

**RESEARCH NOTE**

# Curvilinear relationships in person-environment fit research: Is there evidence for a too-much-of-a-good-thing effect?

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**Abstract**

In this paper, we revisit this well-established linear relationship of person-organisation, demands-abilities, and needs-supply fit with job satisfaction, commitment, and OCBs, and propose that this relationship may be linear for affective work outcomes but curvilinear for behavioural ones. We test this idea in a two-wave sample of 212 employees, with measures taken 4 weeks apart. The results support the idea that the relationship between fit and behavioural outcomes can, indeed, be curvilinear. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between fit and work outcomes by challenging the long-held 'more fit is better' logic that pervades much of the PE fit research to date.

**KEYWORDS**

curvilinearity, demands-abilities fit, needs-supply fit, person-environment fit, person-organisation fit, too-much-of-a-good-thing effect

[Corrections added on 1 April 2023, after first online publication: second author's last name was corrected to Flatau-Harrison and organization was changed to organisation throughout the article.]

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### Practitioner points

- The relationship between person-environment (PE) fit and work outcomes is dominated by a 'more fit is better' logic.
- This study shows that this logic may apply to affective work outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and commitment), but not necessarily to behavioural outcomes (e.g., extra-role behaviours).
- The implication is that fit seems more likely to have unanticipated consequences for performance behaviour when it is experienced above midrange levels, such that effects wane off when higher levels of PE fit are experienced.

## BACKGROUND

Consensus exists in the literature that person-environment (PE) fit is a key antecedent of a happy and productive work life (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Yet while PE fit researchers have generally extolled the value of PE fit for outcomes like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), prior research has been criticized for painting an ambiguous picture of the relationship between fit and work attitudes and behaviours (Vleugels et al., 2023). Indeed, and while these relationships are usually presented as positive and linear, fit researchers (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987) have long questioned the commonly held assumption that PE fit invariably leads to positive outcomes, suggesting that in very high dosages, fit triggers complacency and harms individuals and organisations.

Although it is well-established that increasing the quantity of fit on the lower ends of its spectrum promotes positive work attitudes and work behaviours, the effect of fit on the high end remains largely unexplored. Therefore, in this paper, we revisit the well-established linear relationship of person-organisation (PO), demands-abilities (DA), and needs-supply (NS) fit (for a discussion of these different types of fit, see De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022) with job satisfaction, commitment, and OCBs, and propose that this relationship may be linear for affective work outcomes but in fact curvilinear for behavioural ones. As such, we propose that different PE fit types may be prone to the well-documented too-much-of-a-good-thing (TMGT) effect (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), such that, at high levels, experienced fit may result in complacency meaning that positive effects on behaviour may be reduced (diminishing return hypothesis) or even reversed (inverted U hypothesis).

The PE fit model essentially is a theory about stress and adaptation (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Indeed, Edwards (2008) notes that PE fit emerged as a core concept in theories on job stress (French et al., 1982) and work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), whilst empirical research has shown that PE fit has a favorable impact on stress and well-being (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Moreover, according to Yu's motivational model of PE fit (2013), people have a strong drive for hedonism (e.g., pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, need fulfillment) and are likely to use PE fit as a tool for achieving such positive affective states. Past research (Gabriel et al., 2014; Vleugels et al., 2018) has indeed pointed towards a close association between fit and affect, suggesting that people do seek fit to enjoy the hedonistic benefits (e.g., positive affect and well-being) that result from it (Vleugels et al., 2023). As a result, it can be expected that fit experiences and affect-laden outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment relate to one another in a positive and linear way. Hence, we predict:

- H1:** The relationship between PO fit and (a) job satisfaction and (b) commitment is positive and linear.  
**H2:** The relationship between DA fit and (a) job satisfaction and (b) commitment is positive and linear.  
**H3:** The relationship between NS fit and (a) job satisfaction and (b) commitment is positive and linear.

For OCBs, the picture may look slightly different. More specifically, the stress-reducing qualities PE fit possesses may also explain non-linear relationships between PE fit and OCB behaviours targeting the organisation (OCBO) and change (OCBC). For example, research indicates that an inverted U-shaped

relationship exists between arousal and performance behaviours (Anderson, 1990), such that performance is optimal when arousal is mildly elevated whereas significant decreases in performance are observed when arousal is either low or high. Likewise, Selye's (1974) triphasic model of stress posits that stress at low levels ('homeostasis') decreases performance. However, when stress increases to mildly elevated levels ('alarm phase'), coping responses are activated, which function to increase performance behaviours ('resistance phase'). Finally, when stress becomes overwhelming ('exhaustion phase'), these coping responses eventually become ineffective resulting in a corresponding decline in performance (Leung et al., 2011).

