

# Person Organization Congruence: Review of its Conceptualizations

Rameez Raja

Doctoral Candidate,  
Department of Business & Financial Studies,  
University of Kashmir

Prof. Riyaz A Rainayee

Professor and Head Department of Business & Financial Studies  
University of Kashmir

## Abstract

The concept of person organization fit (P-O fit) has been analyzed and evaluated by different authors; however, the multiple conceptualization of person organization fit reveals that no real consensus exists regarding this concept. This paper, therefore, presents an exhaustive review of person organization fit definitions and its conceptual models which include both complementary and supplementary fit perspectives, so as to arrive at a common inflexion. Also various operationalizations of person organization fit (P-O Fit) are discussed. Further, an attempt is made to integrate these operationalizations with respect to their conceptualizations. These segregations and definitional issues frame a review of the existing literature and also provide basis for future research and suggestions for practical implications.

## Keywords:

Person Environment Fit, Person Organization Fit, Supplementary & Complementary Fit, Needs-Supply & Demand-Ability Fit.

## Introduction

Person Environment fit as a research domain has been prevalent in the management literature from many decades (Parsons, 1909; Parvin, 1968; Schneider, 1987) With this very interest, person environment fit (P-E Fit) has come, through a deluge of experiments and field works trying to capture the elusive criterion of fit (Judge & Ferris, 1992). The principle, governing to these studies was to examine the congruence between a person and a single aspect of his work environment. Reality however speaks something else, people do not interact with a single dimension of their work environment, but are simultaneously nested with multiple dimensions of their environment (Mitchell et. al., 2001; Granovetter, 1985). So this nested view argues that many of the outcomes attributed to congruence research are not simply the result of congruence or incongruence with a single environmental aspect. Instead, majority of the outcomes like job satisfaction, commitment, stress, job burnout, adjustment and withdrawal are more realistically affected by the interactional perspective of fit research, across the multiple domains of the environment (Lewin 1951; Magnusson & Endler, 1977; Schneider, 1983; Terborg, 1981; Kristof, Jansen & Colbert, 2002). Interactional perspective of fit examines the behavior of individuals as a function of the interaction between personal attributes and situational attributes (Chatman, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Schneider et al., 1995). At its most basic level, Interactional perspective argues for

study of the relationship between the individual and the environment (Magnusson, 1990). Although Interactional perspective includes any or all of these situations as a theoretical paradigm, however P-E fit is defined more narrowly. It reflects a specific type of P&E interaction. Harrison (2007) defined person environment fit as compatibility of joint values of one or more attributes 'a, b, c...n' of a focal entity (P) and a commensurate set of attributes 'a, b, c...n' of an entities environment (E). Algebraically, fit is about;

$$(Pa, Pb, Pc, \dots Pn) \quad (Ea, Eb, Ec, \dots En)$$

Kristof, Zimmerman and Johnson, (2005) define person environment fit as the compatibility that occurs when individual and work environment characteristics are well matched. P-E fit in its broader context implies the degree of compatibility or match between individuals and some aspects of their work environment (Dawis and Lofquist, 1984; Kristof- Brown, et al. 2005) like the match between personal interests and vocational characteristics, the congruence between individual values and organizational cultures, the compatibility of individual preferences and organizational system, the match between individual knowledge, skills and abilities with the demand of a job, the correspondence of individual needs and work-provides supplies, or the goal similarity and personality compatibility between individuals and their supervisors.

P-E fit models have always been an eminent theme in the field of industrial –organizational psychology. The notion that people are differently compatible in particular work environment is so well accepted that Saks and Ashforth (1997) called the topic “a cornerstone of Industrial / Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management”. The major challenge which is confronting in fit research is determining exactly what type of P & E interaction demarcates the subset of P-E fit. After a thorough literature review of the P-E fit definitions, the one and only one universally agreed upon condition that appears there is that P-E fit requires that a constellation of P&E attributes influence outcomes. Simply because both P&E are included as predictors does not imply that P-E fit is at work (Kristof-Brown, 2005).

