

ATTRACTION-SELECTION-ATTRITION MODEL (ASA MODEL)

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Organizational Behavior

Proponents: Benjamin Schneider

1. Core Principles

The Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) Model, proposed by U.S. organizational psychologist **Benjamin Schneider** in 1987, offers a powerful, dynamic explanation for how and why organizations become homogenous in terms of their psychological and demographic characteristics, thereby establishing and reinforcing the organizational culture. The fundamental premise of the ASA framework is that the people within an organization determine its nature, and that the collective personality of the workforce is not random, but rather the systematic outcome of a continuous, self-reinforcing cycle. This model shifts the focus of organizational design away from purely structural elements (like hierarchy or policies) and places it squarely on the human capital that constitutes the firm.

The ASA cycle operates under the assumption that organizational leaders and founders imbue the nascent organization with their own values and preferences. Over time, these foundational values attract and retain individuals who share them, while simultaneously repelling those who do not. The model posits a continuous feedback loop: the characteristics of the people who work there define the culture, and that culture then dictates which new people are drawn to, selected by, and ultimately remain within the organization. This cyclical interaction ensures that organizations maintain a remarkably consistent personality profile across generations of employees, leading to strong cultural stability but also potential rigidity.

Unlike earlier models that focused on static fit (Person-Organization fit at a single point in time), the ASA model provides a longitudinal, process-oriented perspective. It suggests that even the most meticulously planned interventions in organizational change may fail if they do not account for the automatic sorting processes inherent in the ASA cycle. If an organization attempts to shift its strategic direction but the underlying attraction and selection mechanisms remain unchanged, the new employees brought in will still primarily reflect the old cultural template, ensuring a return to the status quo through attrition of the misaligned few. Thus, understanding the ASA framework is crucial for anyone studying organizational demographics, change management, and the long-term persistence of organizational culture.

2. Historical Development and Context

The development of the ASA Model in the late 1980s occurred during a period of increasing interest in the concept of **Person-Environment (P-E) Fit** within industrial and organizational

psychology. While P-E fit research traditionally explored how the congruence between an individual and their work environment affected individual outcomes (such as satisfaction and performance), Schneider sought to invert the focus, asking how P-E fit influenced organizational characteristics. He argued that the study of organizational behavior had become overly focused on environmental variables without sufficiently acknowledging the role of employee similarity in shaping those environments.

Prior to ASA, much of the research on organizational staffing treated the selection process as a mechanism to fill specific skill gaps or performance requirements. Schneider's innovation was to conceptualize the process as one of **organizational sorting**, where shared psychological attributes--values, personality traits, goals, and attitudes--were far more critical in the long run than mere technical competence. The model provided a coherent theoretical structure explaining the empirical observation that people who work together often share similar backgrounds, values, and cognitive styles, not merely because they trained similarly, but because they were systematically drawn to and filtered by the organization's established character.

The ASA Model served as a vital bridge between micro-level psychological theories (such as personality theory) and macro-level organizational theories (such as institutionalization and culture formation). By formalizing the three distinct stages of Attraction, Selection, and Attrition, Schneider provided researchers with a testable framework. This framework allowed for empirical investigation into the specific mechanisms through which organizations maintain stability and inertia, thus moving the study of organizational culture beyond descriptive anthropology into predictive, psychological science. The model remains one of the most cited frameworks for understanding organizational staffing and culture maintenance.

3. Key Concepts and Components

The Attraction Phase

The first stage of the model, **Attraction**, dictates that individuals are differentially drawn to organizations based on perceived congruence between the individual's personality, values, and needs, and the organization's expressed culture, image, and mission. Prospective employees utilize the organization's public messaging, reputation, and existing workforce demographics to form an initial assessment of fit. People seek environments where they believe they will feel comfortable, understood, and successful. For example, risk-takers might be attracted to start-ups, while those prioritizing stability might gravitate toward established governmental agencies. This stage sets the initial parameters for homogeneity by limiting the applicant pool to individuals who self-identify as potential fits.

The Selection Phase

The second phase, **Selection**, involves the organization's formal and informal gatekeeping processes. Once attracted, applicants must be selected, and organizations typically prioritize candidates whose characteristics align with the organization's current culture and strategic needs, even if they articulate this preference as seeking "cultural fit" or specific competencies. Selection procedures--including interviews, psychological testing, and assessment centers--are often implicitly or explicitly designed to identify and hire people similar to existing employees. While selection methods are often justified based on predicted performance, research consistently shows that perceived value congruence plays a significant, often unconscious, role in hiring decisions. This organizational choice acts as the second filter, ensuring that only those who pass the organizational "litmus test" join the workforce.

The Attrition Phase

The final and critical phase is **Attrition**, which ensures the maintenance of homogeneity over time. Employees who were either initially mismatched or whose values evolve away from the organization's core characteristics will eventually experience dissatisfaction, poor performance reviews, and stress due to low P-O fit. This misfit leads to either voluntary turnover (the employee quitting) or involuntary turnover (the organization terminating employment). Attrition is the mechanism through which the organization self-corrects and purges dissimilarity. By filtering out individuals whose presence threatens the established cultural profile, the remaining workforce becomes even more tightly aligned in terms of values and personality, completing the cycle and strengthening the cultural inertia.

