

Role Creep: Illumines from the Reactance and Expectancy Theories

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Abstract

At the onset of the covid-19 pandemic, hitherto unexperimented work models were quickly resorted upon as an emergency response to work disruptions, with organizations implementing various measures to mitigate against work and workplace disruptions. Although many organizations have now progressively adapted to a new normal of working, some organizations are still tinkering with different work models in order to survive through the pandemic, with some opting to implementing a head count reduction strategy as a means of maintaining competitiveness, which consequently has led to some organizations suffering from the effects of role creep. This article consequently delves on the challenges that role creep occasions to organizations. Premising on the illumines of the reactance theory and the victor vroom expectancy theory, the article seeks to propose managerial implications of the theories in relation to work designs, with a view of shedding light on how work designs need to be undertaken in challenging times such as in the era of the covid 19 pandemic.

Key Words: Role Creep, Reactance Theory, Expectancy Theory.

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I. BACKGROUND

Studies indicate that employee workload increase can lead to surges in work related stress in organizations (Kenny,2018; Smyth,2017). Workload increases have also been linked to physical and mental health issues in employees (Kouritzin,2020) besides being also linked to lowered employee productivity in organizations (Kenny,2018). Stevenson and Harper (2006) indicate that other undesirable effects of unsustainable workloads in employees include irritability, drug and substance abuse, withdrawal from social groups and increased employee absenteeism.

On the flipside, little workload has been argued to lead to employees being lazy, which leads to reduced employee productivity, and also leads to increased employee participation in organizational politics (Rajan,2018). Accordingly, it is imperative that organizations design jobs with optimal workload, for manageable employee workload can indeed lead to desirable individual and organization outcomes such as enhanced employee job satisfaction, enhanced employee motivation and enhanced employee task performance (Munandar, Musnadi & Sulaiman,2019).

Workload is essentially a mental construct that is defined by the perception of what an individual's mental processing capabilities are vis a vis what is required to undertake a task (Hart & Staveland, 1998). It is informed by an employee's assessment of the tasks that are to be completed within a pre-determined work time (Wefald, Savastano & Downey, 2012). Even so, workload, both in its qualitative and quantitative aspects, can also be operationally defined to imply a complex interaction of variables including job volume, type of work, level of difficulty in doing a job and job responsibility (Susiarty, Suparman & Suryatni, 2019).

Tracing back to the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, there have been increased attempts by organizations to tinker with new ways of working to adapt to the challenges occasioned by the pandemic. This has included relatively novel working ways such as the use of virtual teams, work from home options and other remote working options (Ingusci, Signore, Luisa, Manuti, Molino, Russo & Zito, 2021).

Regrettably, many employees were not prepared for the rapid shift to alternative working options as necessitated by the covid 19 pandemic (Barbuto, Gilliland, Peebles, Rossi & Shrout, 2020). This, compounded with the fact that there were few evidence backed studies on best ways to implement the alternative ways of doing work, has led to employees reporting workload increases and with it greater cognitive, emotional, temporal and performance related demands (Rodríguez-López, Rubio-Valdehita, & Díaz-Ramiro 2021; Lucchini & Bambi, 2020).

Organizations have nonetheless indicated the will to continue using alternative work options even after the pandemic has been contained (Monica, Fulvio, Amelia, Maria, Vincenzo, Margherita & Claudio, 2020). This is from the fact that benefits such as improvements in performance, reduced operating expenses, saved time and organizational resources and higher employee satisfaction have been reported in some organizations following adoption of alternative work designs (Monica et al., 2020; Thulin, Vilhelmson & Johansson, 2020).

Given that there is scantiness of evidence on the benefits of adoption of some of these alternative work designs, it is imperative that human resource thinkers continue to explore the literature with a view of building a sound foundation for refinement of these alternative work designs as they can be sources of role creep in organizations (Rudolph, Allan, Clark, Hertel, Hirschi, Kunze, Shockley, Shoss, Sonnentag & Zacher, 2020). Accordingly, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on design of jobs in an era of a pandemic by interrogating the provisions of two theories viz the reactance theory by Jack Brehm and the expectancy theory by Victor Vroom.

ROLE CREEP

Role creep refers to the gradual but informal expansion of an employee's workload to the point that an employee's assigned work becomes a source of unbearable pressure. Van and Ellis (2004) likewise define it as the slow but subtle enlargement of an employee duties such that the extra roles become added to the in-role behavior of an employee leading to increased work pressure.

