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*A Theory of  
Work Adjustment  
(A Revision)*

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René V. Dawis  
Lloyd H. Lofquist  
David J. Weiss

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# A Theory of Work Adjustment

(A Revision)

## Introduction

One of the major concerns of vocational psychology, which has long been the object of much research activity, is the description, prediction, and facilitation of work adjustment. In the understanding of work adjustment lies the key to many of the problems posed by work, such as: choice of a career, continuing in and progressing in a career, performing satisfactorily in jobs, and deriving satisfaction from work. While a considerable amount of research has been done, a conceptual framework is needed to organize the accumulated research results, and to give direction to future research activity. To meet this need, a theory of work adjustment was developed by the research team of the Work Adjustment Project in the Industrial Relations Center at the University of Minnesota.

The first formulation of A Theory of Work Adjustment was published in January, 1964 as Monograph XV of the *Minnesota Studies in Vocational Rehabilitation* (Dawis, England, and Lofquist, 1964). This theory has provided the conceptual framework for the continuing research program of the Work Adjustment Project. Since publication of the theory in 1964, considerable progress has been made in developing instruments for measuring variables in the theory and in testing its propositions. The instruments now available for application include:

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), to measure the satisfaction of individuals' needs through work (Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist, 1967);

The Minnesota Satisfactoriness Scales (MSS), to measure how satisfactorily individuals perform on their jobs (Weiss, Dawis, Lofquist, and England, 1966);

The Minnesota Importance Questionnaire (MIQ), to measure individuals' vocational needs (Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist, 1964; Weiss, Dawis, Lofquist, and England, 1966); and

The Minnesota Job Description Questionnaire (MJDQ), to measure the kinds of reinforcers available in specific jobs and the levels at which they exist (Borgen, Weiss, Tinsley, Dawis, and Lofquist, 1968). Using the MJDQ, Occupational Reinforcer Patterns (ORPs) have been developed for a substantial number of jobs.

In addition, available psychological tests (e.g. the General Aptitude Test Battery, GATB; U. S. Department of Labor, 1962b) and available occupational ability requirement information (e.g. the

Occupational Aptitude Patterns, OAPs; U. S. Department of Labor, 1962a) make it possible to measure individuals' abilities and to describe the ability requirements of jobs.

These instruments make it possible for vocational rehabilitation agencies and counselors to conduct follow-up studies of clients placed on jobs by using work adjustment measures (satisfaction and satisfactoriness) and relating these to tenure on the job. These instruments also enable rehabilitation counselors to identify the kinds of jobs (in terms of ability requirements and reinforcers) best suited to their clients' work personalities (abilities and needs). Comparing jobs and work personalities in this way allows the counselor to identify appropriate jobs, focus on the most realistic choices of jobs, and predict work adjustment outcomes for the jobs finally chosen. Using the instruments now available, it is possible to evaluate the effectiveness of an agency's vocational rehabilitation program; to compare the different methods of vocational counseling; and to bolster the rehabilitation counselor's expertise in assessing the vocational potential of clients. The Theory of Work Adjustment provides a system for thinking about how people relate to work and what kinds of information are needed to understand this relationship.

With the development of instruments, the acquisition of additional research knowledge, and after discussion of the suggestions and criticisms of colleagues, some modifications have been made in the 1964 theory, and a restatement of it seems desirable at this time.

## A Theory of Work Adjustment

The following Theory of Work Adjustment is based on the concept of *correspondence between individual and environment*. Correspondence between an individual and his environment implies conditions that can be described as: a harmonious relationship between individual and environment, suitability of the individual to the environment and of the environment for the individual, consonance or agreement between individual and environment, and a reciprocal and complementary relationship between the individual and his environment. Correspondence, then, is a relationship in which the individual and the environment are corresponsive, i.e., mutually responsive. The individual brings into this relationship his requirements of the environment; the environment likewise has its requirements of the individual. In order to survive, i.e., exist, in an environment, the individual must achieve some degree of correspondence.

