A qualitative case study of employee turnover in retail business

Omotayo Olubiyi [*], Garrett Smiley, Henry Luckel, Ralph Melaragno

Northcentral University, Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

This study on the person-organization fit theory, measured in terms of value congruence, explored qualitative data from a survey of non-managerial retail employees in a Northwestern state in the United States in relation to job satisfaction and employee-organization value congruence in a retail establishment that has shown a remarkable deviation from the norm with employee turnover far below what is obtainable in the retail industry. The results of a field study of 18 employees, through open ended interviews and survey transcripts, analyzed thematically using Nvivo qualitative data analysis tool, identified five themes that influence job satisfaction and employee retention: Friendly workplace environment, Flexibility, Stability, Management Support, and Independence.

1. Introduction

The person-organizational (P-O) fit theory is a holistic concept that describes compatibility between individuals and organizations, covering how an individual's values, interests, and behavior are consistent with, or compatible with the organization's culture as a whole rather than as a specific function or task. P-O fit analysis draws heavily from the works of Chatman (1989), and O'Reilly et al. (1991); it is typically measured in terms of value congruence; an alignment of the values of individuals and the organizations they work for. The concept of P-O fit is crucial for the survival of business entities because it proposes that if people fit well with an organization, they are likely to exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors (Amos and Weathington, 2008). The positive outcomes of this relationship is supported by the literature and studies have revealed positive associations between P-O fit and several related concepts. For example, job satisfaction (Edwards and Cable, 2009; Liu et al., 2010), employee turnover and retention (Coldwell, Billsberry, Van Meurs and Marsh, 2008), organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Ahmad et al., 2011; Allameh, Amiri and Asadi, 2011), organizational performance (Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel and Pierce, 2011), and work-related attitudes and behaviors (Mullins and Syam, 2014). Studies have also revealed negative associations between P-O fit and employee turnover (Liu et al., 2010; Jung, Namkung and Yoon, 2010), the impact of mentoring on the intervening roles of value congruence, organizational knowledge, and supervisory satisfaction (Fogarty et al., 2017), and the lack of fit as a potential trigger of employee turnover (Bao et al., 2012). In addition, P-O fit is multidimensional, and its components include personality, skills, needs, and most importantly,

values-both personal and organizational (Vveinhardt and Gulbovaite, 2013). Although value congruence is a crucial part of P-O fit analysis, value congruence is itself a narrow concept limited in scope, it is simply the compatibility of labor values between individuals and organizations (Vveinhardt and Gulbovaite, 2013).

In the book Explorations in Personality, Murray (1938) needs-press theory provided foundational discussions on the influence of personal values on the choices people make. Murray argued that people have distinct needs, and would seek opportunities to satisfy those needs (as cited in Prottas, 2011). Most people have the same basic psychological needs (e.g., ambition, materialism, power), but individuals tend to rank these needs differently. To satisfy the needs, people will often seek opportunities (defined as supplies) at work, or elsewhere. Consequently, an individual's personality can be defined relative to the person's perceived most important needs, which is reflected in the individual's representative behavior. For example, a person in need of recognition may constantly seek to describe personal accomplishments. The needs-supply conceptualization of person-organizational fit served as a foundation of much of the subsequent trait oriented organizational research; personal values, organizational values, and value congruence are enhanced when a person's needs are met in a work environment (Cable and Kay, 2012).

The concept of values has been of interest to social scientists for many years, values have consistently played crucial roles for researchers in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and related disciplines (Schwartz, 2012). Although the applications of values constructs in the social sciences experienced a decline during the last century due to disagreements among researchers on the basic conceptual definitions and measurability of values, there has been a renewal of interest in values research.

Particularly in the 1960s, researchers began to focus on the concept of values within the confines of organizational settings to study organizational behavior. To this end, Fleishman and Peters (1962) and McMurry (1963) began to advocate for the use of personal value constructs in work organizations to study the compatibility between management and employees. Presenting similar arguments, Rokeach (1968) argued for the use of values and value systems to study organizational behavior, because values were more structurally fundamental than attitudes, and were therefore more basic in determining an individual's character. Rokeach (1973) further argued that values were more efficient analytical tools, and that the study of values allows for more interdisciplinary collaboration than does the study of attitudes. Connor and Becker (1975) presented further arguments in support of the use of value constructs in the literature in a review of organizational paradigms which categorized reciprocal effects between values and organizational factors. Using a systems approach, Connor and Becker (1975) proposed a multitude of research topics to investigate the roles that member values play in organizational processes, for example; values and organizational context, values and organizational processes, values and managerial actions, and values and organizational performance. The P-O fit theory, operationalized in employee-organization value congruence measures, began to develop as the direction of research focused on the use of personal value constructs in work organizations to examine the compatibility between management and employees (Bao et al., 2012). For the organizational values construct, researchers recognized the personal influences of organizational leaders in the determination of organizational values. For example, Fleishman and Peters (1962) argued that the essence of leadership was simply a function of interpersonal influence which derive from the interpersonal values of a leader, and it was possible to describe organizations in terms of the values dominant in the organization.

