

**TESTING WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY ON
EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT – A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF BANKING
EMPLOYEES IN PAKISTAN**

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality at workplace is connected to the psychological wellbeing and meaningfulness for organization personnel. It motivates employees to have a purposeful life, which can boost their performances and increase their commitment levels with their organizations. The present study based on an interpretative phenomenological approach, attempts to explore the nature of spirituality and its significance with employee commitment within the banking industry in Pakistan. Through snowball sampling, 12 respondents were interviewed to gain insight into the lived experiences related to spirituality and commitment. After careful thematic analysis, findings revealed that workplace spirituality is lacking in the banking sector, and is practiced more at a personal level than at the organizational level, while employees were found to establish more continuance committed rather than normative or affectionate commitment with their organizations.

KEYWORDS: Workplace Spirituality, Employee Commitment, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Workplace spirituality can refer to transcendental experiences of employees promoted through cultivation of values of fellow-feeling, compassion and affection. Instead of simply being religious, spirituality at workplace has more to do with the refinement of an employee's personal character, and the realization of one's essential purpose. It involves fostering an environment where supportive communion amongst workers exist at all levels of the organization; a communion which is characterized by goodwill and encouragement for each other, where mutual coordination is celebrated and organizational excellence is merited by collective efforts of all the members. Organizational theorists have delved upon the contributions which spirituality can bring to the workplace. A consensus exists amongst scholars

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of workplace spirituality, that if administered zealously, workplace spirituality can help foster commitment amongst employees. It develops self-esteem, nullifies counterproductive tendencies, improves employee engagement and helps create a sense of purpose at the workplace. Thus, it has been a subject of considerable interest to the proponents of organizational citizenship behaviour, which has as its core objective, create a sense of mutually beneficial relationship between employees and their respective workplaces.

1.1. Workplace Spirituality

Neal¹, traced the roots of workplace spirituality to Robert Greenleaf's essay on Servant Leadership in 1970. Since then, over the course of 50 years, several trends have emerged while studying spirituality in business², with focus shifting from human intelligence to human spirit.

Milliman³, specified workplace spirituality to be a connection, where individuals are supportive of each other, mien authentic care, and allow for freedom of expression. in a broader context, considers spirituality to be an individual's capacity for concern with human issues, wellbeing of fellows, organizations and ultimately societies at large. Aprilia & Katiara⁴, corroborating the findings of Miliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson⁵, argue that an employee when perceive him/herself as a 'spiritual being', shall not be in pursuit of materialistic goals, but rather develops a worthwhile sense of altruism and virtuosity through meaningful work and community service.

Studies, over the years, conceded this spiritual model that employees not only contribute their intelligence and skills at work but also put in their heart & soul⁶, organizational researchers acknowledged the non-material aspect of an employee's existence, i.e. an inner life which is nourished by an organizational culture harnessing trust, care, meaningful work, learning opportunities and companionship and through which a productive workplace environment is nurtured where employees remain healthy and gain job satisfaction^{7,8,9,10,11,12}. The more workplace spirituality tends to be, higher is the employee's performance, engagement and productivity^{13, & 14}.

Workplace Spirituality has been found to be crucial towards self-growth and maintenance of healthy life patterns. This is because orientation towards religious activities, goal alignment, sympathy, and work meaningfulness contribute to the main spiritual dimension in the workplace¹⁵, which helps form healthy work relationships, reduces stress levels and facilitates work-life balance¹¹.

1.2. Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Commitment:

Observational studies across cultures by Abbas, Idrees, & Rehman¹⁶ and Haldorai, Kim, Chang, & Li,¹⁷ have all found a strong connection between spirituality in the workplace and organizational commitment. Employers,

allowing sufficient avenues to practice workplace spirituality using humanistic values, accrues cognitive and psychological freedom to their employees which then eliminates the likelihood of deviant workplace behaviour and encourages employees to actualize their full potential in their respective work activities.

A number of Cross-sectional studies from recent years acknowledged that meaningful work and sense of community when identified as a spiritual calling, have a greater impact on organizational commitment (i.e. affective, normative and continuance), with the possible effects of employee either being emotionally attached to his/her workplace, or feel morally accountable towards his/her organization. Interestingly, sense of community also tends to serve as a form of continuance commitment guarantor, since it provides emotional safety, belongingness and identification to the employee in troubling times^{10,18, 19}.

