

What is this thing called fit?

Jon Billsberry, The Open University
Véronique Ambrosini, Cranfield University
Nathalie van Meurs, The Open University
David Coldwell, KwaZulu-Natal University/The Open University
Philip Marsh, The Open University
John Moss-Jones, The Open University

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Objectives

A considerable amount of conceptual and empirical research has examined the determinants of people's behaviour (e.g. Bowers, 1973; Chatman, 1989, 1991; Mischel 1968; Pervin, 1978). Today, there is general agreement that individual characteristics, aspects of the situation, and, crucially, the interaction of person and situational variables combine to explain behaviour (Krahé, 1992). In the domain of work, the power of interactions to shape behaviour has been shown in many ways (e.g. Chatman, 1991; Holland, 1985).

Kristof (1996) identified several different forms of interaction between people and their work environments. In addition to the focus of her study on P-O fit, she reviewed the research that explored person-vocation (P-V) fit, person-group (P-G) fit, and person-job (P-J) fit. These four different types of person-work environment fit have been supplemented more recently by Van Vianen's (2000) exploration of person-people (P-P) fit. In all of these domains, researchers have found person-environment interactions influencing some form of behaviour at work. However, what needs to be ascertained is whether or not the prevailing view that the various forms of fit are distinct is correct (Judge & Ferris, 1992; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005). Given the interdependency of the various aspects of the work environment – e.g. the design of jobs is a reflection of organisational culture – several important questions are raised: Are these different types of fit aspects of the same overall sense of fit? Or, are they separate forms of fit that are independent of each other?

Researchers have so far considered fit from three angles. First, fears of anthropomorphism led some researchers to conceptualise fit between people and organisations according to the language and currency of organisations (e.g. O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991). Second, some researchers have explored a narrow segment of fit in accordance with their interests (e.g. Turban & Keon, 1993). The third way that researchers have approached the study of fit was to explore homogeneity between individuals using extant individual-level constructs (e.g. Schneider, Smith, Taylor & Fleenor, 1998). It is the authors' contention that to bring clarity to the literature in terms of fit's definition and boundaries, it is necessary to invest some time understanding the factors influencing people's sense of fit.

Design

The purpose of the current study, therefore, is to explore organisational member's perceptions of fit at work in a non-directive way. In particular, it looks at whether the current list of person–work environment fit domains is complete by constructing a taxonomy of people's fit at work. The method adopted had to meet two main criteria. First, it should be as free of researcher bias as possible. Secondly, it should allow participants to express their own personal representation of fit. To this end the approach developed by Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones and Marsh (2005) was adopted that advocates the use of causal mapping in combination with storytelling.

Methods

The sample was representative of staff at various levels at the Open University. The sample of 63 randomly-chosen employees included a broad cross section of staff. Three members of executive staff were added to the sample in order to capture the highest level. Only 19% of participants occupied (or had occupied) academic jobs, which mirrored the overall percentage of academics as a percentage of the workforce. Names of participants were randomly selected from the university's internal telephone directory. The range of posts of the participants. The participants were aged between 24 and 64 ($\bar{x} = 49.7$, $sd = 9.1$).

