

The Relationship between Person-Organization Fit and Employee Creativity: The Mediating Role of Creative Capital

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between person-organization fit and employee creativity. Specifically, it is proposed that higher person-organization fit leads employees to develop greater degrees of creative capital, which is defined as an individual's resources characterized by heightened levels of intrinsic motivation, task-relevant skills and knowledge, and external support. Greater creative capital, in turn, is proposed to facilitate employees to generate more novel and useful ideas and solutions. Theoretical and managerial implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Person-organization fit, Employee creativity, Creative capital

1. Introduction

Person-organization (PO) fit refers to the compatibility between a person and the organization, emphasizing the extent to which a person and the organization share similar characteristics and/or meet each other's needs (Kristof, 1996). Evidence is mounting that employees' PO fit predicts important work outcomes, such as job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, job performance, intention to stay, and citizenship behaviors (e.g., Chatman, 1991; Chuang, Hsu, Wang, & Judge, 2015; Kim, Samuel, Raymond, & Kim, 2013; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

While most person-organization (PO) fit research has been addressing these topics, relatively little research has addressed the role of PO fit in employee creativity (cf. Spanjol, Tam, & Tam, 2015). It is surprising as well as unfortunate considering the increased importance of employee creativity, or creative performance by organizational employees in today's extremely competitive and unpredictable business environment (e.g., Shalley & Gilson, 2004).

This paper attempts to fill this gap by providing a theoretical model between PO fit and employee creativity. Specifically, guided by existing literature on creativity and PO fit, this paper explains why employees with higher PO fit are likely to engage in more creative behaviors. For doing this, this paper first discusses various antecedents of employee creativity, and based on them, develop a newly combined construct – namely, creative capital. Next, it proposes potential roles of PO fit in developing creative capital and employee creativity. Four propositions to guide future empirical research are presented in this paper, followed by a discussion of their theoretical and practical implications. As a point of clarification, this paper limits its discussion to the effect of the complementary fit between employees and organizations, as opposed to the supplementary fit between them (cf. Kristof, 1996).

2. Employee Creativity and Creative Capital

Creativity refers to generation of novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and useful (i.e., appropriate) ideas (Amabile, 1983; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1991). Creativity has long been considered as an important competency for employees as well as for organizations (Gino & Ariely, 2011; West, 2002); it allows employees to solve problems effectively (Mumford & Gustafson, 1998) and to remain flexible (Flach, 1990) so to take new opportunities and deal with them successfully (Runco, 2004). Accordingly, organizations need creativity to maintain their competitiveness and to cope with ever-increasing demands of customers (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; West, 2002).

Over the past few decades, management scholars have identified certain key factors and sources that should contribute to employee creativity (for reviews, see Geroe, 2008; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Zhou & Shalley, 2003). In particular, social psychologists have identified two personal factors that

leads them to creative performance, such as (1) skills and knowledge about their work which help them identify potential work problems (i.e., *task-relevant skills*; Amabile, 1983; Shalley, 1991) and (2) inner-directed interests or passion to their work (i.e., *intrinsic motivation*; Amabile, 1983; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Taggar, 2002); creative people are shown to be energized by challenging and interesting tasks, a sign of high intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and those who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to be highly creative (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994). On the other hand, interactionist scholars (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993) have found that certain contextual factors such as supervisory support for creative performance and empowering work climate should facilitate employee to successfully display creative performance at work (i.e., *external support for creative performance*; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Finally, recent creativity research works focusing on employees' behavioral aspects have proposed that employees need to engage in certain activities like problem identification, information searching and encoding, and idea generation in order to generate creative ideas (i.e., *creativity-relevant processes*; Amabile, 1983; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004; Zhang & Bartol, 2010); for example, when employees spend more time and efforts to engage in these activities, they can understand their work-related issues and problems better and consider different perspectives of diverse information, which should result in their generating numerous novel and useful ideas and alternatives (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Importantly, it is likely that the effects of these key factors and sources (e.g., task-relevant skills, intrinsic motivation, and external support) on employee creativity should become greater when the employees possess them together. It is because the ways each of these factors and sources influence creativity are different from but complementary to each other. Specifically, intrinsic motivation drives employees to view their work from different perspectives and try new things voluntarily (cf. *novelty*), while task-relevant skills and knowledge enable them to develop and suggest relevant and efficiently implementable solutions and ideas (cf. *usefulness*). Also, external support for creative performance allows the employees to receive positive feedback get legitimacy on their creative ideas from their supervisors and coworkers (cf. *consensus*; Amabile, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Interestingly, it is noteworthy that these factors and sources are interrelated with each other, and when one factor (e.g., intrinsic motivation) is high, other factors (e.g., task-relevant skills, external support) are also likely to be high. For example, intrinsically-motivated employees are more likely to obtain information about their work and acquire skills for them; knowledgeable and skillful employees are more likely to be respected and supported by others; respected and supported employees are more likely to develop interests and passion for their works. Therefore, it is reasonable to treat their effects on employee creativity together. Accordingly, this paper suggest a combined construct, namely "*creative capital*", and define it as follows:

An individual's resources that are characterized by (1) personal interests and passion for their work (intrinsic motivation); (2) cognitive skills and knowledge about their work (task-relevant skills and knowledge); (3) support from supervisors and coworkers for the creative performance (external support); and (4) positive impacts on generating novel and useful ideas and solutions (creativity).

This line of reasoning allows the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Employees with greater creative capital (i.e., higher intrinsic motivation, more useful and relevant task-relevant skills and knowledge, and more external support) will generate more novel and useful ideas and solutions successfully.

Importantly, by focusing on momentary, state-like (i.e., open to development as opposed to trait-like and relatively fixed) factors of creativity, this combined construct implies that it is possible to enhance and manage employee creativity by developing their creative capital. It is important because extant works on creativity management have focused on managing for creativity (i.e., managing factors such as job characteristics and organizational climate for employee creativity) while undermining the possibility of managing creativity (cf. Amabile et al., 1996; Florida & Goodnight, 2005). This implication is discussed later in more detail in this paper.

3. Person-organization Fit and Creative Capital

PO fit refers to the compatibility between a person and the organization, emphasizing the extent to which a person and the organization share similar characteristics and/or meet each other's needs (Kristof, 1996). While most researchers agree about its importance, there is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding its operationalization. For example, some researchers operationalize PO fit as a goal congruence with organizational leaders or peers (e.g., Vancouver, Millsap, & Peters, 1994; Vancouver & Schmit, 1991) while others consider it as the match between individual preferences or needs and organizational systems and structures (e.g., Bretz, Ash, & Dreher, 1989; Cable & Judge, 1994) or the match between the characteristics of individual personality and organizational climate –

sometimes labeled organizational personality (e.g., Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991; Burke & Deszca, 1982). However, the most widely accepted and frequently used operationalization of PO fit is the degree of similarity and compatibility between fundamental characteristics of person and organizations (e.g., values, goals, orientations; Boxx, Odom, & Dunn, 1991; Chatman, 1989, 1991; Chuang, Hsu, Wang, & Judge, 2015; Kim, Aryee, Loi, & Kim, 2013; Posner, 1992). It is because employees' values, goals, and orientations represent not only their unique preferences and needs, but also demonstrate what they have (i.e., supplies) and what they need (i.e., demands); thus the operationalization based on similarity and compatibility between fundamental characteristics of employees and organizations should capture "fit" in more comprehensive and integrative ways (such as representing both supplementary fit and complementary fit; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987) than others.

3.1 Person-organization Fit and Intrinsic Motivation.

Employees who are (or who feel) highly similar and compatible to their organizations are more likely to display great degrees of creativity at their work because they are likely to have heightened levels of intrinsic motivation. Employees with high PO fit are, by definition, more likely to perceive and recognize the similarity to their organizations. Because (1) people are attracted to and prefer to be with similar others (cf. social identity theory; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and (2) people have a strong need to fit their environment (cf. theory of work adjustment; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Deci & Ryan, 2000), employees' perception of high PO fit should lead them to experience positive feelings at work and form positive job attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational identification and affective organizational commitment; Bretz & Judge, 1994; Chatman, 1991; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Importantly, this heightened positivity should lead them to develop strong intrinsic motivation to their work because job attitudes and affective experiences are closely and strongly interrelated with their intrinsic motivation (Fisher, 2000; Ilies & Judge, 2002; Seo, Barrett, & Bartunek, 2004). Furthermore, employees with high PO fit should have high intrinsic motivation because those employees are likely to engage in activities that their coworkers, supervisors, and organizations prefer, and thus may receive great amount of positive reinforcements from them (e.g., recognition, rewards). The positive reinforcements, in turn, will also heighten the employees' feelings of interests and confidence toward their work, which contribute to their intrinsic motivation (Gagné, Senécal, & Koestner, 1997; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Taken together, I propose that:

Proposition 2: Employees with higher PO fit will have higher intrinsic motivation.

