

## Communicating Workplace Spirituality:

### An Employee Recruitment Strategy

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#### ABSTRACT

Workplace spirituality has been the focus of many studies, which underline its importance for organizations and employees. While most larger employers have embraced inclusion strategies that recognize and support neurodiversity, gender, race, ability, and other characteristics, spirituality appears to be excluded from the conversation, despite evidence of its benefits. This study explores the question, “how are large Canadian employers signalling a commitment to workplace spirituality to prospective employees?” Employing content analysis, the websites of 25 large Canadian organizations were examined to discover: (1) how they publicly communicate spirituality; (2) what can be inferred from this communication; and, (3) what first steps organizations can take to signal spirituality to prospective employees. The findings show few of these organizations publicly communicate spirituality, either explicitly or implicitly. We also examine the barriers and opportunities explicit declarations of spiritual support create in attracting and retaining talent.

**Keywords:** Workplace spirituality, spiritual leadership, communication, recruitment, signalling.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Organizations have struggled for decades to improve employee engagement and wellbeing, yet 21% of workers globally are engaged and 33% say they are thriving (Gallup, 2022). Engagement, which measures enthusiasm and involvement, is key to productivity and staff retention. Gallup (2022) estimates poor engagement costs the global economy US\$7.8 trillion per year in lost productivity, employee turnover, and reduced profits. Thriving, which assesses overall quality of life, is a newer workplace wellbeing metric that has received greater scrutiny since the coronavirus pandemic (Harter & Clifton, 2021). Since 2020, workers globally report higher levels of anxiety, isolation, depression, and financial worry (TELUS Health, 2023). In France, for example, 38% of the working population reports feeling anxious (TELUS Health, 2023).

Support for overall wellbeing has become a key tool employer use to find and keep workers and, in recent years, the level of support has expanded from basic health insurance to holistic benefits that include mental, financial, and family wellbeing, along with support for employees who identify as gender non-binary, neurodiverse, racialized, or marginalized (Michalak & Jackson, 2022). In some organizations, including Bank of America, Microsoft, and Rockwell Automation (Stokes, 2023), employee resource groups (ERGs) are formed to foster engagement and belonging by bringing together employees with shared interests, experiences or characteristics, such as veterans, women of colour, or people living with a chronic illness (Casey, 2021).

Despite new ways of caring for employees, spirituality is absent in conversations about engagement and belonging. Encouraging employees to bring their whole, authentic selves to work should also include initiatives supporting spirituality. Indeed, 68% of Canadians indicate a religious affiliation and 54% say their beliefs are important to everyday life (Cornelissen, 2021). Another consideration is 77% of those born outside Canada consider themselves religious, and with international migration accounting for 95.9% of population growth (Statistics Canada, 2023), the number of Canadian employees with spiritual needs seems likely to increase. These statistics indicate that spirituality is important to many Canadians and should be taken seriously by employers.

Spirituality could be the missing element to including the whole person in the workplace (Garg, 2017). “Spirituality may be referred to as the ability of an individual to get connected with complete self, with others and with complete universe too” (Garg, 2017, p. 131). In the workplace, spirituality emphasizes a holistic approach to employees’ needs, including all aspects of the person. Despite the benefits associated with spirituality’s inclusion in workplaces, many employers have not embraced it with a resulting loss of valuable employees and greater cost to the organization (Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022).

This paper seeks to answer the question “are large Canadian employers signalling a commitment to workplace spirituality to prospective employees?” The websites of top employers in Canada, recognized for their commitment to wellbeing, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), were examined to see how many are including spirituality in their employer value proposition. Content analysis was used to review a random sample of employers in Canada who had been recognized by the Great Place to Work (GPTW) organization, which assesses employers’ culture, practices, programs, and employee feedback. Organizations use this recognition for recruiting

and retaining talent. This study examined if these organizations consider spirituality to be part of their support for employee wellbeing.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Definitions for workplace spirituality have taken many forms since its introduction over 20 years ago. Dubey et al. (2020) listed several variations: “individual expression of ultimate concern toward organization”; “that living force which encourages individual toward purposes which are beyond one’s self and that offer one’s life a new direction and meaning”; and “the big empire of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, with higher entities like God, life, compassion, purpose, etc.” (p. 1494). One of the clearest definitions is offered by Ashmos and Duchon (2000): “recognition of an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (p. 139). This definition has been the foundation for many subsequent studies, frameworks, and models (Csiernik & Adams, 2002; Fry, 2003; Garg, 2017; Miller & Ewest, 2015).

