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## Perceptions of HR practices, person-organisation fit, and affective commitment

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**Perceptions of HR Practices, Person-Organization Fit, and Affective Commitment:  
The Moderating Role of Career Stage**

**ABSTRACT**

In a three-wave survey study among 487 Dutch university employees, we examined how and when employees' perceptions of high-performance work practices (HPWP) affect employee affective commitment. We proposed that perceived person-organization (PO) fit mediates this relationship, and that the relationships among perceptions of HPWP, perceived PO fit, and affective commitment differ across career stages. Our results confirm that perceptions of HPWP enhance PO fit perceptions and, in turn, strengthen affective commitment. Moreover, the relationship between perceptions of HPWP and perceived PO fit is only significant among employees in the advancement stage of their careers; however, direct comparison across different career stages reveals no significant differences in the HPWP–PO fit relationship. Furthermore, career stage partly moderates the relationship between PO fit and affective commitment, which is only significant among employees in the maintenance career stage. These findings have important implications for the literature on strategic HRM and PO fit.

**Keywords:** perceptions of high performance work practices, person-organization fit, affective commitment, career stage

Over the past few decades, many studies in strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) have established relationships between HRM practices and organizational performance (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005; Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006). A particular focus has emerged on high-performance work practices (HPWP), a term that refers to a set of interconnected HR practices—such as selective recruitment and selection, extensive training and development, performance management, performance-based pay, and participation in decision making (Jiang, Lepak, Ju, & Baer, 2012)—that are expected to improve firm performance by enhancing employee knowledge, skills and abilities, motivation, and opportunity to contribute. Indeed, HPWP have been shown to affect several employee outcomes, such as employee commitment, turnover, and performance (e.g., Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000).

Building on these observations, researchers have started to focus on employee *perceptions* of HRM practices, which may differ from managers' intentions in implementing those practices. These differences can result from various factors, including discrepancies between managerial intent and implementation, in addition to employee preferences and needs (Nishii & Wright, 2008). Employee perceptions of HRM are more strongly related to employee attitudes and behaviors than are manager reports of HRM (e.g., Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013; Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009). However, the mechanisms through which perceptions of HPWP relate to employee outcomes are still unclear (Jiang et al., 2012; Kehoe & Wright, 2013). Therefore, the aim of the current study is to contribute to the knowledge on how and when perceptions of HPWP positively affect employee outcomes. Specifically, we seek to identify mediating and moderating factors that influence the relationship between perceived HPWP and affective commitment. Affective commitment has been identified as a predictor of several important organizational outcomes, such as performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and turnover (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch,

& Topolnytsky, 2002). Prior studies have identified a direct relationship between HRM and affective commitment (e.g., Ramsay et al., 2000; Whitener, 2001) and have begun to explore mechanisms involved in that relationship; for example, perceived organizational support and procedural justice have been shown to have mediating roles (Meyer & Smith, 2000).

Herein we propose two additional factors that may be involved in the relationship between HPWP and affective commitment. The first is employees' perceptions of person–organization (PO) fit. PO fit is defined as the compatibility between an individual and an organization in terms of the extent to which their characteristics are well matched (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Theory suggests that person-environment fit can be improved by organizational factors (e.g., Bretz & Judge, 1994; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005), and that, more specifically, HR systems can increase employees' perceptions of goal alignment and feelings of value congruence with the organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Bretz & Judge, 1994; Jiang et al., 2012). However, only a few studies have examined the association between HRM and perceived PO fit (e.g., Boon, Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2011). Drawing from these ideas, we suggest that employees' perceptions of fit are likely to (at least partly) mediate the relationship between HRM and affective commitment.

Specifically, we argue that if employees perceive HPWP to be present, they are likely to have a clear understanding of what the organization values and expects (Kim et al., 2005). This understanding helps to remove uncertainty and increases employees' sense of community, and these effects are likely to result in a higher level of perceived fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001) and, in turn, higher affective commitment.

Second, we propose career stage as a moderator in the relationships among perceptions of HPWP, perceived PO fit, and affective commitment. This idea is based on observations that HPWP may not be beneficial for all employees; rather, the effectiveness of HR practices may be contingent on worker characteristics. In particular, employees at

different career stages respond differently to HR practices (Conway, 2004; Guest, 2011), as different career stages are characterized by different work attitudes, work motives, and concerns.

Our work contributes to the strategic HRM literature in several ways. First, we extend current knowledge by examining mechanisms that may be involved in the relationship between HPWP and employee outcomes. Specifically, we combine theory and literature from the domains of HRM and PO fit (e.g., Bretz & Judge, 1994; Kim et al., 2005) with Super's (1957) Career Development Model, and examine the scarcely-tested suggestion that perceptions of HRM can increase perceived alignment between employees and the organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), thereby influencing affective commitment. Likewise, we empirically examine the proposition that there is no single effective HR system for all employees (Guest, 2011). Second, whereas most previous studies on HRM are cross-sectional, we collected data at three time points, and are thus able to separate the independent, mediating, and dependent variables. We further contribute to the PO fit literature by examining antecedents and consequences of PO fit over time (Shipp & Jansen, 2011) and across employees in different career stages (Ng & Feldman, 2010).

