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FLEXIBLE WORKING AND APPLICANT ATTRACTION: A PERSON-JOB FIT APPROACH

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Abstract:

Purpose: The ability to work anytime from anywhere is attractive to job seekers, who respond by developing needs regarding flexible working. Flexibility needs are compared to the flexibility perceived in job advertisements to form an overall perception of flexibility fit. The purpose of this paper is to examine both the impact of flexibility fit (on applicant attraction) and its antecedents.

Design/methodology/approach: The impact of flexibility fit on applicant attraction and its antecedents are examined using person-job fit theory. 92 job seekers analyzed a total of 391 job advertisements. The hypotheses are tested using multilevel structural equation modeling.

Findings: The results show that perceived flexibility fit is positively related to job pursuit and job acceptance intentions. They further show that perceived flexibility fit is driven by perceived job advertisements' flexibility exceeding applicants' needed flexibility, which in turn is driven by the flexibility actually present in job advertisements exceeding applicants' flexibility needs.

Originality/value: The study contributes to literature on new ways of working by highlighting the desirable nature of flexibility and its impact on fit perceptions. It further contributes to literature on person-job fit by investigating a full model of fit, examining both outcomes and antecedents of perceived fit. For practitioners, the study highlights the importance of advertising flexibility to attract applicants.

Keywords: flexible working; new ways of working; person-job fit; applicant attraction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to work anytime, anywhere is provided to 17% of European employees, according to a recent report of the International Labour Office (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017). Given the desirability of such flexible working arrangements (Thompson and Aspinwall, 2009; Thompson et al., 2015), it would not be surprising that they would be sought by the remaining 83%. Studies have found that these new ways of working increase employee engagement (Gerards et al., 2018; Richman et al., 2008) and job satisfaction (Kröll and Nüesch, 2017), and reduce turnover intentions (Kröll and Nüesch, 2017). In such contexts, employees who do not have access to flexible working arrangements might be tempted to find them elsewhere (Mallon, 1998). The business press even reports that "more workers are quitting their jobs for flexibility" (Kline, 2019). Consequently, many applicants would be attracted to jobs that meet or exceed their needs for flexible working. This process of being attracted to jobs that 'fit' or exceed one's needs is often investigated as part of Person-Job (PJ) fit literature (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Traditionally, PJ fit literature has considered job attributes such as pay level, benefits, location or type of work (Cable and Judge, 1996). More recent studies, however, consider more specific attributes such as corporate social responsibility (Gully et al., 2013; Zhang and Gowan, 2012) or global mindset (Phillips et al., 2014). They all found that applicants who value certain attributes are attracted to job advertisements that explicitly advertise these attributes. However, no study has yet looked at applicants being attracted to jobs that fit their needs for flexible working (i.e., flexibility), in spite of the aforementioned desirability of these new ways of working among employees (Gerards et al., 2018). Furthermore, most studies on PJ fit and applicant attraction consider the fit that is consciously perceived and reported by applicants, in line with Cable and Judge's measure (Cable and Judge, 1996), and do not investigate the antecedents of such fit cognition (De Cooman et al., 2019).

The objective of the study is thus to examine both the impact of flexibility fit (on applicant attraction) and its antecedents. Using a sample of 92 job seekers who analyzed a total of 391 job advertisements, the study finds support for its model on the outcomes and antecedents of flexibility fit. Perceived flexibility fit positively impacts both job pursuit and job acceptance intentions (i.e., applicant attraction). It is also predicted by perceived job advertisements' flexibility exceeding applicants' needed flexibility (i.e., subjective flexibility needs fulfillment), which in turn is driven by flexibility actually present in job advertisements exceeding applicants' flexibility needs (i.e., objective flexibility needs fulfillment).

The findings contribute to both literature on flexible working and literature on PJ fit. The literature on flexible working is enhanced by the finding that flexible working resembles pay or autonomy, in that individuals do not mind being provided with more of these than what they originally needed. The literature on PJ fit benefits from the study of the fit process in full, showing how perceived fit originates from information contained in job advertisements and interpreted by applicants in comparison to their needs. Furthermore, the full process of fit is investigated with structural equation modeling, which is a novel and uncommon approach in PJ fit research (Edwards, 2009).

The paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background of the study, defining flexible working, establishing its importance for applicant attraction, and detailing PJ fit in the context of the job search. The third section develops hypotheses based on this theoretical background. The fourth and fifth sections present the methods that are used to test the hypotheses and the test results respectively. The last section

discusses the results and their theoretical and practical implications, along with the study's limitations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Flexible Working

Literature on flexible working (i.e., flexibility) and new ways of working has defined flexibility as the ability to decide where, when and how to work (Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2012). It may be offered to employees in the form of flexible working arrangements such as telecommuting or flexible work schedules.

The ability to decide where to work is about offering employees the flexibility to work from outside their main workplace. Its main flexible working arrangement is telecommuting. Although telecommuting is mostly conducted from home (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), it may also be conducted from other places such as coworking spaces (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016). Hence, employees may benefit from an even greater ability to decide where to work. This flexible working arrangement is generally perceived as an increase in autonomy, and thus a work benefit (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). This is especially the case in certain countries such as France, the UK, the US and Nordic countries (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017).

The ability to decide when to work includes flexible working arrangements such as flexible work schedules or flexitime (Ierodiakonou and Stavrou, 2017), compressed work schedules (Hyatt and Coslor, 2018), part-time work or job sharing. These working arrangements are generally positively perceived by employees, given their potential to improve work-life balance (Deery et al., 2017).

The ability to decide how to work is traditionally referred to as autonomy (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Its prototypical nature of work is freelancing (Pichault and McKeown, 2019). The choice of a freelance career is indeed often made in order to gain more work autonomy and reduce hierarchical constraints (Lo Presti et al., 2018). Autonomy is considered to be a basic psychological need (Van den Broeck et al., 2016) and, as such, an essential antecedent of job satisfaction (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006).

Overall, flexibility is thus generally perceived as a work benefit (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Kelliher and Anderson, 2008). Although the three dimensions of flexibility are distinct (Thompson et al., 2015), they are often jointly offered to employees through bundles of flexible working arrangements (Peretz et al., 2018). Furthermore, the three dimensions are highly correlated, for instance when telecommuting generally improves the ability to decide where, when and how to work altogether (Musson and Tietze, 2003). They also all represent a form of work autonomy (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006). Additionally, certain types of jobs such as freelancing or itinerant sales imply high levels on the three dimensions of flexibility (Lo Presti et al., 2018).

