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When fit matters more: The effect of regulatory fit on adaptation to change

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Regulatory fit theory predicts that motivation and performance are enhanced when individuals pursue goals framed in a way that fits their regulatory orientation (promotion vs. prevention focus). Our aim was to test the predictions of the theory when individuals deal with change. We expected and found in three studies that regulatory fit is beneficial only when a prevention focus is involved. In Study 1, an experiment among students, prevention- but not promotion-focused participants performed better in a changed task when it was framed in fit with their regulatory orientation. In Study 2, a survey among employees experiencing organizational changes, only the fit between individual prevention (and not promotion) focus and prevention framing of the changes by the manager was associated with higher employee adaptation to changes. In Study 3, a weekly survey among employees undergoing organizational change, again only prevention regulatory fit was associated with lower employee exhaustion and higher employee work engagement. Theoretical and practical implications of applying regulatory focus theory to organizational change are discussed.

Keywords: Exhaustion; Organizational change; Performance; Regulatory fit; Work engagement.
Second, it has been proposed that a state of regulatory fit maximizes the chances of employees to be successful during organizational change (Taylor-Bianco & Schermerhorn, 2006). To the best of our knowledge, however, this possibility has not been examined empirically. In other words, do the positive implications of regulatory fit hold true when adaptation to change is required? Given the high failure rate of change initiatives (Burnes, 2005) and the dramatic economic challenges that we currently face (Chung, Bekker, & Houwing, 2012), it is not only empirically but also practically important to examine this question.

In the present article we will, therefore, contribute to existing literature by addressing the previous two questions via three empirical studies and a multimethod design. Our studies aim at: (1) expanding the existing link between regulatory fit and performance to performance in change, following an experimental methodology, and (2) testing the link between regulatory fit and employee adaptation during change implementation in organizational contexts via two survey studies.

**REGULATORY FIT: A FORM OF PERSON–ENVIRONMENT FIT**

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) distinguishes between two chronic motivational orientations, promotion and prevention regulatory focus. Promotion-focused individuals are driven by growth and development needs, they are motivated by their “ideal selves” (i.e., wishes, hopes, aspirations), and are sensitive to the presence or absence of “gains” and “nongains”. Prevention-focused individuals are driven by a need for safety, they are motivated by their “ought selves” (i.e., duties, obligations, responsibilities), and are sensitive to the presence or absence of “losses” and “non-losses”. Regulatory focus is not only chronic characteristic. Environments or tasks can also activate a promotion or prevention focus through the use of situational cues, such as language, rewards, or feedback (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). Therefore, by combining the focus of individuals and environments, conditions of fit or misfit are produced. Individuals experience regulatory fit when they pursue a goal using means that fit their regulatory orientation (Higgins, 2000), for example, when the environmental framing of outcomes they pursue matches their regulatory focus (Lee & Aker, 2004). For promotion-focused employees, regulatory fit could entail, for example, presenting their job performance in terms of the desired level that should be attained (e.g., number of successfully completed projects for an organizational consultant). For prevention-focused employees, regulatory fit could entail presenting their performance goals as the failures or undesired outcomes that should be avoided (e.g., client complaints or extensions in project deadlines for an organizational consultant).

Within person–environment fit literature (e.g., Cable & Edwards, 2004) a distinction has been made between complementary fit (i.e., when a person’s or organization’s characteristics provide what the other wants) versus supplementary fit (i.e., when the weaknesses or needs of the environment are offset by the strength of the individual and vice versa). Because regulatory fit suggests that individuals are provided with a regulatory framing or manipulation that satisfies their own chronic orientation, regulatory fit is more likely to refer to complementary rather than supplementary fit.

Person–environment fit should produce favourable outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005); but why is regulatory fit beneficial? People engage strongly in tasks when they experience regulatory fit, because they feel they do the “right” thing and therefore they are more involved (Higgins, 2005). Experiencing fit makes a message relevant and polarizes attitudes, making positive attitudes more positive and negative attitudes more negative (Avnet & Higgins, 2006). Therefore, promotion-focused individuals with promotion-focused tasks and prevention-focused individuals with prevention-focused tasks are expected to experience favourable outcomes more compared to their misfit counterparts. Positive outcomes of regulatory fit include motivation and performance (Shah et al., 1998), persuasion and positive attitudes (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004), learning (Grimm, Markman, Maddox, & Baldwin, 2008), and health behaviour change (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004).

Although the link between regulatory fit and performance is established, ( Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Keller & Bless, 2006), there is, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical evidence on the effects of regulatory fit on adaptation to organizational change. Research has explored implications of regulatory focus for change-related attitudes (Tseng & Kang, 2008) or choices (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999) or the role of regulatory fit in dynamic decision-making context (Otto, Markman, Gureckis, & Love, 2010), but not the role of regulatory fit in change implementation. In a time of continuous organizational change (Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2010) and difficult transitions within work life (Wilke, 2012), this question becomes urgent. Furthermore, since promotion-focused individuals are generally open to change (Liberman et al., 1999), it becomes particularly important to examine how regulatory fit during change functions for prevention-focused employees, who might be the ones that need the fit most when it comes to change.

**REGULATORY FIT, PERFORMANCE, AND ADAPTATION DURING CHANGE**

Activities matching individual regulatory focus are viewed by individuals as important and valuable.
(Higgins, 2005). There is some evidence that this is also true when people consider new situations. Cesario et al. (2004) found that participants rated a hypothetical city-wide policy proposal as positive and persuasive when its framing was consistent to their regulatory focus. It still remains to be tested, though, whether individuals who experience regulatory fit indeed perform better during change.

