

Fit as a Recruitment and Selection Paradigm

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Abstract

This paper explains how ideas underlying the concept of fit might be used conceptually as a selection paradigm thereby providing an alternative to the dominant psychometric paradigm. This paper describes and critiques the extant selection paradigms before setting out an alternative one based on the concept of fit. Amongst other things, the fit selection paradigm suggests that selectors should provide opportunities for applicants to assess whether or not the job and the employer fits their needs.

Paper

Objectives

Traditionally, the literature on person–organisation (PO) fit focuses on the relationship between employees and employers with the goal of explaining the behaviour of individuals (e.g. Chatman, 1989, Cable & Judge, 1996, 1997) or organisations (e.g. Schneider, 1997; Schneider, Goldstein & Smith, 1995). As such, PO fit is employed as both a unit of behavioural analysis and a psychological construct in its own right. Used in these ways, the construct has helped explain the job choice decisions of applicants and selectors (Cable & Judge, 1996, 1997), how people become socialised to organisations (Chatman, 1991), opportunistic hiring decisions (Levesque, 2005), explained why organisations look and feel the way that they do (O'Reilly, et al., 1991) and accounted for the homogenisation of organisations (Schneider, 1987; Schneider, et al., 1998). In this paper, we want to move away from looking at the behavioural consequences of PO fit and instead use PO fit conceptually. In particular, we shall develop a new way of conceptualising recruitment and selection episodes using PO fit and its theoretical base in interactional psychology to advocate a new organisational entry paradigm.

The Psychometric Paradigm

The traditional and well-established approach to recruitment and selection is the psychometric paradigm (Schmitt & Chan, 1998). This paradigm considers recruitment and selection from the perspective of the organization and shows how good selection decisions should be made (i.e. selecting the person who will perform best in the role). In essence, this approach to recruitment and selection assesses individuals against the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) required to perform well in the post. The paradigm is that of a rational decision-making process operated by the employer. It is an important and deeply entrenched paradigm and many aspects of it are enshrined in

law. Herriot (1992, 1993) summarised the paradigm with the following list of characteristics and assumptions:

- People do not change very much
- They possess attributes which can each be objectively measured independently of each other
- Individual attributes predict work performance
- Individual differences are the biggest single source of variability in performance
- Jobs do not change very much
- Jobs consist of a specific set of tasks
- Job performance can be measured in terms of output and value
- Job tasks require specific attributes
- Selection is by the organization of the applicant
- The main purpose of selection is to predict job performance
- The best performers are the most suitable employees
- The better the selection, the better the performance

The dominance of the psychometric paradigm on recruitment and selection has drawn the attention of researchers who note that is rare for one paradigm to exercise such control over a domain. McCourt (1999) notes that despite its prescriptive exhortations, the psychometric paradigm's domination over research is not reflected in managerial practice. This, he argues, demonstrates that the 'paradigm itself is flawed' (McCourt, 1999, p. 1015).

The Social Process Paradigm

In response to the weaknesses that he saw in the psychometric paradigm, Herriot, (1992, 1993) borrowed ideas from social psychology to propose an alternative paradigm which he named the social process paradigm. The purpose of this paradigm is to understand recruitment and selection as a social process rather than as a series of obstacles to be overcome (Herriot, 1992, 1993; Iles, 1998). It is primarily concerned with the development of the relationship between the successful applicant and the employer during the recruitment and selection process. This process is seen as particularly important in the formation of working relationships because it is a period when the new recruits are particularly attentive and sensitive to cues about what appropriate behaviours at their new employer. Herriot (1992, 1993) summarised the paradigm with the following list of characteristics and assumptions:

- People are constantly changing
- How they view themselves is crucially important
- The self-perceptions are subjective and inter-dependent
- Work behaviour is part of a process which involves social interactions and perceptions of their consequences
- A job is a changing set of role expectations and relationships
- These can often be negotiated by the job-holder
- Selection is by both parties of each other
- The selection procedure is a social process in which a relationship is formed and developed
- It involves information exchange and negotiation

The social process paradigm does not purport to offer an alternative to how staff should be selected. As a result, it cannot replace or offer an alternative to the psychometric paradigm at the core of the recruitment and selection prescriptions. Instead, it is commonly used as a critical adjunct to explore the impact of the psychometric process.

A Fit Paradigm

A second alternative to the psychometric paradigm comes from the emerging research domain of PO fit. Primarily this field is concerned with the relationship between employees and employers, but it has always had a foothold in the recruitment and selection processes and it is been suggested that it could become a competing paradigm (Bowen, et al., 1991; Levesque, 2005).

