

The application of systems thinking in investigating the interconnections between corporate culture, person-organization fit and turnover intention: A case of a Greek consulting firm

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Abstract

The movement of “silent quitting” and the “great resignation” are trends of the post covid era when the lockdowns triggered a shift in the way that many employees viewed their workplace. According to Hopkins and Figaro (2021), with long periods of lockdowns and isolation, workers took the opportunity to reevaluate their lives and priorities. The “great resignation” movement started in spring 2021, when employees were asked to go back to work and by the end of 2021, specifically in the US, over 47 million voluntarily quit their jobs (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). Others, instead of resigning from their positions, opted to solely fulfill the essential requirements of their work, establishing boundaries and declining to undertake tasks beyond their capacity. The contemporary corporate environments demands sustainable organisations where employees are involved and integrated into their work and organization. Sustainable organizational practices enable collaborative working processes, relationships and corporate cultures that promote a stable workplace, and cohesive leadership to result in performance (Vargas-Hernandez, 2022). Harter (2022) identified the primary factors contributing to “quiet quitting”, as the sense of feeling disrespected due to a lack of appreciation, a toxic corporate culture with limited options for personal development, and the lack of alignment with the organization's mission. Our research applies systems thinking and identifies the interdependencies between corporate culture, subcultures, leadership style, person-organization fit and intention to quit and presents a causal work diagram illustrating the many and varied interconnections and the link to organisational sustainability. Our research adds empirical evidence to the above concepts and provides new ways of thinking about the complex system of corporate culture.

Keywords: systems thinking, corporate culture, subcultures, person-organization fit, intention to quit

1. Introduction

Literature demonstrates a significant disparity between social and management scientists on the extensive topic of corporate culture. Social scientists have endeavored to comprehend the fundamental theories of culture, whereas management scientists appear to be eager to employ simplified versions of these theories in managerial contexts. In an era where corporate culture and individual choice are interconnected, understanding corporate culture drivers, becomes critical in retaining talents. The topics of *employee retention* and *intention to quit* examine the important topic of turnover, including its causes and implications. Employee retention is a complex challenge closely connected to company leadership (Keswin, 2022). Intention to quit refers to the subjective estimation by an individual regarding the probability of leaving an organization in the near future (Mowday et al., 1982). The person-organization (P-O) fit concept has been viewed as a predictor of employee turnover (Arthur et al., 2006). The corporate culture has a substantial impact on the ability to retain employees, as they are more inclined to stay with a company when the culture of the workplace is in harmony with their personal values and professional goals (Trice and Beyer,

1993). These authors imply that organizational cultures are significantly correlated to leadership style and influence employee behavior and practices. Research also argues that subcultures exhibit the same characteristics as cultures, including unique patterns of shared ideology and diverse sets of cultural norms (Keyton, 2011). Niemietz, De Kinderen and Constantinidis, (2013) highlight the significance of subcultures in organizational transformation, where the importance and significance is attached to the overall culture, but the role of subcultures is often overlooked. Ogbonna et al. (2015) provide an example of how subcultures might impact the processes in an organization, where subcultures' functions embody the values and norms of their members and exert a comparable influence on the overall culture as well as the behavior of its in-group members (Ogbonna et al., 2015). Systems thinking identifies the interdependencies among the above concepts with the belief that everything in a business is connected to everything else, and this interconnectedness directly impacts an organization and its outcomes.