2.2. Applicant Attraction

Attracting applicants is one of the main objectives of recruitment. Indeed, being attracted to a given job leads to applying for this job, remaining in the applicant pool, and ultimately accepting the job offer if it is made (Chapman et al., 2005).

The intentions to apply for a job and remain in its applicant pool are referred to as job pursuit intentions (Chapman et al., 2005). Job pursuit intentions are first driven by job characteristics (Uggerslev et al., 2012) and work benefits (Thompson et al., 2015). Indeed, applicants intend to apply to jobs that match their profile (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), provide them with sufficient pay, and have reasonable commuting time (Uggerslev et al., 2012). Job advertisements are also made more desirable when they offer work benefits such as flexible working arrangements (Thompson et al., 2015), thereby strengthening job pursuit intentions. Moreover, job pursuit intentions are driven

by attitudes such as being attracted to the job or the organization (Phillips et al., 2014) or perceiving the job or the organization as a fit (Cable and Judge, 1996). Generally, applicants are attracted to, selected into, and remaining in organizations that resemble them (Schneider, 1987). This process is at the heart of the applicant-selection-attrition framework (Schneider, 1987) and of person-organization fit theories (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Similarly, applicants are attracted to jobs that meet their abilities and needs, which is at the core of person-job fit theories (Cable and DeRue, 2002). In certain cases, such as durable unemployment, financial hardship, or absence of alternatives, applicants may, however, be willing to compromise on these characteristics and attitudes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2016).

Following job pursuit intentions, the intentions to accept a job offer if it were made, are referred to as job acceptance intentions (Chapman et al., 2005). Applicant attraction (i.e. job pursuit and acceptance intentions) evolves throughout the job search process. For instance, it has been found that the closer individuals are to accepting a job offer, the more they focus on concrete and instrumental characteristics (E.g. pay, flexibility) over abstract ones (E.g. intrinsic values, similarity with future colleagues) (von Walter et al., 2012). As applicants move through selection procedures with the goal of obtaining employment (Li and Song, 2018), they are also exposed to multiple signals such as information about the job and the organization and recruiter behaviors (Uggerslev et al., 2012). For instance, job advertisements are early signals sent by recruiters that influence the first impression of applicants (Li and Song, 2018). From the recruiter perspective, these signals aim at keeping applicants interested in the job and the organization (Li and Song, 2018). From the applicant perspective, these signals are used to collect information about the job and organization (Acikgoz, 2019). As a result, job pursuit and acceptance intentions are likely to be followed by the actual acceptance of the job offer, and are as such the strongest predictors of actual job choice (Chapman et al., 2005).

2.3. Person-Job Fit

Person-Job fit (PJ fit) theory provides a conceptual framework to capture applicants' needs fulfillment (Cable and DeRue, 2002). At its core, PJ fit is defined as a match between an attribute present or perceived in the job and the extent to which individuals would like or need this attribute to be present (French et al., 1982). PJ fit is traditionally divided into the demands-abilities fit and the needs-supplies fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). The former occurs when the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the individuals match those of the job, and the latter when the needs, desires, or preferences of the individual are met by the job. The present paper is only focused on the needs-supplies fit.

PJ fit has been applied to various contexts such as stress or performance (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), but also applicant attraction and job choice (Chapman et al., 2005; Uggerslev et al., 2012). In the context of applicant attraction, PJ fit posits that applicants compare the attributes of the job to their own needs regarding these attributes. The result of this comparison is a perception of fit, and is one of the strongest predictors of applicant attraction (i.e., job pursuit and acceptance intentions) (Chapman et al., 2005) as well as job satisfaction (Yu, 2016). For example, applicants who care about corporate social responsibility will be more attracted to job advertisements that display such values (Gully et al., 2013; Zhang and Gowan, 2012). The impact of PJ fit on applicant attraction has been found across multiple attributes such as values, competences, location, pay, and benefits (Billsberry, 2007; Cable and Judge, 1996). This attractiveness of PJ fit is even more important in individualistic and humane-oriented cultures, as satisfying individuals'

needs is particularly important in these cultures (Peretz et al., 2018).

Depending on the attributes, fit may not necessarily refer to an exact correspondence between perceived and needed attributes. For example, desirable attributes such as pay, prestige, or autonomy are perceived as fitting even when they exceed the individual's needs (Edwards et al., 2006). However, fit is not perceived when the perceived attributes fall short of the needs. When this is the case, applicants feel their minimum requirements are not met, and the job is deemed inadequate (Osborn, 1990). The job is then turned down (Osborn, 1990), unless applicants are willing or forced to lower their needs to fit the job instead (Vansteenkiste et al., 2016).

PJ fit theory further distinguishes between objective fit and subjective fit (Edwards et al., 2006). Objective fit refers to the match between attributes and needs as they exist independently of the person's perceptions of them. Subjective fit refers to the match between attributes and needs as perceived by the person. Although objective and subjective fit are about a match between attributes and needs, fit itself is not necessarily perceived by the person. The two are causally related but in an imperfect way because of distortions, lack of information, or limited access to objective data (Caplan, 1987). For example, applicants sometimes form their perception of corporate values based on stereotypical industry values, thereby biasing their perception of fit (Vanderstukken et al., 2018). However, individuals' perceived fit is, by definition, perceived and thus mostly influenced by attributes as perceived (i.e., subjective) rather than as actually present (i.e., objective).

This theoretical framework is now applied to the comparison between flexibility attributes present or perceived in job advertisements and applicants' flexibility needs, with respect to the impact of such comparisons on job pursuit and acceptance intentions (i.e., applicant attraction).

