

Ten Compelling Reasons to Incorporate Time in Fit Research

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Abstract

We propose that an examination of temporal and dynamic issues is important for theory, research, and practice related to person-environment fit. The importance and prevalence of time and adaptability in current scholarly research highlights the need for a broader theoretical consideration of the temporality of fit. In addition, there are empirical considerations in when and how fit perceptions are measured, and the conclusions we draw from our research findings. Finally, a temporal consideration of fit is also useful for managers who are struggling to find ways to retain employees while simultaneously asking them to be more flexible and to increase their skills. In this manuscript, we propose ten reasons why it is important to incorporate time in fit research. The resulting arguments outline research questions in need of exploration and lay the foundation for expanding fit theory, conducting empirical research, and informing managing practice.

One of the widely shared beliefs in organizations is that the fit or congruence between a person and the environment predicts important outcomes such as performance, turnover, satisfaction, and adjustment. As prolific as this research has been, person-environment (PE) fit theory has remained largely contemporaneous for more than a quarter of a century (cf., Caplan, 1983; Brousseau, 1983). It is somewhat surprising that, despite a resurgence of interest in temporal perceptions (e.g., Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001; Bluedorn, 2002; George & Jones, 2000; Mitchell & James, 2001), fit research has generally overlooked the temporal context in which current PE fit is situated and in which individuals form their perceptions of fit (Kristof-Brown & Jansen, 2007).

Such a contemporaneous view limits our ability to thoroughly and accurately understand fit experiences. Fit is inherently dynamic (Lewin, 1943) because various types of fit (e.g., person-job fit; person-organization fit; person-supervisor fit; or person-group fit) have the potential to change over time as individuals and aspects of their environments change (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). When this temporal context is ignored, we neglect the important role that it plays in defining experience (Johns, 2006; Kozlowski, 2009; Rousseau & Fried, 2001), which prevents us from understanding the reality of individual interpretations and reactions to fit over time. In the sections below, we propose ten reasons for fit researchers to incorporate time into fit theory, research, and practice. For each research imperative, we review work that has been done, and identify important research questions. The resulting combination outlines a temporal research agenda for fit researchers.

1. The actual passage of time can introduce changes in the person, environment, and/or fit

Fit research emphasizes the congruence between the needs or abilities of a person and the supplies or demands of the environment. However, both the person and the environment are likely to change with the actual passage of time (i.e., “clock time”; Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; McGrath & Rotchford, 1983). Person change can occur as the individual learns, grows, changes priorities, or experiences the atrophy of skills over time. Environment change occurs as organizations respond to the external environment, shift strategic direction, or experience a change in key leadership or group composition. Each of these circumstances influences fit at any given time. Recent fit research has begun to utilize repeated measures to assess actual change in fit over time (e.g., DeRue & Morgeson, 2007), theorize explicit feedback loops over time (e.g., Ellis & Tsui, 2007; Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007; Ostroff, Shin, & Feinberg, 2002), and develop theory to explain why individuals and environments change (e.g., Caldwell, Herold, & Fedor, 2004; Kristof-Brown & Jansen, 2007; Ostroff & Schulte 2007) and how the various aspects of fit may become more or less salient over time (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). However, we have just scratched the surface in examining the role that clock time plays in fit perceptions. For example, are there some types of fit that are more impacted by feedback loops whereas other types of fit that are temporally independent? When the person or environment changes, are fit assessments updated in “real-time” or is there a threshold of change that must be reached before fit is updated?

2. Psychological “time travel” influences current fit assessments

Early fit theorists suggested behavior was a function of the person and environment (Lewin, 1951), but added the caveat that any comparison of the person and environment must be considered in the temporal context of the individuals’ perceptions of the past and future (Lewin, 1943; Murray, 1938). Thus, psychological time (i.e., perceptions of the past and future in the present moment; French, Rodgers & Cobb, 1974; Lewin, 1943) is a crucial part of understanding individuals in relation to their environments. Caplan (1983) was one of the few to build upon these ideas in developing theory about past, present, and future fit in both clock time and psychological time, yet his ideas have remained largely untouched. Recent research has begun to incorporate elements of psychological time (Shipp & Edwards, 2005; Shipp, 2006), acknowledging that retrospections and anticipations may influence current fit perceptions, and may be important omitted variables that should be more explicitly considered in our theorizing. For example, for what types of fit is retrospected and anticipated fit more important? Could retrospected or anticipated fit be more important than current fit, such as when a current fit experience is temporary (e.g., training programs) or constrained by external forces (e.g., job availability or dual career issues)?

