# Applicant–Employee Fit in Personality: Testing predictions from similarity-attraction theory and trait activation theory

## Greet Van Hoye* and Daniel B. Turban**

*Department of Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior, Ghent University, Henleykaai 84, 9000 Ghent, Belgium. greet.vanhoye@ugent.be
**Department of Management, Robert J. Trulaske, Sr College of Business, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65203, USA

We extend prior research by examining whether, and how, applicant–employee fit in the personality traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion affect organizational attractiveness. We test hypotheses based on similarity-attraction theory and trait activation theory. Results from two studies indicate that applicants high in valued traits are more attracted to organizations when employees are more similar to them in those personality traits, whereas employees' trait levels do not affect attraction for applicants low in valued traits. The effects of objective applicant–employee fit in personality on attractiveness were mediated by perceived applicant–employee fit. The pattern of the observed applicant–employee fit interactions was best predicted by trait activation theory and, thus, provide an important extension to similarity-attraction theory.

## 1. Introduction

Attracting and retaining the most talented personnel is crucial for organizational success and survival (Breaugh, 2013). One of the more important determinants of organizational attraction is perceived fit (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005), as applicants prefer work environments that are compatible with their own characteristics (Kristof, 1996). In their review of recruitment research, Cable and Turban (2001) identified three major categories of applicant beliefs regarding work environments theorized to influence perceived fit with and attraction to organizations: employer information, job information, and employee information. Notably, although evidence indicates that organizational attractiveness is related to applicant fit with organization characteristics and with job attributes (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), research on whether or how fit with current employees (i.e., applicant–employee

fit) influences organizational attraction is scarce (Devendorf & Highhouse, 2008).

Thus, we know little about how employee characteristics and their compatibility with applicant characteristics influence organizational attraction. This is an unfortunate gap in the literature, as recruitment activities often provide information about current employees and, thus, applicants are likely to develop beliefs about their fit with employee characteristics, influencing their attraction to the organization (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007). For example, recruitment advertisements and websites often feature testimonials by employees. Similarly, many other recruitment activities, such as job fairs and employee referrals, provide opportunities for applicants to meet employees and to assess fit.

Therefore, this study expands prior research by examining whether the compatibility between applicants' and employees' personality traits (i.e., conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion) affects applicants' perceived fit with and attraction to organizations. In addition, we extend theory by examining predictions from both similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) and trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000)

to examine how applicant–employee fit in personality influences organizational attraction. Our hypotheses are tested in two different samples of (potential) applicants, to assess the robustness and generalizability of our findings. On a practical level, this study offers important implications for how employers can attract the best fitting applicants.

## 2. Person–environment fit and organizational attraction

A person–environment (PE) fit perspective to recruitment proposes that applicants are more attracted to work environments with characteristics compatible with their own characteristics (Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005). Thus, instead of assuming that the factors influencing organizational attraction are the same for all applicants, PE fit theories suggest that applicants' characteristics influence how they react to recruitment activities and to an organization's characteristics (Breaugh, 2013). For example, Schneider's (1987) attraction–selection–attrition framework proposes that different kinds of organizations attract, select, and retain different kinds of people (see also Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). More specifically, applicants are theorized to be attracted to organizations consisting of people who match their own personal attributes (Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 1998). Consistent with these general theoretical assumptions, considerable evidence indicates that PE fit is positively related to organizational attraction (Chapman et al., 2005; Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005). However, fit has been conceptualized and operationalized differently, which has important theoretical implications (Kausel & Slaughter, 2011; Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005).

One important distinction is between supplementary and complementary fit (Yu, 2014). Supplementary fit is conceptualized as the similarity of characteristics whereas complementary fit occurs when one party's characteristics provide what the other party wants or needs (Kristof, 1996). Thus, supplementary fit suggests that individuals are attracted to organizations that have similar attributes; this conceptualization is consistent with the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Van Vianen, 2005). Note, however, that the complementary fit perspective does not focus on similarity, but instead proposes that individuals will see organizations as more attractive when they provide what the individual needs. Importantly, evidence supports both perspectives. For example, Cable and Edwards (2004) found that both supplementary fit, operationalized as value congruence, and complementary fit, operationalized as psychological need fulfillment, independently influenced work attitudes. Thus, because what is meant by fit varies across studies, it is important to describe the specific type of fit examined (Kristof, 1996).

In addition to how fit is operationalized, a further issue is what type of fit is examined. Scholars have investigated a person's fit with a vocation, job, organization, work group, and other persons (Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005). In the recruitment context, however, most studies have investigated whether fit with the organization (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996) or job (e.g., Carless, 2005) is related to employer attractiveness. Only a few studies have examined the compatibility of applicant and employee characteristics (i.e., applicant–employee fit) (Devendorf & Highhouse, 2008; Von Walter, Wentzel, & Tomczak, 2012) and, to the best of our knowledge, none of these have investigated fit in personality traits.

An important issue for fit researchers is what aspect of the individual (and organization) to examine. For example, previous fit research has conceptualized fit using values, needs, and personality traits (Kristof-Brown & Jansen, 2007). With respect to personality, evidence supports the proposition that applicants with particular personality traits are more attracted to organizations with certain characteristics (Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005). For example, Judge and Cable (1997) found that more extraverted applicants were more attracted to organizations with a team-oriented culture and more agreeable applicants were more attracted to supportive organizational cultures. As another example, Lievens, Decaesteker, Coetsier, and Geirnaert (2001) observed that more conscientious applicants were more attracted to large organizations.

Note, however, that in much of the recruitment research examining fit in personality, the measurement of the characteristics of the environment and the person is not commensurate (Kristof-Brown & Jansen, 2007). Specifically, whereas personality traits measure the individual's characteristics, the environment is typically measured with objective (e.g., size) or subjective (e.g., culture) organizational characteristics (Kristof, 1996). In contrast, research on fit in values or needs has used commensurate measures of the environment and person, allowing for a more direct conceptualization of fit and its effects on organizational attraction (Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005). In this study, we adhere to calls to use commensurate measures of personality fit (Caplan, 1987) and examine whether applicant–employee fit in personality is related to organizational attraction (Ryan & Kristof-Brown, 2003).