In addition to performance, successful adaptation to change is often operationalized in terms of individual well-being (Petrou, Demerouti, & Breevaart, 2013; Van den Heuvel et al., 2009). Change is stressful (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and demanding (Monsell, 2003); therefore, adaptation can be inhibited by unwillingness or inability to respond. Exhaustion is a type of psychological strain that can be a result of organizational change (Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, & DiFonzo, 2004) and involves feeling depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Work engagement, on the other hand, which is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), indicates successful employee adaptation to change (Van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2010). By enhancing self-confidence and the experience of feeling right, regulatory fit leads to improved health, subjective well-being (Aaker & Lee, 2006), and work engagement (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008).

WHEN “DISSIMILARITY” MATTERS MORE

It has been argued that during organizational change employees are more likely to perform at their maximum potential when their environment addresses adequately their regulatory orientation (Taylor-Bianco & Schermanhorn, 2006). However, accumulated evidence indicates that promotion- and prevention-focused individuals do not always rely to the same extent on their environment in order to guide and regulate their behaviour. This “asymmetry” could become particularly important when employees face organizational change, a situation with very different meanings and symbolizations for promotion- and for prevention-focused employees (Brockner & Higgins, 2001).

Promotion focus

Promotion-focused individuals are generally self-efficacious (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012). In fact, they often overestimate their control even when the tasks they have to perform are objectively difficult (Langens, 2007). Furthermore, they are oriented towards their self-actualization, in other words, they have internal motives (Kark & van Dijk, 2007) and they should mostly use internal rather than external standards in the regulation of their behaviour (Summerville & Roese, 2008). For example, it has been found that, when promotion-focused individuals evaluate messages, they are based more on subjective feelings and internal information rather than external data (Pham & Avnet, 2004). Similarly, independent individuals find promotion-focused information more relevant than prevention-focused information. Promotion-focused individuals, thus, construe an independent rather than an interdependent self-image (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000).

This tendency of promotion-focused individuals to rely on themselves and to be independent should be pronounced during organizational change. Environmental changes intensify individual differences and habitual behavioural strategies (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993). Promotion-focused individuals are generally open to experience (Lanaj et al., 2012), they are flexible (Wu, McMullen, Neubert, & Yi, 2008), and they have a preference for change instead of stability (Liberman et al., 1999). When a new situation arises, they should, thus, be expected to embrace it without relying to others or seeking environmental guidance. Although we cannot exclude the possibility that regulatory fit may have a positive effect for promotion-focused employees experiencing change, fit should not be as important for them as it is for other individuals who are less independent (e.g., prevention focused).

Prevention focus

Unlike promotion-focused individuals, prevention-focused individuals make more use of interdependent than independent criteria in their self-regulation (Pham & Avnet, 2004) and they are not particularly self-efficacious (Lanaj et al., 2012). Possibly because of being insecure, prevention-focused individuals have been found to copy behaviours of managers to a higher extent than promotion-focused individuals (Zhang, Higgins, & Chen, 2011). This reliance of prevention-focused individuals on their social environment has been confirmed in organizational contexts as well. For example, Breminkmeijer, Demerouti, Le Blanc, and van Emmerik (2010) found that interpersonal conflicts have detrimental effects on exhaustion for prevention rather than for promotion-focused employees because they trigger their fear of failure. This tendency to rely more on others than on one’s own internal criteria should be intensified during change, a situation that prevention-focused individuals are not expected to view in a particularly positive way.

It is generally accepted that prevention-focused individuals are aversive to change (Liberman et al., 1999), they are security oriented and alert (Higgins, 1997), and focus on dissimilarities more than similarities (Förster, 2009). They also have a sharp perception of uncertainty (Tseng & Kang, 2008) and process information in a local rather than global manner, screening the environment to identify obstacles when threat is perceived (Förster & Higgins, 2005). Provided that changes
signal dissimilarity, prevention-focused individuals should be more alert during change. To the extent that changes are perceived as threats, prevention-focused individuals are also expected to process the environment with scrutiny. In other words, they will make more use of situational cues and attach more value to a possible misfit, compared to promotion-focused individuals who are open to change and feel that less is at stake. Therefore, regulatory fit will lead to increased performance particularly for prevention-focused individuals during change.

Regulatory fit is found to improve health and well-being (Aaker & Lee, 2006). Prevention focus becomes particularly important when stress is under study. Failure to attain prevention (versus promotion) goals leads to agitation (Brockner & Higgins, 2001) and anxiety with, but not necessarily, weakened engagement and depressive symptoms (Klenk, Strauman, & Higgins, 2011). Expanding this reasoning to include exhaustion, we propose that regulatory fit is particularly important for prevention-focused individuals because prevention failure resulting from misfit has detrimental effects on them.

Therefore, they will not only perceive regulatory misfit at a larger extent but also experience its negative outcomes more profoundly. Based on the aforementioned evidence, we formulate:

**Hypothesis 1:** Fit between individual and situational regulatory focus during change is positively associated with performance for prevention rather than for promotion focus.

**Hypothesis 2:** Fit between individual and situational regulatory focus during change is positively associated with adaptation to change for prevention rather than for promotion focus.

**Hypothesis 3:** Fit between individual and situational regulatory focus during change is associated negatively with exhaustion and positively with engagement for prevention rather than for promotion focus.

