

# A THEORY OF THE START-UP WORKFORCE

JAMES BORT   
DePaul University

**Start-up employees are a crucial yet understudied stakeholder group. This paper develops a theory of the start-up workforce that positions early-stage employees as influential co-constructors of entrepreneurial opportunities. Drawing on constructivist logic and integrating insights from entrepreneurship and organizational behavior, I explore how entrepreneurial opportunity narratives and career fit narratives, generated at the firm and start-up employee levels, respectively, interact and evolve over time. My model unpacks how narrative fidelity—the completeness and coherence of a story—changes across levels as start-ups take shape. Low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives attract employees by allowing them to envision themselves as co-constructors. However, narratives solidify as fidelity increases through employment growth and employee entrainment. This process then influences employees’ career fit narratives and their decisions to maintain entrainment or resist and exit. By illuminating the dynamic interplay between macro-level entrepreneurial opportunities and micro-level employee career fit, this interdisciplinary theory advances our understanding of why and when start-up employees entrain or resist, and how their co-constructive efforts significantly influence both the respective start-up’s trajectory and their career fit narrative revisions. My work provides tractable theoretical foundations to further distinguish the start-up workforce as a unique stakeholder group within new ventures facing a novel employment situation.**

Founders who successfully exploit entrepreneurial opportunities seldom act alone (Ramoglou, Zyglidopoulos & Papadopolou, 2023). There is growing evidence (e.g., Van Lancker, Knockaert, Collewaert & Breugst, 2023) that the start-up workforce is an influential stakeholder group that helps founders take their entrepreneurial opportunities from initial ideas (Wood, Bakker & Fisher, 2021) to socially objective realities (McBride & Wuebker, 2022). Start-ups entice early-stage employees with provocative narratives outlining a future full of possibilities (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell & Lim, 2021). These employees who get in on the ground floor (Sorenson, Dahl, Canales & Burton, 2021) can act as co-constructors of entrepreneurial

opportunities (Wood & McKinley, 2010) and fundamentally shape future iterations of the narratives that describe these entrepreneurial opportunities (e.g., Garud & Giuliani, 2013). In turn, employees who find the risks of start-up employment tenable (Manchester, Benson & Shaver, 2023) have greater latitude to craft career fit narratives<sup>1</sup>—stories that describe their temporal perceptions of person–environment fit (Shipp & Jansen, 2011)—which are crucial for making sense of their place within the dynamic start-up environment. Critically, scholars in entrepreneurship (Wood & McKinley, 2017) and organizational behavior (Shipp & Richardson, 2021) have coalesced around the idea that “entrainment”—the process by which individuals adjust and synchronize their activities with others (Ancona & Chong, 1996)—is not an automatic process. As entrepreneurial opportunities take on more tangible forms, start-up employees must reconcile their place within evolving start-ups.

The evolution of Etsy illustrates how a start-up’s entrepreneurial opportunity narrative and employees’ career fit narratives interact and evolve. Etsy’s

---

I am deeply grateful to those who provided invaluable support throughout this journey. Associate editor Greg Fisher and three anonymous reviewers offered exceptional guidance that substantially improved this manuscript through each revision. Trent Williams, Rob Nason, and Dave Sullivan provided crucial early feedback that helped get this project off the ground. Maija Renko’s steadfast support was instrumental as the project evolved, as was the assistance of Ali Ferguson. Finally, I thank my advisor and mentor, Johan Wiklund, for always encouraging me to pursue research questions that are personally meaningful.

Accepted by Greg Fisher

---

<sup>1</sup> While Shipp and Jansen (2011) use the term “fit narratives,” I qualify the construct as “career fit narratives” to mitigate potential ambiguity in the macro- and micro-level narratives I am referring to.

early entrepreneurial opportunity narrative emphasized a balance between commerce and social good, attracting employees with similar career aspirations. Some early-stage employees were specifically tasked with maintaining social metrics—co-constructive efforts that led to Etsy's *B-Corp* certification—which aided employee entrainment as the firm began its expansion. However, profit pressures inspired a narrative shift such that many of the firm's social elements ended up being discarded, including its *B-Corp* status, forcing employees to reconcile their place within the evolving firm (Gelles, 2017).

This anecdote illustrates a fundamental conundrum within the start-up workforce. While early-stage employees often craft their anticipated career fit narratives based on an aspiration to co-construct a start-up's entrepreneurial opportunity, they must quickly adapt to the changing realities of the start-up to remain effective employees. As Gil (2018) notes in *High Growth Handbook*, many start-ups become unrecognizable versions of themselves from one period to the next once their abstract entrepreneurial opportunities start to take more tangible forms. Although employees' career fit narratives are understood to be temporal and subject to revisions (Shipp & Jansen, 2011), the challenges for start-up employees crafting career fit narratives are heightened due to the interdependence of the evolving narratives of entrepreneurial opportunities (Garud & Giuliani, 2013). Alignment between start-ups' entrepreneurial opportunity narratives and employees' career fit narratives is crucial. Employees who remain aligned are more likely to extend their tenures and take on more significant responsibilities (Van Lancker et al., 2023). In turn, they accumulate experience and add much-needed stability as start-ups grow. Conversely, misalignment often forces employees to critically reevaluate their employment situations, which can result in organizational disruptions (Baron, Hannan & Burton, 2001; DeSantola & Gulati, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to offer a constructivist theory of the start-up workforce that illuminates how employees identify and reconcile their career aspirations alongside the development of entrepreneurial opportunities. Centered on the co-construction of entrepreneurial opportunities (Wood & McKinley, 2010) and leveraging the narrative perspective for theoretical tractability, this approach encapsulates the evolution of both entrepreneurial opportunity narratives (Garud & Giuliani, 2013) and start-up employees' career narrative fit (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). The model I develop is predicated on the notion that narrative fidelity—defined as the completeness and

coherence of a story—changes over time. Low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives are vague representations, allowing for diverse interpretations conducive to the aspirational aspects of employees' career fit narratives. However, to become effective co-constructors, employees must efficiently craft present career fit narratives reflecting the emerging realities within start-ups. As entrepreneurial opportunity narratives begin to reflect more tangible realities, employees begin to entrain around them in order to maintain social cohesion as the workforce expands (Shipp & Richardson, 2021; Wood & McKinley, 2017). Ongoing entrainment is influenced by a complex interplay of factors unique to the start-up context, reflecting the dynamic nature of both entrepreneurial opportunities and employees' evolving roles that help construct them.

In sum, this work advances an interdisciplinary theory that captures the unique nature of employment within start-ups. While theory acknowledges that employees participate in entrepreneurial opportunity development (McBride & Wuebker, 2022; Wood & McKinley, 2010), the present study shifts the start-up workforce from the periphery to the focal point. My model positions early-stage start-up employees as influential co-constructors of entrepreneurial opportunities, extending insights about how employees can significantly shape a start-up's trajectory (Van Lancker et al., 2023). The dynamics of co-construction are reflected in the interplay of start-ups' entrepreneurial opportunity narratives (Garud & Giuliani, 2013) and employees' career fit narratives (Shipp & Jansen, 2011), illuminating a conceptual bridge between macro- and micro-level phenomena (Vaara, Sonenshein & Boje, 2016) and providing a more comprehensive view of how narratives evolve as start-ups mature. Further, this approach uncovers new insights into why and when start-up employees entrain or exit (Shipp & Richardson, 2021; Wood & McKinley, 2017), suggesting that co-constructive efforts significantly influence employees' career fit narrative revisions and their subsequent behaviors. Overall, I provide further theoretical elaboration that distinguishes the start-up workforce as a unique stakeholder group within new ventures facing a novel employment situation.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

### The Start-Up Workforce

Though understudied compared to other stakeholder groups (Manchester et al., 2023), the start-up workforce has been recognized as distinct (Roach & Sauermann, 2015) and impactful (Van Lancker et al., 2023).

Pioneering work, such as the Stanford Project on Emerging Companies (Baron & Hannan, 2002), has brought attention to the unique complexities and operational volatility found in many start-ups (Baron et al., 2001). Start-ups are a blank canvas in terms of organizational design (Burton, Colombo, Rossi-Lamastra & Wasserman, 2019), and consequently create the infrastructure to support employees in response to critical needs as they appear, such as with firm growth or institutional pressures (Cardon & Stevens, 2004; Van Lancker, Knockaert, Audenaert & Cardon, 2022).