Similarly, we propose that engaging in OCBs is more likely to occur when fit is experienced at moderate levels, while OCBs can be expected to be reduced at both low and high levels of experienced fit. Low levels of fit are typically associated with what Selye (1974) labels 'exhaustion'; feelings of distress that impair satisfaction, motivation, and positive affect (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Therefore, when fit is experienced to be absent or low, employees are unlikely to engage in OCBs because they lack the affective-motivational drive that is needed to mobilize the resources (e.g., time and effort) required to engage in extra-role behaviours (Tepper et al., 2018). As fit experiences increase to a moderate level, feelings of hedonism (e.g., positive affect, job satisfaction) are likely to rise with it, meaning that individuals become more likely to reciprocate with OCBs compared to when fit is experienced as absent or low (Organ, 2018; Vleugels et al., 2019). At this midrange point of fit, engaging in OCBs may also become a coping mechanism ('resistance') to further boost one's suboptimal experience of fit, for example by cultivating an impression of job proficiency or by signalling one's alignment with organisational values or goals (Bolino et al., 2004). Finally, very high levels of experienced fit ('homeostasis') may be seen as a state of low arousal, at which point fully fulfilled hedonism needs result in idleness. For example, research indicates that happiness-seeking is considered as antithetical to active involvement (Baumeister et al., 2013), whilst feelings of hedonism have been linked to passivity in individuals (Veenhoven, 2003). As a result, employees experiencing high levels of fit may be less inclined to engage in more OCBs, especially when these extra-role behaviours threaten to change the much-desired status quo (Choi, 2007). Thus, we propose:

- H4:** The relationship between PO fit and (a) OCBO and (b) OCBC is inversely U-shaped curvilinear.  
**H5:** The relationship between DA fit and (a) OCBO and (b) OCBC is inversely U-shaped curvilinear.  
**H6:** The relationship between NS fit and (a) OCBO and (b) OCBC is inversely U-shaped curvilinear.

## METHOD

The hypotheses were tested in a two-wave sample of 212 employees, of which 195 employees came from an IT department of an insurance company in Belgium and 85 employees came from a convenience sample collected concurrently in The Netherlands. Participants across both samples were simultaneously asked to complete two identical surveys spaced approximately 1 month apart to examine their perceptions of fit and OCBs (total  $n = 280$ ;  $n$  wave 1 = 184,  $RR = 65.7\%$ ;  $n$  wave 2 = 119,  $RR = 42.5\%$ ). Variable means were estimated using FIML to replace missing data, resulting in a final useable sample of  $n = 212$ . FIML is a maximum likelihood-based missing data analysis technique, which analyses incomplete data matrices in full to produce unbiased parameter estimates (Newman, 2014).

PO fit, DA fit and NS fit were assessed with three items each from Cable and DeRue (2002). OCBO was measured with six items (Dalal et al., 2009), OCBC with 4 items (Choi, 2007), organisational commitment with 4 items (Ellemers et al., 1998) and job satisfaction with 1 item (Cammann et al., 1979). Age and gender were included as controls (Table 1).

## RESULTS

Data was analysed using multiple regression in Mplus (Version 8.4) in 8 separate models. Path estimates are recorded in Tables 2 and 3. All variables were grand mean centred. No linear effect was found between PO fit and job satisfaction and thus there was no support for Hypothesis 1a. Support was found

TABLE 1 Correlation matrix.

