

## Causes and Effects of Role Ambiguity as Perceived by Human Resource Management Professionals in Zimbabwe

Takupiwa Nyanga<sup>1</sup>, Pilot Mudhovozi<sup>2</sup> and Regis Chireshe<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Human Resources and Psychology, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Psychology, University of Venda, South Africa*

<sup>3</sup>*College of Education, Department of Further Teacher Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa*

**KEYWORDS** Human Resource Management. Work Stress. Role Ambiguity. Role Conflict. Human Resource Practitioners. Zimbabwe

**ABSTRACT** The study sought to investigate the causes and effects of role ambiguity as perceived by human resource management practitioners. A quantitative design was used. One hundred and thirty (61 male, 69 female) participants responded to a questionnaire on causes and effects of role ambiguity. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data. Five causes of role ambiguity were identified. These were size and complexity of the organisation, rapid rate of change, restrictions on employees' authority, vaguely defined tasks and task interdependence. The perceived consequences of role ambiguity were interpersonal tensions, poor self-image, low job satisfaction, decrease in affectivity, decrease in propensity to leave and extreme behaviour. Recommendations to reduce role ambiguity were made.

### INTRODUCTION

Role ambiguity is defined by Kahn et al. (1964) as the single or multiple roles that confront the role incumbent, which may not be clearly articulated in terms of expectations, priorities, behaviors, or performance levels. Role ambiguity can be traced back to the Hawthorne studies done in the 1930s (Barzilai 2010; Roethlisberger and Dickenson 1939). In an organisation, employees performing the human resource functions could collide in several endeavours in a bid to perform their mandates as enshrined in their employment contracts (Caldwell 2003). This phenomenon has been transferred to modern day organisations throughout the world. This subject has been much debated and researched over the last few decades (Nickluis 2007). Both researchers and practitioners acknowledge that a degree of role ambiguity is inevitable in complex organisations (Quah and Campbell 1994). Role ambiguity is inevitable because it is impossible to eradicate

role stressors completely in organisations because of the several human resource management positions that they have.

The study focused on human resource management professionals because role ambiguity and consequently role conflict are more intense in jobs where more abstract thinking and decision making are required (Menon and Aknilesh 1994). For example, Sayegh et al. (2004) state that the decisions that they make carry much weight in both ethical and financial terms. Today's human resource managers are increasingly expected to make decisions based on paradigms that depart from traditional rationality and information processing models. This is corroborated by Calvasina et al. (2006) who observed that in the United States of America, a number of federal and state laws have been interpreted to hold human resource decision makers personally liable. The decisions that can give rise to personal liability for human resource management professionals include decisions that deny overtime and leave of absence, equal pay, notification of the extension of benefits and workplace safety. However, the decision that the human resource management professional makes, must be made within the context of multiple players, organisational environmental constraints and its potential consequences difficult to evaluate fully (Huy 1999). In addition, in light of the dynamic nature

---

*Address for correspondence:*

College of Education,  
Department of Further Teacher Education,  
University of South Africa  
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane,  
P. O. Box 392, UNISA 0003, South Africa  
E-mail: chireshe@yahoo.co.uk, chires@unisa.ac.za

of the global economy and the unpredictable, uncertain nature of today's business environments (Barr 1998; Ferris et al. 2000), quick decisions under crisis circumstances have become commonplace for many organisations.

The issue of role ambiguity has been found to exist in a wide variety of organisations in Zimbabwe and remains an on going problem (Nyanga 2006; Institute of Personnel Management of Zimbabwe (IPMZ) Report 2007). As a result of its complex nature, it has not been easy for companies to effectively deal with this problem. The Human Resource Departments have not been spared from this challenge. Role ambiguity straddles many human resource management positions that are highly related and intertwined (IPMZ 2007). Role ambiguity takes various forms, for instance big corporations in Zimbabwe including commercial banks and public enterprises have positions of Human Resource officer, Compensation officer, Training and Development officer, and Recruitment and Selection officer. There is a general overlap of roles, duties and responsibilities among these positions (IPMZ 2007). From the foregoing discourse, the question of the causes and consequences of role ambiguity in Zimbabwe's Human Resources Departments remains without conclusive answers. It, therefore, becomes prudent to establish answers to the above raised concerns.

Role ambiguity has a strong negative impact on work engagement of the human resource professionals (Nickaus 2007). Research on the roles of human resource professionals stresses that role change has triggered severe role conflict and ambiguity, which lead to considerable difficulties in their day to day operations (Caldwell 2003). This refers to the role ambiguity related to the strategic partner role and conflicting expectations between line managers. It is noteworthy to state that although previous studies have recognised the potential role conflict and ambiguity of human resource professionals, neither their existence nor consequences, in view of their recently added strategic function, has empirically been investigated (Nickaus 2007).

