



Anticipating the future: Job seeker's evaluation of employer attractiveness during organizational change

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ABSTRACT

Establishing strong person–environment fit is crucial for recruitment but becomes complex when changing organizations seek employees aligned with a future state rather than current characteristics. Integrating the organizational change, signaling, and person–environment fit literature, we extend the understanding of attraction mechanisms during organizational change by conceptualizing person–environment fit as dynamic evolving alongside organizational change, shaping job seekers' perceptions of employer attractiveness based on anticipated fit. Findings from a metric conjoint experiment involving 126 job seekers reveal that signaling proactive change enhances employer attractiveness, particularly for individuals with high openness to change. Anticipated fit plays a critical role, with organizational culture exerting the strongest influence, followed by leadership style and career development opportunities. These findings underscore the importance of strategic signaling in attracting talent during organizational change.

1. Introduction

Positioning themselves as attractive employers enables organizations to strengthen their human resource base, secure competitive advantage, and advance organizational growth and change (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Newcomers drive innovation and transformation by introducing fresh perspectives and challenging established routines (Jain, 2016; Wang & Zatzick, 2019). Accordingly, organizations actively send signals to attract and persuade the most suitable candidates (Connelly et al., 2025), while job seekers face the complex task of selecting an ideal employer by comparing competing organizations (Ployhart et al., 2017). Research on recruitment has significantly advanced our understanding of how organizations can enhance their attractiveness to prospective employees (Baum & Kabst, 2013). A key determinant of employer attractiveness is person–environment (PE) fit (Chapman et al., 2005; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023), defined as the alignment between an individual's characteristics and work environment (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011).

While PE fit is a central determinant of employer attractiveness (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Uggerslev et al., 2012), prior recruitment studies have primarily investigated fit under static conditions (Shipp &

Jansen, 2011; Vleugels et al., 2023). However, what happens when an organization undergoes change—whether due to external disruptions or internal adaptation processes—and redefines the fundamental values and principles that constitute the organizational component of PE fit? While previous studies have been comparatively silent on this issue, the topic gains importance as organizations face growing pressure to adapt their structures and identities in response to ongoing disruptions—such as digital transformation, including advances in artificial intelligence, as well as escalating environmental challenges (Bankins et al., 2024; Bansal et al., 2025; Hanelt et al., 2021). To remain competitive under such conditions, organizations are advised to reassess and realign their structures regularly to meet evolving strategic and societal demands.

To capture the implications of organizational adaptations, a dynamic approach to PE fit is needed to understand how changes in PE fit, driven by organizational transformation, affect recruitment signals. However, as Vleugels et al. (2023) highlight in their systematic review, research on dynamic fit perspectives remains underdeveloped, leaving unanswered how organizations undergoing change succeed in positioning themselves as attractive employers. A central challenge lies in how organizations communicate their transformation—particularly their proactiveness—to attract job seekers who align with their

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transformation efforts. While signaling a proactive stance may convey strengths like organizational competence and strategic direction, it could also deter candidates less open to change. Moreover, little is known about which signals enhance employer attractiveness during organizational change. This raises critical questions about how organizations may communicate change and how job seekers interpret and evaluate such signals.

Our study addresses these issues by examining how an organization's proactive approach to change and job seekers' perceptions of anticipated fit shape employer attractiveness. We integrate signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2025) with PE fit (Van Vianen, 2018) and organizational change research (Stouten et al., 2018) to develop a model explaining how change-related signals influence job seekers' perceptions of a changing organization. These signals include the proactiveness of change (e.g., Sverke et al., 2008), anticipated career development opportunities (e.g., Lievens et al., 2007), leadership style (e.g., Slaughter & Greguras, 2009), and organizational culture (e.g., Baum & Kabst, 2013). In times of organizational change, job seekers with high openness to change are particularly valuable for enabling successful transformation (Augustsson et al., 2017; Long et al., 2025). Our model demonstrates how signaling proactiveness of change attracts these candidates, thereby supporting organizational change. We test our predictions using a metric conjoint experiment based on a sample of 126 job seekers.

Our study enhances the understanding of employer attractiveness during organizational change (Fig. 1) with three key contributions. First, it advances PE fit literature by conceptualizing fit as dynamic in recruitment. While prior research predominantly treats PE fit as static (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005, 2023), we respond to calls for its examination under conditions of organizational change (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Vleugels et al., 2023). We show that higher anticipated fit (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Shipp & Jansen, 2011) enhances employer attractiveness and disentangle anticipated fit into three types—person-supervisor fit (leadership style), person-career fit (career development opportunities), and person-organization fit (culture)—providing insights into how changing organizations attract future-aligned job seekers.

Second, our research integrates signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and PE fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) to identify signals that enhance employer attractiveness during organizational change. We highlight proactiveness of change and anticipated fit signals—alignment with leadership style, organizational culture, and career development opportunities—as key drivers of job seeker attraction. We argue that organizational change creates uncertainty, weakening traditional employer signals that reduce information asymmetry. During change, signal accuracy may decline, raising questions about which cues job seekers rely on. We show that employer attractiveness depends not only on anticipated fit but also on how an organization approaches change. Specifically, signaling proactiveness—a strategic, forward-looking approach to change—may enhance employer attractiveness by signaling purposeful change management and reducing instability concerns. Additionally, we extend research on signal interpretation (e.g., Bafera & Kleinert, 2023; Vanacker & Forbes, 2016; Volkmer et al., 2024), arguing that openness to change moderates the effect of signaling proactiveness. By signaling proactiveness, organizations induce self-selection, attracting job seekers whose change orientation aligns with the transformation strategy.