The concept is not recent in the literature as role creep antecedents, forms and effects have been researched and discussed variously in the literature across the years. Examples include in studies in understanding spontaneous role behavior (e.g., in Katz & Kahn, 1966; 1978), in studies on employee role making, that is, where employees modify job scope to fit personal preferences (e.g., in Graen, 1976) and in studies in understanding job crafting (e.g., in Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Even so, role creep is a complex construct that is caused and compounded by many internal, external, and extra organizational factors (Capelli, 1997). Van and Ellis (2004) argue that it also stems from a hodgepodge of variables such as organizational citizenship behavior, extra role behavior, spontaneous behavior, role making and job crafting therefore making it plausible to be elucidated from theories touching on cognitive aspects, such as the reactance theory (Van & Ellis, 2004).

THE REACTANCE THEORY

The reactance theory is attributed to a cognitive psychologist Jack Brehm and addresses issues around the motivation to resist the social influence of others who have threatened to take or have actually taken away an individual's freedom (Brehm, 1966). Steind, Jonas, Sittenthaler, Traut & Greenberg (2015) argue that reactance is fundamentally an unpleasant motivational arousal that arises when people experience a threat to their free behaviors and hence it is principally a motivator force to restore one's freedom in the circumstances of loss of one's free behavior.

The level of reactance is dependent on the importance of the threatened freedom and also on the perceived magnitude of the threat (Steind et al., 2015). Threats to an individual's loss of free behavior, however, can generally be categorized as internal threats, that is, those that are self-imposed arising from exercising choice of specific alternatives over other options: or can be categorized as external threats, that is, those that arise from impersonal situational factors (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

The type of threat notwithstanding, reactance leads to changes in behavior where an individual's cognitive efforts are ignited, with accompanying changes in emotional states which leads to expressions of hostility, anger, and aggression, in a bid to try to force the removal of the perceived threats (Steind et al., 2015). Reactance can also be subtle and outside conscious awareness (Miron & Brehm, 2006).

Whereas the reactance theory is often times argued to be a theory of motivation, as an individual's reactance has behavior-directing properties which leads to the individual having a strong desire to do something (Steind et al., 2015), from empirical studies, reactance is mostly seen to lead to negative cognitions (Rains, 2013). The predominant feeling in reactance, nevertheless, is that of anger, driving cognitive psychologists to debate on whether reactance could be the same as anger (Harmon, Harmon & Price, 2013). The fact that reactance elicits anger is, however, an influential posit as anger is an important source of approach motivation, which is the type of motivation that drives an individual to move towards a targeted thing (Harmon-Jones, 2003, 2004).

Examples of scholars who have taken the tangent that the reactance theory is a theory in motivation include Leander, Dellen, Rachl-Willberger, Fitzsimons and Chartrand (2016) and Steindl et al. (2015). However, the major difference between psychological reactance and other types of motivations is the fact that in as much as reactance catalyzes a number of goal-directed cognitions and behaviors, reactance is primarily a negative motivational state whose effects are quite pervasive (Proulx, 2012). Negative outcomes to reactance in the context of the workplace may include reduced employee creativity, increased myopic thinking in employees and employees being hyper focused on relevant stimuli (Siegel, 2013).

In discussing reactance in the context of motivation, it is valuable to consider the moderating role of individual differences (Quick, 2010). This is because reactance proneness is a predictor of certain decadent behaviors such as drug and substance abuse (Stephenson, Palmgreen, Hoyle, Donohew, Lorch & Colon, 1999). Moreover, highly competent individuals are also significantly more prone to reactance than low competence individuals which may be an issue of concern to managers in organizations (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Wicklund & Brehm, 1968).

Van and Ellis (2004) argue that the reactance theory is useful in understanding role creep in organizations. This is because role creep has the initial effect of increasing an employee's self-evaluation from the additional responsibilities as assigned by a supervisor: but over time the additional obligations lead to a sense of an employee feeling a threat on personal freedom which then leads to the employee expressing a negative voice in a bid to regain the lost freedom (Van & Ellis, 2004). As important, additional responsibilities as in the case of the initial phases of role creep usually also have an effect of increasing an individual employee's expectations mainly from the feeling of superiority over peers, causing such employees to have an expectancy of special treatment from their organizations and supervisors (Van & Ellis, 2004). This consequently places a demand on organization managers to comprehend the arguments of the Victor Vroom's expectancy theory.