Despite no explicit mention of religion in Ashmos and Duchon’s (2000) definition, there has been debate over whether religion should be a part of workplace spirituality. Houghton et al. (2016) maintain “spirituality is a distinct entity from institutionalized religion” (p. 182). Lyons and Rekar Munro (2022) assert “religion is a formalized system of rituals and beliefs, spirituality is instead focused on the human spirit and its qualities” (p. 115). Differences notwithstanding, the debate cannot be dismissed, as arguments on both sides are strong. Perhaps Bester and Muller’s (2017) proposition offers middle ground, in that, “religion may offer the means to develop spirituality, but...spirituality is the precursor of religion and is not dependent upon religion” (p. 7). For the purposes of this paper, spirituality in general will be examined and not religion specifically.

### **2.1 Why workplace spirituality matters**

Many benefits for employees and organizations have been attributed to workplace spirituality. Dubey et al. (2020) highlight reduced employee stress and absenteeism along with higher morale. Fox et al. (2018) find workplace spirituality has a direct impact on work performance, defined as, “creativity, concentration and clarity, engagement, and commitment” (p. 206). Another study identifies workplace spirituality as “a necessary determinant of employee commitment, job satisfaction, and work-life balance” (Garg, 2017, p. 129). Jena’s (2022) survey confirms the link between workplace spirituality and work performance. For employers, employee engagement and productivity support lower costs and higher profits with less time spent on hiring, training, and retention strategies (Dubey et al., 2020; Hackley, 2019; Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022).

## 2.2 Barriers to spirituality at work

The role of employers in promoting and creating space for workplace spirituality is foundational to meeting the needs of employees (Foster & Foster, 2019). This is not an easy venture within the diversity of today's workforce, when even those who follow the same religion may have different beliefs and practices. The ambiguity of workplace spirituality, coupled with the complexity of attempting to equitably accommodate multiple spiritual traditions may cause some organizations to avoid engaging in it at all. Yet employee calls for "greater freedom to express their spirituality" (Foster & Foster, 2019, p. 66) have grown louder in recent years and some organizations are paying attention.

Leading spiritually shapes how spirituality is performed in the workplace. Unfortunately, some leaders are hesitant about spiritual leadership because they are: (1) ill-equipped, either from their own lack of spirituality or knowledge; (2) resistant, feeling that it intrudes into employees' personal lives; or (3) hostile, due to misunderstanding the difference between spirituality and religion (Cregård, 2017; Lean & Ganster, 2017; Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022).

Creating space for workplace spirituality can also be threatened by the notion that discussing spirituality at work is taboo (Winters, 2017). When employees are unable to talk about this part of themselves, it may feel like a lack of care from the organization and its leaders. When leaders model open communication about spirituality in the workplace, it signals all organizational actors to bring their authentic selves to work, including their spirituality (Daniel et al., 2022).

For workers looking for an organization where spirituality is supported, the search may be difficult. As discussed below, most organizations include broad statements about DEIB and employee wellbeing, but few offer explicit signals of spiritual support, for example, by discussing pastoral services as part of an employee assistance program (EAP), or including a specific mention of faith, spirituality, or inner life.

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## 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP MODEL

Gotsis and Grimani (2017) position spiritual leadership under transcendental leadership and posit it is "both leader and follower centered; it expands on existing leadership theories in motivating followers intrinsically, extrinsically and transcendently through altruistic love, a sense of wholeness, harmony and wellbeing exemplified through care, authentic concern and appreciation of others" (p. 923). Spiritual leadership has also drawn on themes of Ashmos and Duchon's (2000) definition of workplace spirituality: inner life, meaningful work, and community. From this foundation, Fry (2003) produced the Spiritual Leadership model which has had several iterations from its introduction, the most recent proposed by Fry and Nisiewicz (2020). They introduced two models—organizational and personal. For the purposes of this paper, the Organizational Spiritual Leadership model will be used (Figure 1).