While employees of established firms benefit from structured environments and clear career paths, start-up employment offers a markedly different experience, which raises important questions about the composition and motivation of the start-up workforce. In their studies of start-up employee demographics, Ouimet and Zarutskie (2014) and Coad, Daunfeldt, Johansson, and Wennberg (2014) draw similar conclusions across different countries, suggesting that start-up workers tend to skew younger and, as such, are early in their careers. These employees also tend to face lower opportunity costs if a start-up fails, and are typically less expensive to employ (Sorenson et al., 2021). While employees who prefer the start-up environment have higher tolerance for risk (Roach & Sauermann, 2015), attracting experienced employees is challenging. Evidence suggests that experienced employees are more likely to join a start-up if they have a partner with a stable career (Manchester et al., 2023) or are offered a wage premium (Honoré & Ganco, 2023). Start-up employees are far from homogeneous, however. Thus, the motives of start-up employees offer novel insights as well.

There is a notable degree of overlap in motives between founders and start-up employees (Sauermann, 2018). For example, studies suggest that employees who prefer start-up employment value the autonomy and ability to innovate more than wages (Moser, Tumasjan & Welp, 2017; Roach & Sauermann, 2024). Indeed, economic payoffs for many start-ups take time to materialize, reinforcing the value of the psychological income derived from the environment (Gimeno, Folta, Cooper & Woo, 1997). Nonpecuniary motives are further amplified by passionate founders; these founders not only inspire employees to join their start-ups (Lewis & Cardon, 2020) but also fuel employees' journeys as their passion trickles down throughout their organizations (Breugst, Domurath, Patzelt & Klaukien, 2012; Cardon, 2008).

In sum, the current literature on the start-up workforce offers systemic evidence supporting practitioner insights—namely, that a career in a start-up is novel (Knight, 2016). Although interest in and understanding of the start-up workforce are progressing (Van Lancker et al., 2023), theoretical insights from the entrepreneurial opportunity literature stand to fill significant gaps. Next, I provide a brief overview of the constructivist approach to entrepreneurial opportunities and how these opportunities are communicated to stakeholders through narratives.

### **The Construction of Entrepreneurial Opportunity Narratives**

Entrepreneurial opportunities have been (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) and remain (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2024) a critical building block of entrepreneurship theory. While debates concerning the origins and nature of entrepreneurial opportunities persist (Alvarez & Barney, 2020), there is growing interest in the notion that entrepreneurial opportunities are developed iteratively (Berglund, Bousfiha & Mansoori, 2020; Nair, Gaim & Dimov, 2022). For the purposes of this work, I adopt a perspective that is philosophically rooted in constructivism (McBride & Wuebker, 2022; Wood & McKinley, 2010). The constructivist framework offers a lens into the social processes that bring entrepreneurial opportunities to life—namely, through interactions between entrepreneurs and key stakeholders. Building on the constructivist foundations laid by scholars like Von Glaserfeld (1981) and Weick (1979), Wood and McKinley (2010: 69) succinctly summarize the relevance of the constructivist approach for understanding entrepreneurial opportunities:

Subjects do not discover the inevitability of an objective reality, but instead engage the world in a way that allows them to conceptualize a viable future. They then work to organize their experiential world in a way consistent with this viability cognition.

If an entrepreneurial opportunity is a product of a series of ongoing interactions between an entrepreneur and stakeholders, how is it communicated? Early-stage start-ups are as much in the business of crafting compelling narratives as they are in the business of creating products and services. Narratives serve as stories that can be told and retold, most notably capturing a temporal state; they can be delivered in many forms and are generally crafted for an intended audience (Vaara et al., 2016). Narratives

describing an entrepreneurial opportunity might include a pitch to investors, an outline of a start-up's ambitions at a networking event, or a formal business plan.

While the use of narratives has a long history in the entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001), Garud and Guilian (2013) call attention to narratives as a means to articulate entrepreneurial opportunities, noting that the narrative perspective captures both the relational and temporal aspects of the entrepreneurial journey. For instance, Suddaby and colleagues (2021) highlight the relational elements of narratives, theorizing that start-up narratives are crafted to entice and unite stakeholders with different perceptions of uncertainty. Wood and colleagues (2021) emphasize temporal elements of narrative construction, theorizing that narrative crafting can precede entrepreneurial action. Taken together, an entrepreneurial opportunity narrative offers an enticing and comprehensive depiction of the respective start-up's purpose at the beginning of the co-construction process and can inspire employees to join the start-up despite the associated uncertainty.

The narrative perspective offers a great deal of utility when viewing entrepreneurial opportunities with the constructivist lens, accounting for stakeholder involvement as it unfolds over time. While entrepreneurial opportunity narratives are the initial hook that draws in potential employees, employees craft their own career fit narratives to make sense of their place within the start-up (Vaara et al., 2016). In the following, I provide an overview of employees' career fit narratives and why they are relevant to a constructivist theory of the start-up workforce.

### **The Construction of Employees' Career Fit Narratives**

Contemporary careers are increasingly characterized as boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Rather than working their way through an organizationally defined path, individuals generally follow a self-directed career trajectory across organizational boundaries. This development has led scholars to place greater emphasis on how individuals subjectively interpret and find meaning around their career experiences (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005), pushing research beyond objective measures to incorporate individuals' personal evaluations of their experiences and outcomes.

The constructivist lens extends this approach by incorporating sociocultural cues, emphasizing how individuals actively build an understanding of their

careers through cognitive and social processes situated within specific temporal, cultural, and relational contexts (Young & Collin, 2004). Further, constructivist career theories recognize that employees' goals and aspirations are products of ongoing human interactions, such as collaborative projects or mentor-mentee relationships (Young & Valach, 2004). This point of view raises an important question: How do employees make sense of their evolving work experiences as contexts continuously change?

One way employees make sense of their circumstances is by crafting narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Narratives offer conceptual alignment with the constructivist paradigm as they are interpretations of events within temporal contexts and are internally validated as individuals interact with others (Bujold, 2004). Shipp and Jansen's (2011) theory of "fit narratives" offers a particularly useful lens to understand how start-up employees make sense of their rapidly changing work environment as career fit narratives integrate three distinct temporal dimensions: reflections on past experiences, interpretations of present circumstances, and projections of anticipated future possibilities. Career fit narratives are internally crafted stories that serve as sense-making devices that enable employees to continuously evaluate and reconcile their fit within an organization. Within these narratives, employees emphasize different temporal "snippets." For instance, employees tend to emphasize anticipated fit as they prepare themselves for a promotion that aligns with their desired career trajectory. Shipp and Jansen (2011) also note that career fit narratives are revised as employees' work environments change.

The construction and revision of employees' career fit narratives are especially vital in the fluid and often unpredictable start-up context. As I expand on below, nascent start-ups craft ambitious, compelling entrepreneurial opportunity narratives to draw employees in. The ambiguity of an entrepreneurial opportunity narrative is fertile ground for ambitious employees to map a career fit narrative. However, as start-ups mature, so do the realities associated with their ambitions. Thus, the active construction and reconstruction of career fit narratives are critical tools that start-up employees use to reconcile their place within the shifting realities of start-ups as entrepreneurial opportunities take shape.

### **Narrative Fidelity**

Stories describing entrepreneurial opportunities can evolve significantly over time (Garud & Giuliani, 2013). Central to this evolution is the concept of

narrative fidelity. For my purposes, narrative fidelity describes the degree to which a story is developed, documented, and complete. At inception, entrepreneurial opportunity narratives tend to lack fidelity. This lack of fidelity is in part by design, as ambiguity in a story offers flexibility for future possibilities. The flexibility offered by low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives allows nascent start-ups to construct stories that resonate with a variety of audiences that might have different priorities (Fisher, Kuratko, Bloodgood & Hornsby, 2017), and serve as “hooks” that draw stakeholders in (Suddaby et al., 2021). As the entrepreneurial journey unfolds, narrative fidelity tends to increase, representing a more tangible socially constructed reality (McBride & Wuebker, 2022). If the fidelity is low, the story is incomplete, leaving room for wide-ranging aspirations. If the fidelity is high, the story is concrete and less prone to change. Similarly, the fidelity of start-up employees’ career fit narratives also changes as their emphasis shifts from the anticipation associated with what is possible to the reality of their current responsibilities and career trajectories.

## Boundaries

This work has two important boundaries across the start-up and employee levels. At the start-up level, this work focuses on nascent start-ups that are pursuing high-potential entrepreneurial opportunities. These opportunities typically address large markets, leverage innovative technologies or novel business models, and attract external investment capital. Start-ups pursuing high-potential entrepreneurial opportunities tend to offer a continuous path of career growth as they expand (e.g., Bennett & Levinthal, 2017; Van Lancker et al., 2023). At the employee level, start-ups pursuing high-potential entrepreneurial opportunities tend to attract employees who have a more acute understanding of the potential and perils. In other words, employees who join these start-ups typically do so because they can be active participants in an entrepreneurial environment, enjoying autonomy (Sauermann, 2018) alongside the risks and rewards (Manchester et al., 2023). Thus, this theory focuses on early-stage employees who have the desire and ability to become co-constructors of entrepreneurial opportunities.

