Searching for the Right Fit: Development of Applicant Person-Organization Fit Perceptions During the Recruitment Process

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Numerous studies link applicant fit perceptions measured at a single point in time to recruitment outcomes. Expanding upon this prior research by incorporating decision-making theory, this study examines how applicants develop these fit perceptions over the duration of the recruitment process, showing meaningful changes in fit perceptions across and within organizations overtime. To assess the development of applicant fit perceptions, eight assessments of person-organization (PO) fit with up to four different organizations across 169 applicants for 403 job choice decisions were analyzed. Results showed the presence of initial levels and changes in differentiation of applicant PO fit perceptions across organizations, which significantly predicted future job choice. In addition, changes in within-organizational PO fit perceptions across two stages of recruitment predicted applicant job choices among multiple employers. The implications of these results for accurately understanding the development of fit perceptions, relationships between fit perceptions and key recruiting outcomes, and possible limitations of past meta-analytically derived estimates of these relationships are discussed.

*Keywords:* recruitment, person-organization fit, differentiation-consolidation theory, job choice

Given the growing competition for talent among organizations, practitioners as well as researchers have increased their focus on recruiting, or the activities used to affect applicant attitudes about the job or organization and subsequent job choices (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Dineen & Soltis, 2011). While numerous applicant perceptions and attitudes have been studied as predictors of recruiting outcomes, few have garnered as much attention as applicant perceptions of fit with the organization. The general argument linking PO fit perceptions with recruiting outcomes is that applicants are expected to respond more positively to organizations when they have the same values and norms (Bretz & Judge, 1994; O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). To this end, research studies have repeatedly shown that applicants who perceive higher levels of overall PO fit with an organization are more likely to be attracted to and accept offers from that organization (Chapman et al., 2005; Uggerslev, Fassina, & Kraichy, 2012). Yet, similar to research on PO fit in other contexts (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013), much is known about the outcomes of applicant PO fit with a specific organization at one point in time but a lack of knowledge exists regarding when and how applicants develop and modify these perceptions over the course of recruitment.

Although understanding and evaluating the development of PO fit in existing employees is difficult, studying PO fit development in applicants is even more challenging due to distinctive forces specific to the recruitment setting. PO fit is broadly defined as “the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both” (see p. 4: Kristof, 1996). However, extant general PO fit research paradigms which focus on one dyadic relationship (e.g., a current employee and his or her current employer) fail to address the complexity of applicant PO fit perceptions as recruiting requires applicants to gather information and form evolving perceptions about fit over the recruitment process (e.g., Dineen, Ash, & Noe, 2002) and across multiple organizations simultaneously (Barber, 1998). Results of the few recruiting studies using the more “traditional” approach to studying PO fit development with one organization indicate that applicant PO fit becomes more important and predictive of recruiting outcomes later in the recruitment process (Cable & Judge, 1996; Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Uggerslev et al., 2012).
While such studies underscore the importance of recognizing that PO fit perceptions do change over time, there is little, if any, research indicating when and how changes in PO fit influence applicant job choice decisions. Furthermore, the recruitment process has been repeatedly shown to be organized into different stages (Barber, 1998), which could systematically produce meaningful and distinct changes in the development of PO fit perceptions. To compound this concern, solely focusing on how applicants develop PO fit perceptions with one organization while ignoring PO fit perceptions with other job alternatives under consideration is akin to “missing the forest for the trees.” Thus, a richer understanding of the fit development process during recruitment must incorporate the degree to which applicant PO fit perceptions differ across multiple recruiting organizations, called PO fit differentiation, and its influence on applicant job choice decisions as they actually unfold. Thus, in order to understand the dynamic PO fit development process in recruiting, one must examine changes in applicant PO fit perceptions both within organizations and across organizations over time.

This study makes three contributions. First, we extend the emergent PO fit development literature (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Yu, 2013) as well as the established recruiting literature (Barber, 1998; Rynes & Cable, 2003) by integrating a decision-making theory (differentiation-consolidation theory; Svenson, 1992) to posit and test how applicant PO fit perceptions develop during recruitment. Second, we examine initial and changes in differentiation of applicant PO fit perceptions toward multiple organizations to better understand how these fit perceptions develop simultaneously across several possible future employers and predict offer acceptance decisions (Ryan & Huth, 2008). Finally, we study changes in applicant PO fit perceptions for each organization during recruitment stages and examine the unique impact that PO fit perception changes over these stages have on applicant decisions to accept or reject job offers. Together, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the development of applicant PO fit perceptions throughout recruitment.

**Theoretical Development**

Researchers looking to capture the dynamic process of recruitment have coalesced around three time-ordered stages of recruitment: generating suitable applicants, maintaining interest of applicants, and influencing job choice decisions (Barber, 1998; Dineen & Solitis, 2011). During the first preparatory stage of the recruitment process, organizations are looking to capture the attention of individuals to drive those individuals to apply for available jobs (Ma & Allen, 2009). Typically, organizations rely on recruitment-oriented messages to provide individuals with general information about the organization to furnish the targeted group of individuals with enough information to decide to apply (Dineen & Solitis, 2011). Once individuals formally become applicants by applying for jobs, the second, more active, stage of recruitment begins as organizations assess and measure applicant characteristics necessary for the job while still maintaining the interest of applicants (Ma & Allen, 2009; Ployhart, 2006). Information transmitted during this stage often occurs during employment interviews or site visits, where interactions and responses by organizational representatives signal the norms, values, culture, and environment of the organization to applicants (Breaugh, 2008; Walker et al., 2013). Finally, after applicants have been deemed acceptable and presented with job offers, organizations attempt to convince applicants to accept offers and end the recruitment process (Barber, 1998). Consistent with this study, researchers focused on applicant PO fit have mainly focused on the first two preparatory and active stages (Uggerslev et al., 2012), since the final stage is primarily focused on organizational negotiation tactics (Dineen & Solitis, 2011).

While much is known about correlates of applicant PO fit perceptions during the first two stages of recruitment (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011; Uggerslev et al., 2012), little is known about the stability or development of these perceptions over both of these recruitment stages. Currently, our most established empirical findings on the PO fit-job choice relationship comes in the form of a meta-analytic correlation (p = .18; Chapman et al., 2005) which, at best, represents an average estimate across all recruiting organizations and stages of the recruitment process. At worst, this meta-analytic correlation is an unstable and unreliable estimate of the relationship between PO fit and job choice (based on only k = 3, N = 118). Recent theoretical advancements in PO fit development reinforce the instability of these estimates since current fit perceptions are thought to reflect individuals’ evolving view of a given organization (Van Vianen, Stoelhorst, & De Goede, 2013; Yu, 2013). Specifically, Shipp and Jansen (2011) argue current fit perceptions are not simply a function of perceptions of congruence with an organization at that instant, but are also a function of retrospective fit perceptions as well as projected future fit perceptions with a given organization. Traditional PO fit-recruiting studies provide some evidence supporting this conceptualization of PO fit development, since applicants not only use prior job experiences and previous interactions with the recruiting organization to predict current fit perceptions but also anticipate high levels of satisfaction if they take a job with an organization that is more similar or congruent with their values, goals, and norms (Dineen et al., 2002; Judge & Bretz, 1992). Yet, to date, explicit incorporation of this important extension to PO fit research (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013) has not been attempted in the recruitment context.