While the role ambiguity construct has received a fair share of attention over the decades (Kahn et al. 1964; Brief and Aldag 1981; Singh 1998; Beauchamp and Bray 2001), to the best knowledge of the researchers, limited if any scholarly attention was given to populations in Southern Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in

particular. Culture has been shown to impact organisations and interpersonal communications, which affect ambiguity levels and tolerance for ambiguity (Hofstede 1980). The researchers, therefore, sought to establish the causes and effects of role ambiguity with a sample drawn from a collectivist culture. Most of the studies that were conducted previously were fragmented. For example, researchers focused on role conflict and employee creativity (Tang and Chang 2010), role stress and performance (Beehr and Glazer 2005), role conflict and creativity (George and Zhou 2002; Lenaghan and Sengupta 2007), role ambiguity, role efficacy and role performance (Beauchamp and Bray 2002) and role ambiguity and anxiety (Beauchamp et al. 2003). Current literature on comprehensive studies is lacking. Furthermore, although some studies focused extensively on role ambiguity and its correlates within generic work roles, few studies have examined role ambiguity within the interdependent group (Beauchamp et al. 2002) context such as human resource management. The research sought to provide further insight on the causes and effects of role ambiguity among human resource management professionals in Zimbabwe. Knowledge of causes and effects of role ambiguity will help Human Resource Executives to reduce ambiguity and enhance employee performance. The present study, therefore, attempts to fill some of the gaps in our understanding of role ambiguity.

### Conceptual Framework

Changes in the nature of managerial work over the past two decades have had a profound and disconcerting impact on the roles of human resource management professionals (Caldwell 2003). Change in any part of the role or system creates changes in other parts as well. Resultantly, ambiguity in many parts of the organisation is almost inevitably the outcome (Kahn et al. 1964). More so, in situations characterised by interdependence of roles, ambiguity could be predicted to influence the thoughts and behaviours of both the role occupant and other individuals (Forsyth 1999). Roles consist of the set of activities individuals are expected to perform as a function of their positions within a social system (Mintzberg 1993).

Role reflects a person's position in the social system with accompanying rights, obligations, power and responsibility (Tripathi 2004). A person

is subject to rules and regulations, both on the job and away from it. Different employee roles can manifest at the same time that is, one employee performs dual and/or multiple roles that are not clearly defined and structured. The job incumbent becomes uncertain about what is required of him/her in that role. This phenomenon is rampant in the human resource management field where employees' roles are closely inter-related, intertwined and difficult to define (Tripathi 2004). Role ambiguity occurs when the incumbent of a post is uncertain about what is required of him/her in that role. It is the lack of clarity about the expected behaviour from a job or position. Szilagy (1981) viewed role ambiguity as the lack of clarity regarding job duties, authority and responsibility resulting in uncertainty and dissatisfaction. A study by Kahn et al. (1964) described role ambiguity as the single or multiple roles that confront the role incumbent, which may not be clearly articulated in terms of behaviours or performance roles. It exists when focal persons (role incumbents) are uncertain about product evaluation contingencies and are aware of their own uncertainty about them.

For human resource management professionals, their roles have become multifaceted and complex (Caldwell 2003). Their workplace change has witnessed the emerging tensions between competing role demands, ever increasing managerial expectations of performance and new challenges to professional expertise. Human resource professionals encounter challenges that relate to inherent role ambiguities in their functions (Friedson 1994). Thus, role ambiguity arises from tensions between expected, perceived and enacted roles and the consequent 'role conflict' that emerges when an individual performs multiple roles (Ulrich 1997). In essence, it is a lack of clear, consistent information about the expectations associated with one's position (Kahn et al. 1964).

The above discourse draws from Kahn et al.'s (1964) Role Episode Model. The model posits that perceived role ambiguity occurs when a person feels that he or she lacks salient information needed to sufficiently perform his or her role. In addition, Kahn et al. (1964) stated that role ambiguity entails uncertainty about role definition, expectations, responsibilities, tasks and behaviours involved in one or more facets of the task environment. Furthermore, they postulated that the Role Episode Model has two major dimensions. The two dimensions are: 1). task ambiguity

(ambiguity in the performance aspects of one's role responsibilities) and 2). socio-emotional ambiguity (psychological consequences and discomfort an individual might experience in failing to fulfil role responsibilities). Giving credence to the Role Episode Model, Beauchamp and Bray (2001) observed that individuals who reported greater ambiguity were less efficacious about performing tasks associated with their responsibilities.

Several theoretical models have been developed and empirically tested. In essence, the multi-dimensional approach to the study of role ambiguity began with Bedeian and Amenakes (1981) and has been confirmed with Sawyer (1992) and Singh et al. (1996) as cited by in Tripathi (2004). Their findings deduced that there are four widely accepted dimensions to role ambiguity. The dimensions are expectation or responsibility ambiguity where the employee is pondering about what is expected of him, process ambiguity – how to get things done, priority ambiguity – when things should be done and in what order and behaviour ambiguity – how one is expected to act in various situations or what behaviours lead to the needed desired outcomes (Black 1998; Narayana and Rao 2002)

From the arguments given above, it can be deduced that in role ambiguity, norms for specific positions in human resource management may be vague, unclear and ill defined. If a worker is experiencing role ambiguity, they are unsure and unclear of what they should do, what is expected of them by the group and the organisation (Bernadin and Russel 1998). This dilemma has been observed particularly among human resource management professionals in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe (IPMZ 2007).