Beyond that condition, scholars vary widely with regard to how they define the parameters of person environment fit (P-E Fit) interactions. One of the most frequently cited conditions is that the P&E dimensions should be commensurate (Caplan, 1987; Edward, 2008). Which reflects that whatever the dimensions (KSA's / Demands, Need/ Supplies, Values, Traits, Goals), it must be defined in terms of the same content for both (P&E) person and environment. Caplan (1987) argued that commensurate measurement is a “special requirements” of P-E fit, because it makes the conceptual relevance of P-E fit explicit. Edward, Caplan and Harrison (1998) spread out this argument and state that, without commensurate dimensions it is impossible to determine the proximity of the person and the environment to one another and the notion of P-E fit becomes meaningless. Further these commensurate dimensions draw a line of demarcation between P-E fit theory and general interactionistic models of the person and environment.

The second condition for fit, which has often sparked debates, is whether fit occurs only when there is an exact correspondence (identical match) between the levels of person and environment (P&E). Edward (2007) supported this view, using the proximity of P&E to connote the conditions of fit. This view reflects other terms that have often been used in the literature such as “Match”, “Similarity”, “Congruence” of P&E variables (Breugh, 1992; Chatman, 1989; French & Harrison, 1982; French, Rogers & Cobb, 1974).

In order for better understanding of the disagreement over commensurate measures and proximity, one has to arrange the various conceptualizations of P-E fit along a continuum, spanning from the most restrictive definition to the least constrained (Kristof- Brown & Guay, 2009).

The most restrictive definitions are those which require fit to be perfectly congruent between the level of 'P' and the level of a commensurate 'E'. This view is also called as “Exact Correspondence”. As per this view, fit exists only and only when there is exact correspondence between commensurate P&E variables, and the degree of mismatch in either direction directly represent the level of misfit.

Alternatively, a less restrictive definition of fit is one that requires some relationship between commensurate dimensions of P&E, but this relationship allows compatibility to occur across a wider range of P&E levels. Thus, fit may occur when P&E are compatible, not just congruent and misfit occurs when the range of compatibility has exceeded. This view is also known as “Commensurate Compatibility”.

Finally, the least restrictive view of fit also called as “General Compatibility”. It includes an 'E' characteristic that is metrically non-commensurate with 'P' Characteristic, but conceptually related. As Turban and Keon (1993) proposed that individuals with a high need for achievement would be a better fit in organizations that offered pay for performance. The proximity of a person's need for achievement cannot be directly assessed against the organizations pay for performance policy. However, it can be argued that a person who gets recognition through pay is having his or her personal need for achievement met and is therefore a good fit in the environment.

As with any continuum, each perspective had its pros and cons. By embracing the restrictive view of fit as exact correspondence, the answer of what fit is and what fit is not becoming quite clear. Using this perspective of fit, any variance from perfect match on commensurate dimensions cannot be labeled as fit. Research suggests that this definition of fit does not generally reflect layman understanding of fit (Edward, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006). As most people approach the question of 'how well do you fit?' by considering the less restrictive view of general compatibility. However, the boundaries around this construct are vague and fit could be argued to exist in an infinite array of P and E combinations. At the center of the two perspectives is commensurate compatibility, it possesses the merits and demerits of both extremes, but to a lesser extent. Using commensurate P and E variables specifies the relevance of P to E, but fit could be said to occur when P=E, P>E, P<E depending on the specific concept involved.

