Applications of PE Fit: A White Paper for Discussion

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When I was asked to write about the topic of PE fit *applications*, my mind drifted to a conversation I had recently with a Director of HR. This person worked in an organization well-known for its strong values and employee-centered organizational culture. A team of "up-and-coming" managers in their Leadership Development Program had just presented a project to the top managers on the importance of hiring for person-organization fit. When they consulted with me, I presented the Director with the findings from our meta-analysis on various types of fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Upon noticing the effect size of .07 for PO fit and overall performance, the Director became cautious about the project. The Directors' comments implied "If we can't show that it makes a difference for performance, than we're never going to attract the attention of the top managers."

Really? Really??? Evidently I'm still naïve when it comes to what attracts the attention of top managers, because I was under the impression that they would be interested in a concept that is related $\rho=.24$ with job acceptance, $\rho=.32$ with job offers, $\rho=.44$ with job satisfaction, $\rho=.51$ with organizational commitment, $\rho=.43$ with trust, $\rho=.27$ with contextual performance, $\rho=-.35$ with intentions to quit, $\rho=-.27$ with strain, and $\rho=-.14$ with turnover [all effect sizes are reported from the Kristof-Brown et al. meta-analysis, the one with which I'm most familiar. For other, results see Arthur, Bell, Villado, & Doverspike, 2006; Hoffman, & Woehr, 2006; Verquer & Beehr, 2003]. Is it true that if we can't demonstrate a meaningful impact on performance, a concept like PO fit is irrelevant?

I sincerely hope not, or a lot of very bright people have devoted 20 years or more to studying a concept that *has no application*. This discussion was a wake-up call to me, however, to realize that as our colleagues have noted in many domains (see Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007), academics studying fit have not done enough to apply results in a meaningful way for organizations. Some may argue that it's not time yet to take this step. Harrison's chapter "Pitching Fits in Applied Psychological Research: Making Fit Methods Fit Theory," in the recent book by Ostroff and Judge (2007) questions whether we can move forward if we have yet to resolve disagreements over theory and methods of fit. Judge ends the book by saying, "I do believe that there are some problems that are seemingly intractable. However, it is at times like this that the greatest innovations are made" (p.441).

I agree with this assessment. The book by Ostroff and Judge marks an end to a generally healthy period in organizational fit research. This has been a time (1988-2008) when researchers have hotly debated and honed the methodological approaches for assessing fit. Paradoxically, these methodological improvements have left us with a picture of fit that often looks much different from how it: a) was originally conceptualized in the academic literature, and b) is currently conceptualized by practitioners. I believe this is a critical juncture for research on fit, which will help to

define how people in the next 20 years conceptualize the concept, measure and analyze it, and draw practical implications for managers.

How do we then make theoretical and methodological progress, while also making results meaningful for managers? Not easily, but it is possible. First, it will occur through increased "real-time" dialog through forums such as this eConference or special sessions and conferences dedicated to fit experts. These kinds of opportunities allow rapid exchange of ideas that can sometimes take years to play out in the journals. Second, it happens by researchers paying close attention to theoretical and methodological specification when designing and particularly when interpreting their studies. Ostroff's white paper presented at this eConference, "Fitting Theory with Methods in Fit Research" is a good primer for all of us, from tenured professor to doctoral student. Third, I firmly believe that rather than narrowing the way we examine fit, we need to broaden the methods we use to assess it. Different research questions demand different techniques. Allowing this diversity of ideas and methods is something that we should embrace, rather than dissuade. Finally, we need to make more efforts to bring our results to practitioners, and offer meaningful recommendations for how fit impacts leading indicators of organizational and employee health.

In the next section of this paper, I detail three ways in which fit research can be applied to current research and business trends.

Attracting Applicants and Improving Hiring Outcomes: Does fit matter in the recruitment context? If we are to believe Schneider's ASA model, then certainly it does. Applicants may self-select themselves out of recruitment, even in early stages if the organization does not appear to provide the right culture, colleagues, job opportunities, and other resources that the applicant requires. Cable and Judge conducted a series of studies which demonstrate that applicants heavily weight fit-related information in their early application and job acceptance decisions. In both lab and field samples, they demonstrated the importance of pay packages meeting the needs of particular personality traits (1994) and organizational cultures matching applicant personality (1997). Even controlling for the attractiveness of job attributes, they found that similarity between applicant and perceived organizational values was a key determinant of job choice intentions and work attitudes (1996). The implications of this line of research is clear: Fit, particularly PO fit, is a powerful motivator for applicants. Organizations that hope to compete for talented and committed workers should be looking to find ways to facilitate and emphasize determinations of fit early in the recruitment process.

