The part that multiple work roles play in work stress.

Dr. Robin Hill

Paper presented to the Workplace Wellbeing Network and Seminar Series, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, New Zealand. May 30th 2005

There are many sources of work stress. There is a tendency, however to think that the main source of stress comes from being overworked with insufficient time available. The source of stress is simply the sheer volume of work required.

While this is an obvious source of work stress, an insidious and major part of it relates to the different roles we perform at work and in our lives. There are several well documented role factors, identified quite some years ago that contribute to work stress (for example see Shouksmith 1985).

The four main role factors associated with work stress are **role conflict**, **role ambiguity**, **role overload** and **role underload**. A fourth, which I have not seen in the literature, and which I would also like to discuss today is **Role Inequity**.

Role conflict.

Role conflict occurs **when a person is required to perform two or more roles simultaneously that have competing demands.** There are several forms of role conflict (identified by Miles and Perreault 1976) that contribute to work stress.

To understand the labels given to the different forms of role conflict the following needs to be understood. Role situations tend to be viewed in terms of

groups of people known as *role sets*. Within a role set there are a number of role players who, in role terminology, are known as *role senders* on account that they send messages to others as to the role they expect from them. The focal person of interest in the role set might be known as the *role receiver* or *role incumbent*. For example, take a person who performs the role incumbent *parent*. This is a role player who operates within a role set, and hence receives messages of expectation as to the role they play from other *role senders* such as *child*, *spouse*, *school*, and so on. In a more simple role set, a boss is a role sender who places expectations upon an employee role incumbent.

The first, which Miles & Perreault called **Person-Role conflict** occurs **where an individual wishes to act in a manner that is different from that suggested by either their job description or their boss**. Examples:

- A person has come through professional education aimed at producing excellent long-term solutions to problems, but pressures from the boss force the individual into short-term sub-standard quick-fixes.
- A person employed as a specific type of professional – say, a Human Resource Manager – but whose expertise and suggestions are ignored and where the actions of other professions such as Cost Accounting or Information Technology shape their work environment.
- Again, imagine a Human-Resource Manager with a post-graduate degree in psychology who is skeptical about the usefulness of Psychometric Testing for recruitment and selection and who prefers to use other techniques that he or she has expertise in. However, the company he/she works for has purchased a cheap-and-nasty test for this purpose and insists that the HR Manager use it in all cases of employee selection.
- A group of tertiary lecturers, experts in their own right, are in agreement about the content, style of teaching and assessment procedures they should use for a particular course. However, an external accreditation agency insists that they teach other content and with different styles of teaching and assessment – and issue "bad" moderation reports when the lecturers do not comply.
- A professional values the codes of ethical conduct within his or her profession but their organization wishes them to carry out work that breaches that code of ethics.

In more detail **person-role conflict** refers to a mismatch between an individual's core values and beliefs and the prescribed work task requirements (Hastings, 1987).

Role conflict also occurs **where an individual is assigned a task or project with insufficient resources to complete it successfully, or to complete it to his or her own standard**s. Miles and Perreault called this **Intrasender Conflict**. Examples:

- A person is employed to perform a specific job – say coordinator of Training & Development – but who is given neither a budget nor delegated authority to act nor sufficient time to produce an adequate outcome. As such the individual receives mixed messages – a requirement to act but provision of insufficient support to do so.
- A company decides to introduce a new Payroll System, but create very short deadlines for doing so (because the cost of the consultants implementing the change are very expensive per hour). There is one member of the company whose support and guidance is crucial but management divert this person into another project at the time, rendering them as unavailable to the payroll team.
- A manager of a department in an organisation had a branch office in which major dysfunctions and tensions were occurring. The Manager asked a Human Resource Officer to go to the branch and do a thorough, professional analysis. The HR officer's own managers, however, only provided him with resources for a one-day visit to the branch and with the instruction to "write new job descriptions." Although the HR Officer worked for the company, he carried out the analysis of the branch in his own time and it ended out being a 3-month project.

In more detail, **intra-sender role conflict** occurs when incompatible demands are made by a single member (or minority) of the role set (in the cases above, the providers of resources). This presents a situation where the role incumbent therefore receives mixed messages (Hastings, 1988) and hence finds oneself required to perform contradictory or inconsistent roles.