Overall, we expect applicant–employee fit in personality will be related to organizational attractiveness and extend prior research by theorizing and investigating two different mechanisms through which such fit might influence attraction. First, based on similarity-attraction theory, we theorize that applicants will be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar personality characteristics (Byrne, 1971; Schneider, 1987). Second, based on trait activation theory, we theorize that applicants will be attracted to employment contexts in which

the expression of the applicant's personality characteristics is rewarded (Lievens, Chasteen, Day, & Christiansen, 2006; Tett & Burnett, 2003). As will be discussed below, although these are both 'fit' hypotheses, proposing that applicant and employee personality traits interact to influence organizational attraction, the pattern of the interaction differs across these theoretical perspectives.

## 3. Theoretical perspectives on applicant–employee personality fit

A supplementary fit conceptualization, which is consistent with Schneider's (1987) attraction–selection–attrition framework, suggests that attraction will be higher when there is greater similarity of applicant and employee characteristics (Kristof, 1996). The similar-to-me hypothesis proposes that people are more attracted to others who are more similar to themselves (Byrne, 1971), and evidence has supported this hypothesis for both interpersonal and employment relationships (Cialdini, 2001; Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman et al., 2005; Selfhout, Denissen, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Strauss, Barrick, & Connerley, 2001). Such results are also consistent with social identity theory and research, which proposes that people define their self-concept and enhance their self-image by choosing membership in organizations consisting of people similar to themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

Although prior research on applicant–employee fit and organizational attraction is scarce, some evidence supports the similarity-attraction hypothesis in recruitment settings. For example, Devendorf and Highhouse (2008) found that the similarity between the self-image of female college students and the image of prototypical employees at retail stores (in terms of being seen as conservative, sporty, or alternative) predicted organizational attractiveness. Additionally, Von Walter et al. (2012) found that value similarity between applicants and employees (with respect to stimulation and femininity) was positively related to employer attraction. Hence, based on the conceptualization of fit as similarity, one would expect that applicants will be more attracted to organizations with employees who have similar (vs. dissimilar) personality characteristics, expressing a supplementary fit effect.

A different form of the fit hypothesis is suggested by trait activation theory, which proposes that individuals express specific personality traits in response to trait-relevant cues in the situation (Tett & Burnett, 2003). As such, trait activation theory has provided insight into how personality is related to both job performance and assessment center ratings (Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013; Li, Barrick, Zimmerman, & Chiaburu, 2014; Lievens et al., 2006). Tett and Burnett (2003) noted that because trait expression is a fundamental part of human nature, individuals seek situations that afford 'opportunities for expressing his or her

particular array of personality traits' (p. 505). Some evidence indicates that individuals are attracted to others, such as coworkers, who allow them to express fundamental characteristics of their personality (Tett & Murphy, 2002). Importantly, however, applicants seek situations that provide opportunities for expressing traits that are valued by others: '. . .people want to work where they are rewarded for being themselves' (Tett & Christiansen, 2007, p. 977).

Thus, we theorize that when an applicant has a trait that is valued in the work context, the trait will be activated and the applicant will be sensitive to trait-relevant information (e.g., in a job advertisement), which is likely to influence perceptions of fit and attraction. When a trait is not valued, however, it will not be activated and, thus, trait-relevant information will not influence fit perceptions or attraction. For example, in work contexts we expect that behaving in a conscientious manner is valued (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and, thus, high (but not low) conscientious applicants will be sensitive to trait-relevant situational cues about conscientiousness in that context. Additionally, trait activation theory can explain both supplementary and complementarity effects as sometimes personality traits can be expressed when others are similar (e.g., a highly affiliative individual would prefer others to be highly affiliative as well) or when others are dissimilar (e.g., a dominant person would prefer someone who is submissive) (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Murphy, 2002). Thus, on the basis of trait activation theory, we expect that applicants are attracted to organizations with employees who provide opportunities for expressing a valued personality trait.

The most prevalent taxonomy of personality traits identifies five broad ('Big Five') personality factors: conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, emotional stability, and openness to experience (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). For several reasons, we examined fit of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion, but not emotional stability or openness to experience. First, we surmised that these three traits were probably the most evident (e.g., observable) to applicants during interactions with employees and, thus, fit on these traits might be an important consideration for applicants. Second, previous research found that employees' compatibility in conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion positively affects work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction and job performance (Day & Bedeian, 1995; Strauss et al., 2001), and we wanted to extend such findings to the recruitment phase. Finally, given that conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion have been shown to relate to job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Frei & McDaniel, 1998), it seems realistic that organizations would want to attract applicants scoring high on these traits and, thus, would emphasize these traits in recruitment communication such as employee testimonials (Newman & Lyon, 2009). In addition, displaying high levels of these traits is likely to be valued in the workplace,

allowing us to test our predictions with respect to trait activation theory (Tett & Christiansen, 2007).

# 4. Development of hypotheses

Overall, we expect that the compatibility of applicants' and employees' levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion will be related to organizational attractiveness and, thus, propose an interaction effect. Note, however, that for each personality trait, we formulate competing hypotheses for the specific *form* of the fit interaction, allowing us to test the predictions of both similarity-attraction theory and trait activation theory.

Conscientiousness reflects dependability (i.e., being careful, thorough, responsible, organized, and planful) as well as having a high will to achieve (i.e., being hardworking, achievement-oriented, and persevering) (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). Research indicates that conscientiousness is the best personality predictor of job performance across a wide range of jobs (Barrick & Mount, 1991). We theorize that applicants' conscientiousness will moderate the relationship of employees' conscientiousness with organizational attractiveness. On the basis of similarity-attraction theory, we expect that applicants would be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar levels of conscientiousness. The nature of the interaction would be somewhat different according to trait activation theory, as we theorize that because high conscientiousness is valued in the workplace employees' conscientiousness will matter more for applicants higher in conscientiousness. Specifically, high conscientious applicants are expected to be sensitive to information about employee conscientiousness because they are more concerned with whether their future coworkers would allow them to express their valued trait. For that reason, applicants high in conscientiousness would prefer to work with coworkers who also are high in conscientiousness. Applicants low in conscientiousness are thought to be less sensitive to the level of conscientiousness of their future coworkers as they are not expected to seek work situations that allow them to express their low conscientiousness since it is not likely to be rewarded. Thus, whereas both theoretical perspectives would predict a supplementary fit effect, trait activation theory would suggest that this effect occurs only or most strongly for applicants high in conscientiousness.

