

CLEAR AS MUD: HOW UNCLEAR JOB EXPECTATIONS HINDER EMPLOYEE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

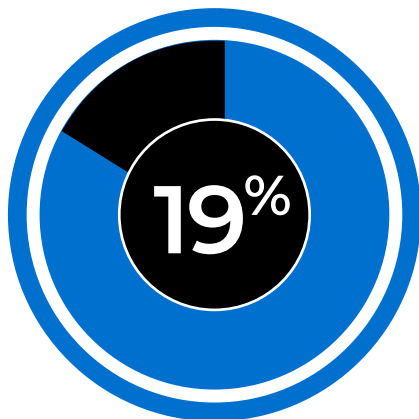
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Most employees have at one time or another been uncertain about their role or received unclear direction. It can happen when starting a new job that's very different from the job description, working in an environment with many company-specific acronyms, or shadowing tenured employees for on-the-job training but realizing everyone completes the tasks differently. These are some of the many ways organizations, often unintentionally, create role ambiguity.

Role ambiguity is the lack of understanding expectations, consequences, and means of carrying out role behaviors. It happens when the organization provides “inadequate, unclear, or confusing information about expected role behaviors” (Quick et al., 1997, p. 33). In times of uncertainty and stress, it's particularly important for employees to understand their priorities. Nearly a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, 19% of employees reported experiencing role ambiguity (InVista, 2021). This low percentage is encouraging because, even amid shifts in physical work spaces and organizational priorities, most employees knew their job expectations.



19% of employees reported
EXPERIENCING ROLE AMBIGUITY
InVista, 2021

CONSEQUENCES OF ROLE AMBIGUITY



THE UNCERTAINTY SURROUNDING ONE'S ROLE HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATION AND INDIVIDUAL'S WELLBEING.



PERFORMANCE

An employee experiencing role ambiguity doesn't know what managers and coworkers expect of them in their job, so it's difficult for them to meet performance expectations. When an employee is evaluated based on unknown expectations, they may perceive the system as unfair, resulting in greater frustration. Research has found a negative relationship between ambiguity and performance ([Fried et al., 1998](#); [Gilboa et al., 2008](#); [Jackson & Schuler, 1985](#)); as one's perception of role ambiguity increases, their performance suffers. In a study on role stress, role ambiguity was found to be a main predictor of job performance ([Antón, 2009](#)).

Employees experiencing role ambiguity are more than **3X MORE LIKELY TO BE AT RISK FOR BURNOUT**

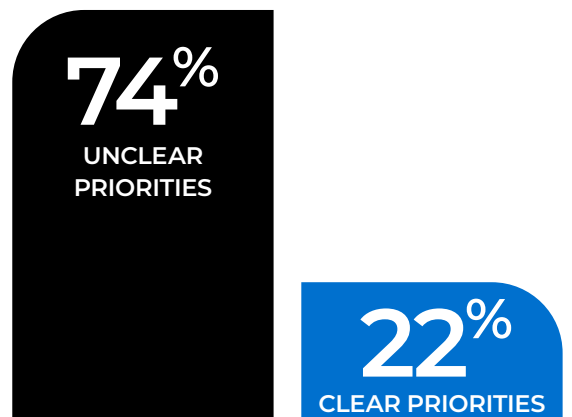
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BURNOUT

Depersonalization, a component of burnout characterized by cynicism and detachment from work, is related to role ambiguity ([Lee & Ashforth, 1996](#)). When employees unsuccessfully try to clarify their job expectations, they may feel helpless, leading them to stop trying. In turn, they may become detached from their work and perhaps even bitter toward those within the organization who were unable to help them understand their job. An InVista study showed burnout risk was significantly greater among those experiencing ambiguity than those who weren't (2021).

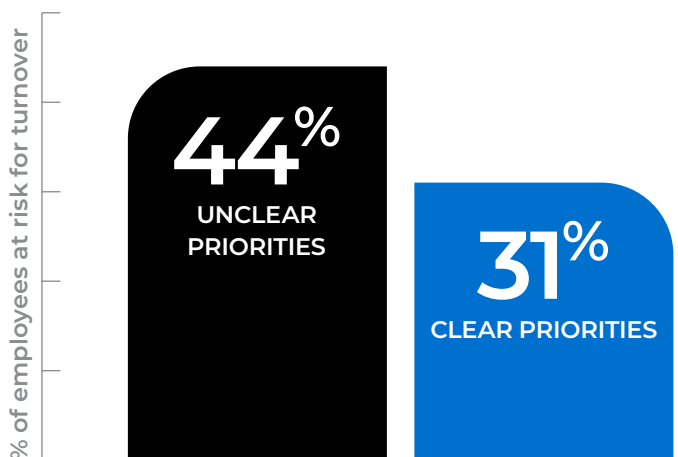
% of employees at risk for burnout





TURNOVER

Turnover is a frequently tracked organizational metric because of its significance to company culture and its financial impact. The research about turnover's relationship with role ambiguity is mixed (see [Antón, 2009](#); [De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017](#); and [Jackson & Schuler, 1985](#), for more information); however, an InVista study found a significant relationship between turnover intentions and role ambiguity. Employees in ambiguous roles were almost 1.5 times more likely to be at risk for turnover than those with clear priorities (InVista, 2021).



