

Colour Match: The Relationship Between Organisational Socialisation and Fit

Helena D Cooper-Thomas
The University of Auckland

People perform better, are healthier, happier, and stay longer in environments in which they fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). It seems evident, then, that both employees and employers should want to optimise levels of fit (Kristof-Brown, 2007), with organisational socialisation offering an important method for achieving this (Chatman, 1991; Cooper-Thomas, Van Vianen, & Anderson, 2004). This is the process whereby new employees are attracted to and enter the organisation and, through their own efforts and those of colleagues, come to perform and behave in ways that match with organisational standards.

I'm going to digress briefly here to tell you a short story that illustrates the relationship between organisational socialisation and fit. I was walking with an HR Director through his organisation and we passed an employee in his mid-twenties, wearing a trendy brown suit and brown brogues. I thought he looked fashionable and professional. Once we were out of earshot, the HR Director turned to me and said "He is definitely new. He doesn't know that it's a blue suit and black shoes here". Now the HR Director was being slightly tongue in cheek, but the message was clear: That employee does not fit. This example demonstrates a number of issues: (1) the importance of fit issues for newcomers (since not fitting can be salient to colleagues); (2) the potential (sometimes unfulfilled) for organisational socialisation to improve fit; (3) the existence of borderline fit, where a person may stay in employment yet not fit the organisation well. I discuss degrees of fit next, and then review the relationship between organisational socialisation and fit.

Conceptualizing Degrees of Fit

Figure 1 provides a model of person-organisation fit, looking at a transverse slice of an organisation. Using Schneider's (1987) proposition, that the organisation comprises the people within it, the organisation in Figure 1 is made up primarily of yellow people. Thus additional yellow people entering the organisation will fit. The red outside comprises people who do not fit – because they are not yellow. Red people, then, are misfits. In between these is a gradual fade through various shades of orange, and this comprises people with "borderline" fit.

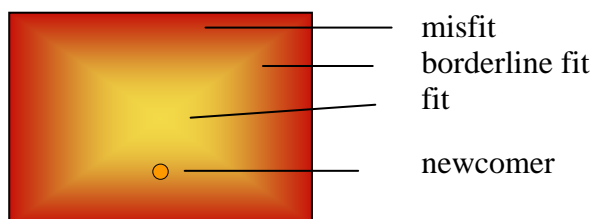


Figure 1. A transverse slice of person-organisation fit in an organisation.

During attraction and selection, the potential employee and the organisation assess each other to determine person-organisation fit (Cable & Judge, 1996, 1997). Optimally, mutual selection will result in the hiring of newcomers who have good fit, (i.e., who are yellow). Minimally, though, potential employees need to achieve at least borderline fit for mutual selection. For both parties, the exact shade of fit may only become clear over time. Thus the newcomer is represented in Figure 1 by the small orange circle as the minimum degree of fit at entry.

The number of employees who have borderline fit, represented by the width of the orange band, varies according to external pressures, the industry, and the internal organisational culture. An example of an external pressure is the war for talent over the past decade. An organisation competing for skilled employees in a tight labour market will need to tolerate poorer fit on non-critical dimensions (e.g., personality) in order to achieve fit on business-critical dimensions (e.g., abilities). In this case, the area of borderline fit will be broader, with more diversity among employees.

Some industries are more accepting of borderline fit than others. Academia is a clear example of an industry with a broad area of borderline fit, with individual employees' eccentricities accepted as long as the requisite organisational outcomes (e.g., publications, funding) are achieved. A third influence on the breadth of borderline fit is the organisational culture. For organisations with cultures that emphasise cohesiveness, these require all employees to have a high level of fit, resulting in a narrow borderline fit area. An example of this from the 1990's is Apple's "mavericks", who represented an organisational culture with a high degree of employee homogeneity (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995, p. 768).¹

Organisational Socialisation and Fit

Changes in fit can be achieved via adjustments in the newcomer, the organisation, or both. Successful organisational socialisation processes move newcomers towards optimal fit, as determined by both parties. Typically, newcomer change will be towards greater fit, that is, homogeneity on dimensions that are important to insiders. More exceptionally, where organisations foresee risks from homogeneity (Jackson, Brett, Sessa, Cooper, Julin, & Peyronnin, 1991; Schneider et al., 1995; Schneider, Kristof-Brown, Goldstein, & Smith, 1997), socialisation may aim to keep or move new employees to borderline fit. Newcomers whose socialisation has been unsuccessful exhibit reduced fit over time. These various possibilities are shown in Figure 2 by movement from the orange circle representing borderline fit, either inwards to the yellow circle (i.e., the newcomer who fits) or outwards to the red circle (i.e., the newcomer who misfits). For those newcomers uninfluenced by organisational socialisation processes, due to a lack thereof, or due to ignorance or deliberate disregard by the newcomer, their fit will remain unchanged.