## LOW-FIDELITY ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITY NARRATIVES

A primary purpose of narratives in entrepreneurship is that they inspire stakeholder action under

conditions of uncertainty (Suddaby et al., 2021). Uncertainty is most prevalent during the “idea phase” of entrepreneurial opportunities; narratives tend to lack specificity during this phase, and it remains unclear whether these stories will ever come to fruition. At this point, narratives are aspirational (Wood et al., 2021) and lack social objectivity (McBride & Wuebker, 2022). These entrepreneurial opportunity narratives can be described as having low fidelity.

Start-up frameworks, such as the lean start-up (Shepherd & Gruber, 2021) and the minimum viable product frameworks (Stevenson, Burnell & Fisher, 2024), directly capitalize on the notion of low-fidelity narratives by acknowledging that start-up ideas often require creative revision (Grimes, 2018). These approaches are notably stakeholder-centric, incorporating feedback and subsequent iterations of ideas based on stakeholder input.

While a low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative can be challenging to interpret (Huang & Pearce, 2015), the point at which it emerges is often the ideal time for an employee to join the focal start-up. Specifically, the start-up is actively seeking input from stakeholders to build social consensus around an underdeveloped entrepreneurial opportunity (Wood & McKinley, 2010). In other words, there is ample room to co-construct the entrepreneurial opportunity. For example, early-stage employees often take on key roles, such as identifying new markets or further developing key features of products or services, as a start-up sets out on its path toward growth (Van Lancker et al., 2023).

## Low-Fidelity Entrepreneurial Opportunity Narratives and Anticipated Narrative Fit

As highlighted above, contemporary careers are unbounded (Arthur et al., 2005; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The constructivist perspective incorporates not only the goals and aspirations of individuals but also the social-contextual cues that validate them (Young & Valach, 2004). Put another way, the constructivist view acknowledges that careers reflect collective efforts, such as the process of building a start-up. The actions and goals of employees are embedded in their career fit narratives, which help employees make sense of their situations within specific contexts.

In their conceptualization of employees’ career fit narratives, Shipp and Jansen (2011) call attention to anticipated fit, where employees compare their present situations to hypothetical outcomes in the

future. Given that joining a start-up comes with risks and tradeoffs (Manchester et al., 2023; Sorenson et al., 2021), the perception of anticipated career narrative fit with the entrepreneurial opportunity must be highly compelling and offer an employee a substantial means to advance their goals in order to be attractive.

Low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives are incomplete stories. While founders originate these narratives (Wood et al., 2021) and are responsible for the initial entrepreneurial actions that lead to new venture creation (Bort, Wiklund, Crawford, Lerner & Hunt, 2024), it is early-stage employees who help define the structure and rhythm of these stories as founders delegate key functions (Mathias & Williams, 2018). This is the essence of co-construction: start-up employees fill narrative gaps with their drive, experience, and expertise, which also fill essential gaps within the focal firm. Whereas a start-up might have a novel product patent, it might lack the sales expertise to stand out in the market. Thus, joining a start-up at a time when its story is still being written can be significant for early-stage employees as they have additional degrees of freedom to construct their own paths (Van Lancker et al., 2023).

Further, start-ups' entrepreneurial opportunity narratives often address a significant problem. For example, Suddaby et al. (2021) offer a poignant case of the "dystopian narrative," wherein the purpose of a start-up is to offer a new path forward that alleviates suffering and averts impending disaster stemming from the status quo. Narratives serve as powerful devices to prompt employee action by articulating shared goals around significant problems that resonate with employees' own values and aspirations (e.g., Young & Valach, 2004). For instance, start-ups in the environmental sector might offer an apocalyptic narrative concerning developing novel technology to combat global warming. Such purposeful narratives enhance the attractiveness of entrepreneurial opportunities by offering employees both the opportunity for active participation in their development and the potential to achieve something meaningful.

Taken together, low-fidelity, high-potential entrepreneurial opportunity narratives create a unique environment for potential employees. These narratives, though lacking specificity, enable employees to envision themselves as co-constructors who can advance their careers by solving significant problems alongside founders. By highlighting both the gaps that need filling and the major problems to be solved, these entrepreneurial opportunity narratives

are likely to align with the anticipated facets of early-stage employees' career fit narratives, thereby increasing their anticipation of fit within start-ups. This reasoning leads to my first proposition:

*Proposition 1. Low-fidelity, high-potential entrepreneurial opportunity narratives increase the likelihood that early-stage start-up employees will envision themselves as opportunity co-constructors, which serves as the basis for them to craft anticipated career fit narratives.*

## ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITY NARRATIVE CO-CONSTRUCTION

Individuals are often drawn to start-ups because of the expansive pathways and freedom to advance their careers through the co-construction process (Proposition 1). However, their ability to capitalize on their ambitions hinges on maintaining narrative fit within the dynamic start-up context. Employees who thrive in the start-up environment demonstrate a heightened capacity to make sense of ambiguity and adapt to changing circumstances. They do so by swiftly identifying critical areas where they can make the most impact, redefining their position and purpose within start-ups accordingly.

### Crafting a Present Career Fit Narrative in a Start-Up

Founders often hire employees so they can delegate their responsibilities (Mathias & Williams, 2018) or fill skill deficiencies (Van Lancker et al., 2023). However, start-up jobs are unique in their high degree of uncertainty in day-to-day work responsibilities; employees often end up filling the most pressing gaps regardless of their intended roles (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006). Thus, it is crucial for employees to reconcile their anticipated narrative fit with the present in order to be effective once hired.

Anticipated career fit narratives are temporal comparisons based on a hypothetical future. Because they are hypothetical, they tend to be low fidelity, focusing on what could be rather than what is. In contrast, employees craft present career fit narratives to make sense of the realities of their current work situations (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). As such, the fidelity of employees' present career fit narratives increases as their place and purpose within their respective organizations become clearer. However, crafting and increasing the fidelity of present career fit narratives when co-constructing a low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity is a challenging task.

Specifically, start-ups frequently pivot as they build consensus around a viable business model. As such, employees' present career fit narratives do not necessarily reflect a defined set of responsibilities within a start-up but instead reflect adaptability and commitment to solving the essential problems the start-up faces.

While there is evidence that the start-up workforce makes financial sacrifices (Manchester et al., 2023; Roach & Sauermann, 2024), these employees might also need to sacrifice other elements of what they anticipated as they craft their present career fit narratives. For example, Jin Yang, an early Dropbox employee, transitioned from his initial external-facing role as community manager to head of black ops, where he focused on secretive internal projects. This shift was significant and was notably of his own accord; the start-up allowed him the freedom to tackle its most pressing challenges. Though the transition required Yang to deviate from his original aspirations, he nonetheless became an increasingly influential early-stage employee (Chopra-McGowan, 2019).

Van Lancker et al. (2023) describe such start-up employees as "surrogate founders." Rather than adhering to a specific role or static set of responsibilities, these employees are granted decision-making authority on behalf of founders. In turn, they must also begin to synchronize their responsibilities with their start-ups' evolving entrepreneurial opportunities, which might not necessarily align with their original job responsibilities (i.e., anticipated career fit narratives). Focusing on a start-up's most pressing needs is a precursor to the entrainment process, which I elaborate on below. The ability to synchronize efforts with the changing realities of a start-up, even at the cost of abandoning elements of their anticipated career fit narratives, allows employees to shift from anticipated career fit narratives to actionable present career fit narratives. In essence, employees make sense of their current work situations by working on tasks that truly matter to their start-ups. By aligning their efforts with these start-ups' evolving priorities, employees can begin to craft more coherent and complete stories of their present fit within their organizations. Thus, I propose the following:

*Proposition 2a. Early-stage start-up employees who increasingly synchronize their efforts around start-ups' most pressing needs, including abandoning elements of their previously crafted anticipated career fit narratives, increase their likelihood of crafting present career fit narratives.*

For a start-up employee to truly "hit the ground running," they not only need to identify the start-up's

most pressing needs (Proposition 2a) but must also do so quickly. Start-ups pursuing high-potential opportunities are generally high-velocity, dynamic work environments (Eisenhardt, 1989); as such, extended amounts of deliberation can be detrimental to success. Furthermore, a low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative often requires a "trial and error" approach to fill critical gaps, requiring employees to quickly adapt as they identify suitable pathways forward (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2014).

Crafting and revising present career fit narratives with speed offers several important benefits. First, while start-ups offer numerous avenues for employees to advance their careers (Bennett & Levinthal, 2017), those who identify critical issues can secure a "first-mover" advantage. Being the first to recognize and address a critical issue allows an employee to own that problem and integrate it into their daily work, thereby enhancing their sense of purpose within the start-up. This ownership not only increases the clarity and scope of employees' potential contributions, which helps them craft present career fit narratives, but also positions them as key players in shaping evolving entrepreneurial opportunity narratives as new problems arise.

