

Person-environment misfit

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Abstract

Misfit occurs when an employee's characteristics are incompatible with those of their work environment. The term "misfit" conveys a sense of a mismatch, of being out of place or different in an unsettling way, and studies indicate that such a mismatch has deleterious effects on individuals who experience misfit. However, misfit is a complex phenomenon, and emerging evidence indicates that misfit may not simply represent the absence of person-environment fit. Research also reveals that misfit can take various forms. For example, misfit may represent a situation of deficiency or excess, or manifest as a social, ideological or functional mismatch. Misfit can also be an episodic or chronic condition, highlighting its multifaceted character. Despite these insights, research on misfit is still in its infancy. Further scholarly exploration of its different temporal manifestations, how individuals respond to misfit, and its positive dimensions are needed to provide a broader view of the construct.

Keywords: Person-environment misfit, excess and deficiency misfit, social, ideological and functional misfit, episodic and chronic misfit, positive misfit.

Person-environment misfit

In the person-environment (PE) fit literature, misfit has recently become the focus of a lot of interest. While traditionally the focus of PE fit research has been on studying the causes and consequences of a fit between individual and work environment attributes, emphasizing harmonious relationships and alignment, scholars now acknowledge that most, if not all, employees have to confront one or more episodes of misfit throughout their careers. Misfit thus represents an important yet largely neglected component of PE fit theory. Consistent with this perspective, it has been argued that the meaning and importance of PE fit can perhaps best be understood in its absence—when people are facing a mismatch between themselves and their work environment (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022).

Definitions of misfit are elusive and the concept of misfit has been articulated in diverse ways across various studies (Englert et al., 2023). For instance, Vogel et al. (2016) argue misfit exists when employees' important values are incongruent with the values of their organization. In contrast, Follmer et al. (2018) conceive misfit as the negative end of the fit continuum, which is associated with discomfort and incompatibility. Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013), however, offer a more comprehensive view. According to them, person-environment misfit is the perceived mismatch between an individual and their environment. This mismatch occurs on a dimension that is important to either the individual, the environment, or both, and relates to individual factors that are more than, less than, or qualitatively different from the comparable factors at the organization level.

Considering this diversity in interpretations of “misfit”, a unified definition that harmonizes these various viewpoints might describe misfit as *a state of incompatibility, objective and/or perceived, that manifests when one or more attributes of the person are qualitatively or quantitatively different from, opposed to, or mutually exclusive with those of the work environment*. Here, “attributes” could include a spectrum of elements such as values,

personality traits, skills, needs, demographics, and social norms—any characteristic that could result in either the individual or the environment rejecting the other. This conceptualization of misfit also acknowledges that mismatches can occur for multiple reasons, such as sociodemographic disparities, conflicting values, or discrepancies in skills and competencies. Additionally, this definition accommodates the idea that misfit can be understood as either an empirical reality (either felt or unfelt objective misfit) or a subjective experience (felt misfit without objective basis), while also differentiating misfit from a mere lack of compatibility or poor fit.

Misfit versus poor fit

Scholars have long argued that misfit exists in the absence of (experienced) fit, suggesting that fit and misfit exist on a continuum with fit at the one end of the continuum and misfit at the other end (Englert et al., 2023). Consequently, most of the earlier empirical work on misfit has taken a theory-free exploratory approach assuming misfit is merely the absence of fit. Only recently have researchers begun to incorporate both fit and misfit in the same empirical studies. These emerging findings now suggest that misfit should be understood as a separate, more detrimental construct and something different than simply a lack of fit.

Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013) were first to explore the idea of fit and misfit being separate entities. In their qualitative study involving 167 participants, they found some people occupy a gray area between fit and misfit. Termed as “borderline fit” (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013, p. 27), these individuals were found to be only partially aligned with their organizational environment. They did not meet the study’s criteria for misfit because the mismatch was not sufficiently salient to them, yet they also did not fully align with the criteria for fit, effectively making them poor fits. Building upon this, Vleugels et al. (2019) provided further empirical evidence that fit, poor fit, and misfit should be considered distinct realities. They tracked employees’ perceptions of organizational value fit and misfit over a 3-month time

interval and subsequently categorized employees into five different profiles—stable fits, dynamic fits, weak fits, mavericks, and misfits—each reflecting a unique pattern of fit and misfit experiences over time. In their framework, misfit represents a sustained antagonism, where individuals consistently reject the idea that their values align with the organization's, while poor fit simply signifies a less-than-ideal match. In addition, the “mavericks” type introduced by Vleugels et al. (2019) showed higher average levels of fit compared to the “weak fits” type. However, these mavericks also exhibited greater volatility in their fit experiences, including recurring experiences of misfit, indicating these were otherwise good fits displaying occasional short-term episodes of misfit. Furthermore, another qualitative study by Follmer et al. (2018) proposed that fit in one area could counterbalance misfit in another, thereby allowing for the coexistence of fit and misfit. This introduces the possibility that individuals can experience varying degrees and types of fit and misfit simultaneously, adding another layer of nuance to how we understand these constructs.

In summary, the evolving body of research challenges prior simplistic views that position misfit as the absence of fit, indicating that misfit is a more complex reality than previously imagined. Although further empirical evidence is needed, emerging misfit research suggest that fit and misfit should not be seen as mere opposites, but as independent and multifaceted constructs that can coexist. Indeed, the limited research that has examined both fit and misfit concurrently over time reveals that a binary “fit or misfit” perspective is overly reductive. Instead, individuals can experience varying types and degrees of fit and misfit over time, and “being a fit” does not preclude periodic, short-lived episodes of misfit. Additionally, and across these investigations, true misfit seems characteristic of a more manifest and persistent mismatch and something that would overtake feelings of poor fit. While fit often remains in the background being the usual state or “norm”, misfit commands attention due to its pronounced negative effects, making it unlikely to be overlooked (Vleugels et al., 2023).

Types of misfit

The term “misfit” conveys a sense of a mismatch, of being out of place or different in a way that is uncomfortable. However, this sense of discord can pertain to various different areas of the work environment. Similar to how “fit” can be evaluated across numerous environmental levels, “misfit” can also occur at different hierarchical levels of the work environment (Englert et al., 2023), such as with the job (referred to as person-job misfit), with a team (known as person-group misfit), at the organizational level (described as person-organization misfit), and even with an entire industry (called person-vocation misfit).

PE fit theory essentially rests on the assumption that the relationship between personal (P) and work environmental (E) characteristics is parabolic. In this view, optimal outcomes occur when these characteristics align perfectly, signifying a state of “fit” ($P = E$). By contrast, when personal and environmental characteristics deviate in either direction from this optimal match, misfit ensues and work outcomes should decline (van Vianen, 2018). Thus, two specific types of misfit can be identified: “deficiency misfit” ($P > E$), which occurs when personal characteristics exceed those of the work environment, and “excess misfit” ($E > P$), where personal characteristics fall short of environmental characteristics (van Vianen, 2018). For instance, and in the case of person-job misfit, “deficiency misfit” ($P > E$) exists when an individual is overqualified for a role (their skills surpass work requirements) or when the job does not provide certain desired features like autonomy (the job’s offerings do not meet the individual’s needs). Conversely, “excess misfit” ($E > P$) arises when, for instance, an individual lacks the skills or competencies required for a job (their skills are inadequate compared to job demands), or when a job offers more autonomy than the individual can effectively manage (the job’s offerings exceed the individual’s needs or capabilities).