EXPECTANCY THEORY

Victor Vroom (1964) is credited to have come up with the expectancy theory. The theory, also known as the VIE theory, is categorized as a process theory of motivation, and is concerned with the cognitive antecedents that go into an individual's motivation. The crux of the theory is that motivation is a cognitive process that drives individuals to correlate the effort they put into work, the performance from the effort, and the rewards they receive from their effort and performance of work (Lunenburg, 2011).

The theory is founded on four basic assumptions. The first assumption is that individuals join organizations with expectations, and the expectations are mainly about their individual needs, their motivations, and their past experiences. According to Vroom (1964) these expectations affect how individuals react to the organization. The second assumption is that individual behavior is a result of deliberate and conscious choice, signifying that people choose behaviors motivated by their own expectations. The third assumption is that different individuals have different sets of goals and expectations, with examples of such expectations including good salaries, job security, promotions, and career advancement. The fourth assumption is that people generally tend to choose among alternatives with a view of optimizing outcomes that are beneficial to them as individuals (Lunenburg, 2011).

Based on the four assumptions, the expectancy theory has three main components: Expectancy, Instrumentality, and Valence (Stecher & Rosse, 2007). The relationship between the components is that a person will be motivated to the degree that he or she believes that his or her effort will lead to acceptable performance (Vroom called this expectancy) and that the performance will be rewarded (in the theory this is what is referred to as instrumentality), and that the value of the rewards will be highly positive (this in the theory is what is referred to as valence). From these three elements, Vroom (1964) posited that the motivation force of an individual can be computed as:

$$\text{Motivation Force} = \text{Valence} \times \text{Expectancy} \times \text{Instrumentality}$$

According to the theory, there is a linkage between an individual's perceived effort and his or her expectation of performance, in what is referred to as the E-P linkage. Principally, the E-P linkage expresses the fact that for an individual to be first motivated to undertake a task, they must believe that the task will result to a certain performance, and that the performance is actually attainable (Isaac & Pitt, 2001). The theory furthermore argues that there is a linkage between performance and outcomes in what is represented by a P-O linkage ((Isaac & Pitt, 2001) with the substance of the P-O linkage being that a person will only perform to the desired levels if they are cognitively persuaded that the performance will lead to desired outcomes, such as rewards. As important, for the P-O linkage to be reinforced, it is imperative to ameliorate any ambiguities regarding expectations on the desired outcomes (Fang, 2008).

Even though the theory has received criticism multifariously, a number of studies have validated it across several settings, leading to some scholars to aver of its applicability in today's organizations (Ivancevich, Konopaske & Matteson, 2012). Pranav and Shilpi (2014) accordingly contend that the theory is cogent and can be useful in understanding how to design work, work environments, cultures, and climates. In quoting Cole and Kelly (2012), Pranav and Shilpi (2014) overtly argue that the theory has expounded how factors such as task variety, autonomy, task identity and feedback, which are key elements in job characteristics, can be used to drive employee motivation thereby leading to enhanced organizational performance.

The applicability of this theory in role creep studies lies in the fact that it emphasizes on the need for equity in the design of employee workload (Mathibe, 2008). Such emphasis on equity in workload is indeed vital as role creep advances inequity in employee workload thereby negatively impacting employees, especially the equity seeking type (Kenny, 2018) resulting to a toxic organizational work climate (Van & Ellis, 2004) and a demotivated workforce (Mathibe, 2008).

ANALYSIS OF THE THEORIES FROM A JUXTAPOSED POSITION.

The literature reviewed in the preceding section suggests that the crux of the two theories is on the importance of focusing on cognitive antecedents in individuals, which may in the design of work contextually imply the imperativeness of centering on employee psychological contracts (Van & Ellis, 2004; Mathibe, 2008). Kreitner and Kinicki (2007) view psychological contracts as individual perceptions regarding the terms and conditions expected in a reciprocal exchange between an individual and another transacting party. As important, psychological contracts are seen to inform expectancy, as in the vroom expectancy theory (Mathibe, 2008) and are also a basis of employee reactance in the circumstance of role creep (Van & Ellis, 2004).

The literature reviewed also indicates that both theories lay emphasis on the primacy of individual differences in the conceptualization of motivated behavior. However, in the expectancy theory, motivated behavior is seen to be reliant on other factors, that is, valence and instrumentality, to determine the motivating force of an individual (Vroom, 1964). If any of these other factors is missing, then the multiplication assumption of the theory is that the motivating force will be zero (Lunenburg, 2011). On the contrary, in the reactance theory, expectation is largely a singular variable that can directly have an effect on an individual's level of motivation, albeit contingent on the magnitude and importance of a given freedom threatening message (Steind et al., 2015).