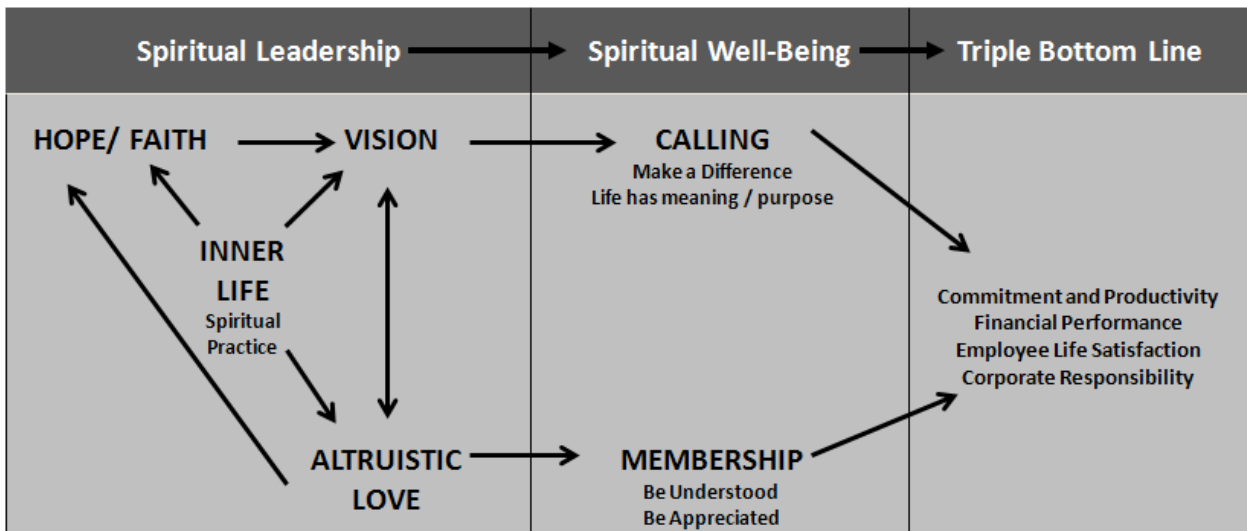


Figure 1

The Organizational Spiritual Leadership model has three sections: spiritual leadership, Triple Bottom Line (TBL), and spiritual wellbeing (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). Spiritual leadership has four components: inner life, hope/faith, vision, and altruistic love. Inner life, or spiritual practice, is central to spiritual leadership as the wellspring from which the other three components flow. “Inner life is a process of understanding and tapping into a power greater than ourselves, along with understanding how to draw on that power to live a more satisfying and full outer life” (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020, Chapter 3, para. 1113). This spiritual journey of cultivating one’s inner life through evolving levels of knowing and being brings clarity to one’s identity, and assurance of one’s place within the organization and one’s valued contributions (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). Leaders may exercise spiritual practices, such as prayer, meditation, and reflection, that encourage the development of their own inner life, which then provides fertile ground for the three other spiritual leadership components: hope/faith, vision, and altruistic love (Fry et al., 2017; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020; Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022). Hope and faith combined is “absolute certainty and trust that what is desired and expected will come to pass” (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020, Chapter 2, para. 866). Vision is how one conceives the future, and altruistic love is treating oneself and others with love and respect (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). When these three components are combined and exhibited, spiritual wellbeing is modelled and normalized for everyone throughout the organization.

Spiritual wellbeing of both leaders and employees, which is composed of calling and membership, is an output of spiritual leadership (Fry et al., 2017; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020). Calling is a feeling of making a difference in one’s work and, by extension, that life has meaning and purpose. Membership is a sense of belonging, of being understood and appreciated. Hope/faith and vision directly impact calling, while altruistic love directly impacts membership. Widodo and Suryosukmono (2021) posit when spiritual leadership is exercised, organizations “are more able to attract intrinsic motivation among their employees, align spirituality-based organizational development with self-development, build harmony, honesty, trust, empowerment, individual awareness and initiative” (p. 2122). Intentional promotion of spiritual wellbeing benefits employees and organizations as it is believed to be “positively related to better coping with long-term and terminal illness, and to physical well-being, a sense of hope, self-esteem, social support, and better marital adjustment and intimacy” (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020, Chapter 5, para 2335).

The TBL section of the model outlines how calling and membership affect organizations inside and out through “people, planet, and profit” (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020, Chapter 2, paras. 913–926). The outcomes of commitment and productivity, financial performance, employee life satisfaction, and corporate responsibility reflect how organizations can positively impact their employees and their environment, while increasing productivity and profitability (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2020).

