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RESEARCH NOTE

Person-organization fit reduces burnout via organizational trust: The moderating role of job crafting

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Abstract

Although PO fit has its origins in the work stress literature, existing research has failed to explain the stress-protective qualities of PO fit. In this research note, we aim to clarify the negative relationship between PO fit and exhaustion and cynicism, two key symptoms of burnout, using a three-wave panel lagged design ($N = 193$). Specifically, we argue that PO fit fosters a work environment that cultivates organizational trust, which, in turn, helps reduce symptoms of burnout. In addition, we suggest that job crafting towards interests and strengths makes PO fit more effective in containing burnout symptoms. Our results provide evidence for the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between PO fit and both exhaustion and cynicism symptoms of burnout. In addition, we find evidence that job crafting based on interests (but not strengths) influences the effectiveness of PO fit in reducing exhaustion (but not cynicism).

KEYWORDS

burnout, job crafting, person–organization fit, trust

INTRODUCTION

Person–organization (PO) fit refers to the congruence between individual and organizational work values (Vleugels, 2024), and has been linked to a wide range of beneficial employee outcomes, including reduced stress and improved well-being, enhanced organizational commitment and performance, and lowered turnover (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Much theorizing on PO fit places the concept within the context of job stress frameworks (Edwards, 2008), with (perceived)

Practitioner points

- Employees who feel well aligned in terms of values with their organization are less likely to experience burnout because they experience higher trust in their organization.
- Job crafting based on interests is most effective in reducing burnout when PO fit is experienced as high.
- Managers need to ensure employee-led job crafting initiatives take place in a context of high PO fit in order to increase their effectiveness in reducing burnout.

mis-alignment between employee and organizational values argued to be inherently impairing to employees (Deng et al., 2016). Although the entire PO fit literature is built around the idea that PO fit is protective and misfit is detrimental (Vleugels, 2024), the exact mechanism(s) through which PO fit protects individuals from burnout remain unclear, with previous research either exploring PO fit as a direct precursor to burnout only (Kilroy et al., 2017), or failing to find support for proposed mediating mechanisms (Tong et al., 2015). Furthermore, to the knowledge of the authors, the only multi-wave study exploring mediation mechanisms linking PO fit and burnout with time-separated data has failed to control for baseline levels of burnout (Tong et al., 2015), which limits the study's ability to clarify how PO fit impacts burnout.

In this research note, we aim to clarify the negative relationship between PO fit and burnout with a multi-wave study highlighting organizational trust as a key mediator, whilst controlling for baseline burnout. In addition, we argue that job crafting is likely to enhance the protective qualities of PO fit in relation to burnout. To test our hypotheses, we employ two mediation and moderation models, examining both exhaustion and cynicism as components of burnout, using a three-wave panel lagged design with a sample of 193 employees.

PO fit and burnout: organizational trust as a mediator

At the core of person–environment (PE) fit theory, which also serves as the theoretical foundation for person–organization (PO) fit, lies the principle that a strong alignment between individuals and their work environment leads to beneficial outcomes for both employees and the organization, whilst misfit results in negative consequences (Vleugels, 2024). In light of this, recent research has shown that PO fit enhances employee well-being (Mackey et al., 2017), whereas PO misfit undermines it (Deng et al., 2016). Research has specifically suggested that burnout may result as a direct outcome of the mismatch between people and their work environment in terms of values (Kilroy et al., 2017), because a lack of PO fit indicates a depletion of essential resources in employees' work situation, rendering their work experience simultaneously more exhausting and more depersonalizing. In line with previous work investigating the link between burnout and PO fit specifically (Kilroy et al., 2017), as well as the relationship between burnout and other organizational outcomes (Büssing & Glaser, 2000; Kilroy et al., 2016), we adopt a similar two-dimensional perspective of burnout in relation to PO fit, utilizing the cynicism conceptualization of depersonalization in addition to exhaustion.[1] Specifically, we predict the following:

[1]This definition is implied by previous meta-analytic (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010) and conceptual (Maslach et al., 2001) research, which identified the third original dimension of burnout, professional efficacy, as being less pertinent to the underlying burnout process.

Hypothesis 1. PO fit negatively predicts (a) exhaustion and (b) cynicism symptoms of burnout.

