

Person-environment fit

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Abstract

This entry reviews and synthesizes what is known about person-environment (PE) fit. The PE fit model represents a well-established framework for industrial psychology and management research by focusing on the compatibility between individuals and their work environment. Different conceptualizations of PE fit exist and fit can be established at different hierarchical levels (e.g., job, group, organization). Various forms of fit, such as person-job fit and person-organization fit, have undergone extensive research and have been shown to significantly impact outcomes that are important for both individuals and organizations. Moreover, selection, socialization, and work adjustment represent three key matching processes that are instrumental in establishing and maintaining PE fit over time. Yet in spite of all of the accumulated knowledge on PE fit over the past decades, areas of ambiguity and controversy continue to exist. Among these, the temporal nature of PE fit, alternative conceptualizations of fit, and an exploration of its dark side effects represent three of the most exciting new avenues for future research.

Keywords: Person-environment fit, supplementary fit, complementary fit, compilation, optimum fit, dark side

Person-environment fit

The person-environment (PE) fit model has been a prominent framework in management research and practice for decades, and has proven to play an important role in explaining employees' attitudes, behaviors, and decisions in the workplace (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Research on PE fit has surfaced in many different literatures, ranging from industrial psychology and organizational behavior to human resource management, and covers a broad spectrum of topics, including job satisfaction, well-being, performance, recruitment, selection and turnover, vocational choices, and organizational culture (Edwards, 2008). In today's work environment, the concept of "fit" is widely understood and desired by both employees and organizational decision makers. However, what exactly does fit entail?

Supplementary vs. complementary forms of fit

PE fit can be broadly defined as the compatibility between a person and their work environment (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). The concept of fit is rooted in interactional psychology, which emphasizes the interplay between personal and environmental attributes as the primary driver of behavior (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). The PE fit model maintains that, by nature of their attributes, some individuals are better suited for certain work environments than for others. Specifically, the idea behind PE fit is that neither individual characteristics (e.g., personal values, goals, needs, abilities, or personality traits) nor factors related to the work environment (e.g., job demands and supplies, organizational culture) can, in isolation, sufficiently explain who will thrive in a particular work setting and who won't. Instead, it is the degree of compatibility between individual and work environmental attributes that is crucial; the better the compatibility between both, the more likely it is that favorable work outcomes will result.

One of the challenges the fit literature faces is that there are many different perspectives on, and definitions of, what it means to be “compatible” (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). In this respect, the distinction between supplementary and complementary forms of fit has grown to become the dominant typology (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Ostroff, 2012). Supplementary fit exists when the individual and the work environment share similar attributes, which is for instance the case when an organization hires someone with values, personality traits, or skills that are already widely present within the organization. The focus here is on the degree of similarity between the individual and the work environment (“being in accord”). The basic idea behind the supplementary fit perspective is that individuals are drawn to people or environments that resemble themselves, because similarity in e.g. sociodemographic variables, personality traits, skills, or values validates their self-identity.

Conversely, the complementary fit perspective focuses on the match between the attributes that an individual brings to, or wants from, the work environment and the extent to which the work environment demands or provides those attributes, and vice versa. Thus, complementary fit exists when one entity provides what the other wants or needs. For instance, an employee may possess specific skills, knowledge, or expertise that an organization requires, or the organization may offer resources or rewards that the individual desires. Underlying this perspective is the premise of need fulfillment (“getting what one wants”), which leads to satisfaction when attributes are supplied in the right amount and frustration when there are discrepancies.

