# Role overload and what you need to know about it

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## Introduction

According to Hartenian et al. (2011), roles can be defined as expectations about social behavior as well as functions carried out by an employee for an organization, or positions occupied by an employee in an organization. Role Overload is whereby the role consists of too many responsibilities for an employee to handle in a reasonable amount of time. It is a situation resulting from the assumption of a role or of multiple roles in which one is asked to do more than one is capable of doing in a specific time. Role overload refers to a situation whereby the employees' role expectations exceed the resources or time available to fulfill assigned responsibilities (Bacharach et al., 1991). An individual role is affected by the roles of the members within the organization with whom he/she relates (Kahn et al., 1964; Dilshad & Latif, 2011). Also, these members, called his role set, have different expectations which they exert on the individual (sole occupant) resulting in the perception of role stress in form of role ambiguity and role conflict. Occupational stress, according to Kelloway & Barling (1990), is made up of role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict.

Role overload is defined in both quantitative and qualitative terms. It must be noted that in some organizations employees are overloaded with work to the detriment of them producing quality work and ultimately they get stressed and leave the organization. Qualitatively, it is considered as the mismatch between the demand of the job and an individual's necessary knowledge, skills, and aptitude which also is defined as role self-distance. The quantitative perspective defines role overload as the conflict between the demand for a job as an organizational citizen and the time available for meeting the job demand. According to Jackson and Maslach (1982),  quantitative role overload at work may itself produce role conflict at work.

Role overload is due to temporary circumstances. For example, if someone leaves an organization, the roles of other employees may need to be temporarily expanded to make up for the missing worker's absence. In other cases, organizations may not anticipate the demands of the roles they create, or the nature of an employee's role may change over time. Also, role overload occurs when an employee voluntarily takes on too many role responsibilities.

# Role Ambiguity

Soltani et al. (2013 ), pointed out that "role ambiguity is the inseparable part of any work environment. According to role theory, role ambiguity refers to the lack of specificity and predictability for an employee's job or role functions and responsibilities (Kahn et al., 1964; Beehr, 1976). It occurs when the expectations, objectives, and responsibilities have not been designed for employees. Therefore, the employees become ambivalent to predict their supervisor's reactions to their tasks as " success" or as " failure (Karasek Jr, 1979; Beehr and Bhagat, 1985). According to Breaugh and Colihan (1994), role ambiguity arises when employees are often unclear about how to do their jobs, when certain tasks should be performed, and the criteria by which their performance will be judged. Role ambiguity is experienced when an individual does not have sufficient information about his role and does not know how to meet the requirements (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Cooper, 1991).

In some cases, it is simply difficult to provide an employee with a crystal-clear picture of his or her role. For example, when a job is relatively new, it is still "evolving" within the organization. In many other cases, role ambiguity emanates from poor communication between either supervisors and subordinates or among members of workgroups.

# Role Conflict

Soltani et al. (2013 ), pointed out that "role ambiguity is the inseparable part of any work environment. Role conflict, as defined by Cooper (1991), is the incongruence of role expectations and a situation whereby an individual is expected to perform two or more different incompatible roles. Role conflict refers to incompatible requirements and expectations that the employees receive from their supervisor or coworker (Rosen et al., 2010). According to role theory, role conflict results from two or more sets of incompatible demands involving work-related issues (Kahn et al., 1978).

# What are the consequences of role ambiguity, role overload, or role conflict?

According to meta-analytic studies role overload, role conflict, role ambiguity, and occupational stress are significantly and positively related. Meta-analyses studies have shown that both role stressors are associated with negative psychological (e.g., job dissatisfaction, anxiety), physical (e.g., self-reported symptoms, sick days), and behavioral (e.g., decreased performance, increased absenteeism) outcomes.

According to Jackson and Schuler (1985), years of research on role ambiguity has shown that it is a noxious state which is associated with negative psychological, physical, and behavioral outcomes. That is, workers who perceive role ambiguity in their jobs tend to be dissatisfied with their work, anxious, tense, report high numbers of somatic complaints, tend to be absent from work, and may leave their jobs.

The most common correlates of role overload tend to be physical and emotional exhaustion. Also, epidemiological research has shown that overloaded individuals (as measured by work hours) may be at greater risk for coronary heart disease. In considering the effects of both role ambiguity and role overload.

Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), in a study conducted in 2007, has reported that those working in the banking sector - both public and private - tend to get stressed as they have to attract and serve a large pool of customers for various schemes besides ensuring timely recovery of loans. Rao et al. also concluded that organizational stress related to inter-role distance, role expectation conflict, and role overload are higher in employees of private banks than in public banks.

Hence, work in long hours or role overload lead to occupational stress (Widmer, 1993). Rosse & Rosse (1981) noted that role conflict (incompatible demands from supervisor or colleagues) and role ambiguity (lack of clarity of supervisor or colleagues' expectations) significantly lead to job stress and consequently intention to leave a job.

## What measures can be taken to reduce the effects of role ambiguity, role overload, or role conflict?

One of the measures that can be taken to reduce role ambiguity is role clarity. Role clarity refers to how clearly a set of activities expected from an individual are expressed. Sherman (1989) postulated that role clarity is a positive motivator for engineers and technical personnel.

Given the negative effects of role ambiguity and role overload, organizations need to minimize, if not eliminate, these stressors. Since role ambiguity, in many cases, is due to poor communication, it is necessary to take steps to communicate role requirements more effectively. French and Bell (1990), in a book entitled Organization Development, describe interventions such as responsibility charting, role analysis, and role negotiation. Each of these is designed to make employees' role requirements explicit and well defined. Also, these interventions allow employees to input into the process of defining their

roles.

One of the mechanisms that can be used to reduce work overload is to analyze the individuals' role responsibilities by reviewing job descriptions and carrying out job analyses (Levine 1983). It may also help to encourage employees to be realistic about the number of role responsibilities they can handle. In some cases, employees who are under pressure to take on too much may need to be more assertive when negotiating role responsibilities.

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## Conclusion

It need not be emphasized that role overload can have *dire consequences* on employees' motivation and creativity if it is not properly diagnosed and alleviated. Role Overload can be mistakenly and falsely referred to as employee incompetence if it is wrongly interpreted. Against this background, the organization needs to use mechanisms like role chartering and job analysis to reduce the repercussions of role overload that can create a recipe for disaster.

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