3. RESEARCH MODEL

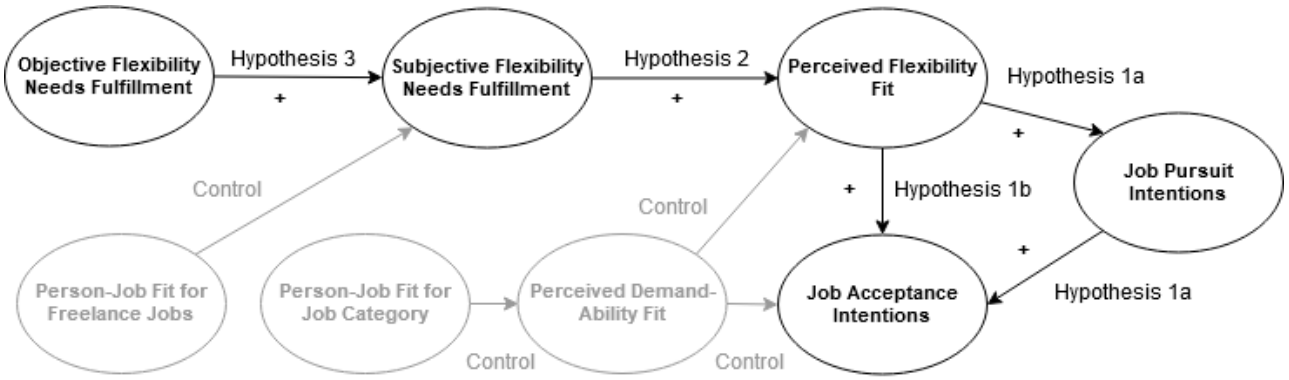
This section develops the research model and hypotheses based on the literature and frameworks introduced in the preceding section. Table 1 defines the key constructs used in the paper in accordance with the reference literature.

Table 1. Definitions of Key Constructs.

Construct	Definition
Job pursuit intentions	The extent to which an applicant intends to apply for the job and remains in its applicant pool.
Job acceptance intentions	The extent to which an applicant intends to accept the job offer, if it were made.
Flexibility	The ability to decide where, when, and how to work.
Perceived flexibility fit	The extent to which an applicant perceives that the job advertisement fulfills his or her flexibility needs.
Subjective flexibility needs fulfillment	The extent to which flexibility attributes perceived by the applicant in the job advertisement exceed the applicant's flexibility needs.
Objective flexibility needs fulfillment	The extent to which flexibility attributes actually present in the job advertisement exceed the applicant's flexibility needs.

It is hypothesized that: perceived flexibility fit is positively related to job pursuit intentions (Hypothesis 1a), as informed by the literature on flexibility; perceived flexibility fit is positively related to job acceptance intentions through job pursuit intentions (Hypothesis 1b), as informed by the literature on applicant attraction; subjective flexibility needs fulfillment is positively related to perceived flexibility fit (Hypothesis 2), as informed by the PJ fit literature; and objective flexibility needs fulfillment is positively related to subjective

Figure 1. Research Model.



flexibility needs fulfillment (Hypothesis 3), as also informed by the PJ fit literature. Each hypothesis is now detailed and defended, and an overall model is presented in Figure 1.

3.1. Hypotheses 1: Relationships between perceived flexibility fit, job pursuit intentions, and job acceptance intentions

The mere availability of flexible working arrangements is enough to increase job satisfaction, even if these arrangements are not used (Chen and Fulmer, 2017). Flexible working is generally perceived as desirable and attractive (Thompson and Aspinwall, 2009; Thompson et al., 2015), as long as it is not imposed (Hyatt and Coslor, 2018). This is even more relevant for freelancers, whose career choice is partly driven by flexibility (Lo Presti et al., 2018). Flexible working allows employees to better manage their work-life balance, thereby increasing their job satisfaction (Deery et al., 2017). It is also associated with job satisfaction, given that it also provides employees with more autonomy (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). Besides the attractiveness of flexible working (Kröll et al., 2018), The researchers have argued that flexible working is made attractive by contemporary culture. Society in general tends to glorify 'flexible' employees who remain available anytime, anywhere (Matusik and Mickel, 2011), thereby reinforcing the satisfaction of working flexibly (Cavazotte et al., 2014). Flexible working is made even more attractive when compared to the traditional, bureaucratic way of working conducted from a single place, on a fixed schedule and with limited autonomy (Lo Presti et al., 2018; Mallon, 1998). Flexible working is perceived as particularly attractive in countries and cultures where work-life balance is important to employees, such as in individualistic and humane-oriented cultures (Peretz et al., 2018), and in cultures where work is less central (Den Dulk et al., 2013). In these cultures, working at the expense of family life is perceived as neglecting the family, whereas in other cultures it is perceived as a supporting the family (Peretz et al., 2018).

Given that flexible working is desirable and attractive, job seekers are likely to have certain flexibility needs they want to see fulfilled. Consistent with PJ fit theory, job advertisements that fulfill applicants' flexibility needs would be perceived as fitting, and thus likely to be pursued. It has been argued that applicant attraction evolves throughout the job search process mainly because of changes in perceptions of fit (E.g. through new information) (Acikgoz, 2019). Perceived fit is thus considered the most proximal predictor of applicant attraction (Acikgoz, 2019). Indeed, perceived fit has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of job pursuit (Chapman et al., 2005; Uggerslev et al., 2012) and job acceptance intentions (Cable and Judge, 1996), across multiple attributes such as values, skills, location, pay, benefits (Billsberry, 2007; Cable and Judge, 1996), and the employer's ethical reputation (Coldwell et al., 2019) or global mindset (Phillips et al., 2014).

Additionally, the closer the individuals are

to entering the job search process, the more they focus on concrete and instrumental benefits (E.g. pay, flexibility) rather than abstract ones (E.g. values) (von Walter et al., 2012). It is therefore hypothesized that perceived flexibility fit would be positively associated with job pursuit intentions at the beginning of the job search process.

Hypothesis 1a: *The higher the perceived flexibility fit, the higher the job pursuit intentions.*

The literature has further shown that fit also predicts job acceptance intentions (Cable and Judge, 1996; Carless, 2005), through the mediation of job pursuit intentions (Chapman et al., 2005). The same relationship is thus hypothesized for perceived flexibility fit.

Hypothesis 1b: *The higher the perceived flexibility fit, the higher the job acceptance intentions, as partially mediated by job pursuit intentions.*

3.2. Hypothesis 2: Predicting perceived flexibility fit from subjective flexibility needs fulfillment

In PJ fit research, perceived fit is defined as a perception that needs are fulfilled. This definition underlies the one for perceived flexibility fit used in the present paper. For such perception to occur, individuals must be aware of the fit. Authors have suggested that individuals form their perceptions of fit by cognitively comparing their needs regarding certain attributes to the way they perceived these attributes in their environment (Edwards et al., 2006). Therefore, fit can also be studied by assessing needs and perceived attributes separately (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). This further implies that perceived fit can be predicted from a combination of needs and perceived attributes (Edwards et al., 2006).