Yousef's (2000) study found that role ambiguity affects attitude towards organisational change independently and negatively. It is associated with low performance, reduced job satisfaction and frustration which enhance turnover intentions (Fisher 2001; Tarrant and Sabo 2010). Beehr (1995) reports that role ambiguity is associated with job stress which refers to a situation in which some characteristics of the work situation are thought to cause poor psychological or physical health. Other studies (Beard 1999; Boles and Babin 1996) suggest that role ambiguity is related to job satisfaction/dissatisfaction, absenteeism, job-related anxiety, organisational commitment, low involvement and intention to

leave the organisation. It is impossible to eradicate role stressors completely in organisations with a whole range of human resource management positions.

The article aims to give a rundown of the conception, stimulators and consequences of role ambiguity as perceived by Human Resources practitioners in Zimbabwe. To this end, the article examines the perceived role ambiguity in terms of causes and effects in relation to age and gender of Human Resources practitioners in Zimbabwe. The major aim is to assess the level of role ambiguity among human resource practitioners in Zimbabwe with the view to give recommendations for improvement. It is hoped that the paper would illuminate further avenues for managerial intervention in trying to avoid the detrimental effects of role ambiguity.

The findings of this study may help business executives and executives of public enterprises to reduce role ambiguity among Human Resource Management Practitioners and enable them to perform their duties to their full potential.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

In order to gain understanding of the causes and effects of role ambiguity among human resource management professionals, a quantitative research approach was used. The quantitative paradigm was chosen because its measurements are reliable, valid and generalisable in their clear prediction of cause and effect (Cassell and Symon 1994). In addition, the quantitative paradigm eliminates or minimises subjectivity of judgement (Kealey and Protheroe 1996). The plan enabled the researchers to capture the opinions of the respondents from various organisations quickly and with ease.

### Sample

One hundred and thirty participants were drawn from Department of Human Resource Management of organisations in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. There were 61 male and 69 female participants. Their ages ranged from 22 to 59 years. The sample constituted 36% of the study population. The human resource management professionals were randomly selected from various organisations. The researchers made use of

employee registers provided to choose the participants. All positions in human resource management were considered.

### Instrument

A questionnaire was used to collect data in this study. The researchers chose the questionnaire because it gathers responses in a standard way, hence it is more objective (Milne 2010). In addition, data collection through the use of a questionnaire is quick and enables the researcher to collect data from a large portion of a group. The questionnaire had three sections. Section A had items on the demographic profiles of the participants; Section B gathered the causes of role ambiguity while Section C collected data on the effects of role ambiguity. The instrument was pilot tested with five participants to assess its suitability for gathering the intended data. It had a reliability co-efficient of 0.85.

### Procedure

The researchers visited the respective organisations to administer the questionnaire. Focal persons at the respective organisations assisted with the provision of registers that enabled the researchers to select the participants. The questionnaire hand delivered to the participants who were given two days to reflect on the questions and give well thought answers. After two days, the researchers went back to collect the completed questionnaires.

### Data

The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics and presented in form of frequency tables. The researchers preferred descriptive statistics because they are used to present quantitative descriptions in a manageable form. They provide a powerful summary that may enable comparisons across people or other units (Trochim 2010).

### Ethical Issues

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the responsible authorities of the participating organisations. Consent to take part in the study was sought from individual participants.

It was clarified to the participants that information gathered was for academic purposes and the respondents were assured confidentiality of the information collected. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. They were informed that reporting was anonymous and they were assured of confidentiality.

**RESULTS**

Tables 1 to 4 present data on the perceived causes and effects of role ambiguity by age and gender.

Tables 1 and 2 show that vague tasks (90%), rapid rate of change (84.6%), restrictions on employee authority (80%), size and complexity of organisation (72.3%) were the major perceived causes of role ambiguity among human resource management practitioners in Zimbabwe. Only 19.2% perceived the role of line manager as a source of role ambiguity. The responses were synonymous across all age groups and gender.

