

Culture

Two Different Brains at Work: The Two Workplace Feelings Organizations Keep Confusing and Why It Matters

Aichia Chuang, Yu-Ping Chen, Tsung-Ren Huang, and Hsu-Min Lee



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Why confusing two distinct brain systems, achievement and belonging, could cost organizations their top talent.

This article reveals groundbreaking neuroscience research demonstrating that job satisfaction and workplace fit, though often correlated in surveys, activate distinct brain systems. Two fMRI studies (N = 103) show that job satisfaction engages lateral prefrontal regions linked to achievement and motivation, while workplace fit activates medial and social cognition networks tied to belonging. A subsequent text analysis (N = 368) confirmed these differences in employees' narratives. These findings challenge traditional engagement metrics and highlight that leaders must manage satisfaction and fit separately. Practical implications include redesigning performance conversations, onboarding, and retention strategies to address both achievement and belonging.

When Sarah, a talented marketing director, announced her resignation despite receiving stellar performance reviews and a recent promotion, her manager was baffled. "I love the work," Sarah explained, "but I just don't feel like I belong here." This scenario plays out in offices worldwide, yet most organizations fail to understand the crucial distinction between job satisfaction and workplace fit, a difference that our neurological research now reveals operates at the most fundamental level of human cognition. Corporate leaders who confuse the two risk misdiagnosing problems, misallocating resources, and losing critical talent.

*Our groundbreaking research is in press at the **Journal of Applied Psychology**. It used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to uncover that feeling satisfied with your job activates entirely different brain networks than feeling like you fit in your workplace: satisfaction involves more with lateral prefrontal regions, while workplace fit activates more medial and social cognition networks. This neurological distinction helps explain why **traditional psychological surveys**, which often find a high correlation between these two feelings, can miss the mark, and why even employees who report being satisfied sometimes choose to leave.*

Bright Yue Hong et al., “**Burnout: Five Misconceptions and a Person-Environment Fit Approach to Tackling It**,” *California Management Review Insight*, March 25, 2024.

Janine Lee, “**The Basics of Belonging**,” *California Management Review*, October 9, 2023.

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What the Psychological Survey Research Says About Fit and Satisfaction

Behavioral organizational research has long documented that workplace fit and job satisfaction are closely intertwined. Conceptually, both constructs share a comparison process. **Perceived fit** reflects the compatibility between an individual and their work environment, including the job, team, supervisor, or organization, whereas **job satisfaction** reflects the state arising from evaluating one’s job relative to needs or desires. In both cases, employees weigh what the environment offers against what they value. Empirically, **research** has found high correlations (averaging .73 with the highest being .85) between perceived fit and job satisfaction across eight job dimensions (e.g., pay, supervision, and task variety). Based on these findings, the authors cautioned, “These results suggest that perceived fit and satisfaction may both reflect affective responses such that, when people indicate that they fit the environment, they are not reporting the result of a comparison process but instead are effectively saying they are satisfied with the environment” (p. 822).

While current psychometric tools are useful for understanding perceptions and attitudes, they also have limits. Because people often want to present themselves in a **positive light**, survey responses can blur important differences between concepts and make results look more strongly related than they really are. In addition, **survey design choices**, such as including several related constructs in the same questionnaire, can introduce bias that exaggerates overlap across different measures as participants infer relationships between similar constructs. Finally, the validity of survey results depends on participants' ability to discern subtle differences in the language of questionnaire items of similar constructs. As such, there is a need to further clarify the relationship between perceived fit and satisfaction through a more objective tool such as a neural examination. If finer-grained neural distinctions between these constructs are uncovered, they could reveal employees' underlying cognition and states that might not appear in traditional psychological assessments.

The Neuroscience of Work: You Can Love Your Job and Still Feel Misplaced

To study possible neurological differences of these constructs, we conducted two fMRI studies (total N = 103) on working adults who took the first-person perspective while reading scripts describing employees with high and low levels of workplace fit and job satisfaction. The neuroscientific finding is striking: job satisfaction primarily activates the brain's lateral prefrontal cortex, regions associated with goal achievement, motivation, reward receiving, and cognitive processing. It's the neural signature of "I'm winning at this game."

Workplace fit, however, tells a completely different story. When people feel they belong, their brains activate medial regions associated with emotion processing and, surprisingly, extensive social cognitive networks, areas that help us understand others' thoughts, intentions, and behaviors.

In other words, job satisfaction is about what you do; workplace fit is about where and with whom you belong. Or, satisfaction emphasizes the self, while fit emphasizes the self-in-relation-to-others. For triangulation, we conducted a behavioral study in which 368

working adults wrote separately about their actual fit and job satisfaction. Text analysis of language related to cognitive, affective, and social processes confirmed the pattern of findings described above.

The Social Brain's Hidden Role

We also explored the nature of workplace fit itself. While the fit literature has predominantly focused on its **cognitive** and **affective** dimensions, our study reveals an illuminating finding: workplace fit strongly engages what neuroscientists call “theory of mind,” the capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling. That is to say, when employees assess their fit, they’re constantly interpreting colleagues’ behaviors, predicting reactions, and navigating complex interpersonal dynamics.

This explains why remote work has created such widespread challenges with employee engagement, even when productivity remains high. In a post-pandemic world, social cohesion at work is eroding. Research from Microsoft published in *Nature Human Behaviour* has shown that remote work often weakens interpersonal ties. We now know that from a neurological perspective, virtual environments limit the rich **social cues** our brains need to process fit effectively. As Amy Edmondson noted in her **research on psychological safety**, the subtle interpersonal signals that create belonging are difficult to transmit through screens.