### **Perceptions of High-Performance Work Practices and Person-Organization Fit**

The strategic HRM literature refers to several types of HR systems, including high-performance, high-commitment, and high-involvement work systems. Because the conceptualizations of these systems overlap to a large extent, we refer to them using the term HPWP (defined above; see also Huselid, 1995), which is the most commonly-used label (Lepak, Liao, Chung, & Harden, 2006). Organizations implement HPWP in order to build long-term relationships with employees by enhancing workers' skills, motivation, and participation in decision making (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000). Researchers have recently started to examine whether and how employee attitudes and behaviors, such as

commitment, satisfaction, and turnover (e.g., Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Liao et al., 2009), are affected by HPWP, and, more specifically, by employee perceptions of HPWP, which, as discussed above, may differ from ‘intended’ HR practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Liao et al., 2009; Nishii & Wright, 2008). In line with this stream of studies (e.g., Kehoe & Wright, 2013), we focus on perceptions of HPWP.

PO fit is defined as the compatibility between people and organizations (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), that is, the extent to which people match “in terms of their values, beliefs, and personality traits with the values, beliefs, and norms of an organization” (Saks & Ashforth, 1997: 396). This construct includes value congruence, personality congruence, and need fulfillment. As in the case of our measurement of HPWP, we focus on employees’ perceptions of PO fit, rather than on objective variables reflecting fit. Perceived fit reflects employees’ feelings of fitting in, a feeling that may be subject to “cognitive manipulation because the assessment is all done in the head of the respondents” (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005: 291), and may differ from objective fit (Cable & De Rue, 2002). Therefore, fit perceptions are better predictors of employees’ attitudes and behaviors than objective fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Research shows that HR practices are important mechanisms through which employees receive information about the organization (Rousseau & Greller, 1994). HPWP reflect the organization’s strategy and values, and therefore communicate important information about organizational characteristics and values, goals, beliefs, and desired employee behaviors to employees (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). As a result, as noted above, employees who perceive HPWP to be present are likely to have a clear view (and correspondingly, low uncertainty) regarding the organization’s values, demands and expectations, and desired behaviors (Kim et al., 2005). In addition, benefits that are provided through HPWP, such as development opportunities, can enhance employees’ perceptions of

need fulfillment, which is an important part of PO fit (Boon et al., 2011; Ramsay et al., 2000). Together, these qualities of exposure to HPWP are likely to enhance employees' feeling of PO fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001). Indeed, previous research has established a positive relationship between perceived HPWP and perceived PO fit (Boon et al., 2011), but not over time.

*Hypothesis 1: Employee perceptions of HPWP are positively related to perceived PO fit over time.*

### **Person–Organization Fit and Affective Commitment**

A core assumption of PO fit theory is that employees are more successful in and committed to organizations that share their values and personality (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Indeed, many studies and meta-analyses have shown that PO fit is positively related to employee attitudes, behaviors, and performance (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Employees who report high PO fit are likely to “feel involved with the broader mission of the organization” (Cable & DeRue, 2002: 876). They tend to define themselves as part of the organization (Saks & Ashforth, 1997), and in doing so, they join a psychological group (Cable & DeRue, 2002), which is likely to increase their affective commitment. In addition, PO fit is likely to facilitate effective communication and trust between organizational members, both of which help employees to make sense of their relationships with, and belongingness to, the organization (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Indeed, in line with this reasoning, meta-analyses show that PO fit is positively associated with affective commitment (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer, et al., 2003). Yet, most studies examining the relationship between perceived PO fit and affective commitment have relied on cross-sectional data. Here, we test this relationship over time, as we expect affective commitment to develop as a result of feelings of PO fit.

*Hypothesis 2: Perceived PO fit is positively related to affective commitment over time.*

## **High-Performance Work Practices, Person–Organization Fit, and Affective**

### **Commitment**

We expect employee perceptions of HPWP to be directly related to affective commitment. From a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964), implementation of HPWP signals that the organization cares about its employees, and is willing to invest in their development (Whitener, 2001). When employees perceive that HPWP are in place, they are likely to reciprocate by showing high affective commitment to the organization (Cole, Schaninger, & Harris, 2002; Whitener, 2001). Yet, although most studies have shown that perceptions of HPWP are related to positive outcomes, some studies have shown that HPWP may also have negative consequences for employees (e.g., Kroon, Van de Voorde, & Van Veldhoven, 2009). A review of HRM – well-being studies (Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012) has shown that, though health well-being might be negatively affected by HRM, happiness well-being (which is reflected in commitment) is positively influenced by HRM. Accordingly, we expect to observe a positive relationship between perceived HPWP and commitment. Few studies have tested the relationship between perceived HPWP and affective commitment over time (one exception is a study by Morris, Lydka, & O’Creevy, 1993).

