



24th DAAAM International Symposium on Intelligent Manufacturing and Automation, 2013

Person-Organisation Fit in the Context of Cultural Learning

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Abstract

The current trends in the international business have been giving rise to increased cultural interactions, reflected in the rapid global movements. In this dramatically changing environment, all companies are seeking the most effective way for integrating workforce into the organisational structure and for achieving the stated objectives and further expansion. Therefore “matching the right people with the right organisation” is the prerequisite for satisfactory performance of recruitment process. This is particularly true when taking the subtle nuances of culture into account. Cultures across the world have a significant effect on perceiving various elements that occur in working life. The match between this culturally developed individual value orientation and the nature of corporate culture is referred to as person-organisation fit (P-O fit). This paper presents one conceptualisation of P-O fit. Initially, it introduces the results of two surveys to support the intention to develop an effective tool for incorporating the assessment of cultural congruence into the recruitment process and later on it focuses on defining P-O fit as one of the working environment related fits and its benefits and limitations.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of DAAAM International Vienna

Keywords: organisational learning; culture; cultural learning; person-organisation fit; recruitment

1. Introduction

The idea of organisational learning has been present in management literature for decades. But since around 1990, when it started to be widely recognised, two major developments have been highly significant in the growth of the field. The first one is the conceptual fragmentation of the field caused by researchers and scholars from disparate disciplines who tend to compete for the best model of organisational learning. The second development is that many consultants and companies have caught onto the commercial significance of organisational learning and much of the

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effort of these theorists has been devoted to identifying templates, or ideal forms, which real organisations could attempt to emulate [1].

A helpful way of making sense of organisational learning is to point out two basic research approaches. The dividing line between them is the extent to which the process of organisational learning is emphasised as a technical or a social process. From Easterby-Smith's and Araujo's explanation [1], it is clear that the technical view assumes that organisational learning deals with the effective processing, interpretation of, and response to information; both inside and outside the organisation. The social perspective on organisation learning focuses on the way people make sense of their experiences at work. From this perspective, learning is something that can only arise from personal interactions, normally in the natural work setting. Those researchers, operating within the social perspective, often view organisational learning as a social construction and as a cultural artefact.

2. Cultural learning in organisations

As it was stated in the previous paragraph, the societal theory of organisational learning implies that the learning process comprises interpersonal encounters and own experience transformed into the personal development. When multinationalism and interculturalism is an inevitable consequence of the processes of globalisation, it seems the culture with its impacts and influences on every individual in organisation must be strongly taken into consideration when it comes to the questions and issues of learning. Organisations in this perspective provide the common basis for encountering the people of many various cultural backgrounds and organisational learning must build upon the complex of different cultural values and norms. These are the attributes deeply ingrained within human nature, acquired unconsciously during one's upbringing, which people are not aware of in their conscious minds. At least until they become visible as a result of a thorough interpersonal comparison. Nevertheless their impact upon human perception, behaviour and decision making in everyday life is significant. And so it is in working environment.

If a closer look is taken at the benefits of cultures for individuals on their personal level, it is the matter of fact that learning from them will help to develop a deeper understanding of worldview diversity and broaden one's personality and perspective on different value systems in general. It helps to open up the notion that there is more than just one worldview and that neither of them is only right or wrong. But the learning concept does not remain on the personal level only; the process of organisational learning is coming full circle when individuals in organisation contribute to the common knowledge improvement. Organisational learning is driven by all individuals who make up the part of it and who broaden, refine and share their own knowledge. This gives an answer to one of the greatest myths of organisational learning, and that is "who question". Prange [2], in order to answer it, contemplates if it is individuals or organisations that learn. Organisations that are committed to true learning practices will create a suitable and encouraging environment and provide the technical tools for enabling the knowledge to be collected and spread. Individuals are the main bearers of knowledge and after all, these two components of organisational learning: individuals and organisation as a whole reinforce one another.

Cultural learning can become the water on turbines of organisational improvement and competitive advantage. However cultural differences can be so stubborn and invincible that is also can add fuel to the development of mutual misunderstandings and frustrations.