Many quantitative studies underscore the benefits of spiritual leadership. Ali et al. (2020) find spiritual leadership reduces workplace ostracism while Yang and Fry (2018) confirm its impact on reducing burnout. Increased work performance is linked to spiritual leadership (Elias et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019; F. Yang, Liu, et al., 2019), and team effectiveness (F. Yang, Huang, et al., 2019). Despite these benefits, many leaders do not consider spiritual leadership to be a legitimate tool (Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022). Until it is brought into the same strategic conversation as organizational culture and leadership effectiveness, spirituality will be relegated to the dark corners of the workplace, seen only by the individual employees who practice their faith privately.

## **5 METHODOLOGY**

To assess the prevalence of signalled spiritual wellbeing support in workplaces, we performed a qualitative content analysis of the websites of a random sample of 25 Canadian organizations, with more than 500 employees that have been recognized as top employers by GPTW Institute. GPTW Institute uses a proprietary model to measure trust, values, leadership, innovation, growth, and focus on human potential to certify employers with a GPTW designation. The certification process involves an employee survey and a self-reported culture audit that includes this question: “How do you ensure everyone - regardless of who they are or what job they do - is a full member of your organization and can reach their highest potential?” (Divilly & Hickey, 2021). GPTW operates globally and publishes annual lists of certified employers. This study used data from Canada’s Best Workplaces 2022 (Great Place to Work Canada, 2022).

### **5.1 Data Collection and Analysis**

This research examined 25 organizations with more than 500 employees. While we acknowledge organizations of all sizes may offer spiritual support, we chose larger employers because they are more likely to have the resources to create formal support modalities and to include this information on their websites. The GPTW list included 58 organizations with more than 500 employees. Using the randomize function in Microsoft Excel, we selected 25 organizations to study. This sample size was selected because it provided a cross section of certified employers. Mason (2010) finds that a median sample size of 25 is standard for content analysis.

The sample included organizations from the provinces of Ontario (n=18), British Columbia (n=3), Quebec (n=2), and New Brunswick (n=1). This distribution was expected as the majority of large organizations in Canada are headquartered in Ontario. Due to the randomization approach, based on GPTW criteria, not all provinces were included, specifically, we note that organizations based in Alberta and most Atlantic provinces were not represented; however, we believe the practices of large employers in these provinces are unlikely to differ significantly because employment standards and benefits are relatively homogenous in Canada. It is also noteworthy that many of the organizations operate at multiple sites across Canada, regardless of where their corporate headquarters are situated. As Table 1 shows, the sample represented a broad range of industrial sectors (n=10), though there is a notable absence of not-for-profit firms, likely because these organizations tend to have fewer than

500 employees. We are confident this sample, based on the larger GPTW dataset, represents a good cross section of large employers in Canada.

Table 1

*Sectors and locations assessed in this study*

Sector
Biotechnology & pharmaceuticals // pharmaceuticals
Biotechnology & pharmaceuticals // pharmaceuticals
Hospitality // food and beverage service
Information technology
Hospitality // food and beverage service
Transportation // transport & storage
Financial services & insurance
Transportation // package transport
Hospitality // food and beverage service
Information technology // software
Professional services
Hospitality // hotel/resort
Manufacturing & production // automotive
Hospitality // food and beverage service
Manufacturing & production // food products: other
Biotechnology & pharmaceuticals // pharmaceuticals
Information technology
Financial services & insurance
Financial services & insurance // investments
Professional services
Health care // medical sales// distribution
Financial services & insurance // re-insurance
Information technology // it consulting
Information technology
Manufacturing & production // personal and household goods

Notes: Information source is *Canada's best workplaces 2022*. (Great Place to Work Canada, 2022). Organization sectors and locations are as listed in the report.

Each organization’s website was reviewed in April 2023 for information signalling support for employee spiritual wellbeing, spirituality, or inner lives. We began with a Boolean web search of the organization name with the operators “spirituality” and “spiritual” to surface any content that might exist outside their websites, for example in news articles or online recruiting sites. For each organization, we performed the same search within their websites. We also manually reviewed all public webpages pertaining to workplace culture, employee benefits, ERGs, wellness, wellbeing, and corporate values. We used codes generated from the workplace spirituality literature such as “spiritual”, “authenticity”, “faith”, “beliefs”, “mindfulness”, and “meditation”. Through successive rounds of iterative coding, we noted any references or artefacts, such as images, that directly or indirectly referred to spirituality. This included explicit references to, for example, pastoral services as part of a benefits program, as well as less content that could refer to spirituality, such as mention of “mind, body and soul”. As well, we noted where support for spirituality was possible, for example, where content mentioned meditation spaces. Through ongoing reflection and discussion, three categories of references to spirituality emerged from the data: explicit, implied, and inferred. These are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