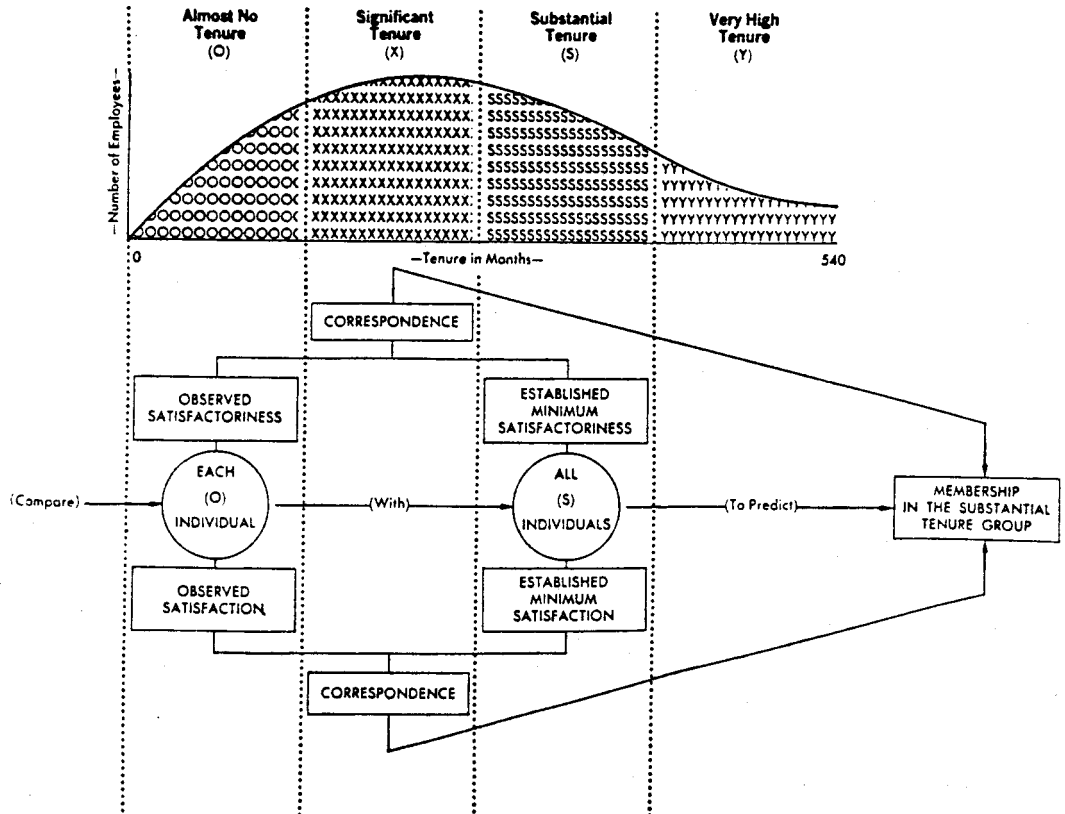
It is a basic assumption of the Theory of Work Adjustment that *each individual seeks to achieve and maintain correspondence with his environment*. Achieving and maintaining correspondence with the environment are basic motives of human behavior.

There are several kinds of environments, e.g., home, work, school, to which an individual must relate. Achieving and maintaining correspondence with one environment may affect the correspondence achieved and maintained in other environments. *Work represents a major environment to which most individuals must relate*.

The individual brings certain skills to the work environment. The work environment provides certain rewards (e.g., wages, prestige, personal relationships) to the individual. The individual's skills enable him to respond to the requirements of the work environment. The rewards of the work environment enable it to "respond" to the requirements of the individual. When their minimal requirements are mutually fulfilled, the individual and the work environment are described as correspondent. In the case of work, then, *correspondence can be described in terms of the individual fulfilling the requirements of the work environment, and the work environment fulfilling the requirements of the individual*.