4. Mechanisms of Organizational Homogenization

The continuous operation of the ASA cycle drives **organizational homogenization**, which is the increasing similarity of employees within a single firm. This similarity, while contributing to cultural stability, often manifests in specific, measurable ways. Psychologically, employees tend to share similar cognitive styles, approaches to problem-solving, and communication patterns. Demographically, homogeneity can often be observed in terms of shared educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, or even racial and gender characteristics, particularly in founder-driven organizations where the initial profile strongly influences subsequent hiring.

Homogenization is profoundly efficient for internal operations. When employees share a common worldview and similar assumptions, communication is faster, decision-making can be streamlined, and internal conflict often decreases because disagreements tend to occur within an accepted framework. This shared understanding forms the bedrock of a **strong organizational culture**, where norms are clearly understood and consistently enacted without the need for constant formal documentation or supervision. The ASA model thus explains not just who works there, but why

some companies exhibit powerful, almost palpable, distinct cultures.

However, the positive aspects of stability and strong culture are often counterbalanced by the danger of **organizational rigidity**. As the ASA cycle reinforces similarity, the organization simultaneously becomes less capable of adapting to external shifts, technological disruptions, or market changes. Homogenous groups are often susceptible to **groupthink**, a phenomenon where the desire for conformity in the group results in irrational or dysfunctional decision-making. The absence of diverse perspectives means the organization lacks the internal friction necessary to challenge deeply held, but potentially flawed, assumptions, locking the firm into outdated strategies and practices.

5. Applications in Human Resource Management

The ASA Model has significant practical implications, particularly within the field of **Human Resource Management (HRM)** and staffing. Recognizing the power of the attraction phase, organizations can leverage their external branding and recruitment materials to clearly signal their cultural values, thereby managing the quality and fit of the applicant pool proactively. HR departments often employ **Realistic Job Previews (RJPs)**, which provide potential hires with balanced information--both positive and negative--about the organizational environment, ensuring that self-selection is based on accurate information and reducing eventual attrition due to misalignment.

Furthermore, the ASA framework guides the development of sophisticated **selection systems** designed not just for skill assessment but for cultural compatibility. While specific personality tests or value inventories might be used, the spirit of ASA suggests that selection interviews should focus heavily on assessing P-O fit, exploring candidates' intrinsic motivations, work ethic, and alignment with the company's mission. However, practitioners must carefully balance the pursuit of cultural fit with legal and ethical mandates regarding diversity and bias, ensuring that "fit" is defined by core values and not demographic characteristics.

Finally, the model provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding and managing **employee turnover**. When attrition rates are high, the ASA model suggests that the root cause may not be salary or benefits, but a fundamental mismatch in the attraction or selection stages. By analyzing the characteristics of those who leave, HR can gain insights into the true, operational culture of the firm and identify discrepancies between the intended culture (what the organization says it is) and the realized culture (the characteristics of those who stay). Strategic intervention, therefore, requires adjusting the initial filters (Attraction and Selection) rather than simply attempting to persuade misaligned employees to remain.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its explanatory power, the ASA Model has faced several significant **criticisms**, primarily centered on its implications for diversity and change management. Critics argue that the relentless drive toward homogeneity, while stabilizing for the culture, is fundamentally detrimental to organizational performance in complex, rapidly changing environments. By prioritizing similarity, organizations may systematically exclude individuals who possess unique skills or perspectives necessary for innovation and creativity, leading to the creation of **organizational monocultures**.

A major theoretical limitation lies in the model's seemingly deterministic nature. Critics question whether organizational outcomes are solely dictated by the demographic composition or if contextual factors, leadership changes, and external environmental pressures can force organizations to change the characteristics they attract and retain. While Schneider acknowledged that organizations can change, the core model suggests that change is inherently difficult because the established workforce composition resists fundamental shifts. Furthermore, the model tends to underemphasize the role of socialization processes, where organizational structure and training actively mold existing employees to fit the culture, rather than relying only on attraction and attrition to achieve congruence.

Ethically, the model raises concerns regarding **hiring bias**. When organizations explicitly seek "cultural fit," this criterion can easily become a proxy for similarity in background, race, or gender, potentially perpetuating discriminatory practices under the guise of psychological compatibility. While the model itself is descriptive, not prescriptive, the pervasive application of "fit" criteria based on ASA principles requires careful monitoring to ensure that the search for shared values does not inadvertently lead to illegal or unethical lack of diversity and exclusion of protected groups.

Further Reading

[Attraction-Selection-Attrition Model \(ASA\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Benjamin Schneider \(Psychologist\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Schneider, B. \(1987\). The people make the place. Personnel Psychology.](#)

[Industrial and Organizational Psychology - Wikipedia](#)