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Firm or subgroup culture: where does fitting in matter most?

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Summary Using the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP), this research investigated the extent to which fit between individuals ($n = 136$) and their competency groups (P–G fit) and the organization (P–O fit) were related to job satisfaction. Even in a consulting firm with a strong organization culture, we found small, but interpretable, differences between the value-based cultures of the competency groups in the firm. Although the two forms of fit were highly correlated, both individual consultants' fit with the culture of their competency group and the organization as a whole were significant predictors of job satisfaction. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, a substantial amount of research has shown that the culture of an organization has implications for both the organization's ability to implement its strategy and its ability to attract and retain employees. When an organization has a strong culture, that is, members hold a set of shared values, and when the culture is consistent with organization goals, it is generally assumed that the organization will be better able to enact its strategy (Sorensen, 2002). In addition, when individuals 'fit' the culture of the organization, that is, when an individual's values are congruent with the values that define the culture of the organization, individuals are more likely to be satisfied and less likely to leave the organization than if there is a lack of congruence (Chatman, 1991; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Vandenberghe, 1999; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003).

At the same time that researchers have explored the overall effects of organization culture, the existence of subcultures within an organization has been a widely observed phenomenon (Hofstede, 1998; Jerimer, Slocum, Fry, & Gaines, 1991). Subcultures may develop within different functions, by profession, practice areas, or by level within the organization (Drucker, 1997; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Wenger, 1998).

In a recent review of the literature on subcultures, Boisnier and Chatman (2003) note that researchers have typically thought of organizations as either having a strong overall culture or as consisting of a more fragmented collection of distinct subcultures. However, they argue that an organization can have *both* a

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strong overall culture *and* distinct subcultures at the same time. They argue that the values of an organization can be distinguished between ones that are pivotal and others that are peripheral. Pivotal values are those values that are strongly held throughout the organization and enforced by sanctions, while peripheral values may also define the culture but are not likely to be sanctioned. Boisnier and Chatman (2003) argue that subcultures within an organization can be defined by the strong pivotal values of the organization but also by peripheral values that may be strongly held within a unit. Thus, subcultures within an organization will be based on both the pivotal values that define the culture of the organization and a set of peripheral values that are not shared throughout the organization. In this way, strong subcultures can reflect the overall culture of the organization but also reflect unique aspects of individual units.

The notion that a strong organization-wide culture and strong subcultures can exist together has important implications in a number of areas. For example, organizations attempt to communicate to potential and new employees the values that define the culture (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000). In doing so, should the organization try to communicate the cultural values that define the overall organization or those specific values that make subcultures unique? Similarly, since shared values and norms among the members of a group can influence the nature of the performance strategies within a group (Jehn & Mannix, 2001) and group performance (Chatman & Flynn, 2001), should hiring managers be most concerned about fit with the organization or group culture? Although substantial evidence exists that both the fit between the person and the overall organization (P–O fit) and the person and the group or subunit (P–G fit) are related to individual outcomes (see Kristof, 1996, and Verquer et al., 2003, for reviews), to our knowledge no research has systematically explored these two types of fit using the same dimensions or tried to identify the relative influence of each.

The distinction between an organization's culture and subcultures is becoming more important as the dynamics and structures of organizations change. As organizations become more 'virtual,' less-co-located, and more reliant on self-managed individuals and teams, maintaining an overall organization culture may become difficult (Mirvis & Hall, 1994; Tolbert, 1996). Further, it has been asserted that employees are becoming more connected to their practice and skills and less so with the organizations in which they apply them (Drucker, 1997; Russo, 1998). Thus, changes in organizations may simultaneously weaken connections to the overall organization and strengthen ties to the unit of which an employee is a part. Despite the fact that relatively little empirical work has addressed the culture of these practice-based groups, writers in the business press have observed their importance. Stewart (1996) has gone so far as to suggest that organization values will emerge from an organization's competencies. 'They [organization values] grow out of core professional skills, communities of practice . . . If this is where we live, this is where we will find our values' (p. 147).

Based on this, we propose that individuals' fit with the value-based culture of both their organization (P–O fit) and subunit (P–G fit) will be predictive of satisfaction at work. Because of the increasing importance of these competency groups in organizations, we speculate that P–G fit will be more predictive of satisfaction than P–O fit.