Similar to how fit can be classified into a “supplementary” and “complementary” form, misfit can also be divided into specific categories. Current research highlights three main types:

social misfit, ideological misfit, and functional misfit, each characterized by unique triggers and outcomes. Firstly, social misfit emerges when individuals feel socially disconnected from or rejected by their peers. Influencing factors may include sociodemographics (e.g., age, gender, cultural background), physical markers (e.g., skin color, piercings, tattoos), or differences in other individual characteristics like humor style, personality, sexual orientation, or desire for social interaction. Social norms play an important role in the development or awareness of social misfit (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013), as do social signals sent by others (Follmer et al., 2018). Secondly, ideological misfit goes beyond social incompatibility and is rooted in differing values, beliefs, ethics, or morals. This form of misfit is often ego-depleting, forcing people to either compromise their self-identity or face the tension of external imposition (Deng et al., 2016). Examples include conflicts over ethics, values, or cultural and principled disagreements (e.g., Vleugels et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2016). Lastly, functional or competency-based misfit occurs when there is a significant gap between an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise or work-related needs and desires versus the demands, expectations and resources that come with the function or role. This type of misfit leads to inefficiencies in professional functioning, feelings of professional inadequacy, or stagnation in career growth (e.g., Chi et al., 2020; Deng et al., 2016). It emphasizes the concrete aspects of role performance and can have long-term implications on an individual's professional self-esteem and future career trajectory.

Causes of misfit

Although not everything is yet known about the origins of misfit and its triggering factors, it is generally believed that misfit can arise for a variety of reasons. One significant factor is ineffective matching systems involving recruitment, selection, and socialization that fail to properly align individuals with their work settings (Vleugels et al., 2023). This results in recruiting and selecting candidates who are not a fit for either the position or the

organizational culture, or ineffective socialization processes that do not mitigate the resulting discrepancies between employees and their work environments. Recent evolutions in hiring strategies, such as fast hiring and “selling” applicants on the job, only have aggravated this issue (Vogel et al., 2016). Indeed, the urgency to fill positions quickly in combination with rushed, reactive decision-making in recruitment and selection have amplified the misfit problem and such inadequate hiring strategies may structurally lock individuals into misfit for an extended period of time.

Furthermore, Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013) suggest that the social context surrounding the employment relationship, as well poorly functioning mechanisms of social exchange between the employer and employee, can also influence the emergence of misfit. For instance, social interactions and prevailing social norms can illuminate the presence of misfit or contribute to its development (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013). Similarly, Follmer et al. (2018) contend that “social signaling”—the various ways individuals convey information, intentions, or social status to others within their community or social network—can initiate or aggravate feeling of misfit. Additional factors such as role isolation, part-time employment, or limited options for career progression can also feed into misfit, possibly by fostering a sense of exclusion and limiting social engagement opportunities. As a result, the feeling of being a misfit may arise from the treatment received, rather than from an objective misalignment between the person and the work environment (Follmer et al., 2018).

Sometimes, misfit happens to individuals who were initially well-suited for their work environment but all of a sudden find themselves misaligned. These are people who once fitted in but no longer do. Such a mismatch is often the result of failed or insufficient adjustment following changes in either the person or environment. These changes can be part of a long-term development process, such as when skills mature and no longer fit the job demands, or they could stem from more abrupt transformational events, such as a change in personal needs

after becoming a parent or a change in organizational culture after a merger or leadership transition (Vleugels et al., 2023). In the former scenario, misfit tends to develop incrementally over an extended period of time. In the latter, misfit may surface abruptly as a crisis that conflicts with one's identity (Jansen & Shipp, 2019).

Finally, it is also important to consider that misfit exists in a multilevel framework (Englert et al., 2023). Just like fit at a lower level is impacted by the level of fit at a higher level (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022), the existence of misfit at one level, such as person-job misfit, could be the result of an incongruence between the individual and the environment at a more overarching level, like vocational misfit. This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the problem, suggesting that addressing misfit may require interventions at multiple levels.

Consequences of misfit

Misfit typically gives rise to a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction among employees, negatively impacting their emotional well-being, thought processes, and actions (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022; Englert et al., 2023). Numerous studies indicate that experiencing misfit can lead to significant psychological stress. Specifically, individuals feeling misaligned are prone to elevated levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, or signs of burnout like emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Usually, these emotions are associated with a lack of initiative taking, job dissatisfaction, and reduced commitment. In addition, those labeled as misfits are often perceived as disengaged and inefficient in their professional roles, and are more likely to sever ties with their organization as evident in higher absenteeism and turnover rates.