Traditionally, germinal studies have presented evidence to support the concept that personal values strongly correlate with attitudes and belief systems, because one cannot effectively separate personal values from personal beliefs whether at home, or in the workplace environment (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Rokeach, 1968). The concept of values, whether personal or organizational, is a robust concept that has presented researchers with opportunities to study values under several frameworks. In recent times, researchers have argued for an interactive model to examine the interdependence between perceived person-supervisor (P-S) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit, and their associations with affective organizational commitment (Flint et al., 2018), and the literature has expanded to include, for example, personal work values (Florea, Cheung and Herndon, 2013; Leuty and Hansen, 2012), studies on values along socio-ethnic conceptualizations (Liu et al., 2010; Watson and Simpson, 1978), and along gender differences and conceptualizations (Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty and Keiser, 2012).

2. Background

Every year, companies spend significant amounts of money to replace employees who voluntarily separate from their organizations (Huning and Thomson, 2011; Olubiyi, 2015). These replacement costs can be as high as $10,000 per hourly employee, and as high as two times the replaced employee's annual salary (Allen et al., 2010; Yurchisin, Park, & O'Brien, 2010). Clearly, retail establishments need to reduce high rates of employee turnover to avoid these cost implications and establish sustainable retention strategies. To this end, research evidence suggests that establishing P-O fit through employee-organization value congruence typically starts from the beginning of the employer-employee relationship (De Cooman et al., 2009). This argument is in line with the Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) model (Schneider, 1987) which implies that job applicants will be attracted to and selected by those organizations whose values are similar to their own; and that once they have joined the organization, those employees whose values do not fit with the organization's values will either leave voluntarily or be removed by the organization. The ASA framework lies within P-O fit traditions and

can be broken down into three key phases. First, in the attraction phase, individuals are attracted to organizations that have similar attributes to themselves (Schneider, 1987). Then, organizations select individuals with specific competencies and attributes that fit the organization (selection phase). Finally, in the attrition phase, those employees that do not fit with the organization will either voluntarily leave or be asked to leave. Therefore, the process results in greater homogeneity within the organization and a high degree of congruence between members and the organization.

The ASA framework aligns with the concepts of P-O fit and value congruence in two key areas. First, it combines elements of P-O fit to help with employee selection and enhances employee-organization value congruence (De Cooman et al., 2009). Then, after getting used to the work environment, work values and P-O fit is known to increase among employees within a few short years (De Cooman et al., 2009). Therefore, the relative stability of personal values implies that staffing maybe the best way to achieve value congruence (Bao et al., 2012).

These arguments support employee-organization value congruence as an underlying concept that enhances organizations' employee selection and retention strategies. However, from the organization's perspective, the fact that employees are retained in an organization does not by itself indicate value congruence between employees and the organization (Hom et al., 2012). In a review of the literature of prevailing turnover dimensions, Hom et al. (2012) reconceptualized employee turnover in terms of different proximal withdrawal states that influence an employee's stay or leave decisions. These states, influenced heavily by the attitudes of employees typically create four broad mindsets:

1. The enthusiastic stayer stays with the organization because they want to, and remain with the organization for as long as they can-or until they retire.
2. The reluctant stayer stays for as long as they have to, or until something happens to remove the barriers to leaving.
3. The enthusiastic leaver wants to leave, and can leave, but when and how they exit depend on certain conditions.
4. The reluctant leavers want to stay, but must leave the job (Hom et al., 2012).

