

**WRONG  
FIT,  
RIGHT  
FIT**

**Why How We Work Matters More Than Ever**

**André Martin, PhD**

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To my wife, for loving all of me and all my nuance  
To my mom, for being in my corner since day one  
To my kids, for giving me a reason to be and do more  
To my mentors, for opening doors and pushing me through them

To all my teams, for showing me the definition of brilliance  
and inspiring me to help more talent find *right fit*.



# CONTENTS

Introduction	There is a <i>Right Fit</i> Company Waiting for You	xiii
<b>PART 1 Context + <i>Right Fit</i></b>		
Chapter 1	How the Workplace Has Changed	3
Chapter 2	Why <i>Right Fit</i> Is So Rare	21
<b>PART 2 Talent + <i>Right Fit</i></b>		
Chapter 3	Beginning the Search for <i>Right Fit</i>	39
Chapter 4	Self-Reflection and Fit Excursions	49
<b>PART 3 Interviewing and Onboarding + <i>Right Fit</i></b>		
Chapter 5	Don't Judge a Company by Its Career Page	85
Chapter 6	Figuring Out If You Really Fit	101
<b>PART 4 Buffers + <i>Right Fit</i></b>		
Chapter 7	Inspirational Buffers and Enhancing Fit Over Time	137
Chapter 8	Relational Buffers and Enhancing Fit Over Time	161
<b>PART 5 Company + <i>Right Fit</i></b>		
Chapter 9	Crafting and Communicating How the Company Works	177
Chapter 10	Reimagining Fit—Recruiting and (Re)recruiting for <i>Right Fit</i>	197
Conclusion	Fit, Fitting In, and the Fine Art of Reinvention	219
	Bibliography	225
	Notes	251
	Acknowledgments	259
	About the Author	261

# FIGURES & TABLES

## INTRODUCTION

Figure 0.1: Handwritten Sentences with Dominant and Nondominant Hands	xv
Figure 0.2: The Elements of <i>Right Fit</i> and Fitting In	xix
Figure 0.3: The Three Hats	xxiii
Figure 0.4: Audience for This Book	xxv

## CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.1: US Employee Engagement Trend, Annual Averages	10
Figure 1.2: A Decade of Growth	11
Figure 1.3: Time Spent on Activities at Work	15

## CHAPTER 2

Figure 2.1: <i>Right Fit</i> vs. <i>Wrong Fit</i> Interview Quote Samples	24
Figure 2.2: Key Statistics from the APA Work and Well-Being Survey	27
Figure 2.3: The Elements of Fit	33
Table 2.1: Fit Questions for Talent and Companies	35

## CHAPTER 3

Figure 3.1: The Holistic Journey to Finding <i>Right Fit</i>	44
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## CHAPTER 4

Table 4.1: Value Pairs	53
Worksheet 1: Lived Value Ladder	54
Worksheet 2: Future Retrospective Questions	59
Worksheet 3: Superpowers and Shadow Sides Excursion Template	63
Worksheet 4: Craft, Company, or Cause	69
Worksheet 5: My <i>Right Fit</i> Leader	72
Worksheet 6: Your Ideal Company	76
Worksheet 7: What Matters Right Now	78
Worksheet 8: The Story of You	81

## CHAPTER 5

Figure 5.1: A Visual Depiction of Confirmation Bias	88
Figure 5.2: Types of Cognitive Bias	89
Figure 5.3: Traditional and Additional Sources to Use in Company Research	93

## CHAPTER 6

Figure 6.1: The Three Versions of the Company and Their Impact on Talent	108
Figure 6.2: EKG Reading of Time to Fit The Fit Assessment	109 127

## CHAPTER 7

Figure 7.1: Meaningful Work Grid	146
Figure 7.2: The Eisenhower Matrix	148
Figure 7.3: Top Ways Leaders Learn over Their Career	151

## CHAPTER 10

Figure 10.1: A Sketch of the Ideal Onboarding	203
Figure 10.2: Visual of a Typical Performance Review Process	209





## INTRODUCTION

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**There Is a *Right*  
*Fit* Company  
Waiting for You**



**Have you ever tried to write with your nondominant hand?** If not, try it now. Grab a piece of paper and a pen, and write the following sentence first with your dominant hand and then your nondominant hand: *The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.*

Take a look at the two sentences. How did it feel to write each sentence? Did one take more effort than the other? Is one better quality? Unless you're ambidextrous, writing with your nondominant hand likely took a lot more effort, required more concentration, induced more stress, resulted in much lower quality, and left you feeling less successful and satisfied with your work (Figure 0.1).

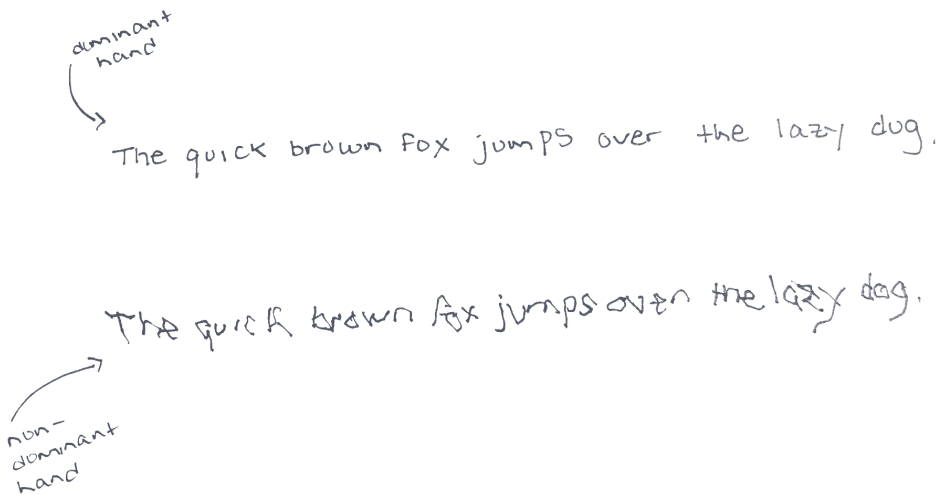


Figure 0.1: Handwritten Sentences with Dominant and Nondominant Hands

This metaphor is an apt descriptor of what many of us feel as we maneuver through our careers and choose the companies we join—it can often feel as though we are spending our days writing with our nondominant hand, leaving us less engaged, less confident, and more stressed. This is a shared experience, and it has a real impact on both our personal commitment to companies and the meaning we derive from work, as shown by the 2022 Gallup *State of Global Workplace* report. Gallup finds that businesses have lost an estimated \$7.8 trillion<sup>1</sup> in productivity due to disengagement in the workplace and estimates that 60% of workers<sup>2</sup> are emotionally detached at work. If we need further proof, we need look no further than phenomena like languishing, the Great Resignation, and quiet quitting (more on these later) that have permeated our workplace conversations as of late. Addi-

tional studies have found that workers who are unhappy at work tend to experience poor health at twice the rate of satisfied workers<sup>3</sup> and that a lack of job satisfaction can lead to long-term mental and physical health problems.<sup>4</sup> It's clear that something isn't working at work.

The well of talent, all of the creative minds and capable knowledge workers who fuel the engines of businesses, seem to be increasingly disconnected from their companies, and companies are struggling to fuel the higher levels of dedication and commitment needed to succeed in these dynamic and uncertain times. Many have come to the conclusion that the only way to solve the issue is to transform the company culture or create new ways of working. Though this is a laudable idea, it requires more change and energy from talent and companies that are already above their cognitive and emotional limits. What if it isn't about changing how we work, but rather simply improving our chances of creating and finding better fit?

## A Theory of Fit

It was the statistics from Gallup that first caught my eye and spurred my research for this book. As an organizational psychologist, my first impulse when reading something about productivity and engagement, or lack thereof, is to immediately consider what in our workplace cultures needs to change. This book originally was going to be about workplace culture in this new era of work—how to assess it, envision a better version of it, and transform it to create a better experience for all of the creative minds and capable individuals that fuel our companies. But, that isn't what happened.

Like any good researcher, I decided to gather data and insights. I began my process by interviewing talent within my immediate professional circle to help inform my working thesis and questionnaire. We talked about the places they worked, their thoughts on engagement, and what kind of cultures allowed them to thrive. Interestingly, those conversations weren't conclusive, meaning they didn't directly point to culture as the culprit—or at least not a single type of culture. What each person keyed in on or described was slightly different, subtly nuanced. These early conversations led me away from changing culture and toward this thing that kept popping up: *fit*, or more specifically, *right fit*.

The spark of something important was there, a potential space in the conversation that was not being talked about. So, I revamped my interview questionnaire to include *right fit* and *wrong fit* experiences at work. Once the questions were clear, I sought out over sixty-five in-depth interviews with talent ranging from twenty-two to fifty-five years of age, from CEOs

to early career talent, from talent working in start-ups to global multinationals, and from talent working in Asia-Pacific to Europe to the US, all to see if my hypothesis was correct:

Could **right fit** help talent discover more meaning and satisfaction at work and help companies find lost productivity?

What is *fit*? For the purposes of the book, *fit* is defined as a deep and authentic connection to how a company works day-to-day. To return to the metaphor, *right fit* feels like you are writing with your dominant hand the moment you walk through the door and most days after. When *right fit* is there, the days feel easy, the work is more meaningful, and our connection to our company grows exponentially. As one interviewee described it, “In my *right fit* experience, it felt like putting on my favorite outfit. I was more me.” Another interviewee said, “You are putting in the hours, but it doesn’t feel like work.” Perhaps even more compelling are the feelings talent have when fit isn’t there. One of our interviewees described *wrong fit* as if “everyone has a secret decoder ring for success, except for me.” Another was much rawer about the feeling when they said “it was like being punched in the face every day in a different way.”

Where talent looks at *right fit* from the perspective of the alignment of their personal way of working with that of the company they have joined, companies must view *right fit* as the clarity, communication, and practice of a consistent way of working that showcases the company at its best. This, unfortunately, is where many companies fail. You see, while companies have become adept at defining their mission, articulating their strategy, sharing their values, and crafting inspiring leadership expectations, few have put in the effort to understand and train talent on how work, done well, happens day in and day out at the company. How does the company actually run? How does the company prioritize work, solve problems, innovate, manage conflict, or socialize projects? Each company does this in a unique and natural way at its best. Those ways of working are innate in the fabric of the company and often emanate from the early days of its founding.

Not surprisingly, I found *right fit* to be elusive among the interviewees, meaning it was hard to find and then retain over time. From a talent perspective, the way a company works is often undervalued during recruitment compared to brand, bigger titles, better pay, or even a little flattery. Further, the current approach to everything from job descriptions to employer branding to recruiting makes it nearly impossible to assess *how the company works day-to-day*. So, many talent end up in experiences that

are vastly different from their early interactions and expectations of the company.