**Table 1: Perceived causes of role of ambiguity by age**

Item	Age (years)	Response frequencies			
		Yes	%	No	%
Vague Task	Below 25	11	22	3	6
	26 - 45	24	48	0	0
	46 and above	10	20	2	4
Rapid Rate of Change	Below 25	9	18	5	10
	26 - 45	21	42	3	6
	46 and above	12	24	0	0
Restrictions on Employee's Authority	Below 25	10	20	4	8
	26 - 45	20	40	4	8
	46 and above	10	20	2	4
Size and Complexity of Organisation	Below 25	40	80	10	20
	26 - 45	19	38	5	10
	46 and above	6	12	6	12
Task Independence	Below 25	12	24	2	4
	26 - 45	20	40	4	8
	46 and above	1	2	11	22
Rules and Policies	Below 25	7	14	7	14
	26 - 45	18	36	6	12
	46 and above	5	10	7	14
Role of Line Managers	Below 25	3	6	11	22
	26 - 45	6	12	18	36
	46 and above	1	2	11	22

Tables 3 and 4 show that propensity to leave (80%), interpersonal tension (73.8%) and low self-

image (71.5%) were the major perceived effects of role ambiguity. Low job satisfaction (63.9%), decrease in affectivity and performance (63.8%) and extreme behaviour (58.5%) were perceived as the main effects of role ambiguity. The same pattern was observed across gender and age.

**Table 2: Perceived causes of role of ambiguity by gender**

Item	Gender	Response frequencies			
		Yes	%	No	%
Vague Task	Male	23	46	0	0
	Female	22	44	5	10
Rapid Rate of Change	Male	18	36	5	10
	Female	24	48	3	6
Restrictions on Employee's Authority	Male	18	36	5	10
	Female	22	44	5	10
Size and Complexity of Organisation	Male	16	32	7	14
	Female	20	40	7	14
Task Independence	Male	15	30	8	16
	Female	18	36	9	18
Rules and Policies	Male	14	28	9	18
	Female	16	32	11	22
Role of Line Managers	Male	4	8	19	38
	Female	6	12	21	42

**Table 3: Perceived effects of role ambiguity by gender**

Item	Gender	Response frequencies			
		Yes	%	No	%
Propensity to Leave	Male	19	38	4	8
	Female	21	42	6	12
Interpersonal Tension	Male	12	24	11	22
	Female	25	50	2	4
Low Self Image	Male	17	34	16	12
	Female	19	38	8	16
Low Job Satisfaction	Male	18	36	5	10
	Female	14	28	13	26
Decrease in Affectivity and Performance	Male	15	30	8	16
	Female	17	34	10	20
Extreme Behaviour	Male	16	32	7	14
	Female	13	26	14	28

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of the present study on causes and effects of role ambiguity are discussed. The causes and effects are discussed in the context of age and gender. A comparison is made of the findings of the current study with available literature.

**Table 4: Perceived effects of role ambiguity by age**

Item	Age (years)	Response frequencies			
		Yes	%	No	%
<i>Propensity to Leave</i>	Below 25	10	20	4	8
	26 - 45	18	36	6	12
	46 and above	12	24	0	0
<i>Interpersonal Tension</i>	Below 25	8	16	6	12
	26 - 45	17	34	7	14
	46 and above	17	24	0	0
<i>Low Self Image</i>	Below 25	13	26	1	2
	26 - 45	21	42	3	6
	46 and above	2	4	10	20
<i>Low Job Satisfaction</i>	Below 25	9	18	5	10
	26 - 45	17	34	7	14
	46 and above	6	12	6	12
<i>Decrease in Affectivity and Performance</i>	Below 25	8	16	6	12
	26 - 45	20	40	4	8
	46 and above	4	8	8	16
<i>Extreme Behaviour</i>	Below 25	7	14	7	14
	26 - 45	11	22	13	26
	46 and above	11	22	1	2

### Causes of Role Ambiguity

The study revealed that a vague task performance objective is a key stimulator of role ambiguity. Most of the respondents irrespective of their age and gender felt that vaguely defined roles are key perpetrators of role ambiguity among human resource management practitioners. The findings confirmed earlier researchers' observations that role ambiguity inevitably occurs when there is poor or inadequate communication about what the employee is expected to do (Khan et al. 1964; Schuler et al. 1979; Robbin 2001; Nyanga 2006).

Unclearly defined task performance objectives, lack of clarity of purpose, goals for both teams and individuals leave the job incumbents to guess as to what they are expected to do. In a related view, George and Jones (1996) are of the view that individuals do experience role ambiguity when they produce innovative solutions to non-routine problems. As has been the case in Zimbabwe, most human resource management professionals were called up to make innovative decisions during the toll of the country's economic crisis, which was compounded by political unrest, thus exacerbating the vagaries of ambiguity. In an effort to meet these new job demands and the desire for success and recognition, role conflict and ambiguity was triggered.

The study also revealed that technological, organisational or social changes influence role

ambiguity among manpower management practitioners. The respondents confirmed that rapid rate of change in an organization and technology is a very strong antecedent to role ambiguity. Interestingly all the 46 and above age group respondents agreed that role ambiguity is caused by the rapid rate of change, this is so probably because this group is failing to cope with changing the roles of human resource managers hence develop negative stereotypes about the changes. Organisational and technological changes are muted so as to include other new roles that emerge as a result of social changes in the political, social and technological environments. The findings are in line with Caldwell's (2003) and IPMZ (2007)'s view that the economic turmoil that has been bedeviling the country for the past decade and resulted in the evolvement of the human resource management roles to include other matters that were deemed critical and shed off others that were seen as less important contributed greatly in influencing role ambiguity.