Hom et al. further identified a variant of the four withdrawal states as slackers; these are employees who, for extrinsic reasons, want to stay indefinitely, principally to avoid giving up good corporate benefits. In fact, Hom et al. (2012) argued that slackers particularly lack value congruence and typically do not hold favorable job attitudes except feeling satisfied with pay and job security. They provide subpar performance, they perform just enough not to get fired, and due to attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) mechanisms, slackers, for minimal contributions, tend to populate firms with high corporate inducements such as job security and benefits. Thus, slackers are loyal, only to their paychecks, are disengaged, and are low performers with few chances of leaving voluntarily.

The attempt by Hom et al. (2012) to integrate the concept of employee turnover into one overall explanatory model was subsequently debated in the work of Bergman et al. (2012), and Maertz (2012). According to Bergman et al. (2012), focusing only on withdrawal states may not present a complete picture for turnover analyses; researchers should also consider anticipated destinations when conducting research on employee turnover. In fact, Bergman et al. (2012) argued that one needs to realize that people do not know precisely where they will turn over to until they have actually gone. In addition, Bergman et al. (2012) argued that there are additional considerations that need to be included in a proximal withdrawal state analysis, one key consideration is that people do not necessarily fall within a single typology of mindset; but rather within a continuum of mindsets because rarely do typologies capture the complex and multifaceted experiences of people. In fact, given proper interventions for value development and value clarification, the perception of personal values tend to change over time (Fitzpatrick et al.,

2016). Similarly, Maertz (2012) argued that by constraining proximal withdrawal states to two dimensions, Hom et al. (2012) model did not fully capture the richness and complexity of proximal withdrawal states. In fact, Maertz (2012) argued that employee preferences and their perceived decision control were not independent concepts as presented by Hom et al. (2012) they are actually intertwined, but in a way not yet completely understood in the literature.

Clearly, the typology of mindsets presented by Hom et al. (2012) relies heavily on the ASA model. However, the problems with adopting the ASA model become apparent from several perspectives. First, given the short period it takes to conduct interviews and evaluate potential employees' fit with the organization, it is often difficult to fully understand a potential employee's values during the screening process (Bao et al., 2012). It is also possible that job applicants will intentionally display desired values based on their knowledge about the organization. Although organizational values tend to guide acceptable behavior within the organization (Wang and Zhang, 2017), organizations can also project a favorable image of their values that is different from their actual functioning environment. The fact that understanding each other's values takes time and is mainly based on behavioral observation, hinders both the validity of staffing as a means for achieving value congruence and the validity of the ASA model itself (Bao et al., 2012). Furthermore, understanding organizational values can be cumbersome due to the multi-dimensional concepts corporate identity that potentially underlines organizational values (Flint et al., 2018). Since values can be difficult to detect during the attraction phase of the ASA model, researchers have suggested that socialization tactics may be a better alternative approach to establishing value congruence because, for the new employee, socialization tactics engenders a sense of fit (Allen and Shanock, 2013; Bao et al., 2012).

3. Theory

Employee turnover is the departure of an employee from the formally defined organization. Since scholarly evidence suggests a distinction between voluntary and involuntary turnover (Allen et al., 2010), this paper focuses on the voluntary type; which occurs when employees decide to leave the organization. High levels of employee turnover, commonly observed in the retail sector, triggers operational disruptions with staff compositions that are often in a state of flux (Nyberg and Ployhart, 2013; Yurchisin and Park, 2010). In 2006, retail sector employee turnover was 34.7%, and fluctuations were observed in rates as high as 100% in 2009 (Ployhart et al., 2009). By 2013, the turnover rates had exceeded 50% (Nyberg and Ployhart, 2013). In this paper, we explore qualitative data from a survey of non-managerial retail employees in relation to job satisfaction and employee-organization value congruence in a retail establishment in the Northwestern part of the United States, that has shown a remarkable deviation from the norm, with employee turnover far below observable trends in the retail industry.

4. Method

One of the most prominent advocates of case study research, Yin (2009) defined case study as an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. By attempting to answer the *how* or *why* question, qualitative methods are better at exploring the experiences of respondents and obtaining deeper, meaningful insights into real life situations. In addition, the very specific context of the study indicated that a single case study was appropriate for the study in line with Yin (2009) identification of extreme and unique cases as a rationale for single case study research. Unlike quantitative studies, where sampling logic is commonly used, the criteria regarding sample size is somewhat irrelevant in a qualitative single case study design (Marshall et al., 2013; Yin,