We conducted three studies to test our three hypotheses, respectively. In all studies, individual regulatory focus, situational regulatory focus, and their interaction were treated as independent variables, but we focused on different outcomes of regulatory fit across studies. Study 1 was an experiment among students who performed a task involving changing requirements with performance as dependent variable. Study 2 was a survey among employees experiencing organizational changes. The dependent variable was employee adaptation to changes. Furthermore, another study was designed to measure in a more dynamic and longitudinal way specific indicators of employee adaptation. Therefore, Study 3 was a weekly survey among employees undergoing organizational change over 3 weeks and the dependent variables were exhaustion and work engagement.

**STUDY 1: REGULATORY FIT AND PERFORMANCE IN A CHANGING TASK**

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 142 (52 men and 90 women) undergraduate students from a Dutch university and their mean age was 20.9 years ($SD = 4.3$). Participants completed two Stroop tasks, of which the second had different instructions. Participants’ individual regulatory focus (promotion and prevention) was assessed and they were randomly allocated in one of two conditions (promotion vs. prevention framing of the second task). Individual regulatory focus and condition were the independent variables. The dependent variable was the improvement of their performance in the second task.

**Procedure**

All tasks and questionnaires were computerized, programmed with Authorware 7.0, and administered individually in soundproof booths in sessions of 10–15 minutes.

**Individual regulatory focus.** We assessed individual regulatory focus with the self-guide strength measure (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997), that measures accessibility of respondents’ ‘ideal’ selves (= what they wish, hope, or aspire to be) and ‘ought’ selves (= what they believe is their duty, obligation, or responsibility to be). The mean time participants need to list and rate attributes that describe their ideal selves represents promotion focus. The mean time they need to list and rate their ought selves represents prevention focus. Because reaction times were not normally distributed, they were transformed using a natural logarithmic transformation (Fazio, 1990).

**Situational regulatory focus manipulation.** Respondents were then asked to complete a Stroop task. In their computer screen they were exposed to colour words depicted either in a matching or mismatching font colour and they had to report as fast as possible the font colour by choosing one out of four possible answers. After five practice trials, respondents received 30 trials with a pseudorandomized proportion between infrequent congruent trials (word presented in a font colour that matched its semantic meaning; e.g., “red” was presented in red font) and frequent incongruent trials (word presented in a font colour that mismatched its semantic meaning; e.g., “red” was presented in green font). Stroop interference scores were computed by subtracting reaction times in congruent trials from reaction times in incongruent trials (Cothran & Larsen, 2008). Low scores in interference represent high task performance.

Participants were then asked to complete a second Stroop task. We manipulated the regulatory framing of our communication in the following way: Half of the participants received a promotion framing (“We now
introduce a new time criterion in order for you to achieve a faster responding. The time limit is adjusted to 4 seconds ("We now introduce a new time criterion in order for you to better avoid mistakes. The time limit is adjusted to 4 seconds"). In fact, there was no time limit in any task and the two tasks were identical. We decided upon this particular way to manipulate the framing of "change" because introducing a novel task after the manipulation would render the two performance scores (i.e., before and after the manipulation) no longer comparable. Although there is no actual task change in Task 2, respondents in Task 2 have to deal with the new aspect of a time limit, which can be a new cognitively demanding aspect.

All error trials (3.9% of total data points) were recoded as missing (Trawalter & Richeson, 2006). Two participants made errors in all incongruent trials. Because their interference could not be calculated, they were excluded from the analyses. Our dependent variable was performance improvement in the second task. We calculated performance improvement as interference in the second task subtracted from interference in the first task. High scores represent high performance improvement.

Results

Table 1 reveals the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables. Strikingly and contrary to our expectations the correlation between ideal and ought strength was $r = .64$, $p < .001$, showing that the measure failed to differentiate between promotion and prevention focus in the intended way. To illustrate this further, we performed two median splits of the sample based on the ideal and ought strength measures. We found that 98 individuals (69% of the sample) were high on both ideal and ought strength or low on both ideal and ought strength. After controlling for participants’ mean reaction time (independent from ought or ideal selves), the correlation between ought self and ideal self dropped to $r = .37$, $p < .001$. Therefore, in order to come up with a “purier” measure of ideal and ought selves, we decided to control for mean reaction time within all our analyses.

Existing experimental research has treated ideal and ought strength both as two distinct variables (e.g., Shah et al., 1998) and as a single measure of relative regulatory focus (e.g., Keller & Bless, 2006). Meta-analytical evidence reveals that promotion and prevention focus are two independent strategies that coexist and are positively intercorrelated (Lanaj et al., 2012). It has also been proposed that promotion and prevention focus could exclude each other, especially during specific instances that require action (Kluger & Ganzach, 2004), as it happens, for instance, in experimental settings. On the one hand, by treating ideal and ought strength as separate predictors in the analyses, researchers assume that they are independent constructs. On the other hand, creating a single measure of relative regulatory focus clearly distinguishes promotion-focused from prevention-focused individuals. This strategy promotes ease of interpretation of the results and is often used by existing research (e.g., Liberman et al., 1999; Spiegel et al., 2004). Therefore, we decided to treat individual regulatory focus in two distinct ways for our analyses according to these two distinct views of individual regulatory focus. First, we performed regression analyses with both ideal and ought strength as two distinct variables. Second, we created a relative score of regulatory focus: We subtracted ought strength from ideal strength and based on this score we performed median split of the sample in predominantly promotion and prevention-focused respondents. Such a dichotomous variable makes it possible to test our hypothesis via a 2 (promotion- vs. prevention-focused participants) × 2 (promotion vs. prevention framing of second task) factorial design.