When an individual enters a work environment for the first time, his behavior is directed toward fulfilling its requirements. He also experiences the rewards of the work environment. If he finds a correspondent relationship between himself and the work environment, he seeks to maintain it. If he does not, he seeks to establish

Figure 1  
THE PREDICTION OF TENURE



correspondence, or, failing in this, to leave the work environment. There are many different kinds of work environments, many different kinds of individuals, and each work environment-individual relationship is idiosyncratic. In many cases, the initial relationship is not correspondent. In addition, both individuals and work environments are constantly changing. *The continuous and dynamic process by which the individual seeks to achieve and maintain correspondence with his work environment is called work adjustment.*

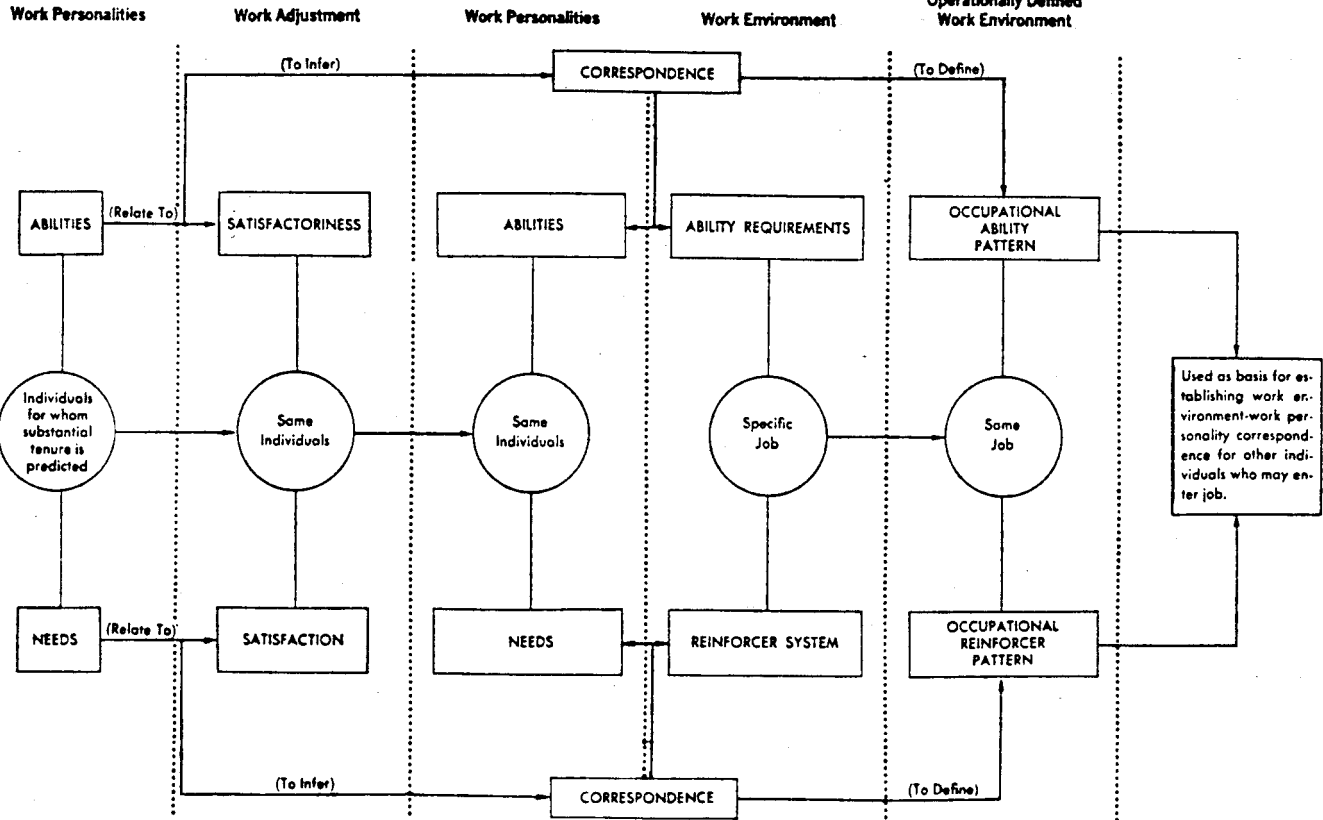
The achievement of minimal correspondence enables an individual to remain in a work environment. Remaining in the work environment, in turn, allows the individual to achieve more optimal correspondence and to stabilize the correspondent relationship. *This stability of the correspondence between the individual and the work environment is manifested as tenure in the job.*

