



# Information control, role perceptions, and work outcomes of boundary-spanning frontline managers

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research demonstrates the destructive consequences of role stress for the work outcomes of employees occupying boundary-spanning positions. Most studies examine the behavior and performance of industrial salespeople. In contrast, limited evidence exists regarding the antecedents and consequences of role stress in service organizations. This article helps fill this notable gap by investigating the correlates of role ambiguity in the context of frontline managers in banking institutions. The article offers a conceptual model and an empirical test using data gathered from 316 bank branch managers. The study findings reveal that information control is an effective mechanism for reducing role ambiguity. The results also indicate that role ambiguity negatively affects job performance and job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation positively relates to job satisfaction, and bank managers' job performance enhances branch effectiveness. The article concludes with a discussion of study implications and suggestions for future research in the field.

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## 1. Introduction

The critical role of boundary spanners in influencing organizational effectiveness encourages significant research attention in the marketing literature. Researchers show interest in the realization that boundary-spanning positions are susceptible to role stress (Singh et al., 1996). Role stress has detrimental effects on employees' motivation and morale and results in poor outcomes in terms of job satisfaction, job performance, organizational commitment, and turnover rates (Babin and Boles, 1998; Brown and Peterson, 1993; Churchill et al., 1985).

Boundary spanners are commonly the main revenue generators for their firms and the only employees who come in direct contact with the paying customer. Therefore, role stress presents a major obstacle to the achievement of performance objectives. Organizations can benefit greatly by adopting appropriate management practices

that reduce feelings of role stress, especially among customer-contact employees.

This study develops a broad conceptual framework that examines interrelationships among information control, role ambiguity, intrinsic motivation, job outcomes, and organizational effectiveness and offers an empirical test for a structural model using data collected from bank branch managers. Branch managers represent a typical example of a boundary spanner. On the one hand, they constantly battle to achieve the financial and operational performance objectives of their branch, set by upper management. On the other hand, they face constant pressure from bank customers who demand lower interest rates and charges for their credit facilities or higher returns for their deposits and other investments. These managers' success in satisfying the diverse and often conflicting demands of top management, customers, and other stakeholders determines the long-term prosperity of the organization.

The purpose of this study is to extend the existing literature through three specific contributions. First, the study emphasizes the important role of area managers in fulfilling the information needs of branch managers and reducing their level of job- and supervisor-related role ambiguity. Second, the study answers research calls for integrating intrinsic motivation into the job satisfaction model (Brown and Peterson, 1993). Third, the study provides an empirical test for a comprehensive model of the antecedents of frontline managers' job satisfaction and performance in the neglected context of financial service providers.

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## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Role ambiguity

The important role of boundary-spanning positions in organizations has attracted significant research attention during the past four decades. Most previous studies focus on identifying the factors that can either obstruct or enhance the performance of boundary spanners. In terms of the frequency of investigation, the most relevant constructs are boundary spanners' personal characteristics, job/task characteristics, organizational factors, and role perceptions (Brown and Peterson, 1993; Churchill et al., 1985). Research findings indicate that role stress is a critical factor that negatively affects the job-related attitudes and behaviors of employees occupying boundary-spanning positions (Singh et al., 1996). Building on the work of Rizzo et al. (1970), the marketing and sales management literature focuses on two role stressors, namely, role ambiguity and role conflict. These constructs represent an integral part of conceptual and empirical models that attempt to examine the antecedents of important work outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and turnover intentions (Babin and Boles, 1996, 1998; Fry et al., 1986; Johnston et al., 1990). Although empirical results regarding the influence of role conflict and role ambiguity are not always consistent, a consensus exists in the literature that role stress disrupts business activities. Therefore, organizations are better off if they can reduce feelings of role stress among their employees.

Role conflict reflects an employee's feelings that the demands/expectations of some job requirements are incompatible with the demands/expectations of other job requirements (Rizzo et al., 1970). Role ambiguity reflects employee uncertainty about which job behaviors are most appropriate in a given situation (Rizzo et al., 1970). For employees occupying boundary-spanning positions, some feelings of role conflict and role ambiguity are inevitable, especially in highly turbulent industries. However, as Singh and Rhoads (1991, p. 329) convincingly argue "in comparison with role conflict, role ambiguity is more amenable to managerial intervention." Because the main objective of this study is to examine how supervisory behavior can contribute to reducing role stress among branch managers, the focus is on the role ambiguity construct.