Restrictions on employee authority were also perceived by the majority of respondents, irrespective of their gender and age as a key factor that stimulate role ambiguity. Organisations adopt self-managed and self-directed work teams with the intention of giving employees the autonomy to make decisions within their areas of jurisdiction. The liberalisation of authority and responsibilities has however precipitated role ambiguity. The findings confirm earlier observations by Wood (2003) who argues that in the execution of a task an employee may not know how much authority is invested in his/her job because all roles in self-directed teams may not be clearly and explicitly defined.

The research also revealed that the size and complexity of organizations is a very strong antecedent of role ambiguity among human resource practitioners. Although the sizeable number of respondents from the 46 and above age group disagreed that the size and complexity of organizations causes role conflict, the majority were in agreement. The findings confirmed Kahn et al.'s (1964) hypothesis that the presence of three organizational conditions contributes to an environment of ambiguity. These are the amount of organisational complexity, rapid organizational or technological change and management philosophy about intra-company communications. Large organizations have a wide range of positions

which are intertwined leading to partial overlapping and duplications of duties (Ouah and Campbell 1994). A company may have overlapping positions in human resources department, for example recruitment and selection, human resource planning and compensation. In terms of tasks of recruitment, selection, placement, compensation and others that need to be done, the activities of the three positions may overlap. Palmer et al. (1992) is also of the view that organizations de-structure to allow employees to be initiative, innovative with less reliance on rules and procedures, bound areas became fuzzy, uncertainty increases and free floating anxiety rises. This implies that the transformation of organizational structure leads to role ambiguity.

Task interdependence was also viewed as one of the precipitators of role ambiguity. The response level to this factor was moderate. The 0-25 and 26-45 results section age groups' observations were in line with the male and female responses. On the other hand, the 46 and above age group did not view task interdependence as a key precipitator of role ambiguity. According to Russell and Bernadine (1996), task interdependence, which is the extent to which team members co-operate and work interactively to complete a task, is a major source of conflict and role ambiguity. One party's performance depend on another party's performance for instance for a training and development officer to be able to perform his or her duties a human resource planning and recruitment and selection officers should have performed their mandates well. If the other party doesn't do its part, the performance chain breaks and may leave some job incumbents with an appetite for success to take over the tasks which were supposed to be done by counterparts hence causing role ambiguity and conflict.

Contrary to other researchers' findings, the study participants overwhelmingly disagreed that the role of line managers causes role conflict. For example, the findings are consistent with Pilgrim's (2008) observation that the inconsistencies in the allocation of tasks and roles by line and human resources managers breed role ambiguity as some employees may end up performing task which do not fall their jurisdiction. It follows that the rules of human resource management professionals and line managers are usually in conflict. The study, however, revealed a totally different picture, perhaps because the roles of line-managers

practitioners provide a service or complimentary role to the functional departments.

### **Consequences of Role Ambiguity**

On consequences of role ambiguity, the study revealed that one of the ramifications of role ambiguity is the propensity to leave which has received an overwhelming "yes" response. Role ambiguity has a buffering effect on labour turnover. Employees' intent would be to leave the appointment and emigrate to neighboring countries and abroad where employment conditions are perceived to be better. The findings concur with (Rizzo et al.1970; Vansell Brief and Schuler 1981; Fisher 2001; Fisher and Gitelson 1983; Jackson and Schuler 1985; Singh 1998; Tarrant and Sabo 2010) who view role ambiguity as negatively correlated to job satisfaction, job involvement, performance variable tension and propensity to leave the job.

Interpersonal tension is another consequence of role ambiguity among human resources professionals in Zimbabwe. The majority of participants irrespective of their age and gender perceived interpersonal tension as one of the effects of role ambiguity. The research findings confirmed those of Caldwell (2003), Friedson (1994), Urich (1997) and Schuler et al. (1979) who indicated that if employees do not know what is expected of them in the execution of their tasks, misunderstandings can arise between them and may result in tensions thereby eroding the co-operative spirit among them. The employee may have both professional and personal clashes with his or her workmates since he or she may be doing what is regarded by his or her counterparts as their duties. In the same vein, the finding is consistent with Nyanga (2006) who postulated that role ambiguity among human resources practitioners in Zimbabwe is problematic because lack of information on how to proceed on critical tasks leads to frustration, which in turn results in tension. Interpersonal tension creates antagonism among workers which in most cases is counter-productive. Interpersonal clashes are one of the major sources of stress. Stress is very detrimental to the physical and mental health of an employee, hence such clashes should be avoided at all costs. This finding supports Beard (1999), Beehr (1995) and Boles and Babin (1996) who reported that there is an association between role ambiguity and job stress.

