

# ATTRACTION-SELECTION-ATTRITION MODEL (ASA MODEL)

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The Attraction-Selection-Attrition Model (ASA Model)

## The Core Definition and Underlying Mechanism

The Attraction-Selection-Attrition Model, commonly known as the ASA Model, is a seminal framework in organizational psychology that endeavors to explain the persistent homogeneity of people within organizations and, consequently, the stability and distinct nature of organizational characteristics over time. At its simplest, the ASA Model posits that the collective personality, values, and goals of the people in an organization determine its structure, processes, and ultimately, its culture. This model moves beyond purely external or structural explanations for organizational outcomes, arguing that the essential character of an institution is a function of the individuals it systematically attracts, selects, and retains.

The fundamental mechanism driving the ASA process is the concept of similarity and fit. Individuals are perpetually seeking environments that align with their own traits, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle where uniformity is reinforced. Over decades, this cycle sculpts the organization's demographic profile and psychological composition, making it increasingly difficult for organizations to integrate truly diverse perspectives or initiate radical change. This focus on the individual as the primary driver of organizational characteristics is what distinguishes the ASA Model from classical sociological or managerial theories that prioritize structure or technology. It suggests that organizational behavior is not merely about managing systems, but about managing the constant flow of people into, through, and out of the organization.

The model functions as a dynamic loop, where the outcomes of one stage influence the inputs of the next. For instance, the type of employees an organization successfully retains (Attrition outcome) determines the organization's current culture, which in turn influences the pool of applicants it attracts in the next cycle. This circular causality ensures that organizations tend toward homogeneity along various dimensions, including personality, cognitive style, and shared values. This theoretical insight is crucial for understanding phenomena ranging from corporate resilience to the difficulty encountered when attempting large-scale cultural transformation programs, as the very composition of the workforce resists deviation from the established norm.

## Historical Context and Theoretical Development

The ASA Model was formally introduced by organizational psychologist **Benjamin Schneider** in 1987. Schneider developed this framework as a direct challenge to the prevailing situational theories of organizational behavior which heavily emphasized the role of external environment, technology, or formal structure in shaping organizational outcomes. Schneider argued that while situations certainly influence behavior, the actual composition of the organization's human capital--the people--exerts a far stronger and more enduring influence on long-term organizational

characteristics. His seminal work sought to bridge the gap between individual psychology and macro-organizational theory by demonstrating how individual differences manifest at the collective level.

Prior to the ASA Model, much of organizational research focused on how organizations socialize newcomers or how structures dictated behavior. Schneider shifted the focus, proposing that the organization itself is a reflection of its members, and that the mechanisms of Attraction, Selection, and Attrition act as powerful, non-random filters. This perspective was revolutionary because it implied that organizational problems, such as lack of innovation or resistance to change, might stem less from flawed managerial systems and more from the inherent similarity of the workforce composition, which had been systematically optimized for the existing organizational state.

The development of ASA was deeply rooted in the broader field of **Personnel Psychology** and organizational staffing research, which traditionally focused on maximizing job performance through careful selection. Schneider expanded this view, suggesting that selection must be understood not just in terms of individual job performance, but also in its cumulative effect on the entire organizational system. The model provided a coherent, unifying theory explaining why organizations often end up looking like the people who founded them and the people who stayed with them, cementing its place as a cornerstone in the study of organizational fit and culture.

### Component 1: Attraction

The initial phase of the ASA loop is **Attraction**, which describes the process by which individuals are differentially drawn to organizations. This stage is governed by the principle that potential employees are attracted to organizations whose perceived culture, goals, and existing members are similar to their own personality, values, and interests. This psychological alignment is critical; people seek environments where they feel they will belong and thrive, often based on early impressions gathered from organizational marketing, reputation, and interactions with current employees.

This differential attraction means that the applicant pool is never truly random; it is already skewed toward individuals who possess characteristics congruent with the organization's existing profile. For example, a company with a reputation for intense competition and high rewards will attract applicants who are highly competitive and risk-tolerant, while a company emphasizing work-life balance and community involvement will attract those who prioritize stability and social connectedness. These self-selection processes significantly narrow the range of individual differences available for the subsequent Selection phase, preemptively filtering out applicants who might otherwise introduce significant variance.

The importance of the attraction phase cannot be overstated, as it sets the boundaries for all subsequent organizational development. If the organization wishes to change its culture--for

instance, moving from a rigid hierarchy to a collaborative matrix--it must fundamentally alter its external messaging and internal reputation to attract a different type of candidate pool. If the organization fails to change what it signals to the labor market, it will perpetually draw the same type of person, reinforcing the status quo regardless of changes implemented in the selection or attrition stages.

## Component 2: Selection

The **Selection** stage involves the formal and informal processes organizations use to choose which attracted applicants to hire. Even within a pre-filtered pool of candidates, organizations employ various selection tools--such as interviews, personality assessments, and background checks--that are often implicitly or explicitly designed to identify those candidates who exhibit the best fit with the existing staff and the established organizational culture. While selection tools are ostensibly used to predict job performance, the ASA Model highlights their function as cultural gatekeepers.

Selection criteria frequently favor candidates who share demographic or psychological similarities with current high-performing employees or senior management. This bias, whether conscious or unconscious, ensures that individuals who are outliers--those whose values or working styles deviate significantly from the norm--are less likely to be offered a position, even if they possess superior technical skills. The informal aspects of selection, such as rapport during an interview, are particularly powerful filters, as interviewers naturally gravitate toward and rate higher those candidates who remind them of themselves or their successful colleagues.

The cumulative effect of rigorous, similarity-driven selection is the maintenance of organizational homogeneity. If the organization's initial selection processes favored conservative, detail-oriented individuals, the organization will continue to hire this profile, reinforcing the organization's conservative, detail-oriented nature. This stage thus actively reinforces the psychological contract and ensures that new hires are likely to sustain, rather than challenge, the existing norms and climate of the workplace.