Needs and perceived attributes can be combined in multiple ways, depending on how perceived fit is conceptualized. First, perceived fit can be conceptualized as the exact match between needs and perceived attributes. In such cases, fit is perceived neither when needs exceed attributes nor when needs fall short of attributes. For instance, stress increases in situations of both email overload and email underload (Stich et al., 2019), or in situations where employees' work-family segmentation needs are either exceeded or unmet (Edwards and Rothbard, 1999). Both examples illustrate a lack of exact match, or fit, between needs and perceived attributes. Second, fit can be conceptualized as at least a match between needs and perceived attributes. In this instance, fit is perceived as long as needs do not fall short of attributes. Additionally, the more that needs exceed attributes, the higher the perceived fit. For instance, perceived fit for pay increases as pay levels exceed pay needs. In other words, individuals in conditions of overpay still consider their condition to be a fit, although their needs are exceeded. The same pattern is found for other desirable attributes such as autonomy or vacation time (Edwards et al., 2006).

As discussed in the previous sections, flexibility is also a desirable attribute. For example, applicants who do not need flexibility are not repelled by jobs that offer flexibility anyway (Rau and Hyland, 2002). In other words, job advertisements may fit applicants' flexibility needs even when such needs are exceeded, in a way that is similar to pay (Cable and Judge, 1994). Therefore, the hypothesized relationship between needs, perceived attributes, and perceived fit is based on the second conceptualization of fit. Hypothesis 2 suggests that the more the flexibility perceived in the job advertisement exceeds the individual's flexibility needs (i.e., subjective flexibility needs fulfillment), the higher the perceived flexible working fit.

Hypothesis 2*: The higher the subjective flexible needs fulfillment, the higher the perceived flexibility fit.*

3.3. Hypothesis 3: Predicting subjective flexibility needs fulfillment from objective flexibility needs fulfillment

As explained by PJ fit literature, individuals form their perceptions of fit based on a comparison between their needs regarding certain attributes and the perceived presence of these attributes. The perception of attributes' presence is based on the actual presence of these attributes, notwithstanding potential information loss due to inaccuracy or biases (Edwards et al., 2006; Vanderstukken et al., 2018). In the context of job advertisements consulted on online job boards, job seekers have access to only a limited range of information to form their perceptions (Gully et al., 2013; Pepermans and De Cooman, 2012). Although they can have prior knowledge of organizations, they generally have access to less information on organizations from job advertisements posted on job boards than they would from job advertisements posted on the hiring organizations' own websites (Lievens and Harris, 2003). For instance, previous studies have successfully increased fit by manipulating job advertisements (Dineen et al., 2002; Dineen and Noe, 2009; Phillips et al., 2014). This implies that job seekers are unlikely to know about flexible work arrangements offered by organizations unless the firms mention them in their job advertisements. In other words, in the context of online job boards, job seekers are likely to form their perception of flexibility only from the flexibility mentioned in the job advertisements.

For this reason, it is hypothesized that the match between flexibility needs and the flexibility perceived in the job advertisement (i.e., subjective needs fulfillment) will be driven by the match between flexibility needs and the flexibility mentioned in the job advertisement (i.e., objective needs fulfillment).

Hypothesis 3*: The higher the objective flexibility needs fulfillment, the higher the subjective flexibility needs fulfillment.*

4. METHODS

This section details the research design, instruments, sample, and data collection procedures. It also presents the analytical procedures used to test the aforementioned hypotheses.

4.1. Sample and data collection procedure

Data was collected from a French online job board specialized in referencing flexible-job advertisements. A link to the survey was displayed on the website home page, inviting website visitors to participate. No other form of invitation was used to invite participants. 92 website visitors clicked the link and took part in the survey. The sample was composed of 55% men and 45% women aged from 20 to 63 years and having a mean age of 36.36 years. 63.7% of the sample had at least a postgraduate degree.

After answering a preliminary questionnaire, each participant was shown a job advertisement randomly retrieved from the website database. The instructions were to read this job advertisement and answer several questions about it1. Once these questions were answered, another job advertisement was retrieved from the website database and displayed to the participant along with the same questions. This process was looped, so that participants were given the opportunity to analyze as many job advertisements as they wanted. On average, each participant analyzed 4.3 job advertisements before quitting the survey. The survey could not be resumed once quitted. A total of 391 job advertisements were analyzed, 299 of them being distinct.

1 The instruction preceding the questionnaire was: "The following statements are about the job advertisement you just read. Could you indicate the extent to which you perceive the statements to be true?".

Each unique advertisement was analyzed by 1.3 participants on average.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Job pursuit and job acceptance intentions

Job pursuit intentions were assessed with two items designed from the literature (Chapman et al., 2005, p. 929): (1) "I would like to submit an application to this job offer;" and (2) "I would like to enter and stay in the applicant pool."

Job acceptance intentions were assessed with two items adapted from Harris and Fink (1987): (1) "If I were offered the job, I would accept it;" and (2) "If I were offered the job, I would accept it immediately." Both scales used 7-point Likert agreement scales ranging from "1 – Totally disagree" to "7 – Totally agree."

4.2.2. Perceived flexibility fit

Perceived flexibility fit was assessed with two items adapted from Cable and DeRue (2002): (1) "The flexibility that I look for in a job would be fulfilled very well by this job;" and (2) "This job would give me the flexibility that I want from a job." The items were assessed with 5-point Likert agreement scales ranging from "1 – Totally disagree" to "5 – Totally agree."

4.2.3. Subjective flexibility needs fulfillment

Subjective flexibility needs fulfillment is defined as the extent to which flexibility attributes perceived by the applicant in the job advertisement exceed the applicant's flexibility needs. Perceived and needed flexibility were thus assessed separately, each with 3 items used in previous studies on flexible working (ter Hoeven and van Zoonen, 2015; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2012): (1) deciding where to work; (2) working at a time schedule that oneself has planned; and (3) having the freedom over how one's job is done.

To assess needed flexibility, all these items were appended with "I would refuse a job in which I could not..." (See Table 2). This formulation was chosen in order to capture the minimum flexibility the respondents would need from a job. Following this logic, a job that does not meet these minimum requirements would not be considered a fit (Hypothesis 2) and would thus be turned down (Hypotheses 1a and 1b). To assess perceived flexibility, all the aforementioned items were appended with "This job would allow me to..." (See Table 2).

