An Experiment Looking at the Effect of Organisational Fit on Creativity

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Introduction

My particular interest is to look at the influence of Person-Group fit on creativity. My reading of the subject so far suggests to me that this is a burning question and I'm intrigued as to the level of influence that fit has on creativity, if any at all.

My intention is that my study will empirically investigate the relationship for creativity of individuals within the group environment. In particular, I plan to study how the fit of people in groups influences their creativity (Choi, 1994), as this question seems to have received very little empirical attention despite being at the heart of conceptual and theoretical discussions. 'Creativity is becoming a core competency for employees and is encouraged in most contemporary organisations' (Amabile, 1996).

Background

Organisational fit is the manifestation of interactional psychology in the business environment. This form of psychology is an explanation of people's behaviour. It says that people's behaviour is caused by an interaction of people and the situation. This approach is grounded on a significant amount of conceptual research that has examined the determinants of people behaviour (e.g. Bowers, 1973; Chatman, 1989, 1991; Mischel, 1968; Pervin, 1978).

As this research is looking at how creativity is influenced by the fit of people in groups (PG fit), this involves looking at behaviour that is a the result of person–situation interactions (Cable & Judge, 1996; Chatman, 1989; Magnusson & Endler, 1976; Mischel, 1968). This aspect of behaviour (Magnusson & Endler, 1976; Mischel, 1968; Krahe, 1992) has become known as person-environment (PE) fit and within organisational settings it is referred to as person-organisation (PO) fit. PG fit is a further refinement of these approaches.

A key theory of Person-Organisation fit has been Schneider's ASA theory (Schneider, 1987) that outlines a framework for understanding organisational behaviour that integrates both individual and organisational theories. The theory explores the outcome of three unified self-motivated processes, attraction-selection-attrition and it determines the kinds of people in an organisation, and it subsequently defines the nature of the organisation, its structures, process and culture (Schneider 1987).

Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith, (1995) paper clearly identifies the ASA framework in a prescriptive way highlighting its homogeneity hypothesis. The model suggests that through this process of attraction, selection that similar people with similar views and values will initially be employed by the business, hence the organization containing similar people. It is this term that is classified as being 'homogeneity hypotheses'.

In the attrition part of the ASA model, Schneider (1987) suggests people who decide they do not fit tend to leave in order to find better fit elsewhere; over time, organisations would come to be filled with increasingly similar employees to produce a homogeneous workforce.

Schneider (1987) states 'people are not randomly assigned to organisations'. Assuming they may go through a number of processes to become members of an organisation. This may suggest that owner managers or founders of organizations play a pivotal role in shaping and creating their own shared goals through the organizational environment. Schneider underpins homogeneity by its own definition that ASA theory will increase the homogeneity of employees in the workplace (Smith, 2008). This definition may be described as a fixed understanding that homogeneity will occur in a stable environment. The ASA theory underpins the cloning theory, based on ASA theory that all become one.

Schneider's attraction process concerns the fact that people's preferences for particular organisations are based on implicit efforts of their own personal characteristics and the attributes of potential work organisations. An example of this can be found in Bowen, Ledford and Nathan (1991) This paper looks at basic steps for selection models in hiring for employees of a manufacturing company, High Involvement Organisations (HIO). In addition to KSA (knowledge, skills and abilities) it also looks at job analysis and personality attributes screened to skills, knowledge and abilities. This particular paper looked at hiring individuals to suit the business not just the job. This may encourage homogenous workforce by choice. On the basis that organisations will have a level of homogeneity, we can ask whether it enhances or stifles creativity.

Since the publication of Schneider's (1987) seminal paper, 'The People Make the Place', there has been considerable debate amongst organisational fit researchers whether greater homogeneity in the workforce is positive or negative for the organisation's survival. The implications of homogeneity may indicate that higher levels of homogeneity are negative; the majority of them argue that greater homogeneity restricts the types of people employed by the organisation meaning that it occupies a narrower ecological niche than it should do.

As a consequence Schneider (1987) says that the more similar people are, the more likely they are to hold similar views and be less likely to generate diverse solutions to problems. The ASA framework is important because the theory underpins the process of encouraging homogeneity in organisations. It provides a process by which attraction, selection and attrition are present in recruiting those who fit in with the environment having similar values and goals. This then encouraging widespread homogeneity and inbreeding of the workforce. In turn developing a 'cloning' effect.

On the other side of the argument are researchers who suggest that greater homogeneity creates conditions in which creativity can flourish (e.g. West & Farr, 1990). They argue that with homogeneity comes, an alignment of values, greater satisfaction and commitment, and an understanding of the organisational environment. In such conditions, people know the boundaries and feel 'safe' leading to a relaxed environment in which employees are able to express themselves and contribute. Some empirical studies have shown that 'social support and stimulation from leaders and peers have moderate, but significant, positive effects on individual creativity' (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Scott & Bruce, 1994; Tierney et al., 1999). Hence, the discussion on whether increased workforce homogeneity leads to more or less creativity has become polarised into extreme positions without an agenda to explore the various issues.

Methodology

One of the reasons no one has looked at this question is that examining the impact of a psychological construct such as fit on the behaviour of an organisation is virtually impossible given the number of influences on organisational behaviour. As a result, I plan to look at dynamics at the person-group level and test my research question (How does PG fit influence creativity?) empirically with an experiment. This will allow me to isolate the variables of fit and creativity and explore how they relate to each other.

My research plan is to use established quantitative methods for measuring fit and creativity. The process will use groups of individuals who engage in creative tasks. These individuals may well be groups of students and or groups of managers in an organisation.

I propose to measure this using value congruence of individuals using supplementary fit (Cable & Judge, 1996). My thesis will look at the relationship between two variables: group fit (the independent variable) and creativity (the dependent variable).This will allow me to flex the nature of the fit in the group to explore the nature of the fit and their creativity. This is important in an interactional design, where sufficient variability in the two elements (P & E – values and creativity) is required. This can identify changes in both elements and therefore draw the appropriate inferences. If there is sufficient variability in these dimensions to show changes, then there is more confidence in the outcomes. For example, if every person was an extravert, and I did not show variability in the P variable (because the researcher may have not considered any introverts or more balanced people). Providing variability in these two dimensions will allow the experiment to be valid (Cable & Judge, 1996, 1997; Kristof, 1996, 2000).

I would welcome feedback on any aspect of this paper and the planned research project.

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