

Sriram Iyer

James is a fresh graduate from a top university, landing a coveted analyst role at a large multinational, ticking every box in the job description and submitting every deliverable on time. He believes that if he keeps his head down, does impeccable work and avoids trouble, his performance will stand out and his career will take care of itself.

A few months in, James is doing his job well, but his focus is almost entirely on individual execution rather than on how work actually flows through the organisation. He rarely networks with peers within or across functions, seldom checks how his work affects others and does not proactively clarify expectations with his manager. As a result, colleagues do not naturally see him as someone working with or contributing to the broader organisation.

Contrast this with May, who joins in the same week. Instead of assuming that good work alone will carry her, she takes time to understand how the organisation really works – its unwritten norms, communication style and expectations – and then adjusts how she contributes. She notices who shapes decisions, how people escalate issues, how disagreement is resolved and what “good work” looks like on her team.

Within a few months, May is the person her supervisor taps for cross-functional projects, not because of an impressive curriculum vitae but because colleagues find her dependable and easy to collaborate with. She is seen as trustworthy and integrated into the team, rather than just focused on her own tasks. She has not become a “yes person”; she still raises concerns, but in constructive ways that are aligned with how decisions are made in the organisation.

This contrast highlights a common early-career misunderstanding. Many fresh graduates conflate fit with either keeping their heads down or engaging in office politics. That prevents them from integrating well and being truly effective.

Fit matters because studies in the United States and Asia have

Dear graduates, education rewards individual brilliance – but fit is key to work success

The trouble is compounded because fitting in is seen as playing office politics.

found that fit is strongly associated with higher job satisfaction, stronger organisational commitment and lower intentions to quit. In other words, fit shapes not just how people feel at work, but whether they stay, grow and perform sustainably.

WHY FIT MATTERS

Organisational scholar Edgar Schein described culture as operating at multiple levels, from visible practices such as dress codes and meeting routines to deeper, often unconscious assumptions that shape how people really think and act at work. Understanding this culture is critical for entry-level graduates, because without reading these deeper norms, strong performers can struggle to see their contributions make an impact or get recognised for them.

Fit operates at three distinct but related levels. First, organisational fit refers to alignment between an individual's values and how an organisation actually behaves. For instance, a graduate who cares deeply about sustainability will experience a better fit with a firm that invests in green practices rather than one that treats sustainability as tangential. When this kind of alignment is missing, people can enjoy their tasks but still feel uneasy about the organisational direction.

The second type is supervisor fit, which refers to how effectively one can relate to and work with

one's immediate manager. This includes basics such as compatible communication styles, shared expectations on autonomy and responsiveness, and the ability to raise problems without fear of retaliation. A manager who prefers constant updates, for example, may not be a good fit for a graduate who expects to be left alone until the deadline.

Finally, job fit describes how well an individual's skills align with the requirements of the role. Someone who enjoys analysis but dislikes constant client interaction, for example, may thrive in a back-office research role but struggle in a sales job.

For most people, feeling in “flow” at work and experiencing real career growth requires some alignment on all three levels of fit: with the organisation's values, the job's day-to-day tasks and with the immediate team and supervisor. When these layers align, effort feels more natural, performance is more sustainable and progress tends to follow.

WHAT FRESH GRADUATES SHOULD FOCUS ON

Fit might be secondary to more pressing considerations and perhaps understandably so. In an annual survey of graduate sentiment in Singapore, fresh graduates recently listed salary as their top priority in their job search for the first time in 14 years, reflecting concerns about rising costs and job insecurity.

Most have also been shaped by systems that celebrate individual

brilliance – exam scores, scholarships and cohort rankings. Online platforms further reward visible personal milestones over quiet collaboration, nudging young workers towards personal branding rather than relationship-building and workplace survival skills.

Universities too emphasise matching skills to job descriptions and industries, which reinforces the focus on job content and starting pay. Deeper questions about organisational values, team dynamics or leadership style are often pushed into the background.

As a result, many graduates start thinking about fit only after problems surface. And even when fresh grads do start to think about fit before taking up a role, they tend to focus almost entirely on job fit while neglecting

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organisational and supervisor fit.

The consequences? Many in their first jobs may enjoy their work itself but feel drained by unspoken norms, unexpected decision-making processes or communication styles that clash with their own. Over time, poor organisational or supervisor fit can lead to stress and burnout, even when tasks are manageable, undermining confidence and triggering frequent job changes.

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IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY

The importance of playing well with others is grossly underestimated. Global reviews of employability research indicate that employers consistently rate graduates' skills in communication, teamwork, adaptability and problem-solving as critical to employability, often as important as technical skills. This is why, in addition to technical skills, employers increasingly assess fit alongside individual competence.

Behavioural interviews, group exercises and case studies are not just screening tools. They offer employers (and candidates) a glimpse into whether job applicants can realistically thrive in that environment.

Even for those hired, fitting in better isn't rocket science. It manifests in simple habits: turning up prepared for meetings, checking how your work affects others and being honest when you do not know something. In the first few months, it helps to treat the workplace like fieldwork: observe who speaks up, who decides, how disagreement is expressed and what success actually looks like on your team.

With supervisors, fit can be as basic as seeking clarification about expectations, sending updates in the format your manager prefers and acting on feedback quickly. Volunteering for unglamorous but important tasks and stepping in during crunch periods signal reliability and trustworthiness.

Most importantly, relationship-building should be intentional. Quick coffee chats, cross-functional projects and expressing appreciation when others help all compound over time, building a reputation as someone who makes collaboration easier.

It might be easy for people having a hard time at a new job to jump the gun and conclude that one doesn't fit in. A more constructive approach is to ask ourselves whether we have first fully understood how the workplace works – who should be consulted, who decides and how success is defined.

Adapting to those norms does not mean losing authenticity but aligning with the organisation's culture and leadership expectations. The aim is not to be liked at all costs, but to be recognised as a contributor others trust and want to work with.

Ultimately, fit is not about squeezing yourself into a mould or playing office politics. It is about creating conditions where competence and character reinforce each other. For fresh graduates, the real win is not just landing a first job, but learning how to make good work count.

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