Sheraz²⁰, while investigating the Pakistani corporate environment, identified that Ethical Leadership ingrained with spiritual mindedness significantly influences affective and normative commitment of employees. Iqbal & Ahmad²¹, suggested that supervisors who practice spirituality at workplace feel strong aversion to nepotism and favoritism. In an earlier study, Shahbaz & Ghafoor²², explored that managers who consider spirituality to be an essential part of their personalities, play a crucial role in promoting organizational commitment and enhancing performance of their employees.

Malik, Shamin, & Ahmad²³, argue that organizations which provide its employees compassionate and value oriented environment are likely nurture affective commitment and reduce absenteeism; while Hussain, Hussain & Hussain²⁴, also identified both to be effective in the reduction of turnover intentions.

1.3. Workplace Spirituality, Organizational Commitment & the Banking Personnel

Researchers, while analyzing the situation of organizational commitment within the banking sector of Pakistan, found employee commitment to be negatively influenced due to paucity of psychological empowerment, inspirational leadership, unscrupulous bosses, and dearth of communitarian tendencies amongst employees. Hussain, Shujahat, Malik, Iqbal, & Mir; and Raza et al.,^{25,26} which lead to high occupational stress.

Bodla, & Ali²⁷, found that spiritually minded leadership operating in banking arena, who exhibited visionary dispositions in providing goal orientation and direction to their subordinates and were able to cultivate a sense of wholeness and harmony through altruism, were also able to effectively harness organizational commitment.

Iqbal & Hassan²⁸, while analyzing the situation of personality traits amongst banking employees in Pakistan, investigated that spiritual environment in the workplace that provides occasion for employees to find meaningfulness in work and relatedness with the organization, are more conscientious, agreeable and loyal with their organization. However, they found no significant relationship, as to whether workplace spirituality in anyway appeases the neurotic behaviour problems of employees.

Thus, the present study attempts to further explore the phenomena of workplace spirituality and its impact upon commitment levels by undertaking a deep-rooted enquiry to understand relative lived experiences of employees within the banking sector.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

To retain their most competent employees is a continuous challenge for organization in today's competitive environment. Khalid, Chaudhry & Aslam²⁹, report lack of individual commitment to be a significant feature for excessive turnover in the banking industry. Increased material demands, lower job satisfaction, stressful work environment and lack of motivation are mostly the reason for higher turnover, not to mention charming facilities provided by competitor banks to poach efficient employees³⁰.

Since, banking is the only sector in Pakistan, which has shown consistent growth over the years, it has huge contributions towards the economic growth of the country. However, researchers have noted that the employees working in the banking sector endure high stress, anxiety, fatigue and depersonalization due to time-bound workloads, relationship conflicts, lack of recognition, rapid technological changes, and reduced morale, which negatively impacts their commitment levels^{31,32,33}.

Thus, the extent literature review suggests that a qualitative micrological analysis of employees, coming from banking environment, can be helpful in gaining an alternative perspective and is likely to increase our understanding of how significant workplace spirituality can be towards fostering employee commitment.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

“In what ways does Workplace Spirituality influence employees' commitment styles within the banking environment?”

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Approach:

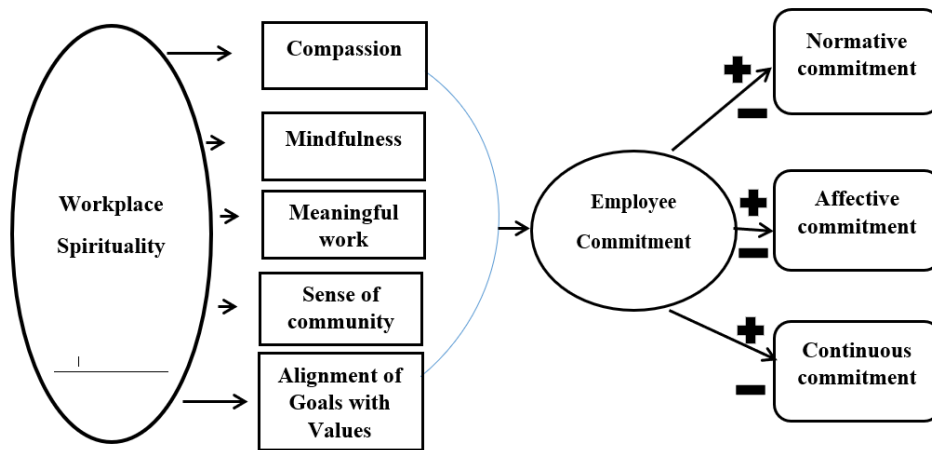
An Interpretivist Approach, based on the philosophical tradition of Phenomenology is adopted to undertake this study. This research strategy strives to explore the causal meanings of shared lived experiences to arrive at a profound understanding of the phenomenon under study³⁴. Qualitative

