

The Elusive Criterion of Fit in Human Resources Staffing Decisions

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Executive Summary

Traditional views of the human resources staffing process have assumed a rational framework, where the objective qualifications of individuals are matched to the requirements of the job. This article presents a model of the staffing process which incorporates fit as a central concept, and suggests the relevance of a political rather than a rational approach to staffing decisions. Furthermore, fit is viewed as not just a passive process, but rather the outcomes of active influence attempts by candidates to manage impressions. Based on this presentation, a revised model of the human resources staffing process is introduced, which should yield a more realistic assessment of how staffing decisions are made in organizations by balancing the rational and political perspectives. Finally, implications for practice and research are discussed, which involve using the construct of fit to re-evaluate the use and effectiveness of staffing decisions and decision tools such as the interview.

Staffing positions in organizations may well represent one of the most important human resources (HR) management functions. Who is hired into the job from outside the organization as well as who is moved to another job internally (e.g., through a promotion decision), or who is moved out of organizations, ideally reflect job-relevant decisions and the maximizing of critical knowledge, skills, and abilities which contribute to an organization's overall effectiveness and its competitive advantage. That is the way we suggest it *should be done*. In practice, though, how are staffing decisions actually made? Can we apply the assumption of a rational model to staffing decisions, whereby decision makers are knowledgeable about the job in question (i.e., they know what characteristics, skills, and so forth it takes to succeed on the job), gather all relevant information about the candidate's job-relevant qualifications, compare these qualifications to job demands, and select the candidates with the best match? Or, is an alternative model more appropriate to capture the realities of everyday staffing decisions?

These questions have troubled us both for some time, which has led us to seek answers through systematic research as well as from managers, executives, and HR professionals who make these decisions frequently. For example, we have asked numerous recruiters who hire our students into HR management positions, "What is it you are looking for in a high quality candidate?" Interestingly, after several requests for clarification from these decision makers, we have found an amazing degree of convergence on the responses provided. Inevitably, it comes down to a statement of "fit" — that is, they suggest they are looking for a candidate who fits. Sometimes they elaborate to specify someone who fits the culture, the value system, and so forth, but frequently it is merely stated as someone who fits. When pressed as to more precisely what it means to fit, many are initially hard

pressed to provide a response. Again there tends to be amazing convergence across decision makers on a statement that goes something like this: "I can't articulate it, but I'll know it when I see it." Furthermore, we have had similar discussions with HR executives who also have articulated the importance of fit, but typically are hard pressed to define it.

One might find such a statement from a person responsible for making important screening/staffing decisions on behalf of the organization refreshing, enlightened, troublesome, or dangerous, depending on one's perspective. What is perhaps clearer is that such a statement challenges the rational model of staffing that has been so firmly entrenched for so long, and it suggests the importance of a criterion called fit, about which we know very little, as well as the introduction of a political perspective on staffing decisions. Furthermore, it appears that this process and the dynamics involving fit are most obvious through one particular HR staffing technique, the interview.

The purpose of this article is to model the HR staffing process more completely by highlighting the role of fit and blending the rational and political perspectives on staffing decisions. This model is intended to reflect the reality of how HR staffing decisions are actually made. Furthermore, it is argued that the notion of fit, elusive and ill-defined as it typically has been, may be a constructive way to understand the use, and usefulness, of staffing decision tools such as the interview. Finally, the role of political influence behavior as a means of managing the impression of fit also is discussed. The article intends to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how fit actually affects the HR staffing process, and how our evaluation of the effectiveness of staffing decisions might be improved from a consideration of fit. Although a number of issues are raised in this article, such a broad and integrative approach is necessary in developing a more informed understanding of the notion of fit.

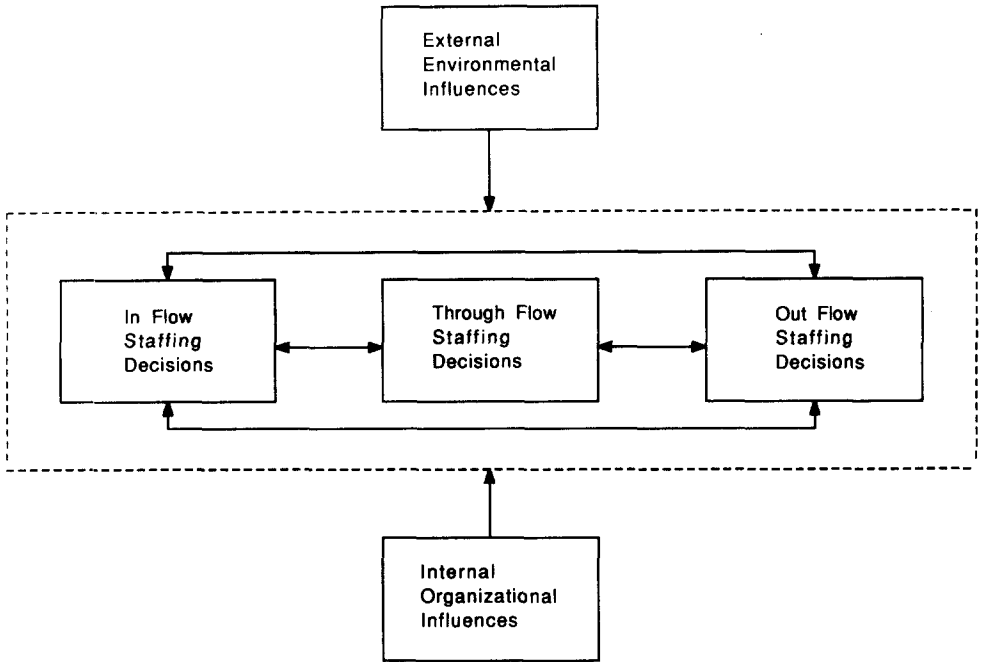
Human Resources Staffing in Organizations