	Age	Gender	OCBO T0	OCBC T0	JS T0	OC T0	PO fit T0	DA fit T0	NS fit T0	OCBO T1	OCBC T1	JS T1	OC T1
Age	NA												
Gender	.00	NA											
OCBO T0	.16*	-.03	(.67)										
OCBC T0	.06	-.07	.53**	(.81)									
JS T0	.23**	-.04	.44**	.04	NA								
OC T0	.14	-.02	.52**	.07	.66**	(.88)							
PO fit T0	.19*	.04	.48**	.08	.59**	.70**	(.90)						
DA fit T0	.15*	-.11	.42**	.23**	.50**	.52**	.60**	(.84)					
NS fit T0	.20**	-.10	.48**	.18*	.72**	.65**	.70**	.72**	(.93)				
OCBO T1	.16	-.13	.71**	.44**	.46**	.46**	.49**	.36**	.56**	(.72)			
OCBC T1	.20*	-.06	.51**	.60**	.11	.11	.10	.19	.17	.63**	(.80)		
JS T1	.20*	-.11	.37**	.09	.56**	.44**	.45**	.48**	.67**	.59**	.30**	NA	
OC T1	.07	-.05	.43**	.07	.59**	.65**	.59**	.45**	.69**	.65**	.29**	.78**	(.93)

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Abbreviations: DA fit, demands-abilities fit; JS, job satisfaction; NS fit, needs-supply fit; OC, organisational commitment; OCBC, change-oriented citizenship behaviour; OCBO, organisational citizenship behaviour; PO fit, person-organisation fit.

for **Hypothesis 1b**, with PO fit displaying a significant linear relationship with organisational commitment ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ). There was also a significant linear relationship between DA fit and organisational commitment ( $\beta = -.24, p < .05$ ), albeit in the opposite direction to predicted.<sup>1</sup> No linear relationship was found between DA fit and job satisfaction. We therefore found no support for either **Hypothesis 2a** or **2b**. Full support was found for **Hypothesis 3a** and **3b**, with NS fit displaying significant linear relationships with both job satisfaction ( $\beta = .65, p < .01$ ) and organisational commitment ( $\beta = .68, p < .01$ ). **Hypothesis 4a** was supported, with PO fit displaying a significant negative curvilinear relationship with OCBO ( $\beta = -.07, p < .01$ ). We compared the model fit of a linear versus quadratic model using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC). Both AIC (182.13) and BIC values (200.30) were lower in the quadratic PO fit model compared to the linear model (AIC = 188.23 and BIC = 203.80), indicating support for the quadratic model.<sup>2</sup> Hypotheses **4b**, **5a**, **5b** and **6a** were not supported. We found support for **Hypothesis 6b**, with a significant negative curvilinear relationship between NS fit and OCBC evident ( $\beta = -.09, p < .01$ ). Both AIC (230.23) and BIC (248.39) were lower in the quadratic model compared to the linear model (AIC = 235.00, BIC = 250.57).<sup>3</sup> Significant curvilinear effects are plotted in Figures 1 and 2.<sup>4</sup>

As a formal test of the shape of the curve we calculated the stationary inflection point of each to locate at exactly which levels of PO fit (**Hypothesis 4**) and NS fit (**Hypothesis 6**) levels of OCBO and OCBC, respectively, start decreasing. To do this, we calculated the derivative form equation of the OCB terms used to plot Figures 1 and 2 (whilst retaining the control terms) and solved the equation for 0.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Negative linear effects between DA fit and the criterion variables were further explored in isolation. For both job satisfaction and organisational commitment these effects were significant and positive when examined in isolation, indicating the presence of an interaction between DA fit and NS fit when both are included in one and the same model. This is unsurprising given the dimension overlap, however, this finding is beyond the scope of this format in exploring.

<sup>2</sup>Comparison was completed without using FIML given the burden FIML places on processing requirements and the bias this would have on AIC and BIC metrics.

<sup>3</sup>Early analyses including DA fit as a quadratic term yielded non-significant results, and thus only the linear term was included to properly investigate the hypothesized linear effects.

<sup>4</sup>Effects plotted using centered control variables and uncentered fit variables.

<sup>5</sup>For **Hypothesis 4** this equation was  $\frac{dy}{dx} = -.14 (\text{OCBO}) + .69$ , for **Hypothesis 6** this equation was  $\frac{dy}{dx} = -.18 (\text{OCBC}) + .83$ .

TABLE 2 PO fit quadratic path analysis (models 1 and 2).