On the company side, a lack of clarity, consistency, and transparency about the company's work principles, practices, and platforms during the hiring process and onboarding tamps down *fit* for extended periods. To complicate matters even more, companies do not often require newly acquired leaders to adopt the ways of working that drive the rest of the company, which becomes a recipe for a bureaucratic, slow, and confusing hairball of coordination costs, context shifting, and confusion.

Remember that \$7.8 trillion of lost productivity? I am guessing a lot of it lies right here.

Something else became clear early on as I explored *right fit* with the interviewees: the pressure many of us feel to “fit in.” “Fitting in” is about a person trying to become something they aren't in the hopes of one day being successful. In this context, “fit” has a negative connotation, especially among diverse or marginalized groups who have often been overtly told (due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) that they don't “fit in” or who have been subtly biased against when they try to find a place in any established community—neighborhoods, schools, companies, etc. This exploration of “fitting in” is important, and many tremendous minds have written about and are working on the subject through the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and how to create unbiased and equitable systems. I applaud that work and believe it is vital for all organizational leaders to lean into it as we create the future of work. For the purposes of this book, I am asking you to hold a new and nuanced definition of *fit* that is focused on helping talent and companies align on how work gets done day-to-day.

Finding *right fit* inside a company has three key dimensions, as shown in Figure 0.2. *Fit* is fully realized when *who* talent is (all of the characteristics and experiences that make them unique) and *how* talent prefers to work aligns with what the company values are and how the company works day-to-day. If there is only alignment on two of the three circles, then, at some level, talent is being asked to “fit in.” That feeling of “fitting in” centers around three key misalignments:

- **Total mismatch:** The company does not value who the talent is or how they prefer to work. At the most simple level, talent might feel this mismatch as, “Nobody at the company ‘looks’ like me or works like me.”
- **Person Mismatch:** The company values the way the talent works but does not value who they are as a person. The talent might experience

this mismatch as, “Nobody at the company ‘looks’ like me, but many people I have met work how I prefer to work.”

- **Way of Working Mismatch:** The company values who the talent is, but doesn’t value how the talent prefers to work. The talent might experience this mismatch as, “People at the company ‘look’ like me but nobody here works the way I prefer to work.”

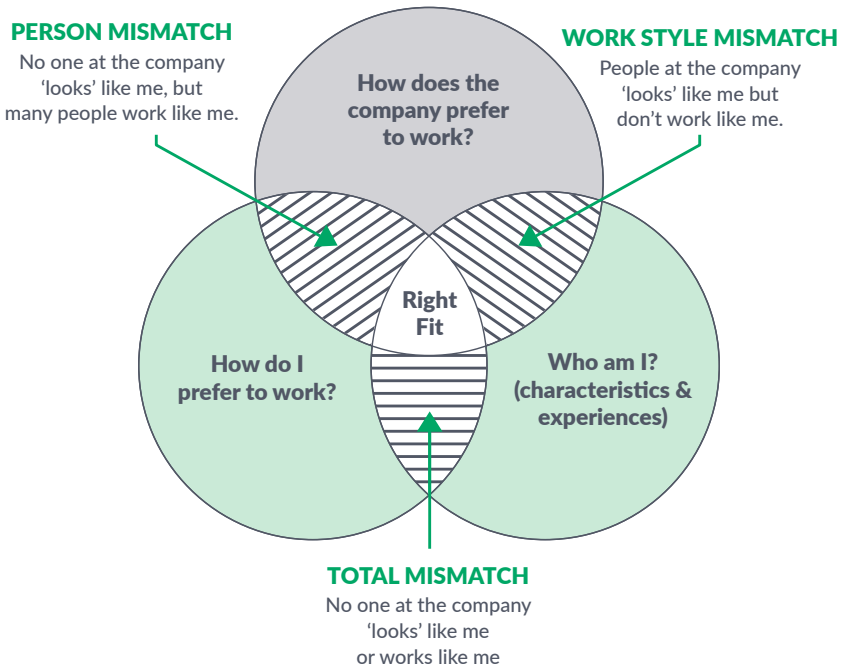


Figure 0.2: The Elements of *Right Fit* and Fitting In

Though much work is being done to understand and alleviate the “fitting in” related bias and inequitable practices, very little attention has been paid to the misalignment of how work gets done on a daily basis. This book attempts to shed light on this subject and offer strategies to find *right fit* with greater frequency. When you have *right fit*, doing your best work comes easy, with seemingly little effort. When you are in a *wrong fit* experience, much of your available creative energy goes to context (fitting in) over craft (the core skill or capability you’ve built up over time).

Many gifted and motivated talent have lost the opportunity to show their full potential due to ending up in a *wrong fit* situation where they are

left endlessly trying to gain the “secret decoder ring” to success. The cost is staggering both to talent and to the company. The company doesn’t get the lift of captured discretionary effort (the extra productivity that comes with deeper commitment or engagement) or the unique brilliance of the person they hired. Even worse, talent walks out of these “fitting-in” experiences feeling less confident, less capable, less cared for, and less themselves.

## Is Right Fit the Cure for What Ails Us?

From the interviews combined with over twenty-five years of leading culture, engagement, and talent initiatives in and with some of the most revered companies in the world, I have come to the conclusion that there is no one silver bullet to the crisis of commitment we are facing in the modern workplace—where talent doesn’t fully feel seen or valued by their employers and company leaders struggle to get the level of engagement and commitment they need from their talent to sustain growth. There truly might not be one silver bullet, but *right fit* does offer a step in the right direction. Let’s start by looking closely at our companies.

Who a company says they are rarely matches how that company works day-to-day. That’s not to say the ways of working are bad or misguided or nefarious. No, they are simply different from what is expressed through formal communication channels, expertly crafted mission/vision/values statements, breathtaking career sites and employer brand campaigns, and inspiring leadership town halls. A 2020 study by MIT and *Culture 500* found zero correlation between the cultural values a company publishes and how well the company lived up to those values in the eyes of their employees.<sup>5</sup>

This divergence happens because actual ways of working evolve organically out of the preferences of leaders who are hired from different companies, the nudges of HR and business processes that are built on the best practices of other places, the complexity and distance that often accompanies scale, and the human nature to interpret vision/values/expectations in a way that most beneficially serves ourselves or our teams. The end result is two versions of the company—what we once were or aspire to someday be and what we actually are day-to-day.

As a result, what a company says about who they are and how they work no longer matches the felt experience of talent. So, talent is forced to bump into ill-defined ways of working, use their creative energy to understand how things actually get done, and struggle, for longer than they should, to feel settled and fully committed.



The company isn't alone in making *right fit* elusive; talent plays a role as well. In my interviews, it became clear that landing in a *right fit* experience seemed to be the hiring equivalent of hitting a bullseye while throwing a dart blindfolded after being spun around three times super fast. It happens, but not frequently nor consistently enough. Upon reflection, many of the interviewees admitted that they hadn't thought hard enough about how they prefer to work nor had they asked questions in the interview process that would help them better understand the ways of working in the company. Further, in the *wrong fit* experiences, most admitted to knowing "something was off" during the process but found themselves being swayed by other signals—company reputation, pay, life circumstances, savvy recruiters, bigger scope, flattery, inspiring leaders, and the allure of a beautiful campus. Then, once they found themselves in a *wrong fit* experience, talent admitted to working harder and longer hours to make up for the feeling of misalignment, leaving them more stressed, less productive, disengaged, and lacking confidence.

Our solutions to this crisis, from companies and talent alike, have either been to simply make the best of an imperfect experience, refresh culture from the ground up, or cut bait and try our hand at the disoriented, blindfolded dart toss again—all of which are emotionally and cognitively draining, complex, and limiting to the productivity, growth, and impact our companies have. Maybe we could talk less about aspirational culture and talk more about how the company works day-to-day. We could seek to know ourselves better and our preferred ways of working before we look for a new gig or hire more talent. We could make the interview process more vulnerable and authentic by showing who we are on most days, not simply our best. We could hire for who we are today and develop everyone for who we need to be tomorrow.

## What This Book Is About

So, what does all this mean? What is happening? Is work really that universally dissatisfying, or is something else afoot? In moments like this, I always turn to a theory that was introduced to me way back in 1997 by Jodie Foster in the movie *Contact* (yes, I am a bit of a sci-fi buff). That theory was Occam's Razor, and it states that all things being equal, the simplest answer is probably the right one.

As you will see in upcoming chapters and through the stories of the interviewees, much of this mass dissatisfaction is attributable to *fit*. This book works off a simple premise. If talent can find *right fit* companies and roles more often, then less of their creative energy will go to context and coordi-

nation cost and more to their craft (what they are brilliant at doing) every day. Thus, they will naturally experience higher energy and engagement, less languishing burnout, will do better work in less time, and hold a stronger sense of meaning and mission. Once this occurs, the company, in return, will regain lost discretionary effort, more capability to learn, higher levels of coordination and collaboration, and higher levels of innovation and performance. Companies will have a more stable climate from which to pivot, transform, and grow. This symbiotic relationship only works if both talent and companies take a step out of the habits we have built and toward a new way of finding fit. If they do, the end result will be healthier, stronger companies filled with content and committed talent. Oh, and remember that pesky \$7.8 trillion? That just might be found as well.

For the remainder of the book, each chapter will take on an aspect of *right fit* and attempt to provide mindsets and tools that can help both talent and companies. In Chapter 1, I'll explore the trends that have contributed to this crisis of commitment and the need to reorient everything around fit. Chapter 2 examines the psychology that guides our actions and why they matter in the search for *right fit*. Chapter 3 provides insight into why self-reflection is an important place to start the journey to find *right fit*, while Chapter 4 provides some reflective exercises to help you down that path. Chapter 5 walks talent and leadership through how to assess a potential company and job with *fit* in mind, while Chapter 6 assesses the ways a company works and its alignment to your work preferences. Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 show how to embark on a longer fit journey through inspirational and relational buffers to keep *right fit* intact or make a *wrong fit* experience palatable. In Chapter 9, we explore how companies should rethink their work practices and how they preview themselves to prospective talent, while Chapter 10 examines how companies could reimagine the recruiting and (re)recruiting of talent for *right fit*. Finally, we wrap up all of the bits and pieces in the Conclusion.

To ensure the book has practical application, peppered throughout the text are insights, excursions, and real stories of *right fit* and *wrong fit*:

- **Company & Talent Insights:** Tips, tricks, questions, and takeaways that can help talent find *right fit* and company to create it.
- **Reflective Excursions:** In-depth exercises or activities that will aid talent and companies to reflect more deeply on *right fit* and how to achieve it given their circumstance.
- **A Fit Assessment:** An assessment tool that can help talent assess how well their natural preferences for work match their current company.