3. Previous survey and its findings

Earlier survey that was carried out within the Institute of Industrial Engineering, Management and Quality, came with interesting results about multicultural awareness in Slovak business community and public sector. An extensive questionnaire was distributed amongst industrial enterprises, universities and research institutions and after the return period 123 completed questionnaires were statistically evaluated. Comprehensive survey results are the part of publication by Caganova [3] and for the purposes of this paper selected findings were retrieved, which are presented in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 thereafter.

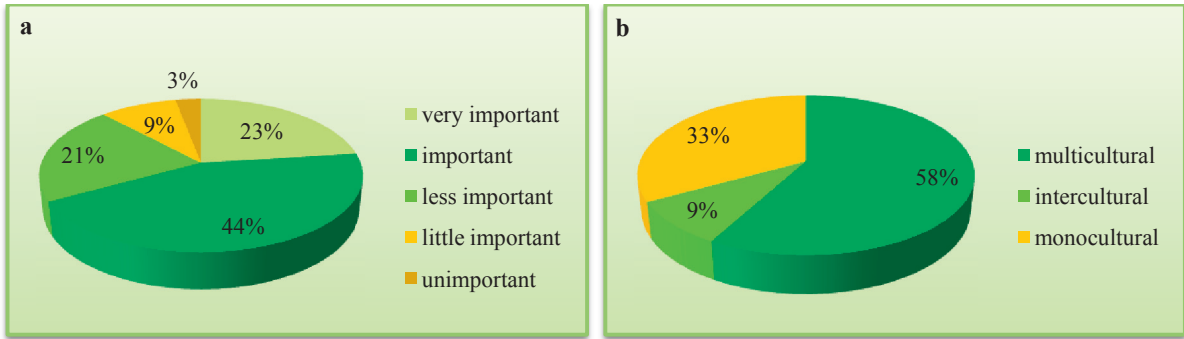


Fig. 1. (a) the importance of cultural diversity in the workplace and organisation; (b) type of organisation from the perspective of cultural diversity. (Source: [3]).

As seen on Fig. 1b two thirds of respondents, who represented people from all levels of management as well as common employees, reported that they view their current workplace and organisation as multicultural or intercultural (note that the author of the survey understands “multicultural” as comprising more than two cultures whereas “intercultural” as purely two component feature). Together with another question where almost 90 % of those surveyed stated they have previously had personal experience working in intercultural/multicultural environment, it is evident that people feel as an integral part of international business structures where blending of different cultures is an inevitable consequence. In addition, as a proof of increasing multicultural awareness, more than two thirds of respondents perceive culture diversity in their workplace or organisation as very important or important, as can be seen on Fig. 1a.

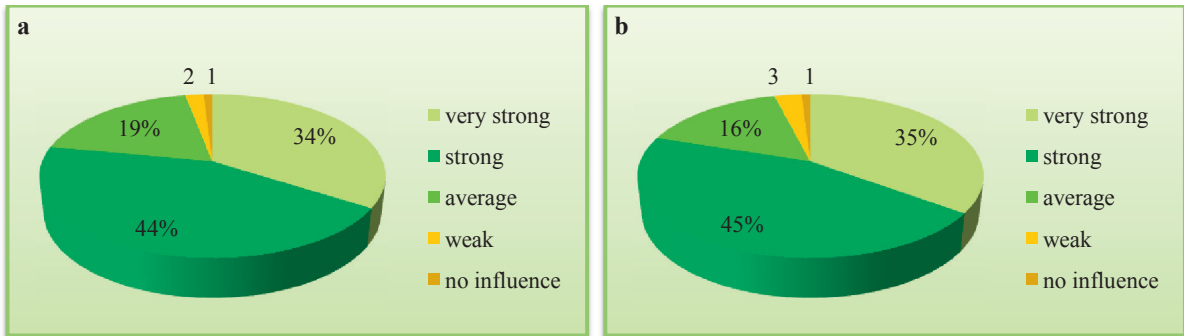


Fig. 2. (a) the influence of healthy culturally diverse environment on innovations in organisation; (b) the influence of healthy culturally diverse environment on competitiveness in organisation. (Source: [3]).