Although misfit generally leads to dysfunctional outcomes, the exact nature of the relationship between misfit and work outcomes is complex and influenced by multiple factors. Firstly, the specific type of misfit can determine the resulting outcomes. For example, being underqualified (excess misfit, $E > P$) typically result in stress and burnout, whereas being overqualified (deficiency misfit, $P > E$) may result in boredom or bore-out. Or social misfit is

more likely to lead to social exclusion outcomes such as loneliness, bullying, or ostracization compared to ideological misfit or functional misfit. Secondly, the importance of the attribute involved can influence the severity of the impact that misfit has. Research shows that fit based on attributes that do not matter is not as important as fit based on attributes that do matter (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Similarly, misfit is believed to matter more when it affects attributes that are of significant importance to the individual. Some of these attributes, such as the need for social belonging, may be universal, while others may be context-specific and not universally detrimental when unfulfilled. Lastly, contextual variables also moderate the impact of misfit on work outcomes (Englert et al., 2023). Older employees, for instance, are usually more triggered by misfit compared to younger workers (Kim et al., 2020; Krumm et al., 2013). Coping behaviors, such as engaging in meaningful leisure activities or job crafting, can also mitigate the negative effects of misfit (Vogel et al., 2016).

While much focus has been given to the impact of misfit on individual employees, its pervasive effects on the broader work environment are equally significant, albeit less scrutinized. Drawing from earlier studies on the relevance of PE fit (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022), it is conceivable that work units where misfit is prevalent may witness a downturn in cooperation, team morale, and productivity. Such an unfavorable work climate can set off a destructive cycle of further employee disengagement and withdrawal, leading to a “brain drain” where talented employees leave the organization. Managers may also have to spend more time resolving conflicts, diverting attention from addressing strategic priorities. Furthermore, the increased turnover associated with misfit is likely to inflate recruitment and training costs as new employees need to be onboarded frequently, impacting the company’s bottom line. Worse even, when misfit occurs in roles that are critical for the functioning of the organization, it can directly impede strategy execution and operational efficiency. Lastly, the negative consequences of misfit may also extend beyond the immediate work environment to external

stakeholders. For instance, employee dissatisfaction, poor performance, or attrition can compromise service quality and customer satisfaction, potentially eroding the company's market position and reputation.

Areas for future research

Research on workplace misfit is still in its infancy, and several critical questions demand our attention as we seek to deepen our understanding of this complex phenomenon. For instance, although PE fit theory posits that misfit is a rare occurrence, newer perspectives challenge the notion that misfit is an exceptional event. In fact, misfit as a temporary experience may be relatively common, and even employees who are generally well-suited for their organizations or jobs may occasionally experience misfit. Likewise, the ways in which individuals respond to misfit remain largely unexamined. Finally, there is emerging interest in exploring the potential positive dimensions of misfit, suggesting that misfit may also have a hidden bright side.

Experiencing misfit versus being a misfit

How prevalent is misfit? Clear numbers are currently lacking because most studies on misfit (e.g., Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013; Follmer et al., 2018) have been qualitative and designed specifically to probe the issue of misfit.

The prevailing assumption is that fit is the norm, while misfit is an anomaly. This stems from the fact that most fit models emphasize that individuals naturally gravitate towards fit through selection, socialization, or work adjustment. Misfit, in contrast, is viewed as a debilitating condition that individuals seek to avoid (Vleugels et al., 2023). Data does suggest that true misfits are rare in organizations, making up just 5% of the sample in a study by Vleugels et al. (2019). However, misfit as an experience seems far more widespread and common. In the same study, only 30% of respondents reported a consistent fit over time, while the majority experienced fluctuating levels of fit, occasionally dipping into misfit. Thus,

episodic experiences of misfit seem more prevalent than chronic conditions of misfit. This aligns with the idea that both individuals and work environments are dynamic, often requiring effort to maintain a stable fit. Additionally, interview studies (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013; Follmer et al., 2018) confirm that most, if not all, employees can easily relate to the topic of misfit, indicating that it is a widespread, albeit often temporary, experience.