Another form of role conflict, which was labelled as **Intersender Conflict** occurs **where an individual is required to act in a manner that will please only a subset of colleagues but which is likely to displease the majority**. Examples:

- An obvious example, perhaps, would be the humane caring manager who is required by senior management (the few) to close down a business unit making many people redundant and thereby upsetting those workers, their families and their co-workers who remain (the majority).

- In the tertiary education sector researchers submitted data to be assigned grades under the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). Staff members requested, throughout New Zealand, that their PBRF results be confidential and not released to their Managers or Deans. They feared that their score would be used as part of their performance appraisals and their criteria for promotion – however, they argued that under privacy legislation the data had not been collected for that purpose. After careful consideration it was agreed that PBRF results would be kept confidential. However, Senior Management at several institutions ordered their Research Managers to release the information to Heads of Schools, Deans and so on. The Research Managers' knew that to do so would appease management but would be met with angry responses of betrayal by most of the researchers.

In more detail, Intersender role conflict occurs when the role incumbent meets opposing or competing pressures in serving the demands of other role senders acting in the same role scenario. Where the role behaviour expected of one role sender (for example, above – the senior management) is incongruent with the role behaviour expected of another role sender (for example, above – the manager's staff, or the Research Manager's colleagues).

In the literature on role conflict many authors also mention:

- Inter-role conflict: Where an individual has multiple roles to play in an organisation whose expectations are inconsistent. In relation to university swim coaches, Hastings (1987 implied an example where a female coach's own child is also on the swim-team and a member of their academic class. The woman acts as mother, professor and coach and must balance the competing demands of child-rearing expectations, lecturing and exam-

grading expectations as well counselling/training expectations of members of the swim team.

- This form of role conflict might also occur where an individual is struggling to balance work roles and family roles.

Role Ambiguity

A second form of role stressor is **role ambiguity** which refers to **the extent to which an individual actually understands (or misunderstands) what is required on the job.** There are four widely accepted dimensions of role ambiguity (see Bedian & Armenakis 1981, Sawyer 1992, Singh, Verbecke & Rhoads 1996).

Goal/expectation/responsibility ambiguity. This occurs where the individual experiences **a lack of clarity about what they are expected to do**. They are unsure what they should or should not be doing. Examples:

- A survey of staff was done in one organisation. The main finding of the survey revealed that individual's felt the major source of their frustration and unhappiness was lack of clarity about what they should be doing, and where the boundary was between those tasks they should do and those tasks that should be performed by some one else. In the organisation surveyed, this was rife right through the organisation, up to and including most of the members of Executive Management.

Process ambiguity, which occurs **when there is a lack of clarity about the ways of achieving the organisational objectives**. The individuals are unclear as how they are supposed to get things done perhaps because they have not been provided with guiding principles or perhaps because communication has been poor. Example:

- A task-force or project group is put together to solve a problem. However, they are provided with no terms of reference nor process or framework for attacking the problem. Instead they have to invent it as they go along.
- The same would occur for an individual who has been seconded to a project to solve a problem – but who has not been provided with the necessary guidance to achieve the objective and perhaps not even a clear definition of the problem.

Priority role ambiguity occurs **when there is lack of clarity about when things should be done and in what order**. What has high priority and what has not? Examples:

- A Factory safety and training officer received countless requisitions to investigate unsafe conditions, to ensure procedures complied with the law and to set up training programmes for individuals. There were so many requests that it was difficult to determine which ones were most critical and which took priority. Most of the time he was criticised for starting projects but not completing them. In fact the very people who were criticising him had actually generated new projects that seemed to have greater urgency attached to them.

- This type of role ambiguity might also arise from the bombardment of emails that many people receive at work, and their difficulty determining which are urgent, which have priority and which can be left until another day. There tends to develop a perception that whatever arrives by email requires an urgent response – otherwise the sender would have sent a memo or letter. An actual example involved a person who tried to prioritise the order in which he dealt with all the tasks required for the day. It was not uncommon, however, to receive an email that did not seem urgent, but which was followed up ten minutes later by the sender calling to ask why he had not responded to the email. What was a priority for the sender often ranked tenth or fifteenth behind other more urgent business, requests and instructions to be dealt with by the receiver.