Even given these recent advancements, extant PO fit-recruiting studies and fit development frameworks are currently limited in their ability to describe how applicants develop PO fit perceptions during recruitment. In addition to focusing on PO fit with one organization, PO fit at one time, or both (for an exception, see Carliss, 2005; Harold & Ployhart, 2008), PO fit-recruiting studies and the fit development frameworks also predominantly focus on subsequent individual reactions and attitudes rather than individuals’ decisions (Jansen & Shipp, 2013; Uggerslev et al., 2012). Together, these shortcomings result in a failure to recognize recruitment as a decision-making process; one in which applicants know they must differentiate among several alternatives and reach a job choice decision after multiple information gathering stages (Barber, 1998; Dineen & Solitis, 2011; Murphy & Tam, 2004). We believe decision-making research is an appropriate framework for bridging existing PO fit research with new fit development models while also addressing theoretical gaps in the recruiting literature.
Theories of individuals’ predecision processes often incorporate multiple alternatives that are evaluated over time and result in individuals choosing one alternative and rejecting others (Weber & Johnson, 2009). Differentiation-consolidation theory (DCT) is particularly relevant to the recruitment setting, since it argues that decision makers positively or negatively adjust and update preferences and attitudes toward individual alternatives as they gather more information over time (Svenson, 1992, 2003). Clear differentiation among the alternatives is also produced by decision makers via adjusting the importance of various attributes of each alternative over time in such a way that a preliminary superior alternative emerges among a number of perceived lesser alternatives prior to making a decision and these attitudes and perceptions are fortified following the choice of the superior alternative (Svenson, 1992, 1996). Creating differentiation simplifies the decision-making process as fewer alternatives are considered throughout, thereby facilitating the final acceptance and rejection decisions (Brownstein, 2003). Thus, DCT recognizes both the impact of developing distinct yet evolving perceptions within and between alternatives before making a decision as well as the benefits to the decision maker from integrating new information quicker, using less effort, making decisions easier, and having fewer regrets about the decision-making process (Russo, Medvec, & Meloy, 1996; Svenson, 1992).

While DCT addresses both the pre- and postdecision processes surrounding an individual’s choice (Brownstein, 2003), research on the predecision, or “differentiation,” portion of DCT is particularly relevant to the understanding of how applicants develop PO fit perceptions and make decisions during recruitment. In short, the recruiting context lends itself to DCT, since applicants know they cannot take multiple jobs (Barber, 1998) and therefore must not only develop accurate perceptions of PO fit with multiple organizations but also manage (i.e., differentiate) these multiple PO fit perceptions in such a way that facilitates decision making at the end of the recruitment process. Next we develop our hypotheses using the tenets of DCT.

**Initial and Dynamic Differentiation of PO fit Perceptions**

The primary process underlying DCT is that of differentiation, whereby decision makers increase the perceived differences between alternatives under consideration prior to choosing (Svenson, 1996). When applied to applicant PO fit perceptions during the decision-making process of recruitment, instances when applicants develop relatively consistent (regardless of mean-level) PO fit perceptions across all recruiting organizations would be an example of low PO fit differentiation (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Conversely, applicants with higher PO fit differentiation perceive high levels of PO fit with one or two organizations and lower levels of PO fit with the remaining three or two organizations. While researchers often discuss differentiation broadly (Brownstein, 2003), those seeking to untangle how differentiation between choice alternatives occurs have focused on the presence of two critical elements of the differentiation process: initial differentiation and changes in differentiation. Initial differentiation of alternatives is often required for the decision maker to recognize that a decision must be reached while initial differences must also become more pronounced over time to facilitate the selection of one of the alternatives (Svenson, 2003). Existing research provides tangential support for DCT tenets, since applicants are expected to develop PO fit perceptions, presumably across multiple organizations, both very early in the process as well as later when they receive clearer or more specific information from these organizations in such a way that it facilitates decision-making at the end of the recruitment process (Uggerslev et al., 2012).

DCT recognizes that applicants are still expected to have formed preliminary perceptions about organizations based on exposure to the organization before the recruitment process starts, even though applicants’ roles prior to the start of, and very early during, recruitment is often more observant than active (Barber, 1998). For instance, research findings indicate that organizational characteristics visible prior to the start of the formal recruitment period, such as those included in business publications, corporate reports, and organization websites influence early applicant PO fit perceptions (Braddy, Meade, & Kroustalis, 2006; Dineen et al., 2002; Lievees, Decaesteker, Coeptis, & Geireaert, 2001). Furthermore, applicant perceptions of PO fit across multiple organizations based on prior information encountered are expected to differ both in direction and intensity. In Rynes, Bretz, and Gerhart’s (1991) sample, nearly every applicant reported using organizational characteristics to develop distinct good (100% of the sample) and poor (95% of the sample) initial fit perceptions with organizations. Given this finding, it is likely that retrospection on prior positive and negative exposure to organizations before the start of recruiting will influence applicants’ preliminary positive and negative PO fit perceptions (Shipp & Jansen, 2011), producing significant initial levels of PO fit differentiation.

Yet, initial differentiation alone has been shown to be insufficient when making complex decisions and decision makers are expected to continue gathering information in an effort to increase differentiation over time to further prepare and simplify future choices (Svenson, 2003). Consistent with this notion, as applicants progress through the recruitment process, PO fit perceptions are expected to change as a function of increased interaction with organizations and their representatives who provide additional information about norms and values (Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Uggerslev et al., 2012). According to DCT, the gathering of additional information is expected to result in increases, or positive change, in differentiation over the decision-making process. This change in differentiation can be a function of an increasingly preferred alternative or decreasingly less preferred alternatives, or a combination of both (Russo et al., 1996; Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004). To this end, individuals are expected to use, manage, and possibly reconfigure their values and goals to differentiate among alternatives when attempting to arrive at a decision (Svenson, 1996). Consistent with this predecision differentiation process, it has recently been theorized that employees actively try to manage their fit perceptions by selectively choosing information to maximize fit, as well as perhaps maximizing the differences in perceived fit across alternatives, to reduce uncertainty and exhibit control over their environment (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Yu, 2013). Thus, by gathering more distinct information and doing so in such a way as to facilitate ultimate decision making, differentiation of applicant perceptions of PO fit across recruiting organizations is expected to increases from its initial nonzero levels over time.