Building on the strong evidence from previous research demonstrating a negative relationship between PO fit and burnout symptoms, we argue that one important mediator of this relationship may be organizational trust. Organizational trust refers to a readiness to let oneself be vulnerable to another party in the expectation that there will be positive outcomes as a result of that vulnerability (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Previous research has established that organizational trust is commonly seen as one of the most proximal outcomes of PO fit (Edwards & Cable, 2009) and mediates the relationship between PO fit and behavioural and affective outcomes (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Kerse, 2021). Accordingly, we argue that organizational trust is a plausible, yet, thus far overlooked, mediator of the relationship between PO fit and burnout.

Research indicates that when individuals share similar values (i.e. experience PO fit), this facilitates open communication and sharing of ideas, fosters predictability through consistent and reliable behaviour, and strengthens emotional bonds based on care and benevolence. Together, these factors contribute to creating a fair, supportive, and secure work environment that nurtures organizational trust. In turn, the presence of organizational trust has been associated with reduced levels of exhaustion and cynicism (Bobbio et al., 2012). Conversely, in cases of PO misfit, employees are more likely to distrust their employer, leading them to approach company initiatives with significant scepticism and remain highly alert to potential conflicts in values and goals. This constant vigilance and experienced frustration can contribute to mental exhaustion and cynicism over time. As a result, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 2. The negative relationship between PO fit and (a) exhaustion and (b) cynicism is mediated by organizational trust.

Boundary conditions of the PO fit-burnout pathway: the moderating role of job crafting

Job crafting refers to the actions employees take to modify their roles, including physical and cognitive changes in task or relational boundaries (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and includes both strength-based job crafting (i.e. employees making self-initiated changes to the task and relational boundaries of their roles to utilize their strengths) and interest-based job crafting (i.e. employees reshaping their work to align with their identity, such as values and needs) (Kooij et al., 2017).

Whilst the job crafting model has been called upon extensively to theorize about relationships between person–job fit and work outcomes (Kooij et al., 2017), its application to PO fit and burnout represents a novel theoretical extension. Despite being a bottom-up, employee-led behaviour, job crafting necessarily occurs within a given organizational context defined by company values and goals (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). We, therefore, expect that job crafting focused on strengths and interests will moderate the relationship between PO fit and burnout as it enables employees to further integrate their key competencies and values into their daily work, which can foster a deeper sense of alignment and connection with the organization's values and goals whilst enhancing the stress-protective qualities of PO fit. This may reduce the likelihood of exhaustion and cynicism, particularly when PO fit is also high, as employees' job crafting efforts will be directed towards role changes that are prioritized and incentivized by the organization. Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 3. Job crafting towards (a) strengths and (b) interests moderates the negative relationship between PO fit and exhaustion such that this relationship will be more negative under higher levels of job crafting.

Hypothesis 4. Job crafting towards (a) strengths and (b) interests moderates the negative relationship between PO fit and cynicism such that this relationship will be more negative under higher levels of job crafting.

METHODS

Online surveys were sent by email to 254 Belgian individuals at three different points in time, with a lag of approximately 2–4 weeks in between each survey (response rates equal 75.98% on T0, 65.35% on T1, and 59.06% on T2).[2] For this study, a 2–4-week time lag between waves was chosen for methodological and theoretical reasons. Methodologically, we aimed to reduce common method bias by separating data collection waves and enhancing data independence. Theoretically, recent research examining burnout on a weekly basis (Bakker et al., 2023; Flaxman et al., 2023; Ybema et al., 2020) suggests that burnout exhibits greater temporal variation than previously thought (Dunford et al., 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2011), and that a 4-week lag specifically is sufficient to observe a pattern of accumulated unresolved stress cycles (Flaxman et al., 2023). Furthermore, prior research by Kooij et al. (2017) has demonstrated that job crafting interventions aligning work with strengths and interests can meaningfully change fit perceptions within this timeframe, further validating our chosen time lag.

A total of 193 individuals participated in the research and completed the baseline (T0) survey. Of these, 147 participants (86 female) primarily full-time (76.2%) workers from a range of industries (70.1% profit sector, 17.0% non-profit sector, and 12.9% government) responded to all surveys. Most (39.5%) had an executive/administrative role, whilst 35.4% were professional employees, and 25.2% held a management position. Of the respondents, 53.7% worked in organizations with 500+ employees, 18.4% in organizations with 200–499 employees, and 5.4% in those with 50–199 employees. The remainder worked in organizations with fewer than 50 employees.