	OCBO T1 (model 1)		OCBC T1 (model 1)		Job satisfaction T1 (model 2)		Organisational commitment T1 (model 2)	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Age	.00 (.00)	.01 (.01)	.01* (.01*)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (-.01)	.01 (.01)
Gender	-.16 (-.23)	.12 (-.23)	-.01 (-.06)	.15 (.15)	-.33 (-.35)	.23 (.22)	-.21 (-.25)	.21 (.21)
OCBO T0	.59** (.57**)	.07 (.57)	-	-	-	-	-	-
OCBC T0	-	-	.59** (.56**)	.07 (.07)	-	-	-	-
Job Satisfaction T0	-	-	-	-	.48** (.48**)	.11 (.11)	-	-
Organisational Commitment T0	-	-	-	-	-	-	.48** (.46**)	.10 (.10)
PO fit T0	.06 (.14**)	.05 (.05)	-.04 (.02)	.06 (.05)	.11 (.14)	.11 (.10)	.23* (.29**)	.12 (.10)
PO fit <sup>2</sup> T0	-.07** (NA)	.02 (NA)	-.05 (NA)	.03 (NA)	-.03 (NA)	.04 (NA)	-.04 (NA)	.04 (NA)
Intercept	5.24** (5.15**)	.09 (.09)	5.35** (5.29**)	.11 (.11)	5.50** (5.47**)	.16 (.16)	4.93 (4.87**)	.15 (.15)

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . All effects in parentheses refer to path estimates in a comparable linear effects only model.

TABLE 3 DA and NS fit quadratic path analysis (models 3 and 4).

	OCBO T1 (model 3)		OCBC T1 (model 3)		Job satisfaction T1 (model 4)		Organisational commitment T1 (model 4)	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Age	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.02* (.01*)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.00)	.01 (.01)
Gender	-.18 (-.18)	.12 (.12)	.01 (-.06)	.15 (.15)	-.19 (-.21)	.20 (.20)	-.11 (-.11)	.19 (.19)
OCBO T0	.55** (.55**)	.07 (.07)	-	-	-	-	-	-
OCBC T0	-	-	.63** (.56**)	.08 (.08)	-	-	-	-
Job Satisfaction T0	-	-	-	-	.18 (.19)	.11 (.11)	-	-
Organisational Commitment T0	-	-	-	-	-	-	.35** (.35**)	.09 (.08)
DA fit T0	-.18* (-.18**)	.07 (.07)	-.07 (-.02)	.10 (.10)	-.15 (-.14)	.13 (.13)	-.24* (-.24*)	.12 (.12)
NS fit T0	.29** (.29**)	.07 (.07)	.00 (.02)	.09 (.09)	.65** (.65**)	.14 (.13)	.68 (.68**)	.13 (.13)
NS fit <sup>2</sup> T0	-.01 (NA)	.02 (NA)	-.09** (NA)	.03 (NA)	-.03 (NA)	.04 (NA)	-.01 (NA)	.04 (NA)
Intercept	5.11** (5.09**)	.09 (.09)	5.40** (5.29**)	.12 (.11)	5.39** (5.35**)	.16 (.15)	4.72** (4.71**)	.15 (.14)

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . All effects in parentheses refer to path estimates in a comparable linear effects only model.

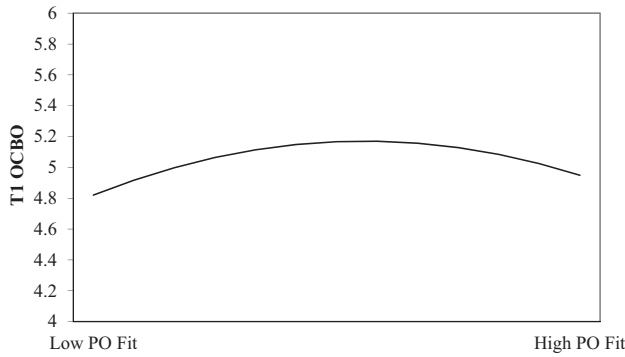


FIGURE 1 Curvilinear relationship between PO fit and OCBO.

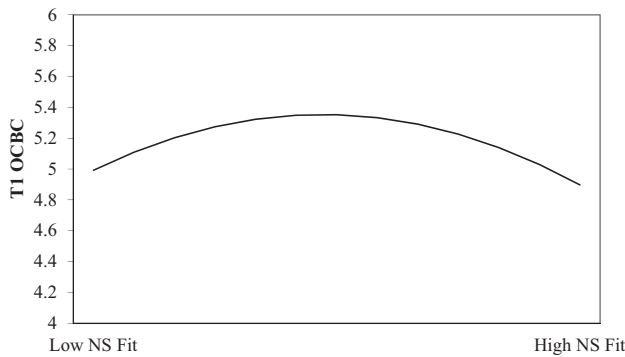


FIGURE 2 Curvilinear relationship between NS fit and OCBC.