¹ Two anonymous reviewers had interesting comments regarding the colour model, which I add here as I think they will stimulate thinking and discussion. One reviewer suggested that the actual colour choice here could indicate that misfits are dangerous, since red is a universal warning of danger. In contrast, having fits as yellow could mean they are spineless, sheep-like employees obeying organisation norms. The second reviewer noted that the colour of organisations may be different according to industry (e.g., technology versus retail), and some may even be multi-coloured (e.g., universities).

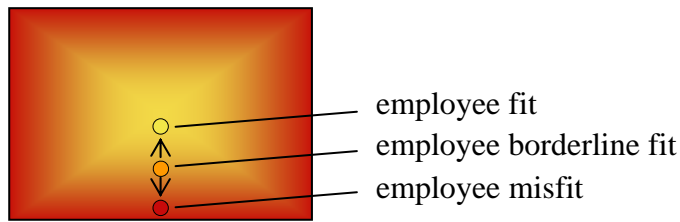


Figure 2. Newcomer adjustments in fit.

Changes in the organisation can be conceived of as a colour change in Figure 2. For example, if the organisation became more orange or even red, then those with borderline fit would shift to have good fit, and those who were previously misfits would attain borderline fit. While the organisation may change over time due to industry pressures, or even newcomer influence (Anderson & Thomas, 1996), it is relatively rare that newcomers can achieve this during their organisational socialisation. More often, though, newcomers' perceptions of the organisation change, as newcomers learn more about their colleagues and the organisation's values, norms, and working practices (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004). In this way, newcomers perceive themselves to have achieved fit.

The combinations of perceived changes in the newcomer and the organisation described above can be depicted as a two by three matrix, as in Table 1. One dimension represents newcomers' perceived changes in themselves, the organisation, or neither; the second dimension represents insiders' perceptions of change in the newcomer, or no change². I do not include insider perceptions of organisation change as this is exceptional, and not typically part of organisational socialisation (see previous paragraph).

Table 1. Relationships between types of change and organisational socialisation

		Newcomer's perceptions		
		Individual change	Organisation change	No change
Insiders' perceptions	Individual change	People-processing	Mainstream	Realisation
	No change	Illusory	Sidestream	Non-existent

The top row, then, represents insider perceptions of the newcomer having changed. There is recent evidence for this, with insiders changing their perceptions of newcomers over time, accepting them as insiders based on organisational tenure and frequency of interaction (Rollag, 2007).

The first box represents the traditional "people-processing" view of organisational socialisation (Van Maanen, 1978). This is a common model for long-term careers in a single organisation, such as the police, where both the newcomer and insiders recognise that the newcomer has much to learn before they will perform their role competently and fit the organisation. In Figure 2, this is represented as insiders

² Note that I will not discuss the relationship between perceived and actual change. This is an important theoretical distinction that several of last year's conference keynotes touched on (Kristof-Brown, 2007; Ostroff, 2007) and that I have researched previously with colleagues (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004). However, it is simpler for the present, brief paper to develop the argument and pick up this issue anon.

and the newcomer perceiving that the newcomer shifts from orange to yellow. For many organisations and newcomers, this model is outdated since it suggests a relatively passive role for the newcomer. This contrasts with research showing that newcomers are often proactive in pursuing their own socialisation (Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005).

The next box along represents the intersection of the newcomer viewing that the organisation has changed (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004), and insiders perceiving that the newcomer has changed (Rollag, 2007). This is “mainstream” socialisation, and is what happens most commonly. Referring to Figure 2, this is represented by insiders perceiving that the orange newcomer has become yellow, whereas the newcomer perceives that the orange border has become broader to now include them.

