

# Keeping fit

**Danielle Talbot, Brenda Hollyoak and Jon Billsberry**

explain that there is more to fitting in than matching the employee with the organisational culture

**I**n the July issue of *TJ*, Anita Weyland noted that it is important to think of how employees fit with the organisational culture<sup>1</sup>. She outlined a number of steps that managers can take to improve the chances of recruiting people who fit and lessen the chances of good people leaving.

But we think there is more to fit than how people fit with the culture of the organisation. In this article, we look at what else is at play and how the latest research into person-environment-fit can inform managers.

Over the past 30 years there has been a growing body of research into how and why organisations and people fit together. Drawing on interactional psychology, which proposes that people's behaviour is influenced by their inherent traits, personalities and environment, person-environment-fit research has found that the way we fit with our organisations has a large influence on our behaviour at work. In particular, people who fit well at work are more committed, have higher job satisfaction and are less likely to leave.

However, recent research has shown that how we fit at work isn't straightforward. In addition to their fit with the culture, people also fit with multiple aspects of the organisation. For example, they also have an element of fit with their jobs, the culture of their team or department, the pace of work and, crucially, the people with which they work and interact.

So, at an organisational level, people may have a fit with their employer's values or culture. For example, Oxfam's strong emphasis on respect for human rights is liable to attract individuals who have similar values and recruiting someone with these values is likely to result in high person-organisation fit. But these same people will also have elements of fit with their colleagues, their jobs, the expectations on the individual worker, the level of bureaucracy and so on and so forth.

The point here is that, while people do indeed

fit in with the culture of the organisation, this is just one element of their fit, which spans many different features of the working environment.

The people we work with are important in our fit perceptions but so too are the job itself and our chosen career. Holland, in his 1973 theory of vocational choice, suggested that people's personality types, upbringing, preferences and experience affect their career choice and that they tend to want to work with like-minded others<sup>2</sup>. Artistic people will look for artistic jobs and conventional people will choose down-to-earth jobs, for example.

Matching a person's personality to the general personality type in a vocation has been accepted practice for many years and, when we consider how people fit their jobs, we recognise that individuals' skills, knowledge and abilities need to meet the job requirements. Person specifications are used in recruitment and selection to this end; the goal being to find people who have the right combination of knowledge and skills to perform well in the jobs that we want to fill.

As a result, person-organisation, person-group, person-supervisor, person-job and person-vocation fit all contribute to how we fit at work and have an impact on affective outcomes such as job satisfaction.

In all of these cases, fit is achieved when the person and the working environment match. In reality, however, it is unlikely that we ever find a perfect match. An applicant may have strong experience but may be lacking professional qualifications, for example. We aim to address these gaps through training and development interventions. When we think of the new employee in relation to the team in which they will be working, it can be the case that we don't want to find someone who is similar to the other team members but one who complements them and fills a gap that exists. For example, in a strongly creative team, it may be necessary to bring in a person who is strong on financial skills.



Fit is, therefore, not simply about matching the person and the organisational environment and ensuring a direct match; it is also necessary to consider how one complements the other. Does the work environment meet the individual's needs? Does the individual meet the organisation's needs? In this case, the new recruit is the missing part of the jigsaw that completes the picture.

The fit between the individual and the organisation would be fairly straightforward to assess if both parties stayed the same, however both change over time. A school leaver or recent graduate may be particularly focused on choosing the vocation that fits them while those of us who have worked for some time may be focused on how we fit socially with our teams and immediate colleagues. Individuals change as they gain experience and skills but organisations, also, are constantly adapting to the ever-changing local market place and global business environment. Individuals, organisations and industries do not develop and change at the same pace, so how they fit with each other is constantly in tension.

Many organisations' recruitment and development activities are specifically targeted at enhancing employees' organisational fit. Companies' websites and brochures emphasise their culture, personality and values and, together with the job description and person specification, what the job requirements are and what will be supplied in return. Selection tools and techniques are used to assess whether applicants have the knowledge, skills and abilities required for the

job, the motivation to work in the team and the drive to meet the company's goals. When the successful candidates start work, we meet and greet them and give them an induction to help them get to grips with the new working environment. Co-workers will tell them what it's really like to work around here, who they should watch out for, who makes the tea and what the unwritten rules and norms are. During employment, employees are appraised, their development needs are noted and gaps are addressed.