3. A process view of fitting over time sheds light on fit dynamics

The consideration of an actual and psychological passage of time implies that there may be a natural evolution or predictable dynamics of fit over time. Some of these dynamics may only be discernable by utilizing a process lens to explore how and why fit changes over time. Fit research has predominantly taken snapshots of fit at particular instances in time, but a process perspective requires a consideration of the evolution of fit over time (cf. Weisbord, 1988). For example, researchers have examined the impact that the socialization process has on fit, and how the hiring stage may influence which aspects of fit are salient (cf. Bretz, Rynes, & Gearhart, 1993; Rynes & Gearhart, 1990; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Similarly, Chatman (1989) encouraged us to view PO fit as an evolving concept, such that individuals

sometimes change to fit an organization and other times change the organization. A related process perspective was highlighted in theory predicting an evolution from surface-level to deep-level diversity (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Their empirical findings may be relevant to the fit domain in that fit may exist on the surface early in the hiring process (e.g., interpersonal fit with a recruiter or fit with espoused values of the organization), and evolve into deeper forms of fit later (e.g., fit with a hiring supervisor or fit with practiced values). A process perspective can also help to explain the mechanisms by which attraction-selection-attrition (ASA; Schneider, 1987) processes occur. How might case studies and qualitative inquiries into fit help us to understand the process by which fit is used and changes over time?

4. Stories of fit over time help people to understand and act upon their fit experiences

Shipp and Jansen (2009) consider fit over time by introducing the concept of fit narratives to explain how individuals temporally understand and react to their fit experiences. Drawing on narrative theory from various disciplines, they propose a model that explains how individuals craft and recraft stories of fit *in medias res* or “in the middle of things” by the temporal influence of past and future fit and the temporal comparison of these fit experiences to current fit. The notion that individuals craft and utilize stories of fit over time raises interesting opportunities for broadening our understanding of fit processes. For example, are there classic story lines of fit that individuals experience (e.g., tragedies, dramas, fairytales)? Fit narratives also have practical considerations in that managers may be able to help recraft stories or introduce new themes (“fit enlargement” akin to job enlargement) to redefine what matters.

5. The duration of fit and misfit differs across individuals and situations

A temporal lens also raises theoretical and empirical considerations regarding the duration of fit experiences. For example, how long will misfit be endured? Early fit research suggested that individuals use the processes of coping and defense to address misfit (e.g., French et al., 1974). Caplan (1983) elaborated on these ideas by introducing toleration, defined as the product of (1) the amount of misfit a person will withstand and (2) the amount of time the person will spend in a misfit situation before attempting to reduce or alter the perceived misfit. Kristof-Brown and Jansen (2007) further elaborated on toleration by defining the *magnitude of misfit* as the amount of misfit (i.e., a measure of degree of change) between the P and the E and the *duration of misfit* as the length of time the person has endured misfit (i.e., a measure of time). They also proposed *trajectory* (i.e., a directional vector) as a temporal indicator describing where the P and E have been (or will be) heading. Although there is an apparent abundance of theory on the topic, little empirical research has been conducted to test these concepts. Additional research is also needed to examine the timing of coping and defense processes in response to misfit. When are these processes initiated and when does one predominate over the other (e.g., changing the actual environment versus changing perceptions to alleviate pain). In addition, even though research has recognized that misfit may not be defended against or coped with (e.g., Kristof, 1996; Schneider, 1987), more research is needed that examines when misfit provides a valuable opportunity to innovate and learn (e.g., wild ducks; Geber, 1990; Billsberry, 2009).

6. The temporal pace or rhythm of the environment influences fit

A separate temporal stream of research has emerged that examines individuals’ fit with the pace and rhythm of various aspects of the environment. For example, some researchers have

studied polychronic fit, defined as an individual's fit with the degree of multitasking supplied by the environment (Bluedorn, Kalliath, Strube, & Martin, 1999; Slocombe & Bluedorn, 1999). Other researchers have examined the congruence between an individual's time urgency and that of their work group (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005). This work draws more directly on time research, and is a good illustration of how time can broaden the questions we ask. Additional research can examine fit with other workplace rhythms, such as the pacing or cycles of task-related activities (e.g., Ancona & Chong, 1996). More broadly, research can examine how multiple combined work-related rhythms influence fit.