As correspondence increases, the probability of tenure, i.e., remaining on the job, increases. In addition, as correspondence increases, the projected length of tenure increases. Conversely, as correspondence decreases, both the probability of remaining on the job and the projected length of tenure decrease. Tenure is the most basic indicator of correspondence. It can be said, therefore, that *tenure is a function of correspondence between the individual and his work environment.*

From the basic concepts of correspondence and tenure it is possible to develop the concepts of *satisfactoriness* and *satisfaction*. If the individual has substantial tenure, it can be inferred that he has been fulfilling the requirements of the work environment and that the work environment has been fulfilling his requirements. If the individual fulfills the requirements of the work environment, he is defined as a satisfactory worker. If the work environment fulfills the requirements of the individual, he is defined as a satisfied worker. *Satisfactoriness and satisfaction indicate the correspondence between the individual and his work environment.* Satisfactoriness and satisfaction, then, are basic indicators of the degree of success an individual has achieved in maintaining correspondence between himself and his work environment. Satisfactoriness is an *external* indicator of correspondence, i.e., it is derived or obtained from sources other than the individual worker's own appraisal of his fulfillment of the requirements of the work environment. Satisfaction is an *internal* indicator of correspondence, i.e., it represents the individual worker's appraisal of the extent to which the work environment fulfills his requirements.

Figure 2

ESTABLISHING THE REQUIREMENTS FOR WORK ADJUSTMENT





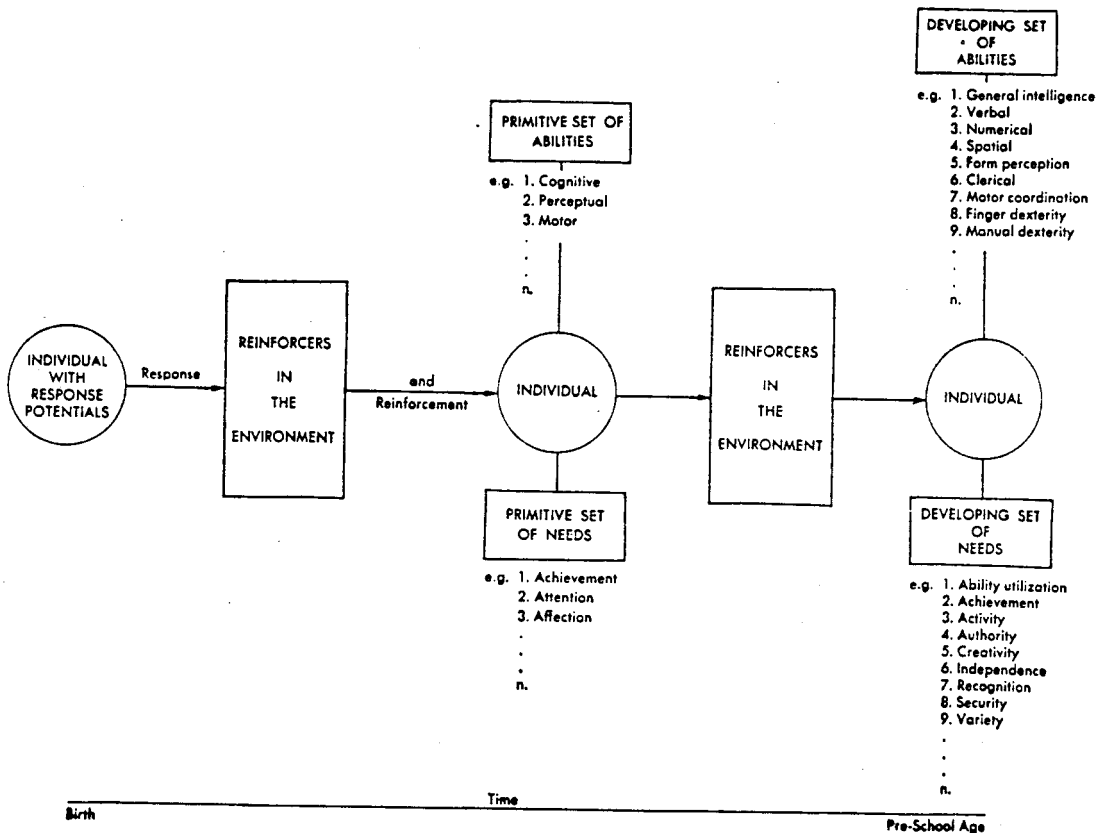
With the additional concepts of satisfactoriness and satisfaction it is possible to establish a methodology for predicting tenure.