phenomenological methods capture the lived experiences of participants brought to life through insights by participants.

4.2 Research Design:

Bryman & Bell³⁵, argue that Interpretivism helps procure a rich and unique data, in order to attempt and understand the connected parts of variables. This qualitative study attempts to establish a relationship between workplace spirituality and employee commitment, through examination of data collected via subject conversational interviews. The study approach helps to accumulate multiple perceptions, variety of experiences, and story narratives related to workplace spirituality and commitment within the banking environment.

Thus, the model for this Study is:



4.3. Population Sampling:

Creswell, & Báez³⁶ posits that in a phenomenological study the participants must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experience and so considered interviewing minimum 12 participants to be sufficient for a qualitative study.

The selection of participants is based upon non-probability purposeful sampling, according to which the researcher exercises discretion to select individuals and sites for enquiry because then participants can be purposefully informed the understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.

4.4. Confidentiality:

The standard assumption in research is that the participants' identity should remain anonymous in studies that involve in-depth interviews³⁷. To maintain confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms have been incorporated as a means of protecting confidentiality.

4.5. Interview Protocol Questions:

Roulston & Choi³⁸, suggest that while designing interview questions, it is important that the questions do not exhibit unacceptable vagueness in expressing the designer's intentions or the literal meaning of the question. So, the interview protocol adopted for this study is carefully aligned with the Research Question, which follows an inquiry based conversation considering participants social, cultural and language encumbrances.

4.6. Data Collection:

Unstructured Conversational Interviews have been utilized as the main means of data collection. By focusing on interviewing, each participant is given the opportunity to reconstruct their experiences according to their own sense of what was important and relevant to the phenomenon. Interviews were conducted in Urdu, which were later translated into English. Field notes were made during the interviews to contextualize any key insights such as expressions, gestures, and impressions demonstrated by the interviewees as well as the environmental setting in which the interviews took place.

The interviews lasted between 40 minutes to 1 hour, which were also audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Questions were based on the concepts extracted from literature review, such as compassion, mindfulness, meaningfulness, shared values, community sense and trust etc. Participants were asked open-ended questions, which then paved the conversational tone, directed towards gaining insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Snowball Sampling technique was exercised to approach participants for this study.

4.7. Trustworthiness/Reliability:

Rose & Johnson³⁹ elucidate reliability as the extent to which the findings represent accurate depictions of respondents under enquiry and all facts are systematically reported. In an effort to ensure reliability, meticulous attention is warranted to any issue that might affect trustworthiness, using field notes throughout the data collection process to capture accounts and record what was observed during the interviews.

4.8. Data Analysis:

As advocated by Creswell & Báez³⁶, for analysis data were reduced into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables and discussions. Participants told their own story and how they experienced spirituality at workplace, which was then transcribed from the digital recordings. These transcriptions were carefully studied grasp the meanings of the participants' experiences as they related to the phenomenon.

A thematic analysis was done afterwards, as per Vaismoradi & Snelgrove⁴⁰, who advocated that understanding of ideas through developing themes can facilitate the analysis of results, and improve exactness. Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun⁴¹, stressed that codes help to structure raw data, while the codes keep evolving during the course of data collection as time progresses, emerging innovative ideas to influx new dimension to research. The tables below summarize the demography and themes investigated in the present study:

4.8.1. *Demography:*

Respondent	Age group	Designation	Qualification	Experience
R1	40 to 50	Branch manager	MBA finance	10 years
R2	20 to 30	Assistant manager	BBA honors and MBA continue	2years
R3	20 to 30	Trade officer	BSC in honors	3 years
R4	30 to 40	Account opening officer	MA economics	2years
R5	30 to 40	Operation manager	MA economics	5years
R6	20 to 30	Officer grade	B. Com	2years
R7	20 to 30	OG.3	Inter B. com continue	1.5 years
R8	50 to 60	Senior manager	MA (IR)	17years
R9	20 to 30	Assistant manager	MBA	3years
R10	40 to 50	Branch manager	MBA	10years
R11	20 to 30	O. G2	B.com	2years
R12	20 to 30	Operation manager	MA	5years

4.8.2. *Themes:*

Themes	Sub – Categories	Category Description	Examples
Spirituality	Satisfaction	Being Happy with the Job	R6' For me spirituality means helping others, showing kindness to them and it leads to be more satisfied with work and job.'
	Meaningfulness	Purpose of self through work is fulfilled	R2' Earning an honest living is my devotion to God, it lifts my self-esteem and is a source for me to reach self-actualization.
	Praying & Religiosity	Practices to connect with God, attaining inner peace	R4' There is a designated praying area for Namaz, after praying I feel fresh and able to deliver efficient work.
	Kindness	Show care for someone	R5' We exercise proper care in facilitating senior

			citizens and housewives, by providing them prompt services and don't let them wait more than necessary '
	Self-Actualization	Living life to the fullest and finding peace through work	R6' Growth in the Banking Sector is very limited – for most employees there's set a path confined with a ceiling, no matter how hard I work career path is limited
	Altruism	Helping others without any benefit and prioritizing concern for well-being of others Selflessly	R10' I believe that we have been recruited to serve the organization and not for charity; I try my best to provide support in my role as supervisor.
	Goal Alignment	The alignment of personal and organizational goals and growing with the organization	R2' Its obvious, if I grow then my organization grows in return too.
	Oblation	Being sacrificial to provide benefit to others, believing to please God	R1' My family tells me that I have compromised my health for work, but I don't believe that. This is the age, if I work hard now I can afford my family a quality living, this way I am happier.
	Accountability	Being responsible; answerable; prudent in exercising judgement	R3' There's a strong mechanism for check & balance here; even if I want to, I can't afford to be lax here.
Commitment	Affective Commitment	Emotional attachment and being passionate about work	R8' Bank is my second home – I voluntarily stay extra hours here daily, so I've decided to make the best of this place
	Normative Commitment	Ethical and Moral obligation to carryout duties and responsibilities	R7' It's necessary to be sincere with the workplace, because if you are not sincere, it means you are playing dice with God

	Continuance Commitment	Working either out of fear of loss or gaining benefits	R3' No matter how frustrated I become here, when the salary is credited into my account it helps me forget all the pain
Counter Spirituality	Mistrust	Lack of sureness and doubtful about others	R12' Competition is cut-throat – vultures are here every step of the way to take credit for your hard work.
	Competitiveness	Lack of cooperation and support in work	R11' It's a limited industry and everyone is easily replaceable, you've to be at your best game, sit for longer hours if you want to survive here.
Environment	Flexibility	Open communication and the ability to adapt to change.	R9' Management wants us to be available 24/7 particularly during closing periods – coz if we don't do it, we wouldn't get recommended for a better grade.
	Team Work	Mutual Support, Collaboration, Coordination, Motivation and Cooperation	R5' We help juniors in completing the tasks assigned by the senior management and give guidelines to them than they feel motivated towards work. There is a huge team-work at our bank.

5. STUDY FINDINGS

5.1. Discussion

5.1.1. Spirituality and Commitment

From participants' interviews, it was observed that majority respondents were unable to draw a distinction between spirituality and religiosity, and considered spirituality to be a religious phenomenon. They conceptualized workplace spirituality as some, *'Method to connect with God'*. Following are stated a few of the responses:

“Spirituality is not for the workplace [...] religion is a personal belief and devotion of every individual, [...] spirituality is self-intrinsic and for self-benefit only.” (R1)

“No matter what nature of work you do, it’s necessary that you should enact your religious principles and be mindful of religious ideas of good and bad into your work, it’s necessary that your work should be according to the teachings of religion.” (R5)

The consensus amongst banking employees was on the proposition that workload in banks is too heavy to cope-up with. This corroborates the earlier investigation by Altaf & Awan⁴², that work overload leads serious physical and mental problems for employees which includes insomnia, fatigue, mental exhaustion and stress. 10 out of 12 respondents viewed workplace spirituality as somewhat means, ‘*connecting them to their religion and inner soul through honest living*’. They don’t interpret bank environment to be spiritually satisfying in itself, however, view their honest living as a means to please God.

