

The Impact of Role Ambiguity on Team Performance Inside a Startup

Ratu Amanda Tiana Cininta^{1*}, Anggara Wisesa²

^{1,2}Bachelor of Entrepreneurship, School of Business Management, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

DOI: [10.36348/sb.2023.v09i07.001](https://doi.org/10.36348/sb.2023.v09i07.001)

| Received: 11.07.2023 | Accepted: 14.08.2023 | Published: 18.08.2023

*Corresponding author: Ratu Amanda Tiana Cininta

Bachelor of Entrepreneurship, School of Business Management, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract

The pet industry in Indonesia is a massive emerging industry with lots of target markets to serve. A study estimated that around 67% of Indonesians have pets in 2022, and the number is increasing annually. The phenomenon drove a new startup, Catalogy, to connect pet owners to pet care businesses. However, as a first time business founder, job assignment can be trickier than it seems. A job description is essential to ease job assignment processes inside an organization, yet not every role can receive desirable job assignments. As role ambiguity arises, it is crucial to examine why role ambiguity occurs and how it influences a startup. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain insights from various startups. Four startups and Catalogy team members were interviewed to answer the research objectives. From the analysis, there are five factors which trigger role ambiguity: (1) Organizational size, (2) Employee capabilities, (3) Team composition, (4) Job division, and (5) Team management. Furthermore, these five qualities of role ambiguity significantly affect on the overall team performance of the mentioned startups.

Keywords: Job Assignments, Job Description, Role Ambiguity, Startup, Team Performance.

Copyright © 2023 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

The pet industry in Indonesia is a massive emerging industry with lots of target markets to serve. Approximately 67% of the Indonesian population have pets in 2022, which will continue to grow annually (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2022). Especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic significantly changed the way people live, many began to search for new companions to spend time at home together. Moreover, the fact that human to their pets contact may help individuals facing daily stressors (Junça-Silva, 2022), reduce anxiety levels, enhance physical activity persistence (Hussien *et al.*, 2021), and promote health and well-being (Young *et al.*, 2020). This phenomenon makes pet products and services more favorable to the market.

In order to serve the growing pet industry, Catalogy seized the opportunity to connect pet owners to pet care businesses, specifically veterinarians, pet clinics, and pet shops. Catalogy is an all-in-one platform startup that serves online consultations with veterinarians and sells pet necessities for various pets. Therefore, Catalogy develops a specific job analysis for

every strategic position within the organization so the business can run smoothly. Nevertheless, as a first-time business founder, job assignments can be more tasking than it seems. A job analysis is essential to ease job assignment processes inside an organization. Creating a job analysis demands complete information concerning work activities, qualifications, and environment, which can produce job descriptions and specifications to attain an organizational goal (Ahmad & Alqaarni, 2023).

However, not every job position and role within the organization can receive a similar and desirable job assignment to their job description. Role ambiguity arises from role vagueness without a clear and precise description of the role occupant. Hence, the misunderstanding of the job responsibilities assigned in the job description may cause role conflict within the organization (Gill *et al.*, 2021).

Similarly, the role ambiguity problem has been a concern for Catalogy. Job distribution and job assignment often do not correlate with the defined role and position. For instance, the Chief of Marketing Officer (CMO) in Catalogy is responsible for social

media management and company branding strategy. However, the CMO must also finish the company's administrative and human resource assignments despite these tasks are not within the CMO responsibility.

This event affects team performance in decision making and hinder organizational growth. These significant consequences of role ambiguity towards organization performance and achievement is crucial to examine. Thus, this research aims to discover the influence of role ambiguity on team performance inside startups and recommend solutions to tackle role ambiguity. Furthermore, the scope of this research focuses on undergraduate students' startups in the Bachelor of Entrepreneurship Class of 2023, School of Business and Management, Bandung Institute of Technology that experienced and/ or currently experiencing role ambiguity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Job Description

Mauliadiani *et al.*, (2019) declared that job description provides insights regarding overall roles, operations, objectives, procedures, and responsibilities for a particular position within a business unit. Job description aids a formal relationship between an organization and their employees (Robbins, 1996, as cited in Ramhit (2019). Thus, job description caters to a set of duties and responsibilities that one should do and need to be undertaken (Dessler, 2013, as cited in Ramhit, (2019). Furthermore, Switasarra & Astanti, (2021) claimed that job description is the backbone of the human resource management. Job description allows the company to conduct performance management, process identification and provide opportunity for many human resource aspects (Baker, 2016, as cited in Switasarra & Astanti (2021).

