


Understanding the Role of Role Clarity in Mediating the Relationship Between Workload and Burnout

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the mediating role of role clarity in the relationship between workload and work burnout among employees in Romania. This research adopted a descriptive correlational design. A total of 400 full-time employees from various sectors in Romania participated in the study, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires: the Quantitative Workload Inventory (QWI) for workload, the Role Clarity subscale of the Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale for role clarity, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) for work burnout. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were conducted using SPSS-27 to explore the relationships among the variables. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed in AMOS-21 to assess the mediating effect of role clarity on the link between workload and burnout, and to evaluate the overall fit of the proposed model. The results revealed that workload was positively correlated with burnout ($r = .53, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with role clarity ($r = -.41, p < .001$). Role clarity was also negatively associated with burnout ($r = -.46, p < .001$). The structural model demonstrated good fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.08$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .052). SEM analysis confirmed that role clarity significantly mediated the relationship between workload and burnout, with both direct ($\beta = .45, p < .001$) and indirect effects ($\beta = .16, p < .001$) being statistically significant. These findings suggest that high workload increases burnout levels, but the presence of clear role expectations can mitigate this effect. Enhancing role clarity within organizations may serve as a critical strategy for reducing employee burnout and improving workplace well-being.

Keywords: Workload, Role Clarity, Burnout.

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of organizational behavior, burnout has become a critical concern across various professional domains, especially in high-demand occupational settings. Burnout is no longer seen as a personal failure but as a consequence of prolonged exposure to job stressors and inadequate structural support. Defined by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal efficacy, burnout has a far-reaching impact not only on individual employees but also on organizational outcomes such as productivity, job commitment, and turnover intention (Ali, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic, technological disruption, and new work models have further intensified workload-related stressors and challenged existing organizational structures to manage employee well-being effectively (Behera, 2025). As such, research into the mechanisms by which workload contributes to burnout, and the protective factors that mitigate this relationship, is essential for developing sustainable work environments.

One such mechanism receiving increasing scholarly attention is role clarity, defined as the degree to which employees understand their job responsibilities, expectations, and boundaries. The theoretical foundation for exploring role clarity as a mediator between workload and burnout is grounded in role theory, which posits that role ambiguity and conflict can lead to psychological strain when expectations are unclear or contradictory (Zheng, 2025). Role clarity helps employees navigate organizational demands by providing structure and reducing uncertainty, which can otherwise amplify the psychological impact of high workload (Zaheer et al., 2024). Indeed, studies have demonstrated that employees with higher role clarity experience lower levels of stress and burnout, even under substantial workload conditions (Kim et al., 2022).

Workload itself is multifaceted, encompassing both objective demands such as task volume and subjective perceptions of time pressure and responsibility. When excessive or sustained over time, high workload becomes a potent stressor linked to numerous adverse outcomes including emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and turnover intention (Hisbih et al., 2023). For example, recent findings in the healthcare sector illustrate how high workload correlates with decreased workplace well-being and elevated burnout rates, particularly when compounded by role confusion or lack of organizational support (Hou et al., 2023). Similarly, workplace violence and pressure to perform have been shown to erode psychological resources

and heighten burnout symptoms through intermediate mechanisms like stress and insomnia (Wang et al., 2023).

In contrast, role clarity functions as a critical buffer, enabling employees to allocate resources effectively, manage competing demands, and maintain emotional regulation (Heo & Park, 2024). For instance, studies in clinical and nursing settings have found that clear role definitions significantly reduce job stress by enhancing decision-making confidence and perceived competence (Kim et al., 2022). When employees understand their specific responsibilities and performance expectations, they are better equipped to navigate heavy workloads without becoming overwhelmed (Rosander, 2021). Moreover, role clarity enhances affective commitment and organizational identification, serving as a foundation for positive workplace dynamics and reduced emotional fatigue (Manolache & Epuran, 2023).