### Defining Person Organization Fit

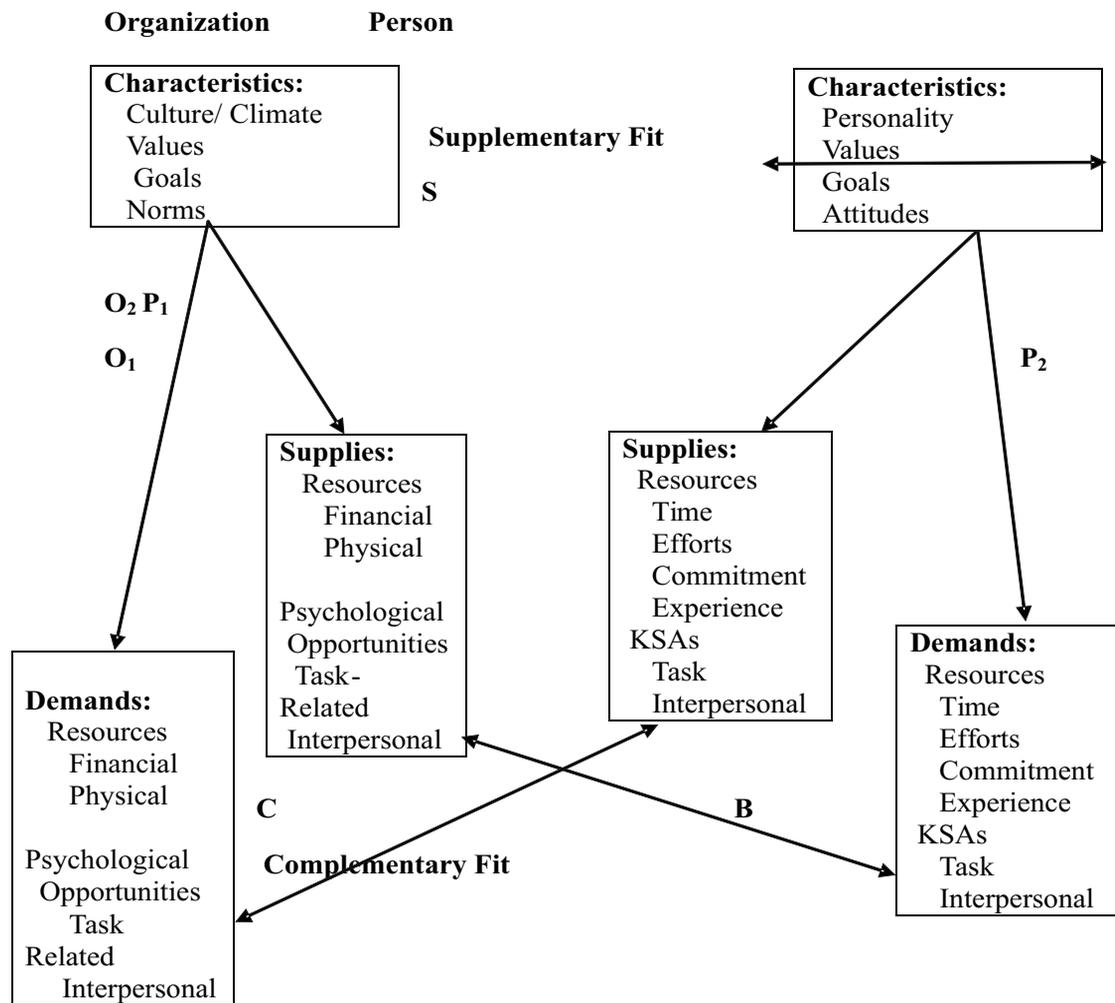
The concept of person organization fit (P-O Fit) has been subjected to chaos and confusion because of its multiple conceptualizations and operationalizations as well as scarce segregation from other subsets of person environment fit (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990; Judge & Ferris, 1992). When discombobulation and disarray creeps in regarding what comes under the purview or rubric of person organization fit, misinterpretations, ambiguity and equivocal operationalizations are necessarily open to that field of research. In the present study two-step approach is used to define person organization fit (P-O Fit). First, different conceptualizations of person organization fit along with their frequent operationalizations are presented. The main motto of the very first step is to depict clearly what is encompassed around the construct of person organization fit (P-O Fit) (Schwab, 1980). Second, to disintegrate the (P-E fit) person environment fit subsets to describe what is not included in the construct of person organization fit (Schwab, 1980; Judge & Ferris, 1992).