Together, these two processes drive the pattern of PO fit perception development that applicants experience as they actively
reduce the discrepancy between their initial state as observant receivers of recruiting information and their end goal of accepting an offer from organizations with similar norms and values and rejecting other offers by the conclusion of recruitment (Johnson, Taing, Chang, & Kawamoto, 2013; Dineen & Soltis, 2011). Thus:

**Hypothesis 1:** Applicant PO fit perceptions will be differentiated across recruiting organizations at the start of the recruitment process.

**Hypothesis 2:** Applicant PO fit perception differentiation will increase over the recruitment process.

DCT researchers, having established the occurrence of initial differentiation and changes in differentiation in decision making settings, have also highlighted the crucial influence that the magnitude of initial and subsequent changes in differentiation have on predicting decisions. First, high initial levels of differentiation across alternatives at the start of the prededuction process have been shown to predict decisions among alternatives in a variety of settings (e.g., consumer behavior; Russo et al., 1996). High levels of initial differentiation should reflect individuals having a preliminary “favorite” choice alternative, whereas individuals with low levels of initial differentiation are likely to remain in preliminary information processing longer and delaying their ability to make a final choice (Svenson, 2003). As applied to the recruiting setting, applicants with high levels of initial PO fit perception differentiation among recruiting organizations are expected to consider fewer, or engage in more editing of, alternatives going forward in the decision-making process. Conversely, applicants with low levels of initial PO fit perception differentiation likely have not edited or screened out many possible alternatives and therefore would be more likely to pursue information about more alternatives during recruitment (Svenson, 1996). Thus, applicants who experience higher levels of PO fit perception differentiation initially should be more likely to accept an offer from one of the remaining alternatives relative to applicants with lower levels of PO fit perception differentiation at the start of the decision-making process.

Yet, given that recruitment is a dynamic process of change and information gathering (Rynes & Cable, 2003), applicant levels of PO fit differentiation are not expected to remain constant throughout the recruitment process. Information gathering over the course of the decision-making process of recruiting should facilitate the screening out of alternatives by possibly influencing memory retrieval, bringing about new relevant attributes of alternatives, or restructuring the relative importance of the known attributes of the alternatives (Svenson, 2003). Even early models of applicant decision making adhere to these concepts of DCT, as applicants are expected to narrow their job search to a more manageable and desirable set of organizations (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012; Power & Aldag, 1985; Solberg, 1967). Consistent with these decision-making processes, applicants who have greater (more positive) levels of PO fit differentiation change are expected to have bolstered the perceived congruence in norms and values between themselves and a promising alternative, downgraded the perceived congruence with the other alternatives, or likely both as the decision-making process continues (Svenson, 1996), making the likelihood of accepting a job offer with the remaining alternative(s) more likely. In contrast, lower levels (less positive) of differentiation change represent an information gathering process that has not resulted in many perceived differences in PO fit across organizations. The subsequent perceived congruence with many alternatives is likely to result in a lower likelihood of offer acceptance for any one of the remaining job alternatives. Together, initial and dynamic changes in applicant PO fit differentiation should influence subsequent job choice decisions such that:

**Hypothesis 3:** Greater (less) initial PO fit perception differentiation will be positively (negatively) related to job choice.

**Hypothesis 4:** Greater (less) PO fit perception differentiation change will be positively (negatively) related to job choice.

### PO Fit Perception Change During Recruitment Stages

In addition to the importance of understanding how applicant PO fit perceptions develop and change across multiple recruiting organizations, it is also critical to understand how changes in applicant fit perceptions within each of these organizations influence job choice decisions. This process is described by DCT since decision makers are expected to gather information about each alternative over the course of the decision-making process and, in doing so, update their perceptions about a number of attributes of that alternative or recognize new attributes altogether (Brownstein, 2003; Svenson, 1992). In fact, Svenson (2003) explicitly speculated how changes in job seeker perceptions of attributes of a job alternative, such as norms and values, occur over time as positive (negative) aspects may become even more positive (negative), negative (positive) aspects may become less negative (positive), or some combination. However, unlike decision-making situations where information gathering occurs in a linear fashion, applicants gather information in two distinct stages that involve different types of information about organizational norms and values (Rynes & Cable, 2003). Yet again, DCT accounts for this possibility as “the process of making a decision involves different stages” (Svenson, 1992, p. 143) and these different stages are expected to have unique influences on final decisions (Svenson, 1996). One of the few studies addressing PO fit change in the recruitment process found that the relationship between PO fit and organizational attraction did vary depending on the stage of the recruitment and argued that information provided by organizations was a key driver (Harold & Ployhart, 2008). Additionally, stages have also been noted by both DCT and recruiting research alike (Brownstein, 2003; Uggerstved et al., 2012) to drive the degree of attentiveness to information employed in each stage with peripheral superficial processing likely in the initial preparatory stage and more deliberative processing likely to be used later in the decision process. Consistent with these findings, changes in applicant PO fit perceptions with each organization during both the applicant generation and maintaining applicant interest stages of recruitment may uniquely influence actual job choice.

Extant research on recruitment and job search suggests a very specific pattern by which organizations present and applicants gather information that should influence how applicant PO fit perceptions about an organization change (Dineen & Soltis, 2011). As mentioned before, research findings indicate that organizational characteristics visible prior to the start of the formal recruitment period from various media sources influence early applicant PO fit
perceptions (Braddy et al., 2006; Lievens et al., 2001). Furthermore, tactics that are initially employed during the applicant generation stage of recruitment such as job advertisements and recruiting brochures (Collins & Stevens, 2002) are expected to simply capture the attention of applicants (Barber, 1998). Applicants are not expected to scrutinize in detail, but rather skim over, information early in the recruitment process such as general information about an organization’s values and norms (Uggerslev et al., 2012). Yet even when decision makers have little to no prior information about alternatives, changes in perceptions of alternatives have been shown to develop quickly and are predictive of future decisions (Russo et al., 1996; Simon et al., 2004). This may also hold for perceptions of PO fit, as applicants are expected to develop meaningful perceptions of their similarity with an organization based on interactions early in recruitment, with applicants self-selecting in or out of the selection process based on perceived congruence (Cable & Judge, 1996).

