

## **Extending Person—Job Fit: The Role of Career Fit**

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## **EXTENDING PERSON—JOB FIT: THE ROLE OF CAREER FIT**

### **Abstract**

Does the match between a person's career aspirations and their current job requirements affect their level of engagement? An engaged workforce is mutually beneficial to both organizations and employees. Engagement contributes to positive business outcomes such as profit and productivity, while also being associated with positive outcomes for employees. The Gallup organization reports that worldwide workplace engagement levels have not increased, and only 13 per cent of employees worldwide are engaged at work (Mann & Harter, 2016). Selecting the right individuals for the right jobs can increase engagement levels leading to mutual benefits for both employees and their organizations. Organizations seek candidates whose abilities fit the requirements of job demands in order to maximize person-job fit (Judge & Ferris, 1992). This is in the best interest of the employee and the organization because employees who are in occupations and environments that match their preferences are more satisfied, committed and less likely to leave than employees who are not a good fit (Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). However, past approaches to person-job fit have focused on vocational skills and occupational fit, without explicitly considering the fit between a current job and the job-holders' career preferences.

Chan et al. (2012) have developed a framework for considering different career perspectives. People with the same vocational skills will vary in the extent to which they want to create new business ventures around that vocation (entrepreneurial orientation), to develop those skills more deeply (professional orientation), or move into managerial or leadership roles in that field (leadership orientation). This entrepreneurial/professional/leadership (EPL) framework provides a means for exploring individual differences in the extent to which people seek to pursue different career outcomes.

Evidence of positive outcomes from person-job fit has largely relied on studies of occupational fit as a measure of person-job fit, exclusive of career fit. The EPL framework provides a means for conceptualizing and measuring individual career preferences. Because the EPL framework is independent of vocational interests (K. Y. Chan et al., 2012), using it to assess career fit is likely to

provide additional insights into the positive outcomes of person-job fit, beyond those provided by studies of person-vocation fit.

In this study, we surveyed 232 working adults from a wide range of occupations, using an existing measure of person-job fit (Cable & DeRue, 2002) and a newly-developed measure of career fit based on the EPL framework. We demonstrate that these two measures are distinct. While traditional job fit was the most significant predictor of employee engagement (accounting for 40% of variance), career fit was also statistically significant, uniquely explaining an additional 3% of variance in engagement levels. We discuss the implications of this study for research, HRM practice, and career development.

### **Keywords**

Person-Job Fit; Careers; Career Fit; Engagement; Entrepreneurship; Leadership; Vocations

## INTRODUCTION

An engaged workforce is mutually beneficial to both organisations and employees.

Engagement leads to positive business outcomes (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) and is associated with positive outcomes for employees such as increased morale (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, & Fletcher, 2017) and a safer place to work (Vance, 2006). However, workforce surveys regularly demonstrate low levels of engagement; for example, The Gallup organisation reports that only 13 per cent of employees worldwide are engaged at work (Mann & Harter, 2016). According to a survey of 828 management academics and 939 practitioners, employee engagement ranked sixth in importance of current management 'grand challenges' (Banks et al., 2016).

Person-environment fit is one of the factors influencing employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Several different conceptualizations of fit have been proposed. Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1964) proposed a theory of work adjustment emphasizing the extent to which individual attributes (e.g., desire for role clarity) match characteristics of the job situation (e.g., degree of role ambiguity). Holland (1985) developed a model of person-vocation fit based around six profiles for matching individuals with jobs: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (RIASEC). More recently, Cable and DeRue (2002) distinguished three aspects of fit (values congruence, needs-supplies, and demand-abilities) relevant to outcomes such as job affect and performance.

These approaches to person-environment fit focus on aspects of the job or organization as important environmental factors. However, no fit measures explicitly address the fit between an individual's career aspirations, and the extent to which these aspirations are supported by their current job. Chan et al.'s (2012) EPL model of career motivations provides a framework for considering career fit. This model is separate from vocational interests and abilities; instead, it considers the extent to which people are motivated to engage in work which involves innovation or entrepreneurship (E), developing deeper vocational or professional skills (P), or taking on greater managerial or leadership responsibility (L).