WORK ATTITUDES

Employees who have a clear understanding of how to do their job rate their organization's climate more positively and report higher levels of job satisfaction and efficacy compared to employees who experience role ambiguity ([Wilson et al., 2004](#)). Ambiguity is also associated with decreased participation, engagement, and a sense of autonomy ([Jackson & Schuler, 1985](#)). When employees experience a high level of autonomy, there is a positive relationship between role clarity and vitality at work (i.e., the extent to which the employee is functioning well and their needs are being met), meaning when there is little or no ambiguity and they are working autonomously, employees are working and feeling their best ([Karkkola et al., 2019](#)). In a team setting, ambiguity negatively impacts engagement and decreases behaviors above and beyond normal job duties, such as helping coworkers with their work ([Mañas et al., 2018](#)).

Employees experiencing role ambiguity are nearly **1.5X MORE LIKELY TO BE AT RISK FOR TURNOVER**

InVista, 2021



CONFLICT

Role ambiguity and role conflict are frequently researched together because they're strongly related. Role conflict occurs when competing expectations are communicated to an employee, and the employee is unable or doesn't know how to fulfill them (Quick et al., 1997). Common examples of role conflict are fulfilling duties outside of one's primary job, reporting to multiple managers, and trying to meet the needs of both work and home life. As role conflict and role ambiguity increase simultaneously, performance decreases ([Fried et al., 1998](#)).



EMOTIONAL

While role ambiguity is a workplace issue, the stress it causes may result in poor emotional wellbeing. A study following employees before, during, and after a stressful event found relationships among role ambiguity and anxiety, resentment, and depression ([Caplan & Jones, 1975](#)). InVista also found these relationships: 66% of individuals who reported experiencing role ambiguity were also experiencing poor emotional wellbeing (2021).

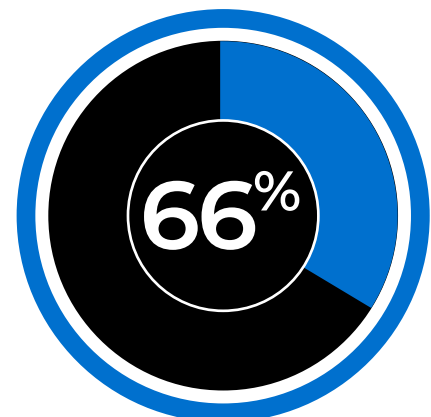
Role ambiguity may influence an organization's bottom line because it's related to performance, burnout, and turnover. And because it also affects individuals' emotional wellbeing and aspects of workplace wellbeing (i.e., conflict and attitudes), organizations should prioritize clarifying role expectations. Let's explore ways organizations and employees can work to provide clarity for job expectations.

THE UNEXPECTED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CREATIVITY AND AMBIGUITY

Role ambiguity may not always be detrimental to employees' work life and health. Role ambiguity has a curvilinear relationship with creativity, which means a moderate amount is ideal for creative performance ([Wang et al., 2011](#)). With too little ambiguity, employees may feel controlled in how they engage in the creative process; with too much ambiguity, they may not know where to begin.

66% of employees experiencing role ambiguity are also **EXPERIENCING LOW EMOTIONAL WELLBEING**