The study further revealed that role ambiguity results in low self-image. Role ambiguity influences the employees to blame themselves for failing to perform as expected probably because what they were supposed to do would have been done by their colleague. The employee may regard himself or herself as incompetent, hence, developing a very low self image. The findings confirmed Nervi et al.'s (2005) view that the interactional intricacies that occur in deciphering job perceptions lead to cognitive distortions that result in problems concerning role definition, ambiguity and conflict. The study findings acknowledge the integral part of role ambiguity and role conflict in enhancing or deterring the effective functioning of human resource management professionals. The employees' self-efficiency and self-image may be lowered thereby impeding the realization of organizational goals. Similarly, the findings concur with Beachamp and Bray (2001) who reported that role ambiguity makes individuals less efficacious about performing tasks associated with their responsibilities.

The research also revealed that role ambiguity makes employees develop a low job satisfaction. Though the participants did not overwhelmingly affirm this view, the majority irrespective of gender and age felt that role ambiguity lowers employees' job satisfaction. Role ambiguity may result in lowering satisfaction for the person who is keen and has a high attachment to his job. Lack of knowledge of exact job expectations demoralizes the employee. Employee morale usually gets dampened if he or she gets criticized for doing other people's tasks. The findings confirmed Koustelious et al.'s (2004) observation that role ambiguity lowers job satisfaction (Fisher 2001; Koustelious et al. (2004); Tarrant and Sabo 2010) and is detrimental to productivity (Koustelious et al. 2004). Palmer et al. (1992) also viewed role ambiguity as negatively associated with important job outcomes such as performance, satisfaction and productivity. Those who did not agree that job satisfaction is lowered by role ambiguity presumably said so because of the limited job opportunities in Zimbabwe. Under such circumstances to seek for job satisfaction becomes a luxury.

The study revealed that role ambiguity may make an employee lose interest in the job and consequently develops a negative attitude towards it, management and the organization at large. This results in affectivity slide on the

downward trend (Chandan 1998). If too many unclear demands are made on an employee he or she may panic and experience so much stress that his or her work performance is influenced negatively. Several studies (Boles and Babin 1996; Fisher 2001; Tarrant and Sabo 2010; Szilagy 1981) also associated role ambiguity with low job performance. Szilagy (1981) also alluded to the fact that high levels of role ambiguity lead to performance and morale problems among employees. Role ambiguity makes employees less involved in their tasks (Beard 1999; Boles and Babin 1996). Employees will do their work with caution thereby reducing their level of creativity. Thus, the conflicts between employees that are created by role ambiguity reduce the level of concentration on task performance. Similarly, Johle and Dale (2001) observed that individuals and work groups may be impacted negatively by role ambiguity to the extent that performance may suffer.

If role ambiguity is left uncontrolled, it may have devastating effects on both the organisation and individuals. Respondents felt that role ambiguity can create psychological disorders and instability within employees. This view was shared by respondents irrespective of their gender and age. Similarly, Beehr (1995), Boles and Babin (1996); Bulleit (2008), Kahn et al. (1964) and Fisher and Gitelson (1983) also observed that disorders caused by role ambiguity may result in some employees suffering from psychological dysfunctions such as stress, withdrawals alcoholism, depression, conflict and low morale. Unwanted work behavior such as absenteeism (Beard 1999; Boles and Babin 1996), deviant behavior, stay-aways and defence mechanisms may also arise.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide some insight into the causes and effects of role ambiguity. The human resource management professionals perceived role ambiguity to be mainly triggered by vague tasks, rapid rate of change, restrictions on employee authority and, the size and complexity of organization. The major perceived effects of role ambiguity were propensity to leave, interpersonal tension and low self-image. They generally agreed that role ambiguity leads to interpersonal tension, low job satisfaction, poor self-image, decrease in affectivity and



performance, and extreme behaviour of employees. It was not surprising that low job satisfaction and propensity to leave yielded the highest 'yes' response, as brain drain was experienced across all categories of employees. Employees left the country en masse in search of better economic fortunes in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Britain, Australia and the United States of America. Low job satisfaction and morale transformed into labour turnover which both came as a result of role ambiguity as observed by Palmer et al. (1992) and Bates (2004). The findings highlight the importance of ensuring that role ambiguity is avoided in the human resource management profession.

### LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study is limited in terms of generalisability of the findings. There are unique context specialist interpretations of these findings. It is well recognized that in an unstable environment, which is characterised by political upheavals and economic turmoil, companies are frequently transformed leading employees to miss what is expected of them. This leads to the discord to the interdependence of tasks and the integrity of rules and policies, as employees will be changing jobs and tasks frequently. New recruits have unrealistic expectations based on their previous experiences and image of an organisation, which is a strong precipitator to the dilution of job descriptions, roles and tasks to be performed. This can turn into disillusionment if every day's job expectations are not clearly defined.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- ♦ Results show the need for organisations to draw job descriptions that minimise role ambiguity since it has been observed that role ambiguity has devastating effects on both the organisation and individual employees.
- ♦ Regular formal or informal job analysis exercises need to be carried out so as to identify and respond to the changing roles of every member in the human resources management departments. Regular consultative departmental and sectional meetings should be held to spell out the specific roles of members in the department.
- ♦ Effective two-way communication channels should be opened and maintained to enable

employees to discuss their uncertainties with their superiors and counterparts.