The present study

We look at the culture of a large, worldwide consulting firm. In such firms a strong culture is important (Chatman & Jehn, 1994). Because of the large number of professional employees working in remote locations, a reliance on formal control systems to guide individuals' behavior may be problematic and social control systems, such as shared values, are likely to be particularly effective and important in influencing individuals' actions at work (O'Reilly, 1989). Consultants in the firm are organized into four practice groups: Strategy; Technology; Business Processes; and Change Management. Although the practice groups are co-located in regional offices, they undertake different types of engagements

and have different clients. Even though the consulting work is done within practice groups, the firm places a strong emphasis on developing a common culture independent of any regional or group differences. To reinforce this all newly hired professional employees spend 2 weeks in a formal orientation program at a central training facility that focuses primarily on the firm's values and general processes. In addition, individual consultants spend one or more weeks per year at this central training facility. Approximately 75 per cent of the annual training is devoted to firm-wide as opposed to regional or specific practice issues. The fact that we are looking at individuals who all do the same type of work, within an organization that emphasizes a strong organization culture, suggests that differences between organization and group cultures may be subtle and makes any tests of those differences very conservative.

Because the culture of a group is likely to reflect many of the core values of the organization, a fine-grained method for assessing values is particularly useful. Therefore, we assessed the culture of the firm and the four practice groups using the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP; O'Reilly et al., 1991). This ipsative measure can be used to develop a profile of the relative importance of 54 values in describing the culture of an organization or unit. It can also be used to develop a profile of the relative desirability of these same values to the individual. Thus, one can assess the overall similarity between profiles of different cultures or between an individual's preferences and the culture across a wide range of values.

Organizational Context

We conducted this study in a large, worldwide consulting firm with consultants who were organized into four distinct competency-based practice groups. Although the groups share field offices, each group concentrates on different types of problems for client companies and manages its own client engagements. The *Strategy Group* (approximately 6 per cent of the firm's consultants) provides advice on long-term strategy to client companies. This group typically works with senior executives in the client organizations regarding topics such as mergers, divestitures, and product and market strategies. The *Technology Group* (32 per cent of the consultants) works with clients to implement and maintain technology systems. For example, the consultants might design a network to facilitate information exchange across divisions or automate a process to reduce labor costs. The *Business Process Group* (50 per cent of the consultants) engages in the implementation of re-engineering and process improvement projects and advises clients on topics such as outsourcing and the tactical use of information systems. The *Change Management Group* (12 per cent of the consultants) undertakes projects associated with supporting change efforts in client organizations, often focusing on human resource issues including training and organization development. We collected data from consultants in three large regional offices.

Method

Overview and sample

Three separate groups of respondents provided data for the study. One set of respondents used the OCP to provide a description of the culture of the overall organization. A second group, made up of four

subgroups, used the instrument to describe the culture of the four competency-based groups within the organization. The third group used the OCP to describe the cultural values they desired within an organization. This group also completed a measure of satisfaction.

Sampling strategy

Senior executives in the organization informed us we should anticipate a response rate of approximately 20 per cent to our survey. We estimated that we would need approximately 150 individual respondents to provide adequate power to test the relations between individuals' fit with the organization (P–O fit) and competency group (P–G fit) and their satisfaction. A randomly generated list of 853 employees (consultants, managers, partners) representing the four competency groups were asked to complete the OCP to describe the values they desired in their ideal organization and to complete a measure of job satisfaction.

Based on previous studies assessing culture using OCP and other methods (Cable et al., 2000; Chatman, 1991; O'Reilly et al., 1991) and other Q-sort-based assessments (Block, 1978), we estimated that a minimum of 10 respondents for each competency group would allow us to develop reliable Q-sort-based assessments of competency group culture. Because of the anticipated low response rate, a randomly generated list of 272 individuals across the four practice groups were asked to use the OCP to describe the values characteristic of their competency group.

Finally, we surveyed partners and managers to create the organizational culture profile. Since we were told to anticipate a response rate of under 10 per cent for this group, a random set of 345 managers and partners were asked to complete the OCP based on the values they believed were characteristic of the overall culture of the firm.

Participants

After two e-mail reminders, the final sample included 136 individuals who described the values they desired (response rate of 16 per cent), 52 individuals describing the organization culture (response rate of 15 per cent), and 51 individuals describing the culture of one of the competency groups (response rate of 19 per cent) including 11 respondents from the Strategy Group, 10 from the Change Management Group, 18 from the Technology Group, and 12 from the Business Practices Group. Although the response rates were low, the absolute number of responses was roughly consistent with what we had anticipated. Of the final sample, 62 per cent of the respondents were male and 61 per cent were under the age of 36. The average tenure of the group was 9.2 years. All respondents in the sample possessed a bachelors degree and 43 per cent also possessed a graduate degree. Of the respondents, 32 per cent were partners or associate partners, 44 per cent were managers, and the rest were consultants. Because of the low response rates, we compared the demographic characteristics of the respondents to the overall population of the firm. In general, the respondents were representative of the overall population, with the exception that the final sample was slightly older and had longer tenure than the average of the firm. This is not surprising in that we oversampled partners. There were no significant differences between the sample and population regarding gender, education, or the percentage of individuals assigned to the competency groups.

