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Perceived person-environment fit and women's career transitions: A comprehensive review

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Abstract

Career transitioning has become indispensable due to the need to adapt to technological advancements, globalization, changing job market dynamics, and evolving employee expectations. However, prior research shows that career transitions to a large extent are influenced by the extent of how well the person fits with their work environment. This research paper aims to comprehensively review the relationship between perceived person-environment fit (PE fit) and career transitioning among women. It also explores the role of PE fit in influencing women's career transition decisions. The study further delves into women's unique challenges in achieving a good fit during career transitions. The discussion in this review suggests that perceived P-E fit plays a vital role in empowering women during career transitions and hence, provides a foundation for interventions and policies that can enhance women's career development and satisfaction.

Keywords: Career transition, perceived person-environment fit, job satisfaction, career development, work environment

Introduction

Work arrangements in the contemporary world are predominantly characterised by the emergence of more flat organizations leading to lesser opportunities for employees' hierarchical growth, transforming employer-employee relations, increasing workplace diversity, and changing employee expectations. The new work dynamics have outmoded the traditional notion of linear corporate career structures. Consequently, the employees have started to re-examine their careers in the context of several works and non-work-related factors such as the organisation's alignment with their aspirations and values, personal fulfilment, career advancement, mental and physical well-being, skill development and learning opportunities, achieving work-life integration and flexibility (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) [39]. The trend has resultantly led corporate individuals to resort to career transition. Research institutes that career transition has become an indispensable feature of the changing career dynamics and thus the phenomenon is critical for career development research (Greer & Kirk, 2022; Deloitte Review, 2017) [15, 12]. Though vast literature exists on career transitioning, yet the insistence has been more on explaining the phenomenon in the context of men. While in the context of women, their transitioning across careers has not been explored much.

Literature suggests that women's career does not follow a linear path due to several work and family-related complexities (Hertneky 2012; Raque-Bogdan *et al.*, 2013). Unlike the traditional notion of career progression, women's careers involve various twists, turns, and transitions. Barnett and Hyde (2001) articulated how the necessity of working women to manage multiple roles impacts their ability to cope with the rising work responsibilities. The social-interpersonal hindrances arising from the conflicting states of work-based requirements and family expectations have their origin in differing work and family demands across time (Srivastava, 2007) [36]. The unjustified juggle to accommodate work and family obligations require women to take breaks or seek flexible work schedules and hence they end up resorting to career relocation (Srivastava, 2007; Wang & Cho, 2013) [36, 1]. Evidence exists that women as compared to men are more likely to change career lanes in order to adjust their work for family (Parker, 2015; Magliano *et al.*, 2020; Hayford & Halliday Hardie, 2020) [32, 17, 29].

Structural barriers and gender bias within organizations can hinder women's career progression. Limited opportunities for advancement, gender-based pay gaps, and lack of support and mentorship can push women to explore alternative career paths (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015) ^[3, 37].

However, women's career transitioning is required to be understood in context to their perceived compatibility with the work environment. Perceived compatibility referred to as PE fit, plays a crucial role in women's career decisions and transitions. Literature on PE fit establishes that the more compatible an individual's characteristics are with their environment, the more positive their attitude and behaviour (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) ^[26]. In this framework, the current study intends to develop a theoretical understanding of women's perceptions regarding their environment fit on their intentions of career transition and the obstacles women face in achieving PE fit while transitioning across careers. Doing so, the study potentially hopes to provide a theoretical insight into the relevance of personal environment fit in determining women's attitude towards their career transitions and suggest interventions required on the part of organisations, society, and individuals to support women in achieving successful career transitions and enhancing their overall well-being and job satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

PE Fit Theory

Person-Environment Fit theory (Edwards *et al.*, 1998) ^[14] examines the alignment between an individual's characteristics and their work environment. It focuses on two types of fit: Person-Job Fit (P-J fit) and Person-Organization Fit (P-O fit). P-J fit explores the match between an individual's skills and a specific job's requirements, while P-O fit examines the compatibility between an individual's values and the organization's culture. High levels of P-E fit lead to positive work outcomes, such as job satisfaction and engagement. P-E fit is not a static concept and can change over time. Individuals may seek to modify their environment or adapt their characteristics to achieve a better fit. Organizations can also play a role in enhancing fit by creating supportive work environments, aligning job roles with employees' strengths, and promoting a culture that values diversity and individual differences.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a psychological framework that focuses on human motivation and well-being. Developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2012), the theory proposes that individuals have three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While autonomy refers to the need for a sense of choice and self-direction, competence reflects the need to feel capable of achieving desired outcomes. Additionally, relatedness involves the need for social connections and belongingness. The theory articulates that when these psychological needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation—the motivation to engage in activities for the inherent satisfaction they provide. In contrast, extrinsic motivation, which arises from external rewards or pressures, may be less enduring and may not contribute to long-term well-being. The theory also

emphasizes the role of the social context in supporting or undermining these needs.

Conceptual Background and Review of Literature

The current paper is structured to have a description of the term career transition in the context of Schlossberg's theory (1981) ^[35] in the first paragraph. The following paragraph is developed to comprehend the person-environment fit framework. Literature concerning relevance of PE fit in career transition is then reviewed to develop an understanding of how PE fit affects women's perceptions towards their career transition. The next section aims to shed light on the challenges that women face in achieving PE fit during career transitions followed by discussion and conclusion.

Career Transition

The transition concept revolves around Schlossberg's theory (1981) ^[35] of transition across careers. Literature on the "career transition" interprets the phenomenon as an outcome of the events that result in a prospective change in overall relationships, routines, and assumptions associated with the self-identity, workplace, family roles, or the overall observed balance of cross-contextual role-playing. Such transitions have been identified as either anticipatory or un-anticipatory or non-eventual in nature and context. Louis (1980) ^[27] articulated that transitioning in a career does not necessarily mean physical mobility rather it may result in a changed orientation towards work at the same workplace. Thus, the changes that career transition unfurls at the personal or organisational level are hard to cope with and hence require continuous appraisal across all phases of transition. Since individual's perceptions concerning transitions differ, so do their abilities to cope up with them. According to Schlossberg (1981) ^[35], situation in which the transition takes place, the individual's own demographic and psychological characteristics, support system available from family and significant others, and the strategies available to cope with the career changes are the four major factors that affect an individual's ability to adapt those transitions.

PE Fit Framework

Person-environment fit (PE fit) refers to the degree to which an individual perceives that their characteristics and values align with those of the environment in which they work. The phenomenon conceptualises that the causation between an individual's self and his/her environment is critical in determining a person's attitude and behaviour towards changes taking place around them (Caplan, 1983, 1987; Caplan & Harrison, 1993; Edwards *et al.*, 1998) ^[7, 8, 14]. Individuals when taking decisions, tend to evaluate the extent to which their own set of skills, values, and interests align with the requirements and characteristics of the environment. This assessment of fit serves as a guide in decision-making, allowing individuals to make choices that are more congruent with their personal preferences and objectives.

The PE fit theory acknowledges objective and subjective as two different representations of an individual's self and the environment. While the objective dimension refers to the attributes of a person or environment as they exist, the subjective facet signifies the attributes of a person or environment as they are perceived by the individual. The

theory recognises the interface between the objective self and the objective environment as an objective PE fit while the interface between the subjective self and the subjective environment is termed a subjective PE fit. The theory further postulates that interaction between objective self and the environment (objective P-E fit) commensurate with the subjective counterpart i.e. subjective P-E fit. The nature and extent of congruence between objective and subjective cores of a person and the environment entail outcomes in terms of an individual's attitudes and behaviour towards work, organisations or their career.

PE fit in organisational psychology has been conceptualised as multidisciplinary with different dimensions such as PV (Person vocation) fit, PO (person organisation) fit, PG (person group) fit, PJ (person job) fit and PP (person) fit indicating individual's congruence with several aspects of the environment such as career choices, organisation, job, group and other persons including supervisors, mentors or co-workers, etc. (Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Karen J. Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006)^[13, 23, 26]

¹. However, of all the dimensions PO fit and PJ fit are considered to be the most persuasive across an individual's work experiences (Boon & Biron, 2016)^[5]. Hence, the PE fit framework provides an optimum theoretical basis to understand women's attitudes towards career transitions as an outcome of their perceived fit with the work environment.

Relevance of P-E Fit in Women's Career Transitions

The women's fit across the transformed organizational work environment has long remained a construct that has been explored across multiple dimensions and contexts. In the PE fit paradigm, several researchers have established that an individual's positive congruence with the organisation leads to employee's higher job satisfaction, less proactive behaviour, lesser involvement in career advancement, lesser consideration for boundaryless career and lower turnover (Abdalla, M. Al-Zufairi, Al-Homoud, & H. Muhammad, 2019; Kostal & Wiernik, 2017; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006)^[1, 25, 19]. Since, intentions to change careers/jobs are believed to be triggered by a stressed work environment (Jasiński & Derbis, 2022) employees perceiving low PO fit would be more likely to leave the organisation. In contrast, high PO fit demonstrates an environment of trust resulting in positive employee behaviour such as less turnovers intentions (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005)^[26]. The review here vindicates the relevance of the existing person-organisation fit on the intentions to stay and continue with the current job across the women workforce.

Grzeda (1999)^[16] regarded women's fit across the prevailing organizational environment as detrimental for women's successful career change. The study compared two distinct perspectives - traditional and contemporary; and observed the respective influences on the mid-career women's career change intentions as an outcome of disfigured person-environment fit. From the traditional perspective, the study acknowledged the gross impact of the lower person-departmental fit, prevalent mid-life crisis, and stage of adult development on women's intention to undergo career change. From a contemporary perspective, the study regarded the environmental turbulence, prevalent organizational strategies, and instances of organizational re-design; as contributing towards the mid-career women's

intentions to opt for mid age career change decisions.

Nordin, Ishak, and Saraih (2017) relied on the three factors (individual, organizational and person's department fit) as determinants of working women's career advancement. The study across the mid-career women in European corporations regarded the women-based individual factors, organization-related factors and extent of women's fit across the existing department; as central to the achievement of career advancement across the women workforce. de Jong, Wisse, Heesink, & van der Zee (2019)^[11] suggested that individual-driven specific personalities do create the conditions that facilitate requisite career advancement across women. The study further upheld the significance of women's fit with the environment in the entire research framework. Research on mid-career course correction in the Indian context also has been observed to involve the prominent role of the person-environment misfit as the major reason that leads to the early exit of women's talent (Karthik, 2016).

Murphy and Volpe (2015)^[31] emphasized the impact of diverse motivating factors and influences on the women's career transition as she progresses across her career despite a not-so-workable person-department fit. The study regarded the individual factors (meaningful work, fun and novelty) and the structural motivating factors (work flexibility and occupational characteristics) as being moderated by conditions (gender, financial resources, interpersonal support) to facilitate encore career transition. Such encore career transitions across the women's workforce have been observed to lead to women's sense of consistent career satisfaction, satisfaction with work life balance, life-based satisfaction and the probable development and retention of a suitable professional work identity as well.

The existing literature on women opting out (Jones, 2012)^[22] in wake of misfit across personality and organizational values has been equivocal about the lack of pro-activeness on account of mid-career women's skillsets. The existing literature points towards the prevalence of the practice of the consistent development of employability and person-organization fit across the current employer (Roczniewska, Retowski, & Higgins, 2018)^[34]. The proactive personality and career success bear a direct relationship. In the context of person-organization fit literature (Bo & Zi-Jing, 2014)^[4], the women's personalities when combined with situational factors could lead to person-department fit across the current and future place of work. The women's sense of proactivity is a major mediator variable in achieving the situational person-department fit in the organization.

Boon and Biron (2016)^[5], articulated that the quality of LMX relationship bear an impact on the employee's perceptions of the work environment which in turn predicts employees' turnover intentions in the wake of PO fit. The study suggested that women perceiving high quality LMX relationships are more likely to perceive higher PO fit leading to lesser intentions of leaving the organisation.

Challenges for Women in Achieving PE Fit During Career Transitions

Literature suggests that strong PE fit enhances the likelihood of job satisfaction and engagement, fosters a sense of fulfilment, promotes motivation and work commitment, reduces the likelihood of turnover, and facilitates personal growth and turnover (Amarneh *et al.*,

2021; Peng *et al.*, 2014; Edwards & Shipp, 2007) [2, 33, 13]. Since PE fit enables individuals to find careers that align with their own personal selves (Van Vianen, 2018) [41], it becomes all the more important that individuals while navigating across careers seek high PE fit. However, considering that several societal, organisational or personal reasons account for women's career transitioning, achieving PE fit poses unique challenges for them.

The notable challenge is the gender stereotyping prevalent in the workplace which hinders women's ability to achieve PE fit. Heilman and Parks-Stamm (2007) [18] revealed how women's performance expectations at work impede their career progression. The perceived mismatch between women's stereotypical and the expected abilities for a particular position in the organization, obstruct them to take up a male gender-typed job. Bias related to their leadership qualities further limits their opportunities to go up the corporate hierarchy (International Labour Organization, 2017) [20].

Furthermore, achieving PE fit across career transitioning requires building professional networks and indulging in workplace behaviors (Stone *et al.*, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2019) [38, 21]. However, male-dominated corporate hierarchies and exclusionary practices at the workplace limit women's propensity to have access to connections and resources required to achieve PE fit. Forret and Dougherty (2004) also supported the crucial role of women's ability to network and seek positive career-based outcomes in the form of compensation determination, enhancement in a number of promotions, perceptions of top management and career-related success factor.

An overt emphasis on achieving work-family balance poses another challenge for women, particularly during career transitions. Managing multiple responsibilities at work as well as a family domain can be demanding and hence impact the perceived fit between work and personal life (Chen *et al.*, 2009; MA *et al.*, 2014) [9, 28]. Consequently, women often seek careers offering flexible work arrangements in the wake of which women tend to scale down their aspirations or turn down lucrative job positions (Coury *et al.*, 2022) [10].

Greer and Kirk (2022) [15] documented social support in terms of emotional, appraisal, informational, and instrumental support required for women while transitioning across careers. Literature suggests that in the absence of social support, people may experience anxiety or may develop a negative attitude towards career changes (Buhl *et al.*, 2017) [6]. Hence, the lack of requisite support and absence of female role models and mentors at the workplace make it difficult for women considering transitions to envision themselves in new career paths. Women experience skill gaps or perceive a lack of confidence when considering career transitions (Kay & Shipman, 2014) [24]. Lower self-efficacy has always remained a reason for women's underrepresentation in male-dominated career trajectories (Betz & Hackett, 1997). Women's economic dependence, limited decision-making power, and societal expectations make them perceive themselves as less capable of reaching upper echelons hence they find it difficult to attain high PE fit.

Organizational practices and structures also pose obstructions to achieving PE fit for women during career transitions. Limited advancement opportunities at the workplace, lack of support for work-life integration, and

gender biases in recruitment and selection processes hinder women's ability to transition successfully and align with the new work environment (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021; Mistic-Andric, 2015) [40, 30].

Discussion and Conclusion

As is evidenced through the review, PE fit is associated with higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions among women. When women perceive a strong fit with their work environment, they experience greater satisfaction as they find their work aligned with their values and goals. This, in turn, increases their commitment to the organization and reduces the likelihood of seeking another career transition. However, the misalignment women perceive between their personal values and beliefs with the organisational values and culture results in dissatisfaction and lack of fulfilment and hence they develop a sense of having been undervalued in the organisation. Consequently, women perceiving low PE fit seek career transitions to find organizations that better reflect their values and provide a more congruent culture.

The study accentuates that understanding the nexus between the work environment and employee characteristics has both theoretical and practical relevance since it would make it possible for the organisation as well as the employee to make better efforts to cope with the obstacles or to manage the stress arising due to changes in career/elements affecting the extent of compatibility between the two.

Addressing the challenges highlighted in the study such as gender biases and stereotyping, gender disparities in networking, work-life conflicts, lack of mentorship, and gender-biased organisational practices, require a multifaceted approach on the part of organizations, policymakers, and women themselves. To support women at work, organisations should develop policies that promote diversity and inclusion. Organisations should strive to create an environment that foster a sense of fit by considering women employees' specific needs, endorsing a positive organizational culture, and offering opportunities for personal growth and greater flexibility. The women employees should be provided with counselling and training to help them devise strategies to cope with the changes happening due to varying work dynamics. To create a conducive environment for women employees, organisations should consider allocating sufficient resources for training, coaching or mentoring them. The complex organisational structures can be redesigned to create better prospects for women so that their perceptions of compatibility between work environment and their career is enhanced. This also accentuates the need of having some kind of mechanism which can be used to monitor the synchronisation of an individual's environment with their career.

Recognizing and valuing the nonlinear nature of women's careers is essential for creating inclusive workplaces that support their diverse career paths and provide opportunities for growth and success. Recognizing and addressing the factors that influence women's perceptions can help create supportive environments that facilitate successful and fulfilling career transitions, ultimately contributing to women's overall career advancement and empowerment. It is important for organizations to recognize the role of PE fit in women's career transitioning and take steps to create environments that promote a strong fit. This can involve providing opportunities for skill utilization, aligning

organizational values with employee values, offering growth and development programs, and fostering a supportive and inclusive work culture. By doing so, organizations can support successful career transitions for women and enhance their overall career satisfaction and success.

Additionally, women by setting realistic expectations for themselves, leveraging transferable skills, reaching out for support at family and work and seeking professional guidance can build confidence among themselves to successfully transition across career. Investing in continuous learning and skill development opportunities would boost confidence among them. Time and stress management skills can further help them navigate through potential obstacles involved in successful career transitions.

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