2. Background

2.1. Corporate culture and subculture

Corporate culture (CC) is a broad and somewhat ambiguous concept which has been investigated for many decades and with various approaches of understanding and measurement. The concept refers to “the shared pattern of beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours that members of the organisation learn over time” (Schein, 1990, p. 11). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) referred in their definition to a set of shared assumptions that guide behaviours. Corporate culture is complex because “it is shaped externally by the national and global environment and internally by the cultures of all of its individuals” (Kucharska & Bedford, 2023, p.27). Deal and Kennedy (2000) argue that corporate culture is the single most important factor accounting for success or failure in organizations; and identified a link between corporate culture and business performance. Carmeli (2005) provided preliminary evidence that employees' withdrawal behaviour and intentions are partly products of CC. Multiple studies indicate that a corporate culture, if aligned with the organisation strategy and environment, will bring superior results (Carvalho et al., 2019). Hofstede's (b. 1928, d. 2020) extensive research on both national and corporate culture has had a profound influence across many disciplines. Hofstede has defined corporate culture as “*the way in which members of an organisation relate to each other, their work, and the outside world in comparison to other organisations. It can either enable or hinder an organisation's strategy*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6). Most quantitative measures of culture include at least one dimension that is conceptually similar to those of Hofstede (Taras et al., 2009). Even if empirical research has identified organizations as complex systems (Carley, 1995), through specifying how the system is structured and the rules of interaction, we can explore the patterns of behavior of its actors. Culture consists of multiple actors that are interconnected and engaged in mutual interaction. According to Kuhn (1974), subcultures can only be understood in relation to all other elements of the system, and CC should be seen as a set of behavioural patterns inside the system. Therefore, the study of the social interactions that power the system consists of interpreting “communicated, learned patterns common to a relatively large groups [of people]” [Kuhn, 1974 p. 157].

Kucharska & Bedford (2023) asserted that corporate culture is influenced by two sets of factors, those that are inherited from the organization and those that derive from the composition of the unit or team and what each individual brings to it. The pluralist position views culture not as a single entity, but rather as a compilation of subcultures existing inside a dominant culture. Those subcultures are defined as cohesive social groups that are characterized by a collective adherence to a specific set of norms and beliefs that emerge inside established units (Martin & Siehl, 1983; Trice, 1993). Martin (1992) argued that organizational cultures might be either coherent and unified, or integrated and defined by collections of subcultures. Subcultures could develop based upon a variety of drivers including task interdependence, reporting relationships, proximity, office design, sharing of facilities and equipment (Martin, 1992). Teamwork itself may lead to the

development of an ingroup/outgroup feeling (Lok et al., 2005) and this professional identity is a strong driver of the development of subcultures (Fitzgerald & Teal, 2004). Location and geography can also be important determinants for the growth of subcultures (Gaved & Mulholland, 2016). The topic of subcultures within organisations has not received a great amount of research attention to date.

2.2. Person – Organization Fit, turnover intentions and employee engagement.

Turnover intention refers to employees' aim to stop working at their workplace (Melky, 2015). The current COVID-19 situation has seen employee retention emerge as a core problem for organizations across the globe (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2017; Yousaf et al., 2019). Kerr and Slocum (1987) and Kopelman et al (1990) argued that the variation in employee retention across organizations may be related to corporate culture values which are influenced by human resources strategies and priorities. The concept of a good "fit" to corporate values also shows a significant relationship with job satisfaction and retention (Chatman, 1989). The person-organization fit is the "compatibility between people and the organizations in which they work for" (Kristof-Brown, 1996, p. 1). Generally, employees are easy to retain, provided they see a good match with their employer (Umamaheswari and Krishnan, 2016) and their leader (Covella et al., 2017). Retention is found to be related to a corporate environment that is structured to support employee empowerment, and enhance employee value (Ohunakin et al., 2019; Frye et al., 2020), as well as a leadership style that is consistent with these requirements (Kim and Park, 2020).

Turnover intention is the most important indicator of actual leaving behaviour (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Employee retention, which is the opposite to turnover intention, is a challenging endeavour that necessitates the reduction of both actual turnover and the eagerness to leave, as turnover intention is argued to be a strong indicator for actual turnover (Firth et al., 2004). Karin and Birgit (2007) defined it as "the intention to voluntarily change companies or to leave the labor market altogether" (p. 711). Moore (2002) explained that although actual turnover behavior is still a popular construct among researchers, turnover intention represents a strong surrogate variable. Griffith et al. (2000) carried out a meta-analysis on predictors of actual turnover in which turnover intention was a key predictor. Kim S., Tam L., Kim J-N., Rhee N. (2017) found a positive association between authoritarian corporate culture and turnover intention. The alignment between an individual's values and goals and those of the organization will result in a stronger sense of purpose and emotional connection, ultimately leading to increased levels of employee engagement, which over time develops a lower inclination to depart from the organization (Memon et al., 2014). There have only been a few research studies in the past that have addressed this indirect relationship. The person -organization fit has often been conceptualized in terms of value (Kristof-Brown, 1996) and goal similarities (Verquer et al., 2003), and previous studies have demonstrated a negative association between the person-organisation fit and turnover intention (Verquer et al., 2003). Memon et al. (2014) hypothesized that the level of employee engagement will act as a mediator in the connection between the alignment of a person with the organization and their intention to leave the company. The alignment between an individual's values and goals and those of the organization will result in an increased sense of purpose and emotional connection, ultimately leading to higher levels of employee engagement. Over time, individuals who have a greater degree of employee involvement are less inclined to depart from the firm (Memon et al., 2014).

