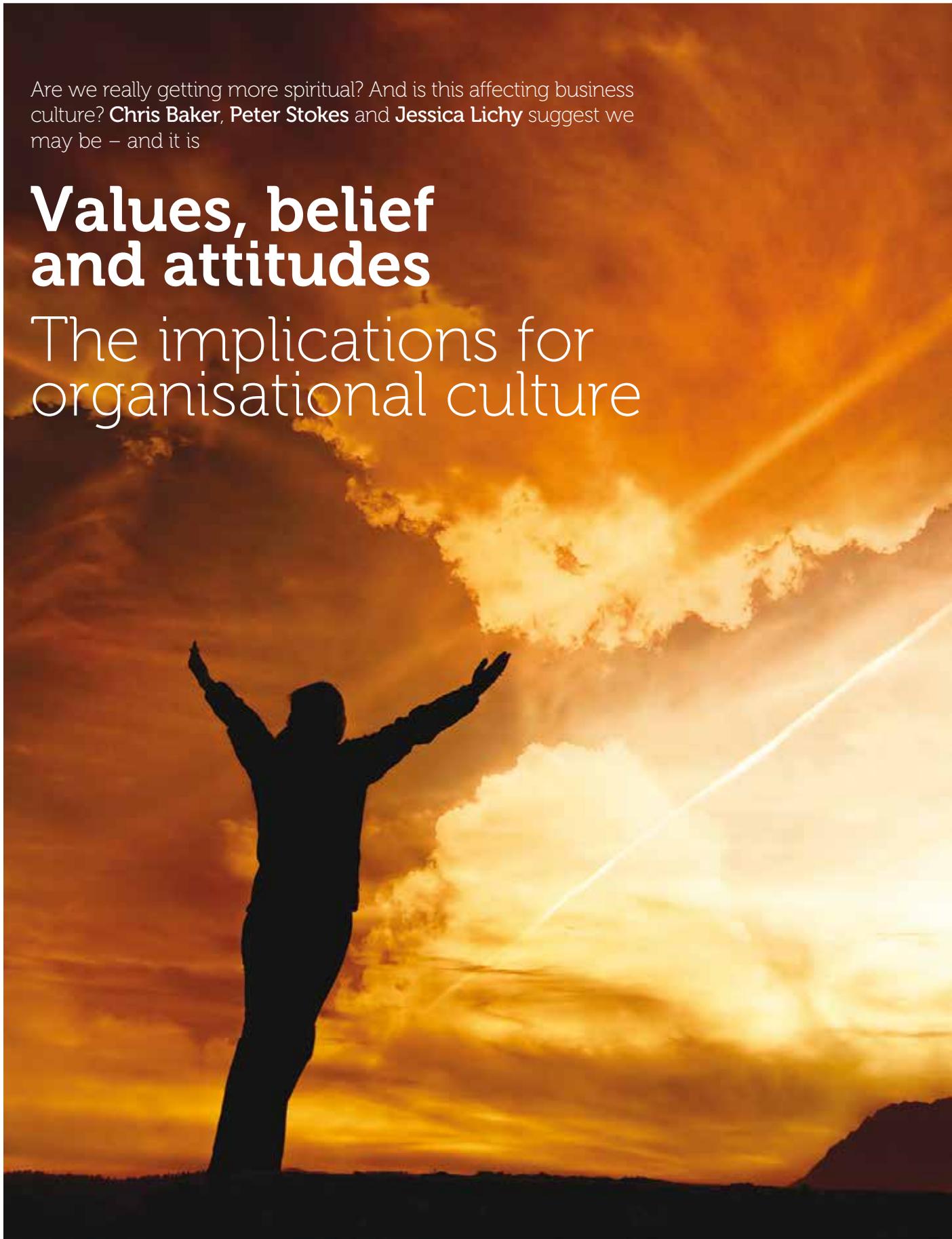


Are we really getting more spiritual? And is this affecting business culture? **Chris Baker**, **Peter Stokes** and **Jessica Lichy** suggest we may be – and it is

Values, belief and attitudes

The implications for
organisational culture





Spirituality in the workplace continues to gain acceptance as a field of study in management education, with widespread application to practices within organisations

In the fields of business organisation and management much has been written and spoken about values and beliefs. However, we find ourselves entering a fresh and novel phase of experience, a new spirituality-linked epoch we can describe as a “postsecular” era in which the secularisation of society has given way to renewed attention to the values of faith, religion and spirituality.

Spirituality in the workplace continues to gain acceptance as a field of study in management education, with widespread application to practices within organisations. As a topic, spirituality is no longer a passing trend – it has gained significant legitimacy in recent years. But managers still struggle to grasp the context and to apply notions of values, beliefs and attitudes to establish an advantage over competitors.

With this in mind, colleagues from the University of Chester in the UK and IDRAC Business School in France have formed an international and cross/inter-disciplinary team project to consider from a novel and hybrid perspective identified by the team as workplace ‘values, beliefs and attitudes’ (or the useful acronym VBA).

The Chester/IDRAC team draws together commentators from the fields of religion and theology, business management, marketing and international business. The results are striking and point the way towards a new way of thinking about and “operationalising” VBA and its strong connections to existing spiritual, religious, social and human capital within organisations.

In recent years, human capital (the skills and knowledge for operating in the workplace) and social capital (the value-creating relationships in the workplace) have received considerable attention.

Social capital has had a chain of significant proponents. Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, among others, have examined it in relation to the neo-liberal, market-driven values and systems that have increasingly dominated national and global markets from the latter part of the 20th century onwards.

