

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Perceived person-vocation misfit predicts exhaustion over job demands

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### Abstract

This study aims to add to the literature on exhaustion by examining the incremental validity of the perceived person-vocation misfit over the well-established predictors (i.e., job demands), as hypothesized in the Job Demands-Resources model. Based on the data collected from a sample of 312 participants, working in a wide range of industries, the results support the hypothesized association. The relative predictors weight analysis revealed that the perceived PV misfit has the largest contribution to the variation of exhaustion (37%), when analyzed together with five types of job demands. Limits, theoretical and practical contributions and future directions are discussed.

### Keywords

person-vocation misfit; job demands; exhaustion

### Introduction

A critical predictor of burnout is person-environment (PE) misfit (Maslach, 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). This concept tackles the interaction between individual characteristics and work environment factors. Previous studies have proved that the higher the incongruence between the two, the higher the strain experienced by employees and consequently, the level of burnout (Bliese, Edwards, & Sonnentag, 2017; Maslach, 2017). PE fit entails various levels, such as, person-organization (PO), person-vocation (PV), person-group (PG) or person-job (PJ) fit (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, Jansen & Colbert, 2002). PV fit is the broader category, acting as an antecedent for the other (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). As such, individuals who perceive that they don't match with the occupations they hold, will not be motivated to bring a significant

contribution to their jobs or organizations, PV fit determining the upper limit of the PO and PJ fit that can be achieved (Vogel & Feldman, 2009).

Previous studies have investigated various job characteristics as antecedents of burnout, such as job demands (Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), control (Karasek, 1979, Johnson & Hall, 1988) or reward (Siegrist, 1996). Other researchers have studied the predictive role of individual variables to burnout, such as self-efficacy and optimism (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, & Fischbach, 2013) or neuroticism (Tai & Liu, 2007). More recent studies have addressed the PE fit as an antecedent of burnout, but researchers studying this link have focused their attention on PJ and PO fits (Tong, Lei, & Peng, 2015). Hence, to the best of our knowledge, PV fit relation with burnout haven't been addressed in empirical studies. Therefore, the current

investigation addresses this gap. If PV misfit succeeds to increase the predictive validity for burnout beyond frequently used predictors, this would add to the existing literature that advocates for assessing PV fit during the personnel selection process. Previous studies have shown that vocational fit predicts task performance, continuance intentions (Van Iddekinge, Putka, & Campbell, 2011) and counterproductive work behaviors (Iliescu, Ispas, Sulea & Ilie, 2014). Current findings can provide another strand of arguments for measuring PV fit during the selection process, indicating that some individuals may have an a priori propensity towards burnout, an antecedent of job performance and turnover intentions (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010).

Of the three components of burnout — exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy —, exhaustion is the core characteristic of burnout (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Seidler et al., 2014), reflecting the emotional aspects of the stressful experience that arises from the person-environment interaction (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). New investigations on burnout have even reduced the concept to the single dimension of exhaustion (Maslach, 2017). Thus considering, this study tackles the association between PV misfit and exhaustion. We examine the incremental validity of the PV misfit in predicting exhaustion over well-established predictors. For this purpose we look at one of the most influential theoretical framework for the study of predictors of exhaustion (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010), namely the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R, Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). This model postulates that there are two overarching work characteristics — demands and resources — that are related to well-being at work. While resources foster engagement, demands trigger an energy depletion process that leads to exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). Therefore, the study aims to test whether PV misfit explains the supplementary variance of exhaustion over job demands.

## **Exhaustion and job demands**

Exhaustion refers to the energetic aspects of burnout, individuals who are exhausted are described as "having worn out; lost energy; and become depleted, debilitated, and fatigue" (Maslach, 2017, p. 143). Exhaustion reflects a response to chronic emotional work-related stressors (Maslach et al., 2001). According to JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), from the two broad categories of job characteristics — demands and resources —, demands trigger a health impairment process that ultimately leads to exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). Job demands refer to "those physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs." (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). High job demands, together with lack of job resources overburden individuals' coping capacity and after prolonged exposure to these imbalanced conditions, they become exhausted (e.g., Boyd, Bakker, Winefield, Gillespie, & Stough, 2011; Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003). The broad category of job demands comprises a variety of job characteristics, such as, work pressure, cognitive demands, emotional demands, role conflict, hassles or work-home interference (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Despite JD-R model views all these demands as contributors to the impairment process, a few empirical studies have shown that some of them not only have no association with exhaustion, but they have positive associations with work engagement (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003; Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, De Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010). A meta-analytical investigation shed light on inconsistent findings concerning job demands, showing that they should be split into two categories: hindrances and challenges (Podsakoff, LePine, & Le Pine, 2007). Hindrances refer to those demands that take a toll on individuals' energy, working as obstacles to personal development and performance (e.g., role ambiguity or job insecurity). Challenges consist of stressors that, despite consuming individuals' energy, are rewarding because they offer them