This was further validated, when asked about organizational practices towards promotion of workplace spirituality, as many respondents recorded prayer to play an essential part in balancing work related stress. However, banks that were visited, did not have particular designated praying areas, while employees usually allocated unofficial space for praying. Following responses highlight the situation:

“There is no specific place for the prayer due to less space in the bank but the bank has no objection if we set up an area where we all go and pray (Namaz) and it fulfills our spiritual needs.” (R7)

“Organization is not liable to provide the “Praying Spaces”, we use our lunch hour and go to nearby Mosque to offer our prayers.” (R3)

Though, the situation was slightly different in Islamic banks compared to commercial banks. All respondents from Islamic Banks indicated that their institution was somewhat cautious in mating their spiritual needs and that praying was a source of inner satisfaction and peace.

“In our bank, we start our day’s work through recitation from Holy Quran [...] every morning one of employees recite verses and we all listen to it carefully [...] it’s a spiritual experience which gives us enough strength to jumpstart our day.” (R1)

When inquired about deriving meaningfulness from their work, 11 out of 12 respondents commented that banking failed to contribute a sense of purpose as they found it to be more of an instrumental nature. The work itself was not deemed as a joyful experience and lacked ‘*purposefulness*’ as stated. For e.g.

“My work is meaningful in terms of earning my bread and butter and my job is supporting me financially.” (R1)

“Turnover rate is usually high in banks [...] like I get a good salary where I am but if some other company serves me a better package I wouldn’t mind

switching.” (R4)

“Bank has provided me with a car, so it’s necessary that I should provide my best in return,” (R2)

“I feel I am not cut-out for this kind of work [...], the job market is terrible and banking is the only sector which is flourishing [...] so I guess I am working here for only financial reasons and the fact that it keeps my family happy and satisfied.” (R12)

Albeit some respondents labelled their work to be challenging and induced learning, yet still it was only inspiring to the level of fostering respect amongst the younger lot or the newbies. Such as:

“I have worked hard for this position [...] I believe our work does inspire our juniors because they desire to be in our place which motivates and encourages them to work hard just as much.” (R8)

It was interesting to note the difference of perceptions between employees of commercial banks and that of Islamic banks, as the latter did consider their work to be meaningful only to the extent that at-least it was not damning or pejorative in the eyes of God. As stated:

“I used to work for a conventional bank then I switched here (Islamic bank), [...] there I felt that somehow I may be displeasing God with my work [...] Even-though I could get a better package working for a conventional bank, at-least here (Islamic bank) I am positive that my livelihood is not Haram.”(R7)

“Job Market is already too constraint [...] I don’t find it easy to switch another sector where I could get paid this much [...] but still at the back of my mind there is this painful cognizance that the work I do is against the commandment of God [...] interest is prohibited after all.” (R10)

Altruism and oblation is experienced at the workplace which is not directly mandated by the organization, but is more personally inclined. Since, employees are encouraged to be sales focus and target oriented, much of the compassion is for personal benefit and creating contacts and not for organizational benefit or growth.

“Every now and then we help customers with documentation, facilitate senior citizens and housewives, [...], though we are not obliged but I feel behaving humanely is crucial. (R9)

Moreover, majority employees maintained a lack of alignment between personal goals and the organization goals, which is a key component of spirituality at workplace.

“They keep telling us that when the organization grows, we grow, and if I am efficient in my work then my organization is deemed efficient [...] if only that were true [...] once you’ve worked in banking no other sector willingly accepts you, growth is stagnant.” (R11)

“My personal goals are personal, don’t know if the organization would ever be interested in them [...] it’s very unlikely we get to switch departments if we have worked for one for a longer time.” (R8)

This ensue for our sample to have been experiencing more continuance commitment and that whatever self-practiced spirituality our banking employees could muster somewhat helped their normative commitment compared to other varieties of commitment.

