researched meaning in the workplace found meaning to correlate with work motivation and positive attitudes towards work (Sargent, 1973). From this evidence, it is proposed that meaning in life will be related to positive work behavior and work attitudes. Hence, the first research proposition:

*Proposition 1: Meaning in life will be positively related to positive work orientations, attitudes, and behavior.*

### Meanings of Meaning in life

Confusion easily arises regarding the definition of meaning in life when this construct is applied to the work situation. Firstly, meaning *in* life should not be equated to the philosophical question: what is the meaning *of* life? This eternal quest is out of reach of objectivistic scientific methodology. However, the significance of meaning *in* life is revealed when rephrased by an individual who asks "What is my purpose here at work? What contribution do I make and what is it that I have to offer that is of significance? What do I want to leave behind here?"

Secondly, *meaning in life* should be distinguished from the related constructs, *meaning of work* and *meaningful work*. *Meaning in life* entails a significance of being—a feeling, experience, or perception that one's existence is of significance. It relates to a sense of being committed to and fulfilling a higher purpose in life. This purposefulness provides one with a reason for living (the term *purpose* is often used as a synonym for meaning). It makes life more than just a survival quest, but rather experiencing one's life as having made or being able to make a difference in the world. At the core of these descriptions lies meaningfulness, the degree that people's lives make emotional sense and the demands confronted by them being perceived as being worthy of energy and commitment. As a result, individuals who state that their lives are meaningful, experience fulfillment and significance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Frankl, 1984, 2000).

The term *meaning of work* describes the role of work in a person's life, the sociological reasons why people work. Several studies testify to the importance of work in people's experience of life as meaningful (Gill, 1999). Work can thus be a pathway to finding meaning in life. *Meaningful work* is about those working conditions that are supposedly motivating and includes aspects such as autonomy, responsibility, task significance, identity, complexity, challenge and variety (Wrzesniewski, 2001). Whereas *meaning in life* stems from the encompassing construct of spirituality, the points of departure of these other two constructs are not seated in spiritual dimension and they are much narrower constructs. The relationships between meaning in life, the meaning of work and meaningful work with work wellness are discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Myers et al. (2000) suggested a general model of wellness from their research conducted on a sample of more than 3,000 people. Their wellness model proposes five *interrelated and interconnected life tasks, namely spirituality, self-direction, work, friendship and love*. Having shown the relationships between meaning in life and wellness, workplace spirituality seems to be an essential element of work wellness. In this paper, work wellness is further explored through the first three life tasks—the relationships of spirituality (approximated by meaning in life) with work and self-direction.

### Meaning in Life and Work

#### Work Wellness

Work is a basic social process found in all societies and is in the modern society often identified with employment, i.e., with activities undertaken for others on a contractual basis. This entails an exchange relationship whereby, for set periods and within prescribed limits and policies, people put their talents at the disposal of an employer in return for tangible rewards such as pay, and less tangible rewards such as recognition and status. With increasing industrialization, many of the psychological needs that earlier societies met through social structures such as religious rituals, the expanded family and the village community have been taken over by institutions of paid work (Gill, 1999). For some, work is replacing family, friendship circles and social groups. Work gives people a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life. The organization within which people work is becoming their most significant community. With these changes, work has become the centerpiece of modern lives, the place where most people seek and find their sense of meaning.

Attitudes towards work are changing. There appears to be a shift away from materialism, a shift towards a society in which spiritual values and meaning in one's life are becoming more important values than materialist 'having'. People are searching for greater meaning in all aspects of their lives. Because work is generally a central part of human existence, much of this spiritual odyssey occurs within the context of the organization. Indeed, over the past ten years, more and more employees sought answers in organizations to the questions of the human soul and meaning in life (Chalofsky, 2003; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003).

Until recently, the human soul, our existential questions and quest for meaning in our lives have been mostly ignored in work behavior theories. The creators of these theories historically concentrated almost exclusively on the human's unconscious and rational nature. Most of these traditional theories of behavior assume that people are either driven through unconscious needs, or are rational maximisers of personal utility, bypassing their spiritual and existential issues. Although research has provided much support for these theories, they cannot account for the full range of behavior such as nonpredictable, or so-called irrational behavior. People are searching for a meaningful framework to understand how events and irrational behavior, such as that of 11 September 2001, followed by deeds of unselfish heroism, fit into a holistic context (Loren, 2002). With such

events, employees' existential questions move to the forefront; finding meaningful answers to them becomes essential tasks for improving and sustaining psychological wellness.