The mediation model involving role clarity offers a nuanced understanding of how workload translates into burnout and highlights potential intervention points for organizational development. Empirical studies have begun to explore such models, emphasizing the role of mediating factors in explaining complex workplace phenomena. For instance, perceived emotional intelligence and goal-role clarity have been found to mediate the impact of stressors on organizational identification and satisfaction (Lai et al., 2024; Manolache & Epuran, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of internal psychological constructs in shaping how external stressors are experienced and managed.

The relationship between workload and burnout is also deeply embedded in broader psychosocial and organizational contexts. For example, workplace incivility, discrimination, and inequality have been linked to heightened job stress and burnout, especially when role ambiguity is present (Mehmood et al., 2023; Mosahab & Mosahab, 2022; Mukhtar & Ibrahim, 2024). These factors can erode organizational trust and job engagement, leading to a disengaged workforce prone to emotional exhaustion and cynicism. On the other hand, structured communication, managerial support, and autonomy can strengthen role clarity and improve resilience against high workload demands (Silaban et al., 2024; Zaheer et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding the interplay between structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors is essential for designing effective interventions.

The mediating role of role clarity has also been studied in culturally diverse and sector-specific contexts. For instance,

in technologically driven industries, clear role expectations have been found to enhance organizational identification and innovation by reducing ambiguity and promoting accountability (Lai et al., 2024). In public sector settings, role clarity was positively associated with psychological well-being and reduced turnover intention when stress levels were high (Ali, 2025; Tun et al., 2024). Similarly, studies on correctional officers and social workers have shown that job demands can lead to burnout through mechanisms like stress and sleep disturbances, especially when role boundaries are poorly defined (Tang & Li, 2021; Wang et al., 2024).

Moreover, the impact of workload on burnout cannot be separated from the broader dynamics of mental health and organizational climate. Workplace bullying, perceived injustice, and lack of training opportunities exacerbate the stress-burnout link and are often rooted in unclear roles and expectations (Bhandesa & Wibawa, 2022; Rosander, 2021; Şeşen & Ertan, 2021). Conversely, proactive strategies such as job crafting, performance feedback, and stress management programs have demonstrated efficacy in promoting clarity and preventing burnout-related outcomes (Le et al., 2022; Mukhtar & Ibrahim, 2024). These strategies are particularly relevant in dynamic work environments where employee adaptability and psychological flexibility are crucial.

Recent studies have also emphasized the psychological mechanisms through which role clarity exerts its mediating effects. For example, affective job satisfaction and emotional intelligence have been shown to enhance employees' capacity to handle ambiguity and reduce burnout risk (Lai et al., 2024). Similarly, clarity in role expectations supports higher perceived control and purpose, which are essential for resilience in demanding work environments (Madden et al., 2022; Zong et al., 2021). In this light, role clarity is not merely a structural attribute but also a psychological resource that facilitates coping, goal attainment, and emotional regulation.

Despite the growing recognition of role clarity's importance, empirical studies exploring its mediating function in the specific relationship between workload and burnout remain limited, especially within Eastern European contexts. Romania, as an emerging economy with a rapidly evolving labor market, presents a compelling context for this investigation. Employees in Romania often face structural challenges such as limited resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and evolving organizational cultures, which can contribute to heightened workload and unclear role definitions (Manolache & Epuran, 2023). Understanding

how role clarity functions in this setting can provide valuable insights for policy makers, organizational leaders, and human resource professionals seeking to optimize employee well-being and organizational performance.

To address this gap, the current study aims to investigate the mediating role of role clarity in the relationship between workload and work burnout among Romanian employees.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the mediating role of role clarity in the relationship between workload and work burnout. The statistical population consisted of full-time employees working in various sectors across Romania. A sample of 400 participants was selected using the Morgan and Krejcie sample size determination table, ensuring adequate statistical power for correlational and structural equation modeling analyses. Participants were selected through a convenience sampling method, and inclusion criteria required that individuals be at least 18 years old and have a minimum of one year of work experience in their current role. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent prior to participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Workload

To assess perceived workload, the study employed the Quantitative Workload Inventory (QWI) developed by Spector and Jex in 1998. This instrument is designed to measure the amount of work an employee is required to complete within a specific time frame. The QWI consists of five items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (less than once per month or never) to 5 (several times per day). Higher scores indicate greater perceived workload. The QWI does not include subscales, focusing solely on the quantitative dimension of workload. Numerous studies have confirmed the construct validity and internal consistency of the QWI, with reported Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.80, indicating strong reliability across diverse occupational samples (Annisa et al., 2024; Rožman et al., 2023; Suprpto et al., 2024).