Satisfactoriness and satisfaction can fluctuate with changes over time in both the individual and the work environment. There are, however, minimum requirements for both the individual and the work environment, i.e., minimum levels of satisfactoriness required of the individual and of satisfaction required by the individual. These minimum levels may be established by observing many individuals who have remained in a work environment. *The levels of satisfactoriness and satisfaction observed for a group of individuals with substantial tenure in a specific work environment establish the limits of satisfactoriness and satisfaction from which tenure can be predicted for other individuals.* This is illustrated by Figure 1.

Satisfactoriness and satisfaction can be also viewed as outcomes in the work adjustment process at various points in time during an individual's period of employment. In this sense, they are measures of work adjustment. As measures of work adjustment, satisfactoriness and satisfaction can be used to establish a methodology for the prediction of work adjustment from the assessment of work personalities in relation to work environments. *The work personalities of individuals who fall within the limits of satisfactoriness and satisfaction for which substantial tenure can be predicted, may be inferred to be correspondent with the specific work environment.* The different work personalities for which correspondence is inferred will establish the limits for specific work personality traits necessary for adequate adjustment to the specific work environment. This is illustrated in Figure 2. These limits (for specific work personality traits) can be used as a basis for estimating the degree of correspondence between other individuals and each specific work environment. *Work personality-work environment correspondence, which is estimated in this fashion, can be used to predict satisfactoriness and satisfaction, indicators of correspondence in the work adjustment process.*

Since satisfactoriness and satisfaction, taken together, can be used to predict tenure, *work personality-work environment correspondence can be used to predict tenure.*

Figure 3  
**INCEPTION OF THE WORK PERSONALITY**



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## The Theory of Work Adjustment in Operational Terms

The individual with his unique response potentials interacts with the environment and experiences a variety of stimulus conditions, many of which he finds reinforcing. As he matures and his experience broadens, he develops primitive sets of abilities and needs. *Abilities are basic dimensions of response capability generally utilized by the individual. Needs are preferences for responding in certain stimulus conditions which have been experienced to be reinforcing. Abilities and needs are the major variables that define the work personality.* The beginnings of the development of the work personality are illustrated in Figure 3.

The individual's abilities and needs undergo further development principally through social and educational experiences. A process of individuation of the work personality continues to a point of relative stability. This process is illustrated in Figure 4. The Theory of Work Adjustment is premised on the existence of a relatively stable work personality.

*The work environment may be described in work-personality terms, i.e., in terms of both ability requirements and reinforcer systems.* Ability requirements may be established from the study of satisfactory workers with substantial tenure. Reinforcer systems may be established from the study of satisfied workers with substantial tenure.

The description of both the work personality and the work environment in the same terms within the framework of the Theory of Work Adjustment stated above, is illustrated by Figure 5. The use of specific instruments to operationalize the theory is illustrated by Figure 6.