Conversely to cognitive and psychoanalytical theories, existential psychology centers on people's ontological (spiritual) quest for meaning in as far as they question their existence, as spiritual beings who want to feel that their existence, and even suffering, has purpose and significance. Meaning in life can be described with two dimensions, framework and fulfillment (Battista & Almond, 1973; Scannell et al., 2002). The framework dimension is about the ability of an individual to see his or her life within some holistic perspective or context and to have derived a set of life-goals and a purpose in life from it. The fulfillment dimensions measure the degree to which an individual sees himself as having fulfilled or as being in the process of fulfilling his or her framework or life goals. A sense of wellness develops through fulfillment of life and purpose goals and the understanding that comes from a meaning framework from which to understand the world (Scannell et al., 2002).

Having a framework of meaning in life helps people to make sense from senseless events and irrational behavior. Frankl (1984) exemplifies this when he makes sense of the atrocities of the World War II concentration camps and his own suffering there when he writes "We are indebted to the Second World War for enriching our knowledge of the psychopathology of the masses, for the war gave us the war of nerves and it gave us the concentration camp" (p. 25). "The concentration camps I went through did in fact serve as a testing ground that confirmed one of the main tenets of logotherapy, the theory that the basic meaning orientation of an individual—or, as I am used to calling it, the 'will to meaning'—has actual survival value" (Frankl, 1986, p. x).

As the movement towards workplace spirituality grows, organizations that have long been viewed as rational systems are making room for the spiritual dimension, a dimension that has less to do with rules and order and more to do with meaning and purpose (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). People are hungry for meaning and they increasingly are trying to integrate their professional or work lives with their spiritual selves (Delbecq, 2001). As people progress in their quest for meaning and finding a meaningful framework, they also bring this quest into organizations.

### **Work Centrality**

The quest for meaning in organizations became especially prevalent in the 1980's when increasing events of downsizing and layoffs disturbed people's image of the organization as a trustworthy community (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Terkel (1985) interviewed many workers who told how work had wounded their spirits. From his discussions, he concluded that work is about a search for meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash. Work is also about a meaningful life rather than just a Monday to Friday sort of dying. Currently, this search for meaning is intensified by organizational realities such as technological advances with the resulting impersonalization of organizations, global competition, further down-

sizing and restructuring of organizations (Cash, 2000). Indeed, there appears to be a soul-searching epidemic afoot in organizations; employees want meaning in their lives. Today's young and middle-aged executives seem to be less interested in earning a living and more concerned with work as an important component in making a life.

Work is thus not merely a job, but an opportunity of great significance that serves other functions than merely earning a living. Although this is now a widely accepted proposition, it initially came from Morse and Weiss' (1955) classical study in which they found that 80% of respondents would keep on working in the absence of financial necessity. This question has since been repeated several times with similar results. This tendency to continue working in the absence of financial necessity after people won the lotto has now been confirmed empirically (Arvey, Harpaz, & Liao, 2004). The central and enduring importance of work in a person's life is illustrated by the words of the 64-year old bus driver who won \$20 million dollars "lottery is just a bonus that came my way, it has not or will not affect my work habits and goals in life" (Arvey et al., 2004, p. 416).

It is from this central place that work started to fulfill in our modern lives that work wellness became such an important element of wellness. Work wellness involves preparing and making use of one's gifts of skills and talents in order to gain purpose, happiness and enrichment in one's working life (Wicken, 2000). Work wellness comes from contributing these unique skills and talents to work that is meaningful and rewarding and expressing your values through personally rewarding activities (Dorn, 1992). Work wellness is thus about meaningfulness and positive work attitudes and orientations.

Work is essential for an individual's well-being, as it is a person's occupation that makes life arguably meaningful (Howard & Howard, 1997). In fact, research in sociology on the functions of work identified meaning as one of seven main reasons why people work (Johada, 1982; Gill, 1999). Other studies found work to be a frequent source of meaning in life (Baum, & Stewart, 1990; Debats, 1999). Engagement in meaningful work is a central tenet of occupational therapy (Strong, 1998). Work prevents signs of alienation, feelings of powerlessness, isolation and meaninglessness. Working gives people a feeling of being tied into the larger society with some value addition, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life. Work is becoming the preeminent venue for discovering meaning in life and expressing one's life purpose (Ciulla, 2000).

Businesspeople often experience their work, family life and their faith to be in separate compartments (Cavanagh, 1999). This separation leaves them feeling dry, unfulfilled and unhappy, often experienced as a profound void or absence in their lives, an existential vacuum. However, people spend too much of their time at work, or in work-related social and leisure activities to compartmentalize their lives into separate work, family, religious and social domains.