PO fit was assessed at T0 with three items from Cable and DeRue (2002) ($\alpha = .93$). Organizational trust was assessed at T1 with 6 items ($\alpha = .90$) (Robinson, 1996). Burnout was measured with 9 items from the Utrecht Burnout Scale (UBOS) at both T0 and T2 (5 items assessing exhaustion, T0 $\alpha = .92$, T2 $\alpha = .91$, and 4 items assessing cynicism, T0 $\alpha = .85$, T2 $= .86$) (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 2000). Finally, job crafting was measured at T0 with 9 items (4 for strengths, $\alpha = .67$, and 5 for interests, $\alpha = .76$) (Kooij et al., 2017). PO fit, organizational trust, and burnout were all measured on a 7-point agreement scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), whilst job crafting was measured on a 7-point behavioural frequency scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*).

Analytical approach

We used a modified version of Model 5 from Hayes' Process Macro (Hayes, 2017), in which we regressed T0 PO fit on T2 exhaustion and cynicism in two separate models (Models 1 and 2 respectively, as depicted in Table 3). To test our hypotheses, we compared two interaction effects (T0 job crafting) alongside the mediation effect (T1 organizational trust), whilst controlling for T0 levels of exhaustion and cynicism (Figure 1). Given the macro employs listwise deletion for missing data, only individuals who completed all three surveys ($n = 147$) were included. All continuous independent variables, including both dimensions of burnout and job crafting, were grand mean-centred.

[2]The project was deemed to pose negligible risk to participants, and thus no formal ethics confirmation was required by the host university. Nevertheless, participants only completed the surveys if they agreed to a preliminary consent form outlining, amongst other aspects of the project, the confidentiality of the data.

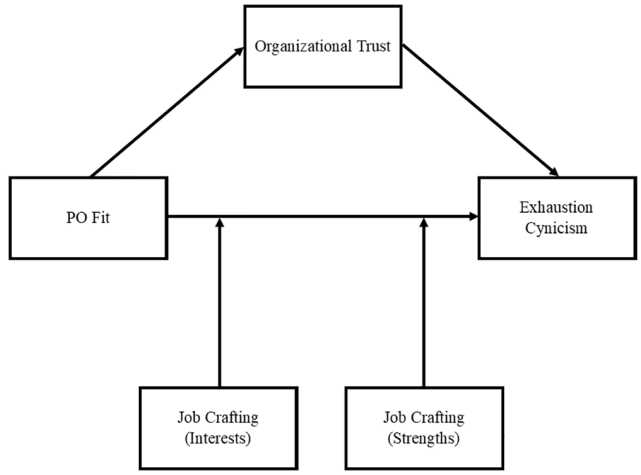

FIGURE 1 Burnout mediation and moderation pathways.

RESULTS

Variable means, standard deviations, correlations, and Cronbach's alpha item reliability statistics are presented in Table 1. An 8-factor model (CFI = .90, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .07) with separated constructs across each wave fitted the data better than a 5-factor model (CFI = .83, TLI = .81, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .09) in which job crafting and burnout sub-dimensions (i.e. strengths and interests, and exhaustion and cynicism) were combined. We additionally tested for weak, strong, and strict temporal measurement invariance to account for the multi-wave measurement of both exhaustion and cynicism to ensure that change in both was as a result of the hypothesized models rather than measurement error.

With respect to exhaustion across T0 and T2, there was a non-significant statistical difference between the unconstrained model and the equal factor loading model ($\Delta\chi^2 = .95$, df = 4, $p = .92$), the equal intercept model and the equal factor loading model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.35$, df = 4, $p = .17$) and finally also between the equal residual variance model and the equal intercept model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1.65$, df = 5, $p = .89$). With respect to cynicism across T0 and T2, there were also non-significant statistical differences between the unconstrained model and the equal factor loading model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1.14$, df = 3, $p = .77$), between the equal intercept model and the equal factor loading model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 2.74$, df = 3, $p = .43$) and between the equal residual variance model and the equal intercept model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 8.08$, df = 4, $p = .09$). Additional measurement invariance model fit statistics are presented in Table 2 (including ΔRMSEA, ΔCFI and ΔTLI statistics). These indicate acceptable and improving model fit statistics for unconstrained, equal loadings, equal intercepts, and equal residual variance longitudinal measurement invariance models for both exhaustion and cynicism (with the exception of the equal residual variance model for cynicism). We therefore conclude support for at least weak and strong temporal measurement invariance in both exhaustion and cynicism and proceed to test our hypotheses.

