

60 years of data reveal the biggest source of workplace stress

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Scientists examined data to identify work stressors that impact employee performance and satisfaction. Credit: Yan Krukau: www.pexels.com/photo/stressed-woman-working-at-the-office-7640809/.

It's not uncommon to come across job descriptions on portals that are

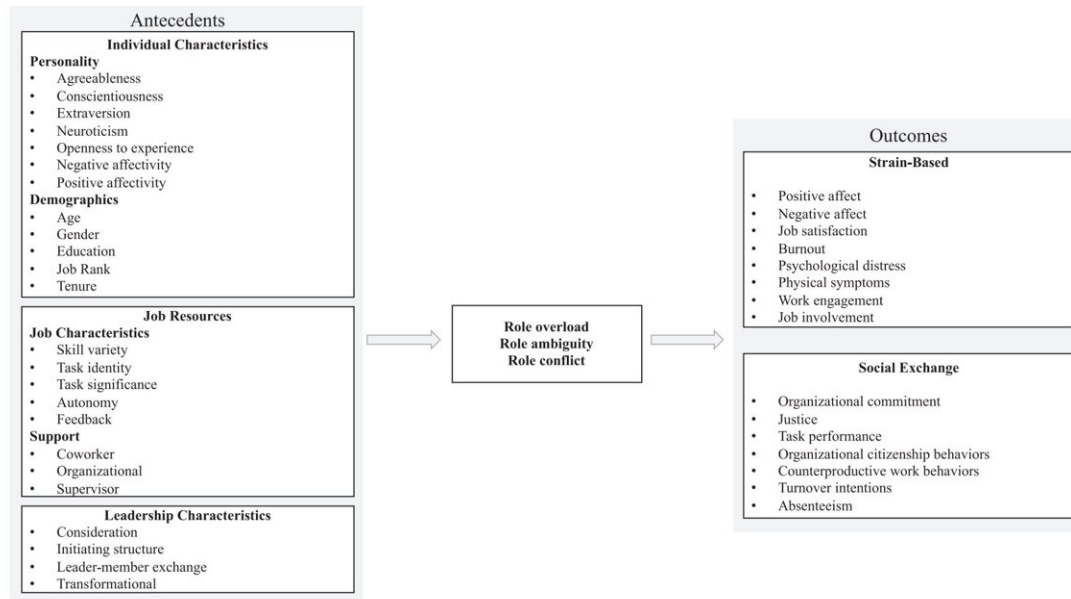
lengthy, yet leave the reader with little clarity about what the role actually involves. Uncertainty about one's role at work may be more damaging than many realize.

A recent [massive study that analyzed 60 years of data](#) found that a lack of clarity about workplace responsibilities is a major source of stress that can negatively affect both employees and employers. For individuals, it can lead to burnout and lower job satisfaction and, for companies, it can reduce performance and increase employee turnover.

This meta-analysis, [published](#) in the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, drew on an enormous body of research spanning several decades, reviewing peer-reviewed studies, theses, and dissertations published between 1964 and December 2024. In total, researchers analyzed data from nearly 80,000 participants across 515 independent studies and 558 separate samples.

Their main focus was on three known workplace role stressors. The first, role ambiguity, is the feeling of never being fully sure what your job actually requires or whether you're meeting expectations. The second, role conflict, comes from constantly juggling demands that don't line up. The third, role overload, is what happens when the workload keeps piling up faster than anyone could realistically keep up with.

Years of data revealed that role ambiguity was the most damaging of the three workplace stressors. When employees are unclear about their responsibilities, they're often left guessing about what deserves their attention, how their performance is being judged, and what they need to do to grow in their role. Over time, that uncertainty can quietly erode one's confidence, motivation, and the effort they put into their work.



Hypothesized model. Credit: *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2026). DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2026.104234

The larger picture of work culture

[Workplace well-being](#) and productivity go hand in hand, which is why researchers have spent decades trying to understand the factors that shape employees' experiences at work. One idea that began gaining attention in the early 1960s was role stressor theory—a framework that explains how the different expectations and responsibilities people face in their jobs can become sources of stress.

Over half a century later, it remains one of the most influential ideas in research about workplace well-being.

In this study, the team performed a deep dive into several major academic databases, gathering every relevant study on workplace stress

that included clear statistical findings and actively employed participants.

They then took a closer look at both the causes and consequences of different workplace stressors, while also examining how factors such as age, gender, and industry could shape employees' experiences of stress.

They found that not only did role ambiguity cause the highest stress, but it was also the primary reason many employees showed lower task performance and likely stopped going above and beyond for their companies.

[Role conflict](#) was the biggest driver of burnout, psychological distress, and intention to leave the job, whereas work overload was associated with physical and mental health issues.

The researchers note that this study gives a clearer understanding of how workplace stressors are connected and provides valuable direction for future research. The insights could help organizations take a closer look at their work environment and find practical ways to reduce these sources of stress, creating a fairer and healthier workplace that supports the growth of both employees and the company.

More information: Gargi Sawhney et al, A meta-analytic review of 60 years of role stressor research, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2026).
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