## Component 3: Attrition

The final stage of the model is **Attrition**, which refers to the non-random process by which employees who do not fit the organization's environment eventually leave, either voluntarily or involuntarily. This is perhaps the most powerful and enduring mechanism for maintaining organizational stability and uniformity. When an individual's personality, values, or preferred work style significantly conflicts with the organizational culture--a condition known as poor Person-Organization Fit--that individual experiences lower Job Satisfaction, increased stress, and is ultimately more likely to seek employment elsewhere.

Attrition acts as a corrective feedback loop. Any individuals who managed to slip through the Attraction and Selection filters but are fundamentally different from the core organizational population will eventually experience dissonance. This mismatch leads to voluntary turnover, where the "misfits" self-select out of the system. While involuntary terminations also play a role, voluntary attrition based on poor fit is the most common way organizations "purify" their composition over time, ensuring that the remaining employees share a high degree of psychological similarity.

The long-term consequence of this attrition is the crystallization of organizational identity. As the outliers leave, the characteristics of the remaining employees become more pronounced and extreme. This explains why very old organizations often possess highly distinctive and sometimes idiosyncratic cultures--those cultures have been refined and reinforced over decades by the systematic departure of those who did not conform to the established norms, leading to a workforce that is deeply aligned with the organization's history and mission.

## A Practical Example of the ASA Cycle

Consider a large, long-established nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental advocacy, known for its deep commitment to consensus-building, slow, deliberate decision-making, and a highly collaborative, mission-driven ethos. The ASA Model provides a clear explanation for how this specific culture persists despite continuous employee turnover.

In the **Attraction** phase, potential employees who prioritize individual rapid achievement or high personal financial gain are less likely to apply, as the organization's reputation signals a focus on collective impact and modest salaries. Conversely, those highly motivated by social purpose and teamwork are strongly attracted. The applicant pool is already biased toward altruistic, patient, and collaborative individuals.

During the **Selection** phase, hiring managers and interview committees, who are themselves products of the existing collaborative culture, employ behavioral interviews designed to assess teamwork and commitment to the mission. A candidate who demonstrates exceptional individual initiative but struggles to articulate their ability to compromise or work through bureaucracy is likely to be screened out, even if technically competent. The organization selects for the type of temperament that thrives in a consensus-driven environment, ensuring that new hires align with the existing temperament of the workforce.

Finally, in the **Attrition** phase, an employee who was hired for their technical skill but quickly grows frustrated with the slow pace of decision-making and the necessity of constant meetings to gain consensus will experience poor Person-Organization Fit. This frustration eventually leads to voluntary departure. The employees who remain are those who are comfortable with, or even prefer, the collaborative pace, thus reinforcing the culture of consensus and deliberation. This cycle

guarantees that the organization remains highly effective at its specific mission, but simultaneously resists any internal pressure to become faster or more competitive in its operations.

## Significance, Impact, and Limitations

The ASA Model holds profound significance for the field of Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management (HRM). Its primary impact lies in providing a powerful, people-centric explanation for organizational structure and stability. It shifts the focus of strategic planning from merely reorganizing charts and processes to managing the human capital flow. For HR professionals, the model emphasizes that recruitment and retention strategies are not just tactical operations but strategic levers for shaping the entire organization's future identity. Understanding ASA is crucial for designing effective staffing systems that align human resources with strategic goals.

In application, the ASA Model is frequently used to diagnose organizational culture problems. If an organization is struggling with issues like lack of innovation or excessive risk-aversion, the ASA framework suggests that the root cause may be the overly homogeneous composition of the workforce, which systematically filters out diverse thought. Consequently, interventions must focus on disrupting the ASA cycle--for example, by intentionally broadening the attraction messaging or changing selection criteria to value complementary, rather than similar, traits.

However, the model is not without limitations. Critics argue that ASA may overemphasize homogeneity and understate the power of organizational socialization processes to change or mold individuals once they are hired. Furthermore, an organization that is too homogeneous--a predictable outcome of the ASA cycle--can suffer from significant drawbacks, including a lack of creativity, groupthink, and an inability to adapt to external market changes, as the collective viewpoint becomes too narrow. This highlights the inherent tension between achieving strong P-O Fit for stability and maintaining heterogeneity for resilience and innovation.

## Connections to Related Concepts and Broader Categories

The ASA Model is a central theory within the subfield of **Organizational Psychology**, which is itself a major branch of Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology. It relates intrinsically to several other core concepts in the field, most notably the theory of **Person-Organization Fit (P-O Fit)**. While P-O Fit describes the compatibility between an individual and the organization, the ASA Model is the dynamic mechanism that explains how organizations systematically achieve and maintain that fit over time. ASA demonstrates that P-O Fit is not a static state but a continuously managed outcome of the three intertwined processes.

Furthermore, ASA is closely connected to research on organizational climate and culture. It provides a psychological foundation for understanding how culture emerges and stabilizes,

suggesting that culture is simply the aggregated manifestation of the shared characteristics of the people who remain. It also intersects with Social Identity Theory, as employees tend to identify strongly with organizations whose members they perceive as similar to themselves, further reinforcing the stability of the workforce composition and collective identity.

Finally, the model serves as a counterpoint to theories of organizational change management, particularly those focusing on top-down structural adjustments. ASA suggests that true, lasting change requires fundamentally altering the characteristics of the people entering and remaining in the organization. Without disrupting the mechanisms of Attraction, Selection, and Attrition, any structural or procedural changes are likely to be superficial and temporary, as the innate tendency toward homogeneity will eventually reassert the original organizational character.

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