3. Research Method

Corporate culture (CC) is often simplified in theory, but in actual fact it is a complex system that needs to be understood using a systems thinking approach to answer the following research question: what are the interconnections between corporate culture, person-organisation fit, leadership style, and turnover intention?

3.1. Sampling

The researchers approached a Greek consulting office, a franchise of a global brand. The office was founded in 2003 and has become a top leadership advisory firm in the local market, with expertise in top-level and senior management executive search. The firm employees 38 business consultants and back-office staff and is managed by a 5-shareholder scheme, of which 3 members act as executives, and are included in the employee number count. All research participants were, at the time, full-time employees of the firm. Following a personal email invitation to participate in an Organisation Culture survey as part of the new business plan 2024-2026 process, employees were asked to anonymously complete an online survey. The online survey link was disseminated via email with the assistance of the human resource department. Furthermore, a gentle reminder was included during data collection to increase the number of responses. Researchers checked each form to ensure there were no missing values in the dataset. From the invitees, 31 out of the 38 in total responded which results in 82% response rate. Of the 31 respondents, 27 belong to the customer front units that drive the business and the other 4 belong to support units. This research is focused on the 27 customer front participants in order to measure the subcultures as well as the overall culture. The demographics of the 27 respondents are as follows: 11 men and 16 women, age ranges between age brackets with 7 participants being over 40 years old, 14 being between 30 to 40 years old and 6 participants being under 30 years of age, giving this research a distribution of opinions in the generational side. Regarding their tenure in the firm, there is an even distribution between participants of under 2 years and over 2 years tenure, with 5 participants being rather new, under 1 year in the firm. Regarding their education, half of the participants hold a bachelor's degree and the other half, Masters and Doctoral degrees.

The firm's 27 customer front consultants are structured into 3 sectorial subgroups that interact on a project basis and needs. For the analysis of the subgroup culture of the 3 business units we take into consideration their demographics. Unit 1 has 6 employees, unit 2 has 14 employees and Unit 3 has 7 employees. The total number of employees in each Unit includes their leaders and the employee number remained the same during 2021-2022-2023, as following an employee resignation a replacement was soon recruited.

Table 1.

Employee resignation per UNIT	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3
	3		3
		1	
	3	1	1

Retention data were provided by the HR department for the above 3 years. Unit 1 lost 3 consultants in 2021 and another 3 in 2023, Unit 2 lost 1 consultant in 2022 and 1 in 2023 and Unit 3 lost 3 consultants in 2021 and 1 in 2023. In total, the firm had 6 out of 27 resignations in year 2021 (23%), 1 out of 27 in year 2022 (3%) and 5 out of 27 in year 2023 (18.5%). From the secondary data retrieved from the organization we can see lower retention in Units 1 & 3, taking into consideration the impact of such rate, especially as these units have less members than Unit 2.

