

Misfit: what do you do when you can't be yourself at work?



The misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes, the ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. — Steve Jobs

Most of us, like Steve Jobs, have come across misfits at work and we may have experienced the feeling ourselves that we are somehow at odds with our work environment. There have been many studies over decades exploring how people fit with their work environment finding that good fit leads to positive organisational outcomes such as job satisfaction and productivity. However, there has been little research on what people do when they misfit at work.

To investigate this, we conducted a two-phase study in the UK and in the US, asking employees to report how they experience misfit, and what they do in response. We conducted interviews with individuals from diverse industries and occupations to answer these questions.

The ways in which people became aware of their misfit varied. Individuals from both the UK and US described the addition of new managers or co-workers, restructuring of the company, and promotions into new positions as triggers of misfit. Others cited changes in culture and practices in organisations and the gradual realisation that the stated values, which originally attracted them, were not the values in use in those companies.

We found that some became aware of misfit only after they had been treated as such by their co-workers. One employee felt she had been "*labelled a bit of a freak*" after sharing her outside interests with her co-workers. Colleagues also sent signals of misfit when people did not behave as they expected: "*in terms of stereotypical characteristics of an accountant, I would be a misfit. And this is just feedback I've been given*". Even simple statements calling attention to differences, such as "*It's really nice to have somebody here who is not like everybody else*", were enough to trigger our participants to question their fit.

Misfit was also encountered when supervisors told individuals they were not meeting performance expectations. As one participant recounted, "*[my supervisor] gave me a two-page list of behaviours that they wanted to see out of me. I'm a goal-oriented person and I like to think that I'm always doing a really great job and frankly I didn't see anything wrong with what I was doing*". This person was blindsided by a negative performance assessment that suggested she was not meeting the demands of her job. Until that point she had felt like she was a good fit.

The interviewees told us how miserable it was to experience misfit at work but surprisingly, most simultaneously experienced good fit with other parts of their work environment. For example, some described good fit with their jobs, but misfit with co-workers or supervisors. Employees discussed fit as a state subject to frequent change and re-evaluation. Participants portrayed misfit as a problem they were attempting to solve, and they used a wide variety of strategies to attack it. We identified three general responses to misfit: *resolution* and *relief-seeking approaches* represent the more positive, and *resignation* as the more negative end of the spectrum.

Resolution of misfit can be achieved by leaving and finding another job. In both of our studies, leaving was one of the first options considered; however, most dismissed this as unfeasible or undesirable. Instead, many attempted to resolve misfit by changing the environment. For example, some adapted their job to fit their skill set. Others sought to change themselves, after concluding that their own behaviour had contributed to their misfit. They did so through introspection, sometimes with the help of mentors, which had the added advantage of facilitating personal development. Personal change was often an effective strategy for resolving misfit, although it required significant effort and time.

Unlike resolution, relief-seeking strategies are defensive, aimed at mitigating the negative feelings stemming from misfit, rather than removing the underlying sources. For example, individuals acted like they fit, adopting behaviours and language to give the impression that they fit in at work. Those who made such surface-level behaviour changes saw them as temporary fixes to alleviate the pain resulting from misfit. Others sought relief by emphasising and focusing on the positive aspects of work. Several participants were quite explicit that their co-workers were the only thing keeping them from leaving whilst others drew on their sense of vocation. However, these relief-seeking strategies can increase stress due to the feeling they could not “bring [their] authentic self to the workplace”.

Many participants were able to resolve or mitigate misfit, but when misfit was ultimately unresolvable, resignation strategies became the last line of defence. Resignation tended to show in two ways – distancing and taking pride in misfit. Those who distanced themselves believed that environmental change was impossible, and personal change was not desirable or feasible. Thus, they gave up on trying to improve their fit and resigned themselves to their condition. There were those however, who took pride in their misfit. They touted the fact that they did not want to be like other employees who did whatever it took to fit in: “*I see through the games and I don't want to play them*”. When participants reframed misfit as a source of pride, they often did so after making unsuccessful attempts to resolve or relieve it. It is not surprising that, in follow-up interviews, we learned that these employees only felt relief when an opportunity to leave eventually became available.

Fitting in does not appear to come easily to most people, but instead relies on active, effortful processes requiring reflection, adaptation and a large dose of persistence.

Managers should be cognisant of the changes necessary for people to fit in. Misfit is not insurmountable, and often minor modifications to job demands may help. But by asking people to change values or ethics, managers may create proud misfits who resent the organisation. We suggest engaging employees by encouraging them to voice their concerns. This may resolve their feelings of misfit in the same way that encouraging authentic self-expression in newcomers improves retention. Organisations may be able to benefit from such misfits by embracing the changes recommended by employees who challenge the status quo.



Notes:

- *This international research team came together through mutual interest in person-environment fit and misfit in organisational settings and have worked as a team, across continents, to bring this project to fruition.*
- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Resolution, Relief, and Resignation: A Qualitative Study of Responses to Misfit at Work](#), Academy of Management Journal, April 2018.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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