2.2.2. Role Clarity

The variable of role clarity was measured using the Role Clarity subscale of the Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale, originally developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman in 1970. This subscale comprises six items assessing the extent to which employees perceive their job responsibilities, expectations, and goals as clearly defined. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very false) to 7 (very true), with higher scores representing greater clarity in one's organizational role. The Role Clarity subscale has been widely used in organizational research and has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$) and construct validity across various cultural and occupational settings (Zaheer et al., 2024; Zheng, 2025).

2.2.3. Burnout

Work burnout was assessed using the widely recognized Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS), developed by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter in 1996. The MBI-GS evaluates burnout in three dimensions: Emotional Exhaustion (5 items), Cynicism (5 items), and Professional Efficacy (6 items), making a total of 16 items. Respondents rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). Higher scores on Emotional Exhaustion and Cynicism and lower scores on Professional Efficacy indicate a higher level of burnout. The MBI-GS has been validated in numerous international studies and is regarded as the gold standard for burnout assessment. Its reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) typically exceed 0.70 for each subscale, and it has demonstrated strong factorial and construct validity in a variety of occupational and cultural contexts (Wang et al., 2024; Wlazlo et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2025).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Workload	3.84	0.69
Role Clarity	4.62	0.81
Work Burnout	4.11	0.73

The results presented in Table 1 show that the mean score for workload was 3.84 (SD = 0.69), indicating a moderate to high perception of workload among participants. Role clarity had a relatively higher mean of 4.62 (SD = 0.81), suggesting that participants generally perceived their roles as clearly

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two main stages. First, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated using SPSS-27 to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (workload) and the independent variables (role clarity and work burnout). This analysis provided an initial understanding of the direction and strength of the linear relationships among the study variables. Second, to test the hypothesized mediating role of role clarity in the relationship between workload and burnout, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS-21. The SEM analysis allowed for simultaneous examination of direct and indirect paths among variables while accounting for measurement error. Model fit was assessed using standard indices.

3. Findings and Results

Of the 400 participants included in the study, 182 individuals (45.5%) were male and 218 individuals (54.5%) were female. In terms of age distribution, 96 participants (24.0%) were between 20–29 years old, 134 participants (33.5%) were between 30–39 years old, 118 participants (29.5%) were between 40–49 years old, and 52 participants (13.0%) were 50 years or older. Regarding educational background, 48 participants (12.0%) held a high school diploma, 176 participants (44.0%) had a bachelor's degree, 134 participants (33.5%) had a master's degree, and 42 participants (10.5%) had a doctoral degree. In terms of work experience, 92 individuals (23.0%) reported 1–5 years, 146 individuals (36.5%) had 6–10 years, 108 individuals (27.0%) had 11–15 years, and 54 individuals (13.5%) reported more than 15 years of professional experience.

defined. The mean for work burnout was 4.11 (SD = 0.73), reflecting moderate levels of burnout across the sample.