When one considers HR staffing in organizations, it is common to assume that this entails considering external applicants for entry into the organization; however, Miller (1984), Sonnenfeld (1984), and others have argued that organizations should consider the staffing process more broadly than external selection. Human resources staffing entails internal staffing (i.e., promotion as well as demotion and termination decisions) in addition to external staffing. As pointed out by Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills, and Walton (1984), managing HR flows entails considering the flow of people into, through, and out of the organization. Effective staffing decisions are predicated on the ability of an organization to balance the HR inputs, outputs, and throughputs. In the present article, we adopt this broader view of HR staffing. Consistent with this perspective, a model of the HR staffing process is presented in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1 illustrates that the three HR staffing processes (in flows, through flows, and out flows) are not independent. For example, the quantity and quality of external hires (in flows) affects performance evaluations, promotions, and developmental mobility of employees (through flows), as well as the desirability and necessity of terminating existing employees

Exhibit 1

Traditional Model of Human Resources Staffing



(out flows). Similarly, the quantity and quality of existing employees may necessitate external hiring or termination of existing employees.

The exhibit also illustrates that all three staffing processes are influenced by internal and external environmental factors. External environmental factors such as laws and regulations place constraints on each of the three staffing activities. For example, equal employment opportunity laws and regulations limit the range of criteria upon which, and perhaps even the processes through which, staffing decisions are based. Internal organizational factors, such as organizational strategies and structures, also are influential. For example, the flattening of organizational hierarchies and expanding spans of controls may give HR managers more autonomy in the procedures used to carry out each of the three staffing processes. Furthermore, such structural changes may affect staffing decisions by influencing the types of people needed to perform their jobs effectively.

Exhibit 1 is a basic rational model of HR staffing which assumes that criteria for staffing decisions are explicit, clearly stated, and precisely specified. Furthermore, it is assumed that such criteria are only job relevant, with no extraneous factors entering in, that staffing decision makers have all the relevant information needed about candidates to make decisions, that they are knowledgeable about the job in question and have experience making such decisions, and that they are held accountable for their staffing decisions. Because a rational model includes these assumptions, these factors often are not included explicitly in staffing models. It may be quite reasonable to question such assumptions, though, given the staffing realities in organizations.

The foregoing model provides a framework within which to analyze staffing decisions. It is rational in its orientation by design, although, to more accurately reflect how staffing decisions are actually made in organizations, we might need to consider alternatives to the precision of the rational model. One such alternative is a political perspective (Ferris and Judge, 1991), and one of the realities we see increasingly in organizations is that HR staffing decisions are based on the criterion of fit.

The Notion of Fit

Observation, Anecdote, and Applied Literature

Whereas there appears to be little doubt that fit is used frequently in making HR staffing decisions, our current level of understanding of the fit construct is based more on anecdotal evidence than on systematic research. The business and popular press have provided some interesting accounts of the types of creatures that roam the corridors of corporate America, and the notion of fit is clearly in evidence. For example, Ferris, King, Judge, and Kacmar (1991) portrayed the importance of fit through a new corporate creature they call the "organizational chameleon." This creature embodies the philosophy of forced fit and adaptation, effectively becoming whatever you want it to be through feigning beliefs, values, attitudes, and so forth. Sofer (1970) appeared to characterize this creature when he stated, "It is said that the would-be successful executive learns when to simulate enthusiasm, compassion, interest, concern, modesty, confidence, and mastery, when to smile, with whom to laugh, and how intimate to be with others. If the operation succeeds, he will have fabricated a personality in harmony with his environment" (p. 61). Sofer's executive, then, is interested in fitting an image or stereotype of expected role behaviors.

Several accounts have been written of what really explains success, in terms of advancement and promotion, in some of the largest and most notable organizations in this country. Katz's (1987) analysis of top-level management succession at Sears, Roebuck, and Company involved fit as a key staffing criterion, whereby fit was operationalized in terms of height. Hence, the use of this criterion produced a succession of CEOs and executive committee members occasionally referred to as the Sears tall men, because an early CEO at Sears believed that height (i.e., at least six feet two inches) was an important staffing criterion leading to effectiveness in these top-level jobs.

Wright (1979) wrote a vivid account of management succession at General Motors (GM), which witnessed succession/promotion candidates trying to fit with not only the GM stereotype, but also the expectations of their superiors who controlled such decisions. Thus, success in the succession/promotion process was determined less by objective credentials and more by how skillful one was at flattering his superior and doing the things that made one appear to fit.

von Werssowetz and Beer (1985) demonstrated how the notion of fit manifested itself throughout HR decisions at Hewlett-Packard (HP). In particular, rather than use statistical tests to predict narrow dimensions of job performance, HP relies on the interview to assess cultural fit. At HP, the

overriding question in the selection process is not, "Does this person have the necessary specific skills?", but rather, "Will this person fit in our culture?" In the eyes of David Packard, focusing on this latter question in the staffing process better enables HP to meet its strategic imperatives such as technological innovation and leadership.

More recently, Bowen, Ledford, and Nathan (1991) provided an analysis of fit in the selection process. They suggested that in addition to basing selection decisions on job analysis data, an organizational analysis also is an important process underlying staffing decisions. The organizational analysis would identify the dominant values, social skills, and traits necessary to fit in the organization. This would then serve as the basis for selection decisions. Bowen et al. (1991) cited several organizations as examples of those that use fit as a central component of staffing decisions.

Kanter's (1977) in-depth, qualitative investigation of the employment practices of an organization sheds considerable light on how fit materializes as a principal criterion for internal staffing decisions. She coined the term "homosocial reproduction systems" to represent how internal staffing decisions are made. The criteria for advancement, she argued, were made up of a set of attitudes, beliefs, values, and characteristics that the key decision makers (i.e., the gatekeepers) deemed important, and this set of criteria, interestingly, often mirrored the characteristics possessed by these decision makers.

Indeed, one can readily see how this may not simply depict a passive process on the part of the candidates (i.e., whether they possess these characteristics or not), but could witness the candidate actually seeking to manage an image that fits with the decision criteria. Thus, we begin to see the transformation of our rational model of HR staffing into more of a political model, where instead of expending energy in the acquisition of important job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities, job candidates invest at least as much energy in honing their political skills, effectively working the system with smoke and mirrors to create an impression of fit which will prove instrumental to some desired outcome. Support for this recently was provided by Rynes, Bretz, and Gerhart (1991), who cited entry-level managerial applicants with quotes such as, "*Especially after the offer, I started judging more.* In the beginning, it was just, 'Like me, please like me'" (p. 508), and, "Recruitment doesn't mean anything ... it's a game and I think *a lot of people get screwed by it*" (p. 510).

The foregoing discussion of fit in HR staffing decisions implicitly raises the form versus substance problem articulated recently by Ferris and King (1991). The essence of this problem is the difficulties involved in distinguishing candidates who are truly qualified (i.e., substance) from those who merely construct images of qualifications and competence (i.e., form). Whereas it is easy to succinctly convey the essence of the form versus substance problem, it is quite another matter to sort out the process dynamics and adequately address it. The rational model of HR staffing decisions would suggest that candidates come to the selection context with knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience, and that decision makers come with an understanding of the job demands and specifications in addition to selection devices designed to best measure candidate characteristics. Both parties have known and acceptable motivations, and metaphorically, the decision maker attempts to hit a stationary target (i.e., make the best deci-

sion by identifying the most qualified candidate) using the best weapon at his/her disposal (i.e., the most accurate selection device).

In practice, however, we find that fit and the realities of the selection context suggest a somewhat different scenario. With candidates actively seeking to alter and manage images of competence, the decision maker is effectively attempting to hit, not a stationary, but a moving target. Selection research suggests we haven't traditionally performed well at hitting fixed targets (i.e., our hit rate, as reflected by validity coefficients, is not great), so one wonders how we could hope to hit moving targets. Let us further complicate the picture by suggesting that sometimes decision makers have other, personally beneficial, objectives they seek to achieve through the staffing process. That is, rather than seeking the candidate most qualified for the job (i.e., defined by a match between candidate skills and job demands), decision makers might seek to maximize their own self-interests by increasing their own power base through coalition building, thus seeking to select candidates who think like they do and fit their personal agenda. Extending our target metaphor, additional ambiguity is introduced here because the decision maker has altered the criteria, and effectively is aiming at a different target.

This section has addressed what we know about the construct of fit based on observation, anecdotal evidence, and some of the applied literature. Indeed, this construct has retained only anecdotal status until quite recently because of its lack of precision and definition. Some research has been conducted on fit in HR staffing, and the results of this work are reviewed in the next section.

Research Literature

Most investigations of fit have been plagued by imprecision, emphasizing nebulous terms such as "right types" (Klimoski and Strickland, 1977; Schneider, 1987). Rynes and Gerhart (1990) have argued that such notions add little to the understanding of fit. An explicit definition of fit is needed to clear the conceptual ambiguity in the construct. Fit was defined by Chatman (1989) as the degree to which the goals and values of the applicant or employee match those of employees considered successful in the organization. It is possible to add to Chatman's definition a more global construct — the degree to which the applicant is liked by the interviewer, co-worker, supervisor, or subordinate may be a direct manifestation of fit. Those who fit are liked by others, those who do not fit are not liked by organizational members. Because most selection decision makers probably consider themselves successful employees, as applied to the interview this may actually translate into how closely the applicant resembles and is liked by the decision maker(s). Similarity effects have been frequently mentioned in the performance evaluation process (Bernardin and Beatty, 1984). Perceived similarity between the interviewer and applicant appears to influence interviewer evaluations as well (Schmitt, 1976). Because managers may prefer individuals similar to themselves (Gilmore and Ferris, 1989b), similarity may be one way to construe fit; however, fit has not been explicitly included as a manifestation of this similarity.

Central to understanding the importance of fit to organizations lies in understanding what including fit in the criterion may accomplish for orga-

nizations. Four possibilities are suggested here: (1) *Fit as a control mechanism*, whereby selecting individuals with certain norms, beliefs, goals, and values, the organization imports control. Thus, rather than gaining control through socialization processes, control is achieved through the selection process; (2) *Fit as work force homogeneity*, where selecting similar people creates, or maintains, a homogeneous, not heterogeneous, work force. This leads to differing policy implications, because homogeneity can lead to groupthink (Schneider, 1983) and discrimination against members of the outgroup (Pfeffer, 1983); (3) *Fit as a job-related criterion*. With the growth in the service sector, hiring on the basis of fit to climate, values, or consumer orientation is indeed job-relevant, resulting in more effective employees being selected (Schneider and Bowen, 1992); (4) *Fit as an organizational image enhancer*. If employees are selected who accurately reflect the preferences of management, the predictability of employee public behavior is increased, and thus consistent with the image that the organization wishes to project. While we do not fully explore the organizational implications, these alternative definitions and uses of fit suggest some possible implications for organizations depending on how it is defined.

Using Fit to Re-Evaluate Staffing Decisions

Probably no HR decision tool has been as widely studied or as heavily criticized as the interview. Hundreds of studies have been published over the last eighty years investigating both the validity of the interview in staffing decisions and the psychological processes that influence the outcomes. Ten comprehensive research reviews on the subject have been published, the first in 1949 and the most recent in 1989, each integrating many studies in order to arrive at some generalizations about the interview. The ten reviews reached similar conclusions, the most significant probably being: (1) the reliability and validity of the interview is low; (2) there are many psychological biases that cause the interviewer to make inaccurate decisions; and (3) the interview is often an inhibiting factor in the selection process. Many have taken the unfavorable conclusions of these reviews and simply recommended against using the interview. For example, Howell and Dipboye (1982) stated, "...interviews as typically conducted are of limited practical value. They are subject to all sorts of biasing influences, and what information they do yield is irrelevant or could probably be obtained more efficiently in other ways" (p. 251). Heneman, Schwab, Fossum, and Dyer (1986) concluded, "In short, there is little reason to believe that the employment interview is efficiently accomplishing its selection purpose" (p. 320). While recent reviews (e.g., Harris, 1989) seem to have taken a more positive outlook than earlier ones, the general belief persists that the interview is not particularly valid (cf. Eder and Ferris, 1989). These conclusions are critical, because not only is the interview one of the most widely used external staffing methods, it often plays an important role in promotion decisions, as well as managing HR out flows (e.g., exit interviews).

It is probably safe to assume, though, that managers have at least some knowledge of the validity evidence on the interview (Dreher and Maurer, 1989). Thus, managers may continue to use the interview *despite* the past validity evidence. Rather than suggesting that staffing decision makers are

erroneous in their continuing use of the interview, it may be that *researchers have been mistaken in condemning the interview.*

Researchers have implicitly assumed that the usefulness of the interview rests on the basis of how accurate the interview is in predicting job performance or productivity measures. This is not the only means of evaluating the interview, however. Inclusion of fit in the criterion is an important factor to consider in evaluating the interview, and may lead researchers to more positive conclusions about the usefulness of the interview. Specifically, the way performance has typically been measured in organizations may be deficient in that it does not fully capture the perceived value of employees to the organization (i.e., value that extends beyond employees' possession of key knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the job). As indicated earlier, affect or liking apparently influences performance evaluation and interview decisions. Attempts to improve performance evaluations generally have been manifested by efforts to measure performance more objectively (Latham and Wexley, 1977; Smith and Kendall, 1963). In essence, this attempt is to move affective and other "biases" out of the evaluation, in order to obtain an accurate measure of employee's actual productivity. Efforts to remove affect from evaluations may only result in removing fit from performance evaluations under the assumption that this is simply error. The position we are taking here is that affect and fit reflect valid, job-relevant information with substantive implications for interview outcomes. This is crucial, because the conclusions researchers draw about the value of the interview may depend on the way the criterion is viewed.

If fit can reasonably be seen as representing the goals and values of an individual and directly manifested by the degree to which the individual is liked by others, the interview would seem to be situated better than other selection measures to assess the goals, values, and perceived likability of the applicant. In fact, past research has indirectly supported this proposition by showing that interviewer judgments seem to predict subjective performance better than objective measures of performance (Hunter and Hunter, 1984). Similarity effects have been demonstrated in both interviewer judgments (Keenan, 1977; Orpen, 1984) and performance evaluations (Ferris, Judge, Rowland, and Fitzgibbons, in press; Wayne and Ferris, 1990). If assessments of fit "contaminate" these judgments, this evidence would suggest that the interview will predict fit better than it predicts objective performance or productivity.

Thus, it is quite possible that we should not remove affect or liking from performance evaluations. Removing affect or liking (as an instrumental outcome of perceived fit) from performance evaluations may only ensure that the interview does not predict performance. Yet, as has been argued here, affect is not irrelevant to judgments of employee value. Even if performance evaluations were totally free of affective processes, supervisor and co-worker affect or feelings toward the subordinate or fellow co-worker may be a legitimate criterion in itself.

Chatman (1989) has argued that organizations may continue to use the interview not to evaluate the technical qualifications of applicants, but rather to assess how well the applicants' values and norms will fit in the organization. Thus, while some selection methods are suitable for judging technical qualifications (e.g., ability tests, work samples, biographical information, and so on), the interview may be ideally suited to assess fit. If

Chatman's arguments are true, it suggests re-evaluating the interview based on its potential to contribute to the fit of the worker in the organization.

Interpersonal Influence and Fit

Practitioners have long recognized that there is a strong incentive on the part of candidates to actively manage the impressions that staffing decision-makers form of them. It has been a relatively recent development, however, for researchers to examine systematically the effects of active influence attempts or impression management on HR decisions. In general, it is clear that impression management by candidates influences decision-maker judgments. In fact, in a recent study, impression-management techniques were found to have a more powerful effect on interviewer judgments than objective qualifications (Gilmore and Ferris, 1989a).

The significant relationship between perceived similarity and decision maker evaluations was reviewed earlier. Perhaps one of the more important goals of those using influence tactics in the selection process is to increase the evaluator's perception of the fit between the candidate and organization. In concept, this transcends similarity between the decision maker and the candidate to similarity between the candidate and the organization's culture. It may be that the specific influence tactics used depend on the situation, but the overall goal of enhancing the perception of congruence between the characteristics one has to offer and what the organization values remains the same. Therefore, the notion of fit may hold the promise of explaining how and why individuals seek to manage impressions in the selection process, and the extent to which they are effective in doing so.

Research has demonstrated that the extent to which a candidate is perceived to fit the job, culture, or organization substantially increases the candidate's likelihood of receiving a job offer (Rynes and Gerhart, 1990). Fit may be inherently vague, which allows it to take a number of forms and permits candidates to play upon this ambiguity and exercise a greater degree of influence over the selection process and outcomes. For example, fit has been viewed as attitude similarity between candidate and decision maker, and such perceived similarity in attitudes has been associated with more favorable evaluations (e.g., decisions to hire) of job candidates (e.g., Peters and Terborg, 1975; Schmitt, 1976). Fit also has been interpreted with respect to appearance, personality, and values, and the extent to which each of these is consistent with some expected or desired level. Molloy (1975) elevated appearance and dress to a higher level in the role it is believed to play in interpersonal evaluations including HR staffing decisions. Recent research has shown that appearance affects staffing judgments (Rynes and Gerhart, 1990).

The research on fit reviewed earlier suggested that assessments of fit typically have focused on the personality of the candidate. Organizations certainly differ in their strategic mission. Because differing strategic missions may require individuals possessing particular personality traits, it seems reasonable to expect that overall personality composition of employees significantly differs by organization. Several writers in the strategy literature have emphasized that the match between the characteristics of the individual and the strategic characteristics of the organization are of central impor-

tance in determining organizational success (Gupta, 1984; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Szilagyi and Schweiger, 1984). For example, an organization that has typically pursued an aggressive business strategy may be more likely to have aggressive employees. If so, the organization may desire to hire and promote aggressive employees in the future. If the candidate perceived the personality desired, he or she might seek to manage the way in which his or her personality is perceived. For example, if the decision maker presents the impression that cohesiveness and cooperation is very important to the organization, the candidate may take particular care not to appear aggressive or stubborn.

It may be that the personality of the staffing decision maker alone is the dominant effect. The candidate may not be aware of the personality of the other organization members, only the decision maker's. If the staffing decision maker displays certain attributes, the candidate may seek to match the actions that manifest the traits. The decision maker displaying certain actions makes it more likely that the candidate will act in a reciprocal fashion. Thus, in such cases, the candidate has effectively managed the shared meaning of personality similarity, and the decision maker may well recommend hiring due to perceived fit to the job (when it is actually perceived similarity to himself or herself). Research on personality and fit has shown that job candidates who possess personality characteristics congruent with the job for which they are being evaluated tend to be judged as more suitable for that job (Paunonen, Jackson, and Oberman, 1987).

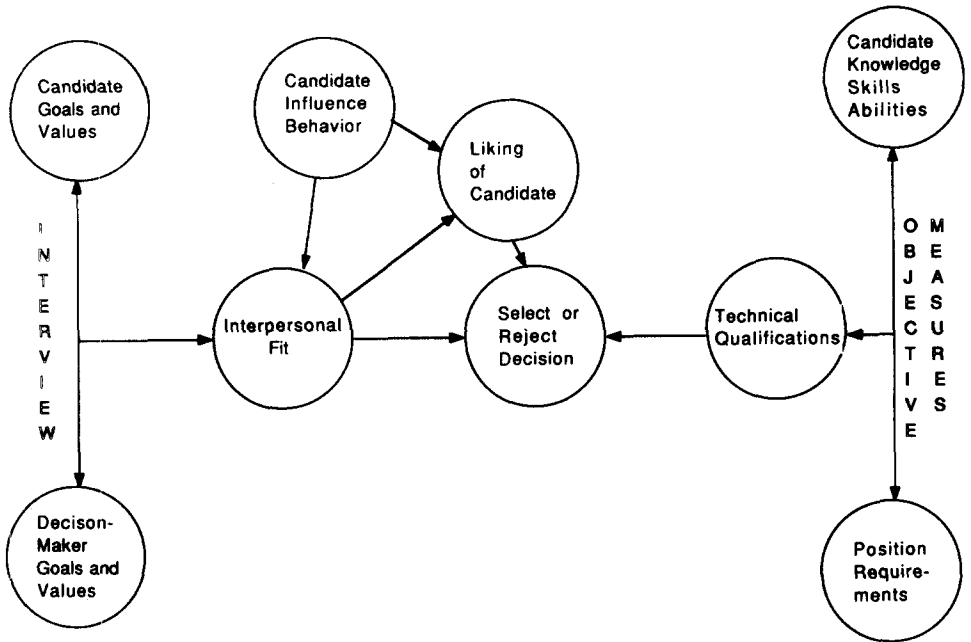
The Role of Fit in the Human Resources Staffing Process

In order to summarize our notions about fit, a model of fit in the staffing process is presented in Exhibit 2. First, it is hypothesized in Exhibit 2 that similarity, in terms of goals and values, will lead to higher assessments of candidate fit. This similarity is defined in terms of a match between goals and values of the candidate and those of the decision makers. It is then hypothesized that this match, defined as fit, will lead to the decision maker liking the candidate. Candidate interpersonal fit and decision maker liking of the candidate, in turn, are hypothesized to lead to higher evaluations of the candidate's suitability. The dimensions (as goals and values) used to categorize fit and affect, or liking, as the most immediate outcome of fit are by no means conclusive; however, they are dimensions of fit that have figured prominently in discussions of the construct. Judge and Bretz (1992) have discussed fit in terms of Ravlin and Meglino's (1987) four value classifications. Chatman (1989) also has discussed fit in terms of goals and values. Furthermore, drawing from the well established similarity - attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1969), it has been suggested that fit probably operates on staffing decisions through its influence on liking (Ferris and Judge, 1991; Ferris et al., 1991).

Exhibit 2 also shows that influence behavior, based on the previous discussion, is expected to affect both perceptions of fit and liking. This model does not assume that it is only the candidate who is using the selection process to his or her advantage. The decision maker also may have an agenda as well. For example, the decision maker may wish to select or promote (or fire) someone who happens to satisfy or further his or her self interest (e.g., hire or promote someone who shares their values and who

Exhibit 2

Role of Fit in Human Resources Staffing Decisions



will add to his or her own power base) (Beer et al., 1984; Ferris, Russ, and Fandt, 1989). Longenecker, Sims, and Gioia (1989) have illustrated how similar processes work with respect to performance evaluation decisions.

The model does not assume that fit exclusively leads to a select or reject decision. The match between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the candidate and the technical requirements of the position are also hypothesized to influence the staffing decision. Further, the model predicts that fit can best be assessed by the interview. Conversely, the match between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the candidate and the technical requirements of the position is hypothesized to best be predicted by less subjective measures (e.g., ability tests or work samples).

Understanding of the construct of fit also depends on the benchmark or reference point against which the individual is compared in order to assess fit. That is, one could assess the degree of fit to the group (Ferris, Youngblood, and Yates, 1985), the job (Rynes and Gerhart, 1990), or the organization (Bowen et al., 1991; Schneider and Bowen, 1992). One would expect some degree of similarity between these sources (i.e., employees who fit in the job are more likely to fit in the group and the organization). For example, Rynes and Gerhart (1990) found that interviewers within the same organization gave more similar evaluations of job candidates' firm- or job-specific employability than did interviewers from different organizations. It is quite possible, though, that some differences would be observed between these sources. This conceptualization does not attempt to make a distinction between these sources. We assume that all may operate on selection decision maker's judgments of fit; however, it would be useful for

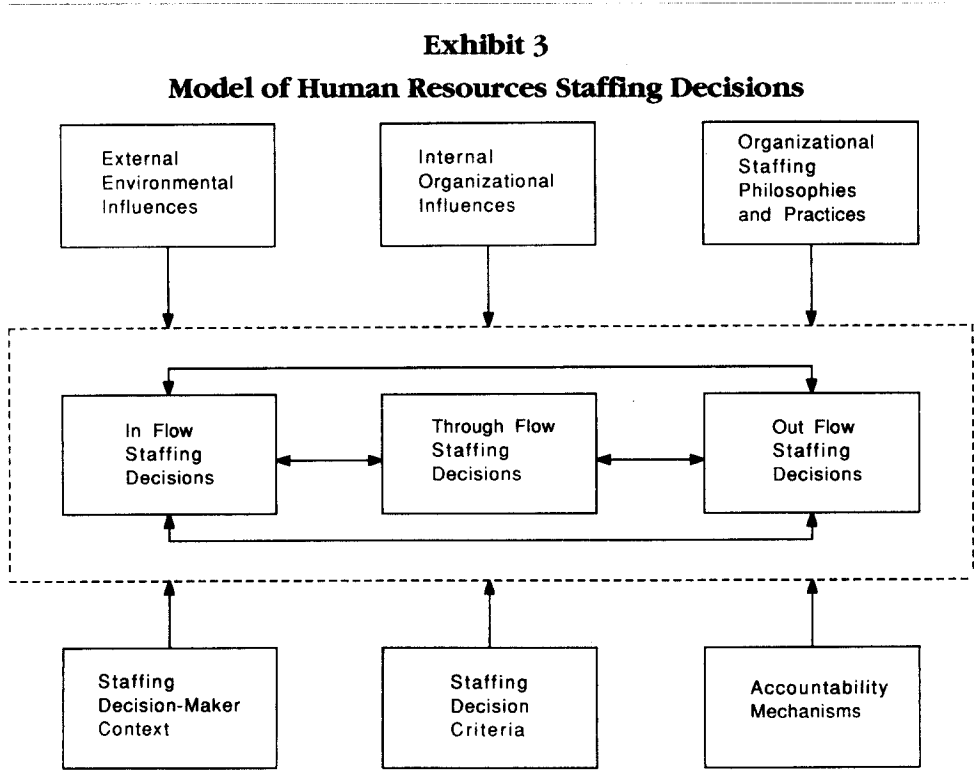
future research to investigate possible differences when considering fit at the job, group, and organizational levels.

This careful analysis of the role of fit in HR staffing decisions, as depicted in Exhibit 2, has important implications for our overall view of the HR staffing process. The model presented in Exhibit 2 complicates the staffing process by adopting a political perspective. We believe this model is realistic because of the centrality of fit to staffing decisions, and because of the potential complexities involved in the process by which fit affects staffing decisions. We now need to bring this more comprehensive analysis to bear on our view of the HR staffing decision process.

A Broader View of the Human Resources Staffing Process

The foregoing model and the ensuing discussion illustrate that the view of the staffing process that was represented in Exhibit 1 was somewhat naive in its assumptions, and simplistic in its depiction or characterization of the process. The complexities of fit dynamics, as noted in the earlier sections of this article, suggest the need for a broader and more complete perspective on the HR staffing decision-making process. Such a view needs to address some of the challenges introduced by the fit construct as well as deficiencies of the basic model of the HR staffing process presented in Exhibit 1. This new broader and more expanded perspective of HR staffing decisions and processes is presented in Exhibit 3, and it strikes a balance in blending the rational and political perspectives.

As Exhibit 3 illustrates, much of what is contained in Exhibit 1 remains. Specifically, staffing is still seen as consisting of three interrelated process-



es: in flows, through flows, and out flows. Furthermore, external environmental influences and internal organizational influences still affect the staffing processes in the manner previously described; however, the model adds several important elements that more accurately depict the context in which staffing decisions are embedded, and provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of fit in the staffing process. These new elements are discussed below.

Organizational Staffing Philosophies and Practices

Organizational staffing philosophies and practices may affect each of the three staffing processes. For example, until quite recently IBM's full employment policy has meant that few individuals are terminated due to layoffs. Similarly, some companies tout their promotion-from-within philosophies which may translate into a greater number of positions being filled internally rather than externally. Another important philosophy is the velocity of flow (Beer et al., 1984). The velocity of flows concerns how rapidly individuals move and are expected to move in the organization. Thus, it is a reflection of whether the organization has a "fast track" philosophy, or a slower evaluation and promotion system. As discussed by Ferris and Judge (1991) and Ferris and King (1991), a fast track system involving quick movement potentially encourages at least as much symbolic behavior (perhaps political in nature) as actual effective performance. Because one is in a particular job or position a reasonably short period of time, and because standards of performance on many jobs are ambiguous at best, individuals are likely to be evaluated more on how much it appears that they are contributing than on the basis of their actual (objective) performance level (Pfeffer, 1981). So, the velocity and direction of internal mobility, as well as the volume of in flow, will be influenced, in part, by the organization's particular staffing policies and practices.

Staffing Decision Criteria

Staffing decision criteria are concerned with whether or not there are clearly articulated standards for HR staffing decisions which are applied uniformly and consistently across all candidates so as to ensure procedural justice and job relevance. Because by its very nature fit is informal and subjective, the influence of fit on staffing decisions is probably greatest when there are fewer restrictions on the criteria that decision makers are able to use in reaching staffing decisions. Furthermore, even in organizations where fit is consciously weighted in selection decisions, there may be differences in the degree to which fit is precisely defined. Some organizations may constrain their decision makers to consider issues of fit only in terms of certain criteria such as values; other organizations may leave the definition up to the decision maker.

Staffing Decision-Maker Context

Gilmore and Ferris (1989b) suggested that some decision makers may be more easily influenced by candidate manipulation attempts than others because of a number of factors about their preparation for the decision task. For example, if the decision maker does not know the job require-

ments well, or what it takes to perform the job, it is difficult to know what to look for. Because organizations often do not provide systematic training for staffing decision makers, and there often are no requirements in terms of experience in making staffing decisions, the possibility that a particular selection decision maker is unsure or unknowledgeable about the criteria is often high. These individuals may serve as a "blank slate" upon which the candidate can create their own image. While this presents the candidate with an opportunity to manage the impression of fit, it also is somewhat of a dilemma since candidates may pick up few cues regarding the image against which they need to match themselves.

Accountability Mechanisms

Do we hold the decision maker accountable or answerable for his or her staffing decisions? In the case of staffing using college recruiting, the answer clearly seems to be "no" (Boudreau and Rynes, 1986). In the staffing context, reduced accountability allows the decision maker more latitude in terms of selection decisions. Thus, the decision maker has more opportunity to make decisions based on "illegitimate" criteria such as the ability of a candidate to augment the decision maker's power base, meet the decision maker's own needs or interests, and so on. It is likely, in this situation, that decision makers rely more on issues of fit, because they may more enjoy being around those who reflect their values and beliefs, and because similarity in terms of outlook may be a fruitful basis upon which to build coalitions.

Implications for Human Resources Staffing Decisions and Processes

So, it seems that the construct of fit, indeed, plays a considerable role in HR staffing decisions. Given the foregoing discussion of fit in the staffing context, there appear to be some important implications for both research and practice.

Implications for Research

Clearly the construct of fit needs further investigation. Rynes and Gerhart (1990) and Bretz, Rynes, and Gerhart (1991) have offered data in support of the construct. The model proposed in Exhibit 2 is one attempt to capture the implications of the construct for staffing decisions, and needs to be empirically tested. Fundamental to supporting the model is that matches between goals and values of the decision maker and candidate lead to greater decision maker affect or liking of the candidate, which subsequently leads to higher evaluations. This would support the existence of a fit construct influencing staffing decision-maker evaluations.

Perhaps more central to this article, research would need to demonstrate that subjective employment practices such as the interview predict fit better than do other HR staffing measures. This might be done by relating decision-maker evaluations of candidate acceptability to both decision maker and candidate assessments of goals, values, and decision maker liking of the candidate. Subsequently, acceptability ratings could be related to fit

and job performance once the individual is on the job. If decision maker evaluations did not predict these assessments of fit better than measures of objective performance, the framework presented in Exhibit 2 would be incorrect. However, caution needs to be exercised in how such research is conducted and thus the interpretations are made. For example, as noted by Ferris and Judge (1991) and Ferris et al. (1989), operating managers will frequently conduct interviews and make final decisions on those to be hired. If a manager hires a candidate, he or she is implicitly making a statement that the person hired is expected to succeed, which will likely influence the subsequent performance evaluations given to the worker. Such inherent bias may cloud the accurate interpretation of the true predictor - criterion relationship.

If these hypotheses were supported, it would suggest that many researchers have erred in condemning subjective selection measures such as the interview. By construing the criterion too narrowly, researchers may have ignored the principal contribution of these procedures in selection decisions. Further research on fit is also merited. Do those organizations that have a closer overall fit between their employees and management realize better overall performance and organizational effectiveness? If not, but if the construct influences evaluations nonetheless, managers may be sacrificing company profits/organizational effectiveness in order to meet their own personal desires.

Also needed is research mapping the construct of fit. To date, we only have a nebulous idea of its nature. We need to articulate more precisely the nature of the fit construct as well as the intermediate steps which characterize the dynamic process through which it operates. Work by Bretz et al. (1991) is helpful in this regard.

Implications for Practice

A major point made in this article suggests that use of the selection procedures such as the interview should depend on the staffing strategy of the organization. If this is so, what is the relative trade-off of technical qualifications versus interpersonal fit issues in making staffing decisions? Furthermore, staffing procedures should be matched to the criterion they are trying to predict. If one wants to predict productivity potential, why use the subjective procedures like the interview? We know ability tests and work samples do a better job of that than the interview probably ever will; however, organizations that also want to examine fit should use the interview to assess it. A multi-measure procedure, using different methods to achieve different predictions, would seem to be the ideal strategy.

Research on the role of the interview in assessing fit holds the promise of increasing our knowledge regarding the utility of the interview in organizations and the usefulness of the concept of fit. If the major ideas presented in this article are supported, then it will demonstrate that HR practitioners have not been as errant in their use of the interview as we have been led to believe. Further, calls for structured interviews as a way to improve the validity of the interview (Latham, Saari, Purcell, and Champion, 1980; Schwab and Heneman, 1969; Carlson, Schwab, and Heneman, 1970) may be misplaced if the true goal, and utility, of the interview lies not in selecting the most technically qualified, but the individual most likely to fit

into the organization. If this is the case, organizations might be well advised to use procedures other than the interview to assess overall qualifications, and use the interview to assess fit. Structured interviews may still play an important role. To the extent that we can situationally define fit, we will want to ensure that interviewers are accurately and reliably measuring candidate fit, and that might best be accomplished by structuring the interview in light of fit-related issues and dimensions.

The inclusion of fit as a criterion in the HR staffing process also may have strategic implications for organizations. By selecting individuals consistent with overall business strategies, organizational performance may be enhanced. Writers in the strategy area have argued this to be the case (Gupta, 1984; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Szilagyi and Schweiger, 1984). A way to implement strategy is by designing an organization's culture to enhance strategic objectives (Butler, Ferris, and Napier, 1991). Firms may select employees who manifestly fit the existing culture. Schein (1990) contended that culture is perpetuated by the selection of new employees who already have the "right" set of beliefs and values. Similarly, others have contended that in order for a corporate culture to flourish, it is important that candidates fit into the existing value system of the organization (Fombrun, 1983). Thus, while using the interview to assess fit may not improve organizational performance through selection of employees with enhanced productive abilities, it may influence organizational effectiveness in the long run by matching the goals and values of the employee to those of the organization.

Although we have argued that fit can be considered in terms of goals and values, the notion of fit is undoubtedly even broader. For example, researchers and HR professionals have recently focused on the importance of HR competencies in obtaining a competitive advantage for organizations today and into the future (Jackson, 1989; Ulrich and Yeung, 1989). Ulrich, Brockbank, and Yeung (1989) have argued that HR competencies fall into three categories: knowledge of the business, delivery of HR practices, and management of change processes. Because these sets of competencies vary across organizations and industries (Ulrich et al., 1989), the fit of the individual to the organization is a very relevant concept. From a staffing standpoint, job applicants must be assessed according to the degree to which their current (or prospective) competencies match those required in the organization. Organizations that do a better job of matching the competencies of applicants to those required in the organization are likely to achieve a competitive advantage. Furthermore, because each of these categories of competencies may be difficult to assess from a formal testing standpoint, the interview is uniquely qualified to assess the degree to which applicants match the particular competency requirements extant in each organization.

Walker's analysis (1988) provides examples of how the notion of fit can be used to establish HR competencies. For example, Chase Manhattan Bank has established four areas of general competence (partner in the business, manages HR as a business, initiates/manages change, and HR professionalism). In order to assess these capabilities, Chase evaluates applicants on personal attributes such as interpersonal skills, being a team player, communication skills, and judgment and decision making. Individuals who fit these requirements are those who possess the strategic capabilities that will enable Chase to perform into the future. Although the

requisite competencies differ, similar competency-based assessment procedures are occurring at Union Carbide and Weyerhaeuser.

A final point is noteworthy regarding HR policy formulation and implementation. Indeed, it is important to formulate HR policies in a careful way, reflecting the organization's mission, goals, and strategy, as well as its philosophies and culture. We need to realize, however, that sound policy formulation by itself does not ensure effective implementation. The HR policy implementation process needs to be addressed directly with education/training of managers (i.e., decision makers) in the nature and specific features of the particular policy, and with accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance. This is no more apparent than in the case of HR staffing policy; these critical implementation aspects are noted in the model in Exhibit 3.

Conclusions

A central assertion made in this article is that fit is not a purely static concept. Although fit has traditionally been viewed in a passive sense, as a match between person and organizational characteristics, it is argued that fit also is a dynamic process, where impressions of fit are actively manipulated by the candidate and opportunistically employed by decision makers. It would be useful for future research to investigate this proposition as well. The challenges that these issues pose for theory, research, and practice on the interview are nontrivial ones. The interview needs to be selectively utilized where it is most appropriate, as noted above. Additionally, interviewers must be well prepared for their selection task by focusing on appropriate decision criteria in a way which will maximize decision outcomes.

Indeed, the fit construct has been an elusive one for both researchers and practitioners. We believe that fit can be a quite useful criterion, but not until it is more precisely defined and it is applied systematically and appropriately. In this article, we have proposed some potentially useful steps which should both increase our understanding of fit and improve the effectiveness of the interview. Finally, because of its pivotal role, conceptualizations of HR staffing decisions need to incorporate fit in efforts to gain a more informed understanding of how staffing processes actually operate in organizations, not simply how we believe they should operate.

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