2009). Nonetheless, researchers have suggested 10 to 15 interviews to reach thematic saturation for a qualitative study (Marshall et al., 2013; Mason, 2010). The target establishment had a total number of 26 non-managerial employees across three locations at the time of this study. Out of this number, only 3 had been working at the establishment for less than one year. This created a pool of 23 participants who conformed to the criteria of being non-managers with more than one year experience at the establishment. The 23 employees were contacted to take part in the study, 5 employees declined, leaving a pool of 18 (78%) participants. 3 of the 18 participants did not identify any new themes or sub-themes, or articulate different words or explanations for Nvivo coding analysis during interviews; thus indicating a point of data saturation. The responses of 15 of the 18 participants thus represent the core data utilized for this study. All 15 participants were Caucasian-Americans, 11 females and four males. Participants' ages ranged from 30-65 years. The participants included two book keepers, six cashiers, and seven store associates. Education levels varied among the participants. One participant possessed a college degree, one reported having some college education, seven reported having associates degrees, and six reported having high school diplomas. 9 of the 15 participants were married, two were single, one was widowed, and two were divorced. All 15 participants reported tenure with the establishment ranging from 3 to 9 years. We obtained ethical approval from Northcentral University's Internal Review Board (IRB). We obtained informed consents, and NCU IRB approval prior to any data collection. See Table 1 for complete demographic data.

This study adopted Beasley, Jason, and Miller's (2012) general environment fit scale (GEFS), used to investigate value congruence within a single dimension of fit in a particular social context, and assess individual perceptions of similarity to others in the setting. The GEFS is a more prolific offshoot of Cable and DeRue's (2002) perceived person-job fit scale, which had been commonly used to evaluate three related concepts; value congruence, needs-supply, and demands-abilities. The GEFS was adapted for this study for three key reasons. Firstly, Beasley et al. (2012) argued that fit with settings was consistently related to satisfaction with the setting. Secondly, fit with settings also relate to how long members intend to stay in that setting. Thirdly, given the consistency of the findings in fit and value congruence research, Beasley et al. (2012) argued that any new measure of fit should be expected to predict job satisfaction and turnover within the setting that the measure targets.

Additionally, this study drew from Cheng, Yang, Wan, and Chu's (2013) Job Responses Measure (JRM) which assessed the key concepts of job satisfaction and turnover intent in the same instrument, it considered the moderating role of work values and the mediating role of perceived organizational support in the relationship between ethical context and job satisfaction, thus evaluating job satisfaction and turnover intention.

Table 1
Demographic data.

Participant	Age Range	Gender	Relationship	Education Before Joining the organization	Education after joining the organization
TW001	51–55	Female	Married	High School	Associate
TW002	51–55	Female	Married	High School	High School
TW003	56–60	Female	Married	Associate	Associate
TW004	51–55	Female	Married	Associate	Associate
TW005	41–45	Female	Single	High School	High School
TW006	41–45	Female	Divorced	High School	High School
TW007	41–45	Female	Divorced	High School	High School
TW008	46–50	Male	Married	High School	High School
TW009	51–55	Male	Married	Associate	Associate
TW010	56–60	Male	Single	High School	Associate
TW011	56–60	Male	Single	Associate	Associate
TW012	61–65	Female	Widowed	Some College	College
TW013	35–40	Female	Married	Some College	Some College
TW014	35–40	Female	Married	High School	High School
TW015	51–55	Female	Married	Associate	Associate

For the purposes of this study, both the GEFS and JRM were modified with open ended questions to obtain perceptions of participants (For further details, please see the Interview Guide). Participants' responses led to the identification and evaluation of emergent themes in five unique categories. It is instructive to note that the five themes described by participants were clearly overarching in nature. In general, participants constantly used different words to describe these themes during the interviews, irrespective of the topic discussed. From discussions on personal values, job satisfaction, to turnover, participant responses constantly revolved around these major themes, described by participants either using similar words or using closely related verbiage.

5. Results

Fig. 1 illustrates participants' perception of job satisfaction derived from Nvivo's verbiage analysis shown in Fig. 2. Similarly, Fig. 3 illustrates participants' perception of value congruence derived from Nvivo's verbiage analysis shown in Fig. 4. Responses obtained from participants were evaluated using the Nvivo software which provides computer assisted coding systems, including qualitative analysis of interview responses. For example, similar terms, related words, and phrases used to describe concerns and opinions during interviews were gathered to derive emergent themes. Results related to job satisfaction revealed that all 15 participants used several related words to report different levels of job satisfaction (see Fig. 1). One participant did not use distinctly separate words that could be coded separately in Nvivo, leading to the number of words coded only reported for 14 participants (see Fig. 2).