*Hypothesis 3: Employee perceptions of HPWP are positively related to affective commitment over time.*

In addition to a direct relationship between perceptions of HPWP and affective commitment, we also expect an indirect relationship between HPWP and affective commitment via the effect of HPWP on PO fit perceptions. When employees perceive HPWP to be present, they are likely to better understand organizational values, beliefs, and characteristics, which is likely to clarify expectations and increase need fulfillment, and therefore enhances feelings of fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001). In turn, the increased sense of



belongingness which employees with high PO fit experience, will lead to increased affective commitment toward the organization (Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Cross-sectional evidence supports this relationship (Boon, et al., 2011).

*Hypothesis 4: Perceived person-organization fit mediates the relationship between employee perceptions of HPWP and affective commitment over time.*

### **The Moderating Role of Career Stage**

According to Super's (1957) Career Development Model, employees pass through three career stages before they start detaching from work. First, employees pass through the 'establishment or exploration' stage, in which their primary concerns are to identify their interests and capabilities, and to establish themselves in jobs that interest them (Ornstein, Cron, & Slocum Jr, 1989). During this stage, the employee is primarily involved in organizational socialization, getting acquainted with the new job, developing competences in organizational and professional roles, and gaining peer acceptance (Lynn, Cao, & Horn, 1996). Hence, during this stage, the employee's most salient needs are related to the work itself and the quality of relationships with peers (Gould & Hawkins, 1978). Subsequently, in the 'advancement stage', the employee is concerned with mastering his or her identified area of interest and becoming an expert in that area. During this stage, employees want to advance their careers, develop stable work lives, and reach independence (Ornstein et al., 1989). Thus, employees in the advancement stage focus on upward mobility, independence, achievement, and promotion (Hall & Nougaim, 1968). Finally, in the 'maintenance stage', employees try to maintain their self-concept and hold on to their earlier accomplishments (Ornstein et al., 1989). This stage is characterized by a reduced emphasis on competition and upward mobility and greater concern for peer and professional relationships (e.g., helping others and mentoring) and strengthening the organization (Gould & Hawkins, 1978; Lynn et al., 1996).

Employees in this stage seek greater opportunities for involvement, more meaningful assignments, and more interesting jobs (Conway, 2004).

Since each career stage is characterized by a specific set of work attitudes, work motives, and concerns, we propose that career stage moderates the relationships among perceptions of HPWP, PO fit, and affective commitment. This idea is supported by a study by Conway (2004), which showed that perceptions of certain HR practices are more influential in some career stages than in others. Similarly, Ng and Feldman (2007) proposed that the factors that promote embeddedness, which is closely related to fit, differ as careers unfold over time.

First, we expect perceptions of HPWP to have a stronger positive association with perceived PO fit in the advancement stage than in the establishment and maintenance stages. As employees in the advancement stage are particularly likely to be focused on career development and moving upward (i.e., promotion) (e.g., Lynn, et al., 1996), these employees may be more receptive than others to the organization's signals regarding means of increasing their performance levels. Employees in the advancement stage may also be more open to relevant benefits that the organization offers them, such as training and career planning. Therefore, the extent to which these employees perceive the organization as offering HPWP is likely to be positively associated with their perceptions of PO fit. Employees in the establishment and maintenance stages, on the other hand, who are, respectively, more concerned with exploring their career niches and maintaining earlier accomplishments (Ornstein et al., 1989), may be less receptive to HR practices aimed at improving their performance. Therefore, HPWP perceptions are likely to have a weaker association with perceived PO fit compared with the HPWP perceptions of employees in the advancement stage.

*Hypothesis 5: Career stage moderates the positive association between perceptions of HPWP and perceived PO fit, such that this association is stronger in the advancement stage compared to the establishment and maintenance stages.*

Second, we expect perceived PO fit to have a stronger positive association with affective commitment among employees in the maintenance stage than among employees in the establishment and advancement stages. Employees in the maintenance stage are more concerned with job security and career stability (Ng & Feldman, 2010) compared with other employees and are less likely to leave the organization (Slocum & Cron, 1985). Employees in this career stage are likely to view high PO fit as an indication that they have chosen (to stay with) the right organization and thus tangible proof of their career success (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Accordingly, achieving PO fit may be particularly satisfying in the maintenance stage, and employees in this career stage may respond to high PO fit with enhanced levels of commitment (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Employees in the establishment and advancement stages, in contrast, are still exploring, experimenting with, and advancing their careers, and may be less likely to view high PO fit as an attractive option, because they want to keep their opportunities open (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Thus, their level of affective commitment is likely to be less strongly affected by their perceptions of PO fit (Allen & Meyer, 1993; Lynn, et al., 1996).

*Hypothesis 6: Career stage moderates the positive association between perceived PO fit and affective commitment, such that this association is stronger in the maintenance stage compared to the establishment and advancement stages.*

Figure 1 shows the proposed model.