Third, we contribute to the change management literature (Oreg et al., 2011; Stouten et al., 2018) by addressing the overlooked role of job seekers during organizational change. While prior research has focused on employees' role in change implementation, emphasizing communication and leadership support (e.g., Fedor et al., 2006; Rafferty et al., 2013), it has also underscored openness to change as critical for successful transformation (e.g., Augustsson et al., 2017; Long et al., 2025). We extend this perspective by demonstrating that signaling proactiveness enhances employer attractiveness, particularly among job seekers with high openness to change, fostering self-selection of

candidates best suited for transformation. Specifically, signaling anticipated fit across leadership style, organizational culture, and career development opportunities along with a proactive approach to change helps organizations attract change-ready job seekers equipped to drive organizational transformation.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

While recruitment and organizational change have extensive research histories, their intersection remains underexplored. Recruitment processes typically reflect an organization's status quo, but this approach is ineffective during change. External disruptions and internal business model shifts alter organizational attributes (Raisch & Fomina, 2025; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Understanding how these changing organizational attributes influence employer attractiveness is therefore critical.

Our theoretical framework is grounded in two key recruitment theories: signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2025) and PE fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Signaling theory suggests that organizations reduce job seekers' information deficits by providing relevant and attractive information.¹ PE fit theory explains that job seekers interpret these signals to assess alignment with their needs and values.²

Organizational change complicates signaling, as shifting attributes like culture, leadership, and strategy create uncertainty, making signals unreliable. When communication is delayed, organizations risk deterring qualified job seekers (Ryan et al., 2000). Proactively signaling impending changes and the envisioned future state may help reduce uncertainty and strengthen perceptions of fit. We integrate signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and PE fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) to examine how anticipated fit influences job seekers' attraction to changing organizations, incorporating recent advancements in literature on the dynamics of fit (Vleugels et al., 2023).

Our model features anticipated PE fit (Shipp & Jansen, 2011) as a recruitment signal that organizations can use to convey attractiveness to prospective employees. Spence's (1973) foundational work on market signaling provides the theoretical basis for signaling theory, particularly in information-asymmetric job markets. In this framework (Connelly et al., 2025), signalers (organizations undergoing change) send signals (information about anticipated fit and their approach to change) to receivers (job seekers). A key principle of effective signaling is that signals are most influential when they are costly to falsify (Connelly et al., 2011). Misleading anticipated signals can impose high costs, leading to employee dissatisfaction, eroded trust, and perceptions of deception.

An individual's perception of PE fit strongly predicts decision-making and behavior (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). People are particularly attracted to organizations that align with or complement their personal values. PE fit is a multidimensional construct encompassing various fit concepts (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Sekiguchi & Yang, 2021). PE fit literature distinguishes between supplementary fit (similarity-based, such as shared values) and complementary fit (where skills are complemented, such as needs-supplies alignment; Kristof-Brown &

¹ Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) applies in situations of information asymmetry between signalers and receivers. Organizations, as signalers, possess more information and thus have the power to decide which information is transmitted as signals. Job seekers infer underlying attributes of employers from these signals. The value of signals depends on their accuracy (how validly they predict the signaler's performance) and on whether their costs discriminate between high and low performers on the given attribute (Connelly et al., 2025). In particular, accuracy may be uncertain when organizational change is in progress.

² According to PE fit theory, individuals seek environments that are congruent with their characteristics (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). They respond positively to congruence because fitting environments fulfill their needs, allow them to demonstrate abilities, and affirm their values (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011).

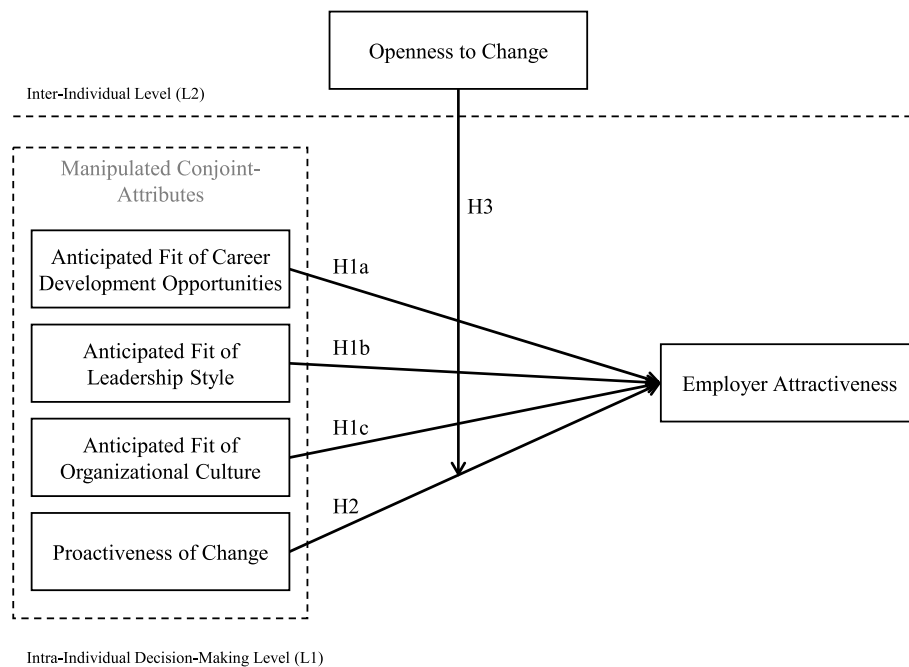


Fig. 1. Conceptual model and hypotheses.

Guay, 2011). Complementary fit occurs when one entity provides what the other requires, as seen in person-career fit, where individuals seek environments that fulfill their needs. Supplementary fit arises when entities share similar fundamental characteristics, typically found in person-organization fit and person-supervisor fit (Van Vianen, 2018).