The central message emerging from these debates was that individual employees going about their everyday life add value in multifarious ways. Consequently, organisations are increasingly alert to the importance of social interactions and relationships at work. The emphasis is on understanding social capital in order to foster, utilise and enhance the success of the organisation.

How does all this fit into the elusive term “postsecular era” and how should businesses be paying attention to it?

The postsecular age dawned due to a range of events and influences but not least to a conjunction of the fall of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War, the emergence of globalised capitalism, and the call for ethical, sustainable and responsible responses from organisations, citizens and stakeholder groups.

Religion was viewed rather negatively prior to these changes. And secularism, built on market-driven mechanisms, materialism, commodification and consumerism, eclipsed many spiritual and religious spheres.

In the 21st century there is evidence that religion is being re-assigned an important role in many individuals’ lives and in the way we understand public life more widely.

This change has been heralded by bodies such as the William Temple Foundation, a charitable body within the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Chester that describes itself as “a research and ideas hub shaping the debate on religion in public life”.

The Foundation has underlined the role of faith-based engagements in civil society for their positive contributions in enhancing resilience in the wider community.

This marries with the increasing number of individuals who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” in addition to those people who consider themselves as not having a religion but nevertheless maintain a close interest and respect for religious notions and practices.

In consequence, businesses and organisations are witnessing a range of new “spaces” opening up connected to spiritual capital, which they will need to be mindful of and address.

The definition of spiritual capital in this context is the “why” that generates, and indeed energises, the “what”.

In the case of faith groups and individuals, their desire to transform daily life for the better comes from the dialectic interplay of theological ideas, beliefs, membership of a faith community, practices of prayer and worship, and the way they seek to conduct themselves in the public sphere.

For those who define themselves as of “no religion”, their spiritual capital will be those values, ethics and visions for change that come from non-religious sources and ideas but which are powerful “whys” that shape the “what” that they do.

Increasingly insightful approaches are beginning to show a role for the recognition of VBA, the postsecular and religious dimensions in organisational life falling in line with a swath of kindred aspects that have emerged in recent decades including coaching, well-being, work-life balance, corporate governance and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Managers are increasingly required to have implicit knowledge of the various aspects of their organisation that give it a particular climate or feel. This awareness goes beyond the mere “culture” of the organisation. Understanding how values can influence attitudes and beliefs can provide managers with an insight into what is important to stakeholders concerning resource management.

All of the above points to the difficulty, merit and appropriateness of actually trying to manage (in the hard culture style) the spaces inside an employee’s head – and indeed heart, as some commentators have noted, raises the question of whether some aspects of the human condition and thinking are likely to be “unmanageable” – postsecular VBA may be just one such space.

In order to look more closely at how issues of VBA, spiritual capital and organisational life play out, the Chester/ IDRAC VBA project interviewed staff from three distinctly different organisations based in the north of England: an IT and web-design company; a regional legal firm; and a Japanese-associated manufacturing enterprise.

The number of employees in the organisations ranged from 30 to 200-plus and interviews involved senior and middle management, human resources personnel and the wider workforce.



60%

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In addition to the interviews, individuals participants were invited to complete a Likert Scale to gauge their identification with one or more of four positions with regard to religious or spiritual beliefs including, for example, "I would define myself as: Religious, Spiritual, Agnostic, Atheist".

The early results reveal a range of interesting and fascinating insights (albeit from an initial small sample).

Approximately 60% of respondents identify themselves as being somewhere on the agnostic-atheistic spectrum. In addition, 20% clearly indicate some form of spiritual belief and a further 20% indicate themselves as being definitely religious.

The profile is interesting in the manner in which it raises attitudes towards faith, values and beliefs and the revealing picture it presents of the contemporary workplace with equal spreads across age, gender and business sectors examined.

In particular, the following factors emerged as prescient and relevant for the role of VBA in the organisation:

Drivers of behaviour

These centred on issues of bottom line; employee satisfaction and happiness; spiritual capital (doing things well and in a good spirit); relating all the aforementioned into the "bigger picture" – macro-global changes and pressures on the micro-individual dimensions.

Sources of VBA

Education, family values and experience, peer pressure, culture, the media, company ethos, business practices, personality, wisdom with maturity, friends, religion, and spiritual values and expectations by others.

Impact of VBA on individual and corporate behaviour

Illustrations of working together and sharing to get through hard times – for example, taking and sharing reductions in hours to ensure people keep their jobs albeit on reduced incomes during order downturns.

Identifying and reporting deceitful or dishonest behaviour.

Being mindful of how to talk to each other and clients.

Negotiating and performing religious identities in the workplace

Seeing religious belief as a private affair that has no formal place within the organisational setting.

The extent to which employees feel comfortable expressing their religion/spirituality in the workplace may well depend on how their managers observe and interpret employment regulations.

These four themes, shaping and reflecting VBA in the corporate setting, that emerged from the project provide a subtle and interwoven indication of the role of spiritual capital in the postsecular organisation.

VBA makes a frequently concealed and everyday contribution to human capital. It plays a role in enhancing not only emotional well-being and satisfaction but also complements a range of workplace skills and capabilities.

In the everyday world of work, VBA and religious belief as it is expressed in the postsecular corporate sphere, spiritual thinking and behaviour complement soft corporate cultural dimensions and are not necessarily to the detriment of the harder dimensions.

VBA, as both a form and expression of spiritual capital, makes a contribution not only at the micro-relational level of individuals but also at the organisational entity level. A more strategic acknowledgement and embracing of it could potentially enhance organisational life and performance at all levels.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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