--- Insert Figure 1 ---

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure and Participants**

We collected data using three measurement waves, with one year between consecutive waves. Data were collected among employees of one Dutch university, which employed approximately 4,500 employees during the period of data collection. In the first wave (Time 1), an on-line questionnaire was sent via email to 3,812 current employees (all employees for whom email addresses were available), with 1,429 employees providing completed questionnaires (a response rate of 37.5%). Compared to all employees of the university at that time, these respondents were slightly older (the average age was 42, versus 41), included more females (52% versus 45%), and included fewer scientific (as opposed to support or administrative) staff members (43% versus 56%). The second questionnaire was sent one year later to these respondents, and 765 out of 1,429 employees returned the questionnaire (a response rate of 54% as compared with the previous wave). The third questionnaire was sent one year later, with 489 of the 765 employees completing this questionnaire (response rate of 64%), of whom 2 employees could not be matched to previous questionnaires. Non-response analyses between Time 1 and Time 3 revealed that those who dropped out and those who completed both surveys did not differ significantly on HPWP, PO fit, affective commitment, gender, education level, job tenure, and working part-time, but that dropouts tended to be younger, with lower organization tenure.

The final sample consisted of 487 employees, of whom 241 were female (49.6%), with an average age of 44.0 years ( $SD = 10.9$ ). The majority of the sample (83.5%) held at least a bachelor's degree, average organizational tenure was 11.8 years ( $SD = 10.3$ ), and average job tenure was 6.1 years (at Time 1;  $SD = 7.3$ ). Most employees worked full time (55.1%). Of the respondents, most were scientific staff (42.0%), scientific support staff (12.8%), and administrative staff members (12.8%).

### **Measurement Instruments**

*Perceived HPWP* were measured at Time 1 with 14 items. In accordance with the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) model (Appelbaum et al., 2000), and earlier studies and reviews on HPWP (Boselie et al., 2005; Combs et al., 2006; Den Hartog et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2012), we included 14 HR practices that influence the ability (e.g., training), motivation (e.g., performance appraisal), and opportunity to perform (e.g., information sharing). Following the majority of HRM studies (Boselie et al., 2005), we measured the perceived availability or presence of HPWP by asking employees to indicate whether the company offers them these practices (e.g., “Does your company offer the possibility to participate in decision-making?”). Response options were “yes”, “no”, or “don’t know”. We opted for these response options (rather than a Likert scale, for example) to mitigate the risk that responses would confound with the mediating and dependent variables (Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, Park, Gerhart, & Delery, 2001). In line with MacDuffie (1995), we took the total number of “yes” responses as the measure of perceived HPWP.

*Perceived PO fit* was measured at Time 1 and Time 2 by using the four-item scale developed by Saks and Ashforth (1997). An example item is: “To what extent are the values of the organization similar to your own values?”. In a brief text introducing these items we clarified that the term “organization” referred to the university. We used a 5-point scale (1: “to a very small extent” to 5: “to a very large extent”). Table 1 presents the reliability levels of all scales.

*Affective commitment* was measured at Time 2 and Time 3 using the 8-item affective commitment scale (Allen & Meyer, 1990; e.g., “I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside it”). We used a 7-point Likert scale (1: “strongly disagree” to 7: “strongly agree”).

*Career stage*. Multiple measures have been used to measure career stage (Lynn et al., 1996), including age, job tenure, and professional tenure; there is no clear consensus as to

how career stages should be operationalized (Morrow & McElroy, 1987). The number of years of work experience is considered to be a reasonable and objective indicator of career stage (Lam, Ng, & Feldman, 2012). Therefore, we operationalized career stage as organizational tenure measured at Time 1. In line with earlier studies (Conway, 2004; Gould & Hawkins, 1978), we distinguished the establishment stage (organizational tenure  $\leq 2$  years,  $N = 108$ ), the advancement stage (organizational tenure 2–10 years,  $N = 181$ ), and the maintenance stage (organizational tenure  $> 10$  years,  $N = 197$ ).

*Control variables.* Control variables included job tenure (in years), age, gender, occupational group (scientific versus support staff), and education level (ranging from 1: primary education to 5: a university degree).

### **Statistical Analysis**

To test our hypotheses, the proposed model was fitted to the data with structural equation modeling using Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). Mplus uses all available data to estimate the model using full information maximum likelihood. To evaluate model fit, we followed Hu and Bentler's (1998) recommendation by using multiple indices of fit, including the chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; acceptable above .90 and good above .95), the Tucker Lewis index (TLI; acceptable above .90 and good above .95), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; acceptable below .08, but preferably close to .06). The measurement model (with HPWP at Time 1, PO fit at Time 1 and Time 2, and affective commitment at Time 2 and Time 3) indicated adequate fit:  $\chi^2 = 989.80$ ,  $df = 643$ ,  $CFI = .92$ ,  $TLI = .92$ ,  $RMSEA = .03$ . As recommended by Pitts, West, and Tein (1996), the corresponding measurement errors of the PO fit and affective commitment items across the two waves were allowed to covary over time. We conducted a Harman's one-factor test to assess whether common method variance was a problem in our study. Since a single-factor measurement model did not fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 2388.16$ ,  $df = 653$ ,  $CFI = .61$ ,  $TLI = .58$ ,

RMSEA = .07), we concluded that common method bias was not an issue. Since we measured PO fit and affective commitment in two waves, we tested for measurement invariance by comparing an unconstrained model in which factor loadings were freely estimated across the two measurement times, and a model in which the factor loadings were constrained to be equal across measurement times (e.g., Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). In such a case, when the  $\chi^2$  difference between the models is significant, the equality constraints are not consistent with the data; thus, invariance is not supported. The results showed that PO fit ( $\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df = 1.61/3, p = .657$ ) and affective commitment ( $\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df = 11.41/7, p = .122$ ) were invariant over time because the  $\chi^2$  differences between the models were insignificant. Considering the proportion of the number of items measuring our core concepts, alongside the number of participants, we followed recommendations of Skrondal and Laake (2001) and included Bartlett factor scores of the bundle of perceived HPWP, PO fit and affective commitment in our model. We allowed all exogenous variables and PO fit at Time 2 and affective commitment at Time 2 to covary.