Results related to value congruence revealed that 12 participants used several related words to report different levels of perceived value congruence (see Figs. 3 and 4).

Interestingly, the results indicated three participants (numbers 14, 12, and 10) reported job satisfaction despite not perceiving value congruence between themselves and the organization. While the longevity of employment in the organization already evidences some form of retention, it appears the three participants may be reluctant stayers; one the four broad mindsets identified by Hom et al. (2012). Despite the relative ease of employee entry and exit commonly observed in the retail sector (Nyberg and Ployhart, 2013), all participants had worked for the establishment for more than three years and indicated a willingness to stay at their jobs.

6. Results & discussion

6.1. Stability

Participants generally described stability in terms of consistency in their lifestyles, regular paychecks, and job security. Knowing what they need to do weekly or daily, understanding expectations, and knowing how to take on tasks without the fear of unexpected consequences like lay-offs. Participants wanted to be relatively certain that their jobs will be there the next day.

6.2. Friendly workplace environment

Friendly workplace environment was perhaps the most repeated theme described as a job satisfaction influencer by the participants. Friendly workplace environment refers to the participants' relationships with management, peers, subordinates, and customers. Some participants reported that they did not feel any work related stress because the work environment fostered good relationships across all employee levels.
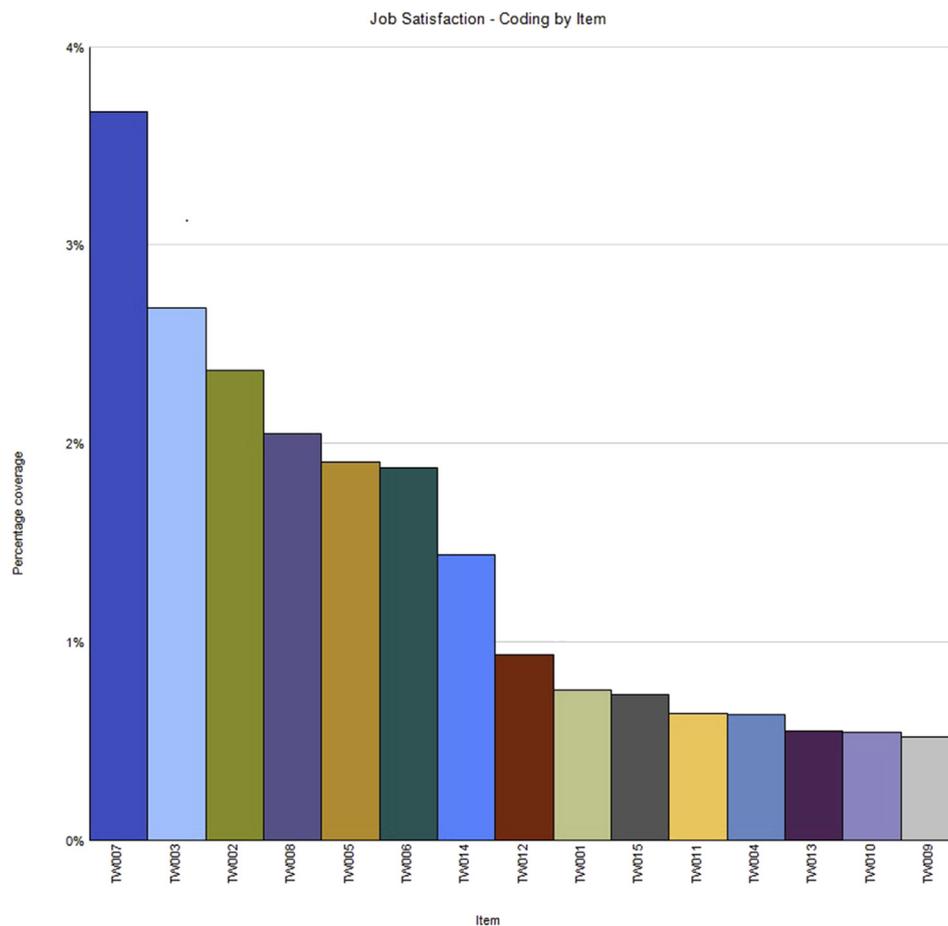

