

Studying the Relationship Between Person–Organisation Fit and Creativity

Philip Marsh
The Open University

Introduction

As with human behaviour, creative behaviour derives from some form of interaction between the individual and context. Within the literature on creativity in organisations there is often an implicit rather than explicit assumption that fit between the individual and the environment or organisation is an important factor. A number of recent studies have identified individual and contextual elements in predicting creativity. These studies implicitly suggest that congruence between the person and the environment on certain dimensions positively influences creative behaviour. For some, misfit of some degree or other is an important condition in promoting individual or team creativity. Others emphasise the importance of some degree of fit in promoting creativity. Very often a generic definition is given to fit. So fit might be with culture or climate, fit with supervisor or manager, fit with the type of work or work processes and fit with various organisational features including organisational and reward structures.

Creativity and Fit

The questions raised within this review are more focussed upon fit than upon research into creativity. The history of study into creativity, particularly the nature and origins of creative behaviour is evolving from definitional premises that seem in many ways more secure than those relating to fit. No doubt answering some of the issues raised in relation to fit may well provide evidence to question some of the underlying assumptions in the area of creative behaviour

In recent years, person-organisation fit research has broadened from an emphasis upon characteristics of individuals and their jobs to examining the fit between individuals characteristics and the attributes of an organisation or a part of that organisation Bowen, Ledford and Nathan (1991). Within this literature, as within everyday life, many different interpretations of and approaches to fit. These include the interaction between two domains, how they are similar and how they differ.

Kristof (1996) identifies three different forms of the construct. These are Supplementary Fit, i.e. similarity of values and goals. Then, two forms of Complementary Fit, which is itself, concerned with demand –supplies relationships i.e. whether one party can provide what the other party wants. In Individual Complementary Fit a high level exists when an organisation supplies what an individual needs. High levels of Complementary Organisational Fit exist when an individual possesses the attitudes, abilities etc the organisation requires.

Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson (2001), in a meta analysis of 172 studies suggest that in addition to person-organisation fit other forms of fit exist, including

person-vocation fit, person-supervisor, and person-job fit. They found each to be only moderately related to each other. Billsberry, Ambrosini, Marsh, Moss-Jones and Van Meurs (2006) argue that these may be just some of the possible categories of fit. They identified sixteen possible types relating to job, people, employment, the organisation and work life balance.

There are several problems with the literature on fit. These include definitional issues in relation to other concepts and approaches to the employment relationships. How does fit relate to or substitute for other similar concepts e.g. work and job satisfaction, motivation, psychological contracts which concern themselves with the employment relationship. A further issue relates to whether fit, as defined so far is a concept with wider application in terms of the interaction of the person with others. If this is so, how does fit relate to other approaches including identity, deviance, group dynamics and social interaction theories? Is fit something separate, something subjectively experienced, can it be measured in isolation from other work and non-work factors, is it a metaphor for other conditions or is it an umbrella concept? If it is the latter much needs to be done to work towards an integrative model.

A third issue is whether some individuals are more predisposed than others to be adaptive in the way they adjust in organisational and situations, whilst others expect the organisation or elements thereof to adapt to their demands, needs, wants or values. In other words are there trait or personality issues in determining fit. If there are do these exist at conscious or unconscious levels or some aspect of both?

A fourth and perhaps even more important issue is one raised by Ostroff and Schulte (2006) who make the point that person–environment fit, and by implication person–organisation fit studies tend to ignore the relevance of system fit, which they define thus:

'the components of the organisation system, e.g. strategic goals, culture, structure, work processes and leadership are major elements that define the E in P-E fit... Where these elements are not internally consistent or aligned the environment into which the individual must fit is too disconnected and disparate to allow an individual to achieve meaningful person-environment fit. ... At the same time, elements of the organisation system emerge from people within the organisation and hence the fit amongst employees helps to define the system elements.'

The question raised by this assertion and by examining the literature on creativity and innovation is whether there is a more composite model of person–organisation fit nesting within system fit. Is it system, person–environment, or person–organisation fit which attracts, develops and retains creative individuals? If so are there certain aspects, conditions or preconditions of each which are essential? Is there a spectrum, or is fit a fluid, dynamic construct within environmental boundaries?