Traditional studies on PE fit have primarily treated it as static (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019), emphasizing that job seekers' current, snapshot-based perceptions strongly predict positive outcomes such as organizational attractiveness and job pursuit intentions (Chapman et al., 2005; Uggerslev et al., 2012). However, in the context of organizational change, static fit perceptions may lose relevance, necessitating a dynamic approach to studying fit. Fit perceptions evolve during organizational transformation, making anticipated fit (Shipp & Jansen, 2011) particularly relevant to our study.

Our model positions anticipated fit and proactiveness of change as critical signals for organizations undergoing change. According to PE fit theory, the interplay between personal (P) and environmental (E) characteristics shapes key outcomes (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). Building on this, we explore how factors that shape fit perceptions vary across individuals and environments (Van Vianen, 2018). In other words, personal and environmental factors jointly influence fit perceptions during change. To address this, we incorporate *anticipated fit* and *proactiveness of change* as representations of environmental change, and *openness to change* as a key personal characteristic. This trait significantly shapes how individuals perceive and respond to signals in changing organizational contexts, offering a nuanced perspective on PE fit dynamics.

Anticipated fit is particularly relevant in organizational change, as what ultimately matters is how ongoing changes influence PE fit in the long term. This concept builds upon recent advances in the PE fit literature (Vleugels et al., 2023) that emphasize the dynamic nature of PE fit over time. Shipp and Jansen's (2011) fit narrative theory provides a significant contribution to this area by examining how individuals' fit perceptions dynamically shift across past, present, and anticipated contexts.

According to fit narrative theory, individual preferences for employers are shaped by fit narratives—constructed and evolving stories that incorporate evaluations of past fit, perceptions of current fit, and expectations of anticipated fit (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Shipp & Jansen,

2011). Influenced by conscious and unconscious processes, these narratives help individuals interpret experiences and guide decisions about organizational compatibility (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). When organizations signal change, job seekers rely on their fit narratives to inform their self-selection process, predicting anticipated fit based on these narratives and the perceived implications of organizational change.

Organizational change can shift attributes in either direction—toward or away from alignment with a job seeker's fit narrative. Simultaneous changes across different organizational attributes can have mixed effects, enhancing some aspects of anticipated fit while diminishing others. In this study, we address this complexity by examining three distinct types of anticipated fit: *person-career fit*, *person-supervisor fit*, and *person-organization fit*. Our goal is to determine the relative importance of each fit type for job seekers during organizational change, providing a nuanced understanding of how anticipated fit influences decision-making in dynamic contexts.

Person-career fit. At the individual level, person-career fit—defined as the alignment between individual career aspirations and available development opportunities—represents a valuable recruitment signal (Connelly et al., 2011). Career development opportunities include promotions, self-development, professional growth, and training. Research confirms the importance of promotion opportunities for employer attractiveness (e.g., Slaughter & Greguras, 2009). Cha et al. (2009) demonstrate that person-career fit enhances job satisfaction, commitment, and for managerial orientations performance, suggesting organizations to align career development opportunities with individuals' career orientations.

Career research demonstrates that organizational change may threaten career security (Spurk et al., 2016; Ogbonna Wilkinson, 2003). Organizational change may disrupt predictable career prospects and advancements causing insecurity and uncertainty (Spurk et al., 2016; Wajcman & Martin, 2001). Employees perceive a change-related lack of organizational involvement in career development negatively (Kelly et al., 2003), whereas access to training and development opportunities elicits more positive perceptions of change (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007). Consequently, job seekers likely prioritize signals about planned career development opportunities that align with their fit narratives and anticipated employment experiences.

Hypothesis 1a. High levels of anticipated fit with an organization's

career development opportunities are positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of the changing organization.

Person-supervisor fit. At the leadership level, person-supervisor fit refers to the alignment between employees and their supervisors in values, personality, and goals (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). This typically suggests that the supervisor's leadership style and the quality of leader-member exchange are well aligned with employees' expectations, characteristics, and preferences. This alignment enhances working relationships, communication, and mutual understanding (Kong et al., 2021). Research confirms its significant impact on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and workplace performance outcomes (Guan et al., 2021). Employer attractiveness is significantly influenced by signaled leadership style during both employment and recruitment. Key indicators include supervision quality (Slaughter & Greguras, 2009) and supervisor support (Turban et al., 1995). Research on person-supervisor fit in recruitment links it to job acceptance intentions, performance, and withdrawal behaviors (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Similar to career development opportunities, a signaled leadership style can influence job seekers' anxiety and uncertainty during organizational change. Employees facing change increasingly seek supervisory support, guidance, and encouragement (Griffin et al., 2001). When job seekers recognize leadership characteristics that align with positive past experiences in their fit narratives, they are more likely to feel confident and attracted to the organization. Consequently, signals demonstrating leadership styles that address job seekers' needs for support and recognition are likely to enhance employer attractiveness.

Hypothesis 1b. High levels of anticipated fit with the organization's signaled leadership style are positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of the changing organization.

Person-organization fit. At the organizational level, signaled organizational culture influences employer attractiveness significantly (Baum & Kabst, 2013; Turban et al., 1995). Organizational culture refers to employees' shared values and norms that underlie policies, work practices, and expected behavior (O'Reilly et al., 1991). Behavior such as workplace friendliness among employees (Turban et al., 1998) serves as an attractive recruitment signal. Person-organization fit influences employer attractiveness significantly during recruitment. Clearly communicating the organization's values facilitates comparison and matching expectations (Jonsen et al., 2015). Research confirms that job seekers' attraction to an organization increases when its values, norms, and policies align with their preferences (Ng & Burke, 2005).

Organizational culture is particularly susceptible to change, as policies, practices, and procedures often evolve. Since cultural fit enhances job satisfaction and performance (Downey et al., 1975), it becomes important for organizations to signal impending changes effectively during recruitment. Job seekers are likely to respond favorably to signals that forecast cultural values aligning with their preferences.