Prior to conducting statistical analyses, the necessary assumptions for Pearson correlation and Structural Equation Modeling were examined and confirmed. Normality was

assessed using skewness and kurtosis values for each variable. All skewness values ranged between -0.81 and $+0.67$, and kurtosis values ranged from -0.54 to $+0.89$, indicating acceptable univariate normality. Linearity was evaluated through scatterplots and confirmed by the visual alignment of data points along a straight line. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which ranged from 1.12 to 1.39, well

below the threshold of 5. Additionally, homoscedasticity was confirmed via residual plots that showed no funneling patterns, and outliers were screened using Mahalanobis distance, with no cases exceeding the critical chi-square value ($\chi^2(3) = 16.27$, $p < .001$). These results support the appropriateness of the data for subsequent correlational and SEM analyses.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Workload	—		
2. Role Clarity	-.41** ($p < .001$)	—	
3. Burnout	.53** ($p < .001$)	-.46** ($p < .001$)	—

Table 2 displays the correlation coefficients between the variables. Workload was significantly negatively correlated with role clarity ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$) and significantly positively correlated with burnout ($r = .53$, $p < .001$).

Additionally, role clarity was negatively correlated with burnout ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher role clarity is associated with lower burnout levels.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Cut-off
χ^2 (Chi-Square)	126.74	—
df	61	—
χ^2/df	2.08	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.052	≤ 0.06

As shown in Table 3, the SEM model demonstrated an acceptable to good fit to the data. The chi-square value was 126.74 with 61 degrees of freedom, resulting in a χ^2/df ratio of 2.08, which falls within the acceptable range. The GFI

(.94), AGFI (.91), CFI (.96), and TLI (.95) all exceeded the recommended cut-off criteria, and the RMSEA value (.052) indicated a good fit, supporting the suitability of the hypothesized model.

Table 4

Direct, Indirect, and Total Path Coefficients of the Structural Model

Path	B	S.E.	Beta	p
Workload \rightarrow Role Clarity	-0.38	0.07	-.41	$< .001$
Role Clarity \rightarrow Burnout	-0.42	0.06	-.39	$< .001$
Workload \rightarrow Burnout (Direct)	0.47	0.08	.45	$< .001$
Workload \rightarrow Burnout (Indirect)	0.16	0.04	.16	$< .001$
Workload \rightarrow Burnout (Total)	0.63	0.09	.61	$< .001$

Table 4 presents the path coefficients obtained from SEM analysis. The direct path from workload to role clarity was

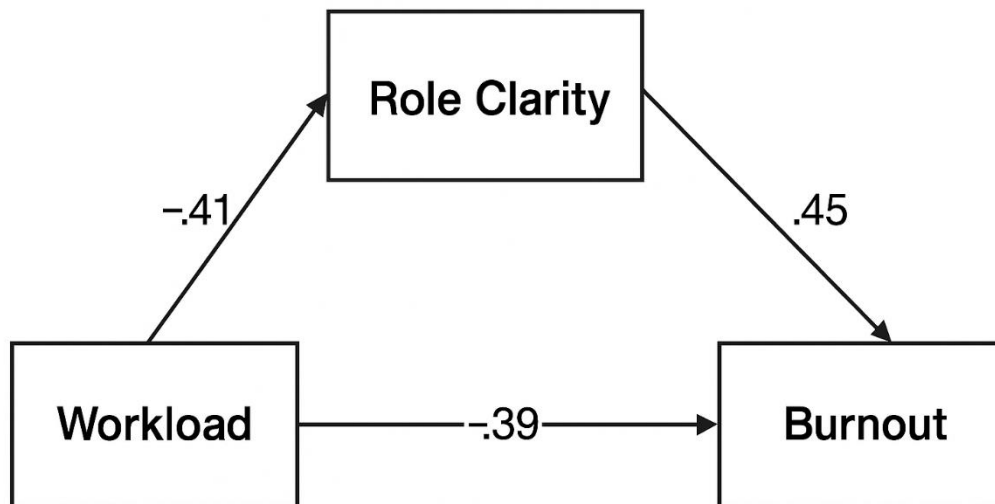
significant and negative ($B = -0.38$, $\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$), indicating that increased workload reduced role clarity. Role

clarity negatively predicted burnout ($B = -0.42$, $\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$), confirming its protective role. The direct path from workload to burnout was positive and significant ($B = 0.47$, $\beta = .45$, $p < .001$), while the indirect path through role clarity

was also significant ($B = 0.16$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .001$). The total effect of workload on burnout was substantial ($B = 0.63$, $\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), confirming both direct and mediated influences in the model.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Coefficients