5.1.2. Counter Spirituality & Commitment:

During the course of interviews, respondents recorded various incidents involving practices that have a negative influence upon the spirituality of our employees and for our purposes we label them as “Counter Spirituality”. Encouragingly, our banking employees reported only few incidents of mistrust but did report excessive competition to be common at workplace.

“It’s prudent not to be too trusting [...], but you cannot function without trust and usually I can trust my colleagues [...], yet still I am cautious not to be blind.” (R11)

Spirituality, which incorporates tolerance as a virtue, revealed for 10 out of our 12 participants to be forgiving and not be vengeful towards anyone who have harmed them in the past.

“It’s better to be forgiving [...], who can claim that they’ve never been harmed or cheated at work, the competition is brutal after all [...], but it’s important for personal peace to let go and not make a big deal out of it.”(R6)

Data revealed for our sample that belief and faith in co-workers and managers was noteworthy in spiritual sustenance of banking employees, however, this was an influx more towards normative commitment rather than contributing any profound affection towards their organizations.

5.1.3. Environment & Commitment:

10 out of 12 Respondents articulated their working environment to be flexible and supportive. Our data revealed that employees experienced open communication at their respective workplaces, where employees could comfortably discuss issues with their managers and bosses without hesitation.

“At our bank there is always a friendly work environment as our managers always treats us respectfully and act more like a leader not a boss. They give guidelines when asked for, help us with difficult tasks and give us room to share our concerns & problems with them.” (R7)

This factor tends to integrate a sense of community amongst employees, where they perceived that something greater than themselves is mandated at workplace which comes in the form of working as a team. All respondents stated teamwork and comradery to be significant for success, learning and

be motivated for showing up daily.

“When I had joined this bank, I once asked my supervisor if I could take notes and learn from her work; her response was that if she was able to transfer to me what she has learned over the years, it would be her success as my supervisor.” (R5)

“My teammates know how to create fun with routine tasks and this also helps me to be excited to take on new challenges [...], we feel excited to come to work at the morning.” (R4)

Even though our respondents didn't find work itself to be rewarding or joyful but working in teams rather infiltrated affection and compassion in them. 6 out of 12 employees who were mostly working at relatively lower grades reflected more emotional commitment compared to high ranking officers.

“We support each other and help wherever we can [...], we are like a family here, and my peers and colleagues are like my second family.” (R12)

“This job is demanding and leave little room for socializing [...], my friend circle in general has reduced, since most of the time is spent at work I like socializing with colleagues [...] public relations has become better though.” (R11)

However, our respondents did note that their organizations were supportive with their financial needs, which was more likely to embed continuance commitment in them.

“The bank supports us in terms of advanced salary, medical benefits, rewards, bonuses and promotions. And if someone get a senior position, then the bank also provides them car and fuel expense is on bank” (R8).

Thus, the two environmental factors i.e. openness and teamwork are found to have the capacity to nurture affectionate commitment amongst employees. They somewhat helped in fostering emotional attachment of employees towards their organization fueling their spiritual nourishment.

5.2. Conclusion

These findings can help to establish that majority employees working in the banking sector don't find meaningfulness and sense of purpose in their work, which is unable to satisfy extractions by Ashmos & Duchon⁶. They've less reasons to be psychologically attached to their organization.

To corroborate Amen & Raziq⁴³ and Malik et.al²³, even within the banking sector, despite its very different nature of work, if spirituality is practiced through enhanced opportunities to be compassionate and altruistic, work can be made meaningful and the organization maybe able to create amongst their employees a sense of loyalty, sincerity and community, which is likely to develop affective commitment into employees and ultimately enhance

employee productivity, reduce stress, lower turnover costs and induce satisfaction.

One key point emerged from this discussion is the value of supervisor's role in instilling spirituality amongst his/her subordinate. Our results support the findings of Bodla, & Ali²⁷, that bosses who assist their subordinates in nurturing compassion, altruism, cooperation through teamwork and fellowship, can play an effective role in the development of affective commitment and achieve workers' job satisfaction.

Moreover, normative commitment of these employee is more a result of personal characteristics and it has less to do with the organizational setup. Organizational structure and culture within the banking sector was not enough to make them normatively committed either. From the overall observations, it can be estimated that the banking sector is reluctant to provide avenues for spiritual sustenance of their employees, a result of which is that there remains more continuance commitment rather than nurturing of affectionate commitment or instillation of normative commitment.

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