- **Real Stories of Fit:** Real stories pulled directly from the interviews, these are narratives that describe how *right fit* or *wrong fit* feels and the outcomes that result from having either.

## Who Should Read This Book?

This book is written for anyone who is attempting to build a career and find a place where they can practice their craft—the emerging investment banker straight out of university looking to learn and be mentored, a seasoned HR practitioner who’s ready to apply their experience to a job in a new industry, the marketer looking to make a jump into sales, or any number of other knowledge workers who want to further their career and feel like their work is meaningful. The aim is simple—to help all *talent*, the creative minds and capable individuals that fuel our companies, to find *right fit*.

What if you’re a manager or leader who is responsible for shaping and designing the company culture and its ways of working? This book is written for you as well. Because *right fit* is fundamentally about the match between the way a company works and the preference of talent, neglecting to mention tools, tricks, tips, and better practices to help leaders and managers would leave the conversation incomplete.

So, I’ve designed the book to speak to readers who might be wearing one of three hats (Figure 0.3):



Figure 0.3: The Three Hats

If you're focused on your own career and finding a place to work where your fellow employees value what you value and work how you work, then this book will give you tools to find those companies, make subtle shifts to be successful in those companies, and build buffers to retain fit when you move teams or are undergoing a significant transition.

If you're a people leader who is responsible for creating an inspiring and engaging day-to-day climate, this book will provide you insight into what matters to your talent, direct your attention to places where engagement and commitment might be at risk, and offer some simple strategies to find the right team members and help them be successful.

If you're a founder of a company, an enterprise leader, or the head of HR tasked with creating a strong and distinct culture, this book will help you see the world through the lens of *right and wrong fit* versus *good or bad culture*. It will give you a way to uncover how the company works "at its best" and create touchpoints for your talent that help you to select those who work like you work, re-recruit everyone to a more consistent way of working, and create buffers to keep the talent you want inside the company and fully committed to your purpose.

So, you might read this book today as you search for your first role in your first company. Later, you might pick it up again when you become a team leader, or, better yet, CEO. Regardless of who you are, this book is particularly valuable if you find yourself in one of the following situations (see also Figure 0.4):

- You are currently interviewing for roles at new companies.
- You have recently joined a new company and are trying to figure out how to be successful.
- You have recently moved teams or changed roles inside your current company.
- You are in a role where you are struggling to stay engaged.
- You feel like you can't practice your craft or do your best work.
- You're thinking about leaving a place where you once had *right fit*.
- You're in a *right fit* experience and want to stay there.

## A Call to Right Fit

We have all faced *wrong fit* or *hard fit* experiences in our careers (whether it was moving to a new team in our current company or a new role in a different one). Why does this happen? How can talent better assess the company/team they're joining before they join? How can you more quickly identify

the real ways of working once you're there? How can you stay where you are and jump out of bed every morning excited to go to work? As leaders of companies, how do you better align who you say you are to how it feels to work at a place every day? How do you rediscover the ways of working that are your company at its best?

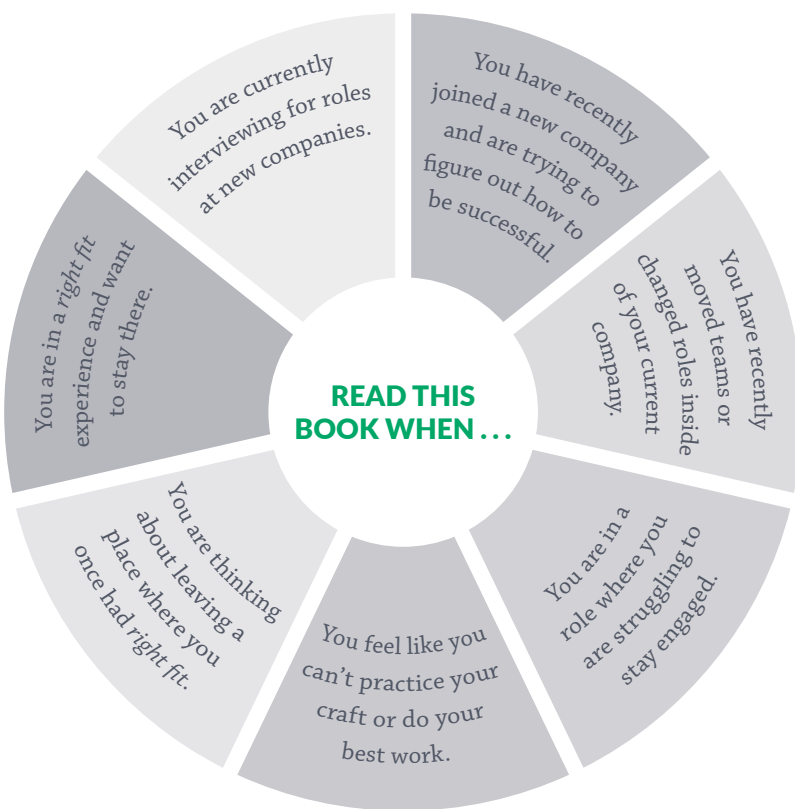


Figure 0.4: Audience for This Book

If you are a leader or executive in any company, the ultimate question is, “Are we clear and consistent about how work gets done, so the right talent will choose us and thrive?”

If you are a talent in a company, the ultimate question is, “Do our ways of working really fit the way I prefer to work?” It’s important to take a moment to note here that there will be times in our lives when *right fit* has to take a back seat—when our choice of where we work, the job we take, or the talent we hire is driven by other factors. Sometimes we just need a paycheck, medical insurance, or skilled individuals filling empty seats so

we can produce our product or provide our service. That's okay. More than okay, actually—it is essential. And, as long as we understand the trade-offs we make and the strategies to create fit over time, this book can still help more of us be more committed in more moments of our days.

As you'll discover in the upcoming chapters, *fit* and finding *right fit* are game changers, and there is no better time to focus on them than right now. Now is the time to boost engagement, inspiration, well-being, and meaning in the work we do. Now is the time to increase the value of work for ourselves and our organizations. Now is the time to level the playing field and balance the power held in the choice of where we work, how we spend our days, and why we stay. Now is the time to make work feel less like work. Now is the time to find *right fit*.

Let's begin.

# PART 1

CONTEXT

+

*RIGHT FIT*





## CHAPTER 1

---

# How the Workplace Has Changed

# REAL STORIES OF FIT

## A Wrong Fit Story

26, female, consumer goods company

First experiences at work can shape us in ways we cannot even imagine. When they are good, our careers accelerate at hyper speed, and when they go wrong, it can be physically, mentally, and emotionally debilitating. When I asked this interviewee what *wrong fit* felt like, she responded immediately with “terrible.” She then went on to offer, “I am not a person who struggles with mental health or depression or anything, but I was genuinely depressed. I slept whenever I wasn’t working. I would have panic attacks. I was so genuinely stressed all the time about everything and nothing. So, it [*wrong fit*] took like, all of me, pretty much.”

When she described *wrong fit*, she said, “I didn’t feel like I was set up to succeed. I didn’t feel like they cared to onboard me. I was kind of just left to my own devices to figure stuff out.” But, upon even more reflection, the talent said, “I really felt like I was watching or letting things happen at this company that were compromising my own values.”

This was a common sentiment across many interviews, where the talent felt like the way the company worked or behaved did not make sense to them in subtle ways that were pervasive but not totally noticeable until the dissonance built up. And, the build-up impacted performance, mental health, and their relationships. This interviewee said, “I couldn’t even enjoy time with my family. I just felt bad about everything.” The advice from this talent, who was just starting out on her career journey when *wrong fit* hit, is to “trust your gut. I think that we all have feelings about stuff, and they are usually right. But, we need to trust those feelings a bit more than we do, even when we have no tangible information backing them up.”

**When we fit, we know it.** We feel it in our bones. We see it in the quality of our work product. And, we hear it in the energy and excitement that echoes in our offices and meeting rooms. The better the fit, the more value can be created for talent, for companies, and for the world. With those motivating factors in mind, everyone, talent and companies alike, should be striving for *right fit*. So why does it seem like *wrong fit* is more the norm?

In an article published by the *New Yorker* in 2021, Cal Newport shared stories of career downsizing and company jumping due at least in part to a reassessment by knowledge workers of what matters.<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, the Future Forum surveyed over 10,000 knowledge workers and found a prevailing disconnect between company's post-pandemic workplace policies and employee preferences.<sup>2</sup> Articles like these, focusing on the state of the relationship between companies and talent, do not paint a rosy picture. Conflicting wants, needs, and priorities seem to be the critique du jour.

With *wrong fit* dynamics dominating the workplace landscape in our psyches, the big question is how do we find the *right fit*? Before we tackle that, though, we need to first get the lay of the land and how we arrived in this place. In this chapter, we'll discuss the current state of the job market (bad) and how it affects the talent swimming around in it (worse). We'll then explore the seven trends that have helped set the stage for this moment of misalignment, where finding *right fit* has become an epic and arduous journey. Lastly, we'll connect the dots and break down what the trends tell us and the questions we should really be asking.

## A Talent Market in Flux

As mentioned in the Introduction, *right fit* is a deep and authentic connection to how a company works day-to-day. Companies searching for talent and talent looking for a place to thrive are both struggling. Finding *right fit* is *hard*. Painfully hard. In one Harris Poll, over 63% of those surveyed reported their job search lasting for as long as six months.<sup>3</sup> Further, according to a survey by the recruiting platform Jobvite, approximately 30% of new joiners leave their job in the first ninety days.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, companies are maneuvering through a talent market that is riddled with complexity from quiet quitting to wavering dedication and engagement to struggles in creating a work environment that is attractive to both their current ranks and future recruits. In a recent study by Braintrust, the average company is hiring for sixty-six knowledge worker jobs with one-half of the roles taking thirty-plus days to hire.<sup>5</sup> That translates to

the equivalent of three cumulative years spent recruiting talent that needs to be hired now.

For companies to continue to have impact, they need to be staffed with talent who are capable, committed, and connected to both why the world is better with the company in it and how the company works day-to-day. That symmetry isn't happening fluidly or easily today. In this chapter, we explore the *why* in more depth by examining key trends that have shaped the job market, talent's perception of what a great company is, and companies' imperfect approach to acquiring the future talent they need.

## Where Is Everyone?

With the ever-increasing movement of talent due to the Great Resignation, the fear of committing to companies prone to short-term-focused mass layoffs, and shifting models of work, we can expect that talent will continue to be on the move with greater regularity. As we look at the talent movement in 2022, 77% of talent that resign do so in the first three years, with 45% resigning within one year.<sup>6</sup> The reasons most cited for these moves are vast but fall into a few main categories, including career (opportunities for growth and achievement), job (availability of resources, training, expectations, stress), and work/life balance (schedule, commute, work policies).<sup>7</sup> One thing is abundantly clear: employees are becoming more discerning in terms of the aspirations they have for the places they work and less willing to compromise.