To test the mediating effect (Hypothesis 4), we followed MacKinnon, Fairchild, and Fritz (2007), who proposed that two conditions must be met to establish mediation: a) the independent variable (i.e., perceived HPWP) is significantly related to the mediator (i.e., PO fit); and b) the mediator is significantly related to the dependent variable (i.e., affective commitment). Additionally, we used the bootstrapping method, which estimates the sampling distribution of the indirect effect by repeatedly drawing random samples with replacement from the original data, providing bootstrapped confidence intervals to test the indirect effect for significance (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). We also tested for full or partial mediation when examining Hypothesis 3 (the independent – dependent relationship; see MacKinnon et al., 2007) and by comparing the fit of our hypothesized model to the fit of a model without the direct relationship.

To test whether the relationships of the hypothesized model vary across different career stages (Hypotheses 5 and 6), a multiple-group analysis was performed. Following Byrne (1998), we first tested the hypothesized model for each career stage. Next, we tested the differences in parameter estimates across the different career stages using z-tests. Since interaction effects are harder to detect than main effects are, especially in field studies, we decided to interpret an alpha level of .10 as a marginally significant interaction effect, in line with other studies (Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pearce, 2005).

## RESULTS

### Descriptives

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations of the variables we measured. In line with our hypotheses, the value of perceived HPWP at Time 1 was positively associated with both measurements of PO fit (Time 1:  $r = .30, p < .001$ ; Time 2:  $r = .29, p < .001$ ), and with both measurements of affective commitment (Time 2:  $r = .25, p < .001$ ; Time 3:  $r = .21, p < .001$ ). Moreover, PO fit at Time 2 was positively associated with both measurements of affective commitment (Time 2:  $r = .65, p < .001$ ; Time 3:  $r = .61, p < .001$ ). With respect to the control variables, Table 1 shows that age, education level, and occupational group were significantly associated with commitment at Time 3. Gender and job tenure were not associated with commitment at Time 3 and were thus not included in our model.

--- Insert Table 1 ---

### Model Fit and Hypothesis Testing

The final fitted structural model is shown in Figure 2 (i.e.,  $\chi^2 = 12.94, df = 2, CFI = .99, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .11$ ). Since the influence of education level and occupational group on commitment at Time 3 was not significant, we only controlled for age.

--- Insert Figure 2 ---



Perceived HPWP was positively related to PO fit over time ( $\beta = .09, p < .05$ ), and PO fit was positively related to affective commitment over time ( $\beta = .15, p < .001$ ). Hypotheses 1 and 2 are thus supported. However, contrary to Hypothesis 3, we found that HPWP was not significantly related to affective commitment over time ( $\beta = -.02, p = .42$ ). Hypothesis 4 proposed that perceived PO fit would mediate the relationship between perceived HPWP and affective commitment. Our analyses for Hypotheses 1 and 2 indicated that the two conditions necessary to establish mediation were met, and the test of the indirect effect was indeed significant (indirect effect  $.01, p < .05$ ; 95% CI =  $.001, .027$ ). In sum, Hypothesis 4 was supported. In addition, we compared our hypothesized model to a model without the HPWP–affective commitment path and found that the  $\chi^2$  difference between these models was not significant ( $\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df = .66/1, p = .417$ ), suggesting full mediation.

Multiple-group analysis was used to test the influence of career stage on the relations among perceived HPWP, PO fit, and affective commitment. First, we tested the hypothesized model for each career stage. Figure 3 shows the results.

--- Insert Figure 3 ---

Figure 3 shows that, in line with Hypothesis 5, the relation between HPWP and PO fit was significant among workers in the advancement stage, and not among workers in the establishment and maintenance stages. However, the parameter estimates did not significantly differ across the career stages. Specifically, the difference between the establishment and advancement stages was marginally significant ( $z = -1.76, p < .10$ ), and the difference between the advancement and maintenance stages was not significant ( $z = 1.27, p = .204$ ). Thus, ultimately, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. Further, in line with Hypothesis 6, we found that the positive relation between PO fit and affective commitment was significant in the maintenance stage, and not significant in the establishment and advancement stages. In this case, the difference in parameter estimates between the establishment and the

maintenance stages was significant ( $z = -2.79, p < .01$ ), but the difference in parameter estimates between the advancement and maintenance stages was not significant ( $z = -1.50, p = .134$ ). Hypothesis 6 was therefore partly supported.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing from PO fit and career stage theories, this three-wave survey study aimed to contribute to the strategic HRM literature by examining how and when employees' perceptions of HPWP enhance their affective commitment. Our results show that perceptions of HPWP increase perceived PO fit and, in turn, affective commitment over time. In addition, although direct comparisons between career stages did not reveal significant differences in the relationship between perceived HPWP and perceived PO fit, we found that this relationship was only significant among employees in the advancement stage. Finally, we found that perceived PO fit is positively associated with affective commitment only among employees in the maintenance stage.