The Misfit Paradox

The neuroscience of workplace fit reveals another crucial insight: employees experiencing poor fit show increased activation in brain regions associated with negative emotion processing and cognitive effort. Paradoxically, misfit actually requires more mental energy than fit which explains why poor workplace fit is so cognitively draining, even when job performance remains strong.

The text analysis of employee narratives confirms this neurological finding: people describing workplace misfit use significantly more words related to cognitive processes, suggesting they're working harder to make sense of their environment. This mental taxation helps explain why **misfits often burnout** despite having the skills to succeed.

Why This Distinction Matters Now

Most senior leaders and their organizations spend heavily on employee engagement surveys, assuming that feeling a sense of belonging at work is the same as loving the job. Our research shows that assumption is wrong and senior leaders who fail to distinguish between the two are likely to implement misaligned interventions, ultimately weakening their ability to retain their talent base. Both fit and job satisfaction are important, but they require distinct solutions.

Practical Applications for Modern Senior Leaders

Manage fit and satisfaction together

It becomes clear that a satisfied employee is motivated to work, while a well-fitting employee is committed to collaborating effectively. Thus, effective leadership requires simultaneously fostering job satisfaction and workplace fit:

- To promote job satisfaction, focus on goal clarity, skill development, and fair rewards, factors that trigger the brain's reward and motivation systems.
- To promote fit, cultivate interpersonal trust, value alignment, and social connection, conditions that activate the brain's social cognition network.

Redesign performance conversations

If the leader's goal is to truly understand how well employees fit within your organization, not just how satisfied they are, leaders need to go beyond traditional performance reviews that often focus on satisfaction. Our neuroscientific finding shows that workplace fit depends on employees' ability to interpret social cues, anticipate reactions, and navigate team dynamics. During performance conversations, supplement standard questions with ones that probe social understanding:

- *“How well do you understand your colleagues' working styles?”*
- *“Can you predict who will support your ideas in meetings?”*

These questions reveal the social architecture that employees' brains navigate daily. When high performers show sparse relationship maps or report cognitive exhaustion from interpersonal interactions, you're seeing fit problems disguised as satisfaction issues. Leaders who redesign performance conversations to assess social calibration, not just task execution, gain sharper insight into long-term engagement, collaboration potential, and even turnover risk.

Create fit-focused onboarding

Rethinking onboarding as a social integration process, not just a task orientation, is key to accelerating new hire success. Leaders should intentionally design onboarding to foster what neuroscientists call “social calibration.” Focus on practices that help new employees answer fundamental brain-level questions such as “Do I belong?” and “Can I trust these people?” to shape **long-term engagement**. Especially in hybrid teams, leaders must design for connection, not just compliance, from day one.

- Pair new hires with mentors who excel in social interpretation, not just technical skill.
- Create safe spaces for “social debugging,” where new employees can reflect on awkward moments or unclear norms.

These practices help newcomers build accurate mental maps of team dynamics and interpersonal cues to accelerate the brain's ability to interpret social signals.

Detect misfit early: Prevent pain before it escalates

Leaders must move beyond a one-size-fits-all explanation for disengagement and start diagnosing whether the issue stems from low motivation or a deeper sense of social misfit. Our neurological finding reveals that poor fit triggers intense emotional stress; yet many employees hide these feelings out of fear of being seen as uncooperative. Leaders should proactively detect early warning signs: withdrawal from informal interactions, reduced meeting engagement, or reluctance to share input. Don't wait for performance to drop, intervene early.

- Hold stay interviews with questions like “*When do you feel most connected here?*” to uncover hidden social dynamics.
- Encourage teams to regularly surface their work values and preferred styles, and treat misfit not as a flaw, but as a recalibration opportunity.

A New Framework for Retention

The next generation of winning organizations will design talent strategies that engage both the achievement system and the belonging system in the brain. By addressing job satisfaction and workplace fit as separate but complementary levers, corporate leaders can reduce turnover risk, strengthen commitment, and unlock human potential.

The lesson for top leaders is straightforward: when talent leaves, it's often not a problem of rewards or motivation. It's a problem of belonging. Solving for both is no longer optional but a strategic necessity.

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Aichia Chuang [Follow](#)

Aichia Chuang previously held Fu-Bon Endowed Chair at National Taiwan University. She earned her PhD from University of Minnesota. Her research interests include person–environment fit, leadership, and cross-cultural management. She has published in journal outlets such as Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology, and Harvard Business Review.



Yu-Ping Chen

Yu-Ping Chen received her PhD from University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests focus on neuromarketing, neuroeconomics, as well as judgment and decision making. Her research appears in journal outlets such as Science, Journal of Marketing Research, and Journal of Applied Psychology.



Tsung-Ren Huang

Tsung-Ren Huang received his PhD from Boston University. His research interests focus on human/machine learning and memory, as well as social interaction between humans and robots. He has published in journal outlets such as American Psychologist, Journal of Applied Psychology, Psychological Review, and Journal of Neuroscience.



Hsu-Min Lee [Follow](#)

Hsu-Min Lee is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University. Her research interests focus on person–environment fit, workplace deviant behavior, team decision-making, group diversity, and social influence. Her research has been published in the Journal of Applied Psychology.