Even if talent decides to stay, in a recent survey of over 2000 US employees who had been in their role for less than six months, researchers from Lattice found that over half of them were actively looking for something new.<sup>8</sup> That figure is astounding, considering conventional "career management" advice argues that talent should stay at a job for at least two years before changing employers.

What does all of this add up to? There is something happening inside organizations that is jarring to talent, putting them in a place where they are questioning their choice—and whatever it is, it is bad enough that many stay actively on the job search even when firmly settled in their company. It might be that everyone is just keeping their plan B at the ready, but it feels bigger than that, like something more pervasive is occurring.

For instance, if we move beyond new joiners, many others are eyeing the door as well. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in March of 2022, total quits (voluntary separations across the US) reached a high of 4.5 mil-

lion, with especially notable increases occurring for highly tenured employees and women.<sup>9</sup> So, it's not just new joiners that are finding less fit with their companies; many others are questioning their choice to remain where they are. Fascinatingly, even if a worker experiencing *wrong fit* has not left their current job, there is a good chance they will, or if they stay, they will be less productive. In 2020, PwC estimated that 65% of employees were looking for a new job,<sup>10</sup> and Gallup estimated that businesses lost \$7.8 trillion of productivity due to actively disengaged employees.<sup>11</sup>

So, the race for commitment and dedication starts with a daunting uphill climb that has left many organizations unsure of how to retain their talent, and it has left many talent uninspired by the shifts being made. More and more talent are actively asking the question, "Does my company work the way I like (need) to work?" And with that question, more companies are left wondering, "Can we build an experience where talent (who works the way we work) will stay?"

Unfortunately, both talent and companies are defaulting to a belief that the days of the twenty-year career at a single company are waning and that movement across companies will be the norm. My belief is that this might be the norm now, but it doesn't have to be our future path. At our core as human beings, we want to be a part of a community and be committed to something bigger than ourselves. We want to belong. Further, we are looking for businesses to be a source of belonging, as shown in the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, where businesses are reported to be the most trusted institutions, with expectations for them to help solve our societal issues.<sup>12</sup>

So, what's standing in our way?

## The Trends

Most conversations about company culture, engagement, or the future of work begin with the rise of COVID-19 as the primary source of the disruption. However, COVID-19 was not the cause of our current struggles; it was a great accelerator of trends that had been bubbling for some time—trends that are pushing us into this crisis of commitment we find ourselves in. Before we get into how to create *right fit* by choosing companies with more precision or building companies where the *right fit* talent will want to come and stay for their career, we need to understand a bit more about how we got here. There are a few trends that play a part in how both talent and companies currently view the world.

## Trend #1: The Rise of the Culture Deck

In 2009, Patti McCord, the then Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) of Netflix, created a presentation that powerfully displayed a relatively new and compelling employee experience called the culture deck. It was filled with poetry, powerful visuals, and a promise to employees that was as progressive as it was enticing.<sup>13</sup> Though the deck was likely part reality and part aspiration, when Netflix released it to the world, it set in motion an era of employee experience marketing that widened the gap between how we talked about our companies' ways of working and the actual reality of their day-to-day.

Netflix's original intent of the culture deck was to create a playbook for how the company worked and provide talent a preview of what to expect upon arriving there. In 2013, Sheryl Sandberg referred to Netflix's culture deck as the "most important document to come out of Silicon Valley."<sup>14</sup> At the time, Sheryl, like many, saw it as the obituary of the big, bureaucratic company of old and a call for a new way of working, a new type of company. Not only did it influence the way we thought about work, but it also resulted in a movement toward highlighting an aspirational version of a company experience and creating big, bold, beautiful employee brands that rivaled that of their products. From Netflix's original deck, this practice of poetically describing culture spread across Silicon Valley and into nearly every major company around the world.

However, these decks, like social media in general, had unintended and largely unseen impacts. These brand campaigns made culture aspirational and the day-to-day climate less and less of a priority. We began talking more about who we aspire to be than focusing on how work was actually getting done. We began to see the rise of recruiters who are expert marketers, CHROs and Chief Talent Officers spending time on

the speakers' circuit, and companies whose reality began to veer from the ideal they aspired toward.

I have had the opportunity to work with many founder-led and privately held companies over the course of my career, and I remember discussing this point with an owner who ran a highly engaged, principle-driven com-

### TALENT INSIGHT

Make sure you take what's on career websites and in culture decks with a grain of salt. Those assets are largely aspirational.

### COMPANY INSIGHT

Beware of overpromising and under-delivering around culture. Your career sites set expectations, and the more the day-to-day veers from them, the less talent will show up for you.

pany. When I asked them why they don't invest more in telling people how great the company is, they said, "The moment you start talking about the company is the same moment you lose focus on becoming a better one. We do; we don't talk." Unfortunately, with the rise of culture decks, we have become more adept at the talking than the doing.

## Trend #2: The Ping Pong Table of Purposeless Perks

Alongside the rise of the culture deck was another phenomenon: the revival of the ping pong table. Now, I grew up with a ping pong table in my home in the Ozark Mountains, and there's no better way to pass time, laugh, compete, release stress, and build a little camaraderie.

However, as the ping pong table found its way into the halls of our offices, something else started to happen. Companies began revamping their perks, places, and bells and whistles to make the employee experience more enticing. Many made their spaces beautiful, carved out snack bars and hip cafés, provided apps for everything from meditation to learning on the go, extended benefits, curated more social gatherings, and aimed to make the workplace more akin to a shopping mall or an amusement park than a place of employment. This movement was an attempt to brighten up the dismal "coma-inducing cubical" landscape of the '90s and entice the next-generation worker to the office, provide them distractions, encourage them to stay at work longer, and hopefully inspire higher levels of creativity and innovation.

Now, don't get me wrong, there are many arguments to be made that innovative office design and carefully crafted perks (healthy food, gyms, ergonomic desks, informal community space, etc.) can reduce stress and increase productivity. And some, like additional parental leave and tuition reimbursement, make society net better off. However, as more and more campus or office perks emerged, the message became less about purposeful connection to the company, the stakeholder, or societal impact and more

### TALENT INSIGHT

Beware of the power of perks. Most extrinsic motivation tools (pay, perks, place) become less important every day you have them. Try to focus more on the work you will do and how it will get done.

### COMPANY INSIGHT

Provide for your talent. Create an experience that is engaging, but use your assets to reinforce your purpose, how you have impact, and what you value. That will net you committed talent who are a genuine community as opposed to talent who are simply consuming your company.

about buying talent’s commitment and engagement. For all of the money spent in these arenas, employee engagement has stayed constant or dipped over the last decade (see Figure 1.1).<sup>15</sup>

As the cycle to entice talent continued, talent grew to hold a consumer mentality around their companies. They learned to expect more—more perks, more offerings, more excitement. As companies attempted to satiate talent’s expectations to be surrounded by perks, many became disconnected from what matters in their company. Even if a company held fast and didn’t make widespread changes to their offices, they did scramble to differentiate along any number of perk categories, from pay to benefits to more development to elevated titles or more flexibility. The race to impress talent was on, and clarity about what actually matters was being clouded by more and more stuff.

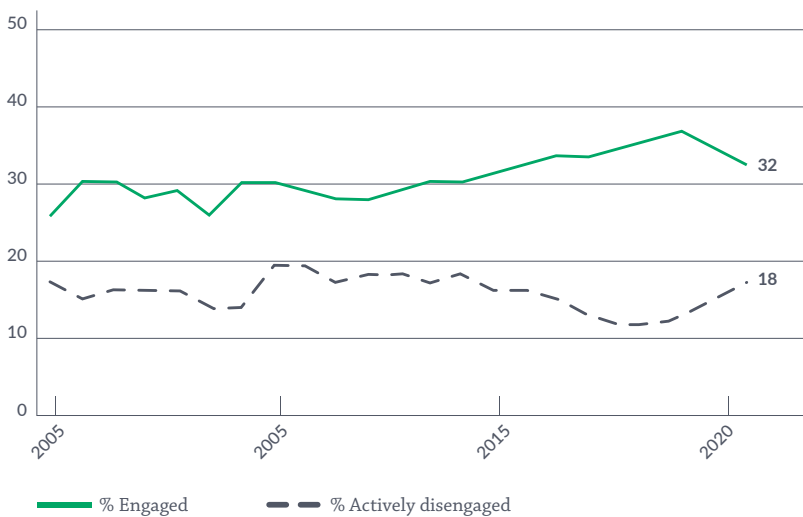


Figure 1.1: US Employee Engagement Trend, Annual Averages

Source: Jim Harter, "U.S. Employee Engagement Needs a Rebound in 2023," Gallup, January 25, 2023. [gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx#:~:text=Story%20Highlights&text=After%20trending%20up%20in%20recent,2020%20to%2034%25%20in%202021.](https://www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx#:~:text=Story%20Highlights&text=After%20trending%20up%20in%20recent,2020%20to%2034%25%20in%202021.)

### Trend #3: The Decade of Decedent Growth

According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2009 to 2020 marked the longest economic expansion in the last eighty years, totaling 129 months.<sup>16</sup> This time was marked by unprecedented levels of cash, public and private investment, start-up creation, and growth of companies big and small. The S&P 500 was at 919 in March of 2009 and is, as



of the writing of this book (even after the recent economic retraction of 2022/2023), at 4,158.<sup>17</sup> This was a time of great innovation, especially in the technology space, but it was also relatively easy to expand, given the favorable economic conditions, including low interest rates and stable consumer spending.

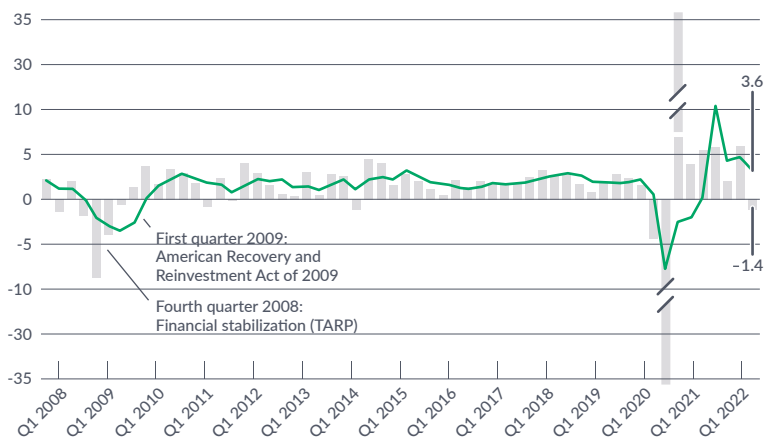


Figure 1.2: A Decade of Growth

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "Chart Book: Tracking the Post-Great Recession Economy," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Updated May 27, 2022. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/tracking-the-post-great-recession-economy>.

