


RESEARCH  IN ACTION | BY JULIE CARLSON

bringing faith to work



Chick-fil-A and Hobby Lobby, two closely-held family companies, recently found themselves in the news when values associated with their founders' faith came in conflict with some more secular views espoused by various politically active groups.

Organizations such as these have clearly stated spiritual values; however, numerous organizations might not be as explicit but are still trying to live out faith while in the workplace.

Mitchell Neubert, professor and Chavanne Chair of Christian Ethics in Business, has spent years researching the direct applications of how faith might impact work.

"The goal of my research is to explain that faith is relevant and encourage people to have appropriate expressions of their faith in the workplace. Living out their faith can benefit organizations because integrating faith into the workplace is associated with employees being ethical, hardworking and committed to their organizations," he said.

In 2009, Neubert received a grant from the National Science Foundation to examine "Entrepreneurial Behavior, Regulatory Focus, and Religion." For the multi-part study, he teamed up with Baylor sociology professors Jerry Park and Kevin Dougherty.

Part of that larger study was published last year in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Using data from the Baylor Religion Survey, the Baylor scholars found American entrepreneurs pray more frequently, tend to see God as more personal and are more likely to attend a place of worship that encourages business activity. On other measures—church affiliation, belief in God and service attendance—entrepreneurs seem to be as religious as everyone else: They attend church monthly, on average, and two-thirds say they have no doubt God exists.

"We speculate that entrepreneurs are more aware of the risks associated with business," Neubert said. "Since a high percentage of entrepreneur ventures fail, maybe these people are more sensitive to the need for guidance and support. People with stable jobs might not feel the need to pray about the job every day. That doesn't mean other people don't pray; it just means entrepreneurs pray a little bit more."

Another study Neubert conducted with Associate Professor Steve Bradley looked at the faith maturity or "spiritual capital" of people in Indonesia and Kenya who receive microfinancing. They found the entrepreneurs who have a high level of faith maturity are more innovative and have higher levels of sales.

"We don't have a complete explanation for the effects. We need to do follow-up research to discover why these people are more innovative and successful than those with lower faith maturity," Neubert said.

Conversely, a preliminary study of people who adhere to a "prosperity gospel" or belief that God promises prosperity to believers finds this does not translate into action and, in fact, they seem to be a little more passive in the workplace.

"We are still exploring this issue, but right now, we are finding that believing the prosperity gospel does not predict entrepreneurial behavior at work. This belief might be associated with positive attitudes, but those attitudes don't translate into action. This is an issue because a large number of people outside the U.S., especially in developing countries, strongly adhere to the prosperity gospel and its hope for a better life," Neubert said.

Other studies have delved into similar questions. In "Called to Commitment: An Examination of Relationships Between Spiritual Calling, Job Satisfaction, and Organizational Commitment" (*Journal of Business Ethics*), Neubert and graduate student Katie Halbesleben looked at how one's feeling of spiritual calling or believing one's work is a mission from God can influence attitudes about work.

"We weren't looking at the secular definition of 'calling' that means passion or fit, but rather a calling from God. We found that people who believe they have a spiritual calling to work are more satisfied with their work and more committed to their organizations. What this tells me is that for some people, faith is a source of motivation and meaning in their work. Those people find spiritual value in what they are doing. That is a good thing for organizations," Neubert said.

Also, churches have an impact on faith in the workplace. The study on entrepreneurs found they are more likely to worship in churches that are perceived as "pro-business." But how are churches "pro-business," and what are the best practices of those that are?

"Are there particular messages in the sermons, special programs (such as affinity groups) for business people or other ways that certain churches validate business?" Neubert asked. "Pastors usually aren't trained to talk about work, but that is where we spend the majority of our days. They typically don't know how to help their members integrate faith with work. We want to help churches realize they do have an impact on the workplace and to be thoughtful and wise about what they are teaching."

While some workplaces have been trying to detach faith from the workplace because of political issues or concerns, in doing so, they might be limiting the potential positive benefits of employees bringing their whole self to work, Neubert said.

"Any business leader or entrepreneur must be wise in how they talk about faith in the workplace. We are such a diverse culture with diverse workplaces, and one can't assume that everybody has the same belief. So businesses have to be careful about encouraging and allowing expressions of faith that don't infringe on other people's rights," he said.

Neubert often discusses the results of his research findings with his principled leadership classes.

"Talking about ethics is a big part of that class," he said. "One of the great things about Baylor is we can talk about where our ethics and values come from. Some institutions want to discuss ethics but not the source of those ethics."

Neubert's students often interview business leaders for their class assignments. Often they learn how these leaders' faith shapes their ethics and how they treat their employees and customers.

Neubert also brings in leaders to his class. "I can ask, 'What are your spiritual values, and as a leader, how could you put those into practice in a way that doesn't alienate people and benefits the organization?'" he said. "Although many people don't live an integrated life; these successful leaders often do."

Through my writing and teaching, I am trying to encourage people to bridge the gap between Sunday and Monday.

If they do it wisely, they can experience an integrated life, which benefits themselves and their organizations and others. They won't need to have one life on Sunday and another life on Monday."