Moreover, start-up employees' ability to quickly increase the fidelity of their present career fit narratives demonstrates their adaptability and signals their commitment to the development of their start-ups' entrepreneurial opportunities. In contrast to employees who wait for direction or assignments, those who proactively seek out and resolve problems are typically more valued and influential. Therefore, I propose the following:

*Proposition 2b. Early-stage start-up employees who quickly craft present career fit narratives increase their likelihood of becoming co-constructors of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives.*

## EMPLOYMENT GROWTH AND EMPLOYEE ENTRAINMENT

Employment growth is a transformative force not only for the organizational dynamics of a start-up as it onboards new talent but also for the evolution of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives. Low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives, although enticing to many start-up employees (Proposition 1), are vague representations of how start-ups end up enacting their opportunities. As such, these narratives do not yet represent something objective. This ambiguity provides enterprising employees with

considerable latitude to contribute to key issues facing start-ups (Proposition 2a) and thus actively shape entrepreneurial opportunity narratives through the process of co-construction (Proposition 2b). However, for start-ups to stay functional as they expand their workforce, they also need a degree of coherence around their entrepreneurial opportunity narratives to ensure they are moving in a consistent direction. Next, I explore why employment growth requires employee entrainment.

### Early-Stage Start-Up Employee Entrainment

Employment growth poses significant challenges for nascent start-ups. Unlike established firms, start-ups typically build formal infrastructure, such as human resources, reactively as needs arise (Cardon & Stevens, 2004), and vary widely in the philosophical underpinnings that guide their approaches toward talent management (Van Lancker et al., 2022). This variability extends to their informal infrastructure as well, such as their culture, which can differ dramatically across organizations (DeSantola & Gulati, 2017). The question of how members of a start-up remain cohesive as headcounts expand has been a focal point of firm growth research since its origins (e.g., Kuratko, Holt & Neubert, 2020; Penrose, 1959). The concept of employee entrainment and its constructivist roots uncover critical clues to this puzzle.

In their seminal work on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest that social reality is a product of habitual and routine human interactions. Building habits and routines with other individuals takes time, which is why the earliest iterations of entrepreneurial opportunities generally lack social objectivity (McBride & Wuebker, 2022). However, McMullen, Plumber, and Acs (2007: 177) note that “as the number of individuals that share a goal increases, the more likely it is that an opportunity will be seen as objective.” To achieve a shared goal, start-up employees must entrain around it as the start-up workforce begins to expand.

In the organizational context, entrainment is fundamentally concerned with the coordination of efforts (Shipp & Richardson, 2021). As the number of employees in a start-up grows, entrainment around the entrepreneurial opportunity narrative is essential for its persistence (Wood & McKinley, 2017). Established employee entrainment creates a strong foundation for new hires to understand the organization’s rhythm and align their efforts with others. However, if existing employees resist entrainment, newcomers

may receive mixed signals about the start-up’s priorities. While new employees bring valuable skills and knowledge, entrainment around key aspects of the start-up’s entrepreneurial opportunity reveals the most effective ways to utilize their talents. Entrained employees collaborate more effectively on problems, leading to more collective solutions. As employees entrain, they also enhance the cohesiveness of the entrepreneurial narrative, which increases its fidelity. These joint efforts reinforce and refine key elements of the entrepreneurial story, creating a more coherent and complete vision of the start-up’s purpose.

While entrainment is an individual choice (Shipp & Richardson, 2021), the constructivist perspective notes that the culmination of entrained individuals’ efforts creates a more objective and shared reality. As employees entrain around an entrepreneurial opportunity, they help to collectively refine it. In doing so, they begin transforming the entrepreneurial opportunity narrative from a vague aspirational representation of a promising idea toward a high-fidelity narrative describing the tangible products or services offered by the respective start-up.

In sum, employee entrainment is a key mechanism enabling start-ups to manage the challenges of expansion while also maintaining social cohesion. Accordingly, I propose the following:

*Proposition 3a. Employment growth increases the likelihood of early-stage start-up employee entrainment, and thus increases the fidelity of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives.*

### Entrainment and Narrative Mutability

Berglund and colleagues (2020) note that entrepreneurial opportunities are mutable. Mutability describes a state in which an entrepreneurial opportunity can be changed and is inherent in its narrative. Low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives are incomplete and therefore describe entrepreneurial opportunities in their most mutable state. In turn, there is ample room for co-construction by employees. However, as narrative fidelity increases, mutability decreases. Employee entrainment plays a crucial role in this process: as more employees align with an emerging narrative, it becomes increasingly stabilized. This shift occurs gradually as the narrative becomes more complete and cohesive, facilitating consensus around the reality of the focal entrepreneurial opportunity (McBride & Wuebker, 2022).

The process of employee entrainment manifests in the shared habits, routines, and expectations that



develop within a start-up. These collective elements not only reflect a start-up's entrepreneurial opportunity narrative but also serve to reinforce it, making substantial changes to the core narrative less likely over time. As Garud and Giuliani (2013) suggest, entrepreneurial opportunity narratives can serve as an important basis for coordinating activities within start-ups. Consequently, deviations from a high-fidelity narrative can potentially disrupt the emerging operational patterns that have been established through entrainment.

Moreover, employees face social pressure to entrain. Resisting entrainment inherently means deviating from organizational expectations (Shipp & Richardson, 2021). To illustrate using Shipp and Richardson's time-based theory, once the majority of a start-up agrees on a specific product development timeline that aligns with the entrepreneurial opportunity narrative, such as Facebook's "move fast, break things" narrative, it becomes an interwoven part of the start-up's culture. Any deviations from this approach can become disruptive as they can increase coordination costs that require the start-up to rebuild consensus.

As employee entrainment reinforces an entrepreneurial opportunity narrative, the narrative gains fidelity and becomes more entrenched. This process shapes the context for further narrative development, but does so in an increasingly limiting way as it can influence hiring decisions, product development, and the way the start-up communicates with its stakeholders. The resulting self-reinforcing cycle reduces narrative mutability and constrains future co-construction by employees. Thus, I propose the following:

*Proposition 3b. Early-stage start-up employee entrainment decreases the mutability of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives as they shift from low fidelity to high fidelity, thereby reducing the likelihood of future co-construction.*

## REVISING AND RECONCILING CAREER FIT NARRATIVES

As the fidelity of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives increases, employees often find themselves needing to revise and reconcile their career fit narratives with the emerging realities of the maturing start-ups. Whereas low-fidelity narratives allow employees to easily project their career aspirations, high-fidelity narratives are more fixed and concrete. Figure 1 illustrates the window of co-construction as

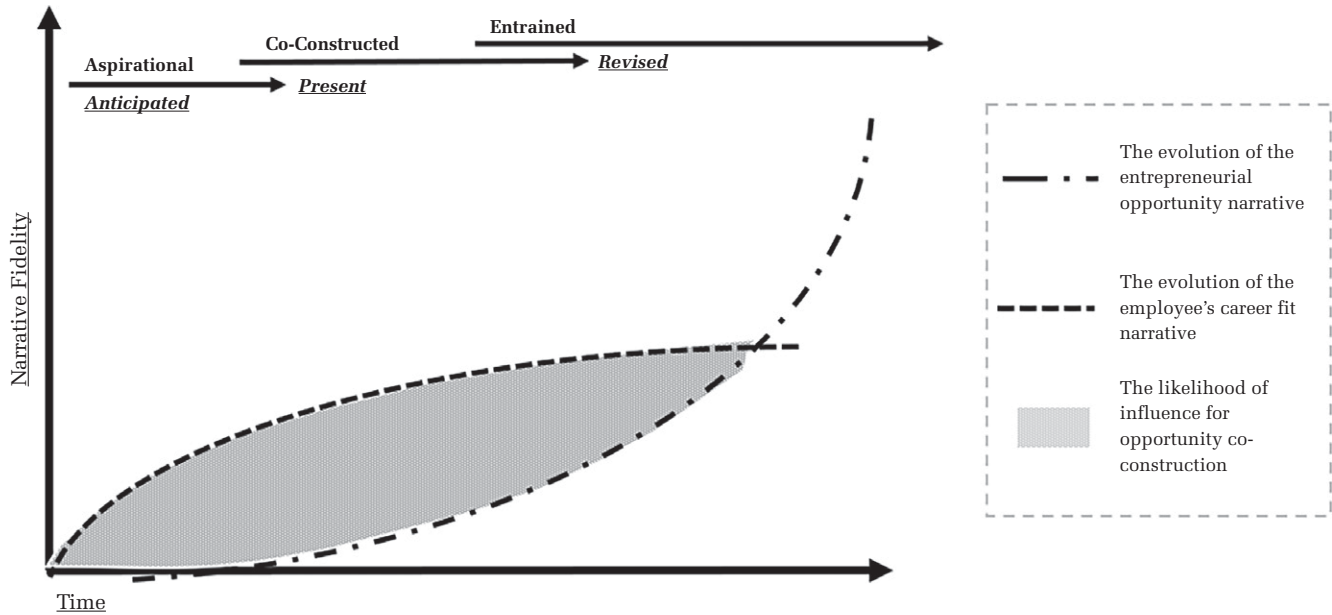
entrepreneurial opportunity and career fit narratives evolve together, culminating toward entrainment, which can inspire career fit narrative revision as narrative fidelity increases. The transition toward an objective reality can be akin to a "reality check" for many start-up employees as their roles within the entrepreneurial journey become clearer.