opportunities to grow and to achieve higher levels of performance (e.g., workload, cognitive demands). Compared to hindrances, which induce a sense of lost control and negative emotions, challenges stimulate individuals' competence and perseverance, yielding additional motivational force. In our study, we aim to catch this differentiation between the two categories of job demands.

### Person-vocation misfit

PV fit is the broadest level of PE fit and it refers to the compatibility of individuals with their vocations/professions (Kristof, 1996). PV fit has roots in vocational psychology, which focuses on the link between vocational interests and occupational attitudes (Tracey & Rounds, 1993). The work on this topic was dominated by Holland's theory of vocational types (1973, 1992). Holland posited that individuals express their personalities and other characteristics through the choice of their occupations. Both individuals and environments can be organized into six corresponding interests' types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional (abbreviated RIASEC). The higher the congruence between the interests' profile of the individuals and their environments, the higher their career and job satisfaction, organizational commitment and performance and the lower the turnover or the perceived stress (e.g., De Fruyt, 2002; Hough, Barge & Kamp, 2001). Despite receiving significant recognition from other researchers in the field, RIASEC model received criticism concerning its content (e.g., Tracey & Rounds, 1995) and predictive values for various work outcomes. For example, two meta-analytical studies (Assouline & Meir, 1987; Tranberg, Slane, & Ekeberg, 1993) showed weak correlations between interests' congruence and job satisfaction.

More recently, researchers within PE fit field have developed alternative conceptualizations for each category of the fit. Kristof (1996) grouped these conceptualizations into objective assessments and subjective assessments. For the objective ones, the focus is on the comparison between directly measured individuals' characteristics

(e.g., values, needs, personality) and environment characteristics (e.g., occupational field, interests). As such, the objective conceptualization is an indirect assessment of fit, as it is the case with Holland's model. The subjective conceptualization assesses the perceived fit between the individuals and their environment. It is a direct assessment, which has been proved to be more predictive than the objective conceptualization for some of the organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction or turnover (Cable & De Rue, 2002; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). Verquer, Beehr & Wagner (2003) concluded in a meta-analytical study that the subjective fit had a stronger relationship with the attitudinal outcomes than the objective fit. A plausible explanation is that the direct perceptions, not the objective reality, trigger the cognitive mechanisms that give rise to attitudes and behaviors in work settings (Cable & De Rue, 2002).

Taking into consideration all of the above, PV misfit is conceptualized as the perceived incompatibility of individuals with their occupations/professions. Previous work that used a direct conceptualization of PV fit (Vogel & Feldman, 2009) illustrated that it is linked indirectly to attitudinal outcomes throughout PO and PJ fits. The authors suggested that individuals who perceive their characteristics are not in line with those enforced by their vocations, can make their ways with difficulty in their jobs or organizations. To measure the perceived PV fit, Vogel and Feldman (2009) developed a questionnaire under the supplementary fit framework. There are two perspectives under which the entire PE literature can be classified: supplementary fit and complementary fit (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). Supplementary fit refers to a situation when there are similarities between individuals and the context. When individuals have supplementary fit, "they perceive themselves as fitting in" (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987, p. 270), meaning that their personal values or interests overlap with those enforced by the context. By the contrary, complementary fit occurs when "the characteristics of an individual serve to make whole or

complement the characteristics of an environment". Complementary fit consists of two dimensions: needs-supplies and abilities-demands. For example, individuals have financial and psychological needs, which are satisfied by their environments. In exchange, they are willing to offer their personal resources, such as time or experience, which contribute to the wholeness of the environment. Building on Vogel and Feldman (2009) work and aiming to overcome the shortcomings of their instrument (i.e., complementary fit was left aside), for the study we developed a questionnaire that included both supplementary (i.e., interest and values) and complementary fit (i.e., needs and abilities).