Future research will need to distinguish between chronic and episodic misfit, exploring their distinct origins and implications for both individuals and organizations. For example, chronic misfit might arise from (a combination of) poorly designed HR processes, dysfunctional personality traits, or a lack of employability, potentially locking people into long-term misfit. Conversely, episodic misfit may result from naturally occurring variation in leadership styles, work demands, or group dynamics. Because of its temporary character, episodic misfit may also be associated with positive outcomes. More comprehensive studies in which misfit is repeatedly examined over time are needed to fully understand the different temporal manifestations (episodic vs. chronic) of misfit.

Responses to misfit

PE fit theory typically predicts that people who experience misfit will leave their job or organization to find better employment elsewhere (Vleugels et al., 2023). Indeed, misfit is often viewed as a debilitating condition, and it is hard to imagine why such a working relationship would continue. However, while the exact link between misfit and turnover is unclear, various meta-analyses indicate that the association between (poor) fit and turnover is much weaker than expected, suggesting that misfits do not necessarily leave. The reason is that misfits' labor market mobility is often limited by factors such as a poor employability, strong community ties, anticipated career costs, or, in the post covid-19 era, job insecurity and an uncertain economic climate (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Similarly, for organizations, budget constraints, high staffing costs, and talent shortages suggest that upskilling and realignment are

often more viable responses to misfit than replacement. Thus, because employees not always have the choice of leaving and organisations not always have the choice of replacing, a better understanding of how individuals respond to misfit is needed.

Qualitative research by Follmer and colleagues (2018) showed that reactions to experiences of misfit are diverse, involving a mix of resolution (e.g., adjustment), relief-seeking (e.g., surface-level behavior change), and resignation (e.g., distancing) strategies. This implies that changing jobs or leaving an organization is not employees' only, or even primary, response to misfit. Depending on the root cause of misfit, different responses may be more effective. For example, chronic misfit due to poor selection might necessitate a job or organizational change, but in many other cases the origin of misfit could maybe be resolved through work adjustments within the same environment. Some forms of episodic misfit may even dissolve naturally over time. Research is still in the early stages of understanding how individuals respond to misfit, and further study is needed to identify the most effective coping strategies for specific types of misfit.

The bright side of misfit

A relatively new idea that has recently emerged in the PE fit literature is that misfit may also have positive qualities. While the drawbacks of misfit are well-documented, this does not negate the possibility that there may also be upsides for the individual and the organization. For instance, at the individual level, employees may leverage misfit as a source of thriving, creativity, and personal growth. At the group and the organizational level, misfits may help counterbalance groupthink and alleviate the risks of inertia and organizational stagnation. As outliers in many possible respects, misfits may contribute a unique blend of attitudes, skills, behaviors, and cognitive styles that may prove to be invaluable for effective group processes and organizational innovation.

The bright side of misfit has an empirical basis also. For example, Follmer et al. (2018) noted that individuals can sometimes derive pride from their misfit. Additionally, van Vianen (2018) reported that while deficiency and excess misfit can be equally harmful, depending on the specific fit attribute under study, excess misfit can also be as beneficial as fit. This is because when certain environmental attributes are present in excess, they can be used to fulfill personal needs in a different domain (carryover) or in the same domain at a later point in time (conservation), both of which may benefit the employee (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999). Deficiency misfit may similarly offer benefits, particularly in areas related to creativity, initiative-taking, and personal development. For instance, the disruptive or “maverick” tendencies sometimes associated with individuals experiencing value conflict may lead to change-oriented behaviors in the workplace (Vleugels et al., 2019).

Thus, rather than dismissing stories of successful misfit as aberrations in our PE fit research, scholars should focus on exploring the positive qualities associated with misfit also. This bright side of misfit may be more likely to show when misfit is temporary as opposed to chronic. For instance, it has been proposed that misfit may be associated with eustress (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022), a type of stress that is positively linked to challenge and motivation, which may be beneficial in the short term but detrimental if chronic. Further exploration of how episodic and chronic misfit are tied to positive outcomes can provide valuable insights into the conditions under which misfit becomes an asset rather than a liability.

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