### Revising Career Fit Narratives

Shipp and Jansen (2011) argue that career fit narratives are not static constructions but are continually crafted and revised as employees make sense of their work experiences over time. Most notable in their theory is their emphasis on revisions to career fit narratives as employees encounter new information or changes in their work circumstances. In the context of start-ups transitioning from low- to high-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives, this process of narrative revision becomes particularly salient.

As a start-up traverses through its life cycle stages, such as gaining legitimacy and establishing market viability (Fisher, Kotha & Lahiri, 2016), employees will incorporate these evolutions into their career fit narratives. The increasing fidelity of the start-up's entrepreneurial opportunity narrative serves as a guide for these revisions, offering more concrete information about the start-up and potentially leading to more accurate and nuanced understanding of career fit within the organization. For instance, a higher-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative often coincides with a diminished capacity for employees to act as co-constructors and a consolidation of possible career paths. The narrowing window for employees to chart their own courses can inspire them to engage in narrative processing in an effort to reconcile their initial expectations with the emerging organizational realities. This process, as Shipp and Jansen (2011) note, involves assessing present career fit while also reinterpreting past experiences and projecting aspirational career fit based on the now more defined entrepreneurial opportunity narrative. Importantly, these revisions are not inherently negative nor universally experienced (e.g., Van Lancker et al., 2023). As I expand on below, some employees may find that the increased clarity and stability that come with increased fidelity reflect their contributions and ongoing career goals, while others might find themselves misaligned. What is critical, however, is that these revisions—regardless of their extent—result in more fully informed career fit narratives that reflect employees' deeper understanding of their place within the evolving start-up.

**FIGURE 1**  
**The Evolution of Narratives**



*Notes:* Italics indicate the overarching state of the entrepreneurial opportunity narrative. The y-axis represents narrative fidelity and moves from low to high. The nonlinear development of narratives illustrates an ideal scenario—an ambitious employee develops their career fit narrative quickly, thus having a higher likelihood of being an effective co-constructor. Bold text indicates that entrepreneurial opportunity narratives are ...; underlined italicized text indicates that employees' career fit narrative is ...

In light of these nuanced changes brought about by increasing entrepreneurial opportunity narrative fidelity, I propose the following:

*Proposition 4. As the fidelity of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives increases, early-stage start-up employees are increasingly likely to reassess and revise their career fit narratives.*

### Effective Co-Construction and Ongoing Entrainment

Early-stage start-up employees who synchronize their efforts with start-ups' most pressing needs (Proposition 2a) and quickly craft present career fit narratives (Proposition 2b) are more likely to influence the co-construction process. As noted by Shipp and Jansen (2011), present career fit narratives are the stories employees use to address their current working conditions. As start-ups evolve, start-up employees are likely to weigh the present portion of their career fit narratives more heavily as their career paths become more linear (Proposition 3b), which increases the likelihood of revision (Proposition 4).

Building on the ideas set forth in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work and echoed by Shipp and

Richardson (2021), ongoing entrainment can be a conscious decision to continue aligning one's actions, routines, and expectations with an evolving entrepreneurial opportunity narrative. In other words, while entrainment can occur subconsciously through habitual interactions, in the dynamic start-up environment employees are more likely to be aware of their entrainment decisions as they directly participate in the construction of the shared social reality that is the start-up (e.g., McBride & Wuebker, 2022). Thus, the decision to maintain entrainment represents and reinforces the shared organizational reality.

When early-stage employees see their ideas implemented or valued as an observable part of an entrepreneurial opportunity narrative, it further validates their roles and impact within the respective start-up. As such, they are likely to find that synchronizing with the rhythms of the start-up is easier as it takes less adjustment (Shipp & Richardson, 2021). Essentially, the rhythm of successful co-constructors becomes naturally attuned to the rhythm of the start-up as a whole, reflecting a harmonious alignment between these individuals' contributions and the organization's direction. Simply put, it is evident that these employees are an important part of the shared reality.

Conversely, as was the case with the socially focused Etsy employees referenced in the introduction, a high-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative might evolve in ways that exclude employees' early-stage contributions. This exclusion can provoke employees' resistance. Shipp and Richardson (2021) argue that such resistance, when unresolved, ultimately leads to exit. This outcome becomes more likely as potential paths consolidate around an entrained narrative, leaving little room for divergent visions. This scenario highlights the double-edged sword of increasing narrative fidelity. On one hand, coherence and completeness can ease the pressures associated with continued expansion. On the other, the abandonment of facets of the firm-level narrative can have an alienating effect on employees.

Thus, the alignment or misalignment between an employee's career fit narrative and a start-up's entrepreneurial opportunity narrative is influenced by the degree to which the employee's co-constructive efforts are reflected in the high-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative. This reflection (or lack thereof) of their contributions affects their perception of career fit and subsequent decision to maintain entrainment. Given these insights, I propose the following:

*Proposition 5a. Early-stage start-up employees are more likely to maintain entrainment within a start-up when their present career fit narratives align with a high-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative that reflects their contributions as co-constructors.*

*Proposition 5b. Early-stage start-up employees are less likely to maintain entrainment within a start-up when their high-fidelity present career fit narratives misalign with a high-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narrative.*

## **Effective Co-Construction and Entrainment Resistance**

Another perplexing question is why effective co-constructors of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives might resist entrainment as fidelity increases. The process of co-construction, which involves iterative cycles of action and reaction (e.g., Alvarez, Young & Woolley, 2020), can imbue the start-up workforce with a degree of agency that is difficult to maintain as entrepreneurial opportunity narratives become more fixed. As such, those who recently succeeded in co-constructing an entrepreneurial opportunity might want to replicate the experience across different start-ups either as a founder or as an

employee of another start-up, where they start the cycle of propositions laid out in this work again.

Effective co-constructors might resist entrainment for reasons beyond the constraints of a high-fidelity narrative. For example, they might aspire to create their own ventures. Co-constructing an entrepreneurial opportunity is a unique and salient feature of the start-up workforce; it entails working alongside a founder to bring a start-up to life. Thus, start-up employees can directly observe the ups and downs of a start-up's trajectory, bolstering their self-efficacy to eventually be founders themselves. Indeed, Elfenbein, Hamilton, and Zenger (2010) find that employees in small firms, as most nascent start-ups are, are more likely to become successful entrepreneurs. As such, some successful employee co-constructors might resist ongoing entrainment as they feel increasingly constrained by their diminished ability to co-construct and instead build anticipated career fit narratives around launching their own ventures.

However, not all employees who are effective entrainment-resisting co-constructors desire to be founders themselves (e.g., Sauermann, 2018). The co-construction process offers a great deal of flexibility, and employees typically enjoy an immense amount of freedom in how they complete their work (Van Lancker et al., 2023). Effective co-constructors stand out among their peers and are likely to enjoy the benefits associated with being a "big fish in a small pond." This feature of start-ups typically does not persist, however, as more employees join and entrainment becomes widespread. Some employees will miss the chance to influence the trajectory of a start-up and will instead search for new low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives with which they can once again align their aspirations.

To summarize, successful co-constructors may prefer the dynamic, influential role they played in shaping a start-up's narrative. As the narrative increases in fidelity and becomes less mutable, these employees may seek new opportunities that allow them to continue exercising their co-construction skills either by founding their own ventures or joining new start-ups with low-fidelity narratives. Thus, my concluding proposition is as follows:

*Proposition 6. Early-stage start-up employees who have successfully co-constructed significant elements of an entrepreneurial opportunity narrative are more likely to resist entrainment if their anticipated career fit narratives emphasize further co-construction either as potential founders or as employees in nascent start-ups with low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives.*

DISCUSSION

In this work, I advance a theory of the start-up workforce that illuminates the distinctive nature of start-up employment. Grounded in the social constructivist tradition (Wood & McKinley, 2010) and leveraging the narrative perspective (Garud & Giuliani, 2013; Shipp & Jansen, 2011), I developed a model that suggests that the uniqueness of start-up work stems from early-stage employees’ capacity to co-construct entrepreneurial opportunities alongside founders.