3.2. Measuring instruments

In our study CC was measured using the Hofstede et al (1990) Multi-Factor Method (MFM). This scale produces six autonomous dimensions and two partially autonomous dimensions. From the autonomous dimensions, D1 describes organizational effectiveness (means oriented vs goal-oriented cultures), D2 describes customer orientation (internally driven vs externally driven), D3 describes level of control (easygoing work discipline vs strict work discipline), D4 describes focus identification (local vs professional), D5 describes approachability (open system vs closed system) and D6 describes management philosophy (employee orientation vs customer orientation). D7

measures acceptance of leadership style, and is also determined by the scores on D1 (means versus goal oriented). The scores on D8 which measures identification with the organization, are partly defined by the scores of D2 (internally versus externally driven). D7 and D8 are normative, producing a good pole and a bad pole; where D1 to D6 are non-normative and in such the desired and actual position is determined by employees, whereas the optimal position is determined by management. The evaluation of these dimensions is presented in a 0-100 analysis, providing where the organisations stands within the spectrum of the two poles. By evaluating these six dimensions, this approach allows for the quantification of cultural dimensions, enabling comparisons over time or between subcultures and the overall culture, ensuring congruence between actual, optimal and desired outcomes. The actual and desired results are obtained via the survey questions where the participants are invited to answer questions on how they see some practices today and how they wish to see them in the future to identify with the organisation (person-organisation fit), where the optimal results are agreed among leaders via a workshop that the researchers run, where the management identified what direction their practices should follow in the 6 dimensions, in order to achieve their strategic objective. The MFM model is well validated and reliable and has been used in research and practice for over 20 years (Hofstede et al., 2010). The data are self-reported, and the analysis is run by the Hofstede Insights Organization which holds the rights to the survey.

Additional surveys were also distributed. The Turnover Intention Scale (TIS-6) by Botham & Roodt (2013) with internal reliability $\alpha = 0.80$, was used as it could significantly distinguish between leavers and stayers (actual turnover), and thereby confirming its criterion-predictive validity. The TIS-6 was compared with the the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, shortened version (UWES-3) which was used to assess work engagement with internal reliability $\alpha = 0.91$ (Schaufeli et al., 2019). A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from "1 - Strongly Disagree" to "5 - Strongly Agree", and a single measure for each causal condition and outcome was calculated for each employee using Fs/QCA. The outcome under consideration is the intention to quit, while the causal condition is employee engagement.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Results

The analysis of the MFM model shows the actual results on the six dimensions as presented in table 2, where the subcultures are close to the overall culture, measuring towards the same direction with no extreme fluctuations. Even though the overall actual culture is defined including the results from 4 back-office employees, in times it seems that it represents the mean of the 3 subcultures. This identifies the significant role of subcultures and how a subculture can influence the overall culture.

Table 2.

	D1 Actual	D2 Actual	D3 Actual	D4 Actual	D5 Actual	D6 Actual
Overall Corporate Culture	68	39	42	63	28	55
Subculture 1	57	29	32	61	30	54
Subculture 2	69	37	35	61	34	64
Subculture 3	71	52	45	58	21	40

The analysis of the MFM model also show the optimal (management view) versus the desired results (employee view) on the six dimensions where the differences in subcultures exaggerate the

overall culture, showing extreme fluctuations and a low identification of employees with the management view. Such extremes present a problem regarding the sustainability of the organization.

Table 3

	Corporate Culture	Subculture 1	Subculture 2	Subculture 3
D1 Optimal	60	60	60	60
D1 Desired	91	88	90	92
D2 Optimal	75	75	75	75
D2 Desired	67	54	79	71
D3 Optimal	55	55	55	55
D3 Desired	55	59	52	52
D4 Optimal	55	55	55	55
D4 Desired	86	83	87	80
D5 Optimal	55	55	55	55
D5 Desired	-4	0	-7	0
D6 Optimal	70	70	70	70
D6 Desired	17	25	8	25

The above analysis is also identified with the semi-autonomous dimension D7, where the results show an overall low acceptance of the leadership style, with an emphasis on Units 1 and 3 that have experienced high employee turnover rates during the past 3 years. Table 4 presents the leadership data.

Table 4.