All items were assessed with 5-point Likert agreement scales ranging from "1 – Totally disagree" to "5 – Totally agree". Subjective flexibility needs fulfillment scores were then computed as the difference between the perceived and the needed flexibility, for each commensurate item pair (1-1, 2-2 and 3-3). Compared to other scores derived from absolute or squared differences, difference scores capture the extent to which perceived attributes exceed needs. When perceptions correspond to needs exactly, the difference score is zero. Then, the larger the difference score, the more needs are exceeded and, therefore, fulfilled according to Hypothesis 2. An absolute difference score would have instead captured the extent to which perceived and needed attributes diverge, which would not have been adequate to test hypothesis 2. Its reverse (i.e., maximum difference minus absolute difference) would have captured the extent to which perceived and needed attributes converge, which would not have captured hypothesis 2 either. Finally, subjective flexibility needs fulfillment was considered a latent construct with its measurement indicators being the three aforementioned subjective flexibility needs fulfillment scores.

4.2.3. Objective flexibility needs fulfillment

As with subjective flexibility needs fulfillment scores, objective flexibility needs fulfillment scores were computed as the difference between the actual and the needed flexibility, for each item pair. The needed flexibility was the same as for subjective flexibility needs fulfillment. To capture actual flexibility, the main author

Table 2. Scales Used.

Items descriptions	Mean	SD
Needed Flexibility[a] *(α = .71)*		
I would turn down a job in which I could not decide where to work	3.56	1.04
I would turn down a job in which I could not work at a time schedule that I plan myself.	3.04	1.25
I would turn down a job in which I could not have the freedom over how I do my job.	3.70	0.88
Perceived Flexibility *(α = .89)*		
This job would allow me to decide where to work	2.52	1.33
This job would allow me to work at a time schedule that I plan myself.	2.75	1.31
This job would allow me to have the freedom over how I do my job.	2.88	1.23
Actual Flexibility[b] *(α = .72)*		
This job would allow me to decide where to work	2.64	1.51
This job would allow me to work at a time schedule that I plan myself.	3.94	1.46
This job would allow me to have the freedom over how I do my job.	2.38	1.11
Perceived Flexibility Fit *(α = .92)*		
The job flexibility I seek would be fulfilled very well by this job.	2.66	1.30
This job would give me the flexibility that I want from a job.	2.51	1.31
Subjective Flexibility Needs Fulfillment *(α = .84)*		
Perceived Flexibility 1 – Needed Flexibility 1	-1.04	1.72
Perceived Flexibility 2 – Needed Flexibility 2	-0.28	1.74
Perceived Flexibility 3 – Needed Flexibility 3	-0.82	1.57
Objective Flexibility Needs Fulfillment *(α = .70)*		
Actual Flexibility 1 – Needed Flexibility 1	-0.92	1.83
Actual Flexibility 2 – Needed Flexibility 2	0.90	1.91
Actual Flexibility 3 – Needed Flexibility 3	-1.32	1.41
Job Pursuit Intentions *(α = .98)*		
I would like to submit an application to this job offer.	1.54	0.94
I would like to enter and stay in the applicant pool.	1.59	0.96
Job Acceptance Intentions *(α = .96)*		
If I were offered the job, I would accept it.	1.72	1.06
If I were offered the job, I would accept it immediately.	1.61	0.96
Perceived Demand-Ability Fit *(α = .93)*		
My personal abilities and education provide a good match with the demands of this job offer.	1.77	1.16
My abilities and training are a good fit with the requirements of this job offer.	1.74	1.12

Person-Job Fit for Freelance Jobs	0.06	0.24
Person-Job Fit for Job Category	0.23	0.42

[a]: this scale was assessed in the preliminary questionnaire.
[b]: this scale was assessed by the main author.

rated each job advertisement using the three items of flexibility. This rating was done based on the author's expert knowledge of flexible working, consistent with the study concept and related literature. Objective flexibility needs fulfillment was then considered a latent construct with its measurement indicators being the difference scores for each item pair.

4.2.4. Control variables

Control variables were used to rule out alternate factors that might influence the outcome variables (i.e., job pursuit and job acceptance intentions) and some of the relationships (E.g. between objective and subjective flexibility needs fulfillment). The variables incorporated in the model as control variables were: perceived demand-ability fit, person-job fit regarding job category (E.g. sales, human resources), and person-job fit regarding freelance jobs. Perceived demand-ability fit is the extent to which the job demands match the abilities of the applicants (Cable and DeRue, 2002), and is an important predictor of job pursuit and job acceptance intentions. It was assessed using two items from the literature (Cable and DeRue, 2002): (1) My personal abilities and education provide a good match with the demands of this job offer; and (2) My abilities and training are a good fit with the requirements of this job offer. For person-job fit regarding the job category, participants selected the job categories of interest to them (E.g., sales, communication, finance, IT…), using checkboxes in the preliminary questionnaire. A job category was also assigned to each job advertisement by the main author. Person-job fit for the job category was then coded as a one when the job advertisement category was of interest to the participant, and as a zero otherwise. Perceived demand-ability fit and person-job fit regarding the job category were used as control variables because participants randomly rated job advertisements they retrieved from the job board database. These job advertisements may not have been within their career interests, as evidenced by the low means of job pursuit and job acceptance intentions (see table 2). Person-job fit regarding freelance jobs was coded as a one when the applicant was interested in a freelance job and the job was indeed a freelance one, and as a zero otherwise. This control variable is used because freelance jobs and freelancers are likely to inflate flexibility attributes or flexibility needs, and because freelancers are likely to be more attracted to jobs advertising flexibility (Lo Presti et al., 2018).

4.3. Statistical analysis

The hypotheses and the measurement model were tested using multilevel structural equation modeling (SEM)2. Indeed, the evaluations of the 391 job ads were not independent from each other and were nested within 92 participants. In such a context, the between level is at the participant level, and the within level is at the job advertisement level. Structural equation modeling is especially relevant given the latent nature of the constructs under investigation. The use of two-item constructs for job pursuit intentions, job acceptance intentions, perceived flexibility fit, and perceived demand-ability fit is tolerable because the correlations between their items are above .7 and the constructs are relatively uncorrelated to some other constructs (Worthington and Whittaker, 2006) (See Table 3).