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of role clarity in the relationship between workload and work burnout among Romanian employees using a descriptive correlational design and structural equation modeling. The findings confirmed a significant positive relationship between workload and burnout, indicating that higher perceived workload is associated with increased emotional exhaustion and psychological strain. Moreover, the results revealed a significant negative relationship between workload and role clarity, suggesting that as employees experience greater workload, their understanding of job expectations and responsibilities diminishes. Finally, the mediation analysis supported the hypothesis that role clarity significantly mediates the relationship between workload and burnout, confirming that when employees have clear role definitions, the adverse effects of workload on burnout are reduced.

These findings align with existing research highlighting the detrimental effects of excessive workload on psychological health. Prior studies have consistently documented that high work demands can exhaust emotional and cognitive resources, leading to burnout symptoms such as depersonalization, fatigue, and reduced efficacy (Ali,

2025; Behera, 2025). For instance, research conducted by Hisbih et al. found that increased workload contributed significantly to turnover intention through elevated stress and diminished well-being (Hisbih et al., 2023). Similarly, Hou et al. demonstrated that high work pressure, coupled with poor role structure, escalated somatic symptoms and sleep disturbances, indirectly increasing burnout in hospital administrators (Hou et al., 2023). These consistent findings across different sectors and cultural contexts emphasize the robust and universal impact of workload as a predictor of burnout.

The present study's identification of role clarity as a protective mediator between workload and burnout is particularly noteworthy. The results showed that when employees possess a clear understanding of their responsibilities, goals, and expected performance standards, the emotional burden imposed by high workload is significantly reduced. This supports the theoretical underpinnings of role theory, which argue that role ambiguity can exacerbate stress and psychological strain by introducing uncertainty and cognitive overload in task execution (Zheng, 2025). The importance of role clarity is further reinforced by studies showing its role in strengthening workplace confidence, reducing anxiety, and

improving decision-making capabilities (Heo & Park, 2024; Kim et al., 2022).

Several empirical studies substantiate the present findings. Kim et al. found that role clarity mediated the relationship between advanced nursing practice and job stress in tertiary hospitals, emphasizing how clear role definitions enhance the ability to navigate complex and high-pressure environments (Kim et al., 2022). Likewise, Zheng's investigation into leader–employee perfectionism incongruence demonstrated that greater role clarity enhanced employee well-being by buffering the psychological strain resulting from misaligned expectations (Zheng, 2025). Zaheer et al. also identified role clarity as a critical organizational factor in telecommunication firms, particularly in developing countries where job structures are often loosely defined and overlapping (Zaheer et al., 2024). These studies corroborate the current findings, reinforcing the importance of role clarity as both a structural and psychological resource.

The inverse relationship observed between workload and role clarity offers valuable insight into how job demands may not only tax emotional resources but also disrupt employees' cognitive frameworks regarding their roles. Heavy workload can overwhelm individuals, forcing them to prioritize task completion over understanding role boundaries or expectations (Rosander, 2021). This erosion of role clarity under pressure can lead to inconsistent performance, role conflict, and organizational inefficiencies. As demonstrated by Manolache and Epuran, lack of goal–role clarity was associated with lower person–organization fit and increased workplace dissatisfaction, ultimately contributing to burnout-related outcomes (Manolache & Epuran, 2023). These findings are echoed in Lai's work, which showed that perceived emotional intelligence and affective job satisfaction were enhanced in environments with clear roles, reducing the risk of burnout and detachment from organizational goals (Lai et al., 2024).