	Leadership Acceptance	Actual Leadership Style	Desired Leadership style
Overall	32%	39% Consultive	58% Consultive
Unit 1 Results	20%	60% Consultive	60% Consultive
Unit 2 Results	43%	36% Paternalistic/Consultive	50% Consultive
Unit 3 Results	20%	60% Paternalistic	80% Consultive

Additionally the semi-autonomous dimension D8 show a low degree of homogeneity, with actual results at 65 and desired at 94, which identifies with the degree to which respondents disagree with the way they experience and perceive their culture. In the analysis of the intention to quit data versus employee engagements for the above participants in the 3 subgroups as shown in Table 5 we observe that the presence or absence of work engagement is not necessarily related to intention to quit, as all consistency scores are less than the 0.90 threshold. However, it is worth mentioning that the absence of work engagement seems to strengthen the intention to quit as it shows greater (Consistency = 0.812928) than its presence (Consistency = 0.522037).

Table 5.

PRESENTATION OF CONVENTION	Intent to Quit	
	Consistency	Coverage
WorkEngagment	0.522037	0.484986
ABSENCE OF CONVENTION	Intent to Quit	
	Consistency	Coverage
~WorkEngagment	0.812928	0.691091

4.2. Systems Analysis Discussion

By embracing a systems thinking mentality with regard to CC, we can gain a deeper understanding of the fundamental patterns, structures, and feedback loops that influence the dynamics of an organization and create the problems that we aim to identify in our study. Thus a proposal for creating a retention strategy will involve identifying the type of culture employees desire and comparing it with the current culture within the organisation, and seeking a balance between optimal and desired culture that retains employees and ensures the company's prosperity. The actual culture is one of the more important determinants, next to issues such as content of the job, remuneration and career opportunities that significantly influence employee retention (Hofstede, 2010). OC has a high impact on retention (Anitha & Begum, 2016).

From our results, we identify the following interdependencies:

- A low score in leadership acceptance which indicates that employees do not believe leaders preserve their desired corporate culture.
- A weak correlation between the absence of work engagement that enhances the intention to quit. The opposite cannot be verified.
- Engagement is negatively associated with intention to quit.
- Overall, we see a disagreement between what management desires (optimal culture) and what employees desired (desired culture), showing a negative relation of organization-person fit. The literature indicates that there is a weak negative relationship between organization-person fit and turnover intention (Khalida & Safitri, 2016)
- From the literature, employee desired culture, when opposite from optimal culture, decreases identification/organization -person fit with the organization and increases intention to quit (Graham, et al., 2022).
- Higher D4 professional culture preference by employees has a negative identification of employees with their team or organisation, which renders them more receptive to external opportunities and increases their intention to quit. The local versus professional score is positively associated with intention to quit.
- Dimension D6 which corresponds to management philosophy towards work-orientation, drives employees to feel that management doesn't prioritize their welfare over clients; and so that negatively affects employee retention (Hofstede et al., 1990): the person organization fit is negatively correlated with intention to quit.
- Subculture scores show a higher gap between desired and optimal culture than the overall culture which is positively associated with intention to quit.

Based on a systems thinking approach and the findings presented above, the authors illustrate the interconnections between CC, person-organization fit and turnover intention via the following causal link diagram, shown in figure 1.