While work has become a negative value for some, it nevertheless remains an activity which molds and affects people's attitudes and perspectives and patterns their social relationships with others. Meaningful work can be the epitome of meaningful activity and experience if one's work is aligned with a sense of purpose

in one's life. Driven by the desire to bring meaning into their lives, workers are looking to business to answer questions about meaning.

The important role that work plays in people's lives appears to be a multicultural and universal phenomenon. The Meaning of Work International Research Team conducted an eight-nation study on the role of work in people's lives (1987). They found general evidence of people's considerable attachment to work. About 86% of their 14,700 respondents indicated they would continue working in the absence of financial necessity; over 25% of the respondents placed work above the roles of family, community, religion and leisure. From the central role that work plays in people's lives, the next research proposition was derived:

*Proposition 2:* Meaning in life through work will show positive correlations with work centrality.

Although work can be the epitome of human existence, it does not follow that people have to work to find their lives meaningful, or that meaningful work necessarily leads to a meaningful life (Frankl, 1992). Research studies confirmed that not all people find their life meaning through their work and that having a job is not a sufficient, nor even a necessary condition for attainment of meaning in one's life (Debats, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). If people see their jobs as hampering the achievement of their full potential, it becomes difficult for them to uphold a sense of purpose. In such instances, work becomes a source of frustration, boredom, and feelings of meaninglessness. People without work can live even more meaningful lives than those who cling neurotically to their jobs to gain a false sense of self-worth or security (Frankl, 1992).

Although it can be frustrating, it is arguably possible that people can experience their lives as meaningful without being involved in meaningful work in their daily employment. To the extent that nonwork roles compete with work-roles, people have to make choices about the relative centrality of work in their lives. The third research propositions therefore states:

*Proposition 3:* Work does not need to be central in a person's life for that person to measure high on meaning in life.

A number of psychologists have theorised about individual's development stages of over the course of life. Notable is Erik Erikson's developmental theory that maintains the individual is in a constant process of growth through various developmental stages through life. Similarly, it could be argued that people must progress through stages in the development of meaning in life (Battista & Almond, 1973). Although some studies found correlations between meaning in life and age (Baum & Stewart, 1990; Debats & Drost, 1995), empirical research results on the relationship of the degree of meaning with age are contradicting. In fact, most studies failed to find statistically significant relationships between meaning in life and biographical variables such as age, sex, qualifications, or culture (e.g., Debats et al., 1993; Debats, 1999; De Vogler-Ebersole & Ebersole, 1985).

Debats (1999) conclude that the absence of significant associations of meaning in life with sex, age and educational level, suggest the search for meaning is a general phenomenon that is not linked with demographic variables. From the

absence of consistent relationships between meaning and biographic variables, Debats (1999) argues the quest for meaning in life is a universal phenomenon and a basic human drive that is independent of specific demographics—it changes its appearance through one's life, but never disappears. From this argument, the fourth research proposition was derived:

*Proposition 4: Meaning in life will not correlate with work related biographic variables.*

### **Career Commitment**

Integration of one's personal identity with your career identity is an essential element of occupational wellness (Dorn, 1992). With work being so central to our lives, it is arguably true that our work and lives becomes meaningful through our careers. Indeed, when a career coincide with one's sense of meaning or purposefulness, it becomes more than just a career, it becomes a calling (Shoshana, 2004), especially if there is congruence between career and personal identity. People's careers thus appear to play a significant role in their experience of work wellness and their sense of meaning in life.

People's commitment to their careers is to be distinguished from commitment to their daily jobs. A career is the pattern of work-related experiences that spans the course of a person's life and includes objective events or situations such as a series of job positions, and work-related events. A career is thus more than just a job; it represents a vocation, an organizational position, future opportunities, work aspirations, expectations and needs (Costello, 2001).

Depending on the extent to which nonwork roles compete with work roles, individuals may not be equally committed to their careers. Career commitment refers to the importance of an individual's career in his or her life and the motivation to work in a chosen vocation (Carson & Bedeian, 1994). Career commitment consists of three dimensions, career identity, career resilience and career planning (Carson & Bedeian, 1994). Career identity is about a close emotional association with one's career aspirations. Career resilience is about persistence; commitment to a chosen career in the face of adversity. Career planning taps into the longer term aspect of career commitment—determining one's developmental needs and setting appropriate career goals.