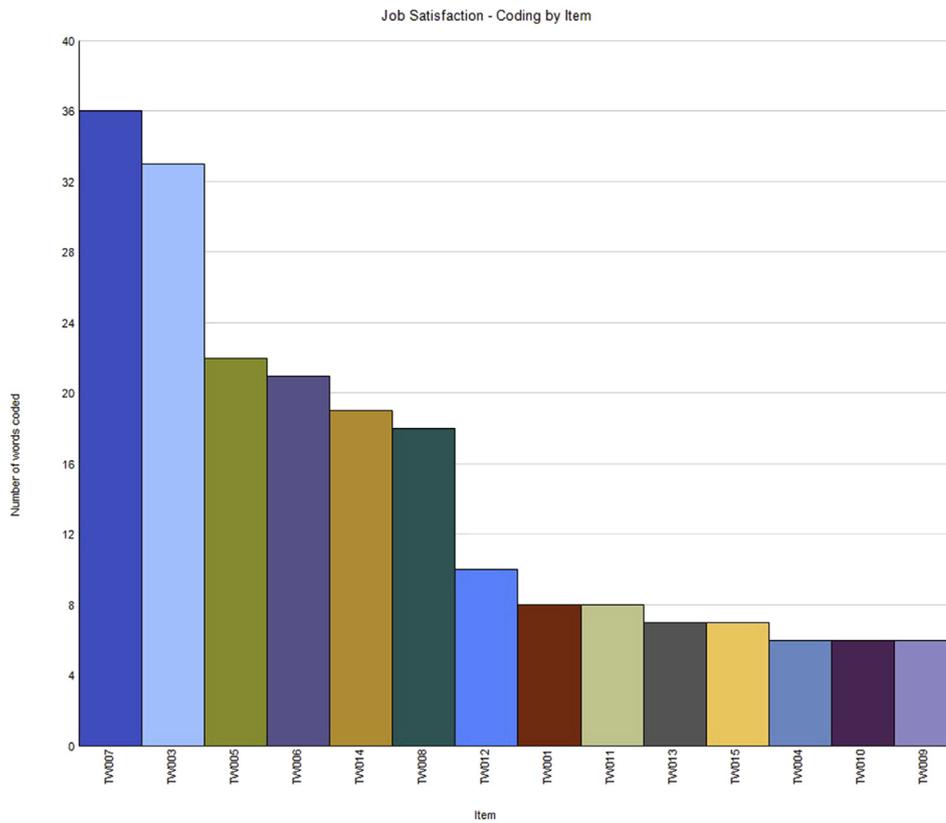**Fig. 1.** Perceptions of job satisfaction.

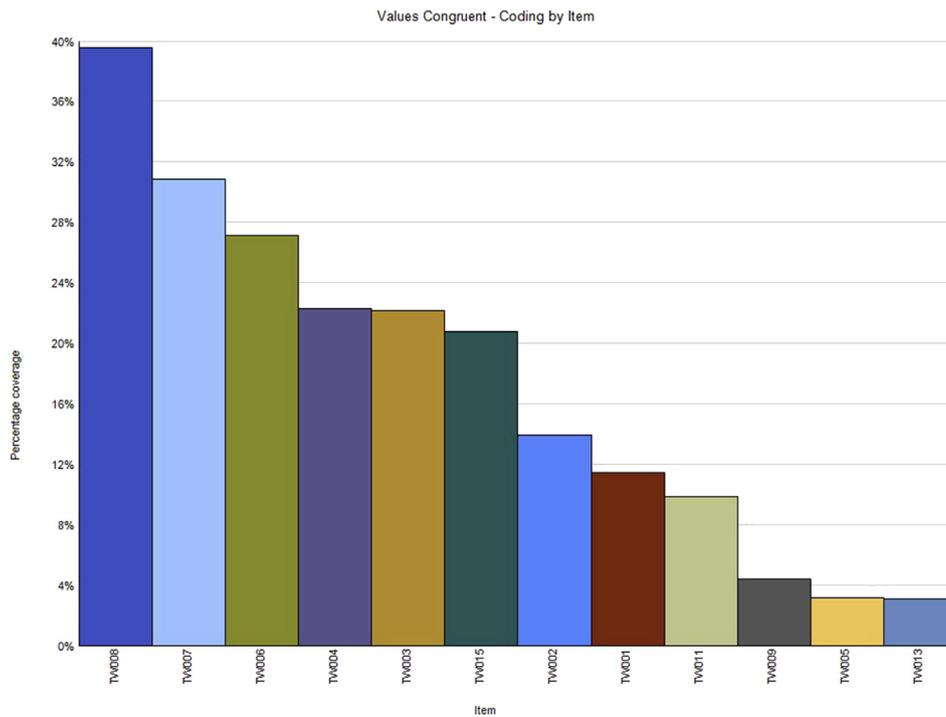**Fig. 2.** Verbiage analysis related to job satisfaction.