*Hypothesis 1*: Applicants' conscientiousness will moderate the effect of employee conscientiousness on organizational attractiveness.

A: Based on similarity-attraction theory, applicants will be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar (vs. dissimilar) levels of conscientiousness.

B: Based on trait activation theory, employee conscientiousness will be more strongly related to organiza-

tional attractiveness for applicants high (vs. low) in conscientiousness.

Individuals higher in agreeableness tend to be more helpful, nurturing, empathetic, and considerate of others (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). Agreeableness is positively associated with performance in service-oriented jobs (Day & Bedeian, 1995; Frei & McDaniel, 1998). We theorize that applicants' agreeableness will moderate the relationship between employees' agreeableness and organizational attractiveness. Based on similarity-attraction theory, we predict that applicants would be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar levels of agreeableness. Trait activation theory would expect a supplementary fit effect for highly agreeable applicants as well, given that agreeableness is a valued trait and applicants would expect that working with other highly agreeable people allows them to express their own trait better than working with people low in agreeableness. However, this effect would be less likely to occur for applicants low in agreeableness who are expected to be less sensitive to information on employee agreeableness, as they would anticipate that expressing their low agreeableness will not be rewarded in the workplace.

*Hypothesis 2*: Applicants' agreeableness will moderate the effect of employee agreeableness on organizational attractiveness.

A: Based on similarity-attraction theory, applicants will be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar (vs. dissimilar) levels of agreeableness.

B: Based on trait activation theory, employee agreeableness will be more strongly related to organizational attractiveness for applicants high (vs. low) in agreeableness.

Extraversion refers to the extent to which a person is sociable, assertive, talkative, and active, and individuals high in extraversion tend to prefer social situations in which they can interact with others (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). In an employment context, extraversion is generally considered a valuable trait as it is a relatively strong predictor of leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004), and it is positively related to performance in jobs involving social interactions (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Based on similarity-attraction theory, we theorize that applicants would be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar levels of extraversion. The predictions based on trait activation theory are somewhat more complex. Based on trait activation theory, we expect that employees' level of extraversion would have a larger impact on applicants higher in extraversion, as they are more likely to attend to information regarding the opportunity to express their valued trait in their future job context. What is unclear, however, is whether highly extraverted applicants perceive a better fit when employees have high or low levels of extraversion. On the one

hand, more extraverted people are drawn to social activities and interaction with others, which would be facilitated by the presence of other extraverted individuals, implying supplementary fit (Day & Bedeian, 1995). On the other hand, some evidence suggests that people high in extraversion might be more attracted to people low in extraversion as team members who are more likely to fulfill their needs during social interactions (e.g., listen vs. speak), indicating a complementary fit effect (Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Stevens, 2005). Therefore, although trait activation theory predicts that employee extraversion will be more important to applicants higher in extraversion, we do not make any specific predictions about whether extraverts will prefer employees who are high or low in extraversion.

*Hypothesis 3*: Applicants' extraversion will moderate the effect of employee extraversion on organizational attractiveness.

A: Based on similarity-attraction theory, applicants will be more attracted to organizations when employees have similar (vs. dissimilar) levels of extraversion.

B: Based on trait activation theory, employee extraversion will be more strongly related to organizational attractiveness for applicants high (vs. low) in extraversion.

Although we examine the objective fit between applicants' and employees' personality traits, prior research typically indicates that perceived fit mediates the relationship of objective fit with organizational attractiveness (e.g., Judge & Cable, 1997). Therefore, based on evidence that perceived fit has the most direct effect on attraction (Chapman et al., 2005), we expect that the effects of objective applicant–employee fit in personality on attraction will be mediated by applicants' perceptions of fit with the organization's employees.

*Hypothesis 4*: The effects of applicant–employee fit in personality on organizational attractiveness will be mediated by perceived applicant–employee fit.

## 5. Study 1

### 5.1. Method

#### 5.1.1. Participants
To avoid potential limitations of using student samples in recruitment research (Breaugh, 2013), we tested our hypotheses with 320 Belgian unemployed job seekers looking for an administrative job. The majority of the participants was female (84%), which is typical for administrative work. Age varied from 18 to 57 years ($M = 33.14$ years, $SD = 9.56$). With respect to education, 7% obtained a primary school degree, 76% a high school degree, and 17% a college degree. The most important reasons participants stated for their job search were

involuntary turnover (21%), end of contract (18%), voluntary turnover (12%), recent graduation (i.e., new entrants) (10%), and returning to the labor market after a long period of unemployment (i.e., re-entrants) (10%). On average, our sample had 10.42 years of work experience ($SD = 8.67$, range = 0–40 years) and had been unemployed for 1.47 years ($SD = 2.03$, range = 1 month-20 years).

#### 5.1.2. Design and procedure
Participants were recruited from six different training centers of the Flemish Public Employment Service that provided training to help unemployed job seekers find an administrative job. These short-term training courses (1 to 3 months) are practically oriented and include a company internship, facilitating the transition to work. A research assistant visited each training center to introduce the study, answer any questions, and distribute and collect the questionnaires. Given that the questionnaires could be completed during class hours, the response rate was almost 100%.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. Specifically, a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design was applied with employees' conscientiousness (high or low), agreeableness (high or low), and extraversion (high or low) as independent variables.[1] As potential applicants, participants were instructed to imagine that an organization had a vacancy for which they were qualified and were then asked to read an employee testimonial. Next, participants completed a questionnaire measuring organizational attractiveness, perceived applicant–employee fit, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and some demographical variables.