Hypothesis 1c. High levels of anticipated fit with the organization's culture are positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of the changing organization.

Fit theory posits that individuals seek work environments aligned with their needs and values (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). In organizational change, alignment in attitudes toward change is particularly relevant, shaping job seekers' perceptions of employer attractiveness. Drawing on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2025), we argue that an organization's approach to change conveys a critical signal to job seekers and helps them to find out if the organization is a suitable place for them to work. Proactive change may enhance employer attractiveness by demonstrating organizational prowess, strategic foresight, innovation, and long-term planning. In contrast, a reactive approach is often linked to crisis-driven decisions, sudden restructuring, and financial distress, creating uncertainty for job seekers.

Proactiveness reflects an organization's strategy to anticipate, initiate, and manage transformation rather than merely responding to external pressures (Segev, 1989). Proactive companies are opportunity-seeking and forward-looking, positioning themselves ahead

of industry trends and fostering long-term competitiveness (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Venkatraman, 1989). Such proactive firms usually embrace new opportunities and speedy realization without over-relying on bureaucratic decision-making (Covin & Slevin, 1991), helping to forward change and organizational adaptability. By communicating a proactive stance toward change, organizations signal adaptability, innovation, and strategic direction—characteristics generally viewed positively (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001) and therefore likely to enhance their attractiveness to job seekers, particularly in fast-changing, dynamic environments. Research in the field of entrepreneurial orientation confirms that organizational proactiveness contributes to competitive advantage, firm performance, and growth (Anderson & Eshima, 2013; Lomberg et al., 2017). More entrepreneurial—and thus more proactive—firms experiment more extensively and create greater value through innovative and bolder product-market entries (Wales et al., 2023). Complementarily, proactive individuals play a crucial role in driving successful organizational change (Kiss et al., 2022; Oreg et al., 2024; Vaag et al., 2022). Research further indicates that proactive top managers stimulate employees' passion for inventing (Schuh et al., 2023) and that proactive change implementation affects employee attitudes and well-being positively (Sverke et al., 2008). In summary, these findings suggest that a proactive stance toward change can be advantageous—an aspect that may also be recognized and valued by job seekers.

For job seekers, a proactive change approach signals that an organization controls its change process and is prepared for future challenges. This perception enhances expectations of career stability and professional growth. Proactive organizations project confidence in their strategic direction, demonstrate commitment to long-term planning, and signal strong adaptive capabilities (Eshima & Anderson, 2017)—attributes likely to enhance employer attractiveness. In contrast, reactive organizations that respond primarily to external pressures or crises may be perceived as unstable, raising concerns about job security and long-term viability. Accordingly, we posit that signaling proactiveness of change enhances employer attractiveness.

Hypothesis 2. The perceived proactiveness of organizational change is positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of the changing organization.

Research indicates that perceived PE fit is stronger when alignment occurs with individuals' strongest rather than weakest attributes. Van Vianen (2018) demonstrates that high-level attribute alignment influences employer attractiveness significantly. Consequently, we propose that the relationship between proactiveness of change and employer attraction depends on job seekers' openness to change.

Openness to change, as defined by Schwartz (1992, 1994), refers to an individual's inclination to embrace new situations, ideas, and experiences. This value orientation relates to proactive behavior such as seeking challenges, demonstrating curiosity, and embracing innovation (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). Individuals high in openness exhibit positive attitudes toward change. This results in enhanced job satisfaction, increased engagement, and reduced resistance (Avey et al., 2008).

When organizations signal proactive change, job seekers with high openness to change likely find it appealing. Organizational flexibility and adaptability signal intentionality and strategic direction (Xhafa et al., 2017)—characteristics aligned with their values. These individuals are likely to view proactive change as an indicator of an environment in which their openness will be valued. Conversely, job seekers lower in openness to change may perceive proactive change as disruptive and prefer organizations that adopt a more reactive approach. Thus, we propose that job seekers high in openness to change particularly value signals of proactive organizational change.

Hypothesis 3. A higher level of openness to change (at the job seeker level) strengthens the positive relationship between the perceived proactiveness of change and the perceived attractiveness of the changing organization.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Experimental setup

To test the hypotheses, we employed a metric conjoint experiment—a methodology that presents participants with systematically varied profiles of manipulated attributes for evaluation. This approach effectively reveals the relative importance of different attributes in decision-making (Mitchell & Shepherd, 2010), and is also utilized in recruitment contexts (e.g., Baum & Kabst, 2013; Schüller et al., 2023). Participants evaluated multiple trade-off scenarios incorporating three antecedents of anticipated fit and proactiveness of change. We manipulated each organizational attribute to reflect either high or low anticipated PE fit in the context of change (see Table 1).

We selected a metric conjoint methodology for several reasons. First, it uncovers implicit decision-making processes effectively. Participants often cannot articulate the factors influencing their choices reliably through traditional surveys or interviews (Shepherd & Zacharakis, 1999). Metric conjoint experiments circumvent this limitation by requiring participants to evaluate different scenarios and make real-time trade-off decisions, thereby minimizing limitations associated with retrospective data and cross-sectional observations (Anderson et al., 2022).

Second, experimental methods isolate causal effects of specific variables in controlled settings effectively. By manipulating attributes systematically—including anticipated fit with organizational culture, leadership style, and career development opportunities, along with proactiveness of change—the conjoint experiment tests causal relationships while controlling for exogenous factors (Grégoire et al., 2019; Lohrke et al., 2010). This approach is particularly valuable in the context of signaling theory, where understanding distinct signal effects is essential—a need highlighted by recent calls for more experimental research designs in this domain (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023; Connelly et al., 2025).

Third, the metric conjoint experiment employs a within-subject design in which participants evaluate multiple scenarios serving as their own controls. This approach mitigates problems due to potential non-random assignments, which supports internal validity and improves

efficiency compared to between-subject designs (Hsu et al., 2017; Lohrke et al., 2010).