By adopting a narrative lens, this work provides a conceptual bridge that captures the dynamic interactions between macro-level entrepreneurial opportunities and micro-level employee career fit (Vaara et al., 2016). As illustrated in Figure 2, low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives provide a mutable framework for employees to project their aspirational career fit narratives. The model then shows how ongoing entrainment hinges on how start-up employees craft, revise, and reconcile their evolving and more fully informed career fit narratives as the fidelity of entrepreneurial opportunity narratives increases. In doing so, this theory positions the start-up workforce as a central, rather than peripheral, aspect of entrepreneurship and organizational theories.

Theoretical Implications and Future Research

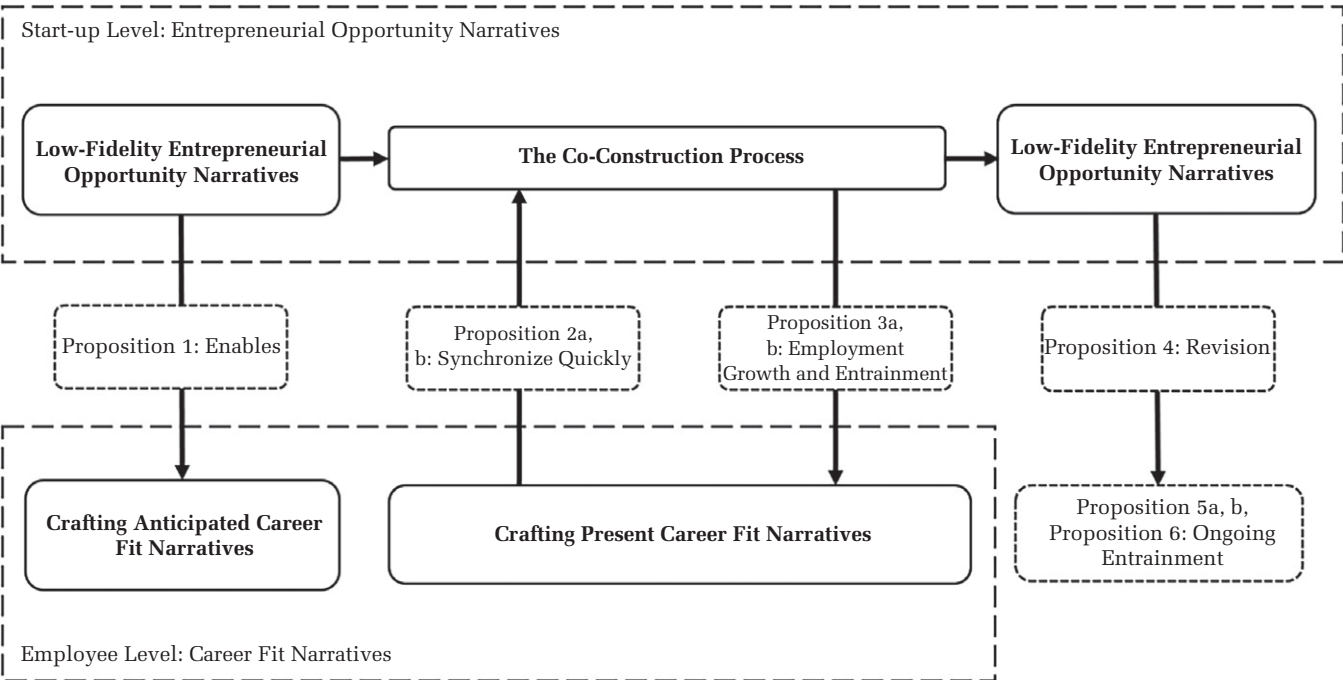
By integrating insights from the entrepreneurship and organizational behavior literatures, this interdisciplinary theory offers implications that advance our understanding of the emerging start-up workforce phenomenon and opens new avenues for future research.

Members of the Start-Up Workforce Can Be Influential Co-Constructors of Entrepreneurial Opportunities

Despite growing acknowledgment of stakeholders and the roles they play in entrepreneurial opportunity development (Ramoglou et al., 2023), the start-up workforce has yet to be a focal point of related theories. By conceptualizing start-up employees as influential co-constructors of entrepreneurial opportunities, this work not only addresses the significant yet understudied roles of employees in early-stage start-ups (e.g., Van Lancker et al., 2023) but also illuminates the dynamic interplay between employees and evolving entrepreneurial opportunities as evident in their respective narratives.

Conceptualizing an entrepreneurial opportunity as a problem that the start-up workforce can co-construct illustrates a critical facet that makes

FIGURE 2  
Conceptual Model



start-up employment attractive. While low-fidelity entrepreneurial narratives lack detail, they typically articulate worthwhile problems in need of solutions (Suddaby et al., 2021). This perspective is crucial to understanding the challenges associated with enrolling stakeholders (Burns, Barney, Angus & Herrick, 2016) as potential employees not only recognize the importance of these problems but also envision themselves playing a significant role in their resolution. Unpacking the narratives at both the start-up and employee levels offers important insights that extend our understanding of the appeal of start-up employment, highlighting how the potential for co-construction and significant impact often resonates with early-stage employees' career aspirations and motivations.

Furthermore, this work extends our understanding of the temporal dynamics in entrepreneurship by highlighting the critical role of employee adaptability. While prior research has emphasized how a lack of urgency from founders can impede success (Bort et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2021), this theory underscores that start-up employees must also rapidly adapt to be effective co-constructors. As illustrated in Figure 1, the window for co-construction is finite and likely nonlinear. Hypothetical futures inevitably transition into tangible realities that members of a growing start-up must collectively embrace. Early-stage employees who can swiftly synchronize their efforts during this critical shift have the potential to exert disproportionate influence on the evolving entrepreneurial opportunity narrative. This insight complements recent findings on role crafting in start-ups (Van Lancker et al., 2023), offering further insights into why some employees are more effective than others in shaping their trajectories within start-ups and, by extension, the trajectories of start-ups themselves.

### **Career Fit Narratives Are Partially Predicated on the Co-Construction Process**

Research in organizational behavior (Shipp & Jansen, 2011) and entrepreneurship (Wiklund, Yu, Tucker & Marino, 2017) has sought answers to questions concerning person–environment fit. However, start-up employees' person–environment fit has yet to undergo significant scrutiny. This oversight is not surprising given our limited understanding of start-up employees more generally (Van Lancker et al., 2023), but stands to be an important area for future research.

I leverage the concept of career fit narratives (Shipp & Jansen, 2011), which explicitly incorporate

the role of time in employees' perceptions of fit. Time is a central but often overlooked component of entrepreneurship theory (Lévesque & Stephan, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). Start-ups might linger in the idea phase for months or even years but then quickly materialize into legitimate companies offering tangible products or services. The organizational changes required to take an entrepreneurial opportunity to market and eventually scale it can be significant (Baron et al., 2001). While every employee starting a new job does so with anticipated career fit in mind, the uncertainty of a start-up places additional pressure on these anticipations as there is often very little that grounds the start-up in reality (McBride & Wuebker, 2022). In other words, anticipated career fit is much more speculative in the start-up context, requiring a higher degree of adaptability and flexibility in how employees craft career fit narratives as they attempt to reconcile iterations of an entrepreneurial opportunity. As my model illustrates, adopting a multilevel perspective that accounts for organizational and career narratives simultaneously is a promising path forward in that it illuminates how fundamental changes in a start-up impact employees (Vaara et al., 2016).

### **Narratives Illuminate the Evolution of Start-Ups and Employees' Evolving Place Within Them**

Narratives can offer a bridge between organizational- and individual-level phenomena (Vaara et al., 2016) and help uncover these phenomena as they are constructed. First, entrepreneurial opportunity narratives describe opportunities in a temporal state (Garud & Giuliani, 2013). Further, early iterations of entrepreneurial opportunities can and do change as they become more concrete (McBride & Wuebker, 2022). My model emphasizes that early-stage start-up employees can shape entrepreneurial opportunity narratives through their co-constructive efforts.

Given the empirical challenges I noted earlier concerning entrepreneurial opportunities, the narrative perspective offers a more straightforward path toward teasing out details about how the co-construction process unfolds. To illustrate, software companies release licenses with their products that outline whether these products are proprietary or open source. An early-stage employee who has a special affinity for the open-source software (OSS) community might see their co-constructive efforts reflected in future iterations of their start-up's products as future licenses increasingly adopt OSS language. As a result, this will reinforce the employee's career fit

narrative as the product narratives align with their associated OSS efforts.

In sum, the narrative approach is valuable because it offers theoretical tractability while also aligning with the constructivist paradigm. Future longitudinal assessments of multilevel narratives could uncover the changes attributable to the co-construction process as it unfolds and also capture how employees perceive their place in start-ups due to these changes.