7. The temporal processes of spillover and spirals influence fit perceptions

Kristof-Brown and Jansen (2007) proposed two processes by which one aspect of fit could influence other aspects of fit over time. First, spillover draws on the work-life literature (Rice, Near, & Hunt, 1980) to describe how a highly salient aspect of fit (e.g., strong person-group fit) is likely to influence or change less important or discrepant fit assessments over time (e.g., recrafting low person-job fit to better match the strong person-group fit). Second, spirals describe how a high correspondence among fit assessments can result in deviation-amplifying spiraling effects (e.g., Fredrickson, 2003; Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995) such that good fit gets better and poor fit gets worse. For example, to the extent you see yourself as a misfit, you may selectively perceive experiences that contribute to misfit, which is likely to spiral towards turnover. Both of these temporal processes may help to explain the evolution of fit over time. More broadly, these theoretical mechanisms suggest that fit research can better integrate fit into the broader temporal context of organizational experience by better positioning fit within existing process models such as the theory of work adjustment, work-life balance, and socialization.

8. Individual temporal focus influences the fit experiences considered at any moment

Temporal focus is an individuals' tendency to think about the past, present, and future time periods (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009). Does this imply that there are some people (e.g., low in current focus) for whom current fit doesn't matter? Individuals who are low in current focus but higher in past or future focus may care less about what is currently happening with fit as compared to past or future fit experiences. In addition, when individuals think about the future, how well can they actually forecast fit? Individuals are notorious for being inaccurate forecasters of their emotions (cf. Gilbert, Gill, Wilson, 2002); are they just as poor forecasters of their fit when they interview for jobs, accept job offers, or fantasize about quitting for something better? In addition, how important is it that an individual's temporal focus matches that of his/her job, group, supervisor, or organization, and is temporal focus a complementary or supplementary dimension of fit (or both)?

9. Fit doesn't always matter, so knowing when it does is important

A typical critique of fit research is that fit may not always matter. A temporal lens encourages us to consider the question of when fit matters and when it does not, and which individual and situational characteristics may attenuate the importance of fit. For example, a high unemployment rate and few job opportunities may drive job choice instead of any consideration of fit, helping to explain times when fit does not matter. Another example, drawing on socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), suggests that as individuals approach endings (e.g., graduation, job transfer, retirement), they move closer to social interactions and away from novel or developmental experiences. So during periods of endings, do person-group and person-supervisor fit matter

more than person-job fit, or do interpersonal needs become more salient than fit itself? In addition, in terms of psychological time, there may be times when past and future fit are more or less influential. Although we suggest that both past and future fit have the potential to influence current outcomes, are there times when what matters is simply the E portion from the past or future rather than the fit from the past or future (e.g., what supplies were received or what demands were made)?

10. The timing of fit measurements is critical for drawing conclusions about fit

To date, we know very little about the best time to measure different components of fit. How soon after a new fit experience begins can we confidently capture fit? Is a change in person, environment, or fit itself continuous or episodic? What are the most theoretically appropriate time lags between fit and its antecedents or outcomes? How long must an individual interact with his or her environment (e.g., group, supervisor, organization) before fit is identifiable and meaningful? How much time must transpire before a past fit experience is used as a standard of comparison for current and/or future fit experiences? If using repeated measures over time, when does fit change versus when is fit stable (and thus, repeated measures aren't necessary)? In addition, there may be cycles of fit and misfit, such as when a particular job offers certain time periods of misfit (e.g., tax time for an accountant) but others periods of fit (the remainder of the accountant's year).

Conclusion

Temporal fit research is still in its infancy (Kristof-Brown & Jansen, 2007). As the ten reasons raised above should indicate, there are many avenues to explore and improve our understanding of fit over time. Although there have been recent theoretical developments in this area, there are many conceptual questions remaining. There is a dearth of empirical research examining temporal considerations of fit and we encourage researchers to examine some of the questions and suggested research outlined above. Insights obtained from such explorations will allow us to draw conclusions that inform management practice, push fit research to the next level, and begin to integrate fit research with related disciplines within organizational science.

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