Once applicants apply for positions and selection assessments occur, applicants are expected to see their perceptions of PO fit with each organization change yet again during this second stage of recruitment. The initial within-alternative information search is likely to give way to a more thorough and selective review of critical attributes of that alternative (Svenson, 2003). DCT research has shown that at different points during the predecision process the importance of information shifts, such that attributes initially favored in the decision-maker’s ultimate choice may not continue to be seen as more favorable, while different attributes of the same alternative increase in favorability (Svenson & Hill, 1997). Consistent with this notion, Osborn (1990) found that as applicants progress through the recruitment process, organizations that fulfilled necessary attributes were initially considered by applicants, but organizations that matched necessary as well as specific applicant-desired attributes were more likely to have their offers accepted. This subsequent distinct change (relative to the change in the first stage of recruitment) is possible due to the increase in information detail that is made available and deeper processing that occurs during the maintaining applicant status stage. For instance, organizations are likely to withhold more diagnostic sources of information, such as realistic job previews and site visits, until later stages of recruitment (Boxwell, Roehling, LePine, & Moynihan, 2003; Phillips, 1998). Thus, positive changes in applicant perceived PO fit with an organization during the second stage of recruitment should result from more complete, personal, and intensive sources of information about the norms and values of an organization relative to information from the first stage of recruitment (Walker et al., 2013). Conversely, less positive or even negative changes in PO fit perceptions developed from more detailed information about organizations may be interpreted as a warning of a problematic situation and increased risk of experiencing negative outcomes if the job was accepted (Yu, 2013), resulting in a reduced likelihood of applicants accepting an offer from that organization.

Together, positive changes in applicant PO fit perceptions during the first (applicant generation) and second (maintaining applicant status) stages of the recruitment process are expected to provide distinct and additional predictive ability of future job choice decisions. Thus:

Hypothesis 5: Positive (negative) applicant PO fit perception change with an organization during the first stage of recruitment will be positively (negatively) related to job choice.

Hypothesis 6: Positive (negative) applicant PO fit perception change with an organization during the second stage of recruitment will be positively (negatively) related to job choice.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants in this study were students enrolled in a combined graduate degree program in accounting at a large southwestern university. Students enrolled in the Program for Professional Accountants (PPA) were not only required to finish undergraduate and graduate course work in five years, but were also required to obtain an internship to complete the program. The recruiting process for PPA students was highly structured and regulated by the department of accounting, which resulted in a number of natural controls for this study. First, recruiting by organizations was only allowed to commence at the start of the spring semester and concluded a month after the end of the same semester. During that time, every PPA student was guaranteed the opportunity to be recruited and interviewed by all of the “Big 4” accounting firms (KPMG, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, and PricewaterhouseCoopers). Each Big 4 firm was given an equal number of formal opportunities to recruit (e.g., host information sessions, host receptions, interview) and were restricted from engaging in other informal opportunities. Finally, job offers could not be extended before the conclusion of the recruitment process with offers from all Big 4 firms being extended on the same day (a week after the last participant survey in this study). Thus, applicant perceptions of PO fit could be gathered about the same set of firms, these firms were given equal opportunities to recruit and interview applicants, and applicants were not able to self-select out because they received an early offer. Offer information and job choice was provided by PPA administrators after the recruiting cycle was over.

As part of their degree requirements, all PPA students were required to enroll in a one-credit course during the spring recruiting semester that covered the career aspects of the accounting profession. Students were surveyed during six class meetings, beginning mid-January until the end of the semester. To capture the entire recruitment process, two additional online surveys were distributed after the end of the course but prior to offers being extended. To incentivize participation in the two online surveys, applicants were given raffle entries for each completed survey, and a third additional entry if they completed both online surveys, to win one of five Apple iPads. Each of the in-class and online surveys included a separate set of items assessing applicant PO fit perceptions for each of the Big 4 firms. Thus, from mid-January to early-June, applicant perceptions of PO fit with each firm were assessed eight times with assessments occurring roughly three weeks apart. Each set of items were on separate pages (or web-pages) of the surveys, with the focal firm replaced in each item. Firm-specific pages in the survey were counterbalanced over the eight occasions to account for possible ordering effects.

All 207 PPA students enrolled in the program completed at least one survey, with complete data for Level 2 variables collected for
169 applicants (82% response rate). The 169 applicants with complete data reported their PO fit perceptions about each of the Big 4 firms an average of 7.21 times out of eight possible opportunities (90% response rate). Thus, 4872 observations of PO fit perceptions with Big 4 firms across 169 applicants and eight measurement occasions resulted in a 74% total response rate for the study. The applicants were 61% female and 39% male; 84% were White and 16% were non-White.

**Measures**

**PO fit perception differentiation.** Applicant perceptions of PO fit with each of the Big 4 firms was measured on all eight occasions using the same 3-item scale (α between .96 and .99) from Cable and DeRue (2002). Items included “The things that I value in life are very similar to the things that [the firm] values,” and “My personal values match [the firm’s] values and culture.” Response choices ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To capture applicant PO fit perception differentiation, within-applicant standard deviation of PO fit perceptions with recruiting organizations at each measurement occasion was calculated (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Lower levels of applicant PO fit differentiation indicate that applicants perceive relatively similar levels of PO fit across Big 4 firms at that measurement occasion, whereas higher levels of PO fit differentiation indicate applicants have divergent levels of PO fit perception across Big 4 firms at that measurement occasion (Chan, 1998). The variable representing initial differentiation was calculated as applicant PO fit perception differentiation during the first measurement occasion.

All temporal change variables for each applicant (i.e., differentiation change) or organization recruiting the applicant (i.e., stage 1 and stage PO fit perception change) in this study were calculated using values generated from empirical Bayes slope estimates provided by HLM 7.0 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Congdon, & Toit, 2011). To obtain empirical Bayes slope estimates, the focal variable (e.g., PO fit perception differentiation) is regressed on the relevant time factor (coded 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 for measurement occasions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, respectively) with more positive slope values indicating greater increase in the focal variable while less positive or negative values indicate smaller increases or even decreases in the focal variable. This approach has been used to model changes of various variables including performance, turnover intentions, and satisfaction (Chen, 2005; Chen, Ployhart, Thomas, Anderson, & Bliwise, 2011; Liu, Mitchell, Lee, Holtom, & Hinkin, 2012). In this study, differentiation change was calculated as the Bayes slope estimate of each applicant’s PO fit perception differentiation trajectory, based on PO fit perception differentiation at each of the eight measurement occasions. More positive differentiation change values indicate applicants who experienced greater increases in PO fit perception differentiation over the course of the recruitment process compared to applicants with less positive differentiation change values.