The following formal propositions about work adjustment, stated in operational terms, serve as a basis for research:

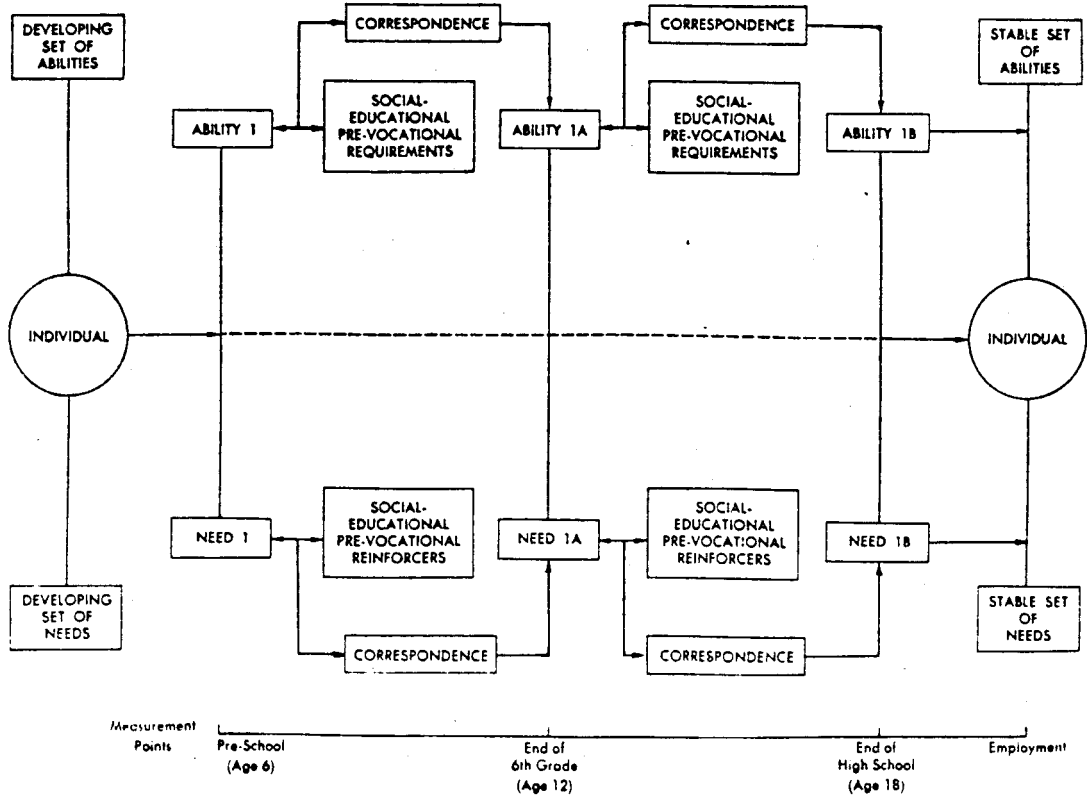
**Proposition I.** An individual's work adjustment at any point in time is indicated by his concurrent levels of satisfactoriness and satisfaction.

**Proposition II.** Satisfactoriness is a function of the correspondence between an individual's abilities and the ability requirements of the work environment, provided that the individual's needs correspond with the reinforcer system of the work environment.

**Corollary IIa.** Knowledge of an individual's abilities and of his satisfactoriness permits the determination of the effective ability requirements of the work environment.

**Corollary IIb.** Knowledge of the ability requirements of the

Figure 4  
INDIVIDUATION OF THE WORK PERSONALITY



work environment and of an individual's satisfactoriness permits the inference of an individual's abilities.

**Proposition III.** Satisfaction is a function of the correspondence between the reinforcer system of the work environment and the individual's needs, provided that the individual's abilities correspond with the ability requirements of the work environment.

**Corollary IIIa.** Knowledge of an individual's needs and of his satisfaction permits the determination of the effective reinforcer system of the work environment for the individual.

**Corollary IIIb.** Knowledge of the reinforcer system of the work environment and of an individual's satisfaction permits the inference of an individual's needs.