3.2 Person-organization Fit and Task-relevant Skills and Knowledge.

Employees with high PO fit are also likely to have great levels of knowledge, skills, and information about their tasks and organizations (cf. task-relevant skill; Amabile, 1983). Given that people tend to perceive and understand events based on what they know and believe (e.g., memory, prototype; Hastie & Dawes, 2001), employees with high PO fit, or employees with relevant and appropriate values, orientations, and goals to their organization are likely to better understand the meanings of organizational events and work-related issues. This enhanced understanding, in turn, allows those employees to obtain further relevant and appropriate knowledge and information. Furthermore, it also enables them to identify successfully areas for the performance improvement (i.e., areas of misaligned work practices to organizational values or goals); organizational events and practices that employees with high PO fit can't understand their meanings are likely to ones that are not congruent with organizational values and goals and thus undermine organizational performance. Successful identification of areas for the performance improvement, in turn, should direct those employees' attention and guide them to obtain useful and implementable knowledge and skills to change the areas. Accordingly, I propose that:

Proposition 3: Employees with higher PO fit will have more useful task-relevant skills and knowledge.

3.3 Person-organization Fit and External Support.

Finally, employees with high PO fit are also likely to have greater degrees of acceptance and support from their coworkers and supervisors. According to Schein (1985), organizational values and goals refer to what most employees have shared with others through certain organizational processes like selection and promotion (cf. attraction-selection-attrition framework; Schneider, 1987) as well as interpersonal processes like socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Therefore, employees' high PO fit means, by essence, the similarity and compatibility of the employees' values and goals with other employees such as their supervisors and coworkers. Thus, employees with high PO fit are likely to perceive the great degrees of similarity of values and goals with their supervisors and coworkers and vice versa. This similarity perception allows them to exchange more positive and supportive attitudes and behaviors (cf. similarity-attraction paradigm; Byrne, 1961), which, in turn, results in the consequence that employees with higher PO fit receive greater degrees of support and acceptance from coworkers and supervisors

about their work ideas and behaviors. Consistently with this line of reasoning, past studies show that work groups with greater levels of fit with organizations tend to receive more support from higher-level of that organization (e.g., Enz, 1988; Klein, Conn, & Sorra, 2001). Therefore, I propose:

Proposition 4: Employees with higher PO fit will have more external support from coworkers and supervisors.

Given that the levels of creativity is determined by creative capital of which factors and sources include heightened levels of intrinsic motivation, relevant and useful task-relevant skills and knowledge, and external support (as proposed in Proposition 1), and these factors and sources are proposed to be positively associated with PO fit (as proposed in Proposition 2, Proposition 3, Proposition 4), it is reasonable to propose that employees with higher PO fit will display greater levels of creativity, and this relationship is mediated by their creative capital. Therefore, I propose:

Proposition 5: Employees' creative capital will mediate the positive association between their PO fit and creativity. More specifically, employees with higher PO fit will have greater levels of creative capital, which facilitate them to generate more novel and useful ideas and solutions.

The theoretical model based on the propositions above is shown in Figure 1.