**PO fit perception change.** As described above, the recruiting process for PPA students was highly structured and every PPA student was guaranteed the opportunity to be interviewed by all of the Big 4 firms. These initial interviews, which indicated the change from the generating applicants phase (stage 1) to the maintaining applicant status phase (stage 2) of recruitment, took place between the fifth and sixth measurement occasion. Thus, to capture the stage 1 PO fit change variable, applicant PO fit perceptions with each firm were regressed on a time factor that captured only the first five measurement occasions (coded as 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4 for Times 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively) to generate empirical Bayes slope estimates. Similarly, the stage 2 PO fit change variable was calculated by generating empirical Bayes slope estimates which required each applicant’s PO fit perceptions with each firm to be regressed on a time factor that captured only the final three measurement occasions (coded as 0, 1, and 2 for Times 6, 7, and 8, respectively). So, for example, if an applicant did not perceive much change in PO fit with a firm during the first stage of recruitment but then did perceive increased PO fit with that firm in the second stage, then the applicant would have a change term near 0 for stage 1 PO fit perception change and a positive change term for stage 2 PO fit perception change.

**Job choice.** Applicant job choice decisions to accept and reject job offers received from Big 4 firms were provided by PPA administrators. Job choice was coded 0 if the offer was rejected and 1 if the offer was accepted by the applicant.

**Controls.** To control for applicant quality, applicant grade point average (GPA) was gathered from resumes on file with the PPA office. Applicant self-reported gender and race, collected during the first measurement occasion, were also used as control variables in this study as all Big 4 firms had publicized diversity management programs that are expected to result in tailored recruitment efforts by organizations for underrepresented groups (Avery & McKay, 2006).

**Analyses**

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2 concerning initial and changes in applicant PO fit perception differentiation, respectively, a growth modeling framework using random coefficient modeling specification in HLM 7.0 was required (Raudenbush et al., 2011). Researchers testing growth models have adopted a sequential model-fitting process which was followed in this study and consists of four steps to examine growth model assumptions before hypotheses can be explicitly tested (Bliwise & Ployhart, 2002). First, intraclass correlation coefficients were calculated at the applicant level for PO fit perception differentiation and results indicated that between-applicant factors explained 21.8% of the variance in PO fit perception differentiation while within-applicant factors explained 78.2% the variance in PO fit perception differentiation. Second, linear fixed effects for time were added to the model and found to be significant and positive (γ = .09; p ≤ .01). Third, accounting for random variability at Level 2 for the growth term significantly improved the model (Δχ²(2) = 84.19; p ≤ .01). Finally, alternative error structures were tested with a heterogeneous error structure significantly improving the model (Δχ²(7) = 78.23; p < .01) over a homogeneous error structure. Thus, the model fits the necessary assumptions and is specified appropriately to allow for formal hypothesis testing. When formally testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, Level 1 variables were not centered to ensure effects for time remained in their original metric, while Level 2 variables were grand-mean centered (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998).

Our hypotheses concerning applicant job choice (Hypotheses 3 through 6) were tested with models developed in HLM 7.0 to account for the nonindependence of the observations (Raudenbush et al., 2011) given that changes in perceptions of PO fit with each
organization over stage 1 and stage 2 of recruiting as well as job choice decisions were nested within applicants. Furthermore, the HLM models developed were specified to follow a Bernoulli distribution, rather than a normal distribution, since job choice was a binary outcome. In all analyses, Level 1 predictors (i.e., stage 1 PO fit perception change, stage 2 PO fit perception change) were group-mean centered while Level 2 predictors (i.e., control variables, initial perception differentiation, differentiation perception change) were grand-mean centered to accurately estimate the relationships between applicant PO fit differentiation, PO fit change, and job choice with an organization relative to PO fit differentiation, PO fit change, and job choice with other organizations that extended offers to the applicant (i.e., distinguishing within- and between-applicant effects; Enders & Tofghi, 2007; Hofmann & Gavin, 1998).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations

Table 1 and 2 list the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between study variables at both Level 1 and Level 2. While applicant GPA did not have a significant relationship with PO fit perception change in either the first or second recruiting stage (r = .03, p ≥ .10 and r = −.03, p ≥ .10, respectively), applicant GPA was negatively related to PO fit perception differentiation change since applicants with lower GPA were more likely to experience PO fit perception differentiation change, r = −.16, p ≤ .05. Additionally, correlational evidence suggests that nonwhite applicants were more likely to have higher levels of initial PO fit perception differentiation than white applicants, r = −.23, p ≤ .01. Finally, stage 1 and stage 2 PO fit perception change were not significantly related, r = −.01, p ≥ .10, possibly indicating the distinctiveness of the information provided in these two phases of the recruitment process.

Test of Hypotheses

Results of the model testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 are reported in Table 3. Hypothesis 1 stated that applicant PO fit perceptions of recruiting organizations would be differentiated at the start of the recruitment process. Model 1 of Table 3 indicates the formal test of this hypothesis. Supporting Hypothesis 1, after including control variables, the intercept term was significant (γ = .43, p ≤ .01), indicating that applicant PO fit perception differentiation at the start of the recruitment process was significantly different from zero. Hypothesis 2 predicted applicant PO fit perception differentiation would increase over the course of the recruitment process. In order to test Hypothesis 2, an additional term for time was entered into Model 1 of Table 3 to capture the trajectory of PO fit perception differentiation. Results reported in Model 2 of Table 3 indicate that the term for time, or the trajectory of applicant PO fit differentiation, was significant and positive (γ = .09, p ≤ .01). That is, on average, applicant PO fit perception differentiation increased over the course of the recruitment process. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Next, results of the model testing Hypotheses 3 through 6 are reported in Table 4 where control variables were first entered in Model 1, followed by applicant initial and changes in PO fit perception differentiation in Model 2, then stage 1 and stage 2 PO fit perception change in Model 3, and finally all study variables were included in Model 4 to predict job choice. Hypothesis 3 stated that greater initial PO fit perception differentiation would be positively related to future job choice. Model 2 of Table 4 reports the results of the formal test of this hypothesis. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the initial differentiation term in the model was significant (β = 0.16; p ≤ .05) indicating that applicant initial levels of PO fit perception differentiation were positively related to job choice. Thus, applicants with higher initial levels of PO fit perception differentiation were more likely to accept a given job offer than applicants with lower initial PO fit perception differentiation. Hypothesis 4 predicted greater applicant PO fit perception differentiation change would be positively related to job choice. Results of the formal tests for Hypothesis 4 are also reported in Model 2 of Table 4 and show that the term for PO fit perception differentiation change was both significant and positive (β = 0.17; p ≤ .05). These results indicate that applicants who experienced greater increases in differentiation over the course of the recruitment process were more likely to accept a given job offer than applicants who had less positive changes in PO fit perception differentiation during recruitment. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Results of the analyses testing Hypothesis 5 can be found in Model 3 of Table 4. Hypothesis 5 posited that positive applicant PO fit perception change with an organization during the first stage of recruitment (generating applicants phase) would be positively related to job choice. Model 3 of Table 4 indicates that PO fit change during the first stage of recruitment was significantly positively related to job choice (β = 3.41; p ≤ .05). That is, applicants who had more positive change in PO fit perceptions with an organization during the generating applicants phase of recruitment were more likely to accept a job offer from that organization relative to organizations with which they had less positive (or negative) change in PO fit perceptions during the first stage of recruitment. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Hypothesis 6 argued that positive applicant PO fit perception change with an organization during the second stage of the recruitment process (maintaining applicant status) would be positively related to job choice. Results of the formal tests for this hypothesis are also reported in Model 3 of Table 4. Consistent with Hypothesis 6, results indicate that applicant PO fit perception change with an organization during stage 2 of recruitment was significantly
related to accepting a job with that organization (β = 2.00; p ≤ .01). These results indicate that in addition to changes during the first stage of recruitment, applicants who had more positive change in PO fit perceptions with an organization during the second stage of recruitment were more likely to accept a job offer from that organization relative to organizations with which they had less positive (or negative) levels of change in PO fit perceptions during the second stage. Thus, Hypothesis 6 was supported. Interestingly, the standardized coefficients, which indicate the relative importance of different predictors (Kaufman, 1996), for stage 2 PO fit perception change was smaller than the standardized coefficient for stage 1 PO fit perception change, indicating that stage 1 PO fit change had a stronger relative contribution in predicting job choice.