Measures

Organization culture, group culture, and desired culture

We assessed the cultures of the overall organization and the four practice groups using the OCP (O'Reilly et al., 1991). The instrument contains 54 'value statements' that emerged from a review of popular press and academic writings on organization culture assessing such things as risk taking,

flexibility, and concern for individuals. The 52 individuals assessing the organization culture sorted those items into nine categories based on how characteristic each item is of the overall firm.[1] The 51 individuals assessing the subcultures of the competency-based groups sorted the items in terms of how characteristic each is of the group of which the individual is a member. The third group of 136 individuals used the OCP to sort the 54 items in terms of the type of culture they would prefer to work in and used the same forced distribution process to place the items in categories ranging from 'most desirable' to 'most undesirable.'

Individual outcome measure

Overall job satisfaction was measured using a three-item scale (e.g., I would take this job again) developed by Quinn and Staines (Cook, Hepworth, Wall, & Warr, 1989). The internal consistency of this measure in this sample was satisfactory (alpha = 0.86).

Control variables

Since this organization placed a very strong emphasis on training and socializing both new hires and longer-tenured employees, we used total days of training the individual had received as a measure of the level of socialization ($M = 45.51$, SD = 63.99). We also used dummy variables for the practice group to control for overall differences. We included these in the analyses of fit and satisfaction.

Results

Organization and competency group culture

Before assessing the relative importance of P–O and P–G fit, it is necessary to develop a reliable description of the organization and group cultures. Recall that separate groups of raters completed the OCP for each competency group and for the overall organization. For each group, we calculated item-by-item averages and developed an overall profile based on those averages. We then used a variation of the Spearman–Brown general prophecy formula to calculate a coefficient alpha for each group. The coefficient alpha scores ranged from 0.85 to 0.96 for the five aggregated profiles.[2] We also calculated the median pairwise correlation for the raters of organization and group culture profiles. These ranged from 0.29 to 0.46. This level of agreement is consistent with or greater than reported in other studies in which agreement was concluded (Chatman & Jehn, 1994; Sheridan, 1992). These results suggest that the profiles for each competency group and the organization are reliable, even though the number of respondents assessing the competency-based groups is small.

To assess the extent to which competency groups had distinct cultures from one another and the organization, we calculated correlation coefficients between the overall profiles. The correlations between the profiles ranged from 0.78 to 0.93 ($p < 0.001$ for all) indicating that the cultures of the competency groups and organization were quite similar. Even though the overall profiles of the

[1]Items are categorized as follows: Most characteristic (desirable) 2 items; Quite characteristic 4 items; Fairly characteristic 6 items; Somewhat characteristic 9 items; Neither characteristic or uncharacteristic 12 items; Somewhat uncharacteristic 9 items; Fairly uncharacteristic 6 items; Quite uncharacteristic 4 items; Most uncharacteristic 2 items.

[2]The interpretation of a reliability coefficient based on Q-sort data is different than if nomothetic data are used and represents the similarity of individuals' profiles to the aggregrated profile and is an estimate of how likely it would be to obtain the same profile if the sample was expanded.

Table 1. Mean OCP dimensions by group

	Innovation	People orientation	Detail orientation	Easygoing	Stability	Outcome orientation	Team orientation
Overall organization	5.39_{ab}	5.22	5.61	3.35_{ab}	4.94	6.54_{ab}	6.10
Change management group	5.90_{ab}	5.02	5.77	3.04_{ab}	4.86	6.95_{b}	5.45
Strategy group	6.09_{b}	4.98	5.15	2.96_{a}	4.55	6.91_{b}	6.18
Process management group	5.01_{a}	4.82	5.80	3.58_{ab}	5.12	6.42_{ab}	5.33
Technology group	5.33_{ab}	5.08	5.70	3.67_{b}	5.12	6.10_{a}	6.19
Overall F	3.22*			2.62*		2.29*	

Groups with a common subscript do not differ significantly (Tukey test $p > 0.05$).
*$p < 0.05$.

cultures of the competency groups were significantly related, our next step was to see whether the groups differed on some specific elements of culture.