Types of fit and their outcomes

Fit scholars agree that supplementary and complementary forms of fit can exist at different hierarchical levels of the environment (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Ostroff, 2012). These include the individual (i.e., person-supervisor fit), job (i.e., person-job fit), team (i.e., person-group fit), organizational (i.e., person-organization fit), and industry (i.e., person-

vocation fit) level. Of these different types of fit, person-job and person-organization fit have been most frequently studied over the past few years (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Person-job fit exists when employees and organizations fulfill each other's job-related needs. In reality, this is the case when (a) an employee possesses the critical skills, knowledge, and expertise required for the job and (b) when the job returns the type of resources (e.g., sufficient levels of autonomy) or rewards (e.g., adequate pay) the employee is seeking. Person-job fit is generally considered a fundamental aspect of the standard selection model, which seeks to identify candidates whose abilities and qualities match the demands of the job. Research indicates in this respect that employees who fit their job well are also more productive and outperform individuals who are mismatched to their job. However, companies do not just hire hands and brains. Instead, they hire "whole" persons with their own personality, aspirations, and needs. Hence, another important consideration is how these attributes match those of the broader organizational environment. When employees share the same values and endorse the strategic objectives of their organization, they also experience a greater sense of fulfillment in their work, believing that their job has purpose and significance. This, in turn, drives their job satisfaction and work commitment forward. As a result, fit scholars generally also count person-organization fit, or the match between employees' more fundamental attributes (e.g., values, opinions, and goals) and the key defining features of the organization (e.g., organizational culture), among the most critical types of fit.

Central to the notion of PE fit is the idea that high levels of compatibility between individuals and their work environment will result in advantageous outcomes for employees as well as the organization (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Research indeed shows that fit produces favorable effects, while suboptimal fit is detrimental. For instance, employees benefit from this fit in terms of increased job satisfaction, well-being, commitment, and overall career success (e.g., salary level, career progression). Equally important, PE fit also serves the

organization in terms of higher work performance and reduced turnover. Generally speaking, however, fit is a more consistent predictor of work attitudes than behaviors, including performance behaviors (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). In fact, the effects of PE fit on turnover and performance are often observed through their influence on work attitudes (Arthur Jr et al., 2006). This suggests that favorable work attitudes, such as job satisfaction and commitment, are the most immediate outcomes of PE fit, while behavioral outcomes, such as performance and turnover, are more distal consequences (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022).

Furthermore, research shows that different types of fit also have significant, independent effects on work outcomes. Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) have meta-analyzed the extant fit literature in four critical domains of PE fit, i.e., person-supervisor, person-job, person-group, and person-organization fit. Unsurprisingly, interpersonal types of fit such as person-supervisor and person-group fit best predict the quality of, and satisfaction with, social dynamics and interpersonal relationships in the workplace, including satisfaction with coworkers, group cohesion, and leader-member exchange. By contrast, person-job fit is most predictive of job-and career-focused outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, intent to quit), whilst person-organization fit is more predictive of organization-focused outcomes (e.g., organizational commitment). On the whole, the predictive power of fit is stronger when the outcomes reside at the same hierarchical level as the type of fit being examined. Conversely, when fit and outcomes reside at different levels of the environment, the relationship is less robust. For instance, person-job fit is a stronger predictor of job satisfaction than is person-organization, person-group, or person-supervisor fit, whilst person-organization fit is the strongest fit predictor of organizational commitment.

Developing and maintaining PE fit

PE fit results from a reciprocal matching process between employees and their respective work environment. The three primary processes that are known to contribute to this matching process are called selection, socialization, and work adjustment.

Employee selection is the process of identifying and hiring the most suitable candidate for a vacant position or job. Foundational models of PE fit (e.g., Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987; see Edwards, 2008) emphasize the important role selection processes play in shaping fit. These models propose that employees do not end up randomly in organizational settings but instead naturally gravitate to jobs and organizations that sufficiently match their abilities, needs, personalities, and values, which is known as the gravitational hypothesis of fit (Vleugels et al., 2023). A vast body of research has confirmed that employees are attracted to and self-select into work environments, or are selected by these work environments, based on their (anticipated) level of fit. In addition, and through the mechanisms of hiring and turnover, selection processes are naturally self-correcting such that over time, individuals who fit poorly sort into jobs and organizations that are more commensurate with their personal attributes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Vleugels et al., 2023).