**Career Identity.** It is through their careers that people give expression to the contributions that make their lives meaningful. Furthermore, many people find meaning through their careers (Baum & Stewart, 1990). The ability to find one's personal identity, to integrate this identity with one's career and thus to find identity in one's career is an aspect of importance in work wellness. People who found new meaning in their careers seem to identify better with their careers (Costello, 2001).

**Career Resilience.** If people's sense of purpose is congruent with their occupations or careers, their work becomes an expression of meaning. In such instances, their careers become the vehicles through which they can give expression to the contributions they want to make to the world. The ultimate sense of meaning is arguably reached if a person finds both life and his or her career mean-

ingful. In this state, people will be motivated and committed to work beyond a personal sense of fulfillment and achievement and workers tend to stay in their careers in the face of adversity (Ashforth, 1999).

**Career Planning.** An individual's career can be a path of meaning and spiritual growth, leading one's progress through the mastery of skills to self-knowledge and to personal enlightenment (Konz & Ryan, 1999). For this path to become significant, it implies that people have to succeed in aligning their careers to their sense of self. This entails much planning of one's career, and perhaps even changing careers to align one's career with your sense of meaning. Depending on the extent to which people succeeded in aligning their careers with their sense of meaning, they may not be equally committed to their careers.

From the discussion, it seems reasonable to deduct that in cases where people's careers are aligned with their sense of meaning in life, one would expect those individuals' careers to become related to a higher calling. As such people will identify stronger with their careers, almost as a spiritual calling, people are expected to show resilience to stick to this calling in the face of adversity and to be more inclined to effective career planning in order to make the most out of their careers. Thus the fifth research proposition:

*Proposition 5: Meaning in life will be positively related to the three dimensions of career commitment.*

### **Job Involvement**

Through their careers, people fill a series of jobs and job positions. Not all people approach such jobs with the same enthusiasm or are to the same extent emotionally involved in their jobs. Job involvement is defined in terms of people's identification with, and the degree of emotional commitment to, their present jobs (Blau, 1985). *Job involvement is about the degree to which people take part in their jobs, the degree of absorption they experience daily in a work activity; perceiving performance in that job as central to their self-esteem and consistent with their self-concepts (Pinder, 1998).* Job involvement is thus not the same as work centrality which is more about the relatively enduring belief about the value of work in general, transcending a specific job.

Riipinen (1997) found job involvement to be related to well-being and positive life affects such as happiness, satisfaction and self-esteem, especially when people experienced need fulfillment in their jobs. By contrast, he found job involvement to be related inversely to negative life affects such as anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. It is interesting to note that these variables correspond to the variables that studies mentioned earlier found to be related respectively with meaning in life and meaninglessness.

From the results found by Riipinen (1997), it is clear that job involvement is an important element to work wellness and that the lack of job involvement correlates with "unwellness" at work. A job is also the practical expression of a career. Jobs also are the activities through which a person makes a positive contribution to the world. A job can be an expression of a person's sense of meaning. I thus expect

to find a positive relationship between meaning and job involvement. Therefore, the next research proposition:

*Proposition 6:* Meaning in life will be positively related to job involvement.

### **Work Satisfaction**

Work provides an opportunity for pleasurable experiences that are intrinsically satisfying and provide a sense of accomplishment. It challenges and engages our senses, skills, and interests; frequently absorbing us in activities that we find meaningful. Being involved in satisfying work can result in an ideal state in which an individual loses awareness of self and time while being highly engaged in the task at hand; the absorbed state of work wellness that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls "flow" (p. 10).

The important role that work satisfaction plays in work wellness has been well described in literature. Pelletier (1994) postulates work satisfaction as a predictor of longevity and perceived quality of life. Feelings of competence in work tasks have a positive effect on life satisfaction, whereas work experiences and work outcomes are consistently and positively related to self-reported emotional well-being (Burke & McKeen, 1995).

Work satisfaction is to be distinguished from job satisfaction. Work is not merely a job, but an opportunity that serves other functions than merely earning a living. Work satisfaction is about those things that people accomplish through working that gives them a sense of contentment with working. Work expectations, those expectations that will result in work satisfaction once they are met, seems to be changing. Extended education has brought with it rising expectations that personal needs will be met in the organization and that one is entitled to have your expectations met. Especially younger people are beginning to claim the right to work that is interesting, meaningful and self-fulfilling.