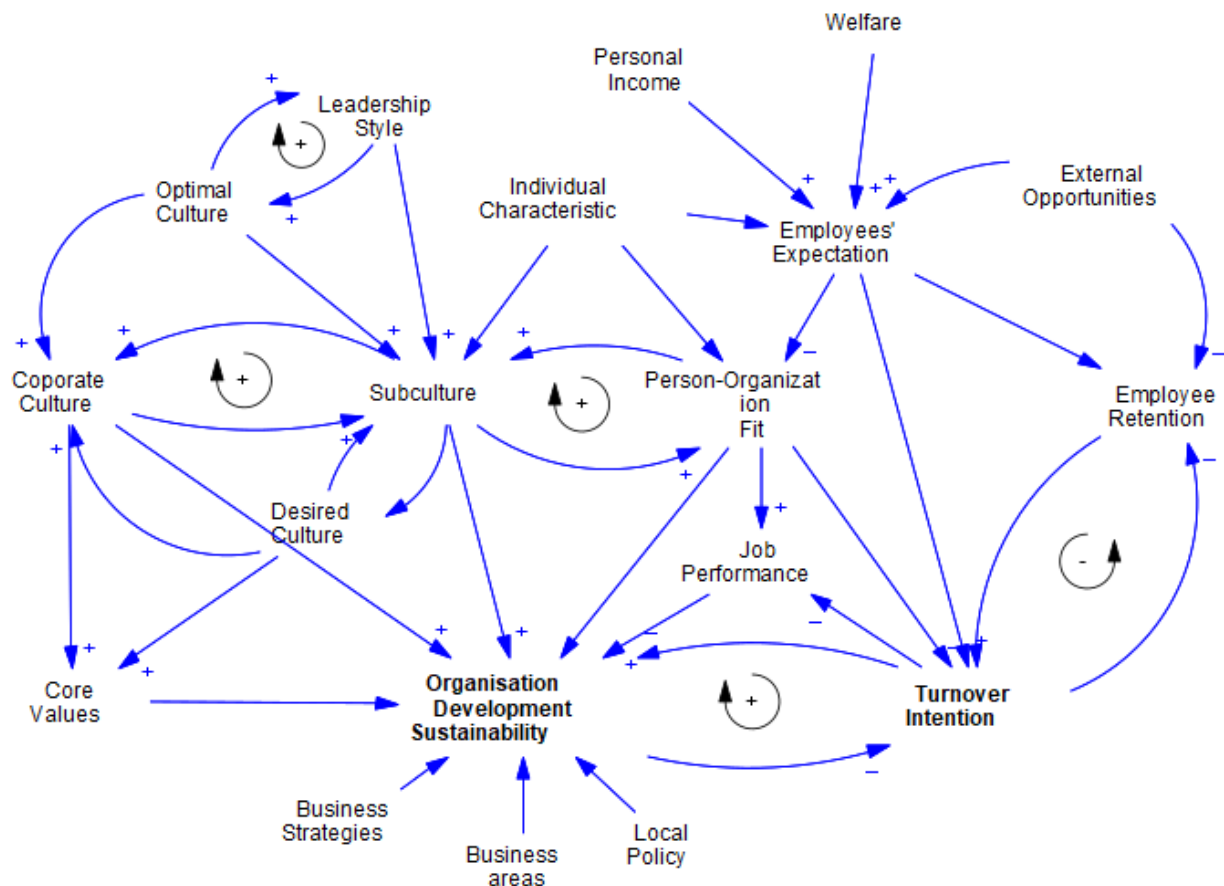


Figure 1

This diagram indicates the web of interconnections present within the complex adaptive system of CC in this organisation. Important points to note are the relation between turnover intentions and the sustainability of the organisation, and employees' expectation as a direct force upon retention and person-organisation fit.

5. Conclusions, limitations, and future directions

This study has focused on the analysis of the desired culture and its impact on employee intention to quit along with other variables. Additional factors also might have an interconnection, direct or indirect, balancing of reinforcing with intention to quit, such as salary and benefits, work advancements and opportunities. Unfortunately, these factors were not able to be included in the present study and future research could empirically research them as well.

In practice, the causal loop diagram as a technique provides an overview of the interdependences of the variables enabling us to visualise the complexity of the situation. Taking a general CAS approach to culture and understanding it using a system thinking lens could provide alternative answers to a problem via the understanding of factors that possibly enhance intention to quit. As noted by Schein (2010), the study of corporate culture is of paramount importance now due to the increasing complexity of business environments, greater interconnectedness, the increasing role of artificial intelligence, and a greater role of stakeholders, all of which present a far more complex scenario for understanding and transforming CC. The fundamental principles of an organization originate from its leadership and their leadership style. A robust corporate culture occurs when there is a cohesive alignment of behavior, values, and beliefs which drive a positive organisation-person fit. Leaders must recognize their important role in preserving the organization's culture, as this will minimize conflicts and foster a positive work atmosphere for employees.

This paper is an early exploration of the use of systems thinking in understanding the relationships between various aspects of culture, intention to quit and how these various factors are interrelated in producing this particular outcome. We conclude that a desired and an optimal culture should be similar, and if this is not the case, an organisation will face difficulties in implementing their strategy.

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