### **Start-Up Employee Entrainment Is an Individual Choice Predicated on Employees' Career Fit Narratives and the Realization of Their Co-Constructive Efforts**

Entrainment has long been recognized as a mechanism for constructing a shared reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the start-up context, entrainment aligns individuals toward a common goal, which is vital in bringing an entrepreneurial opportunity to fruition (Wood & McKinley, 2017). Recent extensions of entrainment theory have highlighted that it is an ongoing process dependent on individual-level dynamics (Shipp & Richardson, 2021; Wood & McKinley, 2017). This work builds upon and extends these insights by exploring how start-up employees' co-constructive efforts shape their entrainment decisions, offering new perspectives for start-up employee entrainment research.

My model suggests that early-stage employees might have to pivot away from their aspirations and instead focus on more pressing needs in order to be effective co-constructors. To better understand the dynamics of the start-up workforce, it will be imperative to unpack this tension. Further, joining a start-up can be a high-risk, time-consuming endeavor. To this end, this endeavor represents a high-stakes employment scenario in comparison to joining an established firm with a rich history and stable trajectory (e.g., Manchester et al., 2023). Employees are likely to have higher expectations for their careers in a start-up. As such, they are likely to focus and reflect on the presence of their co-constructive efforts in their start-ups' entrepreneurial opportunities as a determinant of their success. How their effects as co-constructors ultimately manifest has important implications for organizational behavior theories, such as those on turnover, justice, and job satisfaction.

By positioning entrainment as a dynamic process involving co-construction efforts and future aspirations, this theory provides a more nuanced framework

for understanding employee behavior in the start-up context and underscores the unique nature of start-up employment and the need for theory that accounts for these distinctions.

### **The Start-Up Workforce Is Theoretically Distinct**

Entrepreneurship scholars commonly grapple with fundamental questions concerning the defining characteristics of a start-up (DeSantola & Gulati, 2017) and when a firm has moved beyond the start-up phase of its organizational existence (Davidsson, 2016). This difficulty arises because many characteristics associated with start-ups, such as their small size, younger employees, and flexible work environments, can be found in other organizational contexts and are not necessarily correlated with a firm's age. However, these surface-level similarities mask a deeper, more fundamental distinction.

Building on the foundations of entrepreneurship theory (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) and aligning with Wood (2021), I argue that the start-up workforce is theoretically distinct because of its ability to interact with entrepreneurial opportunities. Entrepreneurial opportunities are inherently uncertain, and a start-up's primary purpose is to capitalize on this uncertainty as it resolves it (Townsend, Hunt, McMullen & Sarasvathy, 2018). The start-up environment presents numerous "unknowns" that require solutions that are not apparent to the founders themselves. As such, the start-up workforce's primary purpose is augmenting founders' capabilities through the process of co-construction. This level of uncertainty and potential for impact distinguishes start-up work from both individual entrepreneurship and traditional employment. Unlike founders, start-up employees play supporting roles whereby they fill critical gaps. These gaps typically change over time, requiring the services of start-up employees to change as well. Similarly, unlike employees in established firms, start-up employees face an evolving landscape where their decisions can fundamentally shape a start-up's future.

By offering a conceptual rather than an empirical distinction of the start-up workforce, I establish stronger foundations for future interdisciplinary research. Notably, previously established assumptions applicable to founders or employees of established firms might not hold for the start-up workforce, suggesting a promising path to uncover the unique challenges and potentials faced by start-ups and their employees.

## Relevance and a Brief Note About Pedagogical Approaches to Entrepreneurship

Given the impact successful start-ups have on the employment landscape (Haltiwanger, Jarmin & Miranda, 2013), a theory of the start-up workforce offers practical significance. First, start-ups tend to attract younger workers. Thus, start-ups not only create the jobs of the future but also offer insights into what future generations of workers will become as they transition to incumbents.

Next, a narrative approach to understanding the start-up workforce can offer deeper insights into these employees' priorities and how they change as their careers evolve. Narratives are artifacts of the time they are created (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Wood et al., 2021), and are repeatedly revised and rewritten as new parts of these stories develop. As such, narratives might illuminate how early-stage employees grapple with emerging complementary phenomena, such as working alongside artificial intelligence or the primacy of virtual meetings.

Finally, entrepreneurial education is almost exclusively focused on educating future entrepreneurs. While this knowledge undoubtedly provides value to those who end up employed at a start-up, there is an opportunity to more explicitly integrate the novel challenges associated with being an early-stage start-up employee into entrepreneurship curricula. Because the issues are interdisciplinary, there is also potential for scholars or educators from human resources, organizational behavior, strategy, and entrepreneurship to collaborate on these efforts, preparing a new generation of start-up employees. Indeed, this might be a fruitful path forward for entrepreneurship education given that the average age of successful founders is over 40 (Azoulay, Jones, Kim & Miranda, 2020), and suggests that preparing students for employment in a start-up is a largely unmet need in the higher education market. While leading a high-potential venture might not be a suitable path for the majority of undergraduate students, working for high-potential start-ups could provide an enticing alternative.

## CONCLUSION

I developed a theory of the start-up workforce aligned with Wood's (2021) view that entrepreneurial opportunities remain a "bedrock" of entrepreneurship research, and suggest that the ability to co-construct entrepreneurial opportunities is a distinguishing feature of start-up employment. The uncertainty, constant changes, and unexpected

outcomes often found in the start-up context highlight that the dynamics between start-ups and their employees are fertile ground for new discoveries about this critical yet understudied stakeholder group. Given their substantial size and impact, there is potential to conceptualize the start-up workforce as a theoretical subdiscipline that further bridges the entrepreneurship and organizational behavior literatures. Grounded in constructivist logic and leveraging the narrative perspective, this work takes a step forward in establishing foundational knowledge for this novel phenomenon.

## REFERENCES

- Aldrich, H. E. & Ruef, M. 2006. *Organizations evolving* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Alvarez, S. A., Young, S. L., & Woolley, J. L. 2020. Creating the world's deadliest catch: The process of enrolling stakeholders in an uncertain endeavor. *Business & Society*, 59: 287–321.
- Alvarez, S. & Barney, J. B. 2020. Has the concept of opportunities been fruitful in the field of entrepreneurship? *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 34: 300–310.
- Ancona, D. G. & Chong, C. L. 1996. Entrainment: Pace, cycle, and rhythm in organizational behavior. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior*, vol. 18: 251–284. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Arthur, M. B., Khapova, S. N., & Wilderom, C. P. M. 2005. Career success in a boundaryless career world. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26: 177–202.
- Arthur, M. B. & Rousseau, D. M. 1996. *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Azoulay, P., Jones, B. F., Kim, J. D., & Miranda, J. 2020. Age and high-growth entrepreneurship. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 2: 65–82.
- Baron, J. N. & Hannan, M. T. 2002. Organizational blueprints for success in high-tech start-ups: Lessons from the Stanford Project on Emerging Companies. *California Management Review*, 44: 8–36.
- Baron, J. N., Hannan, M. T., & Burton, M. D. 2001. Labor pains: Change in organizational models and employee turnover in young, high-tech firms. *American Journal of Sociology*, 106: 960–1012.
- Bennett, V. M. & Levinthal, D. A. 2017. Firm lifecycles: Linking employee incentives and firm growth dynamics. *Strategic Management Journal*, 38: 2005–2018.
- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. 1966. *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.