Although theory has long suggested that perceived HPWP can increase perceived PO fit (e.g., Cable & Parsons, 2001), empirical tests of this relationship are scarce. More generally, although theories in strategic HRM tend to assume causal relationships, few studies have examined relationships over time (Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, & Allen, 2005). The current study, which used a time-lagged dataset with three waves, contributes to the strategic HRM literature by demonstrating relationships between perceived HPWP, perceived PO fit and affective commitment *over time* (Kim et al., 2005). Our results lend credence to the proposition, elaborated above, that when employees perceive HPWP to be present, they have a clear view of the organization's values and expectations, which are communicated through these HR practices (Kim et al., 2005). Accordingly, employees experience lower uncertainty and greater need fulfillment, and their perceptions of PO fit are enhanced (Cable & Parsons, 2001). In turn, PO fit facilitates communication and trust (Edwards & Cable,

2009), thereby strengthening the bonds that employees experience with the organization and enhancing their affective commitment over time.

Unexpectedly, HPWP perceptions were not directly related to affective commitment. This observation suggests that, over time, HR practices only lead to higher affective commitment via enhancing levels of perceived PO fit. However, our analyses did not take into account possible changes in perceived HPWP over time, which may explain the absence of a direct relationship.

Our work further contributes to the strategic HRM literature by examining the HPWP–PO fit relationship across career stages, which we operationalized as organizational tenure. In line with our expectations, the relationship was significant only among workers in the advancement stage; these employees are focused on moving upward and establishing expertise and are thus more likely to be receptive to signals from the organization regarding means of improving their performance. Contrary to our expectations, however, a direct comparison among workers in different career stages did not reveal significant differences in the HPWP–PO fit relationship. This outcome might be explained by Super's (1978) suggestion that the dominance of any one type of concern or motive during a given career stage does not mean that it is not encountered at other career stages.

Our results also add to the PO fit literature, which has thus far tended not to distinguish among different types of employees or career stages (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Specifically, we show that the relationship between PO fit and affective commitment is significant only among employees in the maintenance stage, in line with the idea that achieving PO fit may be particularly satisfying for this group of employees (Ng & Feldman, 2010). However, the relationship between PO fit and affective commitment only significantly differed from employees in the establishment stage, and not the advancement stage, suggesting that employees already develop a concern for job security and career stability in

the advancement stage and thus search for indications that they have chosen (to stay with) the right organization. In addition, many PO fit studies focus on selection and organizational entry (e.g., Cable & Parsons, 2001; Saks & Ashforth, 1997); however, researchers are increasingly acknowledging the importance of understanding the development of PO fit perceptions over time, as well their antecedents and consequences (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Our focus on the relationships among HPWP, PO fit perceptions and affective commitment, across multiple career stages, contributes to this emerging stream of PO literature.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although the three-wave survey design can be seen as a strength, this study also has limitations. First, the appropriate time lag to be employed in studies aimed at examining the effects of HRM is unclear (e.g., Wright et al., 2005). Previous research has shown that employees adapt their expectations and attitudes fairly quickly to changes in HRM; in particular, Piening, Baluch and Salge (2013) found that perceived HR practices influence job satisfaction one year later. Therefore, we chose a one-year time lag. However, there is no consensus on the ideal time lag, and future research could employ shorter or longer time lags to extend our findings. These future studies should also measure perceived HPWP multiple times; since we measured HPWP only at Time 1, our analysis could not take into account possible changes in perceived HPWP over time and as such cannot be considered a longitudinal study (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010).

Second, we measured perceptions of HPWP using yes/no questions, in line with earlier research (MacDuffie, 1995). We opted for this measure as opposed to a coverage measure (asking for the percentage of employees covered by the practices), because a coverage measure does not capture employees' personal experiences of HPWP, which can vary across individuals (Lepak et al., 2006; Nishii & Wright, 2008). Yet other measures, such as a Likert scale, might provide more fine-grained information regarding the extent to which

employees perceive that HPWP are being implemented. On the other hand, the use of a Likert scale may increase the risk that HPWP measures will be confounded with the mediating and dependent variables. Future studies could include other measures of HPWP, such as HR manager or line manager perceptions of HPWP, or the intensity of HPWP (using a Likert scale), to assess the differences between measures and their effects.

Third, we operationalized career stage using organizational tenure. Although this is a common operationalization, it is still a proxy. Future research should consider asking employees to self-select into one of the career stages based on their current work-related concerns and foci. Besides career stage, future research could also focus on employees' needs or values as a moderator, to further examine the effects of individual differences in the relationships among HPWP, PO fit, and commitment.

Fourth, we collected data in a large university. Rating PO fit in such an organization might be challenging, as employees might perceive the university as a more distant entity compared with smaller sub-organizations to which they belong (e.g., a research lab). Yet, research has shown that even in large organizations, PO fit is a relevant construct that has positive effects on employees (e.g., Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). Future research could test our model in a smaller organization to see whether stronger relationships with PO fit are observed.

Finally, future studies could consider other types of person-environment fit as potential mediators in the HPWP–commitment relationship, including person-job fit, person-team fit, and person-supervisor fit, as well as include ‘actual’ (or objective) fit.

### **Practical Implications**

Our study suggests that enhancing employees’ perceptions of PO fit might serve as a means of strengthening their commitment, but that organizations should take workers’ career stages into account when attempting to design such an intervention. Specifically, only

employees in the maintenance career stage are likely to show greater commitment as a consequence of enhanced PO fit. Our results also point to a potential means of enhancing employees' perceived PO fit: namely, implementation of HPWP, while ensuring that employees are made aware of the availability of HPWP and that implementation is consistent with managerial intent. Such an approach, in which managers are likely to play an important role, should involve clear communication of the organization's values and beliefs to employees and creation of a strong organizational culture. In this case, too, organizations should take employees' career stages into account, as employees in the advancement stage of their careers are most likely to show enhanced PO fit as a consequence of perceived HPWP.

### **CONCLUSION**

This three-wave survey study aimed to contribute to the strategic HRM literature by examining how and when perceived HPWP lead to affective commitment. Building on the fit literature, this study demonstrated that perceptions of HPWP lead to perceived PO fit and in turn affective commitment over time. Further, building on career stage theories, this study demonstrated that the relationship between perceptions of HPWP and PO fit particularly holds in the advancement stage and that perceived PO fit only leads to higher affective commitment in the maintenance career stage.

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Table 1.

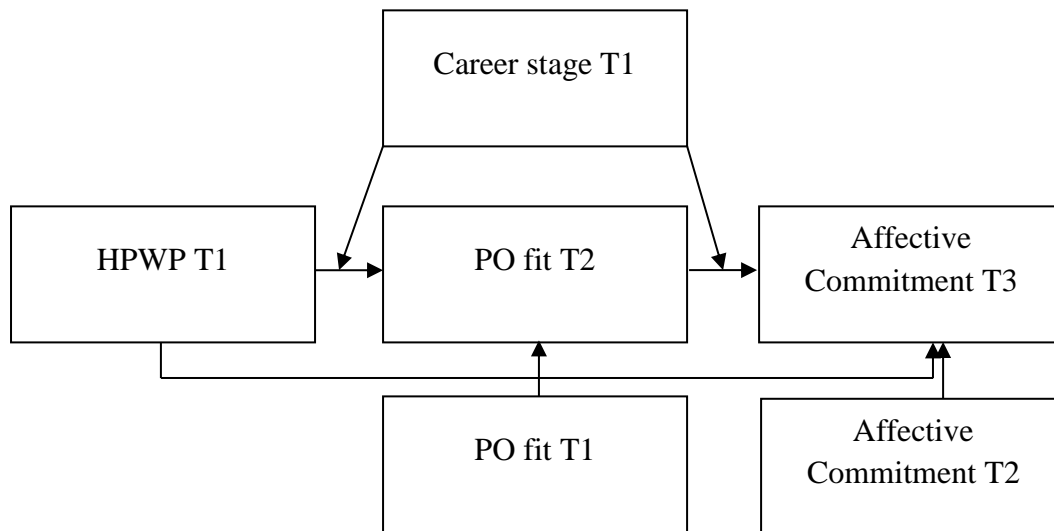
## Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. HPWP T1	9.40	2.90	467										
2. PO fit T1	3.24	.70	474	.30 <sup>a</sup>	.85								
3. PO fit T2	3.13	.71	433	.29 <sup>a</sup>	.68 <sup>a</sup>	.84							
4. Affective commitment T2	4.02	1.01	477	.25 <sup>a</sup>	.51 <sup>a</sup>	.65 <sup>a</sup>	.87						
5. Affective commitment T3	3.95	1.02	470	.21 <sup>a</sup>	.51 <sup>a</sup>	.61 <sup>a</sup>	.81 <sup>a</sup>	.87					
6. Organization tenure	11.81	10.27	486	.17 <sup>a</sup>	-.10 <sup>*</sup>	.02	.19 <sup>a</sup>	.20 <sup>a</sup>					
7. Job tenure	6.11	7.29	486	-.02	-.15 <sup>**</sup>	-.06	.07	.05	.59 <sup>a</sup>				
8. Age	43.99	10.88	484	.17 <sup>a</sup>	-.03	.01	.17 <sup>a</sup>	.21 <sup>a</sup>	.68 <sup>a</sup>	.44 <sup>a</sup>			
9. Gender	.50	.50	486	.00	-.03	-.02	.07	.04	.15 <sup>**</sup>	.14 <sup>**</sup>	.16 <sup>a</sup>		
10. Educational level			480	.10 <sup>*</sup>	.02	-.04	-.12 <sup>**</sup>	-.10 <sup>*</sup>	-.10 <sup>*</sup>	-.16 <sup>a</sup>	-.13 <sup>**</sup>	.07	
11. Occupational group	.42	.49	486	-.12 <sup>**</sup>	-.03	-.07	-.16 <sup>a</sup>	-.14 <sup>**</sup>	-.13 <sup>**</sup>	-.02	-.21 <sup>a</sup>	.12 <sup>**</sup>	.50 <sup>a</sup>

*Note.*  $N = 487$ ; <sup>a</sup>  $p < .001$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ ; <sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ . Reliabilities are reported along the diagonal. T = Time; gender: 1 = female; occupational group: 1 = scientific staff

Figure 1.