3.2. Development of experimental materials

We conducted preliminary semi-structured interviews to develop scenarios and profile cards for the conjoint experiment, ensuring external and construct validity (Grégoire et al., 2019). Using guiding questions while allowing for open discussion, we conducted interviews with employees of varying experience levels until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred after 11 interviews. Participants identified key employer selection factors without examples provided to minimize bias. Findings confirmed that all three organizational attributes and proactiveness of change influence employer attractiveness. To test the experimental design, we conducted a pilot study with 149 students, who provided feedback through open-ended responses. Based on their input, we made minor adjustments, such as incorporating variable definitions directly on profile cards rather than behind help buttons.

3.3. Data and sample

We recruited 219 employees in Germany meeting three criteria—age (18–58 years), at least one year of work experience, and anticipated job change within two years—through the panel provider Cint. After data cleaning in line with Curran's (2016) guidelines,³ the final sample size comprised 126 participants (45 % female; median age = 41, $SD = 11.5$), which aligns with prior research (Mitchell & Shepherd, 2010). Among the participants, 21.4 % were actively seeking jobs, 6.3 % were open to offers, 42.9 % considered changing jobs within six months, and 29.4 % within two years. Work experience ranged from 1 to 43 years, with a median of 16 years ($SD = 11.2$).

3.4. Study design

In our metric conjoint experiment, participants evaluated hypothetical but realistic employer profiles, each defined by four attributes: career development opportunities, leadership style, organizational culture, and proactiveness of change. Each attribute varied across two levels (high/low), yielding 16 (2^4) profile combinations in a full-factorial design. To assess reliability, four profiles were repeated, resulting in 20 evaluations per participant.

Following prior studies (e.g., Shepherd et al., 2019), we provided context before presenting the profiles. Participants were instructed to envision a job search, with non-tested attributes (e.g., salary, industry, location) assumed to match their preferences. After reviewing a practice profile, participants rated each profile based on job acceptance intentions. To mitigate carryover effects, we randomized the profile order.

3.5. Measures

Employer Attractiveness. We measured employer attractiveness through participants' job acceptance intentions (Gomes & Neves, 2011). Participants responded to the question, "How likely is it that you would accept a job offer from the organization?" using an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (most likely).

³ We eliminated eight participants who self-exited the study. To identify careless responses, we then applied three filtering methods: First, we included two bogus items, which led to the exclusion of 41 inattentive participants. Second, we excluded 33 participants with exceptionally short (<313.5 s) or long (>1254 s) response times compared with the median response time (614.5 s). Third, we removed 11 participants whose response patterns consistently deviated significantly from the mean behavior across all participants, either by providing long sequences of identical responses or displaying a high average length of consecutive identical responses.

Table 1
Description of the manipulated attributes used in the conjoint experiment.

Organizational Attribute	Version	Description
Career Development Opportunities	High levels of anticipated fit	Opportunities for professional development, promotion, and trainings fit better with me after the change.
	Low levels of anticipated fit	Opportunities for professional development, promotion, and trainings fit less well with me after the change.
Leadership Style	High levels of anticipated fit	The leadership style of supervisors and the exchange with supervisors fit better with me after the change.
	Low levels of anticipated fit	The leadership style of supervisors and the exchange with supervisors fit less well with me after the change.
Organizational Culture	High levels of anticipated fit	Values, norms, and behavioral rules shared by members of the organization fit better with me after the change.
	Low levels of anticipated fit	Values, norms, and behavioral rules shared by members of the organization fit less well with me after the change.
Proactiveness of Change	High	The company decides to undergo a change proactively.
	Low	The company is forced to change due to external influences.

Openness to Change. We assessed openness to change using a 10-item scale developed by Lindeman and Verkasalo (2005) based on Schwartz (1992). A sample item was “I enjoy new and unexpected situations, even if they require me to adjust.” Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrates acceptable reliability with Cronbach's α of 0.80. The mean score for openness to change was 2.58 ($SD = 0.59$).

Socio-demographic Variables. We collected demographic and professional characteristics (sex, economic situation, education, educational performance, work experience, experience with change, and job search intention) as control variables for employer attractiveness. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

3.6. Analytical methods

Mean test-retest reliability was calculated to assess response consistency. The obtained value of 0.722 indicates acceptable reliability (Karren & Barringer, 2002; Zhu et al., 2022) and aligns with previous metric conjoint studies (e.g., Schüler et al. (2023): 0.72; Küssbauer and Baum (2023): 0.78 and 0.77; Volkmer et al. (2024): 0.76), supporting the study's methodological rigor. We conducted all analyses with the full set of profiles (20) but also only with the original profile set (16) and a resulting sample size of 2016 decisions nested within 126 participants. All results remain stable across these different specifications. We analyzed the data using multilevel modeling in R (R Core Team, 2025), following Aguinis et al. (2013).

4. Results

The multilevel analysis results are presented in Table 3. We began by specifying a null model to partition variance between organizational characteristics (Level 2) and individual characteristics (Level 1). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) indicated that 17 % of the variance in employer attractiveness was attributable to between-individual differences. The presence of variance at two levels supported our use of multilevel modeling, consistent with previous research (Aguinis et al., 2013; Kahn, 2011; Mathieu et al., 2012).

Model 1 (Table 3) includes only control variables. Model 2 adds four organizational attributes, improving model fit and explaining 44.8 % of the variance in employer attractiveness. Hypotheses 1a–c propose that higher anticipated fit in career development opportunities, leadership style, and organizational culture will positively influence employer attractiveness. Model 2 reveals significant positive relationships for (a) career development opportunities ($b = 1.52, p < .01$), (b) leadership

style ($b = 1.86, p < .01$), and (c) organizational culture ($b = 2.06, p < .01$), supporting Hypotheses 1a–c. Among these, organizational culture fit has the strongest impact.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that proactiveness of change positively influences employer attractiveness, which Model 2 supports ($b = 0.73, p < .01$), though its effect is smaller than those of the three PE fit variables. Model 3 adds openness to change but finds no direct effect. Model 4, using proactiveness of change as a random slope, significantly improves model fit over the fixed-slope model ($p < .01$).