Dineen, Ash & Noe (2002) demonstrated that the web may be an effective source of providing fit-based information to applicants to encourage them to apply. Implications of their results are that, returning to the notion of realistic job previews, organizations can benefit from realistic organization previews that make it easy for the applicant to determine his or her fit with the job and the organization. Having said this, in order for this to work, companies need to be better able to accurately assess their organizational cultures, the resources they provide employees, and types of people who succeed in the organization. Whether this need will be met by academics or consultants, will in large part determine how closely integrated our research is with practice. Moreover, we need to offer ways for companies to determine whether the

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benefit of gaining a good fitting employee outweighs the costs of turning away those who are a poor fit. In a tight labor market, realistic job previews are often difficult to convince managers to use, because the cost of unfilled positions is too great. New research on corporate branding in recruitment (e.g., Collins & Stevens, 2002) can be coupled nicely with our understanding of the role of fit perceptions in the applicant search process. However, if branding only emphasizes elements that are desirable for all applicants, a significant opportunity to recruit for fit has been lost.

Redefining Relevant Outcomes: I see fit research moving in two distinct directions. The first, building on the research by Cable and Edwards (2004) and Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, and Shipp (2006) who are now investigating what goes into peoples experiences and perceptions of fit, seeks to dig deeper into the psychological processes by which we determine fit or misfit. Thus, fit itself becomes the outcome of interest. Preliminary results suggest that when studying fit we rarely find support for a perfect congruence or similarity relationship, despite the fact that the theories suggest this is what constitutes a "match." More often, environmental excesses are ignored, or don't have the extreme negative impact that we would expect them to.

Clearly there is work to be done to better understand how people interpret their environment to form perceptions of fit. Some may see this research as a "return to the bench," focusing on underlying psychological processes, with little applicability to organizations. However, I argue that the more we come to understand how people form their perceptions of fit, the more we will be able to guide managers in the ways with which they can affect fit perceptions. Yes, is it further removed from critical outcomes, but understanding how those outcomes are produced is valuable. What is needed, however, is a strong commitment to translating these findings into practical steps and guides for how to raise and lower fit perceptions in the workplace. Controlled field studies are a desirable way to take this next step, and we need to seek out organizations willing to engage in this type of research.

The second direction for fit research is to move outward, to better understand how people integrate perceptions of fit with various aspects of the environment, once they have them. Currently, most of our work on PE fit is still being done in single domains – the job, the group, the organization (i.e., the "fit to" which Ostroff describes). Yet it is the experience of fit to each of these domains that creates our gestalt experience of fitting in at work (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). If our goal is to present managers with a compelling reason for attending to fit, then we need to be prepared to re-integrate these notions of "fit to what?" As interactional researchers, we should be at the forefront of recognizing that people are embedded in complex environments which can provide multi-faceted experiences of fit or misfit. For our research to be meaningful to organizations, we need to understand how people integrate these experiences and perceptions to form their gestalt experience of fit at work, which in turn influences their daily physiological, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes. This requires again returning to basic research on information integration and cognitive processing, some of which can be done in the lab. But also field samples where people are allowed to express what *they* rely on when they assess fit. Qualitative research seems particularly well suited for answering these types of research questions.

Understanding When Fit Goes Wrong: Schneider's ASA model suggests that turnover is the likely outcome of situations in which there is a poor fit. However, we don't yet have a clear understanding of how experiences and events come together to create the gestalt impression of "I'm a misfit. I think I need to get out of here." Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of turnover suggests that, with some exceptions, most individuals leave organizations for reasons *other* than predetermined plans. Whether it is growing dissatisfaction resulting from poor fit on multiple dimensions, or a critical incident that sends the signal that misfit is so dramatic that it can no longer be tolerated, turnover is an anticipated outcome of those with poor fit. In line with the two directions for fit research that I raised previously, we need to understand better when perceptions of misfit become turning points. When does misfit become apparent? What actions could organizations take to reduce the effects of misfit, or to work to rectify a misfit situation before it reaches critical proportions? Moreover, we need to understand why some people decide to stay, even when they know they aren't a good fit. What causes some people to reach out for mis-fitting positions as a way to stretch themselves and push through discomfort to grow and change? And what happens to those who find that fit in the past doesn't exist as they change in a new personal direction or as the organization changes into something new. In short, we still know little about the experience of misfit, or the possible dynamism between fit and misfit that individuals experience throughout their careers. Longitudinal field research and qualitative methodologies seem best suited for answering these kinds of questions.

Conclusion

 I view this as an exciting time in fit research. We have conducted well over 40 years of research on the topic of PE fit, and the advances in the last 10-15 years have been staggering. We now have the techniques to test our theories, expand our views of the theoretical bases for fit, and link it with relevant outcomes for organizations. What this requires, however, is a willingness to address diverse research questions, using methodologies appropriate for the question, and actively translate this research into practical implications for managers. As we better come to understand how fit perceptions are created and utilized, it is up to us to make this relevant to managers. Many of them already intrinsically understand the concept of fit and its importance, but they are unaware of how to assess it, track it, create and cultivate it. Together we can address the question of applications of fit.

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