So, leading companies across industries saw healthy returns year after year that exceeded expectations and allowed them to invest, creating even greater opportunity and broader reach.

However, growth puts pressure on culture. When growth is that consistent over that long of a period, invariably ways of working and leadership habits are formed that don't help in tougher times. Companies learned how to hire at a greater rate of speed but lost the muscle of deep assessment of values and skills. Leadership learned to tell glowing stories of success but lost the ability to help their talent continually grow faster than the company. Businesses learned how to invest in innovation and technology advance-

### TALENT INSIGHT

What are the knowledge, skills, and mindsets you need to strengthen to ensure you are ready to lead during more turbulent times?

### COMPANY INSIGHT

How can you reorient all of your people to "how the company makes money" and focus more energy on the areas that matter most?

ment but lost much of their ability to drive focused, effective execution in the service of the consumer and the mission. The net impact is that many of the muscles we need in more uncertain and dynamic times are not readily available, as we did not stay vigilant in building companies that are as good at execution as they are at expansive growth. One obvious symptom of a larger problem are the proliferation of meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rash of recent layoffs in tech in late 2022/early 2023 due to “over hiring.”

#### **Trend #4: A Crisis of Commitment (Or Lack of It)**

In 2021, Pete Davis wrote one of my favorite books of late, called *Dedication: The Case for Commitment in an Age of Infinite Browsing*. In it, he makes the case that with all of the abundance that surrounds us, we have entered into a constant state of infinite browsing where we strive to “keep our options open”<sup>18</sup> over “the option to choose to dedicate ourselves to particular causes and crafts, places and communities, professions and people.”<sup>19</sup> He ends the book arguing that dedication is the medicine the world needs and provides us all an invitation to transform the “vacant lot of life

into a lush garden . . . place by place, cause by cause, craft by craft, person by person.”<sup>20</sup>

This pursuit of dedication struck me as both tilting at windmills and the greatest challenge of our time. The easiest thing to do is to dip a toe into something, try things on but never purchase, put your hand halfway up in the hopes you don’t get called, or love something until something better comes along. Heck, I have been that person myself a few times, attracted by what could be or what might be waiting around the bend.

Rarely is the new thing universally better, because life is life and companies are, well, companies. With that said, movements like the Great Resignation are fueled by real dissatisfaction with the way work feels and real hope that there are bigger and better

#### **TALENT INSIGHT**

Reflect on what it would take for you to stay at your company for the next ten years. What would need to be true for you? What stands in the way of you fully committing?

#### **COMPANY INSIGHT**

Employees want to know the company is betting on them long-term and that there are progressive experiences on the horizon. How can you invest more time in the progression of your current talent versus using the blunt instrument of hiring to close capability or skills gaps? How could you embed the potential career path in every job advertisement? Or, how could you create the equivalent of a twenty-year job description?

opportunities awaiting us in the future. In essence, talent is seeing a clear opportunity to improve their situation. According to research conducted in 2021, for many, it worked—but not for all. Among college graduates, only about one-half improved their situation on any of those three factors.<sup>21</sup> So, the grass may not be greener. And, because many were able to work remotely for the first time in their lives and found even more access to more places, I fear infinite browsing will get worse before it gets better.

### **Trend #5: The Side Hustle Economy**

The counterpart to dedication is the idea that variety is the spice of life. If you look at the year just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, even with a strong economy, 46% of Americans took on a side hustle to cover their monthly budget.<sup>22</sup> Gig economy companies such as Uber, Instacart, DoorDash, Task Rabbit, Upwork, and Fiverr beg people to put their extra time and creative energy into something other than the company they work for—as the companies are neither paying talent enough to survive nor recognizing their diverse skills in a way that pulls them closer to the company as opposed to pushing them further away. As a CLO (Chief Learning Officer) and Chief Talent Officer, the rise of the “side hustle” economy is fascinating and something our largest companies and biggest brands have yet to fully comprehend or embrace as a source of inspiration and innovation.

Back in the day when knowledge workers could survive (or thrive) on the salary they made in their company, idle “work” time was spent thinking about how to be better, help the company do more, or find a solution to a problem that had been nagging your team. That’s because, for the most part, a knowledge worker’s job covered the costs of our lives, provided us with a sense of purpose, and gave us a certain amount of security. So, in return, we gave more of our “work” time and creative energy to our company. As the reciprocal relationship between talent and the company

#### **TALENT INSIGHT**

Many of us feel constrained in our current roles, like we’re being asked to be a narrowed version of ourselves. So, our creative energy flows to other places. What would you need in order to give more of your creative energy (not more time) to your company?

#### **COMPANY INSIGHT**

How could you reimagine the financial opportunities available to your talent? How could you provide more financial security, create opportunities for talent to explore other passions, and make side hustles a net benefit for both the company and talent?

waned, and our 9-to-5 jobs failed to fully meet our financial aspirations, idle “work” time and discretionary effort were pointed to areas that could be accretive to the livelihood of talent. Thus, the side hustle.

With the side hustle economy, dedication has become diluted. Our time, energy, and creative juices are now flowing to other things, other places, and other financial opportunities. One might argue that formal employers are, now more than ever, getting the rest of us, not the best of us.

## Trend #6: Being More versus Doing More

With any major traumatic event, either at the individual or societal level, we reevaluate who we are, what we want, and how we are moving through the world. The events over the last few years have allowed words like purpose, meaning, and worth to enter into our workplace vernacular in a way that has never before been seen in business, as reported in *Forbes*.<sup>23</sup> Companies are asking the question, “Why is the world better with us in it?” and talent are asking, “Does what I am doing matter?” These are big, existential questions that are both difficult to answer and impossible to ignore. They are creating a short-term dissonance as we reexamine how we are spending our days and whether the amount of energy we are investing is worth the value being created. As shown in the aforementioned article by *Forbes*, a stronger sense of purpose and meaning is becoming more important as a lever for consumer loyalty and is paying dividends to companies and leaders who embrace its importance. Higher levels of physical health, more consistent company growth, and a sense of work feeling more meaningful are just a few of the benefits noted.<sup>24</sup>

A great example of this is the recent article citing the 95,000 hours of meetings that Shopify has removed from the calendars of their employees to create more time for them to be “makers” and create more meaning for themselves and their company.<sup>25</sup> Another article from 2017 studied the time use of the typical knowledge

### TALENT INSIGHT

Examine how you are currently spending your days in and out of work. What activities are getting the majority of your time and energy? Are these the activities that provide you a boost, inspire you to be better, or allow you to practice your craft? What if you found 10% more time to be more inspired?

### COMPANY INSIGHT

If you could reduce administrative tasks by 10%–20%, it would free up time and mental capacity to solve bigger problems and create bolder innovations. Time is finite, so point as much of your talent’s time to what matters most.

worker and found that 41% of tasks don't add value, and two-thirds of the day is spent either in desk work (mostly administrative) or managing across the organization.<sup>26</sup> (See Figure 1.2.)

Much of what knowledge workers are doing at work does not have a strong connection to their purpose or to that of their company. The more time we spend on non-value-added tasks or administrative duties that don't have a clear link to our success or that of the company, the more we can feel burdened by them and experience a drop in our energy or engagement over time. Though we are supremely busy and have full lives with many responsibilities and stressors where burnout is ever-increasing, the answer might not be simply to do less. It might be to better connect all the things we do to a higher purpose.

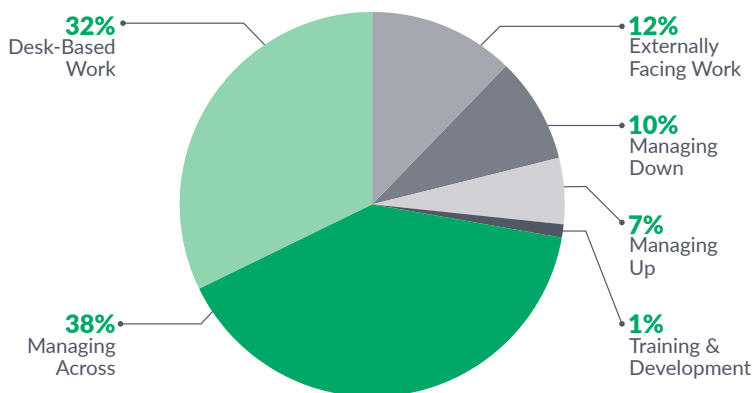


Figure 1.3: Time Spent on Activities at Work

Source: Julian Birkinshaw and Jordan Cohen, "Making Time for Work that Matters," *Harvard Business Review* (September 2013). <https://hbr.org/2013/09/make-time-for-the-work-that-matters>.

If you examine the greatest craftspeople in any field—athletics, art, business, politics, etc.—they are not bound by a lack of energy; rather, it is the opposite phenomenon. They are obsessed and seemingly cannot rest until they have created, designed, or brought to life something new, different, better, or more meaningful. This is due, at least in part, to the motivational process of inspiration. As I state in an article for *Dialogue Review*, "Derived from the Latin *inspirare*, 'to breathe in,' inspiration is quite literally the motivational process by which someone absorbs the creative energy or insight of one object or experience and uses it to bring something new, different, better, or more meaningful into the world."<sup>27</sup> When we are inspired, we have a nearly insatiable energy to create. When

we see purpose in our daily activities, they feel less daunting and more meaningful.

## Trend #7: Peripheral Proximity and Hybrid Working

The last trend encompasses many of the ones above but is important to note. Our definition of proximity and place when it comes to our relationship with our companies is changing. In a 2022 report, McKinsey notes that 25% of workers in advanced economies and about 10% percent of workers in emerging economies could work from home three to five days a week.<sup>28</sup> That is four to five times the pre-pandemic levels.<sup>29</sup> This shift will reduce the need for mass transit, alter the make-up and density of our urban core, and allow talent that has been previously limited to compete for more jobs in more locations.

Additionally, the nature of work within those jobs that require proximity is also shifting. Retail spaces are moving to digital, restaurants are

opening ghost kitchens and shipping meals longer distances, and big box retailers are opening smaller formats and creating more autonomy in scheduling/work relationships. The most technologically progressive companies are creating a “work from anywhere” model (Spotify, 3M, and Airbnb) or condensing campuses to fewer, more collaborative spaces.

In a 2022 study, Zippia estimated that 74% of US companies plan to implement a hybrid model moving forward.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, nearly 60% of construction company Gesler’s 2,300 office building projects have started in the last year, telling us companies are still planning to have physical centers, but the utility and flow of them is changing to be more meeting spaces and hot desks versus permanent offices and assigned cubes.<sup>31</sup> And we’re still at the beginning of understanding this trend and how our spaces will evolve. I hope they go in the direction of pur-

### TALENT INSIGHT

The office is important. Community is important. Proximity can accelerate work. When does the office help you do your job? How can you curate your office time to help you build your craft, develop as a leader, or contribute more to your company?