*Coding category definitions*

<b>Category code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Explicit	Explicit reference to spirituality or a concrete artifact or activity directly in support of spirituality
Implied	References to spirituality that did not use the word spirituality, e.g. one organization refers to wellness of “mind, body and soul”
Inferred	Moderate degree of certainty that spirituality is at least somewhat supported, e.g. through meditation training or dedicated spaces where employees can reflect or engage in spiritual practice
None	No mention of spirituality was found

We also note these categories reflect the experience of an employee or prospective employee assessing spirituality support in an organization. We anticipated other themes or categories might emerge as the data were analyzed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); however, no new categories were found. Each researcher reviewed half of the companies on the list, making notes in a spreadsheet shared on a Google drive. These notes included examples of explicit, implied, and inferred references to spirituality, along with reflective notes. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend keeping researcher notes to guide further reflection and find emergent patterns or themes. When all organizations had been examined once, each researcher did a second analysis on the organizations the other had previously reviewed. Tracy (2013) recommends this approach for collaborative research where a high rate of agreement about coding is required.

In addition to reviewing each other’s notes, we also used regular video calls to reflect, refine, and clarify our data categorizations and findings. Orr and Bennett (2009) recommend recursive reflexivity between researchers to challenge assumptions, biases and practices. Through these conversations, we created, refined, and combined codes to define the ways in which organizations might signal spirituality, for example, references to mindfulness, yoga practice, whole self, authentic self or soul were assessed for meaning and categorization.

We have anonymized the organizations, using codes instead of company names and, since we did not engage any human subjects in this work, nor does either researcher have any personal or professional connection to the examined organizations, we believe a reasonable ethical standard of research has been met.



## RESULTS

Of the 25 organizations reviewed, three explicitly signal spiritual wellbeing support for employees. A sales consulting firm, a subsidiary of a U.S. based parent company (F1), has an interfaith ERG as part of its global employee benefits program, with this description: “the Interfaith employee resource group at (F1) focused on celebrating, supporting and fostering understanding of our global faith and spiritual diversity through inclusive and educational events and initiatives. We champion faith diversity & inclusion, interfaith & intersectional collaboration and allyship across the company” (Salesforce, n.d.).

An accounting firm (F2) offers an interfaith network, operating at local and global levels. The organization clearly ties faith to its broader inclusion strategy and to business results including innovation, leadership, and client support. In a video, the firm’s managing partner and chief executive states, “when we bring varying perspectives to the table it leads to innovative thinking that helps our middle market clients, our people and our firm succeed” (RSM, n.d.). In the video, members of the group discuss the ways in which it has strengthened their faith, connected them with coworkers and built leadership skills. One member mentions the ERG’s role in combating isolation and political polarization. F2 also connects faith and leadership, running an annual conference for ERG members (RSM, 2020).

Though a food services and facilities management company (F3), explicitly signals support for spiritual wellbeing on its website, there appears to be little substance to the offering. The webpage states “we offer our associates resources to support their mental, financial, physical and spiritual wellbeing through our publicly available ‘Stronger Together’ website” (Just Now Compass, 2021). However, the webpage includes only a link to a paid mindfulness mobile application. It is unclear whether additional spiritual support is offered through the company’s EAP.

Four organizations, two technology firms, a pharmaceutical firm, and a professional services firm (F4), use implicit signals of support for spirituality. For example, F4 discusses a commitment to “authentic connection and trust” (Grant Thornton, n.d.a), stating their workplace is one “where everyone feels safe to bring their whole selves to work” (Grant Thornton, n.d.b). The other three communicate mindfulness and meditation support for employees. For two other employers, we were able to infer some signals for spirituality support, based on statements about belonging or specific benefits. For example, a global hotel organization offers a sabbatical program that could be used for spiritual pursuits, and provides a third party EAP which communicates a broad definition of self-care that may include spirituality.

The balance of the employers reviewed (n=16) make general statements about commitments to DEIB and it is possible they are supporting spiritual wellbeing, though no signals were detected on these organizations’ websites. Interestingly, a logistics company posted an article on mindfulness which could have placed them with the four organizations using implicit signals of support for spirituality; however, spirituality was explicitly removed from this mindfulness discussion and replaced with neuroscience.

