Placing The People Makes The Place: The effect of employees' place of work and their organizational fit in The Open University.

Stephen G. Godrich
Open University Business School

Abstract

This paper looks at where people work, in relation to an organization's central (head) office, and its effect on levels of organizational fit. It will suggest that organizational fit may be reduced according to whether employees work in the head office, regional offices or are home-anchored. The question as to the extent to which regional and/or home-anchored employees still have some degree of fit (and possible reasons for this) or regionality becomes a safe haven for misfits (and the implications of this) will also be considered.

The paper considers and questions, in the light of ASA theory, whether misfits are likely to leave or, indeed, in a regional or home-anchored situation, may become centres for organizational learning/innovation and/or resistance. It goes on to suggest a means for testing the hypotheses with a study of employees at the Open University.

Background

With regard to fit, much of the research appears to consider and define aspects of fit with the organization as well as with work-colleagues, aspects of the job and the wider environment (Kristof, 1996; Billsberry et al, 2005; Kristof-Brown et al, 2005). Relatively little work has been carried out which assesses the influence of particular factors in terms of their effect on fit. With so many employees in any particular organization now working in a variety of workplaces, it seems appropriate to test whether organizational fit can be assumed to be uniform across distance and differing workplace scenarios. Few studies have looked at the effect on fit of employee distance from head office although Denton and Peay (1999) found there to be some support of Schneider's (1987) homogeneity hypothesis when studying retail bookstore managers.

Influence of geographical distance employees work from their head office

Much literature appears to assume that people either fit or they misfit. Indeed, Schneider's seminal work regarding Attraction-Selection-Attrition (Schneider, 1987) suggests that those employees who do not fit (misfits) will leave an organization leading to an ever-increasing degree of homogeneity amongst those remaining.

What has received less attention is that employees may have differing levels of fit which may be influenced by where they work, although Cooper-Thomas (2008) suggests there may be areas of fit, borderline fit and misfit which fluctuate (particularly with regard to new employees in an organization). There may well be

many people who have borderline fit or, even, misfit and this is, perhaps, more likely in a scenario where the organizational norms and values are less likely to be reinforced i.e. in regional offices or for those home-anchored employees.

> *Proposition 1: The level of organizational fit with the organization's norms and values will decline the further away from the influence of a main office an employee works.*

'Localness' as a fit factor

The lack of fit with the overall organization for those outside of the head office may be disguised by employees having a strong sub-group fit with the values and norms of the organization at a local level. Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006, pg 201) endorsed this view, particularly with regard to large bureaucratic organisations, going on to suggest that "These subgroups are likely to have more meaning to individual employees" hence fit will be stronger with these groups than with the organization as a whole. They also make the point that good fit with a key part of the environment may compensate for a lack of overall organizational fit.

Regional employees, thus, may still exhibit high levels of fit with their local environment. The paper will discuss the implications of this – fit drift – the idea that employees working away from the main office may exhibit lower levels of fit with the organisation but close fit at a local level where differing norms and values might prevail. It will consider whether local fit should be a sub-division in its own right.

> *Proposition 2: Fit for those employees working away from the main office may still exhibit organizational fit but pertaining to local interpretations of the organization's norms and values.*

Misfit and implications in geographically dispersed workforce

Judge (2007) queries the ASA model suggesting it fails to consider the question of what happens to those employees who may not fit yet other forces prevent them from leaving. Sekiguchi et al. (2008) suggest that individuals with more restraining forces (such as maintaining lifestyle, social networks and the like) will be more embedded in a job and, hence, less likely to leave that job whether they fit in with the organization or not. This factor may be more prevalent in a regional office situation or with home-anchored workers were personal fit factors (and high job embeddedness) lead to lower turnover than expected with those that exhibit a lower degree of fit with the organization.

Billsberry et al (2008) present evidence that suggest that misfits become centres of rebellion. Rebellion, though, can be seen as both positive (as driving organizational learning and innovation) and negative (as institutionalized resistance) factor. I define organizational rebellion as collective and/or individual acts of workplace disruption which can include both innovation (change) and resistance (to change). The clear implication is that it will be misfits who will be most likely to take up this rebellious attitude.

Coldwell et al (2008) suggests that misfits may be tolerated so long as the mismatch is minor. Lyons et al (2007) suggest that a degree of misfit is desirable to drive

innovation. They argue that in organizations where "organizational norms are strong, people will adopt the dominant perspective and potential dissenters who may provide alternative perspectives will refrain from voicing their opinion" (pg 180). Levinthal and March (1993) suggest that "Solutions to problems are localized to the domain of the problems as defined organizationally" (pg 99). They argue that organizational learning is bounded by local environments. Localness (or regionality) is likely to lead to local learning which, in turn, reinforces apparent misfit from head office to regional employees.

This might be perceived as a positive aspect of retaining misfitting employees. It would, perhaps, be in the best interests of organizations to actively marginalise such misfits in regional offices or as home-anchored workers. Leaving misfits in perceived backwaters would enable organizations to gain the benefit of organizational learning and innovation whilst minimizing the risk from rebellion (which might threaten the organizations fundamental norms, beliefs and values). Whilst it may, therefore, be in organizations' interests to keep misfits in the organization, it might be worth doing so at a distance.