### COMPANY INSIGHT

To office or not to office is not the right question. Think about how work gets done when the company is at its best. Consider what principles, practices, and platforms are core to the way you work. Then, and only then, think about when, why, and where you want employees to gather. Oh, and if you want to know more about how to gather, listen to Priya Parker’s<sup>32</sup> podcast on the subject.

pose and multi-use spaces that pull in both talent and consumers in cool and unique ways where physical proximity aids the experience. Need to solve a big problem collaboratively? Head to the office. Want to see, hear, and speak with consumers? Jump in your car and go to the office. Want to learn, grow, and develop? Head on in. Want to get to know your coworkers on a deeper level and build trust? Meet up at the office.

## Moving Beyond Framing the Problem

As we consider the above trends, a picture starts to emerge for companies and for talent—one where reciprocity, trust, and commitment are under pressure as each party tries to fulfill its needs. This dynamic has left many in a *wrong fit* experience where the world makes a little less sense than it should and where doing good work is as fleeting as the feeling of being in a truly engaged culture. This makes sense when you consider that culture is simply the combination of all of our behaviors, what each of us chooses to do every day, both leaders and their teams. If we fit, we hum, we connect, we create momentum and produce work with grace and ease. It is akin to the feeling you have when you walk out of the door in your favorite pair of shoes or outfit—empowered, energized, confident. When we don't, we get frustrated, burnt out, disengaged, or unproductive.

There is a way through this time that is less about change and more about leaning into the idea that there is someone and somewhere for everyone. Instead of taking a job because we revere a brand or trying to change our cultures, spaces, and ways of working to be inviting to everyone equally, maybe there is another way, helping like-minded people and companies to find each other. Now, this is not to say we should stop working on our culture, refining our day-to-day experience or evolving the way we work to meet the demands of the market. We should always seek to be better, and there are plenty of culture books out there that can help.

In the meantime, I have come to believe that we should accept a bit more fully who we are, right now, both as individuals and companies. There are many wonderful companies out there and they are, in the ways that they work, more distinct than they are duplicative. In honor of that truth, we should look toward how we work to tell us a bit more about what we believe and what is valued.

If you're talent, maybe it's time to start searching for a place you can love day-to-day in balance with searching for a position you can do or a brand you revere. And, if you're a leader in a company, maybe it's time to reevaluate who the company truly is and create an experience that fits

those who “love what we love” as opposed to either allowing many cultures to exist under one umbrella or trying to create a place where everyone can be, on average, not unhappy.

The following chapters attempt to help you learn how to do both those things with a bit more intent, by asking talent to see the perspective of companies and companies to better appreciate the hopes and desires talent have when it comes to *right fit*. My hope is that, in doing so, we will all see a boost to engagement, inspiration, well-being, and meaning in our lives and a greater return for our shareholders and customers. After all, they’re the ones who allow us to be employed in the first place, right?

So how do we find the *right fit*? The trends leave us with some significant questions that I will list here.

- How can talent and companies alike more authentically convey who they are and how it feels to work with them? What would a more authentic view of culture look like?
- How can companies attract talent based on the power of their brand AND who they are, how they work, and why the world is better with them in it?
- How can companies work smarter by reducing the administrative load on talent and ensuring that more of our moments at work are meaningful?
- How do we create a relationship between talent and companies that focuses on making the twenty-year career possible if not probable?
- How can we get more creative energy from our talent without asking them to sacrifice more of their life?
- How do companies get clearer and more consistent about how they work when they are at their best so talent knows how to show up every day?
- How do companies help more talent find right fit more often with less effort?

We will look to answer these questions throughout the rest of the book.



# REAL STORIES OF FIT

## A Right Fit Story

38, female, management consulting

I'd bet Voltaire didn't know he would become a prophet for *right fit* when a line from his poem, *La Bégueule*, was translated as "perfect is the enemy of good." You see, *right fit* does not mean perfect fit. It simply means that on more attributes than not, the day-to-day experience we have fits who we are and what we need to practice our craft. This point was a central feature in our interview with a communications expert who is now a management consultant. She describes herself as a corporate newbie, as she only entered the corporate world in 2013. However, after interviewing her, it's apparent that she's no novice. She is a seasoned corporate expert who has spent a significant amount of time considering who she is and what she values.

When thinking about a *right fit* experience, she described it as a combination of "feeling the momentum of moving something forward every day" and "good vibes." The latter point was important to her, as she noted that in a *right fit* experience, she felt like she was working with "cool people in a place where I could spend some time." She was careful not to mistake work feeling good with her being able to bring all of herself to work. "The whole 'bring your full self to work' or whatever is total bullshi—. I have never been my full self anywhere. I want to be able to show up and practice my craft in the unique way that I do it. That is all I need."

She has three factors she considers important in achieving *right fit* but admitted that they "don't have to all be there all the time. Two out of three is fine." One, the work must be work she really cares about. Two, the people she works with must be very intelligent and accountable. Three, the people must also be "cool" and be people she enjoys having a relationship with and learning from. She believes it is almost impossible to find any one company where all of her pillars are met at all times. And for her, this is okay. She understands trade-offs must be made.



## CHAPTER 2

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# ***Why Right Fit Is So Rare***

# REAL STORIES OF FIT

## *A Wrong Fit Story*

52, female, human resources

When you stop to think about it, life is impossibly short. In our more honest moments, we are all worried about the ticking clock of time. This is especially true at work, as it's the one thing that pulls us out of our life commitments (family, friends, community, passions, etc.) and into a world that is often our greatest source of stress. After a long career at a consumer goods company, this interviewee spoke openly about her *wrong fit* experience, starting the conversation by telling me that she “felt like a boiling frog,” as if she was losing her sense of self in “little ways across many days” until she realized she was not a fit for the company and the company did not fit her.

She said she could now admit that she didn't do the work to really understand the nature of the company and the recipe for success. She offered, “It is a bit of an ego thing. I was flattered. They wanted me. It was a bigger role and a VP title. And, because I was the major breadwinner in the family, I couldn't just leave. But, I saw that things were off early and just tried to ignore it.” The interviewee went on to talk about how she got more and more determined as she realized *fit* was not there. She thought, “I could change things. I could make it better,” but in the end, it was just too hard. What the company needed her to be and become was too far from who she was, so she left and is still working through the trauma she experienced while there.

Her advice to others was spot on. She said, “A career is one of the most ‘high-investment’ decisions we will make in our lives. The choice has real implications and ripple effects on your partner, kids, friends, and family. Yet, we spend more time mulling over the choice of which air fryer we will buy than what job we will take or company we will join.” She advised talent to go beyond the pros and cons list and think about how your life would change if the job went right and if it went wrong. If the stakes are high, then be even more careful.

**The average talent will spend 113,880 hours at work during their lifetime.**<sup>1</sup> That number is the equivalent of thirteen years of our lives, and it represents the second biggest expenditure of time, behind only sleep.<sup>2</sup> When companies or talent question why it might be important to find purpose, satisfaction, or *right fit* in one's chosen career, I give them that statistic. Embedded in it is the important role that companies have in ensuring we, as adults, are healthy and happy and have a general sense of well-being. I always thought in my lifetime we would see a company with the employee brand of "Work here, and you'll walk out healthier." I still believe that will happen, either by proactive choice or because we will all see what I see, that we spend most of our adult lives at work.

How we feel at work is integral to our overall happiness. According to Bronnie Ware, a palliative nurse and best-selling author of the book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*, the biggest regrets are all focused on disappointing the ideal self, or the person we are when we are happiest or most engaged.<sup>3</sup> Though a person might not feel the pain of letting down their ideal self in the moment, the more time spent in work experiences trying to fit in versus being in a place and a role that has *right fit*, the more apt a person is to feel unfulfilled, disengaged, or uninspired. In every sense possible, our lives and happiness depend on how we feel at work, and as goes our happiness, so does the company's livelihood.

With that in mind, this chapter will attempt to explore the idea of fit a bit more deeply by examining why and how *right fit* is a reciprocal need between the company and talent. First, a bit more color will be provided around how *right fit* and *wrong fit* feels to the talent interviewed in the study for this book. Then, the impact of *wrong fit* on both talent and companies will be explored by diving deeper into the current state of work and where there are opportunities to improve it. Finally, the chapter will end with a deep dive into the psychological barriers that make *right fit* difficult to find and retain.

## **How Fit Actually Feels**

During each of the interviews, talent were asked to share how *right fit* or *wrong fit* felt when they were in it. The visceral emotion and colorful descriptions provided were astonishing. Regardless of which experience they described, our interviewees were still holding on to the emotion of it, even if the experience was years or decades in the past. These emotional states stayed with them, either because they longed to have them again

(*right fit*) or still feel the pain and regret of a low point in their career (*wrong fit*). Figure 2.1 is a table that sums up some of the most colorful quotes on how fit feels.

## SO, WHAT DOES “FIT” MEAN, REALLY...

### Right Fit

“I didn’t worry about the clothes he was wearing, that relationships formed faster; I felt more comfortable more days and I laughed early on.”

“I could practice my craft. Period.”

“You are putting in the hours, but it doesn’t feel like work.”

“Felt like being excited to show up for work every day. It felt like home.”

“I never had the ‘Sunday Blues.’”

### Wrong Fit

“I felt like I was on a Ferris wheel. The work never ended and didn’t really feel like we were going anywhere.”

“It was impacting my relationships, my mental health. I just didn’t want to go to work.”

“It was like being punched in the face every day in a different way.”

“Everyone has a secret decoder ring for success, except for me.”

Figure 2.1: *Right Fit* vs. *Wrong Fit* Interview Quote Samples

When the interviewees described *right fit*, they didn’t speak about these experiences as times when they were happy, though that was an obvious

outcome. They spoke about these experiences from a standpoint of feeling like they were making the best use of their time at work. Further, the interviewees talked a lot about this feeling of comfort or being at home—where they were putting in hours, solving big problems, and being challenged, but it didn’t feel hard to get work done. They could practice their craft or do the things they could do really, really well. If we return back to the ideas from *The*

### COMPANY INSIGHT

Wondering how to improve your employees’ well-being? Well, it isn’t another well-being training. Look at your company’s work principles, practices, and platforms and ask if the way you work is making your employees healthier. If it isn’t, employ some human-centered design to close the gap. To learn more, head over to Chapters 9 and 10.

*Five Biggest Regrets of the Dying*, our interviewees didn't feel a sense that the time spent was being wasted or a cause for any regret. They weren't disappointing their "ideal self."