Socialization refers to the process by which new hires acquire relevant knowledge about various aspects of the work environment (e.g., through formal training programs, mentoring, and on-the-job experiences), including job requirements and company values and norms, so that they can fully participate as organizational members. Precisely how socialization leads personal and organizational attributes to grow more congruent over time is not yet entirely clear (Vleugels et al., 2023). Nonetheless, socialization is relevant to PE fit because through socialization efforts, individuals seem to develop a better understanding of the demands and expectations of their work environment and learn to adjust their attributes and behaviors accordingly, resulting in better fit (Chatman, 1989; Vleugels et al., 2023).

Post-hire work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; French et al., 1982) refers to the process by which individuals adapt to changes in personal and/or work environmental attributes, causing PE fit to diminish over time. To restore balance, employees will engage in adaptive behaviors, called “work adjustment”, by which they aim to maintain, reestablish, or improve fit over time. Broadly speaking, the PE fit literature differentiates between proactive (changing the environment) and reactive (changing the person) adjustment strategies. Moreover, individuals can employ coping strategies to objectively improve their fit by targeting the root causes of incongruence, or use defense strategies to transform their subjective perceptions of P or E attributes and alleviate the symptoms of incongruence (Vleugels et al., 2023). For instance, and following a role change, individuals may develop better job fit as they acquire new skills or adopt a different way of completing tasks (i.e., reactive coping). Alternatively, they may downplay the importance of certain job features or reevaluate parts of their job to create a better overall experience of fit (i.e., proactive defense). A special form of work adjustment is called self-regulation, which is a dynamic form of adjustment by which individuals manage ongoing, “in the moment” fluctuations in PE fit. Self-regulation refers to one’s ability to manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve goals or adapt to changing situations in the workplace. It has been suggested that, due to its need fulfilling and hedonistic qualities, maintaining optimal levels of PE fit should be regarded an important goal in its own right. In this respect, fit scholars (Yu, 2009, 2013) have proposed that individuals may use various fit management tactics, ranging from cognitive distortion to intentional proactive behaviors, to self-regulate momentary experiences of PE fit.

In sum, PE fit is established through a combination of selection, socialization, and work adjustment, which should be seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing processes (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Whilst selection processes lay the foundation for PE fit within a given work setting, socialization helps to further cement and improve pre-established fit.

Finally, work adjustment strategies can be employed to respond to temporal fluctuations in post-entry fit. Furthermore, socialization and work adjustment also combine into a larger ongoing adaptation process, which can unfold slowly in case of socialization and proactive or reactive coping and defense behaviors, or fast-paced and dynamic in case of self-regulation. Together, selection, socialization, and work adjustment contribute to the development of PE fit and ensure individuals can maintain long-term fit with their work environment.

Areas for future research

The PE fit model been a widely recognized research framework for almost a century, with hundreds of empirical studies exploring its antecedents and outcomes. Despite this significant body of knowledge, several reviews (e.g., Edwards, 2008; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Vleugels et al., 2023) have shown that progress PE fit research is constrained by various challenges that hinder its further development. An additional concern is that there has been a lack of guidance for practitioners on how to utilize PE fit to meet firm objectives (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Therefore, future research into new perspectives on PE fit is needed to push the literature forward toward greater maturation. Ideally, new PE fit research should also generate more tangible practical advice on how to employ PE fit in the workplace.

Temporal nature of fit

A temporal perspective on PE fit recognizes that people and their work environments are dynamic and evolve over time, and that the fit between them can change as a result of these alterations. Research shows that changes in PE fit do matter and significantly influence desirable work outcomes (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Therefore, PE fit change is important to understand and treating either the person or the environment as static is theoretically incorrect and thus problematic for PE fit research, yet this is inherently what most fit researchers do. Indeed, only a small fraction of the available PE fit

research has studied fit through a temporal lens by examining how fit changes longitudinally between persons or dynamically within persons over time (Vleugels et al., 2023).