Singh and Rhoads (1991) develop a multifaceted and multidimensional scale for measuring role ambiguity. In particular, they suggest that role ambiguity comprises the following dimensions: company, boss, customer, ethical, other managers, coworkers, and family. The current study examines primarily the relationship between branch managers and their immediate supervisors. Therefore, the "boss" dimension of Singh and Rhoads's scale is highly relevant. For present purposes, this study refers to this construct as *supervisor-related role ambiguity*. This study also includes the original scale that Rizzo et al. (1970) develop, which focuses on employees' perceptions regarding the requirements and demands of their job. This study refers to this construct as *job-related role ambiguity*.

Contemporary leadership theories, such as the leader–member exchange model and transformational leadership, emphasize the use of communication processes to influence the attitudes and behavior of employees and direct their activities to achieving organizational objectives. The provision of information is also critically important in the development of effective management control systems (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Jaworski, 1988). From a thorough assessment of control theories, Challagalla and Shervani (1996) develop a typology of management control that includes the provision of information and the administration of reinforcements (rewards and punishments). In particular, they define three types of control: output control, activity control, and capability control. In turn, each type of control comprises three dimensions: information, rewards, and punishments.

The provision of relevant and timely information to boundary spanners by their immediate supervisors can serve as an effective mechanism for reducing role ambiguity. This study posits that the information

dimensions included in Challagalla and Shervani's (1996) conceptualization of control provide a comprehensive assessment of the type of information that frontline employees need to understand job-related objectives, performance standards, and supervisor's expectations.

The vast majority of previous studies on the correlates of role ambiguity focus on industrial salespeople. Personal selling is the most effective marketing tool for industrial firms and often the only revenue-generating factor (Krafft, 1999). However, as a result of the expansion of the services sector in recent decades, the number of customer-contact service providers is increasing dramatically. These employees play a critical role in the implementation of marketing strategic decisions at the exchange point (Babin and Boles, 1998). The current study focuses on the working relationship between a branch manager and his/her immediate supervisor, who is commonly an area manager.

### 2.2. Intrinsic motivation

Motivation is a significant determinant of job performance among boundary-spanning employees (Churchill et al., 1985). The literature distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ingram et al., 1989; Tyagi, 1985). Intrinsic motivation is the motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake because of the pleasure or value it offers (Brown and Peterson, 1994). Intrinsically motivated people devote effort on a particular task to derive intrinsically appealing rewards, such as pride, sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and enjoyment (Mallin and Pullins, 2009; Tyagi, 1982). Extrinsic motivation is the "value an individual places on the results of an action and the individual's assessment of the probability of realizing the results" (Ingram et al., 1989, p. 26). Extrinsically motivated people are motivated by the rewards others provide, such as pay and formal recognition.

Despite the strong conceptual support for a positive relationship between an employee's level of motivation and important work outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, job performance), empirical findings are inconsistent (Ingram et al., 1989; Tyagi, 1985). With the exception of industrial salespeople, limited evidence is available regarding the role of motivation in influencing the behavior and performance of frontline marketing employees. Overall motivation is likely a function of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation because employees value both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Amabile, 1993; Tyagi, 1985). However, intrinsic motivation becomes particularly important when the compensation system is based on a fixed salary and various conditions prevent the grant of extrinsic rewards (Cravens et al., 1993). The luxury of financial security encourages employees to pursue intrinsic goals (Oliver and Anderson, 1994). This study focuses on branch managers whose remuneration package is determined by an overall organizational policy and mainly comprises a monthly fixed salary. Therefore, the emphasis is on intrinsic motivation. Previous research indicates that the control system is an effective management mechanism for enhancing employees' motivation (Cravens et al., 1993; Oliver and Anderson, 1994). Conversely, role stressors negatively affect intrinsic motivation (Tyagi, 1982). Drawing on the extant literature, this study proposes that job- and supervisor-related role ambiguity have a significant, negative influence on employees' intrinsic motivation. The implementation of an appropriate information control system reduces role ambiguity (e.g., Challagalla and Shervani, 1996), thus contributing to higher levels of intrinsic motivation. In turn, intrinsic motivation enhances bank branch managers' job satisfaction and performance. Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual model that guides the execution of the study.

## 3. Research hypotheses

### 3.1. Information control

According to Challagalla and Shervani (1996), three facets of control involve the provision of information by supervisors to subordinates: activity information, capability information, and output information.

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