Finally, Model 4 in Table 4 provides further support for Hypotheses 3 through 6. Terms for initial differentiation (β = 0.17; p ≤ .05), differentiation change (β = 0.17; p ≤ .05), stage 1 PO fit change (β = 3.34; p ≤ .05), and stage 2 PO fit change (β = 2.00; p ≤ .01) were all statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction when simultaneously entered into the model predicting job choice. Therefore, Hypotheses 3, 4, 5, and 6 were all fully supported.

### Additional Analyses

It was suggested we investigate the possible usefulness of absolute levels of applicant PO fit perceptions at the last measurement period (Time 8) in our model of PO fit perception changes predicting job choice. We ran two sets of supplemental analyses to Model 3 in Table 4 by adding in Time 8 PO fit perceptions to address the value of this information above and beyond the predictive validity of PO fit perception changes in stage 1 and stage 2. However, we should note that participant attrition was highest at Time 8 and the necessary number of Level 1 observations to estimate four random effects in the model was only satisfied by 14 of 124 remaining applicants and therefore the stability and robustness of the supplemental analyses may be problematic.

For the first set of analyses, we entered Time 8 PO fit perceptions grand-mean centered to reflect how useful this information would be to a recruiting organization trying to predict offer acceptance, as the organization may know the applicant’s PO fit perceptions with their company at Time 8 (but not know the applicant’s PO fit perceptions of all other organizations under consideration). Results of these analyses indicate that the Time 8 PO fit perception term was positive and significant (β = 1.04; p ≤ .01), along with both stage 1 (β = 3.54; p ≤ .05) and stage 2 (β = 1.16; p ≤ .01) change terms. That is, from an organization’s perspective, absolute levels of PO fit perceptions at the end of recruitment, as well as stage 1 and stage 2 PO fit perception changes, significantly predict job offer acceptance. Our second set of analyses addressed the applicants’ perspective, with Time 8 PO fit perceptions entered group-mean centered, since applicants should know where their PO fit perceptions with one organization

### Table 2

**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Hypotheses 3, 4, 5, and 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. GPA</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Race</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Initial PO fit perception differentiation</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PO fit perception differentiation change</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.57**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Stage 1 PO fit perception change</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Stage 2 PO fit perception change</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Job choice</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.15**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Level 2 correlations appear above the diagonal. Level 1 correlations appear below the diagonal. Level 2, N = 169; Level 1, N = 403. GPA = grade point average. Gender was coded male = 1 and female = 0. Race was coded White = 1 and Non-White = 0. 

### Table 3

**Multilevel Model Predicting PO Fit Perception Differentiation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1 Coefficient</th>
<th>Model 1 Coefficient SE</th>
<th>Model 1 t</th>
<th>Model 2 Coefficient</th>
<th>Model 2 Coefficient SE</th>
<th>Model 2 t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 Intercept</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>20.70**</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>4.32**</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-2.07*</td>
<td>-0.14**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-2.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 Time</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>13.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance components</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.05**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Level 2, N = 169; Level 1, N = 1218. GPA = grade point average. Gender was coded male = 1 and female = 0. Race was coded White = 1 and Non-White = 0. 

*p ≤ .05. ** p ≤ .01.
stood relative to their perceptions with all other organizations. Research on fit development suggests tests of mediation for these analyses, with the PO fit development process and actual job choice being mediated by the most proximal PO fit perception (i.e., Time 8 PO fit), since current PO fit perceptions are expected to be a function of past experiences and prior PO fit perceptions with the organization and subsequently influence future behavior (i.e., job choice decisions; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Thus, we first ran a multilevel model with stage 1 and stage 2 PO fit perception change predicting applicant PO fit perceptions at Time 8. Results indicate that PO fit perceptions at Time 8 were significantly and positively predicted by stage 1 ($\beta = 1.73$; $p \leq .01$) and stage 2 ($\beta = 1.19$; $p \leq .01$) PO fit perception change. When PO fit perceptions at Time 8 was then entered into the model, acting as a mediator, it was a significantly positive predictor of job choice ($\beta = 2.53$; $p \leq .01$) while both PO fit perception change terms were no longer significant, thereby indicating mediation.

**Discussion**

Increasingly positive applicant perceptions of PO fit significantly improve selection utility by lowering the selection ratio, whether by inducing the applicant to decide to apply, to agree to engage in high stakes testing, and/or to accept a job offer once the recruiting organization and subsequently influence future behavior (i.e., job choice decisions; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Thus, we first ran a multilevel model with stage 1 and stage 2 PO fit perception change predicting applicant PO fit perceptions at Time 8. Results indicate that PO fit perceptions at Time 8 were significantly and positively predicted by stage 1 ($\beta = 1.73$; $p \leq .01$) and stage 2 ($\beta = 1.19$; $p \leq .01$) PO fit perception change. When PO fit perceptions at Time 8 was then entered into the model, acting as a mediator, it was a significantly positive predictor of job choice ($\beta = 2.53$; $p \leq .01$) while both PO fit perception change terms were no longer significant, thereby indicating mediation.