Another part of survey was focused on how a healthy multicultural/intercultural environment affects different parameters. A large proportion of respondents reported very strong or strong influence on both, innovations and competitiveness in organisation. Since the answers represented their own personal views and opinions, they accurately reflected the level of awareness about the benefits that cultural diversity can bring, regardless of the sector or sphere in which an organisation operates in. If a closer look is taken at the evaluation of these two questions, they both reached over three quarters of very strong and strong affirmations. For all results in detail see Fig. 2a and 2b.

Elsewhere in the survey respondents were asked if they understand cultural habits as the main factor to form and influence the corporate culture. The evaluation came up with considerable amount of affirmative responses (see Fig. 3) what together with other findings from Caganova’s survey [3] offers an important basis and provides a platform for further exploration and study in the field of multicultural society or corporate cultures.

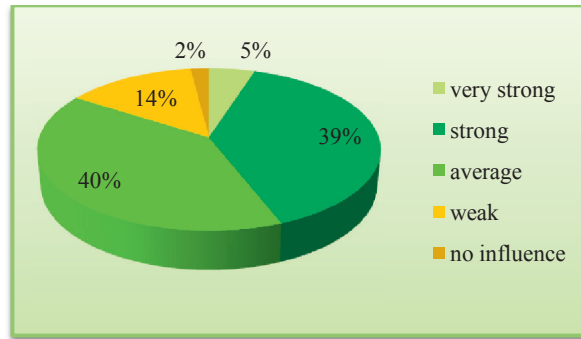


Fig. 3. The influence of cultural habits on forming the corporate culture in organisation (Source: [3]).

4. Exploratory interviews

Later on, another exploratory study was conducted under the supervision of aforementioned institute with the purpose to verify the previous findings and to get a clearer understanding of cultural issues and insights of respondents from Slovak companies; both industrial and service providing. All respondents who work in multicultural environment and deal with cultural diversity on everyday basis could be divided into two main groups; one consisting of managers who are in charge of multicultural teams and the second comprising employees who work as a part of multicultural teams. The industrial sector, in which the organisation operates, the size of a company or years of experience in the field for each respondent were not considered as relevant. The objective was to ask respondents in semi-structured interviews the questions regarding:

- their view on diversity as an advantage or disadvantage for organisational learning,
- their preference for working within multicultural or monocultural team,
- their view on the importance that should be placed upon supporting cultural diversity,
- their own experience with poor cultural match in a work team,
- eliminations of unwanted consequences of hiring people who do not match with organisation from the value orientation perspective,
- preventive measures and tools that could ensure selecting the right people for organisation.

After collecting and evaluating responses it was summarised that regardless the group that each respondent fell into, the attitudes towards inquired issues were significantly similar. They have stated that learning from other cultures within working settings is of great importance. It can bring everyone to new views on surrounded reality; it is a valuable source of innovation potential driven by different mindsets and concepts of thinking. Furthermore the personal enrichment from cultural encounters is not negligible as well. Respondents expressed that they welcome the opportunity to gain knowledge about other cultures, particularly the knowledge about different customs and working styles. But to provide the complete picture, it must not be neglected that respondents from the managerial group noted that cultural diversity can be seen as a disadvantage because of the increased need for understanding the cultural behavioural patterns and adjusting the leadership styles to each and every individual. The more diverse the team is, the more effort and initiative it takes on the side of manager to harmonise and compromise people's requirements. The potential of mutual learning from other cultures prevails over the potential risks it can bring. All respondents see cultural diversity primarily as an advantage, but they emphasised the need for developing and using the tools that could be used to predict the value orientation of individuals before they are hired for an organisation. The tools that would be able to assess if the individual will not only meet the professional requirements of a work position, known as KSA (knowledge, skills, abilities), but will also focus on the match between the organisation (represented in all members) and newcomer to this organisation from the cultural perspective. In the literature, this tool is referred to as a person-organisation fit (P-O fit), and its incorporating into the selection process of employees enables "hiring for organisation", not only "for the job". The concept of P-O fit will be explained later in the next chapter.