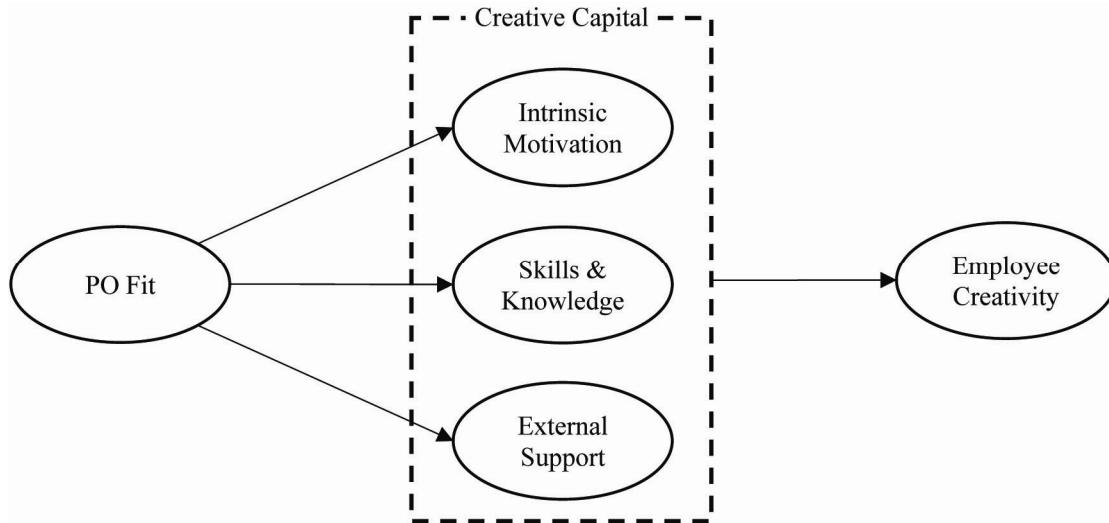


Figure 1. Person-organization fit, creative capital, and employee creativity

4. Discussion

Despite PO fit's prominence in organizational research, little is understood about its role in employee creativity. This paper seeks to address this concern by proposing a positive link between PO fit and employee creativity. Drawing from research in social psychology and organizational behavior, a combined construct, namely, creative capital is developed and proposed to mediate the link between PO fit and employee creativity; the higher PO fit, the greater creative capital, and the greater creative capital, the more creative performance. Overall, the propositions presented in this paper set the foundation for further research in creativity management by highlighting the possibility of increasing PO fit and developing creative capital of employees.

4.1 Managing Creativity

As creativity is subjective in its nature and different from the current ideas and practices (Amabile, 1983), managing creativity is extremely challenging, if not impossible (Amabile & Khaire, 2008; Levitt, 1963). Indeed, Amabile and colleagues (1996) concluded that creativity is unmanageable, and managers can only manage *for* creativity by, for example, managing creativity-undermining environmental elements. Sutton (2001), similarly to them, argued that current management practices in organizations are not suitable for the creativity, and managers and organizations who wish to enhance employee creativity should abandon what they have done so far.

However, the model of this paper implies that this conclusion is premature, and managers can manage employee creativity successfully by developing their creative capital. Specifically, by providing sufficient training opportunities

with displaying more supportive and positive attitudes, managers can directly develop employees' creative capital, which, in turn, facilitates them to engage in creative performance. Furthermore, by selecting candidates with high PO fit and promoting them later in the organization, managers can nurture and foster employees' creative capital and their creativity. The proposed model in this paper also yields a few important practical implications to managers who wish to enjoy great employee creativity. In particular, to enhance employee creativity, managers need to identify organizational operating values and goals accurately (Schein, 1985). Second, they need to assess values and goals of employees (or job candidates) when they evaluate their performance (or credentials). Third, they need to emphasize the compatibility or homogeneity between employees, so that they can recognize the similarity among them and thus exchange positive and supportive attitudes and behaviors (cf. Byrne, 1961; Schneider, 1987).

4.2 Future Research Directions

Some researchers may disagree to the propositions this paper presents. In particular, Schneider (1987) theorized that organizations with great levels of homogeneity (i.e., employees with high PO fit) tend to have low levels of creativity and eventually fail to achieve their goals. Consistently, some past studies show that employees with low PO fit play positive roles in improving organizational creativity (e.g., Park & DeShon, 2010; Van Knippenberg, De Dreu & Homan, 2004). Additionally, there are pieces of anecdotal evidence that non-traditional and weird practices result in great degrees of organizational creativity (e.g., Senge, 1990; Sutton, 2001).

However, it should be noted that the current paper is not contrary but complementary to the above. For example, the ideas of negative impact of PO fit to employee creativity may be more useful in situations where current work rules and practices are totally inappropriate or out-of-dated and thus they should be replaced with new ones. The present ideas of positive impact of PO fit to employee creativity, on the other hand, may be more relevant in situations where focus is given to improve (rather than abandon) current work rules and practices incrementally. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, future research may need to investigate this important issue more clearly. Such research would be able to guide managers and organizations how PO fit can contribute to employee creativity, and thus how they can manage creativity under different situations.

5. Conclusion

Research on PO fit has overlooked its potential impact on creativity in organizations. This paper attempts to fill this gap by conceptualizing creative capital as an antecedent of employee creativity and theorizing its positive link with PO fit. It is hoped that this paper offers new insights and provides the impetus for new and existing scholars to further explore and investigate this important and timely issue in the future.

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