Role Ambiguity

According to Robbins & Judge, (2020), "Role ambiguity means that the prescribed employee behaviors are not clear". Role ambiguity occurs when someone's role in an organization is not understood or when someone is unsure what to do or how to perform his or her role (Yousefi & Abdullah, 2019). The distinctive indicators of role ambiguity occurrence are as follows: (1) Unclear information regarding job requirements, (2) Ambiguous job expectations, and (3) The consequences of a certain job behavior in achieving job expectations (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970, as cited in CahayaSanthi *et al.*, (2020). Based on Thahjadi & Cahyadi's (2020) research, role ambiguity has a significant negative effect on employee performance. Additionally, the lack of clarity in role ambiguity advocates a psychological conflict where the employee will experience work stress which ultimately affects employee turnover rates and job satisfaction levels (Azzahra *et al.*, 2021).

Team Performance

Team performance plays an important role in the overall performance of an organization (Othman *et al.*, 2018). Team performance is considered an important determinant of member satisfaction and team effectiveness (Hwang, 2018). Iorhen (2019) argued a high-performance team owns these characteristics as a team: (1) Well-defined goals and objectives, (2) Common goal, (3) High commitment, (4) Effective leadership, (5) Relevant skills, (6) Creative ideas, (7) Supportive decisions, (8) Open communications, (9) Mutual trust, and (10) Performance norms.

Conceptual Framework

A startup is a new quickly developing company that uses IT/ICT-enabled services to innovate its products/services and processes (Zaeem-AIEhsan, 2021). As a rather young organization, some errors may occur within the organization. On the other hand, startups must fulfill organizational requirements to create a cohesive working environment and sustainable business. The absence of certainty of a specific role will encourage role ambiguity (Lonteng *et al.*, 2019). It indicates the inability of the organization to achieve any goal and the lack of performance. The urgency of clear division of each role is critical to improve company performance in order to achieve the common goals, visions, and missions. Accordingly, the researchers construct the research framework as the following Figure1.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach to address multidisciplinary, cross-cutting research topics. Qualitative research is a type of technique that focuses on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences in order to better understand individuals' social realities (Mohajan, 2018). In order to understand informants' perspectives and activities, a case study is a suitable method to achieve the research objectives. Case study research is richly descriptive because it is grounded in deep and varied sources of information (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019).

To collect the data for this research, the researchers use in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The interview was conducted online via Zoom for 10-25 minutes with nine main questions about the current role situation, company management, working conditions, and role ambiguity that needs to be answered. However, the interview questions do not restrict follow-up questions to achieve clarity and thorough answers from the interviewees.

The researchers interviewed Catalogy team members and other startup representatives who experienced role ambiguity. The detailed informants' profiles for this interview are as follows: (1) Currently working in a startup, (2) Their startup consists of 3 or

more team members, (3) Have a concern about job division and role clarity, (4) Experience the effect of role ambiguity to their team performance and (5) They have managed the startup at least for six months. Accordingly, the researchers use a snowballing method

to find the representatives who fit the previous characteristics. Therefore, this method allows the researchers to be introduced to other informants with the same profile as their previous informants.

