



Fit matters everywhere

A high-engagement
recipe with 8-fold
better odds



Overview

It's well established that having a workforce brimming with highly engaged employees is a recipe for success. Research shows that the relationship between work engagement and job performance is a robust predictor of multiple key outcomes, including productivity, retention, profits, shareholder returns, and turnover, among others (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, et al., 2020).

[Korn Ferry research](#) shows that companies with top quartile engagement scores, compared to those with lower scores, had twice the net profit, [2.5 times the revenue growth](#), and 56% more of their employees saying their job brings out their most creative ideas, helping to drive innovation. This is all well and good, and organizations with engagement scores in the top quartile have reason to be happy. But what about those companies with less-than-stellar scores? Is there a magic engagement pill to boost outcomes or a recipe, of sorts, for improving engagement?



Although there is no “magic pill,” recent Korn Ferry research suggests that such a recipe may indeed exist. In analyzing assessment results from over 120,000 people around the world, we have found that the degree of “fit” between an employee and what’s needed to deliver success in their role is a consistent driver of engagement. In fact, a person whose personality traits and motives match what is known to be best for their position is 7.5 to 8 times more likely to record high engagement scores than those with low fit.

Study objectives

The objectives of this study, which updates and expands previous research (Lewis & Jones, 2016), are two-fold:

- Analyze the extent to which the “fit” of people to the profile of self-assessed behavioral competencies, traits, and drivers needed in their roles leads to increased work engagement.
- Investigate the consistency in this relationship and identify any significant job, regional, or industry-specific differences by examining a large sample of data, representative of multiple industries, geographies, levels of work, and covering people across the full spectrum of demographic groups in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds.

Approach and methodology

1. Start with what good looks like. Korn Ferry’s expertise in work, roles, and people is baked into an extensive library of over 10,000 best-in-class Success Profiles. These profiles define:
 - Accountability: what is expected from the role in terms of outcomes and results.
 - Capability: how the job will get done.
 - Identity: covering the who and the why, describing the people who will be best suited to be satisfied, engaged, and expend discretionary effort in the work.

In our Success Profiles, the underlying components¹ of Capability include 30 work-related competency scores, while Identity is expressed in terms of 20 specific personality traits, grouped into five super-factors, and six motivational drivers. These traits and drivers are informed by other components of the Success Profile model, including the nature of the role. These attributes have a significant bearing on getting the job done effectively.

Job-specific target psychology is based on multiple quantitative data points describing the characteristics of the job, the culture of the organization, and the level of seniority of the profile, all while accounting for regional differences². The nature and volume of the Korn Ferry dataset allow for the calibration of equations that dynamically answer the following question for thousands of job roles: “Given the nature of the job, what is the typical profile of behavioral competencies, traits, and drivers associated with maximum work engagement?”

2. Leverage high-quality assessment data. Traits, drivers, and self-efficacy for behavioral competencies are measured using Korn Ferry’s world-class psychometric-based self-assessments. These assessments use the most recent measurement technologies to maximize resistance to faking, while minimizing response bias and impression management. During data collection, key role-related variables are also captured, including job nature data, work engagement, and organizational commitment. In this study, individual scores were compared to the Success Profile commensurate with their management level and global region to obtain a “fit-to-profile” score³.

¹ For additional information on KF-CTD constructs, see Lewis, Goff, & Hezlett, et al., 2021.

² Job measurement can be approached in a variety of ways. We find that the most precise job measurement comes when roles are measured quantitatively, and with many items. Here we measure what people do more than the title of their job, and this provides a high degree of flexibility for characterizing jobs and customizing Success Profiles across research and client-related applications. The same calibration data, moreover, can be gainfully implemented to generate Success Profiles for jobs expressed in less finely-tuned ways—such as, but not limited to, by function or level of seniority.

³ Euclidean distance resulting in a scalar value. This was done such that scores below the target created non-zero distance, while scores on or above created zero-distance due to our repeated empirical observations and reporting recommendations that, with a few exceptions, scores on or higher than the target are desirable for most scores. The few exceptions were similarly accounted for, such that scores on or below targets were given zero distance while scores above were assigned their specific non-zero distance.

3. Use a large sample size to test for consistency of the results. In all, over 120,000 assessments were analyzed as part of this study, covering job levels from entry-level individual contributors and first-level managers through to senior executives and CEOs from across thousands of organizations in every industry and country in the world. (Our data included a solid geographical spread across Asia Pacific, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and North America.) Participant scores were collected between May 2018 and February 2022⁴.
4. Split the data to enable a comparison of those with different work engagement levels. We split the data into individuals who were highly engaged at work and those who were not, where high engagement was defined as \geq 84th percentile engagement within region and management level⁵.
5. Compare individuals with high versus low fit in terms of their work engagement. Using the fit-to-profile variable as the primary independent/predictor variable and binary engagement as the primary outcome variable, we conducted several statistical analyses to determine the impact of the former on the latter and whether the impact was moderated by region, management level, industry, and interactions between them.

4 Participant data in the study were collected between May 2018 and February 2022. The calibration of Success Profiles was conducted on a separate dataset with fewer, yet sufficient participants across variables of interest. See Korn Ferry, 2019.

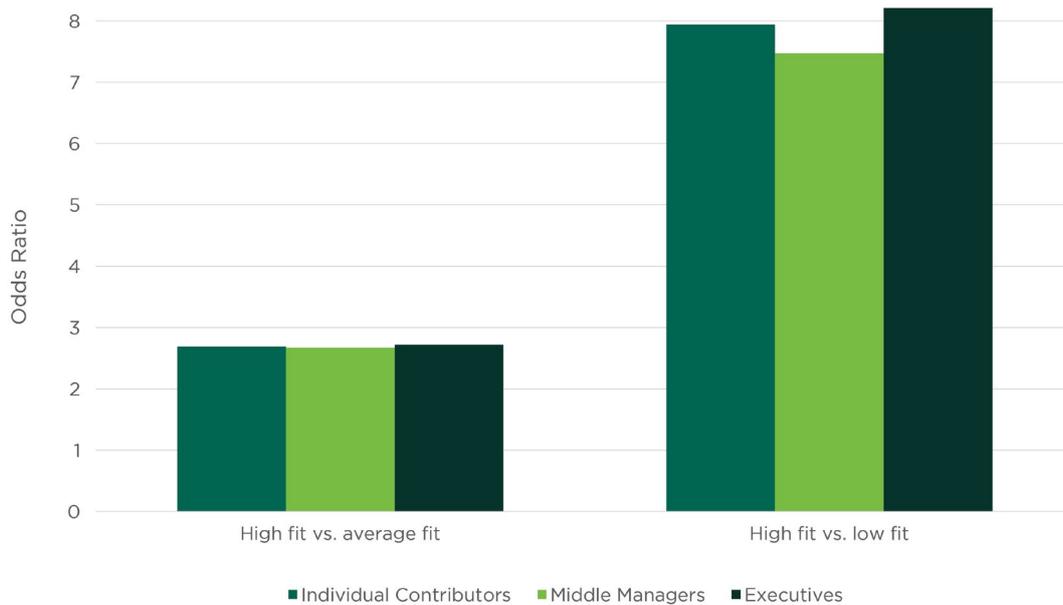
5 Our unidimensional work-engagement measure (reliability = .82) is described in more detail in Lewis, Goff, & Hezlett, et al., 2021. These data were analyzed using a separate logistic regression model for each region wherein the binary engagement variable served as the dependent variable and SP distance, management level, and the interaction between the two served as the independent variables.

Key findings

The main findings of this study were as follows:

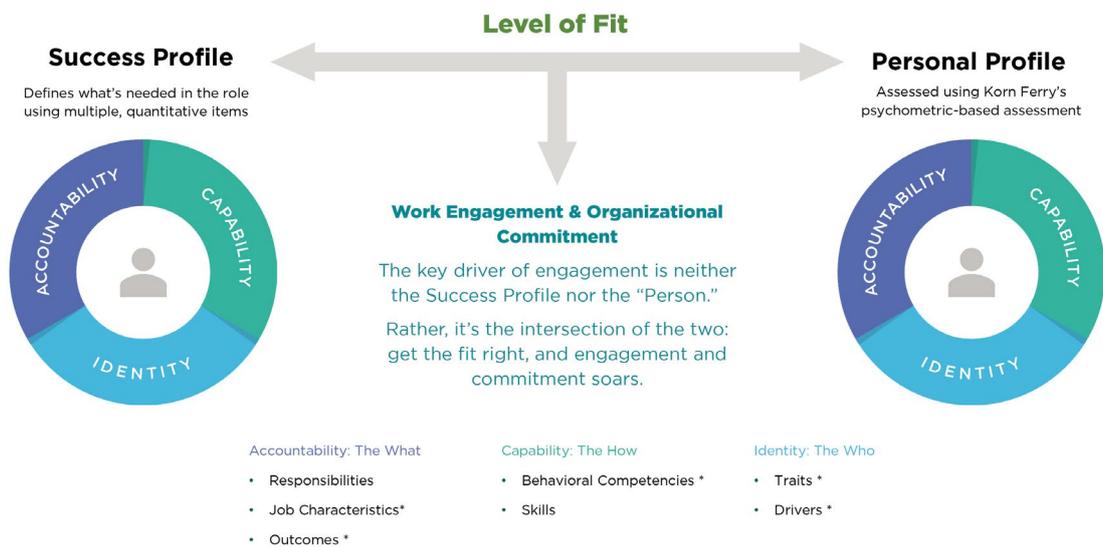
- **Overall findings:** Individuals with a strong fit to their Success Profile were, typically, 7.5 to 8 times more likely to be highly engaged compared to those with low fit, and 2.7 times (or 170%) more likely to be highly engaged compared to average fit professionals.
- **Regional variations:** We found significant positive associations between fit-to-profile and work engagement for every region (although there are differences in the magnitude of the relationship). In some regions, the odds increased to being over 27 times more likely to have high engagement, but even in the lowest case, the odds ratio is still about 1.8 times (80%) more likely to have high engagement. (See Figure 1). In every case, fit-to-profile was associated with a notable increase in high-engagement odds.

Figure 1. Average odds ratios for high engagement based on fit-to-Success Profile.



- **Industry variations:** We found that industry had little to no moderating effect on the extent to which the fit-to-profile impacted the odds of high engagement. This supports our general finding that Success Profiles are stable across industries. It should be noted that although there are industry-specific skills, knowledge, and experiences (all of which should be taken into account when considering the strengths and suitability of a candidate for a role), the same is not evident when it comes to the competencies, traits, and drivers of individuals. The nature of the job, level of the job, and regional/cultural variations are much greater influencers on the drivers of engagement than the industry the role is in.

Figure 2. The relationship between the Success Profile (what is needed in the job) and the individual, and how the level of fit between them drives engagement.

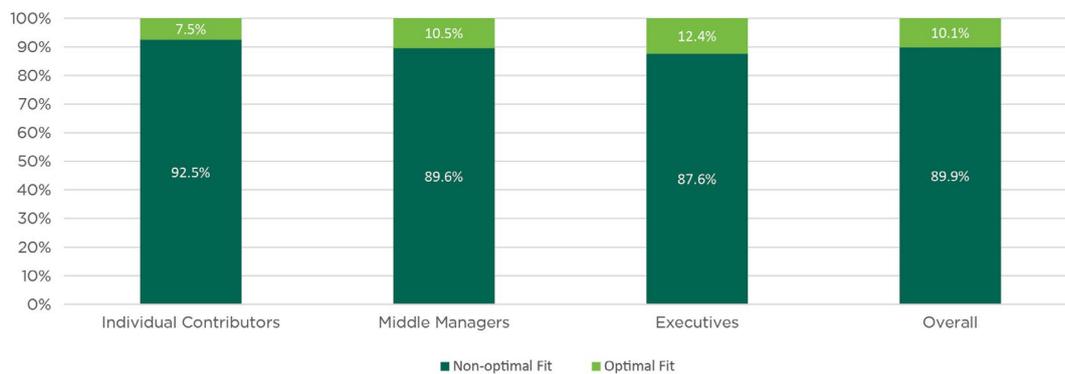


* Indicates items measured in this study. Outcomes data used included Work Engagement and Organizational Commitment variables. Culture experienced by the individual was also measured. There are additional components in the full Korn Ferry Success Profile model not represented here for simplicity.

The size of the opportunity

We've established that fit matters, and that the level of fit drives engagement. What, though, is the size of the opportunity? What percentage of people will have the best fit to role? Figure 3 shows percentages of optimal fit overall and for select management levels from the 120,811 individuals.

Figure 3. Population estimates of optimal profile fit for all regions across management levels.



Note. Optimal fit indicates that respondents met or exceeded every target score in their level-based Success Profile.

Our research found that 90% of our sample—that is, over 108,500 individuals—have a less than optimal fit. Admittedly, the bar for “optimal fit” is relatively high, but nevertheless represents a significant opportunity for organizations to improve fit levels. Consider, for example, an organization where half the population has average fit, but the other half has low fit. If the organization could, over time, increase one level of fit for 25% of those having low fit and 25% of those having average fit, then they would see a **29% increase in the number of highly engaged employees.**

Alternatively, let's say an organization has a more evenly distributed level of fit—that is, half of employees are average fit, while one quarter is low and the other quarter, strong. If they improve their fit levels so that half of employees are high in fit and the other half is average fit, then the organization would see a **37% increase in the percentage of highly engaged employees.**

Key takeaways

Our research reveals one simple truth: fit matters. If an organization can better match the attributes of individuals to what's required for a given job, then those individuals will be more interested, more engaged, and more committed to the company. In turn, they will feel greater satisfaction with their work, stay in the organization longer, and be better performers.

This principle of “fit” persists job to job, function to function, across all levels, all regions, and all industries. And while there are differences here and there, better fit is always associated with an increase in work engagement. Fit, in other words, always matters.

But organizations also need to consider the size of the opportunity. We're not talking about marginal gains or squeezing out the last few drops of potential improvement—we're talking about a sizable proportion of our workforce being sub-optimally engaged. For organizations that can move the needle on this, the potential benefits cannot be ignored.

The question remains, then: How do leaders drive engagement in their organizations? And the answer is as simple as a two-step recipe.



A recipe for engagement

The essence of this recipe is to embed the concept of both defining and measuring what's required in a specific role within your talent strategies for recruitment, assessment, and employee development.

1. Use Success Profiles to systematically describe and define what's required in specific roles.

The profiles should describe not only what needs to be done, but how it needs to be done and who needs to do it in terms of the characteristics of the individuals that will be most engaged⁶.

2. Use high-quality assessment tools and approaches to measure these psychological characteristics.

Professionals whose assessment results fit strongly to target profiles are far more likely to be highly satisfied, emotionally invested, and able to expend considerable discretionary effort toward their jobs.

If your organization is suffering from suboptimal levels of engagement, you can create a long-term strategy to enhance performance with a considered, systematic approach to how you assess, recruit, and develop your talent, using the engagement recipe set out above. Of course, other talent management “ingredients”—pay, recognition, promotion, and autonomy, to name a few—may be needed to maximize engagement. But doubling your profits or multiplying revenue growth by 2.5 times might just be the reward for organizations that get fit right.

⁶ The systematic methods by which we have created SPs as such are described in much detail elsewhere (Lewis, Goff, & Hezlett, et al., 2021; Barnfield, Deege, & Hezlett, et al., 2022).



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About Korn Ferry

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