In the following, we develop hypotheses regarding person-career fit (operationalized using the EPL framework) and engagement. We argue that consideration of career motivations will add additional insights into the way in which person-job fit contributes to employee engagement.

## **ENGAGEMENT AND PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT**

### **Engagement**

Employee engagement is a relatively recent construct in organization science, and one which is defined in diverse (and often inconsistent) ways by both researchers and practitioners (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Kahn (1990) defined an engaged person as someone who is connected to their work and can achieve active, full role performances, displaying personal presence in three ways: physical, cognitive and emotional. The degree of engagement is influenced by three conditions – meaningfulness (feeling worthwhile and valued for contributions), safety (able to act without fear of harm to self-image, status or career), and availability (having the capacity to perform effectively in the job).

In the years since Kahn’s clear exposition, multiple definitions, measures and frameworks have contributed to a situation where the “meaning of employee engagement remains conflated and confused” (Shuck, Osam, Zigarmi, & Nimon, 2017, p. 264). However, there is general agreement that engagement is a positive state of mind and not a trait, attitude or behavior (Macey & Schneider, 2008), and that it is associated with certain antecedents and outcomes (Shuck, Reio, & Rocco, 2011).

The most commonly researched antecedents to engagement cover individual psychological states, job design factors, leadership and management, organizational and team factors, and organizational interventions or activities (Bailey et al., 2017). Bailey et al.’s comprehensive meta-analysis identified only 3 studies as explicitly including a form of person-environment fit as an antecedent for engagement.

Engagement has been shown to have positive outcomes on individual task performance, extra-role behaviors (including knowledge sharing, citizenship behaviors, and innovation), job

satisfaction, and commitment (Bailey et al., 2017). These positive outcomes argue for improved understanding of engagement,

An important consideration for studies of engagement relates to measurement. One of the most commonly used measures of the engagement construct is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli and colleagues (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Grounded in a view of work engagement as being the opposite of burnout, the scale focuses more on the emotional and physical aspects of engagement, with less attention given to cognitive states (Shuck et al., 2017). Rich, LePine, and Crawford (2010) note that the scale also confounds antecedent conditions of engagement with engagement itself. Returning to Kahn's (1990) original conceptualization of engagement, Rich et al. developed a measure covering all three components – physical, emotional, and cognitive. This is the measure we adopt in this study.

### **Person-Environment Fit**

Person-environment fit is a broad-ranging construct which captures the extent to which a person's individual characteristics match elements of their environment. In the work context, this environment can be operationalized at different levels. For example, person-organization fit captures the match between an individual and the organization in terms of values, or with respect to what the organization provides to or expects from the individual (Kristof, 1996). Similarly, person-group fit assesses congruence between individual and group attributes (for example, the pace or time urgency of group work (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005)). At the job level, person-job fit assesses the fit between the demands of a job and the person's abilities (i.e., demands-abilities fit) or what a job supplies and what the person wants (i.e., needs-supplies) (Edwards, 1991).

Fit has always been an important consideration in the careers field. Super (1953) argued for the importance of achieving a match between individual values, abilities and personality and the nature of the job and work situation. Perhaps the best known career fit theory is Holland's (1985) RIASEC framework for comparing individual personality and vocational interests with the "personality" of jobs, assessed on the same six dimensions (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional). A recent review (van Vianen, 2018) concluded that vocational fit has

moderately positive relationships with task performance, as well as with organizational citizenship. There is less support for a link to job satisfaction. A meta-analysis across 53 samples found a mean correlation of .17 between congruence and satisfaction (Tsabari, Tziner, & Meir, 2005).