Fig. 3. Perceptions of value congruence.

Also, because the establishment has been operating in the area for over 40 years, there was a well-established relationship between the organization and the communities they served.

6.3. Family orientation

The theme of family orientation describes participants' feeling that the workplace environment had evolved to be like family. Participants reported that they often do not think of their jobs in terms of a formal or
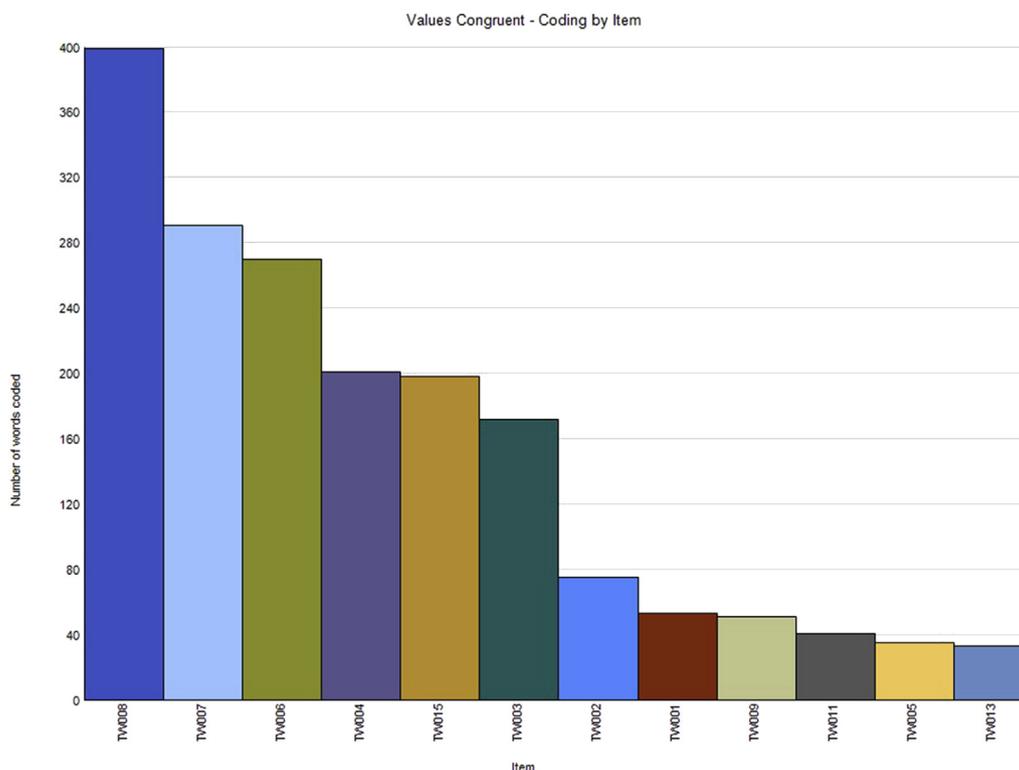
Fig. 4. Verbiage analysis related to value congruence.

rigid job setting, rather they feel as if they are among friends or family.

6.4. Flexibility

The theme of flexibility refers to work schedules, illustrated by the participants as a factor that influences their job satisfaction. Participants' perceptions were that flexibility of work schedule enhanced opportunities for them to pursue other activities like going back to school, having time to take care of their family's needs, or some other work-life balancing activities. The participants commented that without the opportunity of a flexible work schedule it would be near-impossible to pursue other life goals and this would have led to dis-satisfaction, stress, and frustrations at work. In fact, participants believe that the opportunity created with the flexible work schedule enhanced their value congruence.

6.5. Commitment

The theme of commitment describes participants' perceptions of the organization's commitment to their personal welfare. Participants described positive feelings they experience in the organization due to perceived management support for issues they consider important in the workplace environment. Participants also reported that such positive feelings extract reciprocity as they also feel committed to the organization's success.