Research on creativity, as well as job satisfaction and motivation, points to the importance of the vertical and horizontal integration of goals, culture, work processes and practices, leadership and human resource practices in creating appropriate environments within which employees can function effectively and which presumably will influence their perceptions of how they fit with the organisation or sub divisions

of it, levels of motivation and work/job satisfaction. West (1989) and West and Farr (1989) emphasise the critical nature of support within the environment for an individuals innovative actions. This support might come from supervisors or peers. Amabile (1988), Farr and Ford (1990) argue the need for financial and material resources to be available for the task at hand, as well as production systems, informational sources and time and space to engage in the long term thinking associated with creative ideas. Kanter (1983) argues for a flexible structure as such structures manifest a belief in the acceptance of new ideas and increased autonomy.

Amabile and Grysiewicz(1988) in a survey of research scientists identified freedom and control of own work as environmental stimulants to creativity as well as good project management, some system of management and feedback within an environment which encourages experimentation and accepts failure.

Ekvall (1991), Jelinek and Schoonhoven (1991) emphasise that some organisational climates are conducive to creativity than others. Favourable climates are open, give employees responsibility for work, tolerate rather than punish mistakes and nurture new ideas.

Czikzentmihalyi (1991) asserts that creativity cannot be recognised, except as it operates within a system of cultural rules and it cannot bring forward anything new unless it can enlist the support of peers. He demonstrates the beneficial role of working at a time and in a place in which other individuals are engaged in creative activities. He relates creative effort by individuals to the state of the domain they are working in and the characteristics of those who assess creative endeavour in the field concerned. He stresses the interplay between knowledge of the domain, gatekeepers in the field and creative individuals.

It is obvious by now that climate and context as well as individuals or teams are essential to creativity. Within organisations the management or leadership of creativity is also an important actor. Kanter (1991) argues that the successful creative leader has the power to advance ideas and maintain momentum. They have good perceptual abilities which question, rearrange and see things from different angles, they are good communicators, and have the ability to build coalitions, have persistence, work through teams and recognise the contribution of others. In essence creative management and leadership are facilitative and climate building in nature, involving social, perceptual and networking abilities and proactivity. Such an approach accommodates the possibility that individuals can shape to some extent their environment or adapt to fit with it.

This raises an interesting issue to explore further as to whether creative individuals within organisations help to sustain and develop creative environments by promoting the appropriate conditions to facilitate a sense of fit, and is there a fit/creativity balance appropriate to particular environmental conditions? Livingstone et al (2001) in their examination of Supply-Value and Demand-Ability versions of fit in relation to creativity have suggested that the relationship between factors influencing creativity and a broad range of outcomes have received scarce attention. They raise the issue of whether individuals who experience fit between their personal characteristics related to creativity and the organisations creativity climate experience more or less satisfaction and commitment in their jobs, perform better or worse or experience more

or less strain than individuals who do not experience fit. They concluded that knowledge about the optimum level of person and environmental factors may be important to managers trying to develop a creative environment. The strain experienced by individuals was less when demands and abilities for creativity were both either high or low and that commitment was highest when both demands and abilities were high.

Tierney et al (1999) found that a fit between leader and follower motivation, i.e. intrinsic motivation, was found to increase creative behaviour.

Choi (2004) argues that existing studies of creativity and fit have failed to comprehensively test the effects of different versions of fit on individual creativity. He proposes as a result of his study that there are several directions for future research. The first of these is in identifying mediating mechanisms between person–environment fit constructs and behavioural outcomes. He suggests that immediate psychological predecessors of creativity such as creative self efficacy, context satisfaction, psychological safety or feeling of security, perceived freedom, and a boosted sense of efficacy based upon the belief that the context matches one’s own desires, style and abilities. Secondly, he asserts that person–environment relationships are not static, but dynamic and can thus best be examined over time when their mutual influence patterns can be discerned. Thirdly, drawing on Edwards (1996), he suggests the need to examine the idea of ‘stretch’, wherein an individual may be strongly motivated to put extra effort to meet demands or change the situation so that it better serves their needs

Conclusion

The issues raised in this paper arose from considering the relationship between fit and creativity. They are not exhaustive, but are the most obvious at this stage of my research. I would welcome comment, contribution from and contact with others concerned with these or related issues.