Spector (1997) defines job satisfaction as the extent to which people like or dislike their jobs, jobs referring to people's daily work activity. For most people, it is unlikely that a satisfying job can compensate for a meaningless life. Life just is too comprehensive and includes too many dimensions. Also, there is a substantive difference between work or job satisfaction and meaning. Satisfaction happens when certain needs and expectations are being met. These needs and expectations are often superficial and are about short-term gratification, especially in terms of job satisfaction.

Meaning goes deeper than fulfillment of needs and short-term gratification. In a meaningful organization it is less about needs and expectations and more about mission, possibilities and fulfillment. Meaning is about a feeling or perception that one's work is of significance through a contribution to make the world a better place. Meaning is about long-term fulfillment and about deep eternal value that is gained from one's work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Nevertheless, life purpose and meaning in life can be the source of work satisfaction if meaning in life can manifest in the organization. Thus my next research proposition:

*Proposition 7:* Meaning in life will be positively related to work satisfaction.

### Meaning, Self Direction, and Wellness

Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000) suggest self-direction to be an essential element of wellness. They suggest the sense of knowing where you are going and having a sense of being in control of such direction and movement enhance the experience of wellness. Self direction refers to the manner in which an individual regulates, disciplines, and directs the self in daily activities and in pursuit of long-range goals (Myers et al., 2000). It refers to a sense of mindfulness and intentionality in meeting the major tasks of life. Such definition of self direction comes close to the definition of motivation which is defined as that which energizes, directs and maintains behavior (Pinder, 1998). Work related self direction appears to be closely related to the construct of work motivation.

Meaning in life also relates to motivation as an aspect of self-direction. An understanding of people's search for meaning is of primary interest to motivational psychology. As early as 1964, Vroom suggested that work must make sense to individuals before they will perform it. He called for the choice to work to be the principal focus of work motivation research. Frankl (1984) asserts that the will to meaning is the primary motivational force in human beings. However, as far as could be established, Sargent (1973) is the only researcher that empirically examined the relationship between meaning and work motivation. He explored whether work motivation can be seen as a manifestation of a person's will to meaning and results provide empirical evidence of correlations between meaning and work motivation. Sargent (1973) found that work-motivated people tended to have higher Purpose in Live (PIL) scores and tended to evaluate the concept of work more favorably than nonwork-motivated individuals did. He also found a significant tendency among individuals with high PIL scores to evaluate key life concepts (such as work, the organization, purpose, family, leisure and life) more favorably.

A person's level of motivation—the intent to exert any effort, the direction and sustenance of such effort—belongs to the realm of meaning. With reference to Myers et al's. (2000) definition of self direction, work motivation that manifests as an orientation to set and achieve goals (or goal attainment), and self-generated and focused motivation (or intrinsic motivation) specifically appear to be useful constructs in exploring relationships between self direction (as an element of wellness) and meaning in life.

#### Goal Attainment

Most healthy individuals naturally have goal orientations: dispositions toward developing or displaying ability (Dweck, 1986). Goal orientation creates the mental framework within which individuals interpret and respond to situations and thus influences how individuals respond to task difficulty or task failure. Goals are related to wellness in that it gives people something to look forward to and to strive for. Indeed, the depressed person's feelings of hopelessness, accompanied with feelings of having nothing to look forward to and having no goals are among the best documented within the clinical literature on depression (Westgate, 1996). Goals direct behavior and influence the intensity of such behavior.

Goals exist on two main levels: higher-level purpose goals and task-specific target goals. Purpose goals suggest the *why* for performing a behavior and target goals provide the *how*. These higher level, more superordinate goals influence the longer-term orientations and attitudes of individuals (Vandewalle, 1997). Congruence between individuals' purpose and target goals is a key determinant of intrinsic motivation (Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1998).

Research has shown that meaning in life is related to higher level life goals. For instance, Battista and Almond (1973) found a relationship between having meaning in life and higher order goal-positions, life-goals and success in goal attainment. They found that subjects scoring higher on meaning in life saw themselves as more fulfilled in ultimate life-goals. Similarly, subjects measuring higher on meaning in life thought that their lives were going through a significantly greater rate of change for the better. Thirdly, these subjects had higher goal-positions than in the past, relative to subjects scoring lower on meaning. Fourthly, these subjects perceived themselves as doing better than they had expected to do on their life-goals. There are even indications from empirical studies that pursuing goals related to living a meaningful life boosts the activity of certain cells in the immune system (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 2003). With these relationships between meaning in life and higher order goals in life confirmed, I expect similar relationships in organizations and that having meaning in life will be related to work related goal setting and goal attainment. From here, the next research proposition:

*Proposition 8:* Meaning in life will be positively related to work related higher-level purpose goals and task-specific target goals.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000) relate wellness to intrinsic motivation. They note that work provides opportunities for intrinsically satisfying experiences and a sense of accomplishment. This is an optimal state in which an individual loses awareness of self and time while being highly engaged in the task at hand. Excitement and joy are enhanced while anxiety and boredom are minimized.