7. Discussion & conclusions

The results of this case study are consistent with previous studies related to P-O fit operationalized as value congruence, and the associated effects on job satisfaction and turnover. Studies have presented evidence that job satisfaction enhances value congruence, and is therefore crucial to value congruence research (Besen et al., 2013; Harter et al., 2010; Zhang and Gowan, 2012). Researchers have also argued that value congruence reduces the incidents of employee turnover by enhancing

worker retention (Burney and Swanson, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2011; Suar and Khuntia, 2010). Five recurrent themes, consistent within the results of this study were flexibility, friendly workplace environment, stability, commitment, and family orientation. These themes are consistent with similar themes identified in previous related studies (Hom et al., 2012; Palanski, Avey and Jiraporn, 2013). The link between personal values and organizational values is much related to, and supported by, the (P-O) fit theory. Personal values are critical motivators of behaviors and attitudes; therefore, when employees perceive congruence between their values and the values of the organization, the outcomes include job satisfaction and reduced employee turnover (Amos and Weathington, 2008; Edwards and Cable, 2009; Schwartz, 2012). Organizations also portray a set of values which are underlying principles that guide business operations (Suar and Khuntia, 2010). Generally, values are beliefs that also drive organizational behavior; the values may or may not be formally articulated but measured by the perceptions of individual employees, and not necessarily by the organization's charts or records (Ferh and Gelfand, 2012; Malbasic and Brcic, 2012; Ofori and Sokro, 2010).

7.1. Theoretical implication

This research describes value congruence as an important element in job satisfaction, employee retention, positive outcomes, and improved performance. In general, results obtained from this study are in line with previous studies; when there is a congruence of values, the environment affords individuals with an opportunity to fulfill their needs, and the alignment of personal and organizational values tend to enhance employee retention and reduce employee turnover (Chiang and Birtch, 2010; Wang and Zhang, 2017). Literature on organizational values typical argue that a congruence of values provide norms of behavior within the organization and lead to better performance (Astakhova, 2016; Wang and Zhang, 2017). The relationship between person-organization fit and work attitudes can be understood from the interactionist perspective (Chatman, 1989), which claims that employee work attitudes and behaviors are a function of individual and

environmental characteristics. Therefore, people who share similar values will prioritize similar goals, communicate in similar ways, and be able to predict each other's action (Bao et al., 2012).

Going a step further, this research indicates that while employees typically report job satisfaction as a result of value congruence when they perceive personal values in alignment with organizational values, there are some inconsistencies of reported job satisfaction despite a perceived lack of value congruence. This inconsistency potentially describes reluctant stayers; one the four broad mindsets identified by Hom et al. (2012).

7.2. Managerial implication

One managerial implication of this study is that employee-organization value congruence has a significant effect on job satisfaction and employee turnover. As a result, organizational leaders can gain a better understanding of person-organization fit within a value congruence framework within their organizations, particularly at the non-managerial levels, and be better informed in creating internal processes designed to increase job satisfaction and minimize employee turnover. Clearly, a supportive management style could lead to positive engagements, but the measure of value congruence is highly subjective and derived from employee perceptions.

7.3. Limitations

The practice of assessing personal and organizational values from the perceptions of research participants is a limitation because employee-organization value congruence and job satisfaction are typically assessed from the perceptions of employees (Hom et al., 2012; Zhang and Gowan, 2012). Another limitation in this qualitative single case study is that interviewees' responses can be subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation (Yin, 2009). Therefore, the respondents who finished the study may not necessarily be truly representative of a broader population. A third limitation of this study is the use of only one organization. Consequently, the generalizability of the conclusions may be limited to the specific situations explored.

7.4. Recommendations and future research

The findings in this study closely align with previous research on employee-organization value congruence and turnover. However, additional research is needed to focus on different social contexts, for instance, what is the impact of value congruence on employee retention during periods of economic growth or improved economic indices? It is interesting to note that retail employee turnover rates increased steadily between 2015 and 2018 despite unemployment rates falling from 5.7 in 2015 to 3.7 in September 2018. If retail employees seek and obtain alternative employment during economic growth, it may suggest value incongruence between employees and employers in the retail sector, or some other yet undetermined reasons for the high levels of turnover.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Omotayo Olubiyi: Performed the experiments; Wrote the paper.
Garrett Smiley: Conceived and designed the experiments.
Henry Luckel: Analyzed and interpreted the data.
Ralph Melaragno: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data.

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