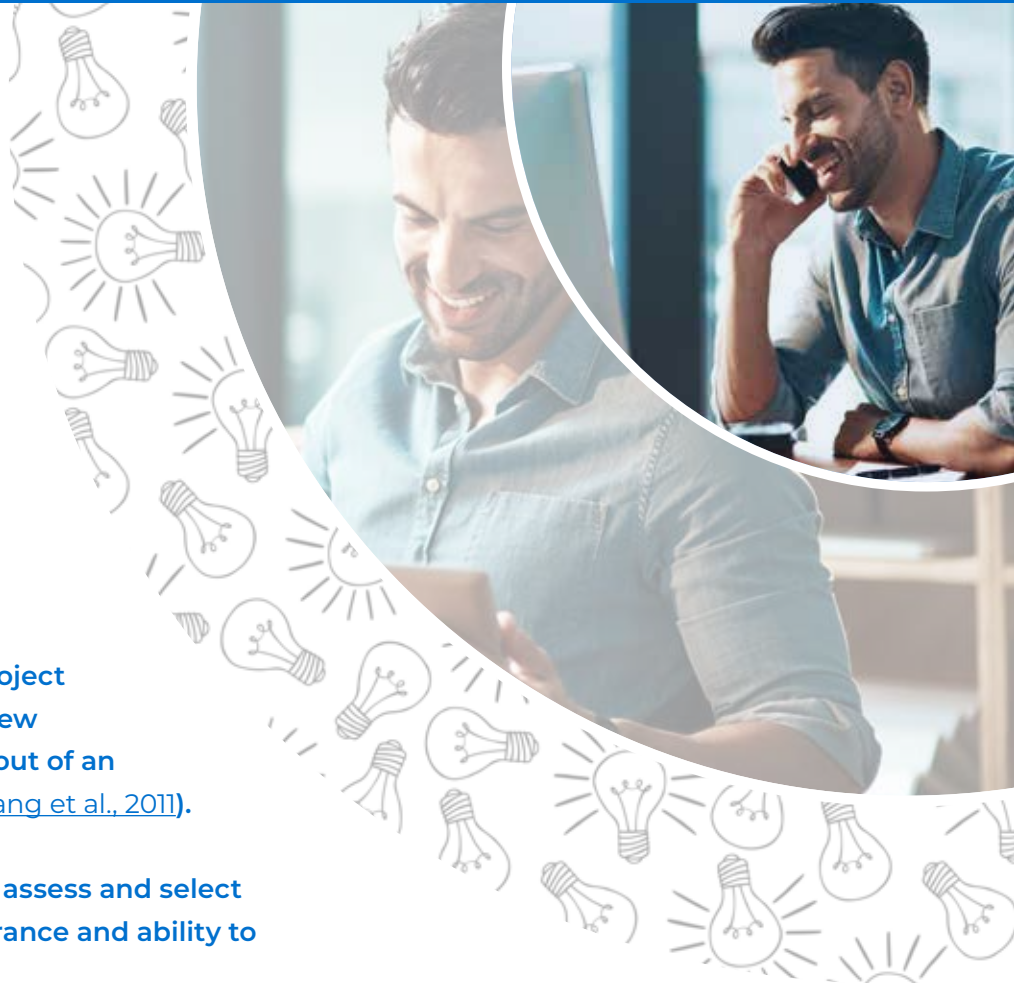
InVista, 2021



REDUCING ROLE AMBIGUITY

Although there are individual characteristics associated with role ambiguity, such as the individual's tolerance for uncertainty, the strongest relationships are within the organization ([Jackson & Schuler, 1985](#)). Employers should be encouraged by this because it means it's possible to change aspects of the organization in order to decrease ambiguity. Some examples are:

- ✓ **Write clear job descriptions, project outlines, and performance review criteria to take the guesswork out of an employee's responsibilities** ([Wang et al., 2011](#)).
- ✓ **If ambiguity is critical to a role, assess and select candidates based on their tolerance and ability to adjust** ([Wang et al., 2011](#)).
- ✓ **If on-the-job training is the best method of training for a role, thoughtfully select and train the trainers or mentors so that new employees are learning the job correctly.**





While finding a solution for role ambiguity is most effective, not all jobs or organizations can provide clarity due to the nature of the industry. In those instances, [De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia \(2017\)](#) recommend preventing turnover by creating a culture with the following goals:

- ✓ **Establish trust with coworkers. When the workplace is built on trust, employees feel comfortable asking colleagues about job duties when the directions are unclear. It's also important for the organization to build trust and create a culture of psychological safety so when an employee identifies and voices concerns about ambiguity, they aren't fearful of repercussions.**
- ✓ **Promote procedural justice, or fairness in the organizational processes that lead to outcomes, such as pay and promotions. See [Donaldson \(2021\)](#) for tips on how organizations can impact procedural justice.**



Providing role clarity is mostly the responsibility of the organization; there is little an individual can do to achieve clarity on their own. However, there are a few things employees can do to encourage their organization to reduce role ambiguity.

- ✓ **Ask for clarification and direction from a manager.** Seasoned employees often have difficulty remembering what it was like when they first joined the organization or what they didn't know initially. This makes writing a new job description or assigning projects a challenge, and managers may not realize how unclear their direction is.
- ✓ **If the ambiguity stems from an organizational process that everyone must "learn along the way," offer to document it.** This shows initiative and will help the next group of new employees.

Often unknowingly, organizations create ambiguity by providing unclear expectations, consequences, and instructions. Over time, employees feel the strain, and it begins to impact their performance, risk of burning out and leaving the organization, emotional wellbeing, and work attitudes. These affect the organization financially and culturally. Most of the interventions mentioned above have little cost; they require only thought and time to communicate expectations in a clear and effective way. Simple changes can give employees the clarity they need to be productive and healthy at work.

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