- ♦ Organisations should put in place guidance and counselling structures to assist individual employees the effects of role ambiguity.
- ♦ Further research should be conducted at national level to get results that would be generalisable to all organisations in Zimbabwe.

### REFERENCES

- Barr PS 1998. Adapting to unfamiliar environmental events: A look at the evolution of interpretation and its role in strategic change. *Organisational Science*, 9(6): 644-667.
- Barzilai K 2010. Organisational Theory. From<[http://www.cwfu.edu/med/epidbio/mphp439/Organisational\\_Theory.htm](http://www.cwfu.edu/med/epidbio/mphp439/Organisational_Theory.htm)> (Retrieved September 25, 2010).
- Bauer JC 2002. *A Longitudinal Evaluation of the Impact of Organisational Structure on Role Ambiguity and Work Group Performance*. DBA Thesis: Florida, USA. University of Sarasota.
- Bates A 2004. *Personnel Management in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Howard Dean and Company.
- Beard FK 1999. Client role ambiguity and satisfaction in client-ad agency relationships. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 39: 69-78.
- Beauchamp MR, Bray SR 2001. Role ambiguity and role conflict within interdependent teams. *Small Group Research*, 32: 133-157.
- Beauchamp MR, Bray SR, Eys MA, Carron AV 2002. Role ambiguity, role efficacy and role performance: Multidimensional and mediational relationships within interdependent sport teams. *Group Dynamics*, 6(3): 229-242.
- Beauchamp MR, Bray SR, Eys MA, Carron AV 2003. The effect of role ambiguity on competitive state anxiety. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 25: 77-92.
- Bedeian AG, Armenakis AA 1981. A path-analysis study of the consequences of role conflict and ambiguity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 24: 407-424
- Beehr TA 1995. *Psychological Stress in the Workplace*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Beehr TA, Glazer S 2005. Organisational role stress. In: J Barling, EK Kelloway, MR Frone (Eds.): *Handbook of Work Stress* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 7-33.
- Bernardin JH, Russell JE 1998. *Human Resource Management: An Experimental Approach*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Irwin: McGraw-Hill.
- Black JC 1988. Work role transition: A study of American expatriate managers in Japan. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 20(1): 277-294.
- Boles J, Babin B 1996. On the front lines: Stress, conflict and the customer service provider. *Journal of Business Research*, 37: 41-50.
- Brief AP, Aldag RJ 1981. The "self" in work organisations: A conceptual review. *Academic Management Review*, 6: 75-88.
- Bulleit B 2008. Effectively Managing Team Conflict: Global Knowledge. From<[http://www. Global Knowledge/](http://www.Global Knowledge/)> (Retrieved May 15, 2009),