Behaviour ambiguity occurs **when there is lack of clarity as how the individual is expected to behave**. They are unsure how to act in different situations. Examples:

- This might occur for a Manufacturing Manager trying to determine their appropriate dress-code when a large portion of their day sees them interacting with staff on the factory floor and where suits, jackets and ties would alienate them – but where another large portion of their day sees them in meetings with other Senior Managers and Executives from other organisations.

- This might occur when a professional (say a process engineer) is asked a delicate question by their CEO, but does not know whether to provide the

short uninformative answer, the detailed and fully justified answer, or the answer that they perceive the CEO wants to hear even if it is the wrong answer.

- This might also occur when a person has been requested to provide sensitive information to someone more senior in the organisation, but is unclear about the motives of that person and whether or not to trust them.

Role Overload and Role Underload.

A third form of role stressor is **role overload** and **role underload**. This is **where an individual is required to work either well above their capacity or well below their capacity**. It is **role overload** that is probably thought of as the main stressor mentioned at the beginning of this article. However, role overload is not simply, or always, just too much work to be done in insufficient time. It also refers to the requirement to perform too many roles – what people may refer to as "too many balls in the air." Example:

- Imagine a school teacher who is expected to teach English to class sizes of 40 often unruly and inattentive pupils. This requires the teacher to not only perform the multiple roles of educator, controller and administrator but also disciplinarian. Imagine if the same teacher is also required to lead the team of English Teachers, plan and organise the annual drama production, be the staff representative on the Board of Trustees, be part of a regional committee promoting education programmes for the gifted and able, and is assigned as the staff member in charge of promoting career education in the school – as well as listen to and heed the demands of parents at the parent-teacher interviews.

Second, role overload also refers to the requirement to perform tasks at the breaking point or beyond an individual's mental and/or physical capacity. Example:

- Requirement to work at a level at the very edge of one's cognitive capabilities has been documented among airline pilots during take-off and landing – which also coincides with the times when the aircraft is most vulnerable to mishaps such as caused by wind sheer or bird-strikes.

Role underload might occur in situations of sheer boredom. Examples:

- Again, this is experienced by airline pilots who are highly trained, highly qualified professionals but who spend hours in the air with very little to do.

This hints at the second form of role underload - when a person is required to work at a level well below his or her intellectual capacity.
- This would occur for example if a marketing professional with a relevant Masters degree and ten years experience found himself or herself, because of staff layoffs, back performing the same sales clerical jobs as when they commenced work a decade ago.

Apparently role overload and underload are particularly stressful when they are both present in the same job, and where the work fluctuates between the two. As can be imagined from the above, this has been documented as a role stressor among airline pilots.

Role Inequity

A fourth potential role stressor which, after a preliminary search, I have not seen mentioned in the literature in relation to work stress, and hence which interests me as a possible research area, is **role inequity**. This would occur when a person perceives themselves to be applying additional effort, expertise or with additional responsibilities – but not being paid or rewarded for it. Such a concept would have a relationship with Adams (1965) Equity Theory of motivation. Examples:
- A person is contracted to work 40 hours per week, is paid for 40 hours only, but consistently works 50 hours per week.
- A person takes on a leadership role and hence assumes additional responsibilities, but who is not paid an additional responsibility allowance or a higher wage.
- Role inequity would also occur when a person doing the same work as others discovers that they are not paid as much or rewarded in the same way as those others.
- Stress might also stem from other well known role inequities – such as gender-role inequities, (stereotyping women into female occupations and men into male occupations and rewarding them unequally), race-role inequities (socio-economic pressures that force Maori or Islanders into low

paid labouring occupations) and perhaps even age-role inequities (there is a saying that it is very difficult to find work if you're unemployed and "over-weight and over forty").

Conclusion

Role related stress is insidious because it isn't as tangible as stress from noise, crowding, hazards, deadlines or a mounting backlog of work. It is also insidious in that several or all of the above role stressors may have accumulated one by one, be operating simultaneously and may even be entangled in one another. They might all be the product of the same deeper systemic source of the stress. If you have experienced work stress, or have known somebody who has, then reflect upon how many of these role factors were affecting you (or that other person) at the same time.

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