This led to the calculation of a stationary point of 4.93 for PO fit in predicting OCBO and a stationary point of 4.61 for NS fit in predicting OCBC. Given that scale values range from 1 to 7, and the calculated stationary inflection points are just above the midpoint of 4 on the scale range, these results provide support for an inverted U hypothesis as opposed to a diminishing return hypothesis, such that at both low and high levels of PO fit and NS fit, OCBO and OCBC, respectively, are low.

## DISCUSSION

In the management literature to date, few attempts have been made to offer hypotheses that challenge conventional wisdom and set down the conditions for opposite effects—including inversions of well-established relationships or non-linear effects (Johns, 2021). This is especially true in a PE fit context, where linear thinking is so engrained and taken-for-granted that it mitigates counterintuitive (e.g., non-linear) thinking (Vleugels et al., 2023). With this study, we contribute to a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between fit and work outcomes by challenging the ‘more fit is better’ logic that pervades much of the PE fit research to date. Our findings indicate that it is worthwhile to view fit through a TMGT lens (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013) and to consider the possibility of non-monotonic effects, especially with regard to behavioural outcomes that hinge on hedonism motives. In particular, fit seems more likely to have unanticipated consequences when it is experienced above midrange levels, such that effects on behavioural outcomes wane off when higher levels of PE fit are experienced.

This paper is the first to document that relationships between fit and work outcomes do not always adhere to the commonly assumed linear (i.e., ‘more fit is better’) logic. This discovery of curvilinear

effects carries substantial theoretical weight because they can signal boundary conditions for existing theory and offer new opportunities for research (Johns, 2021). In a context of PE fit, curvilinearity implies that cultivating experiences of high fit leads to a potential waste of resources because there are no improvements or additional beneficial outcomes in spite of the increase in inputs. Worse yet, such increases may lead to detrimental consequences (e.g., a reduction in OCBs)—just the opposite of what is hoped for and desired (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). The implication of these findings is that there may be an important middle ground for organisations in finding ‘the right person for the right organisation and/or job’ and in cultivating person-environment fit. Indeed, moderate levels of fit are possibly more desirable for encouraging positive and proactive organisational behaviours, rather than extremely high levels of fit. Consequently, managers and HR practitioners could consider ‘casting the net wider’ in their search for fitting job candidates as some fit seems to be healthy but perfect fit may not always be required nor desirable.

The purpose of this study was to offer a starting point to investigate the unanticipated consequences of high levels of fit (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Therefore, an inevitable limitation of this research is that it focuses on three types of fit (i.e., PO, DA and NS fit) and two types of outcomes (i.e., affective attitudes and behaviours) only. Future research will need to confirm whether this TMGT effect also extends to other types of fit (e.g., interpersonal fit constructs like person-group and person-supervisor fit) and outcomes (e.g., task performance). Furthermore, our research also throws up interesting questions about the potential bright side of organisational misfit and suggests that misfitting employees may be able to meaningfully contribute to organisations. For instance, a similar inverted U-shaped relationship may be predicted for change-oriented behaviours (e.g., personal initiative, innovation) in relation to misfit, such that these behaviours are at their lowest when misfit is either low (i.e., denoting a situation of fit) or high, with mediocre levels of misfit—which could be seen as overlapping with imperfect or midrange levels of fit—proving to be most conducive for facilitating innovation and change. Finally, more work is needed to verify the proposed explanatory mechanisms (i.e., hedonism and arousal) behind the curvilinear relationships between PE fit and work outcomes, and to explore when, where, how, and why fit may backfire for individuals and organisations.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

**Wouter Vleugels:** (Conceptualization; methodology; resources; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing). **Huw Flatau Harrison:** (Formal analyses; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Open access publishing facilitated by Deakin University, as part of the Wiley - Deakin University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors has any conflict of interest to report.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Wouter Vleugels, upon reasonable request.

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**How to cite this article:** Vleugels, W., & Harrison, H. F. (2023). Curvilinear relationships in person-environment fit research: Is there evidence for a too-much-of-a-good-thing effect? *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *96*, 669–677. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12432>