Another important dimension supported by the present study is the indirect buffering role that role clarity plays against workplace stressors. Previous studies have shown that job stress and incivility create a breeding ground for psychological distress and turnover intention, but the presence of supportive structures like role clarity can attenuate these effects (Mehmood et al., 2023; Mukhtar & Ibrahim, 2024). Tun et al.'s research on public health professionals found that role definition significantly predicted job satisfaction and reduced the effects of stress and workplace violence on turnover intention (Tun et al.,

2024). Moreover, Silaban et al. emphasized that organizational commitment and well-structured management systems—key sources of role clarity—diminish perceived stress and enhance job satisfaction among local government employees (Silaban et al., 2024). This constellation of evidence underscores that role clarity is not merely an individual-level factor but a systemic one embedded within broader organizational practices and values.

The present study also resonates with research highlighting the broader psychosocial context of burnout. Factors such as workplace discrimination, inequality, and bullying have been linked to job stress and burnout in prior studies (Mosahab & Mosahab, 2022; Rosander, 2021; Şeşen & Ertan, 2021). These negative organizational experiences often thrive in environments where role definitions are unclear, allowing toxic behaviors to persist unchecked. In contrast, positive organizational climates with clearly defined responsibilities and accountability frameworks can reduce these stressors and promote mental health. This relationship was demonstrated by Mozgovoy's study, which linked psychological climate and stress, further emphasizing the organizational responsibility in shaping employee experiences (Mozgovoy, 2021).

Additionally, the findings of this study extend existing knowledge by confirming that the mediating role of role clarity is relevant across diverse occupational and cultural settings. While much of the earlier literature has focused on healthcare, education, and service industries in Western or East Asian contexts, this study contributes novel evidence from Romania, where labor markets are characterized by post-transition structural shifts and evolving management paradigms (Manolache & Epuran, 2023). The Romanian workforce often operates under ambiguous job structures due to bureaucratic inertia or under-resourced organizations, making role clarity a particularly critical factor in reducing stress and enhancing productivity.

The model tested in this study also complements earlier research on affective commitment and job engagement. For example, Lai et al. demonstrated that employees' emotional engagement with their work is contingent on the clarity of their roles, which in turn enhances organizational identification and reduces burnout symptoms (Lai et al., 2024). Similarly, Kang et al. explored how perceived stress in job searching among graduates was moderated by their clarity about job expectations, underlining the psychological mechanisms by which role clarity functions (Kang et al., 2022). These examples reinforce the present study's

conclusion that role clarity not only mediates but also moderates the effect of workload on psychological outcomes.

Taken together, the present findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how workload and burnout are interconnected and emphasize the central role of role clarity in shaping this dynamic. By confirming the mediating role of role clarity, this study offers both theoretical validation and practical relevance for organizational efforts to reduce burnout and promote psychological well-being in the workplace.

While the study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research utilized a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences between workload, role clarity, and burnout. Future studies using longitudinal or experimental designs would provide more robust conclusions about directionality. Second, data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability or recall biases. Third, while the sample size was adequate, participants were selected using convenience sampling from various sectors in Romania, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to other countries or specific industries. Lastly, while the study focused on role clarity as a mediator, other potential mediators such as emotional intelligence, social support, or autonomy were not examined and could contribute additional explanatory value.

Future research should explore the mediating and moderating roles of additional organizational and psychological variables that may influence the workload–burnout relationship. Longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine changes over time and establish causal links more effectively. It would also be valuable to conduct cross-cultural studies to compare the role of clarity and workload in various national contexts, especially in high-demand industries such as healthcare, technology, and education. Furthermore, future work could investigate intervention strategies that improve role clarity and assess their effectiveness in reducing burnout. Finally, exploring potential interactions between role clarity and individual factors such as resilience, personality traits, or coping styles could offer a deeper understanding of how employees navigate workplace stress.

Organizations should prioritize establishing clear and consistent communication regarding job roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations. Job descriptions should be regularly updated, and employees should have access to performance feedback and structured

orientation programs. Managers and HR professionals should receive training on how to communicate expectations clearly and support employees in understanding their roles. Furthermore, reducing excessive workload through task redistribution, automation, or staff augmentation can relieve pressure on employees. Creating an environment where role clarity is continuously reinforced can improve employee engagement, reduce burnout, and foster a healthier organizational culture.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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