

Fit and the Problem of Defining Organizational Boundaries

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Abstract

The literature in organizational fit considers the construct of fit as the main area of interest. So much work looks at various aspects of fit such as Person-Organization, Person-Job, Person-Group fit etc or supplementary versus complementary fit and actual or perceived (indirect or direct fit, respectively). This paper, however, considers the other aspect of 'organization fit' i.e. the organization itself. How does fit potentially change, given *where* people work (regionality and tele-working) or *how* people work (virtual working)? At what point does an employee become a regional employee (and distant from the influence of a head office)? Where is the line drawn? This paper considers the problem of identifying where organizational boundaries exist for employees and the effect this might have on employee organizational fit. In effect, the paper questions the extent to which organizational fit can exist given the complex nature of what 'the organization' itself might be. The question of what constitutes 'the organization' is brought into question i.e. where does 'the organization' itself exist and where, physically, do the employees, choose to – or are made to – work and what might this mean in fit terms. The final section of the paper is an appeal for thoughts on how to resolve the dilemmas in identifying organizational boundaries and the subsequent problem of defining organizational fit for a dispersed workforce.

Background

With regard to fit, much of the research appears to consider and define aspects of fit with the organization as well as with work-colleagues, aspects of the job and the wider environment (Kristof, 1996; Billsberry et al, 2005). The literature covers in great detail the various types of fit (P-O, P-J, P-E, supplementary versus complementary and so on). Kristof-Brown et al., (2005) paper gives a good account of the current state of affairs in this respect and which forms of fit might be most salient. Relatively little work, though, has been carried out which assesses the influence of particular factors in terms of their effect on fit. One factor that may have a significant impact on employees' fit is the location where employees actually work (and, by implication, the subsequent influence of head office, as keeper of organizational values on a dispersed workforce).

The Organizational Boundary Dilemma

Much literature appears to assume that people either fit or they misfit. Indeed, Schneider's seminal work regarding Attraction-Selection-Attrition (Schneider, 1987) suggests that those employees who do not fit (misfits) will leave an organization leading to an ever-increasing degree of homogeneity amongst those remaining. What has received less attention is that

employees may have differing levels of fit which may be influenced by where they work, although Cooper-Thomas (2008) suggests there may be areas of fit, borderline fit and misfit which fluctuate (particularly with regard to new employees in an organization). There may well be many people who have borderline fit or, even, misfit and this is, perhaps, more likely in a scenario where the organizational norms and values are less likely to be reinforced i.e. in regional offices or for those home-anchored employees.

In studies testing organizational fit, the assumption seems to have been made that the organization is a single entity and employees are assumed to fit with that organization or not. What of those employees, however, whose place of work may be a regional office or even at home (tele-working) and may have been subject to little influence from head office? Several studies have used dispersed samples (Cable and Judge, 1996; Wilks and Billsberry, 2007; Cable and DeRue, 2002) and the Schneider et al (1998) study used a wide range of employees from a wide range of industries, yet still failed to recognise that the geographical dispersion of those samples might have played some part in influencing fit. For example, did those employees fit with the organization as a whole or fit with the local interpretations of the organization?

It would appear that there may be a danger that 'the organization' is easily dismissed as being a single entity with values which pervade across the whole of the organization (and the people working in it) which takes little, if any, account of where these employees work. Only the Denton (1999) paper comes close to appreciating the fact that there may be a 'local' issue at play with his study of homogeneity amongst bookstore managers. He hints at a local effect when he hypothesises that "To the extent that workforce homogenization would be more likely to occur in a workforce that has direct and frequent contact with each other, the use of a retail sample would appear to offer a strong test of the homogeneity hypothesis". In effect, Denton suggests that if dispersed retail managers are a homogenous group with their limited contact from head office and their own limited interaction with each other, then the homogeneity hypothesis would, to a certain extent, be evidenced. He goes no further, though, in exploring the impact of regionality/localness and fails to discuss how contact with head office is controlled as a factor affecting homogeneity and organizational fit.

Regionality would seem, therefore, to be a factor which has largely been ignored, as is the fact that employees may flit between offices and/or work from home. The real challenge for the fit researcher, however, appears not to be in the fact that regionality may be a factor but in identifying ways in which regionality can be isolated in any study. At what stage does an employee move from being a regional employee in an organization to essentially a head office worker (with all the influences and inferences which might be involved) working in a regional office? How should this be measured? For example, the number of interactions with head office-based workers is one way. What would count as an interaction... a face-to-face conversation, an email exchange, a telephone conversation etc?

Furthermore, what if differing offices were actually recruiting on differing bases? For example, an organization, as a whole, may recruit on the basis of complementary fit – identifying skills gaps and recruiting accordingly, but regional offices might be more focussed on recruiting those with more supplementary attributes and just some complementarity? Over time, there would be a possibility that all employees would show good fit but possibly only to a close fit to their local place of work rather than to the organization as a whole.

Where next?

It would appear that, if the research in this area is to be moved forward, some work needs to be carried out to define the boundaries of employees' work. What constitutes a 'regional employee'? When do they cross the boundary into becoming a head office worker or, perhaps a tele-worker? How should the level of influence from head office be measured with regard to regional or tele-workers?

It may be that the initial literature review may have missed some important studies, either in the fit field, or, perhaps in another related area. Any assistance in defining organizational boundaries and/or related research would be greatly appreciated if the intended research is to reach any valid and relevant conclusions. Indeed, hints, tips and/or thoughts on research methodology in studying the effects of regionality on fit would also be appreciated.

I am mindful of the fact that Ben Schneider (1987) said that "organizations are the people in them". What I hope to test is whether organizations can be considered as a single entity and that fit and the homogeneity hypothesis may be true but be subject to local interpretations of what that organization might be.

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