

## EDITORIAL

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# Psychological evaluation of personnel, between selection and adaptation paradigms

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*When I was asked to write an editorial for this issue, it was not hard to choose the subject. First, because work and industrial-organizational psychology has in its core the personnel psychology, which is based largely on different psychological assessment procedures. Second, because during my professional and academic experience I have noticed many dysfunctions in addressing the psychological evaluation, whose root often lies in the inadequacy of psychological assessment to its purpose. In this editorial I will argue that psychological assessment for selection purposes and personnel psychological evaluation in organizations, are subject to different paradigms. I will address this further, but not before stating that the meaning I give to this issue extends to any employment context, regardless of its nature (industry, services, education, military, transportation, health, etc.). While the first part is inherently theoretical, the second part is dedicated to discussing some important practical aspects.*

### **Preamble**

The importance of the problem is highlighted by the amplitude that psychological assessment has for work and I/O psychologists. Surveys among HR professionals from various fields and a comprehensive geographical coverage, conducted by Fallaw and Kantrowitz (2013) and Kantrowitz (2014) revealed that

psychological evaluation for selection and retention purposes is on the first place as compared to other types of psychological activities. The same is true in Romania, where 58% of psychologists working in the I/O field state that they conduct psychological evaluation activities, and only 42% state that they conduct support and intervention activities (Association of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2013; Iliescu, 2013). These figures should not surprise us if we consider the employers' expectations of employers as regards organizational psychologists. A survey conducted in the context of a POSDRU project on a sample of 221 Romanian employers (e.g., companies, health, education, NGOs), led to the conclusion that the psychological services the most required by employers are the psychological evaluation, followed, in order by, psychological support and therapy, training and management counseling (Popa, 2012c). Accordingly, it is quite natural that the focus of academic training for psychologists is on procedures and evaluation techniques, and therefore students are interested in the first place in the acquisition of assessment abilities (Popa, 2012b).

The aforementioned arguments strongly support the importance of evaluation in professional activities of psychologists. As mentioned by Thissen and Wainer (2001), in the XXI century psychological and educational assessment techniques tend to acquire a social role that they never had

before. Importantly, there is not a psychological assessment "in general", but psychological assessment carried out by certain "techniques", according to certain "purposes". In the context of this analysis we are mainly interested in the *employment* status as a classification criterion. From this point of view we can distinguish between two fundamentally different situations: assessment "for employment" and evaluation "of employees". The latter, in its turn, can be classified as routine or periodically assessment, and as special, when the purpose is the re-certification of psychological mental capacity in relation to the job, promotion to a new job, assessment of mental abilities after a disease, a serious accident etc. (Popa, 2008, 2012). At this point of the discussion we introduce the distinction between two fundamental approaches in psychological assessment: the selection paradigm and adaptation paradigm.

### **The selection paradigm**

Psychological selection is a decision making process based on the collection of relevant information for comparing people who want to carry out a profession (Popa, 2012). The objective of the selection process is to predict the future work performance. A good prediction leads us to expect that the selected candidates will demonstrate a better professional performance after being hired.

In essence, this process is based on the theory of individual differences, which states that people differ in how they respond to requests from environmental conditions whether these are natural, social or professional. Individual differences are stable psychological attributes, defining individual's consistency and specificity, and playing a *causal* role for the individual behavior (Carver & Scheier, apud Thompson, 2008). Acknowledging the existence of individual differences does not exclude, obviously, the effect of environmental context on behavior, but merely states that people tend to manifest a certain consistency, regardless of the context in which works.

The fact that people are different is not enough to justify the selection approach, if we do not take into consideration a number of additional conditions, which are listed below (Herriot, 1992, 1993; Popa, 2012):

- attributes that underlie individual differences tend to be stable, quasi unalterable under the effect of the accumulation of personal experience;
- individual attributes may be an objective measurement process that brings with an acceptable reliability and construct validity;
- individual differences are the largest source of variability in work performance;
- work activity consists of specific tasks that can be identified and characterized in terms of psychological attributes that contribute to their performance;
- individual performance in work tasks is entirely determined by individual attributes (exclude cooperation with other people or the effect of contextual conditions);
- job tasks, in turn, are relatively stable over time;
- performance in work tasks can be subjected to a measurement process that meets acceptable reliability and construct validity;
- there is an acceptable and quantifiable relationship between the individual attributes and professional performance (criterion validity);

In conclusion, selection paradigm, also called "psychometric" by Billsbery (2007), is based on the assumption of the possibility to predict the fit of a particular set of individual characteristics (predictors) based on work performance indicators (criteria). The prediction validity depends largely on the extent to which the above conditions are really met (Figure 1).