There may also be, what Agocs (1997) calls, institutionalized resistance (as a form of rebellion) from misfitting non-head office employees. She defines institutionalised resistance as "a pattern of organizational behaviour…to actively deny, reject, refuse to implement, repress or even dismantle change proposals and initiatives" (pg 918). This resistance is likely to be more prevalent from employees who have fewer interactions with head office employees (as keepers of the organization's values) and either misfit with the organization as a whole or exhibit closer fit with their local colleagues.

> *Proposition 3: Innovation, organizational learning and resistance to head office change initiatives is an attitude more likely to be a prevalent in misfitting employees working away from an organization's main office.*

Methodology

The discussion has avoided opening up the debate about measuring fit. The debate rages on (Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987; Bretz and Judge, 1994; Harrison, 2007). The real issue is in terms of defining key differences between main office, regional and home-anchored workers and when a worker can be considered to fall into one category or another.

The study will look at a large organization (The Open University) to provide the data. The Open University is considered a particularly appropriate organization to study given it has a head office and supporting regional structure. It also has a significant number of employees who might be considered home-anchored workers.

The research will utilise longitudinal data from whole-of-organization Staff Surveys – 2 data sets from 2008 and 2009 - which will test for degrees of fit using published measures including organization-based self-esteem, trust, commitment and job satisfaction. This survey, unfortunately, is designed to assess overall levels of organizational fit. Further research will be carried out to determine levels of fit with

regard to regional versus organizational fit and the degree of rebellion exhibited by head-office, regional and home-anchored employees.

Conclusion

There are many issues regarding the effect on fit of the distance employees work from the main office – this paper offers tentative theories as to understand the situation and the implications for organizations. Clearly, though, this is an area of fit research which is worthy of further investigation by researchers.

The ASA model goes so far in terms of explaining fit but fails to explore the reasons why some misfits (including borderline fit) stay.

This paper offers some proposals to test propositions which will address this void.

It may well be that, ultimately, it may be where people work that makes the place as much as the place (organization) itself.

References

Agocs C. (1997). Institutionalized Resistance to Organizational Change: Denial, Inaction and Repression. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **16**, pp 917-931

Billsberry J., V.Ambrosini, J.Moss-Jones, P.Marsh (2005). Some suggestions for mapping organizational members' sense of fit. *Journal of Business and Psychology* **19**, **4**, pp.555-570

Bretz R.D., T.A.Judge (1994) Person-organization fit and the theory of work adjustment: Implications for satisfaction, tenure, and career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **44**, pp.32-54

Coldwell D.A., J.Billsberry, N.van Meurs and P.J.G.Marsh (2008). The effects of person-organization fit on employee attraction and retention: Towards a testable explanatory model. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **78**, pp.611-622

Cooper-Thomas H.D. (2008). Colour match: the relationship between organisational socialisation and fit. Paper presented at 2nd Global e-Conference on Fit

Denton D.W., A.Peay (1999) The Attraction-Selection-Attrition model of organizational behaviour and the homogeneity of managerial personality. *Current Research In Social Psychology* **4, 8**, pp.146-159

Harrison D.A. (2007). Pitching Fits in Applied Psychological Research: Making Fit Methods Fit Theory In C.Ostroff and T.A.Judge (Eds.) *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, pp.389-416

Jansen K.J., A. Kristof-Brown (2006). Toward a multidimensional theory of person-environment fit. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, **18**, **2**, pp.193-212

Judge T.A. (2007). The future of person-organization fit research: Comments, observations and a few suggestions. In C.Ostroff and T.A.Judge (Eds.) *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, pp.419-445

Kristof A.L. (1996). Person-organization fit: An integrative review of its conceptualizations, measurement, and implications. *Personnel Psychology* **49**, pp.1-49

Kristof-Brown A.L., R.D.Zimmerman and E.C.Johnson (2005). Consequences of individuals' fit at work: a meta-analysis of person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology*, **58**, pp.281-342

Levinthal D.A., J.G.March (1993). The Myopia of Learning. *Strategic Management Journal*, **14**, pp 95-112

Lyons R.K., J.A.Chatman and C.K.Joyce (2007). Innovation in services: Corporate culture and investment banking. *California Management Review*, **50**, **1** pp.174-191

Muchinsky P.M., C.J.Monoahan (1987). What is person-environment congruence? Supplementary versus complementary models of fit. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **31**, pp.268-277

Schneider B. (1987). The people make the place. *Personnel Psychology*, **40**, pp.437-453

Schneider B., H.W.Goldstein and D.B.Smith (1995). The ASA framework: An update. *Personnel Psychology*, **48**, pp.747-773

Sekiguchi T., J.P.Burton and C.J.Sablynski (2008). The role of job embeddedness on employee performance: The interactive effects with leader-member exchange and organization-based self-esteem. *Personnel Psychology*, **61**, pp.761-792

Talbot D., J.Billsberry (2008). Round pegs, square holes. Paper presented at 2nd Global e-conference on Fit

Wilks L.J., J.Billsberry (2007). Should we do away with teleworking? An examination of whether teleworking can be defined in the new world of work. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, **22:2**, pp.168-177