If we compare these sentiments to *wrong fit*, the differences are staggering. First, the *wrong fit* experiences were emotionally even more raw, and it almost felt like the interviewees were still processing the impact of their *wrong fit* jobs. There was a profound sense that they had not yet fully resolved the "why" behind them, nor had they made peace with who they were or how they showed up when they were in them. *Wrong fit* experiences were still being sorted through and felt mysterious to most that talked about them. Nearly all of the interviewees commented that when they were in *wrong fit*, they lost confidence, weren't able to practice their craft, and felt more isolated and lonely than they ever had at work. One interviewee stated the feeling this way: "You feel bad. You feel like a prisoner who actually signed up to go to jail."

## The State of Talent Today

The impact of *wrong fit* is no small thing. Let's consider again the \$7.8 trillion<sup>4</sup> of lost productivity annually across the globe mentioned in the Introduction. My mind races with what those trillions of dollars represent. To put that number in context, it is nearly one-third of the annual GDP of the US,<sup>5</sup> almost twice the market cap of Apple, Google, and Amazon combined,<sup>6</sup> and twelve times the amount spent on college every year in the US.<sup>7</sup> And, this number doesn't account for the follow-on impacts on talent of carrying the regret and disappointment that surrounds *wrong fit* experiences. When I spoke to one of my interviewees, she described having a couple of *wrong fit* experiences in a row, and she wondered aloud, "Is there something wrong with me? Why does this keep happening?"

When talented employees are not allowed, not able, or not willing to do their best work, they cannot thrive at work or outside of it. The most innovative product ideas never make it off the "back of a napkin," technological and manufacturing advances are never fully debugged, branding and merchandising are unfinished and uninspiring, and operational processes remain unrefined and ineffective. The more insidious outcome is the compounding emotional effects of being in this state. According to interviewees, the longer a talent is in a *wrong fit* experience, the more they lose confidence, competence in their craft, and care for the purpose or mission of their company. Their "ideal self" erodes, so much so that many of the

interviewees spoke of needing to shed behaviors they developed to survive and to rediscover the ones that made them great in the first place. They were, almost without knowing, speaking to the power of culture to shape our behaviors, our values, and our sense of self.

With \$7.8 trillion of lost productivity globally, the number of employees who wake up every morning dreading turning on their computer or heading to work is staggering. They are not reaching their potential, showcasing their talents, or feeling like the time spent away from their families is worth anything more than a barely equitable paycheck. The end result? Nobody is truly winning.

Not only is talent not winning, but they are also barely able to summon the engagement to make it to the starting line. Our organizations are filled with individuals who are burned out, languishing, stressed, disengaged, uninspired, and often on the search for something better. In 2022, Gallup reported that engagement in the US saw its first decline in over a decade, with 32% of full- and part-time employees being engaged while 17% are actively disengaged.<sup>8</sup> Talent struggles in the modern workforce almost regardless of company, industry, region, or country. In January 2021, Adam Grant, a renowned organizational psychologist, coined the term languishing to describe the felt experience of the average employee during the last few years. By his definition, languishing is a “state of stagnation and emptiness.”<sup>9</sup> It is not hopelessness, but rather a feeling of aimlessness or joylessness. Though this feeling might have been a shared experience for some, there were many who experienced a much more pervasive and damaging impact of working in their companies during this same timespan, downright misery.

In the 2021 annual Work and Well-Being Survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, 79% of employees had experienced work-related stress in the month before the survey, and nearly three in five employees reported negative impacts from that stress, including lack of interest, motivation, energy, or lack of effort.<sup>10</sup> Further, 36% reported cognitive weariness, 32% reported emotional exhaustion, and an astounding 44% reported physical fatigue—a 38% increase since 2019.<sup>11</sup> Now, some of this is absolutely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the weight of the times we live in. But as we reach the “new normal,” those numbers don’t seem to be decreasing, which may signal a more permanent shift in either how we experience work or how our companies design it (or not, for that matter).

Interestingly, the World Health Organization has set a new definition of burnout as “a syndrome resulting from workplace stress that has not



been successfully managed.”<sup>12</sup> The WHO goes on to characterize burnout by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance or negative feelings about one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy.<sup>13</sup> If the World Health Organization is leaning in, it is time to take the epidemic of burnout seriously.

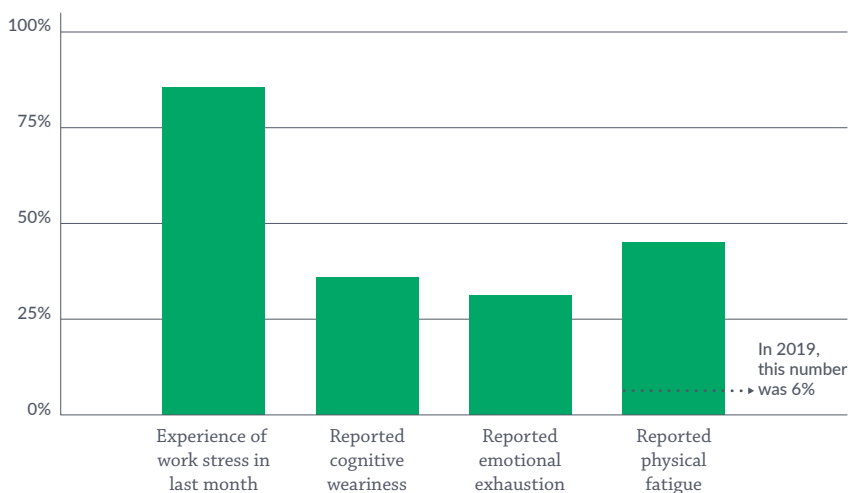


Figure 2.2: Key Statistics from the APA Work and Well-Being Survey

Source: Ashley Abramson, “Burnout and Stress Are Everywhere,” *American Psychological Association Monitor* (January 1, 2022). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-burnout-stress>.

Broadly, from the talent’s standpoint, companies have not yet been able to create environments that allow their talent to survive, let alone thrive. This isn’t due to a lack of trying; on average, companies have invested more and more into the environment at work. However, the investments have not paid off. Let’s start with the simple fact that the most expensive element of running a business is labor. Depending on how you parse out the cost of labor (hiring, wages, bonuses, benefits, facilities, etc.), the total can add up to over 70% of an operating budget,<sup>14</sup> by far the biggest consistent investment a company makes. Further, during the recent pandemic, one study showed that 88% of companies made significant changes to their benefits packages,<sup>15</sup> while another showed 90% of employers increased their spend in wellness programs.<sup>16</sup>

In some stellar research on earnings calls during 2020, Gartner found that talent investments in the form of benefits spending increased five times versus years prior.<sup>17</sup> Adding further validity to Gartner’s findings, Paychex’s 2022 survey of CHROs found that, on average, companies have increased benefits by over 22% when compared to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>18</sup>

Talent in the modern company is struggling to find meaning, stay resilient, and remain committed to the companies they have joined—they are looking for something else, something that is less about hygiene factors and external motivators. And, companies have responded by spending more than ever before on their employees and their experience. However, something is missing as companies are struggling to turn those investments into a better, more engaging environment. In other words, they are unable to turn those investments into more and more consistent *right fit* experiences for talent. So, what do we do?

## The Psychological Barriers to Fit

We should start by looking at the psychology behind fit. Though companies are investing more and more in their employees, increasing talent's engagement has proved an elusive goal. Likewise, talent desperately wants *right fit*, but those experiences feel impossibly hard to find and retain. This disconnect is caused, in part, by aspects of our own hardwiring that make finding fit more difficult. You see, our brain is a complex system that has impacted evolutionary survival instincts, external influences, and our own internal struggle between what we want and what might be best for us. There are three concepts that are worth exploring in regard to our search for and struggle to find *right fit*: cognitive dissonance, BIRG-ing, and approach/avoidance systems.

### Cognitive Dissonance and Fit

A familiar but not well-understood psychological concept called *cognitive dissonance* (the discomfort of making a choice or acting in a manner that is incongruent with one's stated values, opinions, or preferences) helps to

explain the gap between what talent wants or expects, what organizations are providing, and the \$7.8 trillion of lost productivity that is the result.

On an individual level, cognitive dissonance occurs when our perceptions of ourselves (who we are, what we value, what we are capable of, and how we show up in the world) don't match a decision we made or a way that we show up in a given moment. The

#### **TALENT INSIGHT**

If you wonder how finding productivity benefits you, think about having 20%–30% more of your day spent in meaningful work that has you practicing your craft or contributing in ways that fulfill you. Don't know what fulfills you? Check out the Fit Excursions in Chapter 4.

resulting feeling of unease, uncertainty, or regret is the dissonance between what we did or decided in the moment versus what we would do or decide when we are at our best. Cognitive dissonance can help us get more in tune with how our choices reflect our beliefs and values. However, severe cognitive dissonance can motivate us to change our beliefs or choices by settling into an environment that might not be healthy for us. In other words, we will resolve the conflict by shifting what we want or what we believe we deserve. Historically, cognitive dissonance research has focused on the individual, but the emerging concept of *collective cognitive dissonance* argues that if the voiced promise or aspiration (i.e., espoused values and culture for a company) of an organization or group is at odds with the day-to-day reality that is experienced (i.e., the day-to-day environment created), a whole group can feel anxiety, frustration, or fear.<sup>19</sup>

Cognitive dissonance is important to fit. Paying attention to it can help us make smarter decisions at the moment of choice and help explain how and why it feels so damaging when we choose poorly. Cognitive dissonance is very much our “spidey sense,” a way for us to tell, almost subconsciously, that something we are getting ready to do or choose doesn’t line up. Recent studies using MRI scans of the brain have shown that cognitive dissonance activates the part of the brain where our “survival instinct” lies.<sup>20</sup> However, we often ignore this dissonance (more on that in a bit) or, in service of “fitting in,” will change our preferences or behaviors to make something that doesn’t fit work for us. Like, trying to make a *wrong fit* right.

Thus, we will choose to live with or manage cognitive dissonance because we create it knowingly, like when choosing chocolate cake for dessert over a more healthy alternative. Other times, that dissonance cannot be avoided due to constraints such as forced compliance, a lack of information, gaslighting, or the sunk cost in a decision already made.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the reason, living with dissonance comes at a cost to our psychological well-being and mental health.<sup>22</sup> With that said, research has shown that if individuals are able to recognize the cognitive dissonance and the feeling is strong enough, a positive motivational state can be created where individuals show a higher intent to seek the behavior change needed to get back into

### TALENT INSIGHT

Deep reflection about our choices before we make them is vital to diminishing cognitive dissonance and potential *wrong fit*. A strategy for doing this is to try on the choice. Begin sharing the choice you are planning to make with friends or family and pay attention to how you feel. If there is hesitation, doubt, or anxiety as you share, mine that, as there is likely something not lining up.

alignment with core beliefs and values.<sup>23</sup> The takeaway is simple: cognitive dissonance may not feel good, but we should sit with it and pay attention to it because at some level it is our own subconscious telling us something isn't in alignment.