- Cadwell R 2003. The changing roles of personnel managers: Old ambiguities, new uncertainties. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (4): 983-1004.
- Calvasina GE, Calvasina E J, Calvasina RV 2006. Personal liability and human resource decision making. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research*, 18(4): 21- 39.
- Cassell C, Symon G 1994. Qualitative research in work contexts. In: C Cassell , G Symon (Eds.): *Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp.1 -13.
- Chandan JG 1998. *Organisational Behaviour*. New York: MacGraw-Hill.
- Ferris GR, Perrewé PL, Anthony WP, Gilmore DC 2000. Political skill at work. *Organisational Dynamics*, 28(4): 25-37.
- Fisher CD, Gitelson G 1983. A meta- analysis of the correlates of role conflict and ambiguity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 68: 320-333.
- Fisher RT 2001. Role stress: The type A behaviour pattern and external auditor job satisfaction and performance. *Behavioural Research in Accounting*, 13: 143-170.
- Forsyth DR 1999. *Group Dynamics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Freidson E 1994. *How Dominant are the Professions? In Professionalism Reborn*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- George JM, Zhou J 2002. Understanding when bad moods foster creativity and good ones do not: The role of context and clarity of feelings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87: 687- 697.
- George J, Jones CR 1996. *Understanding and Managing People in Organisations*. London: MacGraw-Hill.
- Hofstede G 1980. *Culture's Consequences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Huy QN 1999. Emotional capability, emotional intelligence and radical change. *Academy of Management Review*, 24(2): 325-345.
- IPMZ 1996. *Labour Relations*. Harare, IPMZ Institute of Personnel Management in Zimbabwe Annual Report, Author.
- Jackson SE, Schuler RS 1985. A meta-analysis and conceptual critique of research on role ambiguity and role conflict in work settings. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 36: 16 - 78.
- Johlke SM, Dale FD 2001. Supervisor communication practices and boundary spanner role ambiguity. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 13(1): 120-138.
- Kahn RD, Wolfe DM, Quinn RD, Snock JD, Rosenthal RA 1964. Occupational stress: Studies in role ambiguity and conflict. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 10: 89-111.
- Kahn RL, Wolfe, DM, Quinn, RP, Snoek, JD, Rosenthal, RA 1964. *Occupational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity*. New York: Wiley.
- Kealey DJ, Protheroe DR 1996. The effectiveness of cross-cultural training for expatriates: An assessment of the literature on the issue. *International Journal of International Relations*, 20(2): 141-165.
- Koustelios A, Theodorakis N, Goulimoris P 2004 Role ambiguity and role conflict. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 18(2): 87-94.
- Lenaghan JA, Sengupta K 2007. Role conflict, role balance and affect: A model of well-being of the working student. *Journal of Behaviour in Applied Management*, 9(1): 88-109.
- Menon N, Aknilesh K 1994. Functionally dependent stress among managers. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 9(3): 13-22.
- Milne J 2010. Questionnaires: Advantages and Disadvantages. From < <http://www.icbl.hw.ac.uk/tdi/coobook/info-questionnaires/>> (Retrieved October 15, 2010).
- Mintzberg H 1993. *Structure in Fives: Designing Effective Organisations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Narayana A, Rao P 2002. *Human Resource Management*. Boston: MacGraw-Hill.
- Nervl J, Forest D, Melissa M 2005. Role ambiguity: It's impact on the effectiveness of organisational change. *Research and Practice in Human Resources Management Journal*, 2(1): 73-99.
- Nickaas AL 2007. *The Complex Relationship Between Role Ambiguity, Role Conflict, Work Engagement of HR Managers and the Implementation of SHRM*. Master's Thesis. Universities Maastricht, Netherlands.
- Nyanga T 2006. *Reliance Holdings Job Evaluation Report*. Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, Author.
- Nyanga T, Ziyambi G, Mudhovozi P 2007. *Regency Group of Hotels Job Evaluation Report*, Zimbabwe, Masvingo, Authors.
- Quah J, Campbell KM 1994. Role conflict and role ambiguity as factors in work stress among managers in Singapore: Some moderator variables, research and practice in human resources management. *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*, 2(1): 21-33.
- Palmer PN, WaltVD, VerbaMJ, De-Klerk W, Pitout W 1992. *Management Principles*. Kenwy, Western Cape: Juta and Company Ltd.
- Pilgrim S 2008. *Conflict: An Essential Ingredient of Growth*. London, McGraw-Hill.
- Quah J, Campbell KM 1994. Role conflict and role ambiguity as factors in work stress among managers in Singapore: Some moderator variables. *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*, 2(1): 21-33.
- Rizzo JR, House RJ, Lirtzman S 1970. Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 15: 150-163.
- Robbin SP 2001. *Organisational Theory, Structure, Design and Applications*. London, Prentice -Hall.
- Roethlisberger FJ, Dickenson WJ 1939. *Management and the Worker*. Cambridge, Havard University Press.
- Russel JEA, Bernadin AJ 1996. *Human Resource Management: An Experimental Approach*. London: MacGraw-Hill.
- Sayegh L, Anthony WP, Perrewé PL 2004. Managerial decision-making under crisis: The role of emotion in an intuitive decision process. *Human Resource Management Review*, 14(2): 179-199.
- Schuler R, Alday RJ, Brief A 1979. Role conflict and ambiguity: A scale-analysis. *Organisational Behaviour and Human Performance Journal*, 20: 111-128.
- Singh J 1998. Striking a balance in boundary-spanning positions: An investigation of some unconventional influences of role stressors and job characteristics on job outcomes of salespeople. *Journal of Marketing*, 62: 69-86.

- Szilagyi AD 1981. *Management and Performance*. London: Goodyear Publishing Company.
- Tang YT, Chang CH 2010. Impact of role ambiguity and role conflict on employee creativity. *African Journal of Business Management*, 4(6): 869-881.
- Tarrant T, Sabo CE 2010. Role conflict, role ambiguity and job satisfaction in nurse executives. *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 34(1): 78-82.
- Tripathi PC 2004. *Personnel Management and Industrial Relations*. New Delhi: Sulon.
- Trochim WMK 2010. Descriptive Statistics. From <<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/statdesc.php>> (Retrieved October 10, 2010).
- Ulrich D 1997. *Human Resource Champions*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Vansell M, Brief AP, Schuler RS 1981. Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of the literature and directions for future research. *Human Relations*, 34: 43 - 71.
- Wood JA 2003. Interrelationships of role conflict, role ambiguity and work family conflict. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 11(1): 112-129.
- Yousef DA 2000. The interactive effects of role conflict and role ambiguity on job satisfaction and attitudes toward organisational change: A moderated multiple regression approach. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 4: 289-303.