Hypothesis 3 proposes that openness to change moderates the effect of proactiveness of change on employer attractiveness. Model 5 (Table 3) shows a significant interaction ($b = 0.24, p = .043, CI [0.01, 0.48]$). We plotted the interaction, calculated simple slopes, and z -standardized moderator variables. Fig. 2 shows that the relationship strengthens with higher openness to change. Simple slope tests confirm significant positive effects at both high (+1 SD, $b = 0.88, p < .01$) and low (−1 SD, $b = 0.59, p < .01$) openness to change, with a stronger effect at higher levels. These findings support Hypothesis 3, demonstrating that openness to change amplifies the effect of proactiveness of change on employer attractiveness.

5. Discussion

For organizations undergoing change, attracting talent aligned with their future state requires effective signaling. Through a metric conjoint experiment with 126 job seekers, we demonstrate that proactiveness of change and anticipated fit in organizational culture, leadership style, and career development opportunities enhance employer attractiveness. Among these, organizational culture fit has the strongest impact, followed by leadership style and career development. Signaling proactiveness in managing change significantly boosts attractiveness, especially among job seekers with high openness to change. By conceptualizing PE fit as dynamic, this study advances the understanding of attraction mechanisms in organizational change and highlights how job seekers' attitudes toward change shape their evaluation of employer signals.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it extends PE fit literature on recruitment (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019) by conceptualizing fit as dynamic rather than static. Traditional research treats current, snapshot-based perceptions of PE fit as predictors of organizational attractiveness and job pursuit intentions (Chapman et al.,

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of the study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Job Acceptance Intentions	5.37	2.52	–							
2 Anticipated Fit of Career Development Opportunities ^a	–	–	0.26 ^d							
3 Anticipated Fit of Leadership Style ^a	–	–	0.41 ^d							
4 Anticipated Fit of Organizational Culture ^a	–	–	0.40 ^d							
6 Proactiveness of Change ^b	–	–	0.10 ^d							
7 Openness to Change	2.58	0.59	0.02	.80						
8 Sex ^c	–	–	−0.01	0.11 ^d	–					
9 Work Experience	17.30	11.23	−0.14 ^d	0.05	0.18 ^d	–				
10 Age	39.52	11.48	−0.12 ^d	0.03	0.20 ^d	0.86 ^d	–			
11 Economic Hardship	2.20	0.93	0.07 ^d	0.13 ^d	0.06	0.03	−0.13 ^d	–		
12 Education	4.42	1.82	0.13 ^d	0.17 ^d	−0.03	−0.06	−0.04	0.22 ^d	–	
13 Educational Performance	2.94	0.73	0.09 ^d	0.17 ^d	−0.04	<0.01	−0.01	0.18 ^d	0.29 ^d	–
14 Application Intention	1.80	1.08	0.05	−0.03	<0.01	0.03	0.14 ^d	−0.10 ^d	0.02	−0.01

Note. $N = 126$. Cronbach's α 's are in diagonal in italics.

^a 0 = lower, 1 = higher.

^b 0 = low, 1 = high.

^c 0 = male, 1 = female.

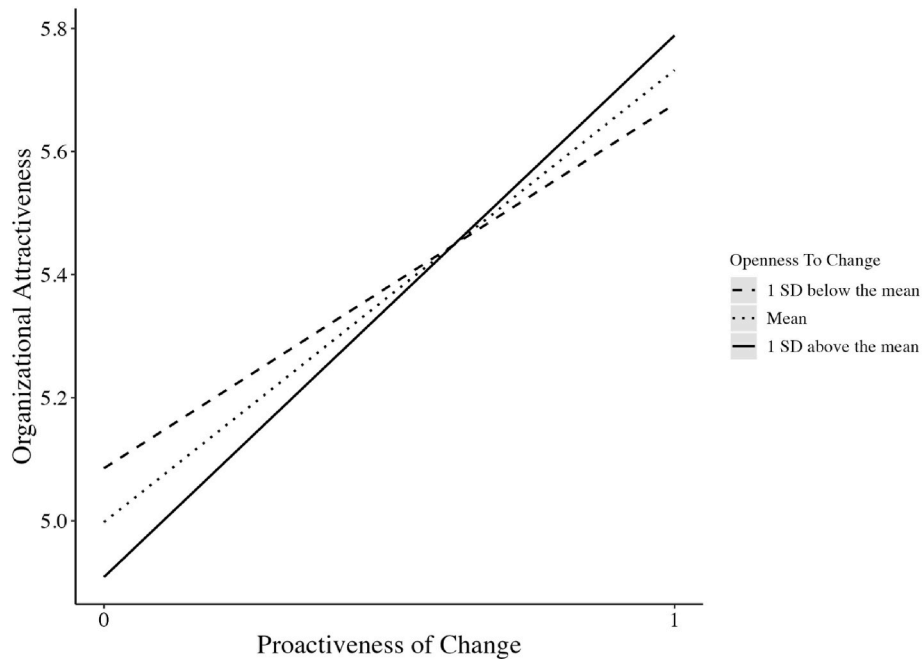
^d Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed); **correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); *correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Table 3

Results of the multilevel regression analyses.