Within one regression analysis (see Table 2), we tested the effect of the condition, ideal strength, ought strength, and their interactions on performance improvement. None of the main effects were significant. The interaction terms also had nonsignificant effects both for ideal strength, $\beta = -.11$, $p = .46$, and for ought strength, $\beta = -.07$, $p = .67$.

In addition, based on the median split of the sample in promotion- and prevention-focused participants, we conducted a 2 (promotion- vs. prevention-focused

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of Study 1 variables (N = 142)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Condition</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Ideal strength</td>
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<td>3. Ought strength</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Ideal strength × Condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ought strength × Condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Task interference (T1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Task interference (T2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Improved task performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T1 refers to Stroop task 1; T2 refers to Stroop task 2; ideal and ought strength have been standardized before computing the interaction term. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .001$.
participants) × 2 (promotion vs. prevention framing of second task) ANOVA with improved performance as dependent variable. Individual regulatory focus of participants did not have a main effect on performance improvement, F(1, 135) = 0.44, p = .51. The experimental manipulation had a marginal positive effect on performance improvement, F(1, 135) = 3.73, p = .06. Because of the way we coded the experimental manipulation (i.e., promotion = 0, prevention = 1), this finding means that a prevention framing of the new task was associated with improved performance. The interaction between individual regulatory focus and the experimental manipulation was nonsignificant, F(1, 135) = 1.00, p = .32. However, simple contrasts revealed that, as hypothesized, prevention-focused participants who received a prevention framing displayed higher performance improvement (M = 0.04, SD = 0.04) compared to prevention-focused participants who received a promotion framing (M = −0.08, SD = 0.04), F(1, 135) = 4.29, p < .05. As expected, promotion-focused participants who received a promotion framing did not differ significantly in performance improvement (M = −0.01, SD = 0.04) compared to promotion-focused participants who received a prevention framing (M = 0.03, SD = 0.04), F(1, 135) = 0.43, p = .51 (see Figure 1, for the plotted interaction).

Although our ANOVA analysis seems to support Hypothesis 1, Study 1 generally resulted in mixed findings, which cannot be interpreted in a very straightforward way. Subsequently, Studies 2 and 3 examined effects of regulatory fit (i.e., between individual and situational regulatory focus) among employees in organizational contexts. Because the regulatory strength measure was less successful than expected in differentiating between individual promotion and prevention focus in Study 1, in the subsequent studies we decided to use conventional questionnaires of regulatory focus. Questionnaires are commonly used to measure employee promotion and prevention focus and they normally result in nonsignificant (Wu et al., 2008) or positive average (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008) intercorrelations between promotion and prevention. Situational focus was conceptualized as the regulatory framing of organizational changes used by managers in their communication.

### STUDY 2: REGULATORY FIT AND ADAPTATION TO CHANGE

#### Method

**Participants**

Invitations to participate in a survey were sent to 226 employees of Dutch organizations experiencing...
organizational changes. The participants who completed the survey were 100 (response rate = 44%). Their mean age was 42 years ($SD = 13.2$) and 69 of them were women. They worked in their organization for a mean of 6.2 years ($SD = 6.4$). The majority of them worked in the health sector (50%), followed by education (10%), business administration (9%), financial sector (4%), media and entertainment (4%), or other sectors. Following previous research (e.g., Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Hetland, 2012), we used a checklist to identify the types of organizational changes respondents were experiencing. Respondents indicated that the changes they were undergoing included new tasks (45%), new ways of completing existing tasks (49%), new ways of working with colleagues or clients (39%), new technologies (43%), new products or services (18%), new location (34%), and flexible workspace (9%).

**Procedure**
Research assistants recruited participants by contacting organizations in the region that were known for undergoing some kind of change. Participants were invited to participate via e-mail. Participation was voluntary and data were handled confidentially. The invitation contained a link to an online survey.

**Survey.** The survey began with the following introductory text: “Organizations often change. Sometimes these changes are radical reorganizations and sometimes they are less radical changes, such as the introduction of a new IT system. No matter what changes there are in your organization, we are interested in the way they influence your work.” Although this introductory text was not repeated before every scale, we assumed that when the words “change” or “changes” were mentioned, participants perceived them in the way they were described in the introductory text.

**Individual regulatory focus.** The regulatory focus of the participants was measured with the Work Regulatory Focus scale (Neubert et al., 2008). Based on factor loadings of the items, we used five items out of the original nine-item scale to measure promotion focus (e.g., “A chance to grow is an important factor for me when looking for a job”; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$) and five items out of the original nine-item scale to measure prevention focus (e.g., “I focus my attention on avoiding failure at work”; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (= “totally disagree”) to 6 (= “totally agree”). Because using short scales may alter the validity of psychometric instruments, we used data from an unreported empirical study to estimate the correlations of our shortened scales with the original scales of regulatory focus. In that study, a total sample of 132 employees working in a Dutch food company participated in a cross-sectional web-based survey. Their mean age was 31.5 ($SD = 9.7$) and 67.4% of them were women. Their mean tenure was 6.6 years ($SD = 7.4$). The majority of them worked at the sales (38.4%) and marketing department (24%). Because the company operates in an international environment, the full 18-item regulatory focus at work scale (Neubert et al., 2008) was used in its original English version. We computed two mean scores for prevention focus (i.e., one in its original nine-item version and one in its shortened five-item version scale that was used in Study 2). Similarly, we computed a full version and a shortened version of the promotion focus scale. Correlational analysis revealed that the correlation between the shortened version and the full version was $r = .96$, $p < .001$ for promotion focus and $r = .95$, $p < .001$ for prevention focus. Therefore, the shortened versions that we used in Study 2 seem to be equivalent to the original scales.