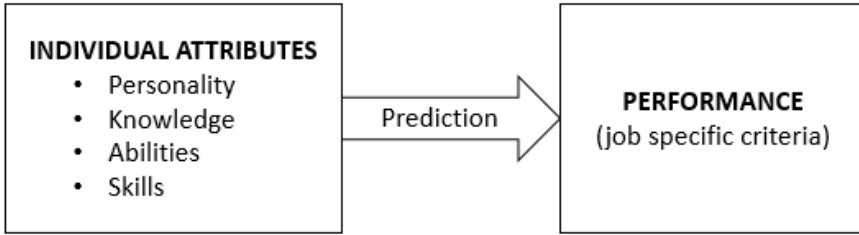


Figure 1. The selection paradigm

In fact, we know that none of these conditions are met completely. The vulnerability of any selection process lies precisely in the fact that there may be greater or smaller deviations from any of the assumptions mentioned above: there is no absolutely immutable individual attributes, which are beyond of time and individual experiences effect; any measurement process is imperfect in terms of fidelity and construct validity; work tasks tend to change over time (e.g., under the effect of technological change); work performance is only to a certain extent strictly individual.

But one of the most serious limitations of selection paradigm is that does not account for

the moderating effect that different contextual variables may have on the relationship between individual attributes and performance at work (Figure 2). Individual attributes are reflected in performance in a context where situational variables have a moderating effect on the relationship between individual characteristics and their professional performance. For example, the scarcity of financial resources of an organization can lead to poor performance of employees, even if they have personal qualities. But even in such a context, effective leadership can offset the impact of resource scarcity on employee performance.

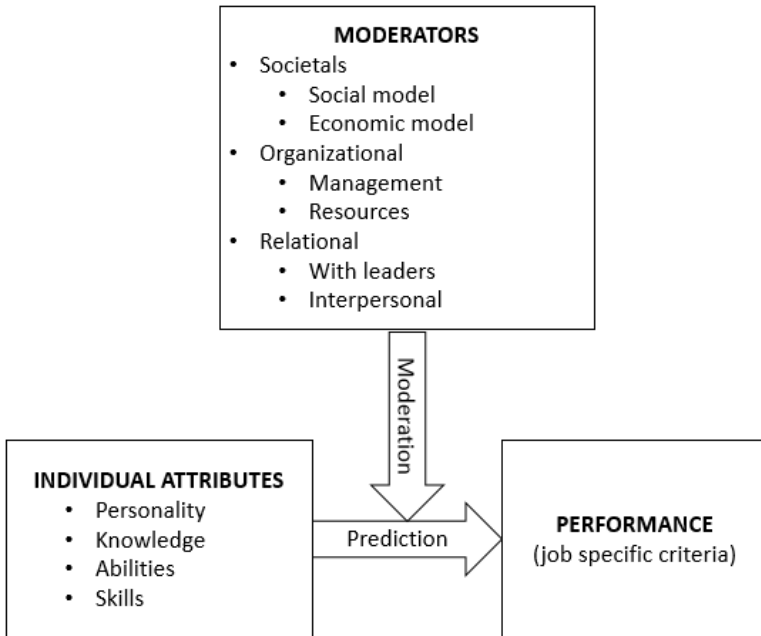


Figure 2. The moderating impact of contextual variables on the relationship between individual attributes and job performance

Despite the limitations noted above, well-designed psychological selection tests have nevertheless an acceptable efficiency, as long as each condition is met at an acceptable level. To understand what the word “acceptable” means would necessitate to digress overly, but deepening the literature related to each of the above-mentioned conditions can provide adequate evidence in this respect. Technically, a selection process can take place even if the aforementioned conditions are not met, but in this case selection shows no value and is simply an ineffectual exercise, devoid of a real purpose.

### **The adaptation paradigm**

The most vulnerable aspect of the selection paradigm is the disregard of the person-situation interaction. To overcome this limit, various theoretical solutions have been proposed. Thus, based on theories from the field of social psychology, Herriot (1992, 1993) puts forward "the paradigm of social processes" where selection is a social process and not a series of aptitudes tests. A prominent model is “person-organization fit” (Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991; Levesque, 2005), which explains individual and organizational performance based on congruence between employees and the work environment. The fit is a concept that is reflected in several facets: with the organization (values, needs, goals, etc.), with the task (performance), with the peers, and work group, with the leaders. Moreover, according to employees’ competencies and organization’s needs, a distinction can be made between “complementary” and “supplementary” fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). The former refers to the situation where candidates’ competencies address a shortfall within the organization and convey abilities which current employees do not possess. The latter refers to the situation where the expected skills of the new employees supplement the already existing skills or competencies within the organization. Finally, we cannot overlook *Minnesota Work Adjustment Theory* (MWAT, Dawis, 2004; Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1964; Dawis, Lofquist, & Weiss, 1968), which is based on

two fundamental concepts: the work environment, which refers to the context that govern the work in the organization (objectives, resources, tasks, rules, etc.); and the work personality, which concerns individual resources, characteristics and results of employees at work.