### **Person-vocation misfit as an antecedent of exhaustion**

The perceived imbalance between what employees want to do and what their occupations require them to do leads to burnout (Maslach, 2017). Considering the abilities-demands dimension of the complementary fit, it is reasonable to think that an employee who does not have the abilities to provide for what his or her occupation requires, will tend to either spend energy to develop those skills or to hide his or her deficiencies. And in both cases, the employee will consume his or her energy. On the long run, this situation can deplete his or her resources and lead to exhaustion. In case the mismatch between employees and their occupations occurs at the supplementary level, the perceived dissimilarities can create alienation from oneself and cognitive dissonance (Grandey, 2003), a gap between inner feelings and external behaviors needed to keep the job. If the discrepancy is not eliminated by quitting the situation, the employees will use their resources to manage the negative affectivity triggered by the dissonance. Hence, they will divert part of their energetic resources from the regular tasks to overcome the emotional crisis, either by modifying feelings or by adjusting their automatic behavioral reactions, which again will lead to exhaustion (Hochschild, 1983).

Another alternative explanation for PV misfit leading to exhaustion is offered by the

Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), a grand theoretical framework that distinguishes between two quality-based types of motivation: autonomous and controlled motivation. Whereas autonomous motivation is internally driven by personal values and aspirations, the external motivation consists of rewards and pressures generated from environmental contingencies. Autonomous motivation predicts positive outcomes, such as, well-being and performance (e.g., Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Richer, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2002), while controlled motivation predicts negative employees' attitudes, such as emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007). Consequently, it is plausible to think that a person who perceives an incongruence with the occupation, will probably find it worthless and meaningless and he or she will only be motivated by low-qualitative drivers, such as a bonus, a promotion or a supervisor's approval. Additionally, the person will perceive that he or she cannot exercise his or her competencies or that he or she cannot make a significant personal contribution to the work. The person will feel alienated from his or her basic psychological needs, which will lead to ill-being (Niemic, Ryan, & Deci, 2006).

All arguments mentioned above build the case for a link between PV misfit and exhaustion. But to prove a sound predictive value of PV misfit, its specific contribution to the variation of exhaustion, above established predictors needs to be provided. A significant amount of empirical research has focused on work demands as critical contributors to exhaustion (e.g., De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Nevertheless, it is plausible to consider that besides contextual characteristics, there are also non-contextual characteristics (i.e., individual differences) that add to the impairment process that leads to exhaustion. As such, previous studies have shown that coping strategies used by employees (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003) and personality traits (Langelaan, Bakker, Doornen, & Schaufeli, 2006) predict exhaustion. We use the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory

(Hobfoll, 1989) as an explanatory framework to argue that PV misfit can add to the impairment process generated by job demands. The central assumption of COR is that individuals who perceive that they lose resources or lack gain of resources are vulnerable to stress. In this context, one might think that job demands and PV misfit have a cumulative detrimental effect on individuals' resources. Job demands consume them in order to be dealt with (Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016), while PV misfit represents an additional burden on resources, either by using them to develop skills they do not have, as is the case when complementary fit is not present, or by perceiving they lose opportunities to accumulate resources that are valuable for them, when supplementary fit is missing.

Based on the arguments presented above, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis.* The perceived PV fit shows incremental validity over job demands for predicting exhaustion.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consists of 312 active employees, with an average age of 41, ranging from 23 to 63 years old. Female respondents accounted for 56.5% of the sample. Participants were employed in a wide range of industries (e.g., insurance, finance, health, security, food services, education, consulting), 96% being full-time employees. The observations used for the current article are part of a larger dataset that was used for another study that had a different purpose (see Boşneag, Petruş, Besciu, & Lăcătuş, 2016).

### Procedure

The study was conducted in Romania and data were collected mainly online (64%), on a volunteer basis, from employees working in urban areas. We used a convenience sampling and most of the participants were approached via email, by sending private invitations to known people and ask them to forward the invitations to other potential participants. Since the number of contacted individuals is

not known, the response rate cannot be estimated.

## Measures

*Job demands.* The questionnaire was developed by Bakker (2014) and comprises five dimensions, namely: work pressure (4 items, sample item being "Do you have to work at speed?"), cognitive demands (4 items, sample item being "Do you regard your work as mentally very straining?"), emotional demands (6 items, sample item being "Do you face emotionally charged situation in your work?"), role conflict (4 items, sample item being "I receive conflicting requests from two or more people") and hassles (5 items, sample item being "I have many hassles to go through to get my work done"). Participants were asked to rate how characteristic each of the affirmations/questions is characteristic for them. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, with response ranging from *never or strongly disagree* to *very often or strongly agree*.