Van Vianen (2018) suggests that new approaches are needed in considering vocational fit, and identifies the importance career development as one avenue for future study. Instead of focusing just on the nature of the current job and work context (as is the general case in fit research), consideration could be given to the extent to which the current job provides opportunities consistent with a person's career aspirations. Chan et al. (2012) have developed a framework for considering career aspirations across three dimensions – entrepreneurial, professional, and leadership/managerial (EPL). These dimensions form a “subjective career space” within which individuals can move as their career develops. People with the same vocational interest (e.g., accounting or social work) may follow different trajectories – some seeking to develop new services (E), others focusing on deepening their knowledge and skills (P), and others moving into leadership roles in their vocation (L).

While the measures developed by Chan et al. (2012) assessed motivation towards E, P, and L career paths, Chan has also developed an unpublished measure of EPL career fit and validated it on a working adult sample in Singapore (K. Y. Chan, personal communication, September 29, 2011). Assessing the extent to which a current job matches an individual's preferences for E, P, or L career progression provides an alternative to the vocational fit framework. The more closely a job supports future career intentions, the more likely the person is to be engaged with that job.

**Hypothesis 1.** EPL career fit is positively related to engagement

In order to confirm that EPL career fit makes a unique contribution to explaining variation in engagement, it is necessary to compare it with existing measures of person-job fit. As discussed above, vocational congruence does not have a strong relationship to affective outcomes such as job satisfaction. In contrast, measures of other forms of perceived fit (notably needs-supplies fit) have been shown to be good predictors of outcomes such as job and career satisfaction (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Cable and DeRue's perceived fit scale (PFS) measures two types of person-job fit (needs-supplies and demand-abilities) as well as person-organization fit (value congruence). It therefore provides a comprehensive basis of comparison for EPL fit.

**Hypothesis 2.** EPL career fit will account for a significant amount of variance in engagement, over and above that accounted for by the PFS scale.

## METHOD

### Participants and Sample Size

In order to obtain responses from working adults in a wide range of occupations, several complementary approaches were taken. Personal approaches were made to passengers on a commuter ferry and to parents attending children's sporting events, while social media was used to distribute an URL to an online questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and those working fewer than 20 hours per week were excluded from the study. This resulted in 232 completed questionnaires.

Most respondents (56.3%) were aged between 30 and 49, with 28.6% older than 49 and 15.2% younger than 30; 52.6% were female and 47.4% male. All worked more than 20 hours per week; 79.5% were in permanent employment, 6.6% on temporary contracts, and 14% were self-employed. Occupational groups were primarily professionals (44.4%), managers (30.2%), clerical (6.9%) and sales (3.4%) with a correspondingly high level of education (21% Masters degree or higher; 52.4% Bachelors or postgraduate diploma; 15% diploma or certificate; and 11.6% high school qualification).

A low risk notification was submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, with all ethical requirements being complied with in conducting this research,

### Measures

Participants rated their own job engagement, person-environment fit, and EPL career fit using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

#### *Job engagement*

We measured job engagement using Rich et al.'s (2010) 18-item, 3-factor scale, designed to reflect Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of engagement as comprising three dimensions – physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Sample items include “I work with intensity on my job”, “I am enthusiastic in my job”, and “At work, my mind is focused on my job.” Following Rich et al.'s conceptualization of engagement as a second-order factor, we used a single engagement score as the dependent variable.

#### *Person-Environment Fit*

We used Cable and DeRue's (2002) perceived fit scale (PFS) to assess person-environment fit. The scale comprises nine items measuring three different aspects of fit: values congruence fit (e.g., “My personal values match my organization's/company's value and culture”), needs-supplies fit (e.g., “There is a good fit between what my job offers me and what I am looking for in a job”), and demand-abilities fit (e.g., “The match is very good between the demands of my job and my personal skills”). Values-congruence fit uses the organization as a referent, while the other two facets focus on person-job fit.

#### *EPL Career Fit*

We used an unpublished measure developed by the Careers Aspiration Survey group at Nanyang Technological University (K. Y. Chan, personal communication, September 29, 2011). The scale comprises 9 items assessing the extent to which respondents believe their current work is consistent with their E, P, and L career motivations. Sample items include: “Working in this organisation/company fulfils my desire to gain experience in planning new business ventures”; “Working in this organization/company fulfils my desire to continuously advance in my technical expertise throughout my working life”; and “Working in this organization/company fulfils my desire to lead others and take leadership roles”.