- Berglund, H., Bousfiha, M., & Mansoori, Y. 2020. Opportunities as artifacts and entrepreneurship as design. *Academy of Management Review*, 45: 825–846.
- Bingham, C. B. & Eisenhardt, K. M. 2014. Response to Vuori and Vuori's commentary on "heuristics in the strategy context." *Strategic Management Journal*, 35: 1698–1702.
- Bort, J., Wiklund, J., Crawford, G. C., Lerner, D. A., & Hunt, R. A. 2024. The strategic advantage of impulsivity in entrepreneurial action: An agent-based modeling approach. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 48: 547–580.
- Breugst, N., Domurath, A., Patzelt, H., & Klaukien, A. 2012. Perceptions of entrepreneurial passion and employees' commitment to entrepreneurial ventures. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 36: 171–192.
- Bujold, C. 2004. Constructing career through narrative. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64: 470–484.
- Burns, B. L., Barney, J. B., Angus, R. W., & Herrick, H. N. 2016. Enrolling stakeholders under conditions of risk and uncertainty: enrolling stakeholders under risk and uncertainty. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 10: 97–106.
- Burton, M. D., Colombo, M. G., Rossi-Lamastra, C., & Wasserman, N. 2019. The organizational design of entrepreneurial ventures. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 13: 243–255.
- Cardon, M. S. 2008. Is passion contagious? The transference of entrepreneurial passion to employees. *Human Resource Management Review*, 18: 77–86.
- Cardon, M. S. & Stevens, C. E. 2004. Managing human resources in small organizations: What do we know? *Human Resource Management Review*, 14: 295–323.
- Chopra-McGowan, A. 2019. June 24: What startup employees can teach the rest of us about work. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Coad, A., Daunfeldt, S.-O., Johansson, D., & Wennberg, K. 2014. Whom do high-growth firms hire? *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 23: 293–327.
- Davidsson, P. 2016. The field of entrepreneurship research: some significant developments. In D. Bögenhold, J. Bonnet, M. Dejardin, & D. Garcia Pérez de Lema (Eds.), *Contemporary entrepreneurship: Multidisciplinary perspectives on innovation and growth*: 17–30. Cham: Switzerland: Springer International.
- DeSantola, A. & Gulati, R. 2017. Scaling: Organizing and growth in entrepreneurial ventures. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11: 640–668.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. Making fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32: 543–576.
- Elfenbein, D. W., Hamilton, B. H., & Zenger, T. R. 2010. The small firm effect and the entrepreneurial spawning of scientists and engineers. *Management Science*, 56: 659–681.
- Fisher, G., Kotha, S., & Lahiri, A. 2016. Changing with the times: An integrated view of identity, legitimacy, and new venture life cycles. *Academy of Management Review*, 41: 383–409.
- Fisher, G., Kuratko, D. F., Bloodgood, J. M., & Hornsby, J. S. 2017. Legitimate to whom? The challenge of audience diversity and new venture legitimacy. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 32: 52–71.
- Garud, R. & Giuliani, A. P. 2013. A narrative perspective on entrepreneurial opportunities. *Academy of Management Review*, 38: 157–160.
- Gelles, D. 2017. November 25: Inside the revolution at Etsy. *New York Times*.
- Gil, E. 2018. *High growth handbook*. San Francisco: Stripe Press.
- Gimeno, J., Folta, T. B., Cooper, A. C., & Woo, C. Y. 1997. Survival of the fittest? Entrepreneurial human capital and the persistence of underperforming firms. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42: 750–783.
- Grimes, M. G. 2018. The pivot: How founders respond to feedback through idea and identity work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61: 1692–1717.
- Haltiwanger, J., Jarmin, R. S., & Miranda, J. 2013. Who creates jobs? Small versus large versus young. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 95: 347–361.
- Honoré, F. & Ganco, M. 2023. Entrepreneurial teams' acquisition of talent: Evidence from technology manufacturing industries using a two-sided approach. *Strategic Management Journal*, 44: 141–170.
- Huang, L. & Pearce, J. L. 2015. Managing the unknowable: The effectiveness of early-stage investor gut feel in entrepreneurial investment decisions. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 60: 634–670.
- Ibarra, H. & Barbulescu, R. 2010. Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 35: 135–154.
- Knight, R. 2016. May 16: How to know if joining a startup is right for you. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Kuratko, D. F., Holt, H. L., & Neubert, E. 2020. Blitzscaling: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Business Horizons*, 63: 109–119.
- Lévesque, M. & Stephan, U. 2020. It's time we talk about time in entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 44: 163–184.
- Lewis, T. & Cardon, M. S. 2020. The magnetic value of entrepreneurial passion for potential employees. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 14: e00193.



- Lounsbury, M. & Glynn, M. A. 2001. Cultural entrepreneurship: Stories, legitimacy, and the acquisition of resources. *Strategic Management Journal*, 22: 545–564.
- Manchester, C. F., Benson, A., & Shaver, J. M. 2023. Dual careers and the willingness to consider employment in startup ventures. *Strategic Management Journal*, 44: 2175–2194.
- Mathias, B. D. & Williams, D. W. 2018. Giving up the hats? Entrepreneurs' role transitions and venture growth. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 33: 261–277.
- McBride, R. & Wuebker, R. 2022. Social objectivity and entrepreneurial opportunities. *Academy of Management Review*, 47: 75–92.
- McMullen, J. S., Plummer, L. A., & Acs, Z. J. 2007. What is an entrepreneurial opportunity? *Small Business Economics*, 28: 273–283.
- Moser, K. J., Tumasjan, A., & Welp, I. M. 2017. Small but attractive: Dimensions of new venture employer attractiveness and the moderating role of applicants' entrepreneurial behaviors. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 32: 588–610.
- Nair, S., Gaim, M., & Dimov, D. 2022. Toward the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunities: Organizing early-phase new venture creation support systems. *Academy of Management Review*, 47: 162–183.
- Ouimet, P. & Zarutskie, R. 2014. Who works for startups? The relation between firm age, employee age, and growth. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 112: 386–407.
- Penrose, E. 1959. *The theory of the growth of the firm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ramoglou, S. & McMullen, J. S. 2024. "What is an opportunity?": From theoretical mystification to everyday understanding. *Academy of Management Review*, 49: 273–298.
- Ramoglou, S., Zyglidopoulos, S., & Papadopoulou, F. 2023. Is there opportunity without stakeholders? A stakeholder theory critique and development of opportunity-actualization. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 47: 113–141.
- Roach, M. & Sauermann, H. 2015. Founder or joiner? The role of preferences and context in shaping different entrepreneurial interests. *Management Science*, 61: 2160–2184.
- Roach, M. & Sauermann, H. 2024. Can technology startups hire talented early employees? Ability, preferences, and employee first job choice. *Management Science*, 70: 3619–3644.
- Sauermann, H. 2018. Fire in the belly? Employee motives and innovative performance in start-ups versus established firms. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 12: 423–454.
- Shane, S. & Venkataraman, S. 2000. The promise of entrepreneurship as a field of research. *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 217–226.
- Shepherd, D. A. & Gruber, M. 2021. The lean startup framework: Closing the academic–practitioner divide. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 45: 967–998.
- Shipp, A. J. & Jansen, K. J. 2011. Reinterpreting time in fit theory: Crafting and recrafting narratives of fit in medias res. *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 76–101.
- Shipp, A. J. & Richardson, H. A. 2021. The impact of temporal schemata: Understanding when individuals entrain versus resist or create temporal structure. *Academy of Management Review*, 46: 299–319.
- Sorenson, O., Dahl, M. S., Canales, R., & Burton, M. D. 2021. Do startup employees earn more in the long run? *Organization Science*, 32: 587–604.
- Stevenson, R., Burnell, D., & Fisher, G. 2024. The minimum viable product (MVP): Theory and practice. *Journal of Management*. Forthcoming.
- Suddaby, R., Israelsen, T., Mitchell, J. R., & Lim, D. S. K. 2021. Entrepreneurial visions as rhetorical history: A diegetic narrative model of stakeholder enrollment. *Academy of Management Review*, 48: 220–243.
- Townsend, D. M., Hunt, R. A., McMullen, J. S., & Sarasvathy, S. D. 2018. Uncertainty, knowledge problems, and entrepreneurial action. *Academy of Management Annals*, 12: 659–687.
- Vaara, E., Sonenshein, S., & Boje, D. 2016. Narratives as sources of stability and change in organizations: Approaches and directions for future research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 10: 495–560.
- Van Lancker, E., Knockaert, M., Audenaert, M., & Cardon, M. 2022. HRM in entrepreneurial firms: A systematic review and research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32: 100850.
- Van Lancker, E., Knockaert, M., Collewaert, V., & Breugst, N. 2023. Preparing for scaling: A study on founder role evolution. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 38: 106315.
- von Glaserfeld, E. 1981. The concepts of adaptation and viability in a radical constructivist theory of knowledge. In I. Sigel, D. Brodzinsky, & R. Golinkoff (Eds.), *Piagetian theory and research*: 87–95. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Weick, K. E. 1979. *The social psychology of organizing*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wiklund, J., Yu, W., Tucker, R., & Marino, L. D. 2017. ADHD, impulsivity and entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 32: 627–656.

- Wood, M. 2021. Entrepreneurial opportunity: Bedrock in entrepreneurship research. *Oxford research encyclopedia of business and management*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Wood, M., Bakker, R. M., & Fisher, G. 2021. Back to the future: A time-calibrated theory of entrepreneurial action. *Academy of Management Review*, 46: 147–171.
- Wood, M. & McKinley, W. 2010. The production of entrepreneurial opportunity: A constructivist perspective. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 4: 66–84.
- Wood, M. & McKinley, W. 2017. After the venture: The reproduction and destruction of entrepreneurial opportunity. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 11: 18–35.
- Young, R. A. & Collin, A. 2004. Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64: 373–388.
- Young, R. A. & Valach, L. 2004. The construction of career through goal-directed action. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64: 499–514.



**James Bort** (jbort@depaul.edu) is an assistant professor at DePaul University. He received his PhD from Syracuse University. His research interests include the start-up workforce, computational social science, and well-being.