P-O fit is broadly defined as the compatibility or congruence between individuals and their employing organization by most researchers. Congruence, however, is a subjective term and mean differently to different people. Although, two perspectives of congruence or fit has been raised to clarify the issue of multiple conceptualization. The first one is supplementary and complementary fit perspective and the next perspective is need- supply and demand- ability fit. Supplementary fit occurs when the person supplements, embellishes, or possesses similar or matching characteristics to other individuals in the work environment whereas Complementary fit occurs when a person or organization characteristics provide what the other wants or need (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). For example, from a supplementary standpoint, congruence is achieved when organization attract individuals who have similar goals and values, whereas, from a complementary standpoint, congruence is achieved when the unmet needs of individuals are satisfied by the resources and tasks that are provided by the organization. In both the cases, there is strong evidence that P-O fit has a positive impact on a wide array of employee attitudes and behaviors, particularly job satisfaction and turn over intentions (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Kristof, 1996; Kristof et al., 2005; Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991; Zahid, 2013). The second perspective on P-O fit concerns the needs-supplies and demands- abilities distinction. According to Kristof (1996), from the needs-supplies perspective, P-O fit occurs when an organization satisfies individuals' needs, desires or preferences. In

contrast, the demands-abilities perspective suggests that fit occurs when an individual has the abilities required to meet organizational demands. No doubt, that these two fit perspectives had been used frequently by researchers however, the integration of the two fit perspectives is very rear and scarce. Majority of the studies had used isolated approach to fit (for exception see Bretz & Judge, 1994; Bretz, Rynes & Gerhart, 1993). Throughout this long way finally, Kristof-Brown (1996) proposed a model which is advancement over previous studies and also helps to a larger extent to solve the issue of multiple conceptualizations of person organization fit (P-O Fit). Kristof defines it as "the compatibility between people and organization that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both". This definition acknowledges the multiple conceptualization of person organization fit (P-O Fit) and takes into account both of the fit perspectives simultaneously.

As the model depicts that supplementary fit is said to exist when the compatibility between the characteristics of the organization (culture, climate, values, structure, norms etc.) and that of the person (values, goals, personality, attitude etc.) are met, as shown by arrow 'S' in the above model. Besides supplementary fit, compatibility between the person and the organization can also be depicted by what they supply and demand in employment relation or agreement. Hogan, (1991); Schein, (1992), argued that these demands and supplies are likely to be influenced by the underlying characteristics of both of the entities the person and the organization as indicated by (arrow O1, O2, P1,P2) in the above model. However, the dimensions on which compatibility may occur are different, more explicitly, organizational supplies (financial and non-financial resources) as needed by the persons. When the supplies of the organization met the employee requirement, needs-supply fit is said to exist as represented by (arrow B) of the model (Figure 1.1). Likewise, organizations demand contribution from their employees in terms of time, efforts, knowledge, skill, abilities 'KSA' etc. When the abilities of the employee met the organizations requirement, demand-ability fit is said to exist as shown by (arrow C) of the model. Muchinsky & Monahan (1987) used this perspective of need-supplies (N-S) & demand-ability (D-A) fit to describe complementary fit.

(Figure 1.1)



**Conceptualizations of Person Organization Fit, Source: Kristof Brown (1996).**

**Operationalizations of Person Organization Fit**

Specifically, four different operationalizations of P-O fit were identified. Out of the four operationalizations, two reflect supplementary fit, one arises from needs-supply conceptualizations and the fourth one can be traced with either of the two perspectives.