Motivated behavior is moreover seen to be driven by different triggers from the perspective of the two theories. In the case of the reactance theory, motivated behavior is triggered by negative activates in the form of freedom threatening messages which would lead to individuals developing negative cognitions such as guilt, feelings of anger and aggression (Steind et al., 2015). On the other hand, the expectancy theory typifies a scenario of positive triggers to motivated behavior that make individuals to work harder to attain desired performance levels (Lunenburg, 2011).

Lastly, the expectancy theory can be seen to direct performance from a causal perspective in the sense that instrumentality and valence are seen to interact with expectancy to determine the level of an individual's motivation (Vroom, 1964). Consequently, to increase an individual's motivation, it follows that an increase in valence and instrumentality is required. On the other hand, in the case of the reactance theory, performance has a reverse causality relationship with reactance as stellar individual performance leads to additional workload which then leads to employee psychological reactance (Van & Ellis, 2004).

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

In an era of work disruptions such as in the prevailing covid 19 pandemic, it is required that organization managers draw from sound theoretical perspectives in order to establish inventive work designs. Doing so will not only minimize work disruptions but will also guard against the occurrence of role creep as is currently being reported in some organizations across the globe (Rodríguez-López et al., 2021; Lucchini & Bambi, 2020).

The conceptual literature reviewed indicates that role creep is undesirable owing to its noxious effects on both individual and organizational performance. Theories that may be useful in understanding how to address role creep thus become handy, and some of these theories that may find applicability in the design of jobs include the expectancy theory and the reactance theory (Van & Ellis, 2004; Mathibe, 2008).

The arguments of the expectancy theory on addressing role creep mainly gravitate around employee expectancy, valence, and instrumentality (Vroom, 1964). Lunenburg (2011) argues that an understanding of three linkages in the theory viz Effort-to-Performance Expectancy, Performance-to-Reward Expectancy and Valences of Rewards is vital and indeed so if the concerns of role creep are to be addressed in organizations.

To address effort to performance expectancy, Lunenburg (2011) argues that managers ought to enhance employee self-belief in their undertaking of tasks. Ways of doing this includes clarification of job requirements, provision of required training, provision of sufficient time and resources to undertake tasks, listening to employees' suggestions on ways to change their jobs, attempting to alleviate problems that may hinder effective performance and providing coaching to employees who lack self-confidence (Lunenburg, 2011).

To strengthen the Performance-to-Reward Expectancy, managers ought to increase employee confidence that acceptable performance will result in valued rewards (Lunenburg, 2011). This can be done through measuring job performance accurately, clearly describing the rewards that will result from good performance, describing how an employee's rewards are based on performance, providing employees with examples of those whose good performance has resulted in higher rewards and having concrete acts accompany

statements of intent (Lunenburg, 2011). Organization rewards can either be monetary (Dunn, 2009; Mercer, Carpenter, & Wyman, 2010) or non-monetary (Markham, Dow, & McKee, 2002).

To improve on the valance of rewards, managers should individualize rewards by understanding what individual employees value, as different employees value different things (Lunenburg, 2011). Managers can also improve on the valance of rewards by minimizing the presence of counter valent rewards which would otherwise cause employees to perform their jobs at minimum levels despite the fact that formal rewards and the job itself have been designed to motivate them to perform at higher levels (Lunenburg, 2011).

The reactance theory contribution in the understanding of how to mitigate against role creep in organizations primarily lies in cases where there is an over fulfillment of obligations (Van & Ellis, 2004). Its areas of applicability in work design studies can nonetheless be narrowed down to its interconnection with employee organizational citizenship behavior (Van & Ellis, 2004). Consequently, if the effects of role creep are to be mitigated in organizations, managers must address issues that affect organizational citizenship behavior. One way of doing this is by ensuring equitable employee workload through clarifying and demarcating employee role boundaries (Van & Ellis, 2004)

II. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this article, we have argued from the expectancy theory and the reactance theory to come up with areas of managerial implications of these theories in addressing concerns of role creep in organizations. Based on the literature, the areas of managerial implications discussed can be explored as propositions for a theoretical framework for future research on role creep in organizational settings, especially where employees have embedded and continuing relationships. Even so, such research should consider additional theoretical perspectives propounded in the social exchange theory, as these may help identify additional factors that buttress reactance.

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