To draw a conclusion at this stage it might be useful to say that cultural learning is the prerequisite of a successful company that can be supported by maintaining a wide representation of appropriately selected employees.

5. Individual's fits levels related to working environment

When trying to understand and predict the attitudes and action of employees with regard to their working environment, many researchers have taken a closer look at the models measuring the congruence between individuals and the specific level of working environment and their utilisation for practice; see [4, 5]. The individuals' fits approaches vary but the model shown in Fig. 4 can be concluded as an optimal categorisation to embrace all aspects of working environment [5, 6].

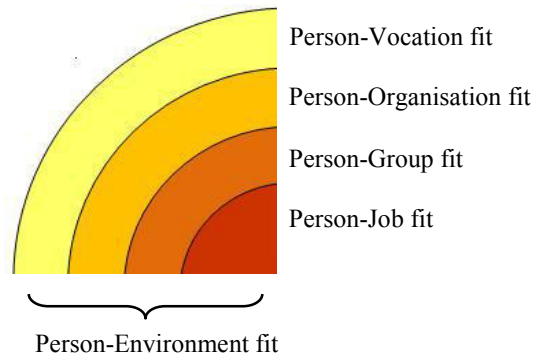


Fig. 4. Levels of individuals' fits (Source: author elaboration based on [5] and [6]).

The most important from all person-environment fits are those related to job (P-J) and organisation (P-O). Whereas the P-J fit primarily focuses on assessing the suitability of an individual for the tasks that are required for successful performance of a specific job, P-O fit focuses on looking for congruence between individuals and organisations from the value orientation perspective that mainly arises from cultural background. The other two levels (person-group and person-vocation fit) are considered as complementary to the whole, since person-group fit assesses the compatibility between the individual and other co-workers from the perspective of effective team cooperation. And finally the broadest level is not bounded directly to a specific organisation as it is related to the general occupation or profession. Compared to P-J fit P-O fit is much less commonly used in organisations to be systematically measured during the hiring process with the utilisation of designed tools. Handler [7] defined P-O fit as "the congruence of an individual's beliefs and values with the culture, norms, and values of an organisation". One limitation that is immediately evident from this definition is the fact that the elements of this fit are much more of a "soft" character. That is to say, it is difficult to examine the job-related outcomes of a match between person and organisation as it relates to very abstract concepts such as "values" and "culture". On the other side, only because it is of softer nature and involves less objective constructs than P-J fit, that does not mean it is of less importance.

5.1 Significance of measuring P-O fit

The idea of measuring P-O fit must be transformed into the elements required for using it as a systematic part of the hiring process within the organisations. Implementing P-O fit into the hiring process attempts to understand the selection process beyond the standard evaluation of professional KSA and it offers the potential for a more flexible and comprehensive approach to employee selection [8, 9, 10]. One of the possible approaches for testing and measuring the P-O fit is based on an integrative model of P-O fit, see Fig. 5.

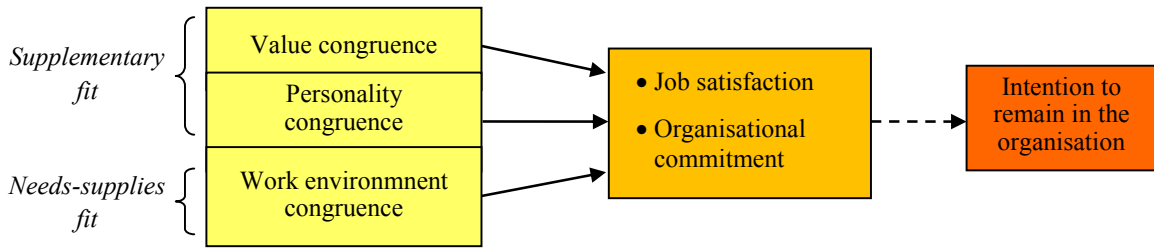


Fig. 5. An integrative model of P-O fit (Source: [8]).