**Theoretical Implications**

Using the tenets of decision-making paradigm DCT, we extend existing theory on the fundamental fit-job choice relationship by detailing how applicant PO fit perceptions across multiple recruiting organizations and over temporally distinct recruitment stages influence subsequent job choice decisions. By focusing on just one company, prior research on PO fit has yet to fully recognize and delineate the decision-making process for applicants. As summarized in Table 4, our overarching contribution suggests that to better understand recruiting outcomes, a fundamental necessity is to examine how applicants develop PO fit perceptions across and within organizations during the recruitment process. By incorporating a decision-making perspective, we clarify that recruiting is a context in which applicants know they must differentiate among a number of alternatives throughout multiple information gathering stages to consolidate onto one superior job choice while rejecting other perceived lesser alternatives (Dineen & Solis, 2011; Weber & Johnson, 2009). The results of this study underscore the necessity of taking a richer, more nuanced, view of PO fit, its differentiation across multiple organizations, and its change over the course of the recruitment process when studying applicant job choice decisions.

Second, our findings reveal that when applicant PO fit perceptions about recruiting organizations are more differentiated, it significantly improves our ability to predict job choice. As DCT argues, we find that applicants engage in decision making by differentiating perceptions of PO fit across recruiting organizations.
in such a way that a preliminary superior alternative emerges, yet also dynamically adjust perceptions of alternatives throughout recruitment as perceptions are fortified to consolidate the choice of one superior job alternative. This meaningful differentiation in perceptions of organizational values and norms occurs as early as the start of the predecision process (Soelberg, 1967; Svenson, 2003), since we found greater initial differentiation in PO fit was more predictive of future job choices. These findings underscore the conclusion that perceptions at the start of recruiting, based on early information, play a meaningful role in actual decisions about which job to accept (Breaugh, 2013; Dineen & Solits, 2011). Furthermore, our results also show that greater change in PO fit perception differentiation over time predicted job choice decisions. A pessimistic, yet salient, extension; a larger degree of initial differentiation along with increasing differentiation over time may set up a soon-to-be new employee for a larger fall once employment begins and the employment “honeymoon,” or DCT’s “consolidation,” period ends (Boswell, Shipp, Payne, & Culbertson, 2009).

Third, our results show applicant PO fit perceptions of each recruiting organization over the decision-making process are inherently unstable, emphasizing that PO fit perceptions meaningfully change across two recruitment stages linked to (1) applying for a job and (2) maintaining interest during selection processes. While meta-analytic results reveal PO fit perceptions are only modestly related to job choice (r = .18; Chapman et al., 2005), the zero-order correlations between applicant perceptions of PO fit and ultimate job choice in this study were lower early in the recruitment process (r = .06 over the first five assessments) and steadily increased as the assessments grew nearer to the job choice decision (r = .22, .33, and .48, respectively after the interview). Thus, applicant generation and maintaining applicant status stages of recruiting capture distinct processes that feature meaningful changes in PO fit perceptions which predict future job choice decisions and should be studied as such. Tracking how fit perceptions dynamically change over stages of the recruitment process answers the call to empirically establish how these predictors evolve over meaningful durations of time (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). The consequential implication is that applicants, and perhaps current employees, do not manage and develop their fit perceptions in a linear fashion (Shipp & Jansen, 2011), but instead do so in more disjointed or distinct development patterns which differentially influence meaningful outcomes.

Taken together, these results reveal that utilizing longitudinal data and recognizing that multiple organizations may be involved are significant advances in understanding PO fit perceptions during recruitment. Nearly all empirical findings obtained in past research rely on PO fit perceptions from one organization at one time. Conclusions about the “representativeness” of meta-analytic average correlations (Chapman et al., 2005; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) will be a function of when these estimates were obtained during each study. For example, if PO fit was assessed during a screening interview early in recruiting instead of during the final selection interview, then our results suggest that the observed correlation with job choice would be substantially lower in the former compared to the latter case while also failing to account for the role of differentiation. To the extent applicant PO fit perceptions are obtained at or near the same point during the recruiting process (e.g., all primary studies assess PO fit once during the campus interview) and with similar levels of differentiation across alternatives being considered, the representativeness of prior research findings are likely relevant only for that particular point of the recruiting process. Overall, the inclusion of DCT into recruiting research has provided additional grounds for considering how individuals evaluate and make decisions when faced with future and approaching decisions among multiple but uncertain options. We believe further refinement and application of decision-making theory will advance the recruitment literature substantially.

**Practical Implications**

These findings have two critically important practical implications for organizations attempting to recruit applicants. First, these results highlight the importance of each organization actively managing the information they make available to applicants, including the information shared right at the start of the recruiting process. This study shows that the higher and more differentiated an applicant’s PO fit perception is throughout the recruiting process for a specific organization, the stronger the relationship with future job choices. This underscores the importance of recruiting materials that organizations create to engender applicants to develop positive PO fit perceptions with their companies, including how organizations design their websites and utilize customized PO fit feedback (Braddy et al., 2006; Dineen et al., 2002), even before applicants apply to the organizations. While much of the prior research on the importance of information provided early in the recruitment process has been focused on how organizations can establish positive applicant perceptions initially (Cober, Brown, Keeping, & Levy, 2004; Collins & Han, 2004), results here indicate it also is important to identify ways organizations can keep applicant perceptions from becoming less positive or even more negative. Additionally, following initial information, the findings illustrate how critical it is that organizations take steps to ensure that applicant PO fit perceptions continue to increase, and do not drop, throughout the recruiting process.

Whether focusing on early or later recruiting materials and processes to enhance applicant PO fit perceptions, because of the importance in applicants differentiating their perceptions across organizations, a given firm should also engage in market research as to the recruiting efforts undertaken by their competitors for labor. This is important in both absolute terms as well as in relative terms for a particularly desirable applicant. In an absolute sense, firms must know how their recruiting materials, especially those used by applicants in establishing fit perceptions, compare to the materials for their primary competitors for labor. For highly desirable applicants, organizations would be served by proactively identifying other organizations under consideration by the applicants and recruiting against them in an effort to produce differentiation. This could be done positively, by highlighting aspects of their organization that would appeal to the applicant (i.e., enhancing the positive PO fit trajectory the applicant has for their organization; Dineen & Noe, 2009) or it could be done negatively, by bringing to the forefront aspects of the other organizations that would not be appealing to the applicant (i.e., by promoting a negative PO fit trajectory in the applicant for the other organizations; Van Hove & Lievens, 2009).
From an applicant perspective, given some of the change in PO fit perception differentiation may be produced to aid in the decision-making process rather than by objectively rating alternatives (Svenson, 2003), one implication of this study is that applicants should consider being more strategic in not just planning their job search (Van Hoot & Noordzij, 2009) but also as they progress through the recruitment process. Utilizing decision-making techniques such as creating T-charts (i.e., listing pros and cons of each choice) or decision matrices (i.e., assigning point values for decision criteria) may be useful to counteract potential decision-making biases. Additionally, if changes in PO fit perception differentiation are (partially) biasing applicant decisions, then applicants may also employ strategies such as making evaluations of organizations public to family or friends, allowing themselves more time to make job choice decisions, evaluating recruiting information in less aroused states, or expecting to provide justification for their final decisions to help attenuate these effects (Brownstein, 2003). While utilizing such practices may curtail the benefits derived from the differentiation process (e.g., using less effort, making decisions easier; Russo et al., 1996), the long-term benefits may outweigh the associated short-term costs.