**Situational regulatory focus.** To measure regulatory framing of organizational changes by the manager, we adapted Neubert et al.’s (2008) scales so as to refer to change communication. Using a scale ranging from 1 (= “totally disagree”) to 6 (= “totally agree”), participants were asked to rate a number of statements following the introductory sentence, “While communicating the change to us, our manager …”. Promotion focus subscale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$) consisted of nine items (e.g., “… focuses on the way the change can help us further our professional growth”) and prevention focus subscale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$) included also nine items (e.g., “… is oriented towards preventing failure in the new tasks”).

**Adaptation to changes.** Employee adaptation to organizational changes was measured with the three-item individual task adaptivity scale by Griffin, Neal, and Parker (2007). This scale refers to the way individuals cope with, respond to, and support change. A sample item is “Overall I adapt well to changes in my core tasks” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 85$). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (= “never”) to 5 (= “always”).

**Control variables.** Individual positive reactions towards organizational changes are predicted at some extent by employee perceptions of control over the changes and their attitudes towards these changes (Metselaar, 1997). In the present study, however, we are interested in the effect of regulatory fit on employee behaviour rather than attitudes. Therefore, we assess the effect of regulatory fit on employee adaptation to changes over and above the attitudes that employees have towards these changes. Following previous organizational change research (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Wanberg & Banas, 2000), we included two self-constructed single items to control for the effect that specific organizational changes may exert within our analyses. One item (“To what extent do the changes affect your daily life?”) was used to measure the impact of the changes. The answering scale ranged from 1 (= “I
hardly experience them”) to 10 (“I experience them daily”). Via another item (“How positively or negatively do you rate the changes?”), respondents indicated their attitudes towards the changes using a scale ranging from 1 (“very negative”) to 10 (“very positive”). Furthermore, in the analysis we controlled for the type of organization where employees worked. This was dummy coded into a variable comparing health sector, which was the prevalent response (50%), to all other sectors.

**Strategy of analysis**

To test our second hypothesis, a hierarchical moderated regression analysis was conducted with adaptation to changes as dependent variable. In the first step, control variables were entered. In the second step, we entered the standardized scores of individual and situational regulatory foci. In the third step, we entered the interaction term between individual and situational promotion focus and the interaction term between individual and situational prevention focus.

**Results**

Intercorrelations between the study variables (see Table 3) revealed that individual promotion focus was unrelated to individual prevention focus, $r = -0.01, p = .93$, whereas situational promotion had a moderate positive correlation with situational prevention, $r = .37, p < .001$. Regression analysis (see Table 4) showed that individual promotion focus had a positive effect on adaptation, $\beta = .05, SE = 0.05, p < .001$, whereas situational promotion had a non-significant effect on adaptation. Individual and situational prevention focus had nonsignificant effects on adaptation. The interaction term between individual and situational prevention focus had a significant effect on adaptation, $\beta = .03, SE = 0.05, p < .05$. A graphical representation of the interaction can be found in Figure 2. Simple slope analysis revealed that, as expected, when respondents with high individual prevention focus (1 SD above the mean) perceived high levels (compared to low levels) of situational prevention focus, they reported higher

![Figure 2. The effect of situational prevention focus on adaptation to changes moderated by individual prevention focus.](image)

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<th>9</th>
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<td>2. Impact of changes</td>
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<td>3. Attitudes towards changes</td>
<td>6.63</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>4. Individual promotion focus</td>
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<td>5. Individual prevention focus</td>
<td>4.20</td>
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<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Situational promotion focus</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Situational prevention focus</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.37***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Promotion focus interaction</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Prevention focus interaction</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Adaptation to change</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dummy variable refers to the prevalent type of organization (= health sector) versus all other sectors; interaction refers to the interaction terms between standardized individual and standardized situational regulatory focus. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$. 

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy variable</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of changes</td>
<td>.08**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards changes</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>1602.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Individual promotion</td>
<td>.05***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual prevention</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational promotion</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational prevention</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>5.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Promotion interaction</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention interaction</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>2.45†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dummy variable refers to the prevalent type of organization (= health sector) versus all other sectors; interaction refers to the interaction terms between individual and situational regulatory focus. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$, †$p \leq .10$.  

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adaptation to organizational changes; Estimate = 0.165, \( t = 2.10, p < .05 \). The simple slope for individuals with low prevention focus (1 SD below the mean) was nonsignificant; estimate = -.06, \( t = -0.78, p = .44 \). As expected, the interaction term between individual and situational promotion focus was unrelated to adaptation. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Because of the limitations of cross-sectional studies, we examined the regulatory fit hypothesis for employees with a weekly study focusing on a wider range of outcomes.

STUDY 3: REGULATORY FIT, EXHAUSTION, AND ENGAGEMENT DURING CHANGE

Method

Participants
Participants were 30 teachers of a Dutch secondary school experiencing a transition from common to competency-based education. The implemented school policy included working on the skills of the students, matching theory with practice and using teamwork in education. Of the participants, 18 were men, 11 were women, and one did not give demographic information. Their mean age was 45 years (SD = 8.49) and they worked for a mean of 39 hours per week (SD = 8.18). From the 95 teachers who were contacted, 55 returned the questionnaires. Of them, 30 completed all four surveys (response rate = 32%) and formed the sample for the analyses. Study completers did not differ significantly from dropouts in any study variable.

Procedure
Participants were informed about the study through a presentation by a research assistant and were invited to participate voluntarily. The study involved one general survey and one weekly booklet, consisting of three identical weekly surveys. To participate, first, they had to fill in the general survey and then complete one weekly survey for three consecutive weeks at the end of each week. The general survey contained information about behaviours that participants generally demonstrate (general level), whereas the weekly surveys contained information about behaviours participants demonstrated during the previous week (week level).