When the newcomer perceives that there has not been any change, yet insiders view the newcomer as having changed, this represents “realisation” socialisation. This may particularly occur when insiders initially question the newcomer’s fit, for example if they doubt the recruitment and selection process, or if newcomers are visibly different. Indeed, Elfenbein and O’Reilly (2007) suggest that, for newcomers who are socio-demographically different, co-workers judgements of fit are initially made on these surface-level features, yet subsequently revised to be based on deeper-level evaluations such as values and abilities (Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007). In Figure 2, the newcomer sees him- or herself as yellow, whereas insiders shift their perception of the newcomer from orange to yellow. Having had personal experience of this as the newcomer, I know that this phenomenon exists!³

The bottom row in Table 1 reflects organisational insiders perceiving that the newcomer has not changed. I propose that these types of organisational socialisation occur less often, and usually represent either borderline fit or misfit. Where a perception by insiders that the newcomer has not changed coincides with the newcomer perceiving that they have changed to fit the organisation, I term this “illusory” socialisation. Such newcomers lack awareness of the extent of their poor fit, even if they were able to recognise that their initial fit needed to improve. In Figure 2, insiders perceive that the newcomer remains orange, that is, borderline fit, whereas the newcomer perceives that they have shifted to yellow.

Next, when insiders perceive no change, and the newcomer has changed their perception of the organisation to achieve fit, this is “sidestream” socialisation. In Figure 2, both insiders and the newcomer perceive the newcomer as initially having borderline fit, that is, being in the orange area. But for the newcomer, he or she perceives that the area of borderline fit has increased to allow acceptance of him or her. This occurs particularly where the organisation has to accept borderline employees due to constraints such as skill shortages. In these situations, newcomers may have the requisite abilities for the job but poor or different interpersonal styles that prevent them from fitting organisational norms. These employees may feel that they are an accepted part of the organisation, but the reality is that they are not truly accepted as insiders and remain on the margins (Wilkinson, 2008).

³ I was invited to do a project with a partner organisation of my own employer. So effectively I was a newcomer. The project, an assessment system evaluation, had a joint deliverable to the organisation and the country’s government. I think I was 26 at the time, reporting to a white male CEO aged 50 or so and his senior management team who were similar. It was only when I had given these colleagues my report that I was accepted. My fit was exemplified by the CEO saying to me, after reading my report, “Why didn’t you tell me you could do this?”. I was invited to stay on to present my findings to the Board.

The final box at the bottom right represents “non-existent” socialisation, where neither insiders nor the newcomer perceive any change, and hence fit remains as it was at entry. This may be either orange or yellow in Figure 2, representing borderline or good fit. This may work well in some cases, for example CEO’s who are hired into organisations based on their prior track record, with an expectation from both parties that their level of fit is appropriate for the job (Gabarro, 1979). However, non-existent socialisation can also represent a failure of socialisation on the part of the newcomer, the organisation, or both. It seems likely to me that the employee in the brown suit that I mentioned at the start of this paper fits this category.

Next Steps

From these ideas, there are two areas that are particularly interesting for pursuing research on organisational socialisation and fit. The first is how adjustments in fit are achieved. Research has confirmed that formal sources influence fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Kim et al., 2005). Yet as people are moving organisations more frequently (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006), formal programs – with their tendency for general content – will be only partially relevant for any specific newcomer. More flexible means of achieving fit are needed. The role of newcomers in pursuing their own adjustment is one interesting avenue for research where there has been much progress (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). However, a third source of socialisation has been neglected, which is the potential role of proximal colleagues (Anderson & Thomas, 1996; Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007; Cooper-Thomas, in press). Interactions with colleagues have been confirmed as affecting socialisation outcomes (Rollag, 2007; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). What is needed now is to understand what the underlying processes are. This is especially important given that newcomer fit is dependent on their match with colleagues.

The second issue is the need for ongoing organisational socialisation. Individuals and organisations change over time, requiring adjustments to retain optimal fit. There are two paths towards employee misfit and turnover (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005); one is a gradual shift and the second is a sudden move, precipitated by critical events either at work or home. Further research is needed on socialisation processes that can reverse these trends and resocialise employees; this would seem more likely for those whose misfit is gradual than sudden. To date, there has been minimal investigation of employee resocialisation, hence comparing resocialisation and fit against the significant body of knowledge of initial socialisation and fit would be a good place to start.

Underpinning both of these issues are many others, especially regarding the conceptualisation of fit and hence appropriate research methods (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006; Ostroff, 2007). In spite of considerable exploration of fit issues to date, there is plenty left to discover!

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