Taking these steps helps people and organisations fit together well. But is it necessarily a good thing that we attract people who fit in?

Schneider<sup>3</sup> noted that people with similar values and personalities are drawn together and are attracted to similar companies, which leads to organisations becoming increasingly homogenous. He speculated that, although it can be comfortable for people to work with colleagues who are similar in terms of personality or values, it can ultimately result in group think, a lack of creativity and an inability to adapt to the changing organisational environment.

If it is indeed the case that having people with similar values and personalities can stifle change, it may ultimately be in an organisation's interest to recruit people with a different worldview, who will question the status quo and rock the boat. Recruiting for this type of misfit may therefore help organisations adapt and survive, especially in times of economic turbulence and change.

## References

- 1 <http://bit.ly/qJs7YU>
- 2 Holland J L *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Careers* Prentice Hall (1973)
- 3 Schneider B "The People Make the Place" *Personnel Psychology* 40(3), 437-453 (1987)





We understand relatively little about organisational misfit at present but the research data that we do have shows that it has negative outcomes, particularly for the misfits themselves. When people misfit with organisations, they experience stress and are likely to want to leave. Those who can't leave, because there are few opportunities in the job market or because they lack the skills or qualifications to secure a different job, may find that they are trapped.

### Employees in this situation tend to take one of five routes:

- 1 They pretend that they fit in by putting up a façade
- 2 They may be passive and suffer in silence
- 3 They may express their dissatisfaction, for example by raising complaints or being disruptive
- 4 They may try to change the workplace to suit them
- 5 They carve out a specialised niche.

The last option – carving out a specialised niche – is more common than may be thought. Most of us don't carry out every aspect of our job description and emphasise some tasks or roles more while others are dropped, delegated or taken on by someone else. Misfits are not necessarily easy to spot, therefore, as they may be quietly waiting for the chance to escape or may have carved out a role in which they have managed to remove those elements of the working environment with which they misfit.

L&D professionals appreciate that individuals need to develop continually in order to perform

well in their current roles or to prepare for career progression. As employees are educated, trained and developed, they are changing and their fit with the organisation is being affected. This may be positive – as would be the case if someone was gaining new skills to equip them for their job – but it could also be negative. For example, if the organisation was seeking to affect cultural change or making significant changes such as restructuring, the shift in values, whether perceived or actual, may lead employees to re-evaluate their fit.

However, development activities are not the only reason why someone will re-appraise his organisational fit. Research from the United States suggests that shocks or triggers, which can be positive or negative, lead individuals to consider how well they fit<sup>4</sup>. These may originate within, or outside of, the organisation. For example, if a friend decides to make a career change, it may make you reflect on whether you are in the right career or job yourself. Within the organisation, major events such as redundancies, restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, and the appointment of a new CEO are prime trigger events that will prompt employees to consider their organisational fit.

Smaller changes can have the same effect, however, so that a new person joining a team, the withdrawal of facilities or changing the day-to-day office routine can cause people to re-evaluate their fit. A UK study suggested that a manager leaving a team and a new one joining had a high likelihood to trigger misfit perceptions in the team<sup>5</sup>.

The ways in which people fit and misfit in organisations is, therefore, far from simple. What managers need to bear in mind is that fit is multidimensional, encompassing the organisation, the team, the job, our vocation, the supervisor and our colleagues. The fit with these different facets of the organisation are all-important but some will be more or less salient depending on our life and career stage.

Just because individuals fit well, does not mean that they will necessarily continue to fit well: as the individual changes and develops, and the organisation moves to stay ahead of the competition, the fit between the two parties flexes.

As educators and developers, we endeavour to anticipate these changes and to develop individuals so that they can keep pace without being triggered into misfit. **TJ**

## *While people do indeed fit in with the culture of the organisation, this is just one element of fit*

### References

- 4 Wheeler A R, Coleman-Gallagher V, Brouer R L, Sablynski C J "When Person-Organization (Mis) Fit and (Dis)Satisfaction Lead to Turnover: The Moderating Role of Perceived Job Mobility" *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(2), 203-219 (2007)
- 5 Talbot D L, Billsberry J "Perceptions of Fit and Misfit: An In-Depth Study of Similarities and Differences"; presented at the Academy of Management Annual Conference, San Antonio, Texas (2011)

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