

Studying the Fit of Expatriates: A Cross-Cultural Post-Modern Approach

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Background

My line of enquiry evolved out of several simple but practical issues that were presented to me anecdotally.

Firstly, a businessman I know in Shanghai was relating to me how vexing and disruptive it was to his business to have an incredibly high failure rate in 'expatriates' who come to China and cannot or do not complete their contracts. It seemed to matter little where the expatriate arrived from; and it seemed a lack of professional skills was not a reason for failure either. For whatever reason, they did not fit and they left early costing his organization thousands upon thousands of dollars (pounds). As the conversation continued he relayed how his situation was not unique; many of his colleagues echoed the same consternation. Perhaps most disconcerting to him was the point that, these were talented professionals and semi-professionals in quality positions earning compensation packages that would incite envy around the water cooler back home. These were not the young low wage ESL type teachers more focused on the travel experience than career.

Second, in Shanghai, China there are approximately 100,000 business people earning about US\$300,000 (£150,000) of which approximately 30 to 35 percent apparently fail to complete their overseas posting. This is just Shanghai, China. If we now add in Beijing, Mumbai and other centres with large groups of expatriates; if this failure rate could be reduced by even 1%, a quick calculation and we see the saving to industry is staggering. Furthermore, the saving in heartbreak, time lost, and potential career damage to the individual is incalculable.

Third, it was pointed out that an enormous trend in expatriate employment is the expatriate coming to the USA and other developed countries. In fact, Microsoft is wrestling with this dilemma currently as it recruits more and more foreign programmers. This point, viewing the expatriate as 'non-western' has not even been considered.

This brings me to the final point, given the ever increasing global mobility of workforces; it is becoming more important all the time to incorporate multiculturalism in organizations more effectively to create a better fit and maintain competitiveness.

It was the desire to explore this issue of better identifying the expatriate for overseas assignments, which I believe is really a subset of the multicultural dimension, coupled with my background in psychology, individual psychology, in particular, that has brought me to the start of a PhD.

Introduction

"The last 2 decades have seen a paradigmatic shift in the work context..... Massive changes ...have made the nature of work considerably more multicultural." (pg. 20, Landy, F. J. 2005). "The result ...has been to highlight the different realities that are defined by national culture." (pg. 21, Landy, F. J. 2005).

If, as is pointed out throughout the literature, person-organization fit (fit) remains an important yet elusive concept to define and measure (Billsberry, J; Ambrosini, V; Moss-Jones, J; Marsh, P. 2005), acknowledging and integrating a cross-cultural component to the debate has just added another layer of complexity. Researchers have been mapping out an ever expanding constellation of definitions, factors, types of fit, and types of organizations influencing fit. (Kristof, A. L. 1996) As the list grows more unwieldy, it is of less and less practical value; fortunately, there seems to be a road ahead. It seems all roads are leading to a post-modern, sense-making, approach to measure fit, an approach that acknowledges multiple realities. (Barinaga, E. 2001; Billsberry, J. et al, 2005; Landy, F. J. 2005; Williams, Roger. Forthcoming).

Theoretical Framework

Schneider ((1987) in Landy, 2005) turned the selection fit debate on its ear when he proposed his Attraction–Selection–Attrition theory. In his view, people are attracted to organizations whose organization values mesh with their own and these values are established at some point by the organization founders. Kristof (1996) expanded the fit debate by adding multiple types of fit. Sekiguchi (2004) as did Billsberry, et al (2005) questioned: Fit to what, the job or the organization? However, of more interest was Sekiguchi's (2004) study of P-O Fit on Japanese students was one of the early studies on a non-Western culture.

To delineate fit, researchers have explored an ever increasing number of factors that influence fit (Kristof, A. L. 1996; Lee, C; Hui, C; Niu, X; Tinsley, C. 2006; Lock, J.D. and Bourdeau, N. 2004). Yet as more factors have been added, the waters seem to muddy even more. Furthermore, most studies have been from an American/Western Europe perspective. Tests most commonly used to measure Fit have also been developed with the American and Western European audience in mind; and the odd study that has used the tests on non-US groups has had mixed results (Dalton, M. and Wilson, M., 2000). In fact, Vandenberghe recommended that 'additional work is needed on the structure of the OCP across nations and industries.' (In *The Organizational Culture Profile Revisited and Revised: An Australian Perspective*; Australian Journal of Management, Vol. 30, 2005). Finally, as Billsberry, et al (2005) point out numerous problems exist, first and foremost perhaps is definitional: What is fit? With the aforementioned conflicts in mind, a post-modern perspective which seats meaning clearly within the person and their interpretation may provide the method to gain a global concept of fit. With a post-modern approach, the above factors will always be contextually relevant to their experience. (Barinaga, E. 2001;Landy, F.J. July, 2005; Williams, Roger. Forthcoming).