## 6 DISCUSSION

This limited audit indicates larger employers may be missing opportunities to attract, engage and retain talent. Given the importance of spirituality to a majority of Canadians, it seems likely that an employer offering peer networks, facilities for spiritual practice at work, and access to professional spiritual support will be more attractive to talent than organizations which do not. In addition to a more competitive employer brand, spirituality may also be a pillar for organizations focused on DEIB improvements which allow their employees to thrive. Despite the business case for recognizing and supporting spirituality at work, the absence of explicit and implicit signals on large employer websites suggests barriers remain when it comes to the workplace.

Looking at the growth of discussions about race and gender inside organizations, perhaps there is a model to follow. In the early part of this century, organizations began to focus on equity and diversity, with initially poor results in terms of addressing gender and racial bias in hiring and promotion (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Employers using top down mandates and mandatory training experienced high levels of resistance among managers; however, Dobbin and Kalev (2016) find when managers were engaged as drivers of the initiative and offered voluntary training, supported by an organizational task force, representation of women and racialized employees improved. While there is considerable work to be done in supporting workplace diversity, most organizations are able to have productive conversations about gender, race, neurodiversity, mental health, and disability, among other topics. Perhaps a similar approach can remove barriers to discussions of spirituality.

Fry and Nisiewicz's (2020) Spiritual Leadership model may be a starting point for understanding and accepting spirituality in the workplace. Given the benefits of its inclusion, it should behoove leaders to model an openness to discuss spirituality, while staying attuned to employee spiritual wellness, and exercising spiritual practices for themselves. This may be challenging for some leaders who are reticent or sometimes openly resistant to spirituality themselves, as previously mentioned. Therefore, we need leaders who are willing to cultivate their own inner lives through self-reflection, discovery of their own areas of needful growth, and "sitting in the muddiness of uncertainty and confusion and allowing new insights to unfold" (Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022).

It is noteworthy to mention that these organisations may, in fact, promote workplace spirituality. However, this promotion was not apparent on their websites and, thus, would not serve to attract prospective employees for whom spirituality is important. Exhibiting concrete examples, such as ERGs, in a prominent place on their website will allow easy access to this information and elevate the organization's spiritual profile publicly.

## **6.1 Who will lead the charge?**

Many leaders are reluctant to bring their own spirituality to work, let alone encourage its inclusion organization-wide. Since religious organizations are assumed to be exercising workplace spirituality already, some would suggest they could lead this evolution. However, the line between religion and spirituality is delicate and involving religious organizations may accentuate this divide (Cregård, 2017; Lyons & Rekar Munro, 2022). In addition, many European churches and denominations have a complex history of colonialism and oppression, particularly for Canadian Indigenous communities. This may also be the case for people moving to Canada from other formerly colonized places. Distancing this movement from any one religion may result in more acceptance by leaders and employees in Canadian organizations. This may also offer an opportunity to decolonize workplaces and bring Indigenous ways of knowing and being into a broader business discussion, beyond spirituality.

## **6.2 Limitations and Future Research**

This research examined a limited sample of organizations with large numbers of employees. It is possible smaller employers are attending to employees' spiritual needs and further research into whether organization size has any correlation with spirituality is recommended. It is also possible some of these firms offer spiritual support; however, that information is not signalled publicly or that spirituality is recognized at certain locations but not others.

Future research could examine the barriers and opportunities that explicit declarations of spiritual support create in attracting and retaining talent, and in the best practices for signalling such support. Additional research could also assess workplace spirituality beyond Western cultures and organizations, particularly as a tool to decolonize organizations.

## **6.3 Summary**

As this research has briefly demonstrated, there is an opportunity to address the spiritual needs of employees and workplaces. By inviting workers to include their inner lives as part of their authentic selves at work, leaders create space to build engagement, trust, and belonging in organizations. This investment, in turn, supports culture and performance along with emerging TBL priorities.

A small number of employers are confronting the tensions surrounding organizational conversations about spirituality and belonging. Despite the challenge in starting these conversations, there is much to be gained. In the words of one executive, "the initial discomfort of joining in is something that can be overcome" (RSM, n.d.). It is clear there is work to be done to bring this into mainstream management thinking to the same extent as other DEIB commitments.

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