From our point of view, all these models can be included under the generic term of “adaptation paradigm”. By “adaptation”, we refer to the relationship between the organizational-contextual and individual factors, which materializes at the individual level through a series of adaptive responses (performance, commitment, persistence, etc.) or maladaptive (low performance, breach of the rules, counterproductive behavior, turnover, etc.) (Popa, 2012). Adapting is a process which starts from the stage of hiring and continues throughout the employment relationship. During this relationship, the degree of congruence between the individual resources and employee-organization mutual expectations may be subject of many changes. These changes may occur both at the organizational level (such as technological developments, changes in objectives, staff restructuring, changes in job descriptions) and at the employee level (performance decrease due to aging, changes in aspirations and motivation, etc.). Such situations produce variations in the degree of adaptation and generate pressure for reshaping the relationship between the employee and the employer (e.g., desire to change job). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that future organizational performance criteria had to be more strongly linked to the present level of adaptation than the mental attributes measured in the selection process. By this statement we do not want to minimize the importance of selection, yet to connect the prediction of performance to contextual variables, whose effects converge with stable individual attributes assessed in selection. In fact, as stated by Bowen, Ledford and Nathan (1991), people are not employed for a job, but for an organization.

A set of fundamental assumptions is summarized below (Billsberry, 2007; Billsberry & Searle, 2007; Herriot, 1992, 1993; Levesque, 2005):

- jobs are constantly changing;
- relations between employees and employers are changing;
- organizations need employees to grow with them;
- current fit between employees and organization is a predictor of future fit;
- employee – organization fit is the result of a system of interactions covering extremely varied domains: job and profession characteristics, relationship with supervisors, with colleagues, with family, etc.;
- fit (interaction) between the employee and the organization is the most important predictor of performance.

### **The object of measurement in the two paradigms**

Both paradigms rely on the core concept of “fit”, and are founded on the evaluation (measurement) process. The major difference between the two perspectives is that while the selection paradigm is aiming to predict (fit) the employee performance based on stable individual characteristics, the adaptation paradigm aims to predict performance relying on the current adaptation and a set of organizations’ subsequent expectations for the same job or to another one (Figure 3). This difference results in directing the measurement process towards different variables. Psychological selection exams are based on a wide variety of predictors. An extensive analysis of them is not the subject of our discussion, but those interested can read the comprehensive article authored by Salgado, Viswesvaran and Ones (2005). In this context, it is adequate to categorize the predictors in: general skills, which are non-specific professional performance oriented

(intelligence, with its various facets); specific skills, relevant for the task performance aimed at in the selection process (e.g., motor coordination, spatial orientation, vigilance, etc.); personality traits considered relevant for adapting to the organization and work environment characteristics. The value of predictors lies in their validity examined in reference to a set of assessed work performance criteria.

Under the adaptation paradigm (Figure 3), which becomes of interest after employment, predicting the future performance is more secure if it depends on matching the person with the work environment. Individual manifestations in the work environment are compared with the corresponding expectations of the organization. The better match between person-organization we have, the more we can expect a good adaptation in the future (on the same job or another one), and a higher performance of the organization. Talbot and Billsbery (2010) believe that “fit” and “mismatch” between the person and the organization are not complementary facets of the same reality, but rather different aspects of adaptation. For example, a teacher may be able to effectively convey his/her knowledge to students, but display behaviors that are incompatible with the status of a teacher.

It is natural to assume that the degree of the adjustment/maladjustment at some point has to do with the predictors assessed in the selection process. But their predictive power somewhat “freezes” when the candidate for a particular work job is declared “apt”. After a person was hired, his/her evaluation should take into account especially the particular way in which his/ her attributes translate into a professional conduct in the specific context of the evolving work environment.