	Model					
	Null Model	Model1 RIFS	Model 2 RIFS	Model 3 RIFS	Model 4 RIRS	Model 5 CLIM
Predictors (Intercept)	Estimates 5.37 *** (0.10)	Estimates 4.20 *** (0.49)	Estimates 1.01 ** (0.50)	Estimates 1.08 * (0.59)	Estimates 0.89 (0.58)	Estimates 1.37 ** (0.62)
Control variables						
Job Search		0.13 (0.09)	0.13 (0.09)	0.13 (0.09)	0.14 (0.09)	0.14 (0.09)
Sex		0.08 (0.20)	0.08 (0.20)	0.09 (0.20)	0.09 (0.19)	0.09 (0.19)
Work Experience		−0.03 *** (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)
Education		0.14 ** (0.05)	0.14 ** (0.05)	0.14 ** (0.05)	0.13 ** (0.05)	0.13 ** (0.05)
Educational Performance		0.17 (0.14)	0.17 (0.14)	0.17 (0.14)	0.19 (0.13)	0.19 (0.13)
Economic Hardship		0.15 (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)	0.15 (0.10)	0.15 (0.10)
Change Experience		−0.06 (0.20)	−0.06 (0.20)	−0.06 (0.20)	−0.14 (0.20)	−0.14 (0.20)
Level 1						
Anticipated Fit Career Development			1.52 *** (0.06)	1.52 *** (0.06)	1.52 *** (0.06)	1.52 *** (0.06)
Anticipated Fit Leadership Style			1.86 *** (0.06)	1.86 *** (0.06)	1.86 *** (0.06)	1.86 *** (0.06)
Anticipated Fit Organizational Culture			2.06 *** (0.06)	2.06 *** (0.06)	2.06 *** (0.06)	2.06 *** (0.06)
Proactiveness of Change			0.73 *** (0.06)	0.73 *** (0.06)	0.73 *** (0.07)	0.11 (0.31)
Level 2						
Openness to Change			−0.04 (0.16)	0.04 (0.16)	−0.15 (0.18)	−0.04 (0.16)
Cross-level interaction						
Proactiveness of Change × Openness to Change						0.24 ** (0.12)
Variance components						
Residual (L1) Variance	5.25	5.25	2.53	2.53	2.49	2.49
Intercept (L2) Variance	1.11	0.84	0.97	0.97	1.20	1.18
Slope (L2) Variance					0.15	0.13
Intercept–slope (L2) covariance					−0.61	−0.61
ICC	0.17					
−2 log-likelihood (FIML)	5768	5754**	4881***	4881	4875***	48753*
Pseudo R ²	0.00	0.04	0.45	0.45	0.45	0.45

Notes: RIFS = Random Intercept and Fixed Slope Model; RIRS = Random Intercept and Random Slope Model; CLIM = Cross-Level Interaction Model; FIML = Full information maximum likelihood estimation; L1 = Level 1; L2 = Level 2. L1 N = 2016 and L2 sample size = 126. Values in parentheses are standard errors; Significance of RIRS models is compared to Model 3; Significance of CLIM models is compared to respective RIRS models. CLIM models for all L1 predictors were tested, but only significant models are reported. * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

**Fig. 2.** Interaction effect of proactiveness of change and openness to change on employer attractiveness.

Notes: With a low level of openness to change (−1 SD below the mean), the relation between proactiveness of change and employer attractiveness is $b = 0.59$ ($p < .01$). At a high level of openness to change (+1 SD above the mean), the relation between proactiveness of change and employer attractiveness was $b = 0.88$ ($p < .01$). The difference in the slopes was statistically significant ($p < .05$).

2005; Uggerslev et al., 2012). However, organizations are required to adapt continually to economic, technological, and environmental shifts (Bankins et al., 2025; Bansal et al., 2024; Hanelt et al., 2021; Stouten

et al., 2018). Addressing calls to explore fit in these changing work environments (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023), we examine how anticipated future fit influences job seekers' attraction

to organizations undergoing change. This contributes to the growing literature on temporal perspectives on fit (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Vleugels et al., 2023). Building on temporal fit research, which has largely focused on clock time (e.g., Boon & Biron, 2016; Gabriel et al., 2014), we investigate psychological time by examining fit anticipations (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Our findings establish anticipated fit as a key driver of employer attractiveness during organizational change.

We disentangle anticipated PE fit by examining its distinct types and their relative importance. PE fit is multidimensional (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Sekiguchi & Yang, 2021), and prior studies emphasize the need to differentiate fit types and examine their unique effects within a single study (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Vleugels et al., 2023). Our study examines three types of anticipated fit and covers both supplementary (person–supervisor and person–organization fit) and complementary fit (person–job fit). Our findings show that both influence employer attractiveness during organizational change significantly.

Second, we contribute to the intersection of signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and PE fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) by developing an integrated model that identifies effective signals in uncertain and developing contexts, such as organizational change. Organizations undergoing change can use these signals to enhance their employer attractiveness for job seekers. Our study highlights proactiveness of change and anticipated fit signals—including alignment with leadership style, organizational culture, and career development opportunities—as critical signals influencing employer attractiveness. Prior research has identified recruitment signals such as employer awards (Dineen & Allen, 2016; Überschaer & Baum, 2020). We extend this literature by introducing recruitment signals in dynamic change contexts. We demonstrate that signaling proactiveness of change—an organization's strategic and forward-looking approach to change—enhances employer attractiveness by reducing uncertainty and signaling adaptive capabilities. Organizations that manage change proactively signal strategic foresight and long-term planning, making them more attractive to job seekers looking for career prospects and growth-oriented work environments.