A systematic review of the available temporal fit research (Vleugels et al., 2023) revealed that changes in fit either result from (a) a transition (e.g., joining a new organization, a job or career change), (b) a larger, ongoing adjustment process (e.g., socialization, proactive and reactive adjustment strategies), or (c) a transformational change event (e.g., a personal life event that alters one's personal values or needs). In addition, fit change can be conceptualized as slowly unfolding change over larger time intervals (i.e., baseline level change) or as dynamic change from one moment to the next (i.e., situational level change), with both levels of change being entangled in complex ways. That is, situational changes in fit could be conceived as the building blocks of more encompassing, yet slower evolving, change in baseline assessments of fit. Alternatively, the quality of baseline level fit may also shape how fit is experienced at a more dynamic (i.e., daily or weekly) level. Finally, changes in fit can also be considered within two different temporal frames—clock time versus psychological time. Across clock time, fit change represents “real change”, attributable to discrete happenings (e.g., socialization, personal life event), that manifests with the linear passage of time. However, individuals may also “imagine” change in fit by comparing fit in the present to recollections of past fit or anticipations of future fit, causing fit to change across psychological (or subjective) time. These personalized stories of fit or “fit narratives” (Jansen & Shipp, 2011) are important to consider because it is believed that individuals not only respond to actual changes in PE fit, but also to how fit changes in relation to a past or future reference point.

Even though temporal fit studies indicate that stability in fit is the exception rather than the norm, surprisingly little is known about the temporal qualities of PE fit. The reason is that many theoretical and methodological obstacles stand in the way of developing a truly temporal perspective of PE fit (Vleugels et al., 2023). Historically, fit researchers have placed an overly

strong emphasis on selection, a one-off matching process that cannot account for post-hire changes in fit, and socialization, a slowly unfolding change process bound in time. By contrast, work adjustment processes, which can account for many different types of change in post-hire PE fit, received comparably much less research attention. In addition, much of extant temporal fit literature has focused on how fit changes between persons over time (selection paradigm), at the cost of developing a clearer view of how fit changes within individuals (adaptation paradigm)—a change perspective that better aligns with original theorizing on fit. Moreover, the temporal fit literature has been preoccupied with traditional (i.e., linear) as opposed to more complex (e.g., curvilinear) forms of change; has favored normal causation (i.e., change in fit as predictor of something else) over reverse causation (i.e., fit change as an outcome) research; and has ignored the temporal interplay between fit and misfit. More research on these topics is needed to explore and map out the temporal qualities of PE fit in further detail, in addition to its implications for individuals and organizations.

Alternative ways of looking at fit

Fit researchers have traditionally focused on similarity and complementarity as the primary determinants of fit. However, alternative conceptualizations of compatibility exist that can also provide a broader perspective of PE fit. One such conceptualization is “compilation” proposed by Ostroff (2012), which represents a distinct form of complementary fit. The notion of compilation introduces the idea that fit can be achieved by adding a distinct but complementary attribute to a group or environment. Unlike complementary fit, which is about reciprocal need fulfillment through desirable attributes, compilation involves a combination of distinct but reinforcing attributes. Compilation exists when people are complementary but not identical to each other or to others in the group, such that their different characteristics (e.g., different personalities or different skills) combine in such a way as to complement one another. The idea of compilation highlights the potential of diversity to contribute to a more

comprehensive understanding of fit. Yet despite its potential to enrich PE fit theory, there has been limited theoretical and empirical exploration of compilation as a special case of fit.

Supplementary and complementary forms of fit should also not be seen as mutually exclusive concepts and necessarily be examined in isolation. For instance, and in her 1996 review, Kristof describes “optimum fit” as an ideal form of fit that simultaneously combines both high levels of supplementary and complementary fit (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). The notion of optimum fit calls for a closer examination of the interplay between different types of fit. However, and while fit scholars have recognized the distinction between supplementary and complementary forms of fit in previous research, they have rarely integrated them into a single empirical framework. Consequently, our understanding of optimum fit remains limited to date. For example, research suggests that individuals may also experience fit in compensatory or interactive ways. Therefore, it remains uncertain which configuration of supplementary and complementary fit has the greatest impact on work outcomes and whether the pursuit of optimum fit is indeed key to achieving a positive and productive work experience.