General survey.
- **Individual regulatory focus.** The regulatory focus of the participants was measured with the two 9-item subscales of the Work Regulatory Focus scale (Neubert et al., 2008): promotion focus (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .92 \)) and prevention focus (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .88 \)). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (= “totally disagree”) to 6 (= “totally agree”).

- **Situational regulatory focus.** To measure regulatory framing of organizational changes by the manager, we used the scale that we adapted in Study 2 based on Neubert et al.’s (2008), including nine items for promotion (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .81 \)) and nine items for prevention (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .84 \)).

- **Exhaustion (general level).** Exhaustion was measured with Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, and Jackson’s (1996) five-item MBI-GS subscale (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .91 \)). Items (e.g., “I feel burned out from my work”) were rated using a scale ranging from 0 (= “never”) to 6 (= “always”).

- **Work engagement (general level).** To measure employee work engagement, we used the three-item subscales from Schaufeli et al.’s (2006) UWES-9 questionnaire: vigour (e.g., “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”; Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .92 \)), dedication (e.g., “I am enthusiastic about my job”; Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .92 \)), and absorption (e.g., “I am immersed in my work”; Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .89 \)). The answering scale ranged from 0 (= “never”) to 6 (= “always”).

Weekly survey.
- **Exhaustion (weekly level).** The weekly version of MBI-GS exhaustion scale included four items (e.g., “This week, I have felt burnt out from my work”). Items were rated using a scale ranging from 1 (= “totally disagree”) to 6 (= “totally agree”). Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .57 \) at Week 1 and it reached satisfactory levels at Week 2 (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .75 \)) and Week 3 (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .84 \)).

- **Work engagement (weekly level).** The weekly versions of vigour, dedication, and absorption scales included three items each. A sample item is “This week I have been enthusiastic about my job”. Items were rated using a scale ranging from 1 (= “totally disagree”) to 6 (= “totally agree”) and Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) ranged weekly from .76 to .80 for vigour, from .73 to .81 for dedication, and from .69 to .80 for absorption. Momentary approaches to work engagement suggest that, when the period that work engagement refers to is short, respondents are more likely to distinguish between the three dimensions in recalling their experiences (Sonnenst, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010). Although our questionnaire refers to the period of 1 week, there is reason to expect that work engagement emerges more clearly as a three-dimensional concept when it is perceived at the weekly level than when it is perceived at a more general level (e.g., referring to the states that employees “generally” experience). Furthermore, confirmatory analyses using the AMOS software revealed that the three-factor solution was superior to the one-factor solution at Week 1, \( \Delta \chi^2(3) = 14.82, p < .001 \), and at Week 3, \( \Delta \chi^2(3) = 9.55, p \)
Strategy of analyses. Our weekly repeated measurements were nested within individuals; therefore, the data can be viewed as multilevel (Hox, 2002). Our two-level hierarchical structure included 30 participants at the higher level and 90 occasions at the lower level. We conducted multilevel regression analyses using MlwiN (Rasbash, Steele, Browne, & Prosser, 2004), in order to test the effect of the interactions between individual and situational regulatory focus on exhaustion, vigour, dedication, and absorption. One analysis was conducted for every dependent variable, resulting in four analyses. In every analysis we controlled for the effect of the general-level (i.e., higher-level) variable on the respective weekly level (i.e., lower-level) dependent variable (e.g., general-level exhaustion on weekly level exhaustion). We, thus, tested the effect of regulatory fit on the specific week levels of the dependent variables, over and above the “baseline” level of the dependent variables, i.e., the regular levels of exhaustion and engagement. Predictors were centred on the grand mean (Hox, 2002). Prior to analyses, intraclass correlations showed that the variance in the week-level outcomes attributed to between-persons variations thus, at the higher level, was 60% for exhaustion, 63% for vigour, 75% for dedication, and 45% for absorption. This reveals that, although dependent variables displayed significant amounts of variance at both levels of analyses, for most of the variables this variation was mostly at the higher level, which justifies the use of higher-level variables to predict lower-level outcomes.

Results

Intercorrelations between the study variables (see Table 5) revealed that individual promotion focus was unrelated to individual prevention focus, $r = .09, p = .63$, whereas situational promotion had a positive correlation with situational prevention, $r = .69, p < .001$. Multilevel regression analyses (presented in Tables 6–9) showed that neither individual nor situational regulatory focus had significant main effects on any of the dependent variables. As expected, the interaction term between individual and situational prevention focus was associated with exhaustion, estimate $= -0.304, SE = 0.115$, $t = -2.643, p < .05$ (see Table 6); vigour, estimate $= 0.226, SE = 0.080$, $t = 2.825, p < .01$ (see Table 7); dedication, estimate $= 0.244, SE = 0.078$, $t = 3.128 p < .001$ (see Table 8); but not absorption, estimate $= 0.130, SE = 0.086$, $t = 1.511, p = .13$ (see Table 9).
### TABLE 6
Multilevel estimates for models predicting week-level exhaustion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model variables</th>
<th>Null</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>M3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimate</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>Estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.356</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>14.818***</td>
<td>2.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General-level exhaustion</td>
<td>0.251</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual promotion focus</td>
<td>-0.028</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>-0.166</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual prevention focus</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.155</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational promotion focus</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational prevention focus</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion interaction</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>-0.160</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention interaction</td>
<td>-0.163</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>-1.283</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$-2 \times \log$</td>
<td>215.475</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>210.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta -2 \times \log$</td>
<td>4.08*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-person variance</td>
<td>0.415</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-person variance</td>
<td>0.609</td>
<td>0.198</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0.499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N = 30$ employees, $N = 90$ observations. Interaction refers to the interaction terms between standardized individual and standardized situational regulatory focus. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$.

