# Co-Worker Relations and Person-Organization Misfit

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*"I don't really feel a part of my company ... I don't think like the others do, kind of like I don't really belong…at times I feel really lonely."* Research participant

*"There are very few men where I work, thus there are sometimes difficulties like not being included in social activities, or other communication dynamics. I actually find my social work-life here quite difficult."* Research participant

*"As one of the younger people in my workplace, and having only started recently, I feel somewhat separate. I guess I tend to be shy naturally anyway, which makes it difficult to fit in immediately with new co-workers."* Research participant

*"I feel unaccepted by my colleagues - I am fairly new in this position, and find it stressful to fit in with everyone, even though there are a lot of positives about the job."* Research participant

Research on the development of fit has typically looked at organizational recruitment and socialization processes, and assessed their influence in achieving improvements in fit (Chatman, 1991; Cooper-Thomas, Van Vianen, & Anderson, 2004; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005). Since employees perform better, are healthier, happier, and stay longer in environments in which they fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), it makes sense for organizations to try and improve fit. Much less research has focused on misfit, and how people develop and maintain perceptions of not fitting in. In this chapter, we argue that misfit is, in part, developed and perpetuated through poor co-worker relations and we present initial research which shows that social relationships at work are central to perceptions of misfit. Furthermore, we show how the quality of social relationships – or lack thereof – seem to be influenced by differences in personal characteristics (e.g., gender, personality), and result in negative outcomes, such as poorer communication and increased loneliness.

Our interest in the link between social relationships at work and perceptions of misfit stems from other research on co-worker relations (Wright, 2005). As part of a larger quantitative survey, a small amount of qualitative information was gathered asking participants to comment generally on their social relationships at work. A clear theme emerged illustrating a connection between 'fitting in' with their organization – or not – and the quality of their co-worker relations. This chapter will prove an opportunity to explore these relationships in more depth. Hence, the main contribution of the chapter will be in providing a conceptual understanding of this under-researched area – that is, the relationship between co-worker relations and perceptions of fit and misfit.

**Organizational Fit/Misfit**

Typically, person-organization fit is defined as the match between one's values and abilities and those held or required by the organization. Schneider's (2001; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995) attraction – selection – attrition (ASA) theory suggests that people are attracted to organizations that have similar values to their own; they are selected into those organizations; and, if and when there is poor fit, they leave. The relationships of fit with work attitudes may be through need fulfilment, or the enjoyment of interacting with similar others (Schneider, Kristof-Brown, Goldstein, & Smith, 1997). In our research, we will explore misfit in interactions along three dimensions identified in our earlier research (Wright, 2005). These are based on an individual: 1) not finding similar others at work; 2) not enjoying a sense of belonging or companionship at work and, potentially related to this, 3) not having enjoyable interactions with colleagues.

**Conceptualizing Degrees of Fit**

Figure 1 provides a model of person-organization fit, looking at a transverse slice of an organization. Using Schneider's (1987) proposition, that the organization comprises the people within it, the organization in Figure 1 is made up primarily of yellow people. Thus additional yellow people entering the organization 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.
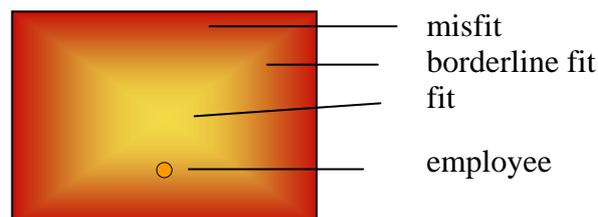


*Figure 1: A transverse slice of person-organization fit in an organization.*

Our contention is that when people want to fit in the organization (i.e. be a 'yellow') but deem themselves to be misfits in the organization (i.e. they are 'red'), this may be due to one or more of the three dimensions outlined above. That is, perceptions of dissimilarity, lack of a sense of belonging, and lack of enjoyable interactions. Hence, colour mismatch may be due to objective (e.g., demographic) or subjective (e.g., belongingness) factors.. The larger perceived disparity between wanting to be a 'yellow' and actually being a 'red' will lead to greater psychological distress, particularly if the individual is powerless to influence the organizational environment (e.g., personal characteristics of co-workers) to more closely match to their authentic self. Further, we argue that chronic perceptions of misfit have the potential to result in the more extreme feelings associated with alienation, loneliness, and ostracism.

**Organizational Misfit and Co-worker Relations**

There is little work on the relationship between co-worker relations and fit, other than research showing that general socialising can reinforce organizational socialisation in achieving fit, while relationship building with the boss can negate these (Kim et al., 2005). Furthermore, beyond the earlier work of Jackson and colleagues (Jackson, Stone, & Alvarez,

1993), very little is known about the relative importance of individual differences in perceptions of fit and misfit. Last, we know very little about the potential perpetuating cycle of social relationship quality and organizational misfit. By early adulthood (and in some cases childhood), individuals regard social inhibition and withdrawal as maladaptive behaviours (Younger & Boyko, 1987). Therefore, the negative social reputation associated with social withdrawal may lead 'misfits' to develop negative self-perceptions and further exacerbate their withdrawal. In the absence of intervention, the pattern of behavioural withdrawal, negative co-worker reputation, and negative self-perceptions may result in the employee feeling 'out of place' most of the time whilst at work. In our view, employees who experience this high degree of misfit because of poor co-worker relations may find it difficult to access social opportunities and solve interpersonal dilemmas, becoming gradually more social inhibited. Over time, these employees may become locked in a cycle in which social inhibition leads to negative self-perceptions of social competence and co-worker rejection, which in turn lead to further social withdrawal and chronic feelings of misfit. In the absence of intervention or organizational culture change, these factors may lead to heightened psychological distress and feelings of alienation and loneliness.

In this chapter we will discuss the interplay of the literature on organizational fit and co-worker relations and explore the oscillating links between organizational misfit and workplace relationships. We will analyse qualitative data to explore these theorised links. In sum, the chapter will generate a new conceptual understanding of how organizational misfit may be developed and perpetuated through poor quality workplace relationships.

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