2 The analyses were done using the R software with the lavaan package version 0.6-5.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

	PFF 1	PFF 2	JPI 1	JPI 2	JAI 1	JAI 2	OFNF 1	OFNF 2	OFNF 3	SFNF 1	SFNF 2	SFNF 3	PDAF 1	PDAF 2	PJF FREE
PFF1															
PFF2	,860**														
JPI1	,431**	,456**													
JPI2	,424**	,460**	,959**												
JAI1	,442**	,487**	,843**	,842**											
JAI2	,453**	,495**	,844**	,847**	,934**										
OFNF1	-,005	,028	,065	,039	,068	,043									
OFNF2	,030	,097	,078	,086	,036	,045	,441**								
OFNF3	-,002	,018	,034	,037	,029	,012	,509**	,413**							
SFNF1	,577**	,561**	,339**	,311**	,338**	,316**	,349**	,124*	,184**						
SFNF2	,630**	,618**	,299**	,296**	,335**	,336**	,164**	,429**	,252**	,607**					
SFNF3	,618**	,593**	,309**	,312**	,318**	,319**	,097	,225**	,391**	,600**	,712**				
PDAF1	,315**	,358**	,648**	,655**	,559**	,556**	,033	,078	,047	,161**	,207**	,204**			
PDAF2	,283**	,352**	,629**	,643**	,546**	,558**	,019	,081	,033	,114*	,168**	,193**	,864**		
PJF FREE	,207**	,154**	,158**	,142**	,128*	,114*	,029	-,014	-,017	,168**	,127*	,133**	,105*	,097	
PJF CAT	,101*	,111*	,120*	,104*	,028	,047	-,004	,023	-,080	,027	,039	,045	,169**	,157**	-,088

Several indices were used to assess the overall fit of the measurement and structural models (See Tables 3 and 4). For a well-fitting model, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) should exceed .95, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should not exceed .06, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMSR) should not exceed .08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), the Normed Fit Index (NFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) should exceed .90 (Salisbury et al., 2002), and the Chi-Square ($\chi 2$) divided by the degrees of freedom (df) (i.e., $\chi 2/df$) should be between 1 and 5 (Salisbury et al., 2002). The results for the measurement and structural models are presented below using these techniques.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Measurement model

The measurement model was assessed with a confirmatory factor analysis. The measurement model containing all constructs demonstrated a poor overall fit (See Table 4, Measurement model 1).

Among all the constructs, objective flexibility needs fulfillment had the lowest factor loadings. This may be explained by the fact that, contrary to the other constructs, objective flexibility needs fulfillment contained measurement indicators obtained from several raters. Flexibility needs were rated by the participants, whereas actual flexibility was rated by the main author.

Table 4. Fit Indices for the Measurement Model (N = 391).

Fit indices	Recommended values	Measurement model 1	Measurement model 2
χ^2		314.86	48.52
d.f.		62	34
Sig. (p value)		.000	.051
CFI	> .95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)	.95	.99
RMSEA	< .06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)	.10	.03
SRMR	< .08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)	.04	.02
NFI	> .90 (Salisbury et al., 2002)	.94	.99
TLI	> .90 (Salisbury et al., 2002)	.93	.99
χ^2/df	[1;5] (Salisbury et al., 2002)	5.1	1.43

Note. Measurement model 1 contained all constructs, whereas Measurement model 2 excluded the Objective Flexibility Needs Fulfillment construct.

Removing objective flexibility needs fulfillment from the measurement model indeed allowed the measurement model to fit well (See Table 4, Measurement model 2). Discriminant validity was confirmed using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of the correlations (HTMT) approach (Henseler et al., 2015), given the HTMT values were all superior to .85 (Kline, 2015).

5.2. Structural model

The model was found to have a good overall fit (See Table 5), with all hypotheses being supported (See Table 6 and Figure 2). Perceived flexibility fit was positively related to job pursuit intentions ($\beta = .269$, $p < .001$), thereby supporting hypothesis 1.

Job acceptance intentions were positively related to both perceived flexibility fit ($\beta = .118$, $p < .001$) and job pursuit intentions ($\beta = .836$, $p < .001$). The relationship between perceived flexibility fit and job acceptance intentions was indeed partially mediated by job pursuit intentions (Indirect effect = .224, $p < .001$). Therefore, hypothesis 1b was supported.

Subjective flexibility needs fulfillment was positively related to perceived flexibility fit ($\beta = .815$, $p < .001$), thereby supporting hypothesis 2. Finally, objective flexibility needs fulfillment was positively related to subjective flexibility needs fulfillment ($\beta = .212$, $p < .001$), thereby supporting hypothesis 3.

Table 5. Fit Indices for the Structural Model (N = 391).

Fit indices	Recommended values	Structural model
χ^2		181.211
d.f.		93
Sig. (p value)		.000
CFI	> .95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)	.983
RMSEA	< .06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)	.049
SRMR	< .08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)	.077
NFI	> .90 (Salisbury et al., 2002)	.966
TLI	> .90 (Salisbury et al., 2002)	.978
χ^2/df	[1;5] (Salisbury et al., 2002)	1.949

Table 6. Hypotheses Testing (N = 391).

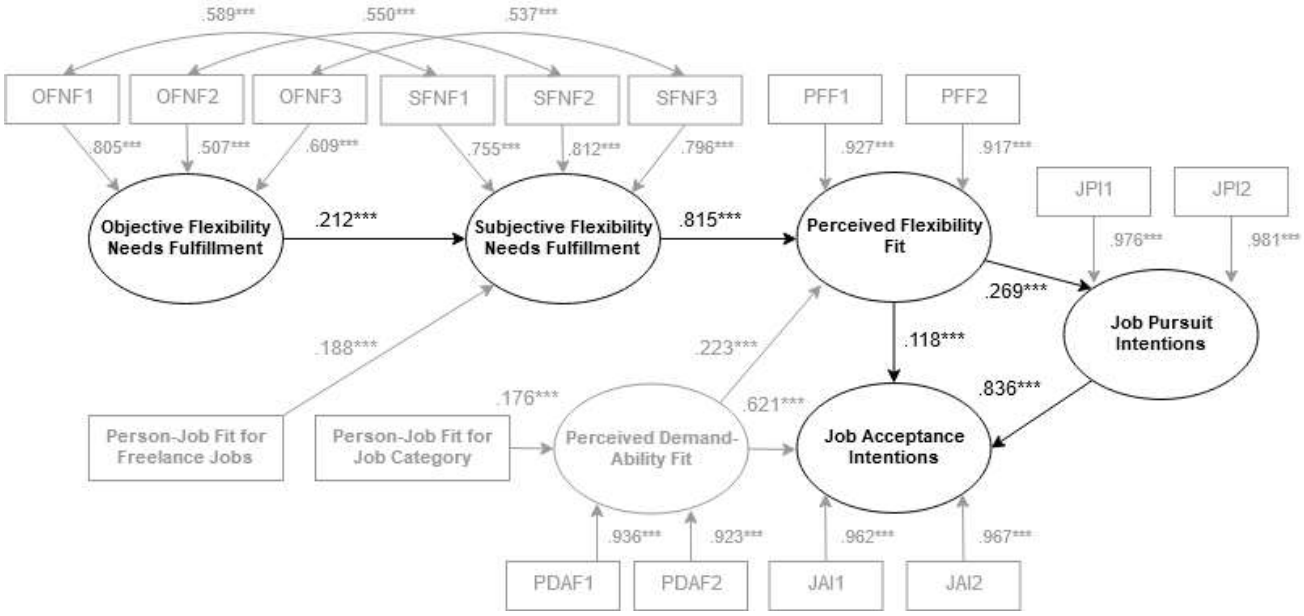
Hypotheses	Standardized estimate	Sig.
H1a: Perceived Flexibility Fit → Job Pursuit Intentions	.269	.000
H1b: Perceived Flexibility Fit + Job Pursuit Intentions → Job Acceptance Intentions	.224[a]	.000
H2: Subjective Flexibility Needs Fulfillment → Perceived Flexibility Fit	.815	.000
H3: Objective Flexibility Needs Fulfillment → Subjective Flexibility Needs Fulfillment	.212	.003