Intrinsic motivation stems from the innate psychological need of self-determination and is thus fundamental to self direction. Intrinsic motivation refers to the desire to perform an activity because one expects some subjective reward or expects to experience some internal feelings because of performing well, and the satisfaction derived from participation in a particular activity. Intrinsic motivation is also related to aspects such as autonomy, relevance and feelings of competence and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1991). People are said to be more intrinsically motivated when they perceive themselves to be the source of their behavior.

If people believe that their life and work fulfill some purpose, they tend to work with more vigor and purposefulness (Frankl, 1992). The result of purposeful behavior is more intrinsic motivation and self directedness. A person's will-to-meaning can thus be a source of intrinsic motivation. Therefore the ninth research proposition:

*Proposition 9:* People with meaning in life will be more intrinsically motivated.

Although the correlations between meaning in life and work motivation in Sargent's (1973) study were in the expected directions, they were weaker than expected. Based on his correspondence with Viktor Frankl about his findings, Sargent (1973) concludes that work centrality might mediate the relationship between people's sense of meaning and their level of work motivation, as not all people find their life meaning in their work. As work is not necessarily central to every person's life, some people may find meaning in areas of life other than work. Work centrality thus might play a mediating role in the relationship between meaning and work motivation. It is on this conclusion that the tenth research proposition is based:

*Proposition 10:* Work involvement plays a mediating role in relationships between meaning in life and work motivation (as operationalized through goal attainment and intrinsic motivation).

### **Finding Meaningful Work**

The basic tenet of meaningful work is that people who find their work meaningful will be more motivated and as a result not only perform better, but also experience more work satisfaction. As such, being engaged in meaningful work can thus make an important contribution to wellness.

But what constitutes meaningful work? Many studies tried to discover the desired contents for jobs; a universal set of characteristics that will make a job meaningful and desirable. Many authors, especially in more dated literature, equate meaningful work with job enrichment, defined as work that involve and develop many different skills, higher levels of challenge, responsibility and task significance, identity, complexity and variety (e.g., Hirschfeld, 2000; Pollock, Whitbred, & Contractor, 2000; Wrzesniewski, 2001).

The suggestion that a job with certain characteristics will be universally meaningful to the jobholder is based on a series of implicit, but erroneous assumptions, such as that all employees are alike, all situations are alike and there is one best way to motivate people. The reality is that individuals define meaningful work and a meaningful organization in different ways as each person has a unique set of life priorities stemming from their sense of purpose and meaning in life. The relationship between meaning in life and meaningful work is probably nowhere more unlikely, but paradoxically accurate in the cases of so called dirty work. Dirty work encompasses jobs that can be physically dirty (e.g., trash collecting), jobs that are stigmatized (e.g., funeral services), or jobs with low prestige (e.g., driving taxicabs). Workers who perform these jobs often find meaning in their ungrateful jobs through focusing on the essential services they provide to the community. They imbue the stigma with a positive and meaningful value, thus transforming it into a badge of honor (Ashforth, 1999). This is reflected clearly in the comments of the gravedigger captured in Terkel's (1985) famous book *Working*. "Not anybody can be a gravedigger. . . . A gravedigger, you have to make a neat job. . . . A human

body is going into this grave" (p. 658). "A gravedigger is a very important person. . . Can you imagine if I wouldn't show up tomorrow morning? We have a funeral for eleven o'clock. Imagine what happens? The funeral arrive and where you gonna bury it?" (p. 660).

The traditional and more generic definition of meaningful work as described earlier is different from the definition of meaningfulness; meaning in life goes deeper than meaningful work. Meaningful work, in terms of existential psychology, occurs when people are able to find or create meaning in their work-life and existence through their work. The issue is whether a continuous basis exists for experiencing personal meaning in the activity. Without such a basis, every choice to provide 'meaningful work' seems random and arbitrary. Management cannot dictate what their employees' life meaning should be; they can only provide them with a freedom of responsible choices that can facilitate alignment between people's jobs and their sense of meaning in life.