Results for hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3. We found a significant negative relationship between both PO fit at T0 and exhaustion at T2 ($B = -.18$, $p < .05$) and also PO fit at T0 and cynicism at T2 ($B = -.20$, $p < .05$). We therefore found support for Hypotheses 1a and 1b across both Models 1 and 2, respectively. Given evidence for both these direct effects and for a relationship between PO fit and the mediator, organizational trust, in both Model 1 ($B = .41$, $p < .001$) and Model 2 ($B = .30$, $p < .001$), we proceeded to test for an indirect mediation effect. The indirect effect of PO fit on exhaustion through organizational trust was −.09. Furthermore, the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval around the indirect effect supported partial mediation given it did not contain zero (95% CI [−.16, −.02], 5000

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlation matrix.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. PO Fit T0	5.07	1.31	(.93)															
2. Exhaustion T0	2.88	1.46	−.43***	(.92)														
3. Cynicism T0	3.03	1.52	−.57***	.70***	(.85)													
4. JC-S T0	4.97	.94	.26**	−.01	−.11	(.67)												
5. JC-I T0	4.13	1.11	.22**	−.05	−.15	.57***	(.76)											
6. Trust T1	4.83	1.24	.56***	−.46***	−.58***	.06	.14	(.90)										
7. Exhaustion T2	3.24	1.43	−.46***	.67***	.59***	−.15	−.18*	−.48***	(.91)									
8. Cynicism T2	3.19	1.46	−.57***	.54***	.79***	−.09	−.13	−.57***	.70***	(.86)								
9. Pos. Type D1	–	–	−.31***	.30***	.24**	−.15	−.30***	−.29***	.35***	.21*	–							
10. Pos. Type D2	–	–	.17*	.02	−.03	.08	.12	.03	−.06	−.02	−.60***	–						
11. Pos. Type D3	–	–	.17*	−.36***	−.24**	.09	.21*	.30***	−.33***	−.21**	−.47***	−.43***	–					
12. Org. Size D1	–	–	−.01	.12	.05	−.08	.00	.02	.19*	.13	.08	−.06	−.02	–				
13. Org. Size D2	–	–	−.02	−.07	−.06	−.04	−.12	.17*	.08	−.01	.07	−.14	.08	−.09	–			
14. Org. Size D3	–	–	−.04	.06	.09	.09	.06	−.10	−.05	.06	−.01	.07	−.07	−.05	−.12	–		
15. Org. Size D4	–	–	.09	.07	.10	.01	.08	.01	.05	.10	−.13	.20*	−.07	−.09	−.23**	−.11	–	
16. Org. Size D5	–	–	−.04	−.07	−.08	.02	.00	−.10	−.15	−.14	.02	−.06	.04	−.20*	−.52***	−.26**	−.51***	–

Note: $n = 147$.

Abbreviations: JC-I, job crafting interests; JC-S, job crafting strengths; Org. Size D1, <10 employees; Org. Size D2, 10–49 employees; Org. Size D3, 50–199 employees; Org. Size D4, 200–499 employees; Org. Size D5, 500+ employees; Pos. Type D1, executive/administrative role; Pos. Type D2, professional role; Pos. Type D3, management role.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Longitudinal measurement invariance tests.

Model	χ^2	*Df*	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2$	ΔRMSEA	ΔCFI	ΔTLI
Cynicism									
Unconstrained	104.68	19	.18	.88	.83				
Equal loadings	105.82	22	.16	.89	.85	1.14	−.02	.01	.02
Equal intercepts	108.56	25	.15	.89	.87	2.74	−.01	.00	.02
Equal residual variance	116.64	29	.14	.88	.88	8.08	−.01	−.01	.01
Exhaustion									
Unconstrained	82.92	34	.10	.96	.94				
Equal loadings	83.87	38	.09	.96	.95	.95	−.01	.00	.01
Equal intercepts	90.22	42	.09	.96	.95	6.35	.00	.00	.00
Equal residual variance	91.87	47	.08	.96	.96	1.65	−.01	.00	.01

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index.

TABLE 3 Mediation and moderation model results.