Conceptualizing person organization fit (P-O Fit) as a supplementary perspective has been concerned with measuring the compatibility or congruence between the characteristics of the organization and the person. The most frequent operationalization of person organization fit research is the similarity between the organizational and individual values (Boxx, Odom & Dunn, 1991; Chatman,

1989, 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Posner, 1992). O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, (1991) use the same labeling for 'person culture fit'. As they postulate that compatibility between an organizational value and that of the individual may be at the crux of fit (O'Reilly et al., 1991) however, person organization fit and person culture fit can be used interchangeable.

The second operationalization of P-O fit focuses on goal congruence with organizational leaders or peers (Vancouver, Millsap & Peters, 1994; Vancouver & Scmitt, 1991; Witt & Sliver, 1995; Vancouver, Millsap & Peters, 1994). This operationalization of person organization fit is guided by Schneider's (1987) ASA (attraction, selection,

attrition) frame-work that states 'people are attracted to and selected by organizations whose goals are congruent to them' (Schneider, 1987; Vroom, 1966).

A strict need supply perspective is reflected in the third operationalization of person organization fit, as this perspective define fit as match between organizational systems, structures and individual needs and preferences (Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989; Cable & Judge, 1994; Turban & Keon, 1993). Although this operationalization is better suited for person vocation fit (P-V Fit) (Rounds, Dawis & Lofquist, 1987) and also serve as explanation for person organization fit as well (Bretz & Judge, 1994).

The fourth operationalization of P-O fit is defined as the match between the characteristics of individual personality and organizational climate (Bowen et al., 1991; Burke & Deszca, 1982; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1984). This operationalization reflects supplementary and at times as needs- supplies fit perspective. As when we study the overall compatibility between the two entities i.e. the organizations climate and individual personality supplementary version of fit is said to exist when organization climate is studied in terms of supplies (communication patterns & appraisal systems) and employees are construed as needs. The model present in the (figure1.1) distinguishes different fit perspective however; it does not mean that they are contradictory rather they act as complementary to each other. So we can say that multiple fit perspectives can be incorporated into one single operationalization (Kristof-Brown, 2002).

### Discussion

The demonstrated importance of person organization fit in the hiring process and its effects on outcomes both individual and organizational make it an area of interest for future research. Browen et al., (1991); Bridges, (1994) argue that managers and practitioners hire people for organizations and not for the specific job. This even further increase the complexity of person organization fit (P-O Fit). As one of the objective of this study was to integrate various multiple conceptualizations of person organization fit, however many issues remain unaddressed. One of the important advantages of multiple conceptualizations is that a clearer and comprehensive picture of person organization (P-O Fit) domain is attained. As earlier definitions presented on person organization fit (P-O Fit) suggested that benefits of congruence may be maximum if both perspectives of fit exist simultaneously, but on varying characteristics. This phenomenon would have an addictive effect on dependent variable, like people who are high on both types of fit will possess more positive work attitude and less turn over intentions than those who have only high supplementary or complementary fit. Another contingency is that, various conceptualizations of person organization fit (P-O Fit) may

predict outcome variables differently (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Bretz et al., 1993). As supplementary congruence on values, personality or goals will have significant impact on attitudinal outcomes, supplementary fit on KSA may have strong effect on individual performance. The new direction for research gets paved when congruence exists in single conceptualizations where as other conceptualization shows opposite result. This multiple conceptualization of fit perspective can be opted by practitioners and managers to further the literature on person organization fit.

### Conclusion

In today's corporate world, where retention of knowledge workers is of a strategic importance, fitting an employee to the organization is of an equal importance. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of both researchers and managers towards person organization fit (P-O Fit) research. Nonetheless, due attention must be paid towards multiple conceptualizations and operationalization strategies of person organization fit. Addressing the issue of conceptualization and operationalization with utmost care would draw convincing and reliable conclusions regarding person organization fit (P-O Fit). Furthermore, future research should continue to explore the person organization fit domain using multiple measurement models.

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