Because fit is PO, often overlooked in the debate is defining the organization. Most often organization culture is used as the descriptor of an organization. However, like defining the person and fit, defining the organization suffers as well. For example, the Turban, D. B. et al (2001) study defines organizations in terms of "State owned vs. Foreign owned in China". Lock and Bourdeau (2004) describe organizations in America from another perspective. Slaughter, et al (2004) create a test to describe organizations in terms of distinct personalities.

With so many unique conceptualizations of organizations, how can we measure the appropriateness of PO Fit? Again, a cognitive mapping process delineated by Billsberry, et al (2005) may prove useful, especially if linked to Prototype Theory ala Broughton and Shaw (1990). By having organization members define via maps and then consolidate the maps of the participants, we can create a prototype that defines the organization.

Studies that look at fit from a non-US/Western European perspective are few (Lee, C.; Hui, C.; Niu, X.; Tinsley, C. 2006; Turban, Daniel B.; Lau, Chung-Ming; Ngo, Hang-Yue; Chow, Irene H. S.; Si, Steven X. .2001). Seriously confounding the fit issue when we move to other cultures is the concept of culture itself. Most studies that have explored fit in non-US cultures have used Hofstede's conceptualization of culture. Hofstede viewed culture on dimensions such as 'collective-individual' and how a country viewed itself informed organization behaviour. However, his conceptualization of culture has been questioned by the GLOBE Project who, based on psychometrics alone, found no support for Hofstede's dimensions. Barinaga, E. (2001) addressing the concept of culture definition with a post-modern sense-making perspective informs us as to how culture is a creation of each individual. 'Culture' for one is not the same as culture for a different person because each creates the meaning based on their experiences. And since each person has a different set of experiences and interpretation of the experiences, their view of culture cannot be the same.

As we have seen, to move fit research forward we need a more multicultural approach and a method of measuring that more completely represents reality as a whole. A cognitive mapping approach which speaks to the individual nature of decision-making may provide the approach especially if we can consolidate responses to create schemas or prototypes of collectives against which individual responses can then be compared. (see Broughton and Shaw, J. 1990).

Research Questions

I am interested in several issues:

1. Does cognitive mapping better represent the PO fit?
2. Creating cognitive maps and prototypes of organizations to explore the question: Are there different organization 'types'?
3. Are there cultural differences in responses on the cognitive maps of individuals: Does Hofstede's conceptualizations of culture stand the test?
4. Does time affect the PO fit? i.e. With time do new hires better reflect the prototype?

5. Explore 'expatriation' from the non-traditional view. (Most often 'expats' are viewed only from the view of Americans or Europeans going on foreign assignment. However, globalization is challenging the concept (Giridharadas, A.; April 12, 2007; Dalton, M. and Wilson, M., 2000; Landry, 2005).

Design

Within an organization, divide employees into seven groups as follows: one group of the management/'founders', and one group each of Chinese, Latin, and British new organization hires, and one group each of Chinese, Latin, and British who have been with the organization for awhile (veterans), preferably with high evaluations. If they have stayed with the organization for several years it could be assumed they better fit the organization (question 4 above). Create the same structure for a second organization, but ensure the organization is 'culturally' different from the other organization to allow a tentative answer to Question 1 above.

To create profiles/maps:

1. Create individual cognitive maps of individual new hires, veterans, and management following Billsberry, et al (2005) method or Broughton method, ideally when hired during indoctrination.
2. Repeat #1 with new hires and veterans at 90 days, the point where they are moved from probation status (and measure those who leave).
3. Consolidate individual profiles to create a prototype for each group and consolidate management to create an organisation prototype. (see Broughton)
4. Measure fit between the 2. i.e. does the individual map fit the organization profile and does the organization prototype/map fit the individual.

I want to measure the following outcomes:

1. Compare the profiles of the various cultural groups. Are there cultural differences in the way groups perceive their fit?
2. Do the profiles reflect Hofstede's conception of cultural groups?
3. Compare the profiles of the individuals to the prototype.
4. Do the veterans and new hires at the end of probation exhibit a better 'fit' than new employees and those who leave? This should begin to explore attrition (S-A).
5. Allows me to begin exploring the factors most relevant to 'expats' (a growing group of workers worldwide).

Conclusion

The objective is to develop a metric that is flexible and organization specific. At this juncture, I visualize the issue as a very organization-specific situation and many of the old methods seem to no longer be effective or able account for the new realities of the global business environment.

I look forward to your ideas, questions and concerns to help me clarify my proposal. Thank you for your input.

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