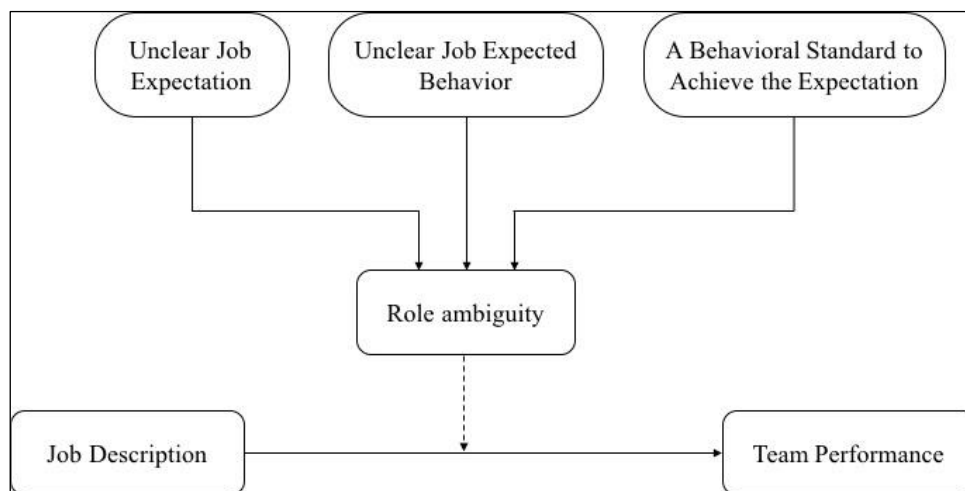


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interview with seven informants, four startup representatives, and Catalogy team members, these startups do not explicitly claim they experienced any role ambiguity inside their startups. However, the outcomes become significantly complex as there are newly discovered role ambiguity factors to startup. The effect of role ambiguity has become more prominent in small teams and/ or organizations. During the interview, one of the informants, Mr A, mentioned that

"In the end, this business or projects did not happen because our team was still too small and we were not capable of obtaining these collaborations yet." -Mr A

These startups faced several challenges in growing their business due to limited human resources. Other than small team size, they admitted that particular expertise and knowledge in pursuing their position are important. Nevertheless, these startups were fundamentally initiated to carry out academic program obligations, which did not cater enough diversity of proficiencies for the team. A comment from Mr. F, another informant,

"... for instance, if Catalogy has grown and experienced increase in team members, it would be easier to distribute tasks among them. As a result, each division would work according to their specific assigned tasks and responsibilities." -Mr. F

Moreover, each informant may share a different level of compassion and devotion towards the business. This leads to work neglect and builds pressure

on other team members. In certain cases, the person who oversees their responsibilities is not aware of the cause of their actions. These neglects produce responsibility confusion inside the team and eventually initiate unnecessary ambition to take over specific tasks. Ms. E confessed that her initiatives to show examples to her team backfired as she received additional tasks. Ms. E, stated

"At first, I wanted to show examples because it is okay to show an example. But over time, they relied on me too much (to finish the work)." -Ms E

Accordingly, Ms O believed that they must take over some of the existing assignments because some members do not execute their work well. As the commitment fluctuates over time, it will provoke complex situations within the business as it will determine how the business will operate in the near future and what type of decisions are crucial to make. Ms O said,

"However, in the end, there is always an issue where the team member did not commit to their job and we cannot simply remove their tasks... So, sometimes, the only way out is to carry out the team and cover up what has been missing." -Ms O

Additionally, poor team management and inadequate job division make these startups more vulnerable to low team performance. Objective Key Results (OKR) is the most popular team management tool often utilized to determine common goals. Consequently, these startups start monitoring and controlling through meetings and evaluations when it is

laborious to attain those objectives. Nevertheless, these startups are unable to utilize the established OKR due to several circumstances. Ms. Y mentioned that,

“... The OKRs themselves also lack clarity. For instance, if we want to focus on sales, it should be specified what aspects of sales we are targeting. We need to clearly define whether it is about quality or quantity. It should not be a matter of who is responsible for the quantity and who is responsible for the quality, but rather, everyone should feel collectively responsible for both aspects. This way, we can enhance our sense of accountability towards achieving those objectives...” -Ms Y

Another team management method is applied in corresponding to the latest situation inside the company. On certain occasions, the team members will take charge of some tasks assigned to other positions. This condition usually happens when the assigned person cannot accomplish the given work because of internal and external issues. Although they try to communicate their concerns, miscommunication can

occur. This miscommunication not only causes confusion on task responsibility but also triggers tensions between team members. Moreover, these startups are unable to gain advantageous growth due to unsettled disputes. A statement from another informant, Ms. R,

“It (the initiative) affects the communication (within the team)... It leads to miscommunication, lack of coordination inside the team... That (the initiative) eventually influences people’s confidence (at work).” -Ms R

Ms. R also believes that these initiatives come from the position of the founder of the business, which generates a sense of belonging toward the business and the desire for the business to succeed. However, the taken choice and movement are only partially acceptable business-wise.