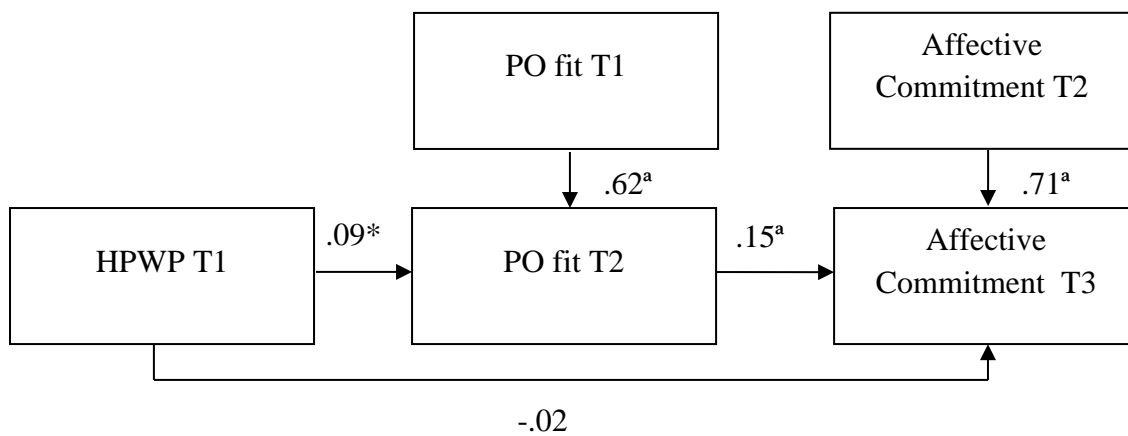
Hypothesized model



Note. T = Time.

Figure 2.

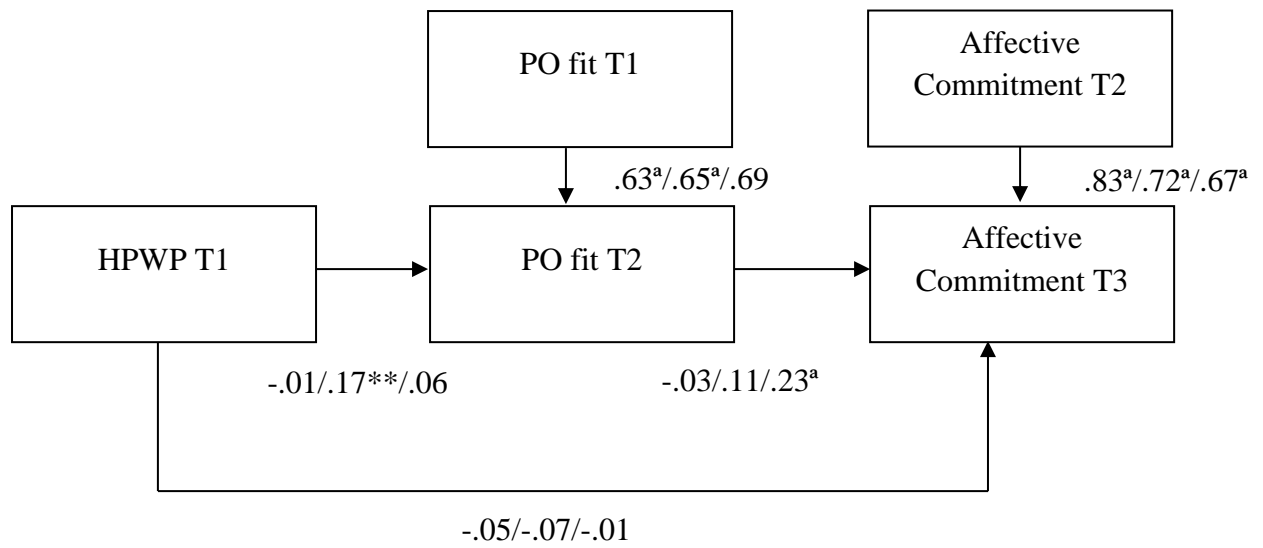
Standardized effects for all employees (controlling for age)



Note.  $N = 487$ ;  $^a p < .001$ ;  $** p < .01$ ;  $* p < .05$ . T = Time.

Figure 3.

Standardized effects for career stages (controlling for age)



Note.  $N = 487$ ;  $^a p < .001$ ;  $^{**} p < .01$ ;  $^* p < .05$ ;  $-.01/.17^{**}/.06$  refers to the standardized effects for establishment/advancement/maintenance career stage. T = Time.