**Proposition IV.** Satisfaction moderates the functional relationship between satisfactoriness and ability-requirement correspondence.

**Proposition V.** Satisfactoriness moderates the functional relationship between satisfaction and need-reinforcer correspondence.

**Proposition VI.** The probability of an individual being forced out of the work environment is inversely related to his satisfactoriness.

**Proposition VII.** The probability of an individual voluntarily leaving the work environment is inversely related to his satisfaction.

Combining Propositions VI and VII, we have:

**Proposition VIII.** Tenure is a joint function of satisfactoriness and satisfaction.

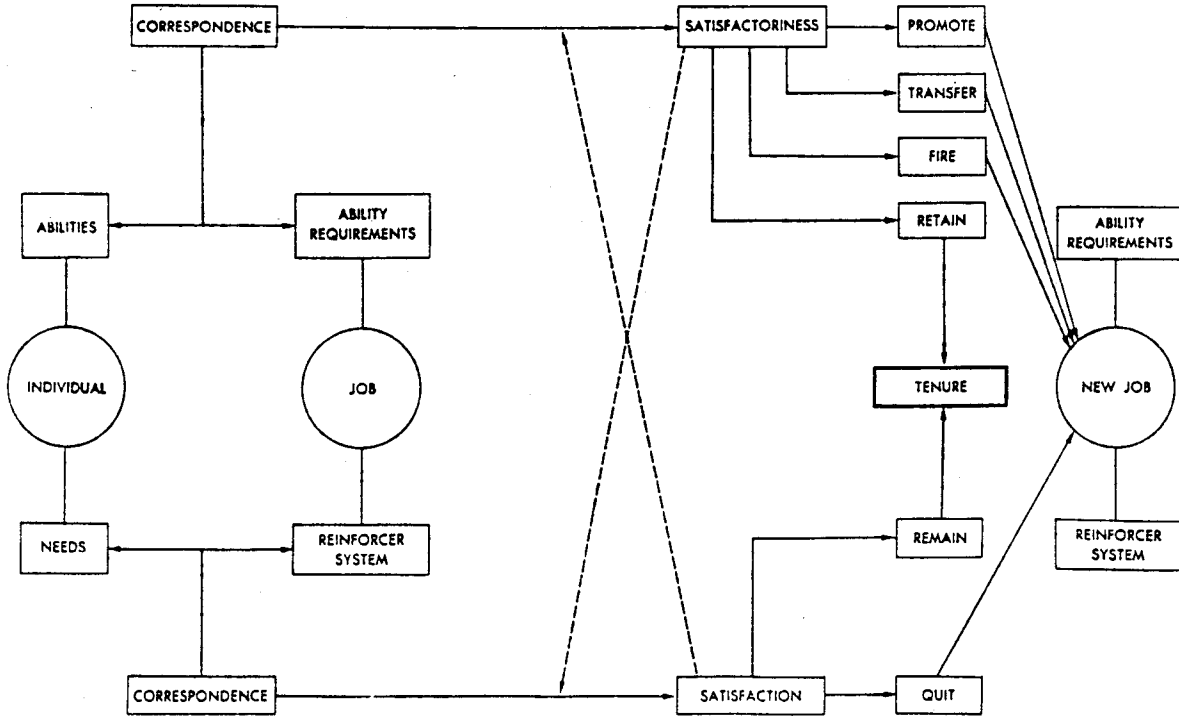
Given Propositions II, III, and VIII, this corollary follows:

**Corollary VIIIa.** Tenure is a function of ability-requirement and need-reinforcer correspondence.

**Proposition IX.** Work personality-work environment correspondence increases as a function of tenure.

The present set of propositions is premised on existing knowledge about work personalities and work environments. This knowledge is, in turn, limited by the current methods used to describe work personalities and work environments. Additional research findings and improved methods may suggest other propositions. It is felt that a start must be made with the technology available at this time.

Figure 5  
WORK ADJUSTMENT



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Figure 6  
THE THEORY OF WORK ADJUSTMENT IN OPERATIONAL TERMS