From these research findings, new attributes that could produce role ambiguity within startups can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Finding Summary

Sectors	Sub Sectors	Indicators
Organizational Exigencies	Organizational Size	Number of Employees
		Existing Role Functions
	Employee Capabilities	Skill
		Knowledge
		Motivation; passion
Team Composition	Commitment	
Organizational Behaviors	Job Division	Field of Expertise
		Assigned Tasks
		Responsibility
	Team Management	Work delegation; initiative
		Common goals
		Team Management Tools
	Team Monitoring	
	Team Controlling	

Reflecting on Iorhen’s (2019) opinion about high-performance team characteristics, these startups do not own every mentioned attribute. In fact, they can only fulfill little to none of those qualities. The role ambiguity they have and/ or currently experiencing develops a significant impact on their team performance. It is agreeable that they can still acquire various accomplishments despite their low performance as a team. The lack of clarity, communication, harmonious team environment, and the absence of individual initiatives and devotion generate discouraging team surroundings. These conditions eventually lead to unproductive and ineffective team performance.

In addition, these research findings exhibit the prominent effect of role ambiguity on team

performance. Regardless of being a startup, role ambiguity can emerge in a small organization where there is a lot of work that must be accomplished. If the implementation of job analysis and job description lacks transparency, it will encourage confusion that ultimately forms role ambiguity. Increasingly, the degree of the condition's severity will significantly impact the team’s performance.

There is no universal solution to solve role ambiguity. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that communication is an important aspect often forgotten by startups. The function of communication is not only to talk about work progress but also to discuss various issues that disturb the company as a whole and/ or the individuals inside the team. Individual concerns are as important as organizational concerns because the team

depends on each member's effort. Further, commitment to work is also a compelling instrument to solve role ambiguity. Building a business is similar to building a relationship since each party is responsible for establishing and maintaining the relationship. Working inside a team is an individual duty to fulfill every organizational vision, mission, and goal. Accordingly, commitment determines the work culture inside the startup. So, it is compulsory to improve team commitment before expanding business operations.

Conclusively, it is exceptionally important for business leaders to create a clear job division and direct team management. An explicit difference of expectations, authorities, and responsibilities assists each team member in addressing their roles inside the organization. It is recommended to ensure team members work within role differentiation and implement those distinctions in the real-working environment. Furthermore, direct team management with meticulously scheduled activities, such as meetings, evaluations, and work deadlines, will support the team to work accordingly. As humans are prone to mistakes, it is best to set up particular mitigations and backup plans to ensure the business progress is on track. Eventually, the organization can perform well as a team.

CONCLUSION

In summary, role ambiguity in startups is driven by various factors divided into two groups: (1) Organizational Exigencies and (2) Organizational Behaviors. Each instrument plays a significant contribution to the role of ambiguity existence.

Role ambiguity intervenes in the team to excel in performance due to internal conflicts between each team member. It builds unnecessary tension within the team and creates additional stress and pressure on other team members responsible for finishing the tasks. In addition, behavioral negligence toward work and acts of indifference to other team members have impacted the team heavily. Miscommunication that leads to role ambiguity also produces internal conflicts, and intensive coordination and discussion with team members are the key. When these attributes are not fulfilled, the startup cannot achieve advantageous opportunities, partnerships, and company vision and missions. Role ambiguity within the startup influences an organization's inability to obtain common goals. Therefore, it is important for role holders to be responsible for their roles and the team while being devoted to their assigned work. Consequently, it can minimize role ambiguity effects on team performance.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, S., & Alqaarni, S. (2023). Job Analysis in Organizations: Transition From Traditional To Strategic. *International Journal of Professional*

Business Review, 8(5), 1–18.