The focus on 'ideal' job characteristics such as job enrichment as a pathway to meaningful work has had a negative effect in the sense that it suggests that organizational meaning can be dealt with in isolation from the rest of a person's life. A meaningful job or meaningful activities can not compensate for the experience your life as being meaningless. This postulation has been confirmed by research showing many people being involved in so called meaningful work, but who still had suicide ideations because they experienced their lives as meaningless (Frankl, 1992). Meaning in life encompasses experiencing one's whole existence as meaningful, not just your job; meaningful work thus does not necessarily lead to a meaningful life.

The relationship between work and meaning in life is confirmed by the fact that the unemployed are in a particular danger of experiencing their lives as meaningless with a resulting existential neurosis (e.g., Frankl, 1992; Gill, 1999). Frankl (1984) found that even individuals who are financially protected by social security still experience psychological distress as they equate unemployment with being useless and therefore with a meaningless life. He describes how jobless patients were placed as volunteers to help without remuneration in welfare organizations. Although their economic situations remained unchanged, depression caused by their feeling of meaninglessness vanished when given a chance to fulfill tasks they considered meaningful.

If management can help employees finding meaning in life through their work, the returns seem to be substantive. Frankl (1992) cites examples where absenteeism was reduced and productivity was increased substantially as a result of management using a meaning in life orientation to work, expressed in the betterment of their society and service of their community. Support for this notion comes from Konz and Ryan (1999) who posit that organizations which provide their employees with opportunities for spiritual development perform better than those that do not provide such opportunities.

Although people do not have to work to find their lives meaningful, work does play an important role in a person's experience of a meaningful life. Modern work can still provide meaning through usefulness. Nevertheless, work-related

activities are not the sole determinants of inherently meaningful work; both the objective and subjective contexts of work also provide meaningfulness (Ciulla, 2000).

Wrzesniewski (2001) argue that employees are active creators of their work and tasks. She also motivates that the meaning of work and one's work identity are core ingredients in the creation of a job over time. Yet, employees' needs for meaningful work can only be fulfilled through work that is personally significant or meaningful to them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The will to meaning is thus expected to encourage employees to craft over time meaningful jobs that are aligned with their sense of meaning in life. The 11th research proposition thus reads:

*Proposition 11:* People with meaning in life will be more inclined to look for and find work that is meaningful to them and that is aligned with their sense of purpose.

### **Work-Life Balance**

The concept of work is increasingly being contrasted with leisure. This was not always the case. Among peasants there was little distinction between work and leisure—recreation was organized primarily in the intervals between working time. In the modern society, leisure is regarded as a period to be filled by amusement and pleasure that tends to be found outside organizations. Entertainment is provided not by the workers themselves, but by others—workers in the leisure industry. With the increasing segmentation between work and leisure, the search for meaningful work as compensation is increasing rapidly. For a true understanding of an individual at work, not only should that person's work life be considered, but also his or her life away from work (Snir & Harpaz, 2002).

One way to relate occupation to meaning is through the use of time. Results from a survey of UK and US employees illustrated that what the well-educated new entries to the workforce wanted more than anything else was meaningful employment—with time to pursue other interests besides work (Doerr, 1998). A young graduate expressed this need for balance clearly in Sturges and Guest's (2004) qualitative study: "I work to live, I don't live to work. I won't be happy at work unless I'm happy in my social life" (p. 6). The tension between working long hours and a desire for work/life balance is obvious.

Much has been said about the relationship between wellness and balance, with the consistent message of the importance of balance. Warr (1994) considers a mentally healthy person to be someone who is balanced and in harmony. Failure to find balance can impact negatively on well-being. For example, in a study of working women, Napholz (1995) found that those whose work had first or equal priority to their home life had higher depression and higher role conflict scores than did those who put their relationships first.

Growing numbers of people, tired of being cogs in a well-oiled machine, are starting to look for meaning in their work and to give their lives a better balance. There is a trend evident that more people are retiring early because they want more time, balance and more meaning in their lives (Doerr, 1998). However, having time

available for leisure does not automatically provide balance and meaning. Unless there is also some sense of purpose in the time that is available or in the leisure, even such time might be a source of frustration. For instance, the unemployed has much time available, but being unemployed is much different from having leisure time. Furthermore, leisure involvement can also only serve as a partial compensation for deficits in job satisfaction (Snir & Harpaz, 2002).

In the organization (as an important domain of human endeavor), all the aspects of wellness come together in an integrated and balanced way, but at the cost of time spent at work. Nevertheless, time commitments related to work should be balanced in a healthy individual with time, energy, and satisfaction devoted to family and friends (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003). Integrated functioning reflects the balance a person maintains in different domains of life, e.g., love, work and play, the so-called work/life balance. The problem with work/life balance is a problem of good intentions and difficult choices. Although professionals seek work/life balance, their concern for career success draws them into a situation where they work increasingly long hours and experience an increasingly unsatisfactory relationship between home and work. A meaning perspective can assist in such difficult choices.