[a]. This standardized estimate corresponds to the mediation indirect effect.

6. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of flexibility fit on applicant attraction using the full process of fit. The findings show that perceived flexibility fit is indeed positively related to applicant attraction (i.e., job pursuit and job acceptance intentions). Moreover, the study has shown that flexibility attracts applicants in a way that is similar to pay, autonomy, or other desirable attributes. The more the flexibility perceived in a job advertisement exceeds the applicant's needs, the more it is perceived as a 'fit' and the more it attracts. The study has additionally shown that this relationship originates from actual flexibility exceeding needed flexibility, in the context of the limited information available in job advertisements published on online job boards.

Figure 2. Structural Model



6.1. Limitations

Before discussing the implications of these findings, several limitations have to be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from an online job board specialized in flexible-job advertisements. This implies that participants may have had salient needs for flexibility. However, and as shown in Table 2, needed flexibility items had means close to the scale midpoint, and a range across the full Likert scale, thereby minimizing this concern.

Second, the study has only considered the job search process prior to actual application. As participants were not actually applying to the jobs, the study contained no behavioral outcomes of job acceptance. Given that many flexible work arrangements are negotiated (Clarke et al., 2019; Hornung et al., 2008), perceived flexibility fit is bound to evolve throughout the recruitment process. Perceived flexibility fit is then bound to evolve further once employed in the company, as the information provided in job advertisements may not always be accurate (Dineen and Noe, 2009). Although this full process was not investigated, the measure of job acceptance intentions is considered the best proxy for actual job acceptance, especially when paired with a measure of person-job fit for the job category (Chapman et al., 2005). Furthermore, flexibility is a concrete and instrumental attribute that is thus likely to remain important throughout the job search process (von Walter et al., 2012).

Third, the study measured the flexibility actually present in the job advertisements regardless of applicants' perceptions, but did not measure the flexibility actually needed by applicants regardless of their own perceptions. Although the measurement of objective needs has often been ignored in PJ fit research too, it remains an important part of the fit process (Edwards et al., 2006). Further studies may create an indicator of objective flexibility needs from a combination of flexibility needs antecedents, such as household characteristics or commute time (Mokhtarian and Salomon, 1997).

Fourth, the study relied on difference scores to measure subjective and objective flexibility needs fulfillment. Difference scores and related computations are constrained by the weights they give to attributes and needs, and by their linearity. If there were reasons to hypothesize that attributes and needs influence fit with distinct weight or in a nonlinear way, other methods may be more adequate (Edwards, 2009). However, this study only considered the case of attributes exceeding needs and

not the case of their correspondence (i.e., fit).

Fifth, only one rater was used to assess the job advertisements' flexibility, thereby reducing the reliability of the measure. However, actual flexibility (i.e., rated by the main author) shows good convergent validity, as it was significantly correlated to perceived flexibility (i.e., rated by the participants), with inter-item correlations ranging from .226 to .355 ($p < .001$).

Finally, participants were French and analyzed job advertisements for French jobs. Differences in national cultures and policies regarding flexible working could prevent the results from generalizing to other countries. As discussed before, flexible working is more attractive in individualistic and humane-oriented cultures, and in cultures where work is less central (Den Dulk et al., 2013; Peretz et al., 2018). French culture is considered to be low in individualism and humane-orientation (House et al., 2004), but also low in cultural centrality of work (Den Dulk et al., 2013). In other words, the relationship between perceived flexibility fit and applicant attraction (Hypotheses 1) may even be stronger in certain other countries (E.g. UK, US, Nordic countries). Regarding hypotheses 2 and 3, national applicants may develop their perceptions of flexibility, their flexibility needs and their perceptions of flexibility fit based on their own cultural perspectives. These results may thus be relatively culture-independent. This may, however, not be the case when considering international applicants (Li and Song, 2018) (E.g. expatriates), as their own cultures or country laws may create different perceptions (Vanderstukken et al., 2018) or needs. For instance, 35-hour workweek may be considered a flexible working arrangement in certain countries, whereas it is the French statutory working week. However, the flexibility measures used in this study were about flexibility needs and not about flexible working arrangements expectations. In fit research, expectations are considered to be needs distorted by past or current experiences (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Schneider, 1975).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study makes a number of theoretical and practical contributions, which are now discussed.

6.2. Research implications

The study makes contributions and opens up new avenues for further research in the flexible working literature, the PJ fit as well as job search literature.

The first theoretical contribution to the flexible working literature is the finding that perceived flexibility fit is driven by flexibility needs exceeding perceived flexibility. This supports previous findings that flexibility is indeed desirable for applicants (Cable and Judge, 1994; Thompson and Aspinwall, 2009), while adding that excess flexibility contributes to applicants' sense of fit. A second contribution is that flexibility is perceived from flexible working arrangements actually mentioned in job advertisements. This means that flexible working arrangements that are not mentioned in the job advertisement are likely to be ignored. It would therefore be worthwhile to have further research on the impact of advertising for flexible working arrangements on applicant attraction is warranted.