### TABLE 7
Multilevel estimates for models predicting week-level vigour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model variables</th>
<th>Null</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>M3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimate</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>Estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>4.535</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>38.109***</td>
<td>4.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General-level vigour</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.806</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual promotion focus</td>
<td>0.196</td>
<td>0.135</td>
<td>1.366</td>
<td>-0.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual prevention focus</td>
<td>0.164</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>1.366</td>
<td>-0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational promotion focus</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>-0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational prevention focus</td>
<td>0.226</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>2.825**</td>
<td>-0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$-2 \times \log$</td>
<td>159.440</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>158.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta -2 \times \log$</td>
<td>0.644</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.560*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-person variance</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-person variance</td>
<td>0.348</td>
<td>0.110</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>0.236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N = 30$ employees, $N = 90$ observations. Interaction refers to the interaction terms between standardized individual and standardized situational regulatory focus. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$. 

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Significant interactions are graphically displayed in Figures 3–5. Simple slope analyses with asymptotic z-tests conducted for the significant interactions revealed that the slopes for participants high in individual prevention focus (1 SD higher than the mean) were all significantly different from zero. Specifically, when highly prevention-focused individuals perceived high levels (compared to low levels) of situational prevention focus, they reported lower exhaustion, estimate = –0.52, z = –2.54, p < .05; higher vigour, estimate = 0.39, z = 2.61, p < .01; and higher dedication, estimate = 0.30, z = 2.02, p < .05. On the contrary, as expected, the interaction term between individual and situational promotion focus did not predict any dependent variable. The slopes for respondents with low individual prevention focus (1 SD below the mean) were all nonsignificant, estimate = 0.15, z = 0.53, p = .60, for exhaustion; estimate = –0.11, z = –0.53, p = .60, for vigour; estimate = –0.26, z = –1.31, p = .19, for dedication. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported for three of the four outcomes.

Table 10 presents the results for the aggregate (overall) score of work engagement as a dependent variable.
Results revealed that the interaction between individual and situational prevention focus was significantly related to weekly work engagement in the same direction as it was for vigour and dedication, estimate = 0.197, SE = .072, t = 2.736, p < .05. Simple slope analyses, however, revealed that none of the two slopes were significant, estimate = –0.27, SE = 0.18, z = –1.49, p = 14, for low individual prevention focus; estimate = 0.16, SE = 0.14, z = 1.41, p = 25, for high individual prevention focus.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this article, we examined the effect of regulatory focus on performance, adaptation, work engagement, and exhaustion during change. In Study 1, prevention-focused...
participants presented with a prevention-focused changing task, performed better compared to when change was promotion focused. This regulatory fit effect was not found for promotion-focused participants. In Study 2, only the combination of individual and situational prevention (and not promotion) focus was associated with adaptation to changes. In Study 3, only the combination of individual and situational prevention (and not promotion) focus was associated positively with weekly work engagement and negatively with weekly exhaustion.

In general, it is assumed that every type of regulatory fit is beneficial (Aaker & Lee, 2006). From our results, however, it follows that when it comes to change, this might not be the case. Prevention-focused individuals are conservative (Crowe & Higgins, 1997) and aversive to change (Liberman et al., 1999). Under certain conditions, though, they may demonstrate creative (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011) or risky (Scholer, Stroeßner, & Higgins, 2008) behaviour. Therefore, they rely more strongly on environmental input in order to display a range of behaviours not typically expected from them. Our findings imply that prevention- and not promotion-oriented employees rely more strongly on regulatory cues of their manager’s communication during organizational change, which may lead to a more acute perception of regulatory fit and consequently more profound outcomes. This is in agreement with existing evidence indicating that during the assessment of a given situation prevention oriented individuals make more use of interpersonal and external rather than internal standards (Zhang et al., 2011) and rely more on external data rather than internal structures (Pham & Avnet, 2004). These findings support the idea that regulatory fit improves performance (Stam, Van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010), but with a distinction between promotion and prevention focus. In particular, regulatory fit improved performance only when prevention (and not promotion) focus was involved.

Despite being rarely reported, asymmetrical regulatory fit effects (e.g., significant regulatory fit effects for prevention but not for promotion focus) can be found in existing research (for example, Keller, Lee, & Sternthal, 2004; Sue-Chan et al., 2012). In one of their experiments, Sue-Chan et al. (2012) found that individuals with entity orientation (i.e., the belief that skills are fixed and cannot change, which was compared to prevention orientation) benefited from a prevention-oriented coaching. However, individuals with incremental orientation (i.e., the belief that skills can develop, which was compared to promotion focus) did not benefit from a promotion coaching. Such a finding agrees with our reasoning that regulatory fit is more essential for prevention-focused individuals. In other words, being more insecure, prevention-focused employees tend to use more external help than their own internal standards. Therefore, they are more in need of regulatory fit and profit more from a prevention-focused manager communication during the uncertain time of changes. Because promotion-focused employees do not to rely to external confirmation, their motivation and performance will not depend as strongly on coaching or organizational communication. That should be particularly the case during organizational change, a situation that promotion-focused employees feel ready to embrace. This is supported by our second study, whereby individual promotion focus was positively associated with reported employee adaptation to changes irrespectively of the levels of situational regulatory focus.