Previous investigations using the OCP (Chatman & Jehn, 1994; O'Reilly et al., 1991) have reported that the 54 value items reflect seven factors including: (1) innovation; (2) stability; (3) people orientation; (4) outcome orientation; (5) easygoing; (6) detail orientation; and (7) team orientation. To identify differences among the subcultures, we calculated scores for each of the seven OCP factors for each group by averaging the scores on specific value statements that loaded on each factor and then comparing these means with separate one-way ANOVAs.

As shown in Table 1, there were no significant differences for four of the dimensions: stability, people orientation, detail orientation, and team orientation. Significant differences existed on the innovation, outcome orientation, and easygoing dimensions. Overall, these results suggest that there are small but interpretable differences among the subcultures and organization culture. These difference suggest that P–G as well as P–O fit may be useful in explaining individual satisfaction.

Person–organization and person–group fit

Recall that 136 respondents used the OCP to describe the organization culture they most desired. It should be noted that none of the individual respondents contributed to the development of the organization or competency group culture profiles. We calculated P–O fit and P–G fit by correlating the individual profile with the organization profile and appropriate competency group profile. Thus each individual received two fit scores: one based on fit with the profile of the organization culture and the other based on the fit with the profile of the competency group of which he or she was a member. Overall, individuals' P–O fit correlations ranged from -0.52 to 0.53 ($M = 0.02$, SD $= 0.19$). The range of P–G correlations was -0.55 to 0.48 ($M = 0.01$, SD $= 0.18$). There was no significant difference between the means of the fit measures. These two fit scores were highly correlated ($r = 0.92$, $p < 0.001$). This high correlation between the fit scores is not surprising given the similarity between the subcultures and overall organization culture.

To determine the relations between P–O and P–G fit and satisfaction we conducted two hierarchical regression analyses. In the first step of each, we entered the control variables for practice group and previous socialization. In the second step we entered either P–O or P–G fit. These results are shown in Table 2. The results of both regression analyses are nearly identical. In the separate equations, both P–O and P–G fit explained significance amounts of variance in satisfaction (P–O fit, $t = 3.16$, $p < 0.01$; P–G fit, $t = 3.77$, $p < 0.001$) even after controlling for practice group and socialization. These results

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results for individual satisfaction† ($n = 136$)

	Model 1	Model 2
Control variables		
Business process group	0.14	0.13
Strategy group	−0.01	−0.01
Change management group	0.09	0.09
Socialization	0.06	0.06
Change in R^2	0.02	0.02
Fit		
P–O fit	0.28**	
P–G fit		0.30***
Change in R^2	0.08***	0.09***
Overall adjusted R^2	0.09	0.09
Overall F	2.54*	2.82*

†Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Signs have been reversed so that positive values are associated with higher levels of individual affect.
***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

are consistent with previous work that shows that value-based fit between the individual and culture is related to individual outcomes, in this case satisfaction. (Kristof, 1996).

Because of the high correlation ($r = 0.92$) between the two measures of fit, assessing their independent contributions of the two types of fit to satisfaction is difficult. For example, including both fit measures in a single regression equation introduces collinearity problems that make it impossible to accurately assess the independent contributions of the variables. Therefore, we were forced to try indirect ways to determine which type of fit was most important.

First, we calculated the difference between P–O and P–G fit and included it in a regression equation along with P–O fit and the control variables. Although there are problems with using difference scores such as this, our logic was that the difference score would provide an indirect measure of the relative strength of the two types of fit for each person as well as a measure of the level of fit. This analysis essentially replicated Model 1 shown in Table 2 but added the difference score in a third step. The first two steps of the analysis are identical to what is reported in Table 2. Adding the difference score in the third step explained marginally more variance in affect (beta = 0.30, $t = 1.76$, $p < 0.10$). Although the test and results are weak, this analysis suggests that exploring P–G fit may be useful in understanding individuals' affect.