	Trust T1 (model 1)		Exhaustion T2		Trust T1 (model 2)		Cynicism T2	
	B	SE	*B*	SE	*B*	SE	*B*	SE
PO Fit T0	.41***	.07	−.18*	.08	.30***	.07	−.20*	.08
JC-I T0			−.03	.09			−.02	.08
JC-S T0			−.12	.10			.06	.10
PO Fit × JC-I T0			−.17**	.07			−.08	.06
PO Fit × JC-S T0			−.06	.07			−.01	.07
Exhaustion T0	−.18**	.07	.47***	.07				
Cynicism T0					−.28***	.06	.59***	.06
Trust T1			−.22**	.08			−.18*	.08
Org. Size D1	.51	.45	.91*	.44	.45	.43	.94*	.41
Org. Size D2	.51*	.21	.51*	.21	.50*	.21	.29	.20
Org. Size D3	−.22	.36	−.30	.35	−.13	.35	.05	.33
Org. Size D4	.07	.22	.22	.21	.16	.22	.29	.20
Pos. Type D1	−.45*	.22	.37	.23	−.50*	.21	−.06	.21
Pos. Type D2	−.31	.22	.17	.22	−.35	.21	.05	.20
Constant	.17	.18	2.96***	.18	.19	.17	3.08***	.17

Note: $n = 147$.

Abbreviations: JC-I, job crafting interests; JC-S, job crafting strengths; Org. Size D1, <10 employees; Org. Size D2, 10–49 employees; Org. Size D3, 50–199 employees; Org. Size D4, 200–499 employees; Pos. Type D1, executive/administrative role; Pos. Type D2, professional role.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

bootstrap resamples). The indirect effect of PO fit on cynicism through organizational trust was −.05, and the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval around the indirect effect again supported partial mediation given it did not contain zero (95% CI [−.11, −.01], 5000 bootstrap resamples). We therefore found support for Hypothesis 2a and 2b across both Models 1 and 2, respectively.

In relation to Model 1, the interaction term between PO fit and job crafting towards strengths (JC-S) was non-significant ($B = -.06$, $p = .42$). However, the interaction term between PO fit and job crafting towards interests (JC-I) was significant ($B = -.17$, $p < .01$). To aid interpretation, we created a Johnson–Neyman plot (Figure 2) to examine the 95% confidence interval bounded region of significance for the

interaction between PO fit and JC-I. From Figure 2, the relationship between PO fit and exhaustion became significant and negative from the point at which centred values of JC-I were −.13 or greater (as indicated by the blue dashed line). We therefore tested for simple slopes at 1 SD above and below the mean of JC-I (equating to the values of 1.11 and −1.11, respectively, from Figure 2) and plotted the results in Figure 3. There was a negative relationship between PO fit at T0 and exhaustion at T2 for individuals with high levels of T0 JC-I ($B = -.37$, $p < .01$). There was no significant relationship between PO fit at T0 and exhaustion at T2 for those with low levels of T0 JC-I ($B = .01$, $p = .93$). We therefore found support for Hypothesis 3b, but not 3a, in relation to Model 1. With respect to Model 2, neither the interaction between PO fit and JC-S at T0 ($B = -.01$, $p = .87$) nor the one between PO fit and JC-I at

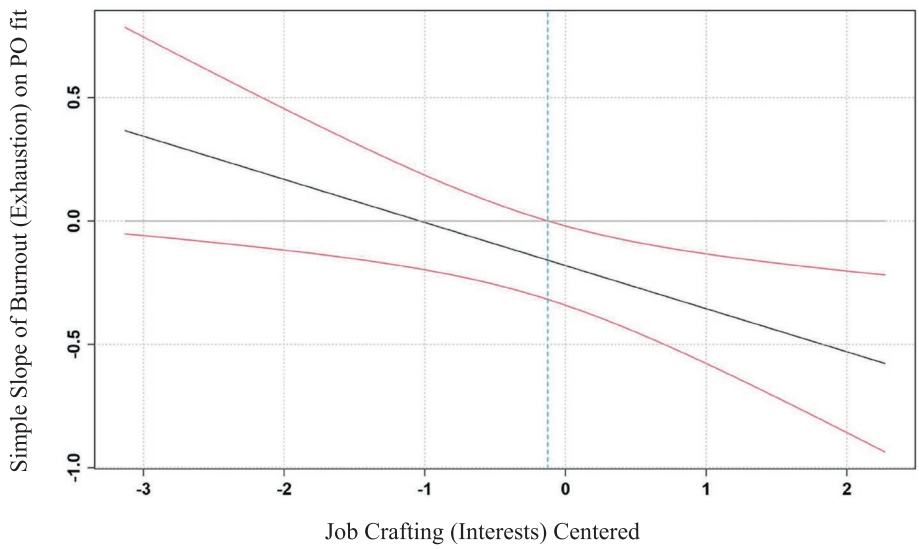

FIGURE 2 Johnson–Neyman plot of the region of significance in the interaction between PO fit and job crafting (Interests).