The concepts of compilation and optimum fit remain rooted in traditional understandings of fit. However, in the face of the evolving dynamics of modern workplaces, which are characterized by freelancing, gig work, and flexible and remote work arrangements, one may question whether these traditional notions of fit still adequately capture the complexities of nowadays work settings. With work becoming more temporary, dynamic, and project-specific, social exchange mechanism are less pertinent because commitment and trust expand to multiple employers, work relationships become embedded in multiple psychological contracts, and values become less important to skills. Hence, it has been suggested that future research should move beyond the perspectives of complementary (e.g., person-job) and supplementary (e.g., person-organization) fit to focus on a broader approach based on “person–skill fit”, which encompasses the alignment between an individual’s specific skills and the

requirements of a particular role or task (Ben-Gal, 2023). Unlike person-organization fit, which focuses on cultural fit with one organization, and person-job fit, which considers the fit between an individual's attributes and needs and job-related demands and supplies, person-skill fit delves into the technical proficiency and capabilities required to excel in a given position.

Dark side of fit

In general, the common theme of PE fit research is functionality enhancement. That is, PE fit is presumed to be a condition that serves to enhance or improve the organization in one or more beneficial ways—to boost productivity, improve satisfaction, or make the organization more effective. By contrast, there has been a significant lack of research exploring the potential negative implications or drawbacks of PE fit.

While many outcomes of PE fit are typically viewed as functional, it is important to consider the possibility that certain downstream effects of PE fit may be less functional in nature. These effects may impose direct costs on both individuals within organizations and organizations themselves, or on society as a whole. For example, there may be unanticipated negative effects of PE fit on individual behavior, such that when fit is experienced in excess, a significant decline in performance may occur (Vleugels & Flatau-Harrison, 2023). The pursuit of PE fit also pervades many different organizational decision-making processes. The concern is that when HR processes are based on fit, they may inadvertently perpetuate existing power imbalances and inequalities within organizations. For example, the use of fit in recruitment and selection has been controversial because it may result in bias and discrimination under the guise of (a lack of) social fit (Billsberry & Vleugels, 2023). Equally, individuals who are perceived to have better fit may receive disproportionate advantages, including more responsibilities and challenging tasks, but also more developmental opportunities, social support, and financial rewards, compared those who fit less, even though this latter group of employees may require more care from their work environment. Moreover, and from a group,

organizational, and societal perspective, the benefits of high levels of fit must be weighed against its potential costs, including favoritism, self-censorship, and conformity, which may eventually result in organizational inertia, corruption, and the reproduction of inequality (Schneider, 1987).

Dark side effects of fit may stem from various mechanisms and processes, with the specific effects dependent on the hierarchical level of the environment and the type of fit being examined. When considering dark side effects of fit within individuals, excessive levels of job and organizational fit may impede individual adaptability, self-development, and initiative taking by fostering a sense of complacency and general satisfaction with existing work conditions (Vleugels & Flatau-Harrison, 2023). Conversely, when considering fit between individuals, those who demonstrate better job, organizational, and vocational fit are more likely to receive a preferential treatment compared to those who fit less. This may trigger processes of distributive injustice in the form of an unequal or unfair allocation of opportunities, resources, and rewards. Additionally, collective fit at the group or organizational level can lead to homogeneous environments where conformity becomes prevalent. Such environments, as highlighted by Schneider (1987), discourage diversity and complicate the inclusion of individuals who bring new ideas and alternative perspectives. Overall, taking a dark side perspective on PE fit seems crucial to counterbalance our current overly optimistic view of the construct. In the absence of such a truly critical view, our current understanding of fit remains incomplete, and an ethical and responsible use of fit in organizational settings cannot be guaranteed.

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