Second, we attempted to identify whether there might be specific areas in which fit differed by looking at the differences between fit scores within competency groups. Since the means of both P–O and P–G fit were approximately 0, we assumed that within any group 50 per cent of respondents should score higher on each measure. We calculated one-sample chi-square tests to determine whether the overall distribution of scores differed from what should be expected. When the scores from all competency groups were examined together, the distribution of scores for individuals with higher P–O fit (or higher P–G fit) did not significantly differ from the expected distribution of 50 per cent (chi-square = 1.83). However, when the same analysis was conducted for each competency group a different pattern emerged. For both the Change Management and Process Management competency groups, the percentage of individuals with higher P–O fit scores than P–G fit scores was greater than expected (Change Management – chi-square = 6.26, $p < 0.01$; Process Management – chi-square = 13.07, $p < 0.01$). The results were the opposite for the other two competency groups. A greater percentage of individuals in the Technology and Strategy competency groups more closely fit the group culture (P–G fit) than the organization culture (P–O fit) (Technology – chi-square = 13.33, $p < 0.01$; Strategy – chi-square = 6.00, $p < 0.01$). Taken together, these results suggest that although there is no

overall difference between P–O and P–G fit, some differences do exist within specific competency groups. This is further indirect evidence that exploring both P–O and P–G fit may be useful in developing a full understanding of person–situation interactions.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, we found that both P–O and P–G fit were related to individuals' satisfaction at work. In contrast to other studies, we looked at the two types of fit simultaneously using a large set of values to test both. Overall, we found that both P–O and P–G fit had similar relations to satisfaction. This is no doubt due to the fact that the cultures of the organization and competency groups were very similar. This similarity is not surprising in that all of the competency-based groups were in the same 'business' of consulting and the organization sought to present a consistent face to clients. In addition, this firm invests substantial resources in company-wide training and socialization, including a central facility at which all consultants spend substantial time.

Although we speculated that P–G fit would be more predictive of satisfaction than P–O fit, this was not directly supported. It may well be that this effect would be observed in organizations where groups are more distinct. For example, if the relevant groups were distinct business units or engaged in different types of work, differences between group culture and organization culture might be more pronounced. This would allow a more realistic competitive test between these two types of fit.

Even in an organization that seeks to develop a strong, consistent culture we did find some indirect evidence that distinct group cultures can emerge and be related to satisfaction. Competency groups differed from one another on some dimensions of culture, even though no group differed from the organization's culture. And within two of the competency groups fit with the group was higher than fit with the organization. It may be that these groups recruit and select people based on fit with the subculture to a greater extent than other groups do or that these groups do more to socialize consultants into the competency group than do the other groups. Clearly further research is necessary to explore both how differences between group cultures emerge and the relative contributions of P–O and P–G culture fit to satisfaction.

The OCP proved to be a viable tool for the simultaneous assessment of individual, group, and organizational culture profiles. It can provide comprehensive, detailed portraits of the values characteristic of the organization, subgroups, and the individual, and allow direct comparisons across all of these entities. These comparisons can be made at an overall level or at a more fine-grained level. The specific items in Q-sort-based assessment approaches, such as the OCP, can be used to develop specific 'clinical portraits' based on the specific items that are ranked (Block, 1978). Although the specific items are not amenable to sophisticated statistical analysis, the portrait can provide an understanding of the specific values that best describe a person, group, or organization.

There are a number of factors that may limit the generalizability of our results. First, as we noted above, the firm we studied operated in a single industry and sought to build a strong organization culture. In other more diversified firms that compete in several industries, subcultures may become more differentiated. In this way, our site perhaps provides an overly conservative test of the phenomenon.

A second limitation comes from both the sample size and low response rates. Although we anticipated a low response rate and sampled accordingly, questions can certainly be raised about the extent to which the low response rate could have distorted the results even though our sample was quite representative of the overall firm. In addition, the small number of individuals providing profiles of the cultures of the competency-based groups is troublesome. The reliability of Q-sort data is assessed

differently than for nomothetic data and our estimates of reliability were consistent with those that are typically reported in published work using Q-sort measures, including the OCP. Despite this, the small number of responses invites questions regarding the assessments.

Third, there are many ways of assessing culture and fit, all of which have different strengths and weaknesses. We chose the OCP in part because it can assess a very complete list of the values that can define a culture. In our view, this is important for studies comparing cultures or assessing congruence, since there is a risk that omitting important, salient values may distort results. However, the OCP is an ideographic, ipsative measure which limits the use of some statistical techniques (Edwards, 1994).

In summary, is sharing values with the overall organization or the group to which a person belongs more important? These results suggest that both are important but that their relative importance may be difficult to determine precisely. What the results do suggest is that if discernible subcultures exist, managers may potentially increase the satisfaction of employees by systematically attempting to improve the fit between the individual and the culture of the group. Group cultures are easier to change than organization cultures and may directly and indirectly affect important outcomes (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Further, the conclusions from this study suggest that organizations that are concerned with their ability to establish and maintain employee connections in a global, virtual work environment may do so by focusing on subcultures as well as the overall organization culture.

Author biographies

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