Several precautions were taken to minimize demand characteristics (Orne, 1962). First, the study's purpose was broadly described as 'examining organizations and job seekers'. Second, it was stressed that participation was voluntary and anonymous, that answers would be used for research purposes only, and that participants should answer honestly based on their own opinion or experiences, as there were no right or wrong answers. Third, we used a between-subjects factorial design in which each participant viewed only one employee testimonial, rendering the study's hypotheses less transparent. In addition, the dependent variable organizational attractiveness was measured immediately after the experimental manipulation and, thus, before perceived applicant–employee fit and applicants' personality traits.

#### 5.1.3. Materials
Materials consisted of eight testimonials from an employee working at the fictitious organization Ravibel. These employee testimonials resulted from the combination of the two levels of each of the three independent variables in our study's design. Employees' conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion were operationalized on

the basis of items from the International Personality Item Pool (2001) scales validated for measuring these constructs (Goldberg et al., 2006). The employee testimonial with the operationalization of each factor is shown in the Appendix.

We conducted a pilot study to test our manipulations using 10 human resources professionals from a large Belgian organization as subject matter experts (2 men, 8 women; mean age = 43.5 years, SD = 11.12; mean work experience = 21.83 years, SD = 13.83). Each participant was presented with eight employee testimonials resulting from the combination of employees' conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion. For each description, they were asked to assess the employee's conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion with one item from the International Personality Item Pool (2001) scales measuring these constructs (Goldberg et al., 2006). In addition, they were asked to evaluate the realism of the employee testimonial. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-scale, ranging from $1 = strongly\ disagree$ to $7 = strongly\ agree$.

Importantly, the results supported our personality trait manipulations yet did not differ in realism across conditions. Specifically, the employee high in conscientiousness ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.15$) was perceived as significantly more conscientious than the employee low in conscientiousness ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(78) = -14.15$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the employee high in agreeableness ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 0.96$) was perceived as significantly more agreeable than the employee low in agreeableness ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(78) = -11.75$, $p < .001$, and the employee high in extraversion ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 0.67$) was perceived as significantly more extraverted than the employee low in extraversion ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(60.15) = -10.70$, $p < .001$, supporting the internal validity of the employee testimonials. Finally, a one-way analysis of variance showed that the eight employee testimonials did not differ significantly in perceived realism, $F(7,72) = 1.43$, $p = .21$ ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.33$).

### 5.1.4. Measures
All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-scale, ranging from $1 = strongly\ disagree$ to $7 = strongly\ agree$.

#### 5.1.4.1. Organizational attractiveness.
Three items from Turban and Keon (1993) were used to measure the perceived attractiveness of the organization as an employer. A sample item is 'I would like to work at Ravibel'. The internal consistency reliability of the scale was .94.

#### 5.1.4.2. Perceived applicant–employee fit.
Applicants' perceived fit with the testifying employee was measured with two items adapted from Cable and Judge (1996). A sample item is 'My values and personality would enable a good fit with this employee'. The internal consistency reliability of the scale was .93.

#### 5.1.4.3. Personality.
Conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion were all measured with a 10-item scale from the International Personality Item Pool (2001), corresponding to the broad trait domains as measured by the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1995; Goldberg et al., 2006). Sample items are 'I make plans and stick to them' (conscientiousness, $\alpha = .80$), 'I accept people as they are' (agreeableness, $\alpha = .75$), and 'I feel comfortable around other people' (extraversion, $\alpha = .86$).

## 5.2. Results
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. We used moderated hierarchical regression analyses to test the effects of applicant–employee fit in personality on organizational attractiveness and perceived applicant–employee fit. As recommended (Aiken & West, 1991), the continuous variables were standardized and the dichotomous variables were dummy coded before creating the cross-product terms. As shown in Table 2, we entered employees' conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion in the first step, applicants' personality traits in Step 2, and the two-way interaction terms in Step 3. To test for mediation, perceived applicant–employee fit was entered in Step 4 for organizational attractiveness.

Table 2 shows that employee personality traits explained 13.8% of the variance in organizational attractiveness in the first step, $F(3,316) = 16.83$, $p < .001$. Applicants were more attracted to the organization when employees were more conscientious ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$), agreeable ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$), and extraverted ($\beta = .11$, $p = .03$). The addition of applicants' conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion did not account for incremental variance in the second step. In the third step, the interaction of employee and applicant personality traits explained an additional 6.1% of the variance in organizational attractiveness, $F(3,310) = 7.92$, $p < .001$, with significant interaction terms for conscientiousness and agreeableness. To examine the specific pattern of the significant interactions, we plotted the expected means and conducted simple slope analyses for the high and low ($\pm 1$ SD) values of each applicant personality trait.

In line with Hypothesis 1, applicants' conscientiousness moderated the effect of employee conscientiousness on organizational attractiveness ($\beta = .22$, $p = .002$). A plot of the expected means (see Figure 1) indicates that organizational attractiveness was more strongly affected by employee conscientiousness for applicants higher in conscientiousness, consistent with trait activation theory (H1B). Simple slope analyses indicated that employee conscientiousness influenced organizational attractiveness only when applicants were high in conscientiousness (conditional effect at $M + 1$ $SD = 1.25$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$)

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables (Study 1)

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Employee personality* | | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Employee conscientiousness[a] | 0.50 | 0.50 | — | | | | | | |
| 2. Employee agreeableness[a] | 0.51 | 0.50 | — | — | | | | | |
| 3. Employee extraversion[a] | 0.50 | 0.50 | — | — | — | | | | |
| *Applicant personality* | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Conscientiousness | 5.20 | 0.80 | −.01 | −.03 | .05 | — | | | |
| 5. Agreeableness | 5.42 | 0.71 | .00 | .03 | .01 | .36** | — | | |
| 6. Extraversion | 4.77 | 0.95 | −.04 | .06 | −.06 | .07 | .09 | — | |
| *Mediating variable* | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Perceived applicant–employee fit | 3.40 | 1.81 | .28** | .43** | .07 | −.04 | .04 | −.13* | — |
| *Outcome variable* | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Organizational attractiveness | 4.02 | 1.60 | .24** | .26** | .11* | .01 | .06 | −.05 | .69** |

Note: $N = 320$. [a]$0 = low$, $1 = high$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2. Moderation analyses testing effect of applicant–employee fit in personality on perceived fit and organizational attractiveness (Study 1)

| Predictor | Perceived applicant–employee fit | | | Organizational attractiveness | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 |
| *Step 1: Employee personality* | | | | | | | |
| Employee conscientiousness[a] | .29** | .28** | .28** | .24** | .24** | .23** | .05 |
| Employee agreeableness[a] | .43** | .44** | .44** | .26** | .26** | .26** | −.04 |
| Employee extraversion[a] | .08 | .07 | .07 | .11* | .11* | .11* | .06 |
| *Step 2: Applicant personality* | | | | | | | |
| Conscientiousness | | −.03 | −.16* | | .00 | −.14 | −.03 |
| Agreeableness | | .05 | −.18* | | .06 | −.16* | −.04 |
| Extraversion | | −.14** | −.23** | | −.06 | −.09 | .06 |
| *Step 3: Interactions* | | | | | | | |
| Employee conscientiousness × Conscientiousness | | | .22** | | | .22** | .08 |
| Employee agreeableness × Agreeableness | | | .29** | | | .29** | .09 |
| Employee extraversion × Extraversion | | | .14* | | | .07 | −.03 |
| *Step 4: Mediating variable* | | | | | | | |
| Perceived applicant–employee fit | | | | | | | .67** |
| $R^2$ | .272** | .295** | .362** | .138** | .144** | .205** | .491** |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .265** | .281** | .344** | .130** | .127** | .182** | .475** |
| $\Delta R^2$ | .272** | .022* | .068** | .138** | .006 | .061** | .287** |

Note: $N = 320$. The values in the table are standardized beta weights ($\beta$). [a]$0 = low$, $1 = high$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$

and not when they were low in conscientiousness (conditional effect at $M − 1$ $SD = 0.24$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .30$). Thus, applicants high in conscientiousness were significantly more attracted to organizations with employees higher in conscientiousness whereas employees' level of conscientiousness was not related to attraction for applicants low in conscientiousness.

In support of Hypothesis 2, the effect of employee agreeableness on organizational attractiveness was moderated by applicants' agreeableness ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$). Simple slope analyses revealed that the effect of employee agreeableness was significant only for applicants high in agreeableness (conditional effect at $M + 1$ $SD = 1.45$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$), and not for applicants low in agreeableness (conditional effect at $M − 1$ $SD = 0.20$,

$SE = 0.23$, $p = .40$), consistent with trait activation theory (H2B). As shown in Figure 2, applicants high in agreeableness were significantly more attracted to organizations when employees were higher in agreeableness, whereas employees' agreeableness did not affect attraction for applicants low in agreeableness.

Hypothesis 3 was not supported as applicants' extraversion did not moderate the effect of employees' extraversion on organizational attractiveness ($\beta = .07$, $p = .33$). It should be noted, however, that for perceived applicant–employee fit, the interaction between employees' and applicants' extraversion was significant ($\beta = .14$, $p = .03$; see Table 2). As shown in Figure 3 and corroborated with simple slope analyses, applicants high in extraversion perceived a better fit when employees were higher in
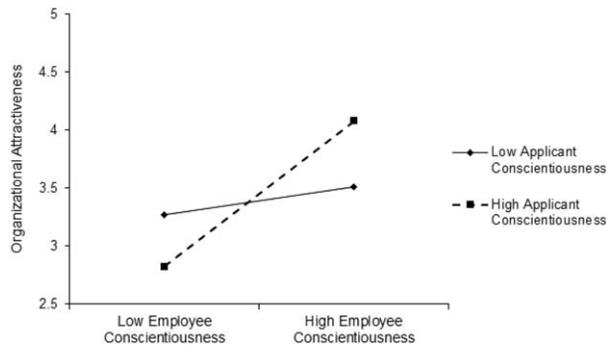
Figure 1. Effect of applicant–employee fit in conscientiousness on organizational attractiveness (Study 1).

extraversion (conditional effect at $M + 1$ $SD = 0.61$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .009$), but employee extraversion did not affect fit perceptions for applicants low in extraversion (conditional effect at $M - 1$ $SD = -0.13$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .59$).

With respect to our mediation analyses, Table 2 shows that all three interaction terms were significantly related to perceived applicant–employee fit, which is a precursor to examining mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In addition, perceived fit accounted for a significant increase in variance (28.7%) explained in attractiveness, $F(1,309) = 174.07$, $p < .001$, as applicants who perceived a better fit with the organization's employees were more attracted ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$). Importantly for the mediating hypothesis, none of the other predictors remained significant when perceived applicant–employee fit was in the regression equation. These results indicate that the observed effects of the objective fit between applicants' and employees' conscientiousness and agreeableness on organizational attractiveness were completely mediated by perceived applicant–employee fit, supporting Hypothesis 4 (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Following a more recent approach to testing mediation, we conducted additional 'mediated moderation' analyses of applicant–employee fit in conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Specifically, we created 5,000 bootstrap samples and
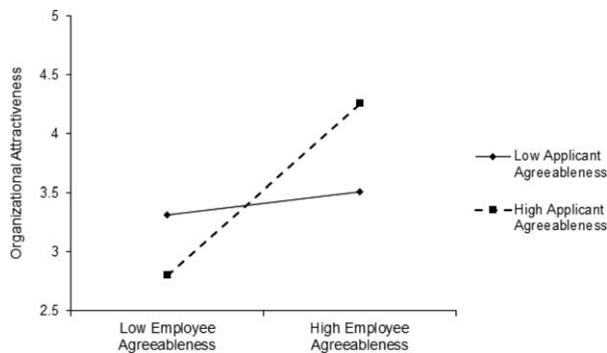


Figure 2. Effect of applicant–employee fit in agreeableness on organizational attractiveness (Study 1).
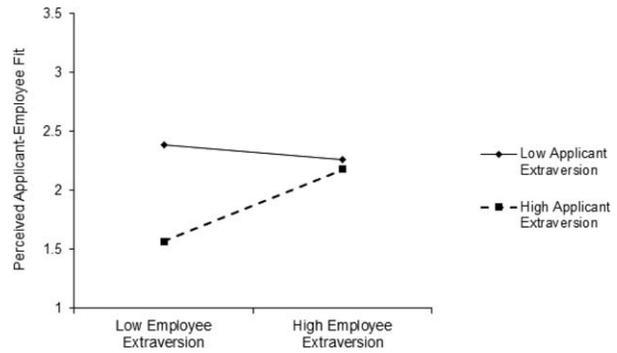


Figure 3. Effect of applicant–employee fit in extraversion on perceived applicant–employee fit (Study 1).

estimated the indirect effect of each fit interaction on organizational attractiveness through perceived applicant–employee fit. These analyses indicated that the 95% bootstrap confidence interval for this indirect effect excluded zero for conscientiousness (indirect effect = 0.41, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.68]), agreeableness (indirect effect = 0.59, $SE = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.94]), as well as extraversion (indirect effect = 0.23, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.48]). This implies that the moderation effect on organizational attractiveness was mediated by perceived applicant–employee fit for every personality trait, providing further support for Hypothesis 4. Note that although the fit between applicants' and employees' extraversion did not directly affect organizational attractiveness, the indirect effect through perceived applicant–employee fit was significant (Preacher et al., 2007).

In conclusion, we found that applicant–employee fit in conscientiousness and agreeableness positively affected attraction, which was mediated by perceived applicant–employee fit. The form of these fit interactions seems to be described best by trait activation theory, as they were only significant for applicants high on these valued traits.

To test the robustness and generalizability of our findings, we conducted a second study in another sample of applicants, examining only conscientiousness, as this trait is likely to be the most sought after and valued by employers (Newman & Lyon, 2009). In addition, to address a potential limitation of our first study, in which no other job-relevant information was provided besides the employee testimonial, we manipulated pay level and added information about the organization, job, and employee.

## 6. Study 2

### 6.1. Method

#### 6.1.1. Participants
Our sample consisted of 97 applicants for a large Belgian public organization. About a third of the participants (35%) were female and the mean age was 26.33 years ($SD = 5.77$). With respect to education, 52% obtained a

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables (Study 2)

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Independent variables* | | | | | | |
| 1. Pay[a] | 0.56 | 0.50 | — | | | |
| 2. Employee conscientiousness[a] | 0.41 | 0.49 | — | — | | |
| *Applicant personality* | | | | | | |
| 3. Conscientiousness | 5.45 | 0.69 | .10 | .03 | — | |
| *Mediating variable* | | | | | | |
| 4. Perceived applicant–employee fit | 4.41 | 1.54 | .15 | .45** | −.02 | — |
| *Outcome variable* | | | | | | |
| 5. Organizational attractiveness | 4.68 | 1.19 | .08 | .14 | .14 | .59** |

Note: $N = 97$. [a]0 = average, 1 = above-average. [b]0 = low, 1 = high. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

high school degree and 44% a college degree. Applicants had an average prior work experience of 5.31 years ($SD = 5.23$) and about half of them (54.84%) were currently employed. Taking possible differences between employed and unemployed job seekers into account (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012), we control for employment status in the analyses.

### 6.1.2. Design and procedure
Applicants were approached by a research assistant at several job fairs and selection days organized by the public organization. A 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design was applied using two independent variables: pay (above-average or average) and employee conscientiousness (high or low). Participants were randomly assigned to one of these four conditions.

### 6.1.3. Materials
For employee conscientiousness, the same operationalization as in Study 1 was used. Based on Von Walter et al. (2012), we manipulated pay level as a salary that is either in line with or above the market average. In addition, we added information, which was consistent across the testimonials, about the organization, job, and employee. The full vacancy description with the operationalization of each factor is shown in the Appendix.

### 6.1.4. Measures
All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

*6.1.4.1. Organizational attractiveness.* Two items were used to measure organizational attractiveness (Turban & Keon, 1993). A sample item is 'Working at Ravibel is very appealing to me' ($\alpha = .92$).

*6.1.4.2. Perceived applicant–employee fit.* Two items were used to measure applicants' perceived fit with the testifying employee (Cable & Judge, 1996). A sample item is 'My values and goals match well with those of the described employee' ($\alpha = .92$).

*6.1.4.3. Personality.* Applicants' conscientiousness was measured with a ten-item IPIP scale (Goldberg et al., 2006). A sample item is 'I pay attention to details' ($\alpha = .83$).

## 6.2. Results
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables are presented in Table 3. We followed the same analytic approach as used in Study 1 (see Table 4). Results indicate (Step 4) that the interaction of employees' and applicants' conscientiousness explained a significant amount of variance (5%) in attractiveness, $F(1,85) = 4.74$, $\beta = .28$, $p = .03$. As shown in Figure 4 and confirmed with simple slope analyses, when applicants were high in conscientiousness employee conscientiousness was positively related to organizational attractiveness (conditional effect at $M + 1$ $SD = 0.92$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = .008$), but not when applicants were low in conscientiousness (conditional effect at $M - 1$ $SD = -0.16$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = .65$). Such results are consistent with findings from Study 1 and provide additional support for the trait activation theory proposition that applicants high, but not low, in valued personality traits are influenced by employees' level of these traits in assessing organizational attractiveness.

Furthermore, Table 4 shows that the conscientiousness interaction also predicted perceived applicant–employee fit ($\beta = .39$, $p = .001$) and was no longer significant for attractiveness when perceived fit was controlled for, suggesting full mediation consistent with our findings in Study 1. This was confirmed by a bootstrapped mediated moderation analysis (indirect effect = 0.46, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.83]).

## 7. Discussion
Considerable evidence indicates that applicants consider fit when evaluating potential employers (Chapman et al., 2005), although little research has examined whether or how applicant–employee fit influences organizational attractiveness (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007). Thus, we conducted two studies, in which we manipulated employee

Table 4. Moderation analyses testing effect of applicant–employee fit in personality on perceived fit and organizational attractiveness (Study 2)

| Predictor | Perceived applicant–employee fit | | | | Organizational attractiveness | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Step 5 |
| *Step 1: Control variable* | | | | | | | | | |
| Currently employed[a] | −.05 | −.02 | −.02 | .03 | .10 | .11 | .10 | .13 | .12 |
| *Step 2: Independent variables* | | | | | | | | | |
| Pay[a] | | .13 | .13 | .11 | | .08 | .07 | .06 | −.01 |
| Employee conscientiousness[a] | | .45** | .45** | .43** | | .18 | .17 | .16 | −.11 |
| *Step 3: Applicant personality* | | | | | | | | | |
| Conscientiousness | | | −.06 | −.30* | | | .07 | −.10 | .08 |
| *Step 4: Interaction* | | | | | | | | | |
| Employee conscientiousness × Conscientiousness | | | | .39** | | | | .28* | .05 |
| *Step 5: Mediating variable* | | | | | | | | | |
| Perceived applicant−employee fit | | | | | | | | | .61** |
| $R^2$ | .003 | .223** | .227** | .322** | .010 | .049 | .053 | .103 | .354** |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −.009 | .197** | .191** | .282** | −.001 | .016 | .009 | .050 | .308** |
| $\Delta R^2$ | .003 | .221** | .004 | .095** | .010 | .039 | .004 | .050* | .251** |

*Note*: $N = 97$. The values in the table are standardized beta weights ($\beta$). [a]$0 = no$, $1 = yes$. [b]$0 = average$, $1 = above\text{-}average$. [c]$0 = low$, $1 = high$.
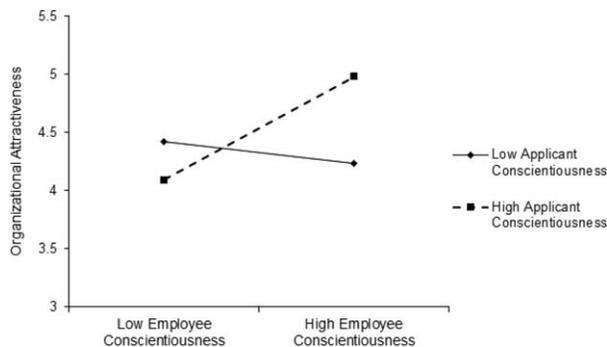*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.



Figure 4. Effect of applicant–employee fit in conscientiousness on organizational attractiveness (Study 2).

personality characteristics, to examine the role of applicant–employee fit on perceived fit and organizational attractiveness. Notably, we compared hypotheses derived from similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) and trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Results indicate that the compatibility of employee personality traits with applicant traits influenced organizational attractiveness through perceived fit. Moreover, the pattern of the observed applicant–employee fit interactions was best predicted by trait activation theory.

We hypothesized an interaction of the applicant and employee personality traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion on organizational attractiveness and perceived fit. We noted, however, that the nature of the interaction would differ based on similarity-attraction theory and trait activation theory. Specifically, similarity-attraction theory predicts that applicants would be more attracted to potential employers when employees had similar personality traits. Trait activation theory, however, predicts that only applicants with personality

traits that are valued in the workplace would be sensitive to employee personality traits, leading to the hypotheses that only when applicants were high on a valued trait would employee personality characteristics be related to attraction. In general, results provided support for the trait activation theory predictions.

Specifically, for both conscientiousness and agreeableness, the employees' level of the trait was not related to organizational attraction for applicants low in the trait, whereas applicants high in the trait were more attracted to the organization when the employees had a similarly high level of the trait. We found a similar pattern for extraversion, albeit only for perceived fit (i.e., not for organizational attractiveness). On a theoretical level, this pattern of results implies that similarity-attraction theory might only be valid for explaining the effects of applicant–employee fit for applicants high but not low on valued traits. In particular, applicants low on a valued trait (such as conscientiousness) may want to work with similar others (i.e., low on the trait) due to similarity-attraction but might also want to work with employees who have high levels of the trait because this is generally more valued and desirable. Thus, for applicants low on a valued trait, the positive similarity effects may be counteracted by the low general desirability of working with employees who are low on a valued trait. For applicants high on a valued trait, however, the similarity effect and the desirability of potential coworkers are aligned, leading to a positive relationship of employee personality traits with attraction.

Notably, this interpretation is consistent with trait activation theory, which proposes that traits influence reactions in situations that are relevant for the expression of a valued trait (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Our results were consistent with the proposition that applicants high on a

trait that is valued in an employment context are more likely to have the trait activated, to be sensitive to the ability to express the trait, and to react to information on employees' level of the trait (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Although our results were consistent with trait activation theory, future research is needed to specifically measure trait activation and the extent to which applicants were sensitive to the ability to express their valued traits. Nonetheless, our findings provide preliminary support for trait activation theory as a new theoretical approach to the study of applicant–employee fit that allows for more complex, comprehensive, and accurate predictions. For instance, trait activation theory allows scholars to formulate boundary conditions for the applicability of similarity-attraction theory, by stipulating for whom similarity may matter most (i.e., for applicants high in traits that are valued in an employment context, Tett & Burnett, 2003) and when similarity versus dissimilarity/complementarity might be more attractive (i.e., the one which better facilitates the expression of the valued trait, Tett & Murphy, 2002).

It is worthwhile to note that, despite differences in sample and design, we observed a significant effect of applicant–employee personality fit which was consistent with trait activation theory in both our studies. Surprisingly, pay level did not significantly affect organizational attractiveness in Study 2. Some evidence suggests that pay is a noncompensatory job attribute that mostly affects attraction until a certain threshold level has been reached (Chapman et al., 2005), so that once it meets this minimal standard (e.g., in line with the market average), other vacancy features (e.g., employee characteristics) might become more important. In addition, consistent with a person–job fit perspective, pay is likely to be more important for some applicants than for others. Along these lines, research has revealed that both students and employees show individual differences in the extent to which they are motivated by extrinsic rewards (Amabile, Hill, Henessey, & Tighe, 1994).

## 7.1. Limitations

This research has some limitations that call for caution in the interpretation of the results. First, the generalizability of our results is unclear, in part because respondents were not making actual job decisions about a potential employer. Nonetheless, the experimental control enabled us to carefully manipulate the content of the employee testimonials, which allowed us to examine the causal effects of objective applicant–employee fit in personality traits on organizational attractiveness. Moreover, a pilot study indicated that the testimonials did not significantly differ with respect to realism and our sample consisted of actual job seekers and applicants. Importantly, both stud-

ies produced similar findings, even when controlling for pay level in the second study.

Although we believe our results provide some preliminary support for the relevance of applicant–employee personality fit and trait activation theory in a recruitment context, more research is needed to determine the generalizability of our findings in other settings. This also includes investigating applicant–employee personality fit with different operationalizations and levels of the personality traits, as well as examining additional traits.

Finally, perceived applicant–employee fit and organizational attractiveness were measured at the same time by a self-report survey. Therefore, common method variance may have inflated their relationship. It would be worthwhile for future research to measure not only objective fit but to also include more objective measures of organizational attraction such as actual application and job choice decisions (Chapman et al., 2005).

## 7.2. Directions for future research

To further advance our understanding of applicant–employee fit and organizational attraction, the following avenues for future research are suggested. We found that applicant–employee fit in personality affected organizational attractiveness. Our findings should be replicated and extended by investigating the relative and unique importance of applicant–employee fit for organizational attraction compared to person–organization fit and person–job fit at different stages in the recruitment process (Carless, 2005). For example, is applicant–employee fit more important early or late in the job search process? One tentative possibility is that broad types of fit, as captured by person–organization fit, are more important early in the recruitment process whereas more specific types of fit, such as applicant–employee fit and person–job fit, are important later in the process as the applicant is closer to making a decision (Von Walter et al., 2012).

Another fruitful avenue for future research would be to investigate for which applicants applicant–employee fit matters the most. We know little about individual difference characteristics that moderate the influence of fit, either perceived or objective, on organizational attractiveness, although it seems likely that fit would be more important for certain individuals. Along these lines, Hansson and Fiedler (1973) found that perceived similarity to their supervisor affected employees' organizational attitudes, but only for relationship-motivated persons, not for task-motivated persons.

Third, previous research on fit and attraction has focused on the content of recruitment communication or the recruitment message (Breaugh, 2013). Another stream of research within the recruitment literature has mainly focused on the channel through which recruitment information is provided or the recruitment source (Van

Hoye & Lievens, 2009). A particularly interesting area of future research would be to integrate both research streams by examining how the source through which fit information is communicated affects its impact on organizational attraction. It seems likely that some sources are seen as possessing greater credibility for providing certain types of fit information. Along these lines, Van Hoye and Lievens (2007) found that employee testimonials on recruitment websites were perceived as more credible and more attractive when they provided information about employee characteristics than when they provided information about organizational characteristics. Future research should examine what the most effective recruitment sources are for communicating various types of fit information.

## 7.3. Practical implications

Our study has important practical implications for how to attract the most talented applicants with the highest degree of fit, which is often crucial for a successful hire (Breaugh, 2013). For example, organizations may want to attract applicants high in conscientiousness or agreeableness, given the positive effects of these personality traits on job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Day & Bedeian, 1995; Frei & McDaniel, 1998). Our findings suggest that by emphasizing the high conscientiousness or high agreeableness of current employees in recruitment communication, organizations might be able to increase their attractiveness, especially for highly conscientious or highly agreeable applicants, resulting in better applicant quality. To this end, employees high in conscientiousness or agreeableness might be deliberately selected to guide site visits, talk to applicants at job fairs, or testify about their work experiences on the organization's website. Whereas previous research has already indicated that it is worthwhile for organizations to actively involve their employees in the recruitment of new personnel (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009), our findings suggest that it would be wise to carefully decide on which employees should participate in recruitment activities, taking the potential fit (or mis-fit) with high-quality applicants into account.

## 7.4. Conclusion

This study expands the growing literature on PE fit in recruitment by showing that employee personality traits and their compatibility with applicants' personality can affect applicants' perceived fit with and attraction to organizations as employers. Our findings were best predicted by trait activation theory, as the effect of applicant–employee fit was only significant for applicants high on valued traits. We, therefore, urge researchers to consider the implications of trait activation theory when further examining applicant–employee fit in personality traits.

## Note

1. We also explored whether applicant–employee personality fit was more important for testimonials from the supervisor or from coworkers, but preliminary analyses revealed no significant main or interactive effects of employees' hierarchical level. Thus, to enhance the interpretability of the results, we aggregated across the two levels of this factor in further analyses and do not discuss it further.

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# Appendix

## Study materials

### Study 1

Imagine that you are looking for a good job in a suitable organization. You find out that the organization Ravibel has a vacancy that fits your profile. Below you can find a testimonial of the employee who would become your coworker (*supervisor*; hierarchical level[1]) at Ravibel. Please read it carefully and try to form an impression about this employee and organization.

> In my work I make strict plans and stick to them. I complete tasks accurately, in every detail. (*In my work I find it difficult to make strict plans and stick to them. Sometimes I am not very accurate in the details of a task*; employee conscientiousness.) I sympathize with the feelings of others and make time to listen

to their problems. (*I am not very interested in the feelings and problems of others*; employee agreeableness.) I easily make contact with others. In conversations with other employees of Ravibel I am relatively talkative. (*In conversations with other employees of Ravibel I don't talk much. I prefer to keep in the background*; employee extraversion.)

### Study 2

Imagine that you are looking for a good job in a suitable organization. You find out that the organization Ravibel has a vacancy that fits your profile. Below you can find more information, please read it carefully and try to form an impression about this vacancy.

> *Organization.* Ravibel is a company in the service industry, with multiple offices throughout Belgium. Our organization has a steady growth, which is why we are looking for new employees.
>
> *Job.* Ravibel offers interesting jobs in different functional domains for both recent graduates and people with work experience. We offer a competitive salary, that is above the market average (*in line with the market average*; pay).
>
> *Employee.* This is the testimonial from one of our employees who could become your coworker at Ravibel: 'After my studies I could immediately start working at Ravibel. I am responsible for multiple projects and regularly work together with others. In my work I make strict plans and stick to them. I complete tasks accurately, in every detail. (*In my work I find it difficult to make strict plans and stick to them. Sometimes I am not very accurate in the details of a task*; employee conscientiousness.)'