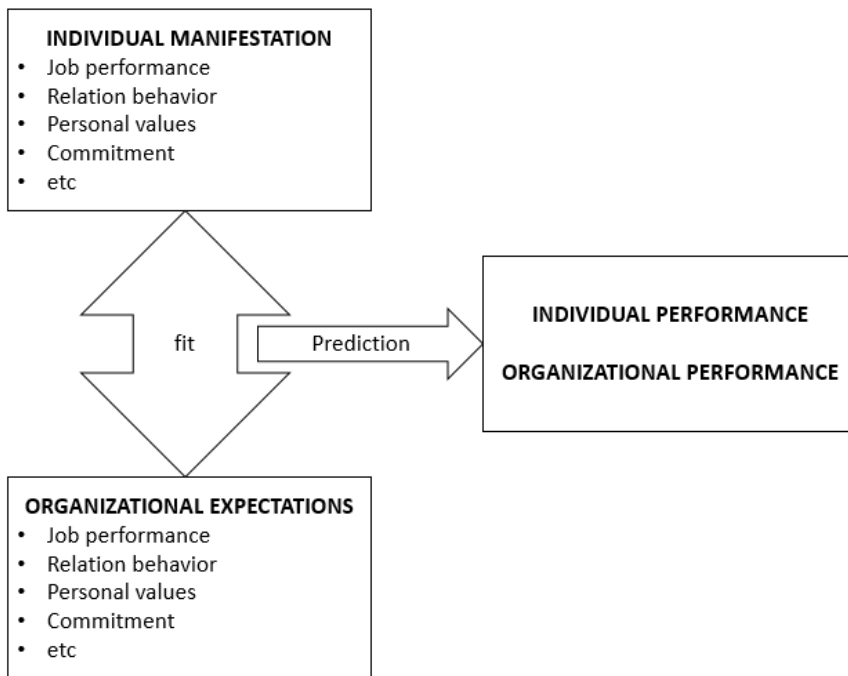


Figure 3. The adaptation paradigm

Typically, the aspects measured in the context of the adaptation paradigm refer to needs, values, goals, and motivations. The fit of these variables with the organization expectations play a predicting role for the individual and organizational performance. Other issues relevant to work adaptation are: quality of relationship behaviors (with colleagues, leaders), the balance between work and family life, and conformity with the system of norms and rules of the organization. We believe, along with Mutchinsky and Monahan (1987), that the assessment of adaptation cannot be complete without evaluating the job performance. Though not sufficient, work performance is necessary for adaptation. A person can only be adjusted if he/she achieved the minimum acceptable level of performance decided by the employer. When an employee does not achieve this minimum he or she is undoubtedly considered a poorly suited employee. There is nothing contradictory in stating that the present performance is a predictor of future performance. It might even be the best predictor. Finally, of particular relevance in assessing adaptation are the critical work

incidents. These are behaviors and events that place the employee at the extreme limit of the area of adaptation, or even beyond this limit. Here, we include a significant reduction in the level of performance (errors, incidents or accidents involving the work, etc.), or conduct that seriously deviates from the social or organizational norms.

The selection paradigm implies a prediction of the performance level. Candidates who are below the cut-off score are rejected. Within the adaptation paradigm we speak of a minimum acceptable level of performance set by management decisions, which may vary depending on the organization's objectives or on certain conditions. This can lead to a situation where an employee who has been "adapted" at a certain moment, can be later assessed as "maladapted" because the employee could not cope with the increased requirements, or a new technology. This observation points to another challenge the selection process needs to face up: what is the level of setting the performance criteria as to minimize the risk that, after employment, people reach their maladjustment threshold too early, as a result

of (un)predictable changes in the job requirements?

In conclusion, the explicit goal of the evaluation of the adaptation is a diagnostic one, and refers to the fit between person and organization at a certain time. The implicit goal, however, is a predictive one: if an employee is diagnosed as “adapted” at a time when we can say that he is “adaptable” in the future, to the same work position. More directly speaking, the present adaptation is a predictor of future adaptation. This is the fundamental rationale of the adaptation paradigm that can viably sustain psychological approach for periodic recertification of employees, where this procedure is regulated.

### **Consequences of the paradigm choice on the psychological assessment of personnel**

The main idea we derive from all the above is that the real effectiveness of the psychological assessment depends on the appropriateness of the paradigm employed for a certain assessment. From this point of view, we discern between the candidate assessment during the selection process and the worker evaluation during his employment. In the first case, the task is to assess relatively stable psychological attributes relevant for the predicted work performance. In the latter case, the task is to assess aspects that describe the degree of congruence between the employee work behaviors and employer expectations. Sometimes the adaptive measurement is carried out in selection (e.g., the fit between individual values and the organizational ones), but this is a particular case.