Employee adaptation to change was illustrated also in terms of exhaustion and work engagement. The negative link that was found between prevention regulatory fit and exhaustion is in the same line with research linking individual prevention focus with emotional exhaustion (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2010) or anxious attachment (Moss, 2009) in employees and distress in chronic patients (Schokker, Links, Luttik, & Hagedoorn, 2010). By experiencing misfit more profoundly, prevention-focused individuals are likely to develop adverse health reactions that are typical for prevention failure (Klenk et al., 2011). Our finding that vigour and dedication are predicted by the interaction between individual and situational prevention focus introduces the importance of prevention focus in the study of work engagement. Although employee promotion focus interacts with leadership styles to predict employee engagement (Moss, 2009), in organizational change context it is important to focus on prevention focus too. Because prevention regulatory fit had a nonsignificant effect on absorption, it is not surprising that it had a weaker effect on the aggregate work engagement than on vitality and dedication. Perhaps this is the reason why the interaction effect of individual and situational prevention on aggregate work engagement did not result in significant slopes. Absorption is not the core dimension of engagement and it is a more complex and short-term peak experience (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Indeed, absorption was the dimension of engagement with the lowest variance at the higher level. Therefore, it could be explained by unstable or momentary factors that we did not measure rather than perceived regulatory fit.

Taken together, our findings confirm propositions about the beneficial character of regulatory fit during organizational change (Taylor-Bianco & Schermerhorn, 2006; Van den Heuvel et al., 2010). Furthermore, they refine these propositions by illustrating the differential role of regulatory fit for prevention-focused individuals, for whom more is at stake, and for promotion-focused individuals, for whom fit will not play such a crucial role.

**Contribution and limitations**

The main contribution of our research is expanding empirical evidence regarding the positive effects of regulatory fit to include adaptation to change. More importantly, the use of a change context revealed that the predictions of
regulatory fit theory are particularly important for prevention-focused individuals. We made use of a multimethod approach, comprising one experiment among students and two survey studies among employees, which lead to a similar pattern of results. Furthermore, instead of participants' choices or attitudes as dependent variables (e.g., Liberman et al., 1999; Tseng & Kang, 2008), we measured actual performance on a changing task. Within the third study, although the weekly design has not captured longitudinal effects, it added on the interpretation of our findings by employing multiple weekly measurements and by controlling for individual “baseline” behaviours.

Notwithstanding the strengths of our research, limitations should be noted as well. The relative small sample sizes limited the power of analyses within the second and third study. Furthermore, the self-guide strength measure in Study 1 did not differentiate clearly between promotion and prevention focus, an issue that we addressed via median splits of the sample. The use of conventional regulatory focus measures in Study 2 and 3 resulted in nonsignificant correlations between individual promotion and prevention focus. Furthermore, all information was gathered based on self-report, resulting potentially in common method bias. Most importantly, the measurement of situational regulatory focus was not based on organizational records or report of the managers but was reported by employees. Therefore, self-report was the only way to capture environmental influences, which can lead to untrustworthy measurements (Spector, 1994). For example, employees may be prone to perceive and report at a larger extent a situational regulatory focus that matches rather than mismatches their individual regulatory focus. However, the correlation between individual and situational regulatory focus was high in Study 3, which comprised a rather small sample, but average in Study 2, which comprised a bigger sample and, thus, provides more reliable estimates. Especially in Study 3, an additional and relevant problematic issue can be that all employees worked within the same setting. This raises a question, namely, what causes the variation of the situational regulatory focus variable. Based on leader–member exchange literature (Graen, & Uhl-Bien, 1995), though, we could expect that employees experience a different relationship with their leader, comprising different communication styles and cues, even if they have the same supervisor.

Implications for research and practice

To combine the strengths of experimental and field research, future researchers could conduct field experiments among employees by manipulating, for example, the framing of new policies or innovations that are introduced in organizations. When situational regulatory focus, however, cannot be manipulated, it is of vital importance to include additional ways of measurement other than self-report, for example, reports of the managers or use of organizational records (e.g., memos, e-mails, meeting output, etc.). Furthermore, making a priori decisions about which type of regulatory focus (promotion or prevention) plays an important role in certain research areas (e.g., change implantation), is misleading, since different foci may hold different patterns of effects. Finally, future research on regulatory fit during change should focus on objective job performance in addition to participants’ self-report.

Implications of regulatory fit for practice can be challenging. For instance, how can managers provide different regulatory framings of change messages when change communication generally follows one line? Hopefully, things become simpler if we assume that prevention-focused employees are particularly attentive to change. Of course, employees can develop both types of regulatory focus. Therefore, we are not suggesting that change messages should always have a prevention framing. It is important, however, to keep in mind that for prevention-focused employees more is at stake during change and the effects of a misfit could be particularly adverse. While a change message could be carved in such a way so as to follow a middle way including both promotion and prevention cues, prevention employees should be approached in an attentive way by managers. For example, regulatory fit should be targeted as a goal especially for prevention-focused employees. This can be achieved by communication provided through coaching, individual development plans for prevention-focused employees or other aspects of leader–member exchange.

Although regulatory fit is not the only factor contributing to successful change, it can be the key to create and sustain healthy organizations during times of change. This is not only accomplished through the positive effects that regulatory fit holds for employees with prevention orientation but also through the elimination of adverse effects when misfit is present. These can be the ways to deal with resistance, low motivation, and poor performance, to name only a few of the obstacles undermining change, and to create a prosperous environment facilitating change.

REFERENCES


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