## Approach and Avoidance Systems

When we make choices in situations where our options are constrained, the information is murky, or the stakes are high, we often will feel that tinge of cognitive dissonance that something is off. That *something* could be low-level misalignment with values or beliefs, or it could be our *avoidance system*, the emotional response system that pays attention to the environment and whose sole purpose is to stop us from doing things that put us in danger, sending us often subtle and usually subconscious signals that we are in danger physically, mentally, emotionally, or some combination.

Interestingly, we don't always catch the cues or trust that nagging feeling in our gut. Sometimes, we enter into dangerous situations, stay in these moments instead of turning away from them, or we make choices that are detrimental to us in the long term. We choose to buy a product we don't need, stay in an unhealthy relationship that doesn't feed us, walk down a dark street at night by ourselves, or join/keep working at companies that don't fulfill us or fit how we work. So, why do we do this?

Well, one explanation is that there is another system that can dominate these moments: the *approach system*—or, the emotional processes that urge us to fulfill our deepest pleasure-based desires. This system plays to the base level of our being, wanting more of what makes us feel good. Sometimes, those “feel good” desires misalign with what we value or what is safe or good for us. This system is joy-seeking, ego-affirming, and out to satiate our wants and extract as much pleasure as possible from our surroundings. Remember the *wrong fit* story at the start of this chapter? The flattery of a bigger title, better pay, or more responsibilities plays to our egos and can activate this system very quickly, causing us to limit our view of the situation or make a choice that might bring pleasure now and pain later. If you have ever had dessert after a big meal and regretted it shortly after, say hello to your approach system.

Let's turn now to how this impacts *right fit*. In many of the top places to work, the power of the brand, the pull of beloved consumer products, the beautiful offices and abundant perks, and the potential wealth creation play directly to the approach system and make it nearly impossible for tal-

ent to see, let alone properly assess, *right fit*. So, talent can easily end up accepting jobs with companies that don't value what they value or want to work how they work. Discerning between excitement due to *right fit* versus excitement due to gaining riches and spoils can be subtle. BIRG-ing, the next concept we'll explore, can help explain why.

## BIRG-ing and Fit

To better understand our attraction to successful brands and revered products in our decision-making about who to join, talent can look toward a well-studied area of social psychology called *BIRG-ing*,<sup>24</sup> or basking in reflected glory. A team of researchers led by Dr. Robert Cialdini studied this celebrity- and success-based form of indirect impression management, or our propensity to affiliate more readily with entities or individuals who are deemed successful. What they found is that we will use others' success to boost our own self-image (BIRG-ing) by connecting ourselves to their success, or, alternatively, distance ourselves from failure (CORF-ing, cutting off reflected failure).

They researched this phenomenon by assessing students' reactions the day following a win or a loss by their football team. What they found was students tended to describe the game with "we" language and wear their team colors or logo after a win (BIRG-ing) and use "they" or wear unaffiliated clothes the day after the loss (CORF-ing). This research has extended well beyond sports and into areas such as political affiliations, parenting, and the workplace, with the most important point being that we will often be driven to build a strong connection or make a decision due in part to our subconscious impression management or indirect desire to look good.

The research on BIRG-ing shows that we will be drawn to align ourselves with teams, movements, and companies that appear to be successful or revered. So, the more powerful the consumer brand, the employee brand, or the number of "best place to" lists that a company is on, the more likely talent will be enticed to choose them regardless of what it's like to work

### TALENT INSIGHT

If you joined a company where you also are a consumer, that can create a powerful connection, but it could also cause you to remain in a job or within a company that doesn't fit your goals or work style. The pull of the consumer brand is powerful, so make sure you pay attention to whether you're there because you like the product or because you actually like working at the company. If you want to explore further, head to the Fit Assessment and Chapter 6.

there. As our interviewees noted, there was often a mismatch between the experience of being hired into the company and what it was like once they arrived, and that mismatch was rarely positive, a subject we will dive into deeply further in the book.

## Finding Fit Versus Fitting In

An additional psychological factor can be found in the benign-sounding “fitting in.” The end goal of any modern workplace must include creating a space where everyone who works there feels like they belong and can do their best work. We know from extensive research that higher levels of

belonging have a significant impact on performance, with Harvard Business Review citing research that showed a 56% increase in performance and a 75% reduction in sick days, equating to a potential annual savings of more than \$52M for a 10,000-person company.<sup>25</sup> In that same research, the authors shared an additional insight from EY’s Belonging Barometer that over 40% of 1000 people surveyed felt isolated at work.<sup>26</sup> There is a clear upside to creating belonging, much like engagement, but the reality is severely lagging behind the promise.

Though there’s a wide range of explanations for why a person might not feel a sense of belonging, ranging from work-related stress to unconscious bias and inequity, we’ll take a page out of Dan Heath’s book *Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems before They Happen* and move on from examining the feeling people have in their workplaces. Instead, we’ll take a closer look at how to solve this issue at the decision point to join or not join, to stay or go.<sup>27</sup>

From a talent perspective, fit is not about fitting in. It’s not about materially altering one’s perception of identity to be liked or seen or revered. Instead, it’s about deeply knowing and exploring our own values, norms, and behaviors, then expertly comparing and contrasting them to those of the company before a shared commitment is made. The very definition of

### COMPANY INSIGHT

Having a strong consumer brand can be the ultimate talent attraction mechanism. Just ask the likes of Apple, Google, Nike, Amazon, or Netflix. However, the consumer brand also sets an expectation for how it will feel to actually work for the company. If the day-to-day isn’t great, the consumer brand will keep talent there for only so long. Want to learn more about what you can do? Head to Chapters 9 and 10.

fit is “to be the right shape and size for.” We try on jeans, test drive cars, and buy most products with a thirty-day satisfaction guarantee. Yet, we join companies based on a very narrow and curated set of interactions, knowing little about whether we fit and on what factors we align or not.

Talent almost never really sees, or peers deeply into, a company before they join it. And, companies rarely get a deep look at talent and how they might show up after the flattery of a job offer or newness of a new position have worn off. For all of our structured interviews, campus visits, and background research through references on Glassdoor, our ability to construct a pure and accurate view of the day-to-day life in a company is barely appreciated, let alone kept at the center of the process. That seems counterintuitive given we will spend an estimated 1932 hours at work annually, which equals the already mentioned 13 full years and two months<sup>28</sup> at our place of employment over our lifetimes. To put the lifetime number in context, we will, on average, spend about 328 total days socializing with friends, 3.7 years eating, and twenty-six years sleeping over that same period.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 2.3: The Elements of Fit

Fit matters, and working on fit might be the way we make real inroads in belonging, engagement, and the lost productivity in companies today. Social science has long held that once we join a group and feel a sense of connection or the signs that belonging is possible, we begin to value and conform more readily to the group's behaviors and norms. This conformity from a place of belonging is a human need and is rooted in our search for survival and protection and community. We choose to tighten our bonds with a group that holds shared norms, behaviors, rituals and values in return for security, safety, camaraderie, and affiliation. In a sense, we will give up just a little individuality to gain the benefit of being a part of something bigger than us.

When talent begins from a place of *right fit* or alignment with the company, success comes easy, and a person is more likely to seamlessly move and adjust with the needs or expectations of the company over time. However, when we land in a company where there is misalignment or *wrong fit*, we end up using our creative energy to “fit in” and in doing so are, almost daily, writing with our nondominant hand. We might still assimilate to the norms, values, and ways of working of the company, but the toll is additional stress, burnout, feelings of incompetence, and a lack of progression of one's respective craft.

Fit has many elements including purpose, values, craft, capability, manager, team, location of company, job description, and ways of working. But, it is the last item on that list that sits mostly out of sight until after a job begins, even though it accounts for the majority of our day-to-day experience.

So, as talent, how do you find *right fit*?

How do you avoid letting your surface-level desires or impressions of management drive your choices?

How do you avoid spending your thirteen years at work in a way that feels more meaningful than mediocre?

And, as a company, how do you build for *right fit* and get back some of the \$7.8 trillion of lost productivity?

How can you use your status as a revered brand or beloved place to work to get the right talent, not talent that simply admires you the most?

The path is simple, and it starts with thinking through the following questions, many of which I'll try to help you answer through the remaining chapters.



**Table 2.1: Fit Questions for Talent and Companies**

AREA	QUESTION TO BE ANSWERED	TALENT PERSPECTIVE	COMPANY PERSPECTIVE
Interviewing	How do we interview differently to ensure a better fit?	How well does the company's/division's/team's way of working fit my values, beliefs, and skills?	How well does a potential talent fit our current "profile of success"?
Onboarding	How do we onboard to create a deeper dedication?	What do I need to shift, shed, strengthen, or start doing to be invaluable and fully engaged?	What do our new joiners need to see/know/do/feel so they can sustain success over the long term?
Performing	How do we sustain excellence and engagement over time?	Am I of craft or of company? How do I keep true to my reason for being here clear?	How do I better utilize the multiple skills of talent that have figured us out?
Transitioning	How do we maximize the value of a move?	How do I know when it is time to go and where I should head next?	How do we use transitions to re-recruit our talent to the company we are versus the one we were?
Transforming	How can we help create an even better future?	What can I do day-to-day to make my company better?	What can we do day-to-day to create the best place to work on earth?
Avoiding	How do you avoid the pitfalls, potholes, and purgatories of fitting in?	How do I know when joining up was actually me selling out?	How do you care for your employees without carelessly designing your orgs?

# REAL STORIES OF FIT

## *A Right Fit Story*

53, male, retail

There is no “perfect fit” company. If you’re looking for a perfect fit, it’s probably best to go out and create a company from scratch. However, there are companies that make sense more often than they don’t. Sometimes, the ways of working are a pleasant surprise, as in the case of this interviewee.

The interviewee described *right fit* eloquently when he said, “You sing in the morning . . . you don’t count your hours.” Interestingly, his *right fit* experience was not automatic, as he came into the company from an acquisition. He offered, “I was looking at options outside of the new company but was asked to join a leadership seminar with fifteen leaders from the acquiring company, and over the course of the week, I found they had similar values, interesting backgrounds, and a way to work that felt very familiar.” He then shared that this alleviated the cognitive dissonance he was feeling because “the culture that had been described to me is maybe not the culture that these leaders are experiencing or creating.” In the end, this interviewee spent about five years at the acquired company, acknowledging that the fit was strong.

His hope for future recruitment processes is that everyone is “super transparent in the process.” He said, “I don’t want a happy candidate; I want to make a satisfied employee. So, if [a company] acquires [employees] based on great marketing, [the employees] will ultimately arrive and be dissatisfied. Maybe it is better to be super clear and super authentic up front.”