An appreciation of time as an exhaustible resource in a finite life is driving the strife to fill one's time with meaningful activities (Howard & Howard, 1997). There is also evidence that well-being in the work environment may be improved through participation in work related leisure activities (Haworth & Hill, 1992). Chalofsky (2003) goes further than the time and leisure dimensions of balance and proposes three nontangible balances that are related to meaning. These are balance of the work self and the personal self, balance of the spiritual self and the personal self, and balance of giving to oneself and giving to others. It is on this discussion that the next research proposition is based:

*Proposition 12:* People with meaning in life will be more inclined to strive for and achieve balanced work/life lifestyles.

### **Work Values**

Westgate (1996) describe an intrinsically held value system that forms the basis of one's behaviour as an essential dimension of wellness and self-direction. Values are one's beliefs, opinions and attitudes about what is right and preferable; normative standards to judge and to choose among desirable or undesirable modes of behavior and actions; and principles that lay the foundations for people's motivation and attitudes (Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999). As values enable a person to choose among alternative modes of behavior, they are thus fundamental to the ability to self-direct one's actions. As such is an intrinsically held value system clearly another dimension of self-direction.

Work values are similar to general values, except that they are more specific to the work setting (Ros et al., 1999). *Work values* refer to people's beliefs, opinions and attitudes about what is right and preferable in at work (Sagie, Elizur, & Koslowsky, 1996). According to Frankl (1984) values aid people's search for meaning and values supply meaning in the everyday situations that typically occur

in life. From this conceptual relationship between meaning in life and work values, I expect a relationship between work values and meaning, especially when work is central to a person's life. From this discussion, the 13th and last research proposition:

*Proposition 13: People with meaning in life will adhere to strong and positive work values.*

The postulated relationship between meaning in life and work/life balance is expected to impact on the relationship between meaning in life and work values. Many authors equate work values with the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE)—a dedication to work that manifests as long hours at work with little time for recreation and leisure (Furnham, 1990). However, with the apparent shift to an era where quality of life and work and meaningful work became important values, the work ethic seems to be losing its grip on the peoples of the industrialized nations. A strong PWE would impinge on people's time available for meaningful activities other than work. Research proposition 13 is thus expected not to hold true for work values when measured as PWE. In terms of its relationship to meaning in life, work values should rather be measured through longer term spiritually valued attitudes such as pride in work and ethical behavior (Cavanagh, 1999), purity of intention, unselfishness and self-transcendence (Delbecq & Leigh-Taylor, 2000).

### Discussion

By operationalizing spirituality through one of its major elements, meaning in life, much knowledge can be gained and progress be made towards understanding spirituality in organizations. With work becoming the centerpiece of modern lives and the place where many people find their life meaning, the search for meaning will continue at work. The vital role of a sense of meaning in psychological well-being has been confirmed empirically. However, little is still known about the role of life meaning in organizations. With meaning in life playing such an important role in general well-being, it is also considered to play a significant role in work wellness. A sense of meaning in their lives should have a direct effect on employees' well-being in organizations. The converse also appears to hold true; meaninglessness is expected to effect negative work orientations and attitudes. In other words, meaninglessness is expected to be inversely related to work wellness.

Theory conceptualization on the role of meaning in life in organizations appears to be stronger than empirical evidence at this stage. Strengthening theory on meaning and spirituality in organizations should thus rely heavily on empirical studies in future. Through the 13 research propositions in this paper I proposed relationships between meaning in life and various work related variables—opportunities to research workplace spirituality. The existence of such relationships should now be examined through empirical research to confirm or to refute the propositions claimed between meaning in life with the work wellness variables. It will be especially helpful if further studies could provide insight on causality in such relationships.

Future studies should also explore *how* to find meaning and how the variables mentioned in this paper change once people discover meaning in their lives. Future research could explore the role that organizations' formal vision, mission and values statements play in employees' sense of meaning. Researchers can examine how organizational culture, organizational context and leadership styles influence employees' sense of meaning. The types of organizations in which individuals experience a higher sense of meaning can also be explored. It may be of value to explore whether employees' sense of meaning is related to organizational lifecycles and in which phase of an organization's lifecycle do employees experience the most meaning. The relationship between meaning and performance also warrants future research. Research possibilities with regard to meaning in the workplace are almost unlimited at present.

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