This model comprises supplementary fit measured by value and personality congruence and needs-supplies fit measured by work environment congruence. All types of congruence examined in this model result in having an effect on employee satisfaction and commitment to organisation with the subsequent intention to remain with the organisation. The portrayed model presuppose the direct and positive correlation between value, personality and work environment congruence on one hand and employee satisfaction and commitment on the other one. [8]

Another useful approach in developing P-O fit theories, which is widely presented in the work by Kristof [5] is depicted on Fig. 6. This model distinguishes between supplementary and complementary P-O fit, with regard mainly to value orientation, or value and personality characteristics together. From this perspective the supplementary P-O fit indicates the similarity of fundamental characteristics between the individual and the organisation. For the organisation these characteristics traditionally include culture, climate, values, norms and standards for behaviour. On the individual’s side there are most often culturally subjected values and beliefs in the centre of the interest. A complementary fit searches for the characteristics that would make a whole of an entity or in other words add what is missing. In the core it doesn’t look for a similarity, but rather for those aspects that are yet missing to create the functional entity or improve the existing system.

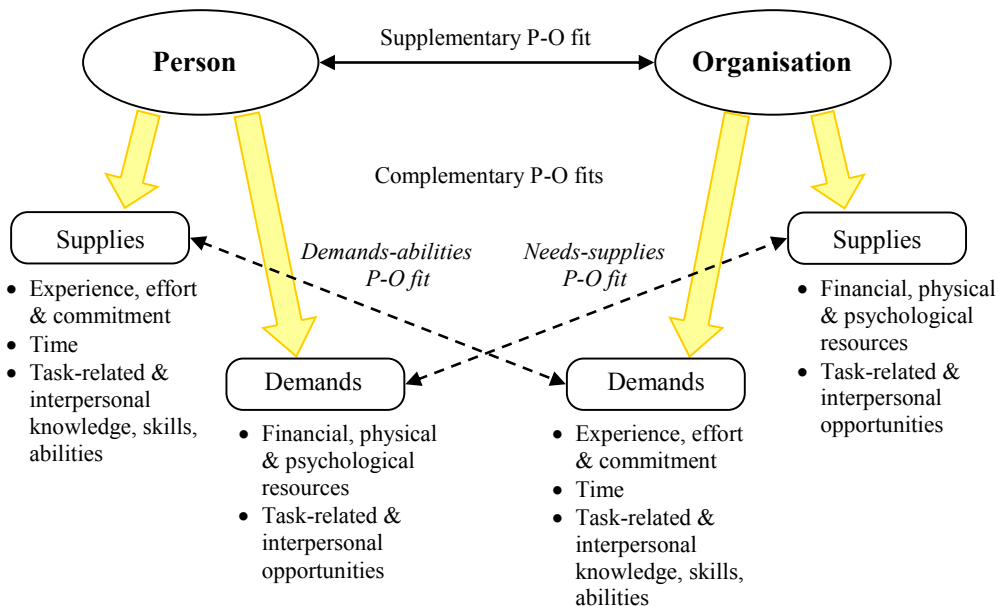


Fig. 6. Various conceptualisation of P-O fit (Author elaboration based on [5]).

5.2 Limitations of using P-O fit

As stated previously, the largest limitation of using P-O fit lies in the fact that it deals with softer aspects of human nature. Therefore it is necessary to choose the correct model for measuring fit within the organisation. There are several widely applicable models that can be utilised for this purpose. As Handler [7] says, when comparing pros and cons of using P-O fit, while there are many great benefits of measuring congruence as a part of applicant selection process, there are also several issues that must be fully considered when thinking of using this tool. Besides accentuation of the less objective nature of P-O fit dimensions Handler further mentions other potential problems. One of them stems from the fact that the core of it is entirely dependent upon the culture of the organisation, which an individual is compared to. The problem could arise from a larger amount of groups within an organisation if they did not share the same value orientation. For this reason, it is of high importance to ensure that the cultural standard to which an individual is compared is reflective of his or her real future workplace.