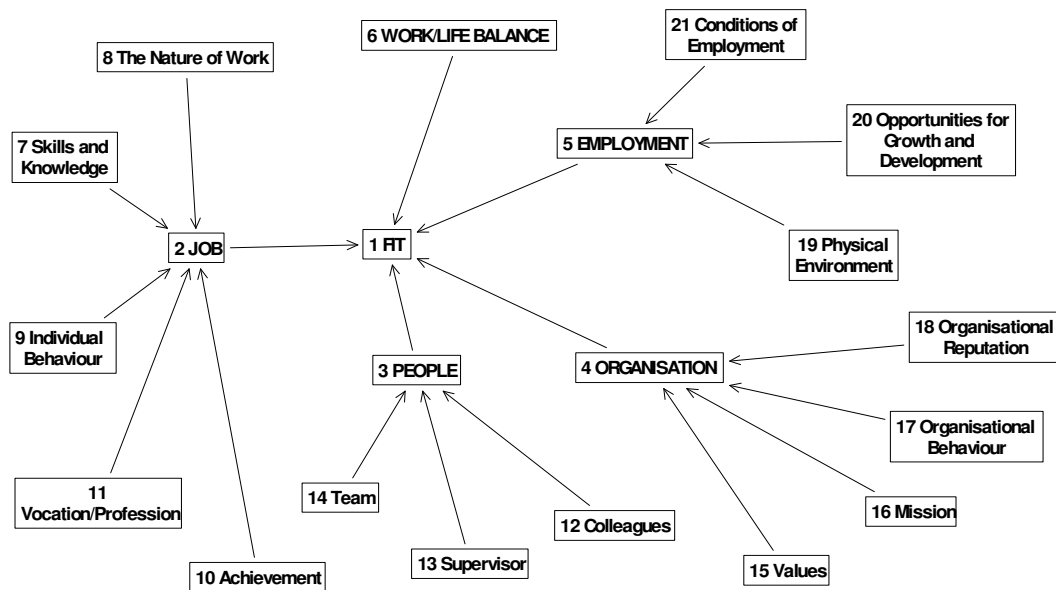
Results

The majority participants (92%) unprompted, produced a 'domain map' of fit that corresponded to some known types of fit. This occurred in spite of the fact that most respondents stated that the notion of 'fit' was something that they had not previously thought about before. Although not every participant mentioned every domain and some people used slightly different words, five domains typically emerged as primary concepts linked directly to the central construct of the 'fit' construct. These five domains concerned participants' perceptions of fit with:

- The people they work with
- The requirements of the job
- Organisational level matters
- Conditions of employment
- Work/life balance

Whereas the first three of these categories are recognised by the fit literature as P–P, P–J and P–O fits, the last two have received relatively little attention.

The causal mapping technique encouraged participants to develop each domain and to surface the various factors influencing them. From the maps and associated transcripts, the five domains were subdivided into sixteen sub-domains (see diagram).



The five domains of fit that these maps surfaced provide a different split of workplace P–E fit to that currently found in the fit literature. P–O, P–J, and P–P fit all appeared as main domains of fit, but the P–V domain surfaced in the current study as a subdomain of P–J fit. The P–G domain was conceptualised as a sub-domain of the P–P domain. Those who included P–V fit on their maps indicated that their vocation defines the type of work they do and the skills and knowledge required to do it. Hence, in all cases it emerged it was as a sub-factor of the job domain.

Two other types of fit emerged: people’s fit to their employer’s conditions of employment and their perceptions of their work/life balance. The first appears to be a new form of fit that has not previously been reported in the literature. Interestingly, this form of fit was described differently by people at different levels of the organisation. Senior people focused on autonomy, challenge and opportunities for growth and development whereas lower levels concentrated on the conditions of work. Person–work/life balance fit is also new to the fit literature although closely related to “job embeddedness” or, the forces that keep employees from leaving their jobs. This concept includes ‘fit’ as one of three constructs influencing embeddedness strength (the others are relationships and sacrifice). The construct of fit is also divided into on-the-job and off-the-job domains (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski and Erez, 2001) and this clearly runs parallel to work/life balance domain found in this study and underlines its validity.

Most of the participants, at some point during the session, described the consequences of fit. People who reported good fit were much less animated than those people who reported poor or misfit. The positive qualities associated with good fit included confidence, happiness, comfort, greater motivation, enjoyment, responsibility, creativity and less stress. Most ‘fits’ appeared to have thought little about fit prior to the sessions and it seemed a largely irrelevant idea for them. Misfits were completely different; no introduction to the concept was required and they were able to describe many stories of organisational incompatibility. Their maps were considerably more developed than those of ‘fits’ and related stories directly attributing negative outcomes to poor fit.

Conclusions

Results indicate that organisational members' sense of fit is influenced by five qualitatively distinct domains (job, people, organisation, employment, and work/life balance), which contain sixteen subdomains. Although all domains and subdomains extracted appear relevant to people's sense of fit, two appear as particularly important to people's sense of fit: line management and organisational values. Both subdomains were mentioned whenever participants described events causing a sense of misfit. None of the participants reported becoming a 'fit' having been a misfit and it seems that when people join organisations they are either 'fits' or appear neutral when appointed (cf. Schneider, 1987). A misfit is something one becomes.

This study suggests several further avenues for future research. It has identified two different states: 'fit' and 'misfit'. There are many different ways of conceptualising the relationship between these two states. But as yet, even the most basic characteristics of these constructs are not known. For example, it is not known if the two states are continuous or categorical variables. That is, are they simply different polar extremes on a linear continuum, or are they different categories? Clearly the concepts of fit and misfit are crucially important in explaining employee attitudes and behaviour at work and once better understood will pave the way for management to identify prescriptive remedial interventions for cases of organisational incompatibility. Another avenue for future research concerns the composite map and taxonomy of fit that was been developed in this paper. These suggest a network of relationships derived from qualitative data. It is important to test both the map and the taxonomy with a large scale quantitative survey, especially given the single organisation nature of the study.

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