In practice, there are certain professions in which psychological evaluation of personnel is regulated, usually on an annual basis: army and militarized institutions; transportation; education, etc. In our view, oftentimes the main limitation of such periodic assessments is the inadequacy of the paradigm for the purpose of the periodic assessment. In other words, oftentimes the tools are used to assess mainly the general psychological attributes, sometimes even skills that are not relevant in the context, and

do not correspond to the assumed goal. In this case, a more useful approach in predicting future performance would be to acquire information on the degree of adaptation of the person since the last assessment. This can be done by interviewing techniques (computerized or in person), by employing specialized scales for assessing adaptation, through directly evaluating the employees at the workplace (where psychologists should be employed), or by the transfer of work related information from management.

Such an approach would therefore remove the selection paradigm with its inappropriate “accepted/rejected” decision used for periodic assessment, and replace it with the paradigm of adaptation, which involves rather a psychological support. Employees with adjustment problems at work can be included in counseling programs (e.g., for career planning, for stress management at work), in training courses (e.g., to deal with work-family imbalance), or even therapy programs (e.g., for controlling posttraumatic consequences of work incidents or accidents).

The inadequacy of assessment paradigm in personnel evaluation generates a series of significant adverse effects, such as:

- waste of time, as evaluator and employees are removed from the work;
- waste of financial and material resources allocated to the evaluation process;
- lack of real outcomes that do not really serve the organization nor the employees;
- devaluation of psychologist profession by the engagement in formal activities perceived as such even by employees, instead of interventions with an established goal.

Such periodical psychological examinations oftentimes bring about an atmosphere of resignedly complicity between evaluators and the assessed individuals, where no one really believes in the usefulness of the evaluation, but accepted it only by reason of being imposed by regulations. The lack of validity studies regarding the outcomes of periodic evaluations performed on a

superficial theoretical basis unduly maintains the illusion of their usefulness.

Faced with this reality, it seems natural to ask what are the causes producing and supporting it. A first explanation would be the deficiencies in the academic training programs for psychologists. Faculties of Psychology are largely focused on predictors (the study of psychological attributes and their measurement techniques). In comparison, the problem of criteria identification and measurement (performance indicators and work adaptation problems) is much less present in university curricula. This is rooted in poor connection between the academic and professional environment. Predictors are general human abilities/features, while job performance indicators are, most often, highly context specific. As a result, psychology graduates tend to work in different environments insufficiently equipped with the ability to assess job performance. Moreover, classical predictors' measurement is more advanced than the measurement of fit indicators (Karren & Graves, 1994), and their validation must meet all scientific requirements (Arthur Jr., Bell, Villado, & Doverspike, 2006). This finding suggests that psychological research must invest more seriously in the assessment of the work fit indicators area.

A second possible explanation would be related to the psychologists themselves, who prefer the relatively easy solution of psychological tests, with standardized results, giving the status and professional prestige, instead of a genuine professional approach, in the real benefit of employees and their employers. A third explanation that we could consider involves the employers themselves, who often require psychological assessments without understanding its nature and its utility in relation to the expectations they have. And if these are based on official regulations, such evaluations are very difficult to be replaced, tending to be perpetuated as an effect of regulation.

Last but not least, I must point out the fact that sometimes this approach is supported by the work regulatory bodies of psychologists, based on the argument that it is providing jobs for psychologists. But on short-

term such jobs are unrewarding and on long-term are not sustainable.

### **Some conclusions**

The main objective we pursued here was to highlight the existence of two different paradigms applicable in the psychological assessment of personnel. The selection paradigm, labeled by some authors as "psychometric", is suited for candidates' selection. Its goal is to measure psychological predictors, namely individual attributes which are relatively stable and generate acceptable statistical predictions for future work performance. For the evaluation of the currently employed personnel, however, we argue that not the Selection, but the Adaptation paradigm is the model of choice. In this case the goal is also the prediction of future performance, but not based on individual attributes, but using various data about the degree of current adaptation to the working environment. Unlike selection paradigm, which is concluded, as a rule, by a decision, adaptation paradigm naturally leads to psychological support activities for employees who have some kind of work adaptation difficulty. This is enforced by the fact that employees are an important resource for any organization, who are not easily replaced considering the investment the organization has made in their development.

These two paradigms are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Assessment for selection purposes may include some "fit indicators" as predictors, as employee evaluations may sometimes include aptitude tests (e.g., basic cognitive tests applied to pilots who suffered head trauma, for their readmission for flying).

Relying on an adequate paradigm for psychological evaluation in any context is a prerequisite for efficiency. The appropriateness of the assessment process and techniques for their real purpose, however, is not easy. The fact that we find in many situations, sometimes on a large enough scale, a glaring inconsistency between the evaluation process and its purposes deserves a high consideration in the psychological professional field.

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