5.3 Shortcomings of previous P-O fit studies

Clercq, Fontaine and Anseel elaborated an extensive report [4] based on their study aimed at identifying the most comprehensive value model for assessing P-O fit. They suggested that there are several shortcomings within the previous studies that prevent an optimal integration and understanding of research findings. The limitations mainly were found in the manner in which the P-O value compatibility has been assessed. Firstly, a number of studies have used models that include a mix of values, KSA and personality traits. This conceptualisation makes it difficult to find out which constructs are responsible for which congruence effects. Secondly, the majority of studies on P-O fit examined overall fit across a wide variety of values, taking a cataloguing approach rather than starting from a well-developed theoretical structure. Lastly, when building up the concept for P-O fit study, it becomes clear that there does not exist one dominant value framework. To make things even more complicated, numerous studies have used scales made up of a mix of different value instruments or organisation-specific value items.

Clercq, Fontaine and Anseel have suggested that one of the possible theoretical models to be used in developing an effective assessment tool could be the Schwartz value model (see [11, 12]), which they supposed might increase the understanding of the interplay between different values in determining P-O fit and its outcomes. They have subjected it to the study and have stated that this model meets the requirements for thoroughness, comprehensiveness, and a cross-culturally validated theoretical value structure. The attempt to develop the usable tool for assessing the person-organisation fit within an organisation is a challenge for the future.

6. Conclusion

The comparison process of measuring P-O fit yields the valuable outcome in form of a data-based estimate of compatibility between an individual and organisation. This information is regarded useful for helping organisations to make all kinds of important decisions [7]. While the softer nature of P-O fit dimensions makes the outcome less tangible and influence of good P-O fit for objective aspects of job performance less visible, various studies have demonstrated ways in which dealing with P-O fit can have significant value for an organisation. Probably the most notable outcome of good P-O fit is increased tenure; in other words the intention to remain with the organisation. This outcome has a causal relationship with increased employee satisfaction, organisational commitment and identification.

It is indisputable that learning from other cultures brings numerous advantages, both on the personal and professional level. As every culture possesses characteristics less or more different from other ones, blending of them could contribute to improvements and developing new ideas in the organisation that would not be possible with the group of individuals of the same cultural background. Culture in this sense is perceived as a competitive advantage for every organisation successfully adopting the tools for processes for better selection and integration of a culturally diverse workforce. Global companies nowadays are shifting from the understanding of cultural encounters as inevitable and rather undesirable to perceiving culture as an attribute to benefit from. As Johnson [13] says in one of her books, a diversity-driven corporate culture must be inclusive of diversity-driven people. These statements gained support in the questionnaire survey as well as the later exploratory interviews.

Slovakia is a relative novice in dealing with different cultures and the driving force of Slovak economy lies mainly in its automotive industry. But irrespective of the industrial sector, all organisations should place the attention on building the diversity based competitive advantage [14]. This sort of competitive advantage lies in a fact that working teams with diverse sets of experiences, mental models, thinking styles and interpretations; in other words: culturally diverse teams; produce more options and more creative solutions to problems and challenges than homogeneous groups [15].

The main contribution of this paper steams not only from offering the results of two surveys that can be a starting point for future research, but also from underlining the limitations of every attempt to develop the usable tool for assessing the P-O fit within an organisation. The main limitation arises from the ambiguity and lack of clarity in distinguishing between the culturally influenced attributes resulting in shared values and core beliefs on one side and what is referred to as an individual's nature and temperament. The latter, unlike the former is not only learned through the process of upbringing but largely inherited. Therefore it is a task and at the same time a challenge for those striving for making the employee selection process as complex as possible to choose or develop the best value orientation assessing tools. Defined as the tools, which help to improve the organisational learning and ensure best possible outcome from the employee selection process.

Acknowledgements

This paper has been published as a part of submitted VEGA project no. 1/0787/12 „The identification of sustainable performance key parameters in industrial enterprises within multicultural environment“.

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