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A Social Network Approach to Flexing the Environment in Organizational Fit

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Abstract

This developmental paper looks at how organizational fit has been assessed, principally, from the perspective of the individual person (P). It goes on to suggest that the influence of the environment (E) – through the development of informal social networks may be more salient to individuals in the workplace and have greater influence for those individuals over outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The paper suggests that it may be that individuals form social networks outside of the usual organizational constraints/structures of, for example, the geographic location of where the employee works. This paper contends that value congruence amongst disparate individuals in the workplace may be the basis for developing a social network. If so, this would suggest that it could be environmental factors which encourage or discourage the formation of informal social networks which may be more salient to individuals in the workplace over and above any sense of organizational fit. Finally, the paper suggests how the hypothesis might be tested.

For most individuals, the working environment revolves around interacting with colleagues and those interactions are likely to influence and affect behavior and outcomes. Lewin, almost 80 years ago, argued that behavior was a function of the individual interacting with his/her environment (Lewin, 1935). Academics working in the field of organizational fit have taken this idea to show how individuals might fit with various aspects of the working environment (see Kristof for a comprehensive meta-analysis of the various conceptualizations of fit (Kristof, 1996)). Essentially, organizational fit is usually assessed through some form of measure which looks at how the individual person (P) interacts with various factors/constructs. For example, a person could fit with their supervisor (P-S fit), their job (P-J fit), their group/team (P-G fit), their organization (P-O fit) and so on. In fact even if there was no apparent fit, a notion of complementary fit was put forward by Muchinsky and Monahan (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987) i.e. an individual who failed to fit through these other forms of fit are likely to bring other skills/attributes which complement the organization and therefore, they (the individuals) would still enjoy a degree of organizational fit.

Fit has, historically, been assessed from an individual's perspective (i.e. how does that individual fit with various factors) (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Chatman, 1991; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) based on a premise put forward by Schneider (Schneider, 1987). He suggested that individuals and organizations had a mutual attraction, when both parties were looking for employment and employees,

respectively) and that if this attractive quality failed in any way (after an individual had joined an organization) then that individual would feel a sense of misfit and leave the organization. The implication here is that if there is good fit between the individual and organization then beneficial outcomes such as increased job satisfaction and higher organizational commitment are more likely.

The difficulties, however, in identifying organizational fit (and, subsequently, which of the fit constructs has greater influence for an individual) has been problematic in the field. As Rynes and Gerhart suggest, organizational fit “continues to elude precise, consistent definition” (pg 14, Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). They go on to suggest that fit covers everything from an individual’s fit with an organization’s strategies, culture, norms and values through to how best an individual’s knowledge, skills and abilities meet specific job requirements.

So, not only is there a difficulty in identifying precisely what is organizational fit but also that it has been operationalized as the extent to which an individual fits with an aggregate of all the individuals in a workplace (typically) (Chatman, 1989; Edwards & Cable, 2009) and therefore assumed a level of fit, or otherwise, based merely on this correlation. This approach, however, fails to acknowledge the fact that there may be individuals who do not ‘fit’ yet, in disagreement with Schneider, still remain in the organization. It might be that an individual may fit on one level e.g. vocation, but fails to fit on other aspects such as the group that s/he has to work with.

In many respects – in spite of Schneider’s argument – once an individual enters an organization, that person is unlikely to be able to influence certain aspects of the working environment such as where they sit, who they work with and so on. The individual can, though, exercise some degree of choice over the social network (and in particular the informal social network i.e. the network which is based on friendship rather than a formal working relationship) to which they belong. Early research into social networks identified that, as individuals, we are attracted to certain people rather than others – what Moreno called a ‘*law of social gravity*’ (Heider, 1946; Moreno, 1934).