*PV misfit.* Since there was no measure of the perceived PV misfit that covers both supplementary fit (interests and values) and complementary fit (needs and abilities), a new instrument was developed for the study. Using an inductive methodology, three organizational psychologists formulated a pool of relevant items for the perceived PV fit, covering the two types of fit. After sequential elimination of redundant items and factorial analysis, the final version reflects a one-dimensional structure with four items, one of each kind of fit (interests, values, needs and abilities). More details on the development of the instrument can be found in Boşneag et al. (2016). An example item is: "I feel that my values match with those of my occupation/profession". Items are rated on a 7-point scale, response ranging from *totally disagree* to *totally agree*. The scores for PV misfit are the reversed scores of PV fit, which was measured with the instrument described above.

*Exhaustion.* The scale is part of the Job Demand-Resources Questionnaire (Bakker, 2014) and consists of 4 items, measured on a 4-point scale, with response ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. An

example item is "During my work, I often feel emotionally drained".

*Demographics.* Relevant information on demographics, such as gender, age, work tenure were collected, using the items included in the JD-R questionnaire (Bakker, 2014).

**Results**

Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies and correlations of all study variables are presented in Table 1. Correlations support the hypothesized associations between the variables, PV fit

having the highest correlation coefficient with exhaustion, out of all the study variables ( $r = -.38, p < .01$ ).

To test for the common method variance, given the self-report nature of the study, Harman's single factor test was used. The exploratory factor analysis, deployed for all thirty-one observed variables, with one-factor extraction and an unrotated solution shows that the single factor explains 23% of the variance. Thus, we can conclude that the common method variance does not bias the results.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and correlations*

Variables	Descriptive		Correlations								
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Demographics											
1. Gender											
2. Age	42.98	11.67	.31**								
Job demands											
3. Work pressure	13.61	3.91	.07	-.09	(.85)						
4. Cognitive demands	16.75	2.81	.01	-.04	.39**	(.80)					
5. Emotional demands	16.10	5.55	.15*	-.17**	.38**	.29**	(.85)				
6. Role conflicts	10.19	3.24	.01	-.19**	.24**	.04	.21**	(.73)			
7. Hassles	15.22	4.64	.02	.07	.35**	.22**	.35**	.39**	(.85)		
8. Person job misfit	11.70	5.31	.09	-.11	.01	-.19**	-.01	-.08	.06	(.86)	
9. Exhaustion			.14*	-.14*	.32**	.06	.32**	.26**	.36**	.38**	(.83)

Note. Values in parentheses indicate the reliability score for the scale.

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

To test the incremental validity of the PV misfit on exhaustion over job demands, a hierarchical regression was used. We introduced control variables (gender and age) in the first step, job demands in the second step, as they are well-established predictors of exhaustion and PV misfit in the last step. As seen in Table 2, PV misfit is positively related to exhaustion and it provides a significant increment in the prediction of exhaustion, having the highest predictive value, even after

controlling for the other widely recognized predictors.

We estimated the relative importance of predictors, using a relative weights analysis that assesses "the proportionate contribution each predictor makes to  $R^2$ , considering both its direct effect (i.e., its correlation with the criterion) and its effect when combined with the other variables in the regression equation" (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004, p. 240). The results of this analysis, presented in Table 3, show that PV misfit has, by far, the most

significant contribution in explaining the variance of exhaustion (almost 37%), while the second contribution is provided by hassles (20%).

Table 2. Incremental validity of PV fit over demographic variables and job demands for the prediction of exhaustion

Variable	$\beta$	Exhaustion	
		$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
1. Controls		.02*	.02*
Gender	.04		
Age	-.08		
2. Job demands		.24**	.22**
Work pressure	.21*		
Cognitive demands	-.06		
Emotional demands	.15*		
Role conflicts	.09		
Hassles	.20*		
3. PV misfit	.36**	.36**	.12**

Note. \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 3. Relative predictor weights

Variables	Raw importance weights	Relative weights as percentage of R-square
Gender	.01	2.3%
Age	.01	3.7%
Work pressure	.05	14.3%
Cognitive demands	.01	1.3%
Emotional demands	.05	13.4%
Role conflicts	.03	8.4%
Hassles	.07	19.9%
PV fit	.13	36.7%