- Azzahra, S., Ilmi, Z., & Wijaya, A. (2021). The Influence of Role Ambiguity, Job Stress and Leadership on Job Satisfaction and Employee Turnover at PT. Bank BRI Syariah Samarinda. *Saudi Journal of Business and Management Studies*, 6(1), 15–23. <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjbms.2021.v06i01.003>
- CahayaSanthi, Melda, N. P., Piartrini, & Saroyini, P. (2020). The Effect of Role ambiguity on Work Related Stress and Employees' Work Satisfaction. *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, 4(6), 99–107.
- Gill, A. N., Ilyas, M. A., Fellow, R., Awan, R. A., & Raza, M. (2021). Role Ambiguity And Role Conflict On Organizational Performance In Telecommunication Sector: Taking Job Satisfaction As A Mediator. *Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology*, 18(10), 1215–1228.
- Hussien, S. M., Soliman, W. S., & Khalifa, A. A. (2021). Benefits of Pet's Ownership, a Review Based on Health Perspectives. *Journal of Internal Medicine and Emergency Research*, 2(1), 1–9. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37191/Mapsci-2582-7367-2\(1\)-020](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37191/Mapsci-2582-7367-2(1)-020)
- Hwang, M. I. (2018). Relationship between Teamwork and Team Performance: Experiences from an ERPsim Competition. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 29(3), 157-168.
- Iorhen, P. T. (2019). Strategies For Developing High Performing Work Teams (HPWTS) In Modern Organizations. *Journal of Business Management and Economic Research*, 3(2), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.29226/R1001.2019.106>
- Junça-Silva, A. (2022). Friends with Benefits: The Positive Consequences of Pet-Friendly Practices for Workers' Well-Being. *International Journal Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(1069), 1–10. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031069>
- Lonteng, E. ., Kindangen, P., & Tumewu, F. (2019). Analysis of Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Towards Cyberloafing at Pt. Bank Sulutgo Manado. *Jurnal EMBA2*, 7(4), 5973–5982.
- Mauliadiani, R. S., Siahaan, E., & Harahap, R. H. (2019). The Influence of Job Description and Leadership on the Employees' Work Effectiveness at the Sanitation and Landscaping Agency of Medan with Supervision as Moderating Variable. *International Journal of Research & Review*, 6(8), 478–493.
- Mohajan, H. K. (2018). Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects. *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, 7(01), 23–48.
- Nurhayati-Wolff, H. (2022). *Indonesia: pet ownership rate 2022*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1325607/indonesia-pet-ownership-rate/>
- Othman, A. K., Hamzah, M. I., & Nor, A. M. (2018). The Influence of Team Characteristics on

Team Performance Among Employees at Selected Telecommunication Companies. In *Proceedings of the 2nd Advances in Business Research International Conference* (pp. 271–288). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6053-3_26

- Patnaik, S., & Pandey, S. C. (2019). Case Study Research. In *Methodological Issues in Management Research: Advances, Challenges, and the Way Ahead* (pp. 163–179). <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78973-973-220191011>
- Ramhit, K. S. (2019). The impact of job description and career prospect on job satisfaction: A quantitative study in Mauritius. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17(7), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v17i0.1092>
- Robbins, S., & Judge, T. A. (2020). *Organizational behavior 18ed*. Pearson Education.
- Switasarra, A. V., & Astanti, R. D. (2021). Literature Review of Job Description: Meta- analysis. *International Journal of Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management*, 3(1), 34–41. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24002/ijieem.v3i1.4923>
- Thahjadi, K., & Cahyadi, F. P. (2020). The Influence of Time Pressure, Role Ambiguity, Workload And Lack of Motivation On Employee Performance. *Media Bisnis*, 12(2), 153–160.
- Young, J., Pritchard, R., Nottle, C., & Banwell, H. (2020). Pets, touch, and COVID-19: health benefits from non-human touch through times of stress. *Journal of Behavioral Economics for Policy, COVID-19 Special Issue 2*, 4(2), 25–33.
- Yousefi, M., & Abdullah, A. G. K. (2019). The Impact of Organizational Stressors on Job Performance among Academic Staff. *International Journal of Instruction*, 12(3), 561–576.
- Zaeem-ALehsan. (2021). Defining a startup- A critical Analysis. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3823361>