### *Control Variables*

Age has been shown to have a weak effect on engagement (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), and (through a process of self-selection) longer tenured employees may have higher person-environment fit. We therefore included age and tenure as control variables.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Because our study focused on perceptions of employees (regarding job fit and engagement), all variables were assessed using self-report measures (Chan, 2009). Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test hypotheses. The two control variables (age and tenure) were entered first, followed by the three PFS scales – values congruence (Fit (VC)), needs-supplies (Fit (NS)), and demand-abilities (Fit (DA)). Finally, the three EPL fit dimensions were added – entrepreneurship (Fit (E)), professional (Fit (P)), and leadership/management (Fit (L)).

## **RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables are summarized in Table 1. All scales demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach alpha ranging from .78 to .96). Consistent with Cable and DeRue's (2002) findings with respect to job satisfaction, all three facets of the perceived fit scale correlated significantly with engagement in our study, with needs-supplies having the highest correlation.

All three facets of EPL career fit show significant positive correlations (ranging from .27 to .60) with job engagement, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that EPL career fit would explain significant variance in engagement, over and above that explained by the PFS fit scale (which measures person-organization and person-job fit). We tested this by carrying out hierarchical multiple regression; Table 2 summarizes the results. The first model includes the two control variables, age and tenure. Neither variable was significant.

In the second step, the three PFS facets (Fit (VC), Fit (NS), and Fit (DA)) were entered, and these accounted for 39% of variance in engagement ( $\Delta R^2 = .392$ ). Fit (VC) was barely significant ( $\beta = .09, p < .05$ ), but Fit (NS) ( $\beta = .27, p < .01$ ) and Fit (DA) ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ) showed strong relationships with engagement.

In the third step, the three EPL fit facets (Fit (E), Fit (P), and Fit (L)) were included in the model. Only Fit (P) had a significant coefficient ( $\beta = .16, p < .01$ ). Coefficients for all three PFS facets reduced, with VC no longer being significant in the final model. Inclusion of the EPL fit scales led to a small but statistically significant increase in variance accounted for ( $\Delta R^2 = .033$ ).

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided preliminary evidence to support further exploration of the role of career fit in contributing to employee engagement. While the incremental contribution made by career fit in our study is small in practical terms, it suggests a number of avenues for future research.

Only one facet of EPL fit (that relating to professional motivation) was a significant predictor of engagement. This may be partly a function of our sample characteristics. Almost three-quarters identified as professionals or managers, and the same proportion had university degree qualifications. This may have resulted in an over-representation of people with strong P motivation in the sample. Only 14% of the sample were self-employed, suggesting a low representation of respondents following entrepreneurial careers. Future studies could seek to use a broader sample, seeking to engage people with more diverse career motivations and employment categories.

Van Vianen (2018) argued for an intraindividual approach to person-job fit, considering individuals' self-reported needs and values. From an EPL perspective, future studies could evaluate the extent to which EPL motivations moderate the relationship between EPL fit and engagement. If a person has low E motivation, for example, then the relationship between Fit (E) and engagement is likely to be weaker than for a person with a high E career motivation.

Different types of fit have been shown to have independent effects on outcomes such as job satisfaction (Kristof-Brown, Jansen, & Colbert, 2002). Kristof-Brown et al. also demonstrate that

different aspects of work experience can influence which types of fit have most impact. They suggest that career stage theories may help clarify the sources of variation in fit perceptions over time. The EPL framework provides a way to explore longitudinal patterns. Chan et al. (2012) describe EPL dimensions as defining a subjective career space within which people can follow different trajectories. New graduates, for example, may choose to deepen professional skills early in their career (following a P trajectory), before some seek to gain leadership responsibilities (L) or seek entrepreneurial opportunities (E). It is possible that the effect of EPL career fit on engagement will be more substantial in proximity to such transition points. At the individual level, shifts in perceived EPL fit may signal impending self-initiated job changes consistent with individual EPL motivations.