As the study relied on French applicants and job advertisements, further research may also try to expand its findings to other countries or cultures. Researchers interested in this endeavor may find a short summary of French specificities useful. In France, flexible working arrangements are widely available because of the combination of high state support for work-life balance and low cultural centrality of work (Den Dulk et al., 2013). Furthermore, and contrary to certain other countries, employers within the same industry in France might have to comply with flexible working arrangements through industry-wide agreements

(Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017). These constraints, plus French trade unions' reluctance towards new ways of working (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009), make it harder for French employers to exceed the country's or industry's average flexibility. French employers indeed tend to offer only state-issued (E.g. sabbatical leave, right to disconnect) or industry-agreed (E.g. telecommuting) flexible working arrangements (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009).

Regarding the PJ fit and job search literature, the first theoretical contribution lies in the investigation of the fit process as a whole, including outcomes and antecedents of perceived fit. Previous studies on PJ fit and applicant attraction have often been limited to the investigation of the outcomes of perceived fit (De Cooman et al., 2019). However, the present investigation has demonstrated that looking at the full process of fit is relevant to the study of applicant attraction, given that objective needs fulfillment is directly related to the content of job advertisements and, as such, to the root cause of applicant attraction (Lievens and Harris, 2003). Second, perceived flexibility fit was predicted by subjective flexibility needs fulfillment at 81.5% ($\beta = .815$, $p < .001$). This explanatory power is higher than any previously reported antecedent of perceived fit (Edwards et al., 2006), despite participants rating job advertisements unrelated to their job search criteria. This finding indicates that subjective flexibility needs fulfillment is a promising antecedent of perceived flexibility fit. Similar relationships may be found for other attributes of similar desirability, such as pay or prestige. Third, the present study is one of the first to capitalize on structural equation modeling to investigate a full process of fit (Edwards, 2009). This attempt was however eased by the fact that fit was measured as a latent construct (i.e., perceived fit), and not by combining separately measured attributes and needs, as commonly done with polynomial regressions. Further refinements of research methods are needed to be able to capitalize on structural equation modeling for fit research, regardless of how fit is measured and conceptualized. Finally, the external validity of these findings is evidenced by the use of real job seekers, visiting a real online job board and answering the surveys within the job board as part of their job search process.

6.3. Practical implications

The study also makes several implications for HR practitioners. First, the findings have shown that the more flexibility is mentioned in job advertisements, the more it is perceived. The more it is perceived, the more it 'fits' applicants' needs for flexibility and, therefore, attracts them. This implies that organizations may increase applicant attraction by offering more flexible working arrangements and advertising them more explicitly in their job advertisements. Flexible working arrangements that are not advertised are unlikely to contribute to perceptions of flexibility fit, which may lower applicant attraction. Offering flexible working arrangements to employees also has several advantages besides applicant attraction. Flexible working arrangements tend to improve job satisfaction, organizational commitment (Chen and Fulmer, 2017) and retention (Kröll et al., 2018). They can also improve the well-being of employees – women in particular (Uglanova and Dettmers, 2017) – and of society as a whole, through improved work-life balance (Bayazit and Bayazit, 2017) and satisfaction through leisure time (Uglanova and Dettmers, 2017).

Second, the findings have shown that applicants' flexibility needs operate as a minimum to reach. Therefore, determining applicants' flexibility needs would appear to be pivotal to guarantee applicant attraction. Such needs can be found through surveys using scales like the ones used in the present study.

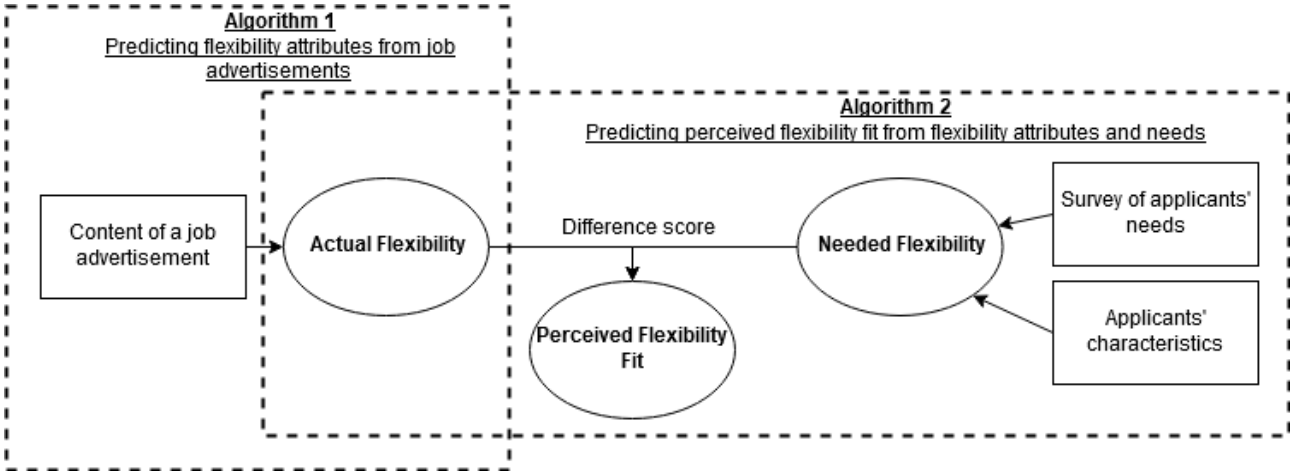
Third, significant innovations can still be made towards a more refined algorithmic prediction of fit. Perceived flexibility fit was

found to be partially driven by the flexibility actually mentioned in job advertisements. As such, being able to score flexibility attributes from the content of job advertisements would enable the prediction of perceived flexibility fit in real time, as long as applicants' flexibility needs are available to the algorithm. In other words, machine learning algorithms could potentially predict perceived flexibility fit for job advertisements, before these job advertisements are even seen by applicants. Modified algorithms would fit the general trend of job matching, where applicants get pushed relevant job advertisements. A general concept for such algorithms is presented in Figure 3.

6.4. Conclusion

To conclude, the growing desirability of flexibility is impacting how recruiters advertise their job offers. The process investigated in this paper details where perceptions of flexibility fit originate and how they impact applicant attraction. It can form the basis of future studies that examine similar fit processes but for different attributes, or of future studies that examine the origins of flexibility needs and desires.

Figure 3. Potential Algorithm to Predict Perceived Flexibility Fit.



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