Overall, we believe it is critical that recruitment research continues to determine the impact of recruitment activities and decisions on applicant PO fit perceptions (and other recruitment-related attitudes) longitudinally, in order to establish the utility of various managerial and applicant activities in changing PO fit perceptions over the duration of recruiting. The importance of various job and organizational attributes as well as recruiter and manager actions are likely to be critical in shaping applicant perceptions of PO fit (Cable & Judge, 1996; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). However, the criticality of those factors, and specifically when they are most influential during recruiting, has yet to be ascertained temporally.

**Limitations and Future Research**

One limitation of this study is the focus on investigating perceived subjective PO fit of applicants during the duration of the recruitment process. Perceived, or molar, assessments of PO fit are expected to be more affect-laden than alternative operationalizations of PO fit. Nevertheless, they often are the most proximal predictor of outcomes in recent models of fit, including models predicting recruiting outcomes, compared to objective or indirect PO fit measurements (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006). While research indicates that applicant PO fit perceptions may develop from objective PO fit and that the effect of objective PO fit is mediated by applicant perceived PO fit (Cable & Judge, 1996; Dineen et al., 2002; Judge & Cable, 1997), future research should examine if alternative operationalizations of fit produce similar findings to those of this study. However, an important and interesting caveat to this suggestion lies in researchers studying indirect objective fit in the recruitment process. Given that it is calculated by using perception-independent comparisons of the person and organization (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), indirect objective fit and the relationship with recruiting outcomes may be invariant regardless of when PO fit was measured as applicant and organization characteristics are likely to be relatively stable across the recruitment process. Thus, studies addressing changes, or lack thereof, in other measures of applicant fit (e.g., indirect subjective fit) is a critical next step for researchers.

While applicants in this study were seeking full-time employment with large multinational organizations rather than participating in a simulated experiment involving freshmen or sophomores in college (Darnold & Rynes, 2012), these full-time jobs were temporary (internships) and applicants may approach this type of recruitment process differently. However, both anecdotal and empirical evidence indicates that applicants in this study treated the recruitment process as a serious step toward securing permanent jobs with the Big 4 firms. Directors of the PPA program noted that at the conclusion of the internship in prior years, over 95% of all interns are extended full-time job offers. The concern that internship recruitment was approached differently by applicants was further attenuated by applicant mean responses to three items assessing the extent to which they expected their internships to result in a full-time job offer (M = 4.7 out of 5-point scale) and three items assessing their motivation to get an internship (M = 4.8 out of 5-point scale). Thus, in this study both organizations and applicants should be expected to value the internship recruitment process and treat it as they would a search for permanent employment. Future studies should look at samples of applicants who are applying for permanent employment since their job choice decisions may be differently influenced by impending financial needs or family demands (Boswell et al., 2012).

This study addressed the relationship between the applicant PO fit perception development process over a number of organizations and subsequent job choice decisions; yet it was unable to account for possible differences in the specifics of the actual jobs. Research indicates that characteristics of job offers such as pay, type of work, and location all have significant effects on recruiting outcomes (Chapman et al., 2005). However, concerns about drastic differences in these potential confounds are somewhat limited in this sample. Specifically, applicants in this sample were applying for similar jobs at the same level in each of the Big 4 firms. Also, PPA administrators noted that within a given recruiting year, very little variance in compensation exists across applicants and between organizations. Another potential confound, location of job, was also not expected to have a large influence on findings of this study. Each of the Big 4 firms had multiple offices (M = 5) within 200 miles of the university from which these applicants were recruited from and greater than 90% of offers accepted were for positions within that distance. However, future research should broaden the heterogeneity in aspects of the recruiting organizations compared to the four firms examined in this study. For instance, would white-collar applicants evaluate organizations differently than blue-collar applicants, perhaps with the former focusing more on fit with the organization and the latter focusing more on fit with the job (e.g., based on the pay, job characteristics, and location factors mentioned previously)? Despite the significant effects found for applicant PO fit perceptions over the recruiting process, utilizing a more diverse sample of organizations may yield different, and perhaps even larger, effects.

Additional questions regarding the generalizability of either the sample of applicants used or the nature of the recruiting process could be answered by future research. First, as the participants in this study were “active” job seekers, one could wonder how the recruitment of more passive job seekers who may only apply to one organization would differ. Additionally, as the likelihood of
receiving an offer has also been shown to affect recruitment (Uggerslev et al., 2012), applicants being recruited by fewer or even one possible employer may develop PO fit perceptions more strongly or quickly. Another issue is that all applicants in this sample progressed through the recruitment process with all interested recruiting organizations in a relatively parallel manner and were ensured of the opportunity to interview with all four organizations. However, it would be interesting to examine the development of PO fit perceptions for applicants whose recruitment by multiple organizations were not so synchronous. For example, would applicants who are far along in the recruitment process with one organization reevaluate their PO fit perceptions if new recruiting organizations entered into the process? Perhaps how the applicant would respond to the new organization would depend on whether the applicant’s perceptions of PO fit were increasing or decreasing for their existing job alternative, as well as the current level of perceived fit with the existing organization compared to the initial level of fit perceived with the new organization. Similarly, for currently employed job seekers, what would the difference in fit perceptions need to be between their current employers compared to new potential employers in order for the individuals to continue the recruiting process with the new potential employers? Clearly, future studies using longitudinal designs are needed to address these possibilities.

**Conclusion**

Extending beyond the few studies that have examined time-related processes (Becker, Connolly, & Slaughter, 2010; Boswell et al., 2003; Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Rees, 1966; Rynes et al., 1991; Soelberg, 1967), we argue that to accurately understand the antecedents and consequences of applicant PO fit perceptions, it is critical to assess PO fit differentiation and test the role of PO fit across and within organizations repeatedly over the entire recruiting process. In an effort to advance recruitment research by conducting descriptive field research and developing empirically grounded inductive theories of psychological recruitment, we call for an aggressive shift from cross-sectional single organization-focused research to longitudinal methodologies addressing multiple recruiting organizations. Recruitment is a decision-making process whereby applicants gather information about alternatives to facilitate a job choice decision. To extend beyond simply generating estimates of relationships at just one point of the recruitment process often with just one organization, estimates that do not accurately depict the predictive validity of the same relationships at other points in time across multiple organizations or the typical recruitment process for either the applicant or organization, future research should assess the strength of these relationships at multiple points in time across multiple organizations to better capture the underlying processes reflected in decision-making theories such as DCT.

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