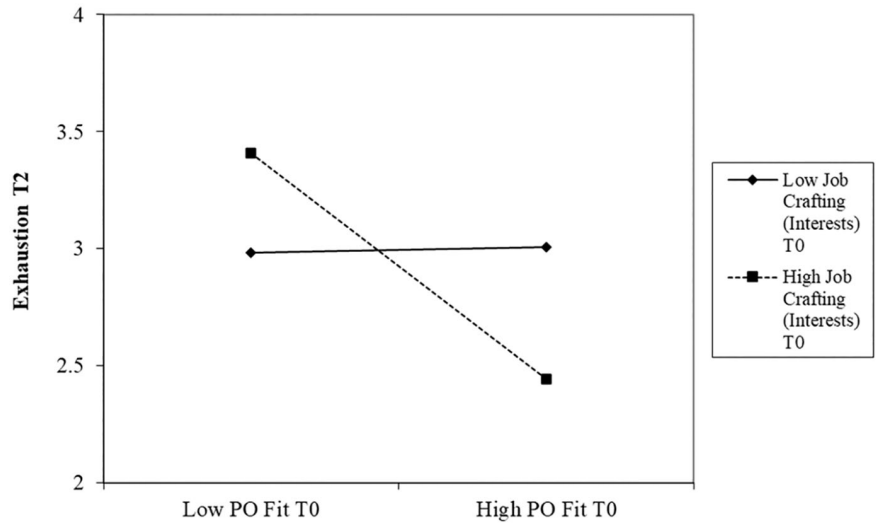

FIGURE 3 Simple slopes interaction between PO fit and job crafting (Interests).

T0 ($B = -.08$, $p = .22$) significantly predicted cynicism at T2. We therefore found no support for either Hypothesis 4a or 4b in Model 2.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study is the first to identify a significant mediator, in the form of organizational trust, for the negative relationship between PO fit and exhaustion and cynicism symptoms of burnout. This suggests that PO fit plays a key role in reducing burnout because it promotes organizational trust, which is vital for contributing to a supportive relationship between employees and their organization. Additionally, our study also advances job crafting theory through our finding that JC-I enhances the negative relationship between PO fit and exhaustion symptoms of burnout specifically, with the lowest exhaustion levels observed when both PO fit and JC-I are high (Figure 3). This supports our argument that JC-I reinforces the stress-protecting qualities of PO fit. Moreover, the fact that exhaustion and cynicism were affected differently by the interaction between PO fit and job crafting further supports our approach in treating both constructs as conceptually distinct symptoms of burnout.

Interestingly, Figure 3 reveals that whilst exhaustion levels show little difference when JC-I is low, regardless of whether PO fit is high or low, exhaustion is highest when JC-I is high and PO fit is low. This suggests that JC-I may backfire if employees do not feel aligned with the organization's values and goals. In such cases, job crafting may be driven by self-interest, potentially undermining organizational goals. For example, if an employee redefines his/her role based on personal interests, but the organization disincentivizes these efforts, it may further increase exhaustion. Finally, the significant moderation of PO fit with crafting towards interests, but not strengths, may be explained by the fact that interest-based job crafting involves employees reshaping their work to align with core aspects of their identity, such as values and personal goals, thereby naturally reinforcing their perceived PO fit. In contrast, strengths crafting may be more related to competencies and skills, which are more directly associated with person-job fit (Kooij et al., 2017).

Practically, this study underscores the necessity of aligning bottom-up job redesign initiatives, such as job crafting, with top-down HR practices that align individual interests, values, and goals with the organization's culture, such as seeking PO fit. To avoid undesired outcomes later in the employment process, organizations should ensure that prospective employees' interests and identities align with the organization's values and culture, especially if proactive behaviours such as job crafting are expected or encouraged.

In building on our findings, future research could consider incorporating more comprehensive temporal designs that can credibly rule out alternative theoretical models (e.g. reverse causality) and distinguish between-person and within-person variation in PO fit and burnout. Such approaches should consider the measurement of independent, mediator, and dependent variables at each time point, and the use of more sophisticated analytical approaches such as the random intercepts cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM) to adequately decompose between-person and within-person variation (Hamaker et al., 2015).[3] This would enable researchers to make even stronger causal claims about whether changes in burnout are truly driven by changes in PO fit and organizational trust.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Huw Flatau-Harrison: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; validation; investigation. **Wouter Vleugels:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; data curation; methodology; project administration. **Rein De Cooman:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; data curation; methodology; project administration.

[3]We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this opportunity for future research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

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