In the late 1970’s Lincoln and Miller attempted to identify the common attributes amongst individuals in social networks at work (Lincoln & Miller, 1979). The attributes they focused on were regarding individuals’ authority (what Lincoln and Miller refer to as ‘formal organizational position’), sex, race, education and branch assignment. They found little decisive support for their hypotheses – most interestingly not only did they not find support for primary (friendship) ties based on individuals’ having similar attributes (pg 193) but they also found that friendship networks were actually more likely to develop between individuals in different branches (i.e. where individuals worked on different sites and had less face-to-face interaction) (pg 190-191). These findings would suggest, though, that individuals may not be forming friendship networks based on the attributes tested in this study but could be forming them on other bases. Whilst there may be a wide array of possibilities for the formation of informal networks the fact that they appear to span the wider organization and across sex, race, education etc, might suggest there may be a more fundamental ‘social glue’ which influences the situation. This commonality could be something such as, for example, value congruence between individuals (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) rather than something which is perhaps of

a more individual nature between specific dyadic relationships (e.g. common hobbies, children at the same school etc).

Taking the idea further, Johnson-Cramer et al found that individuals who had closer cultural values were more likely to form informal social networks (albeit, in their study the cultural values were based around vocational cultural values rather than more generic values) (Johnson-Cramer, Parise, & Cross, 2007).

So, rather than value congruence being a means of identifying organizational fit (as Kristof-Brown and Chatman et al might suggest), this might be more appropriately used as a means to identify informal social networks (and workplace outcomes for individuals). In effect, it is the environment which individuals operate in which may have a greater influence in how, firstly, they develop informal social networks which, subsequently, affect outcomes.

So, if informal social networks were being established it would seem there must be a basis on which these friendships developed (unless they are entirely random, of course). A possibility, therefore, is that the establishment of informal networks may be based on similarities in individuals. A potentially relevant attribute which has not yet been tested being that individuals with similar generic values are more likely to form informal social networks than those who have differing values.

H1 – Where individuals share similar values the greater the likelihood that they will develop informal social networks with colleagues in the organization.

Given that values are relatively stable over time (Dose, 1997) and does not correspond to a specific object or situation (Rokeach, 1973) would suggest that individuals with sharing value congruence are not only likely to establish a social network but, over time, may come to have even more aligned value sets. In effect, the environment is affecting and being affected by the interaction of the actors in their social networks, albeit in a workplace setting.

In order to test the hypothesis, it is proposed to carry out a full-roster approach (as advocated by Brass and Marsden (Labianca & Brass, 2006; Marsden, 1990)) in order to define the informal social network in an SME. (How to operationalize this is currently being developed and will be included in an update of the paper and when presented – should it be accepted).

In terms of identifying individuals' values, the chosen method is using Schwartz's Values Survey instrument (Schwartz, 1992). Other instruments were considered however, the Schwartz tool captures broader values than just work values in tools such as Cable and Edwards, and Ravlin and Meglino (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Edwards & Cable, 2009; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1992; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). In fact the Cable and Edwards tool was itself based on Schwartz's model of human values. Ravlin and Meglino used their Comparative Emphasis Scale (CES) which only measured 4 work values. Both of these tools were perceived to be inappropriate in that the proposed research is investigating informal social networks (albeit based in the workplace) and so a broader conceptualization of values (than just work values) was deemed to be necessary.

The Schwartz model is based on the Rokeach Value Survey ((Rokeach, 1973) which incorporate the five core aspects of values which recur in the literature where values ;

1. are concepts or beliefs
2. pertain to desirable end states or behaviors
3. transcend specific situations
4. guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events
5. are ordered by relative importance (pg 3-4, Schwartz, 1992)

Measuring the extent to which individual's values are congruent with others in their informal social network will be carried out (although again, the precise details of this will be developed in due course although a regression analysis seems most appropriate). Respondents will also be asked about their level of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and tenure (as well, of course, job role, gender, age etc).

Should the findings suggest that the establishment of an informal social network at work is linked to value congruence and subsequent behavior and outcomes for individuals this would imply that the environment (E) would, indeed, have a defining impact for individuals and how they fit, in a working environment. In so doing, this could have major implications both for organizations and individuals, in the workplace, for example, with regard to the socialization process for new employees.

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