**Discussion**

In this study we aimed to investigate perceived PV misfit as a new critical predictor of exhaustion, in an attempt to further the research of antecedents of exhaustion, through introducing a variable framed within the PE interaction literature. The findings show not only that the perceived PV misfit is an essential predictor of exhaustion, but that it is

a more significant predictor than job demands, which are considered to be the most relevant ones. For the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that addressed the perceptions of PV misfit as an antecedent of exhaustion. One possible reason why researchers have left this variable aside is that there is an understandable tendency to look for predictors that are proximal to the work context. And PV misfit is more distal, since it is developed before

integrating into a specific work context. However, there is one potential explanation for the results. As suggested by Kristof-Brown and colleagues (2005), PV fit is an antecedent of PO and PJ fits, which have proved to be antecedents of exhaustion (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). As illustrated by Vogel and Feldman, without PV fit, an individual will be prevented to achieve significant amounts of PO and PJ fit. Consequently, low PO and PJ fit are linked to exhaustion, partly explained by the incapacity of the individuals to cope with their specific demands and partly by the emotional depletion caused by not satisfying their basic psychological needs (Niemic, Ryan, & Deci, 2006). The considerable percentage of variance of exhaustion explained by the perceived PV misfit (37%) draws attention to the importance of this variable for future investigations.

COR theory provides an explanatory framework for the current results, as it is a central theory in the field of burnout (Hobfoll, 2010). The main assumption of the theory is that individuals have a natural tendency to acquire and secure things that they value the most and that any loss of resources is felt more intensely than any gain of resources. Additionally, to prevent loss of resources individuals consume from the existing resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, individuals who perceive that they do not fit with their vocation, will employ their personal resources either to regulate their dissonance, as it is the case with supplementary misfit, or to develop skills they do not have, as it happens in case of complementary misfit. Because PV misfit is a priori to the integration of the individual in an organization, it is conceivable that it consumes individuals' resources even before they tackle their specific job demands. As such, if individuals are already short on resources, the job demands make the situation even worse. Therefore, measuring the PV fit in the selection process, would prevent both individuals and organizations to incur undesirable costs.

Also, current results are in line with the meta-analytical findings that split job demands into hindrances and challenges (Podsakoff, LePine, & Le Pine, 2007). They show that cognitive demands and role conflict do not predict exhaustion, probably because

they function as challenges: they use energetic resources, but also contribute to the professional development of the individuals.

### **Theoretical and practical implications, limitations and future directions**

Corroborating current results that support the association between perceived PV misfit to exhaustion with the findings from the study that linked perceived PV fit to engagement (Boşneag et al., 2016) we can conclude that PV fit can work either as a personal resource in the JD-R model, when it achieves higher values or as an additional demand, at low scores. It is like starting the day with the personal batteries charged, when having high PV fit, the situation in which there are enough energy resources to use for dealing with job demands. Or like starting the day with a reduced level of energy and incurring additional costs along the day, to cope with the job demands.

From a practical perspective, this study represents a wake-up call for those who are tempted to chose jobs which are not congruent with their vocational profile, showing that they might be prone to exhaustion.

The results of this study should be considered in light of some limitations. One of the most important limits is the new instrument that was developed to assess perceived PV misfit. Even though we built upon Vogel and Feldman work (2009) and the theoretical conceptualizations of PE fit literature, additional empirical work on the validity of the instrument is needed. Specifically, we tried to overcome the limitation of Vogel and Feldman (2009) work on PV fit that took into consideration only the supplementary fit and developed a unitary construct. However, the current results support also a one-factor solution, even though the items cover both supplementary and complementary fit. To test the robustness of the current scale, additional proofs for concurrent and predictive validity are needed. Another limitation is related to the cross-sectional design, which does not allow to

make causal inferences about the relation between PV fit and exhaustion.

Future studies should address potential mechanisms that link PV misfit to exhaustion. One of the possible routes was mentioned in the current article and it refers to the motivational aspects of one's job. For example, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs might account as a partial explanation of the relation. Additionally, investigations should tackle both direct measures and indirect measures of PV misfit, since one of the critics brought to the direct one refers to the caveat of the common method variance which can cause measurement error.

## Conclusion

Much of the previous work on the role of the incongruence between individuals and their work environments in predicting exhaustion has focused on PJ and PO aspects. In the current article, we showed that the perceived PV misfit, one type of the PE fit, that is present before the organizational integration of individuals, is a significant predictor of the exhaustion, over job demands. The results show that PV misfit has a more substantial contribution to exhaustion, compared to job demands. These findings expand the literature that supports assessing PV fit of candidates during the selection process. Further investigations suggested in the current article can shed light on the mechanisms that link the two concepts.

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