The theoretical roots of PO fit lie in the domain of interactional psychology. The ideas associated with interactional psychology are associated with the person–situation debate of the early 1970s. This debate centred on the best way to predict people’s behaviour at work. As the label suggests, situationalists contend that the environments in which people find themselves dictates behaviour (e.g. Mischel, 1968). In contrast, trait theorists argue that traits have a causal role in producing specific patterns of individual behaviour and, in addition, they produce individual differences in the way people respond to situations. This debate came to a conclusion in 1973 with the publication of a study by Bowers that showed that the interaction of person and situation factors was approximately twice as powerful as a predictor of behaviour than either person or situation factors. From this debate, interactional psychology emerged as the most accepted explanation of human behaviour (Krahé, 1992).

From its base in interactional psychology, PO fit considers the interaction between people and environmental factors and thereby avoids one of the greatest problems with the psychometric approach; namely, that it focuses on recruitment and selection from the organization’s point of view and largely ignores the perspective of the applicants. By looking for a ‘fit’ between applicants and organizations, the PO fit approach has the potential to look treat the two sides of the recruitment encounter more even-handedly. It is too early in the lifecycle of the PO fit approach to recruitment and selection for it to have supplanted the psychometric paradigm. However, the growing importance of the area means that increasing numbers of selectors are becoming aware of it.

The following assumptions underlie the PO fit paradigm. They are based on Bowen et al, (1991), Kristof (1996), Levesque (2005), Schneider (1987), Schneider, et al. (1997). Here we present a summary in the style of Herriot (1992, 1993) below in order that easy comparison can be made across the paradigms.

- Organizations, jobs and the business environment are constantly changing
- As is the relationship between employees and employers
- It is impossible to predict the future with any degree of success
- Organizations need employees who grow and develop with them

- The fit between employees and employers influences how people grow and develop with the changing organization
- An employee's fit is influenced by interactions in a large range of domains (e.g. job, profession, work/life balance, values, supervisor, team members)
- The complexity of PO fit means that it is usually not possible to isolate the specific factors contributing to prolonged high performance with any degree of success
- The interaction between people and work environments is the biggest single source of variability in performance
- The prime focus of selection for both parties is finding a relationship that is mutually beneficial
- There is no fit between the parties if it is not in the best interests of either party
- Employers seek to recruit 'whole people'
- Employees seek an employer where they will thrive

When considering competing paradigms to the psychometric one, McCourt's (1999) analysis suggests that a better alignment between theory and practice is a key determinant. On this measure, the PO fit paradigm would appear to score highly. The PO fit paradigm explains why the unstructured interview has a persistent hold on personnel selection as it allows both sides of the engagement to explore the future relationship for themselves. It would also explain why the more 'rigorous' personnel selection methods (e.g. psychometric tests, work samples, analogous tests) tend to be used for screening applicants rather than selecting them, which is the preserve of the interview, as selectors realise that assessing people in the 'artificial and surreal' (Billsberry, 2007, p. 63) selection environment is unable to capture the complexity of behaviour and a poor predictor of future performance.

Conclusions

One advantage that the PO paradigm has over the social process paradigm as a competition to the psychometric paradigm is its theoretical and practical usefulness. Its roots in interactional psychology provide both conceptual and methodological guidance to researchers that lose none of the rigour of psychometric approaches. Indeed, the analysis of interactions can be immensely complex relying on methods such as polynomial regression.

On a practical level, the PO fit changes the foci of the encounter. No longer is selection all about the selector's job in assessing applicants. Instead, it is about both sides of the encounter exploring the advantages and disadvantages of the possible relationship for themselves. From the selector's perspective, it is more than assessing KSAs relevant to the specific opening, it includes a dynamic assessment of how the potential new recruit will grow and develop in the role, influence others, and relate to the organisation. The selector also has a responsibility to give applicants the information they need to assess the opportunity for themselves. From the applicant's point of view, selection is about finding somewhere

The PO fit paradigm is a more subtle and complex paradigm than the psychometric one. It allows for mutual adaptation, rather than the unidirectional overtones of

socialisation or personalisation, and for the emergence of relationships. It appreciates the complexity of the encounter and near impossibility of making definitive judgements about the ability of suitability of a person for a job. As such, it makes a compelling alternative to the psychometric paradigm.

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