From a practical perspective, greater insights into the role of EPL career fit could assist employers in efforts to retain and develop staff. This may be particularly true of organizations experiencing challenges in persuading technical specialists to take on leadership roles – a common problem in sectors such as health (see, for example, Dickinson, Ham, Snelling, & Spurgeon, 2014). Understanding the relative strength of EPL motivations, and providing work experiences to facilitate better EPL career fit may assist in developing the right mix of specialist and leadership potential.

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Table 1

*Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1. Age <sup>1</sup>	3.89	1.21									
2. Tenure	8.02	8.32	.44**								
3. Fit (VC)	3.62	1.01	.02	.11	(.94)						
4. Fit (NS)	3.68	0.85	.21**	.17*	.52**	(.87)					
5. Fit (DA)	4.00	0.74	.30**	.24**	.30**	.63**	(.78)				
6. Fit (E)	3.04	0.93	.01	.02	.38**	.35**	.19**	(.86)			
7. Fit (P)	3.78	0.83	.11	.12	.37**	.52**	.43**	.46**	(.84)		
8. Fit (L)	3.56	0.89	.07	.08	.36**	.36**	.31**	.47**	.62**	(.89)	
9. Job engagement	4.22	0.63	.17*	.12	.41**	.60**	.54**	.27**	.50**	.35**	(.96)

<sup>1</sup> Age (in years) was measured in categories: 1 = 18–19, 2 = 20–29, 3 = 30–39, 4 = 40–49, 5 = 50–59, 6 = 60–69, 7 = over 70.

*Note.* *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in parentheses are Cronbach alpha reliabilities. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

Table 2

Regression results using job engagement as the criterion

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i> 95% CI [LL, UL]	<i>beta</i>	<i>beta</i> 95% CI [LL, UL]	Fit	Difference
(Intercept)	3.90**	[3.63, 4.18]				
Age	0.07	[-0.00, 0.15]	0.14	[-0.00, 0.28]		
Tenure	0.00	[-0.01, 0.02]	0.06	[-0.08, 0.21]		
					$R^2 = .031^*$	
					CI[.00,.08]	
(Intercept)	1.96**	[1.56, 2.36]				
Age	0.01	[-0.05, 0.07]	0.02	[-0.09, 0.14]		
Tenure	-0.00	[-0.01, 0.01]	-0.04	[-0.15, 0.07]		
Fit (VC)	0.09*	[0.02, 0.16]	0.14	[0.02, 0.26]		
Fit (NS)	0.27**	[0.16, 0.37]	0.36	[0.22, 0.50]		
Fit (DA)	0.23**	[0.12, 0.35]	0.28	[0.14, 0.41]		
					$R^2 = .423^{**}$	$\Delta R^2 = .392^{**}$
					CI[.32,.49]	CI[.29, .49]
(Intercept)	1.71**	[1.30, 2.13]				
Age	0.02	[-0.04, 0.07]	0.03	[-0.08, 0.14]		
Tenure	-0.00	[-0.01, 0.00]	-0.05	[-0.16, 0.06]		
Fit (VC)	0.07	[-0.00, 0.15]	0.12	[-0.00, 0.24]		
Fit (NS)	0.21**	[0.10, 0.32]	0.29	[0.14, 0.43]		
Fit (DA)	0.20**	[0.09, 0.31]	0.24	[0.11, 0.37]		
Fit (E)	-0.01	[-0.09, 0.07]	-0.02	[-0.14, 0.10]		
Fit (P)	0.16**	[0.05, 0.27]	0.21	[0.07, 0.35]		
Fit (L)	0.02	[-0.08, 0.11]	0.02	[-0.11, 0.15]		
					$R^2 = .456^{**}$	$\Delta R^2 = .033^{**}$
					CI[.34,.52]	CI[-.00, .07]

Note. A significant *b*-weight indicates the beta-weight is also significant. *b* represents unstandardized regression weights. *beta* indicates the standardized regression weights. *LL* and *UL* indicate the lower and upper limits of a confidence interval, respectively.

\* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .