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COMMENTARY

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Fit, misfit, and design: JOD studies that touch reality



Richard M. Burton

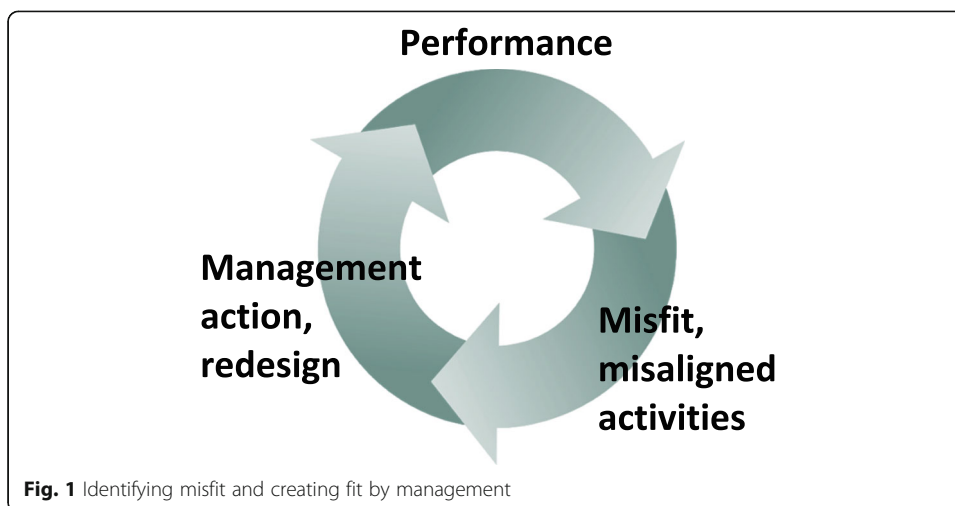
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Fit is both conceptually and empirically at the heart of our science in organization design. Illustratively, Joseph (2018) found in a text analysis of abstracts in the *Journal of Organization Design* (JOD) that fit was the most prevalent topic in articles published since the journal's founding. Fit is synonymous with words such as alignment, match, integration, and coordination. Alternatively, misfits are synonymous with misalignments, mismatches, gaps, and undesired properties. In this commentary, I take a less formal approach and review all of the JOD articles to find out how the concept of fit is used in these papers. All the articles, whether or not they use the term fit, address the question of how we get the elements of an organization to work together to meet its goals; that is fit.

Fit, misfit, and design

The fit concept is central to modern organization design. The core idea is that the design of an organization needs to align its strategy with other contingency factors. Designs that fit deliver better performance; misfit produces disorganization and consequently lower performance (Donaldson and Joffe 2014). Organizations should design for good performance—efficiency and effectiveness; the organization elements should work together or be in fit; misfits are the evidence that the organization elements are not working together, thus calling for action to improve by restoring fit. Burton and Obel (2004) present four fit criteria for design: strategic among the given contingencies, contingency of the strategy to the design, design among the internal contingencies, and total fit among the previous three. Puranam et al. (2014) list four elements for organization design: task division, task allocation, reward distribution, and information flows. Any design that does not address these elements is incomplete and likely in a state of misfit.

The fit/misfit sequence usually begins with the identification of a misfit where one or more contingencies diminishes performance; then, given the misfit, there is consideration of the managerial actions required to bring it back to fit. The identification of a misfit and the restoration to fit is management driven—not an automatic process of adjustment. The ongoing redesign of an organization demands that managers are the designers of the organization as shown in Fig. 1. We will see this theme throughout the JOD articles challenging us to rethink the role of management in organization design.



Touching reality

What do we mean by “touch reality?” Here, we mean that the author/researcher was in direct contact with the phenomena in observing the organization and its members, gathering the data, and developing the questions and implications for our understanding and research. We include case studies, field studies, ethnographies, and field experiments in our review. We have not included empirical articles that analyze data from a variety of sources including large databases, survey data analyses, simulation studies, or theoretically argued models; all of these add to our science but are not the focus of this review.

The “touch reality” studies broaden the scope of design studies both in methodology and in the unit of analysis beyond the firm. We have a larger laboratory with greater variety from which to learn about our science. Puranam (2012) listed three characteristics of design studies: consilience, empirical methods, and prototyping new organization designs. In the articles reviewed, you will find that each article will broaden and deepen your understanding of fit, misfit, and action for organization design with new insights and interesting questions yet to be addressed.

The studies

For this commentary, I picked eight articles where the authors touch the design phenomenon. In JOD, we have a broad domain of organization design including eco-systems, collaborative communities, internal fit challenges of macro and micro designs which include managerial action, and more explicit consideration of routines and information processing in organizations. The goal is to expand the domain of organization design with different empirical approaches; simulation, field studies, and case studies give us a richness where we can experiment and generate new design possibilities and prototypes that do not yet exist. I picked articles with primary foci or attributes on fit, misfit, and management action with data from field studies, case studies, field experiments, and ethnographies as shown in Table 1. I will not summarize each article; the abstract and the complete article are readily available in JOD. The articles are listed by first authors’ last name in Table 1.

Table 1 Fit, misfit, design, redesign, management action

Abbreviated title	Article listed by author(s)	Fit, misfit, design, redesign, management action	Study type	Link to the paper
Complementarities and organizational (Mis)fit: a retrospective analysis of the Toyota recall crisis	Camuffo and Wilhelm 2016	Misfit—redesign	Case study, field study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-016-0006-6
Exploring reasons for the weekend effect in a hospital emergency department: an information processing perspective	Duvald 2019	Misfit—redesign—fit	Ethnographic field study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-019-0042-0
Designing social networks: joint tasks and the formation and endurance of network ties	Hasan and Koning 2020	Design—fit	Field experiment	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-020-0067-4
Transitioning from an economic cluster to a collaborative community: mining projects in Greenland	Kadenic 2017	Design—fit	Case study, field study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-016-0011-9
Developing a governance model for PPP infrastructure service delivery based on lessons from Eastern Australia	Levitt and Eriksson 2016	Design—fit	Case study, field study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-016-0009-3
Navigating in a hierarchy: how middle managers adapt macro design	Livijn 2019	Misfit—redesign—fit	Case study, field study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-019-0046-9
Transitioning from a hierarchical product organization to an open platform organization: a Chinese case study	Luo et al. 2018	Redesign—fit	Case study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-017-0026-x
Designing the microstructure of routines	Steinberger and Jung 2019	Design—fit	Field study	http://jorgdesign.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41469-019-0058-5

Camuffo and Wilhem (2016): Complementarities and organizational (Mis)fit: a retrospective analysis of the Toyota recall crisis

In a field case study of Toyota, Camuffo and Wilhem (2016) analyze how the highly integrated lean production organization generated its own unintended misfit of quality deterioration under excessive growth. Quality depended upon the complementarities among standardization in manufacturing, employee skills, decentralized decision-making, and supplier collaboration. Fit was evident, but perhaps more fragile than envisioned. In short, a nexus of high interdependency among design elements can lead to a fragility and lack of agility yielding performance loss. The challenge for researchers is a better understanding of fragility for misfit in a design and the agility to redesign and achieve fit.

Duvald (2019): Exploring reasons for the weekend effect in a hospital emergency department: an information processing perspective

In her ethnographic field study using an information processing lenses in hospital emergency rooms, Duvald (2019) found misfits that compromised the quality of care. Duvald mapped the information flows and decision-making to demonstrate the continuing

redesign of the emergency room from day to night and over the weekend. That is, information processing and operational routines were altered on a continuing basis requiring adaptation by management to demonstrate agility. With this analysis of who talks to whom, who makes which decisions, who does what, and how these are ever changing, we have a better understanding of fit and organization design at the micro level of information processing and the continuing role of management.

Hasan and Koning (2020): Designing social networks: joint tasks and the formation and endurance of network ties

Using a field experiment in a training boot camp, Hasan and Koning (2020) used a joint task assignment to investigate whether network ties would be induced; and if so, what these ties would be. Friendship and advice networks were created. Management now has the ongoing responsibility of redesign using work assignment to achieve communications which enhance advice nets and friendship. The challenge is to select the joint tasks which will yield fit for the organization. Hasan and Koning have both broadened the domain of organization design, but also suggested that we need to know more about this process where field experiments can help give a more nuanced answer.

Kadenic (2017): Transitioning from an economic cluster to a collaborative community: mining projects in Greenland

Applying a single case study of cluster formation to collaborative community design, Kadenic (2017) interviewed key informants in the local community, many governmental agencies, and businesses; further, she examined documents, reports, and other data sources. The question is to describe and understand how a cluster can become a collaborative community where the members worked together, yet achieve their own individual goals. Kadenic documents a rich and detailed design process for creating a collaborative community and a deeper understanding of what is meant by fit in an ecosystem organization. The design process itself foresaw many potential misfits and then developed a logic and theoretical propositions to avoid these elements in the design itself. Trust, fairness, and the breaking down of boundaries had to be established with time and patience. Thus, the fit concept is extended to the design process—as well as the design itself.

Levitt and Eriksson (2016): Developing a governance model for PPP infrastructure service delivery based on lessons from Eastern Australia

Using semi-structured interviews with various executives, Levitt and Eriksson (2016) investigated public–private partnerships in three Australian states. These partnerships change the boundary for design to the partnership—a small ecosystem involving many players with different goals and incentives. The design of the governance system requires the simultaneous consideration of contracts, investments, public and private financing, leases, maintenance of infrastructure over time—going beyond bid and build contracts for public investments. It is evident that for these ecosystems, fit among all of the interdependent players for coordination and control is the central organization design problem.

Livijn (2019): Navigating in a hierarchy: how middle managers adapt macro design

In her field case study of FOOD, Livijn (2019) focused on the relation between the macro redesign of the firm and the micro redesign that included the middle management. Here, middle management did not simply interpret and implement the top management design, but modified and adapted the incomplete top-level design at the operating level with new processes and routines. Interestingly, top management knew that their redesign was incomplete and would require middle management action. Middle management had to develop its own redesign within the top management framework to obtain fit for the organization. Said differently, the top-level redesign was incomplete and in misfit from the beginning, i.e., before implementation. Fit was achieved only when middle management entered into a dynamic process of adaptation. A broader challenge for further research is whether a macro-level or top-management design can ever be in fit; or, is macro-level design (where most of our research has been focused and developed) inherently in misfit? The implications for designing an organization and obtaining fit are enormous. Managerial action must be included from the beginning and that requires a new framing and mindset for our science. Our models and empirical studies must include management action as well as macro design.

Luo, Van de Ven, Jing, and Jiang (2018): Transitioning from a hierarchical product organization to an open platform organization: a Chinese case study

Using a case study of the Firm, Luo and colleagues focused on the challenge of a hierarchy transitioning to a micro-level enterprise utilizing a platform organization. They began with employee interviews and then administered a large survey. The new organization incorporates the market and consumer preferences at the enterprise rather than the corporate level. They found the new design yielded role confusion during the redesign process, control imbalance with too much control on the new enterprises and insufficient attention to external stakeholders, and staffing mismatches of skills for the new enterprises. This case study examines not only an interesting transition situation but also new questions for the redesign process. Here, the Firm initiated the transition and a sequence in the design process; first, created significant misfits in redesign that began in fit, and second, redesigned to fix these misfits to achieve a new and different fit. We must ask the question of whether the misfit to redesign to fit is as linear as presented in the literature—or are there many redesign paths with misfits created in the process? Burton et al. (2020) in press) argue the latter is the norm—indeed, inevitable.

Steinberger and Jung (2019): Designing the microstructure of routines

Using a field study of two Korean restaurants, one chain and one independent, Steinberger and Jung found that the concurrent coordination was resolved in different ways. The chain relied more on standard operating procedures, and the independent more on memos and comments. Codification is blunt and perhaps more efficient, where the memo approach may be more effective—and agile. The chain approach specifies who talks to whom about what and the independent approach is more emergent. What are contingencies for the design and who should do the design for codification and emergent organization design?

Discussion and conclusion

Fit for performance is fundamental in organization design. How do we achieve fit? One approach is to use our theory to design a priori an organization in fit. Here, Hasan and Koning's field experiment on creating network ties, Levitt and Eriksen's research on designing a public–private partnership in Australia, Kadenic's case study of cluster to collaborative community in Greenland, and Steinberger and Jung's micro routine design cases are examples. We use fit propositions to design the organization(s).

A second approach is misfit to redesign to achieve fit. We begin by observing the misfit and then use theoretical design rules to realize fit. Camuffo and Wilhelm's case study of Toyota, Duvald's hospital emergency room case study, and Livijn's macro–micro redesign are examples. A third approach is redesign to fit. Luo et al's platform transition designs in China are examples. The best design approach depends upon the situation and how the design challenge is framed.

Case studies, field studies and experiments, and ethnographies: can we generalize or is it simply one study? Each study must be contextualized in the literature and compared with other studies and theory. A simple description is not sufficient. But a case study can challenge our theory with new questions and insights that may not be seen with confirmatory studies of what we think we know. Our knowledge base changes from case studies in ways that we did not anticipate. We learn what we may have thought we knew, but did not. We make our knowledge base more relevant in theory and for practice. These “touch reality” studies answered some questions, but also generated new insights and questions that require more investigation and further our science.

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Author's contributions

The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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