Moreover, we advance understanding of boundary conditions influencing signal interpretation (Drover et al., 2018). Research shows that receiver characteristics shape signal perception—shared sender–receiver attributes enhance signal attractiveness (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023), while individual differences influence signal processing (Vanacker & Forbes, 2016). Examining international new ventures, Volkmer et al. (2024) demonstrate how receiver characteristics—international experience, networking ability, and personal initiative—influence signal interpretation. Their integration of signaling theory and PE fit theory explains differential signal perception among receivers. Extending this research, we identify openness to change as a critical boundary condition for how job seekers interpret proactive change signals. Our findings demonstrate that job seekers high in openness to change perceive proactiveness of change as particularly attractive. This highlights the importance of aligning organizational signals with individual traits, as proactive organizations benefit most when attracting candidates predisposed to thrive in dynamic environments. Furthermore, we address gaps in the signaling literature, including calls for temporal investigations of signals (Connelly et al., 2025) and for more experimental research (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023). Whereas prior studies have relied predominantly on observational data (Connelly et al., 2025), we employ a metric conjoint experiment.

Third, we contribute to the literature on change management. In today's fast-changing environment—characterized by technological disruption, geopolitical uncertainty, and environmental challenges—organizations are expected to adapt continually to remain competitive (Bansal et al., 2024; Dries et al., 2025; Hanelt et al., 2021; Teece, 2025). Prior research has focused predominantly on employees as key stakeholders in successful change implementation (e.g., Oreg et al.,

2024), emphasizing their willingness to support change as essential for sustainable outcomes (Fedor et al., 2006). Openness to change is recognized as a critical individual value orientation for effective change implementation (e.g., Augustsson et al., 2017; Long et al., 2025), while a proactive approach to change links to positive outcomes, such as increased employee well-being (Sverke et al., 2008). However, viewing employees as primary “change recipients” (Oreg et al., 2011) overlooks other critical stakeholders, and little is known about how organizational change efforts are communicated externally, particularly in the context of recruitment.

Our study addresses this limitation by examining job seekers—an understudied stakeholder group in change management research. Organizations undergoing change face the critical task of managing signals carefully to attract job seekers who are both open to change and align with their envisioned future state. Our findings highlight that proactively communicating change enhances employer attractiveness, enabling organizations to attract job seekers best suited to support transformation efforts.

Our findings highlight proactive change communication as a strategic recruitment tool. While organizations often frame change as a reactive necessity, signaling proactiveness enhances employer attractiveness among job seekers open to change, fostering self-selection for transformation. This extends prior research on proactive strategies (Lomberg et al., 2017; Oreg et al., 2024; Segev, 1989) and identifies an additional advantage: Proactiveness serves as a recruitment signal, attracting candidates who support transformation. Moreover, signaling anticipated fit in leadership, culture, and career development aligns recruitment with evolving needs. As Meyer et al. (2010) note, cultural fit is key to commitment during change but hiring based on pre-change fit risks misalignment. Our findings suggest that organizations can mitigate these risks by signaling evolving attributes and thereby attracting candidates aligned with their transformation trajectory.

5.2. Practical implications

Our study provides several practical implications for organizations undergoing change. We advise them to prioritize transparent communication about anticipated changes in organizational culture, leadership style, and career development opportunities to enable job seekers to assess PE fit accurately. Consistency across recruitment channels (Baum & Kabst, 2014) further ensures that candidates process PE fit signals effectively (Drover et al., 2018). Organizations are encouraged to use diverse platforms and interactive tools to highlight anticipated fit. Strategic social media campaigns can emphasize key aspects of change, while corporate websites provide comprehensive information. Multimedia content—such as employee testimonials, virtual tours, and infographics—enhances message credibility and engagement. To attract job seekers high in openness to change, organizations may demonstrate a proactive approach to change management by signaling employee involvement, feedback utilization, and support systems that facilitate change.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study has limitations that suggest avenues for future research. We examined three key types of anticipated fit to investigate fit multidimensionality during organizational change. Future studies may explore further types of fit such as value congruence, work style similarity, and interpersonal compatibility within person–supervisor, person–team, and person–organization fit types.

To address potential measurement error bias and enhance result validity, we implemented several methodological safeguards. We conducted pretesting, including interviews and a pilot study to refine the conjoint design and ensure theoretically consistent, realistic manipulations (Grégoire et al., 2019). The experimental design mitigated introspection and recall biases through real-time decision simulation and

systematic variable manipulation, addressing endogeneity concerns and supporting causal inference (Anderson et al., 2022; Shepherd & Zacharakis, 1999) while reducing common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also employed validated scales, incorporated control variables to address confounding effects, and ensured measurement robustness through reliability analyses. Data cleaning procedures, including removal of careless responses, ensured sample integrity.

While conjoint experiments provide robust internal validity and variable isolation, future research may validate our findings through field studies. Real-world employment decisions involve interconnected rational and emotional factors not fully captured in laboratory settings, warranting validation in naturalistic job search contexts. Furthermore, while our study treated job characteristics, salary, and location as stable factors, Shah et al. (2017) emphasize salary's critical role in job satisfaction and change readiness during organizational transformation. Future research may examine interaction effects among PE fit characteristics, reflecting the complexity of career decision-making.

6. Conclusion

This study explores factors influencing employer attractiveness in the context of organizational change. Our findings indicate that higher levels of anticipated fit—specifically regarding career development opportunities, leadership style, and organizational culture—are associated positively with the perceived attractiveness of a changing organization. Moreover, organizations perceived as proactively managing change are evaluated more attractively by job seekers. This relationship is moderated by individual openness to change: Job seekers with higher openness respond particularly positively to proactive change signals.

From a practical perspective, we advise organizations to communicate changes related to culture, leadership, and career development transparently while ensuring alignment between communicated signals and actual practices. Future research may explore anticipated fit across industries and cultural contexts, as well as its long-term implications for retention and performance. Scholars are also encouraged to examine its relevance for other stakeholders, including investors, middle managers, and employees.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Franziska Kriener: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mirjam Nicole Streeb:** Writing – review & editing. **Sebastian Fischer:** Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Matthias Baum:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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