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## Benefits and Disadvantages of Individuals' Multiple Team Membership: The Moderating Role of Organizational Tenure

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**ABSTRACT** Many employees in today's organizations are involved in more than one team at the same time. Building on the challenge-hindrancer stressor framework, this study investigates potential benefits and disadvantages of such multiple team membership (MTM) for individual employees. Furthermore, we extend this framework with insights from the job demands-resources model to propose that, depending on an employee's organizational tenure, individual MTM will differentially shape his or her perceptions of work challenge and role ambiguity, subsequently influencing the employee's job performance and absenteeism. We tested our conceptual model using time-lagged multi-source data from a large organization of applied research ( $N = 1211$ ). Our results demonstrate that, for employees with relatively low organizational tenure, MTM was negatively associated with perceived work challenge and positively associated with perceived role ambiguity, which in turn associated with lower job performance and higher absenteeism. For employees with higher organizational tenure, by contrast, MTM associated positively with their work challenge perceptions and subsequent performance outcomes, whereas MTM was unrelated to perceived role ambiguity as well as absenteeism. These findings identify relevant psychological mechanisms and a key contingency factor that explain when and why MTM may have positive or negative individual-level consequences.

**Keywords:** absenteeism, job performance, multiple team membership, organizational tenure, role ambiguity, work challenge

### INTRODUCTION

A prominent characteristic of contemporary work is that employees are frequently involved in more than one team at the same time (O'Leary et al., 2011a; Rapp and Mathieu,

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2019). Research suggests that such multiple team membership (MTM) is increasingly common in a wide variety of countries, industries, and occupations (Mortensen and Gardner, 2017; Mortensen et al., 2007). In project-based work settings, for example, parallel project teams often share overlapping personnel stock (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). Similarly, health care professionals often work concurrently in multiple patient care teams (Crawford et al., 2019), and knowledge workers are sometimes involved in nine or more concurrent R&D teams (Bertolotti et al., 2015).

In line with this development, scholarly interest in MTM's consequences has increased during the last decade (O'Leary et al., 2011a, 2011b). Most of this research has focused on the organizational and team levels of analysis. Qualitative studies at the organizational level have shown, for example, that organizations use MTM to spread 'expensive resources across teams that don't need 100% of those resources 100% of the time' (Mortensen and Gardner, 2017, p. 58; see also Mortensen et al., 2007). Furthermore, social network research has found that MTM can promote useful information and knowledge flows between simultaneous projects (Vedres and Stark, 2010). Team-level research similarly suggests that MTM may associate with more efficient work routines and better opportunities for intra-team learning, thus improving a focal team's performance (e.g., Bertolotti et al., 2015; Cummings and Haas, 2012). Taken together, these studies paint a picture of MTM as highly efficient and effective, and it seems only logical that organizations are eager to adopt this type of work arrangement.

Importantly, however, this near-exclusive focus on organizational and team outcomes has left us with relatively little insight into how MTM influences an individual employee's experiences and behaviours on the job. Complex work phenomena can have markedly different consequences at different levels of analysis (Heck and Thomas, 2015; Hox et al., 2017), and the scant theory and research on the individual-level consequences of MTM are ambiguous regarding the overall assessment of this type of work arrangement. On the one hand, theorists have emphasized the psychological disadvantages of MTM, depicting this work practice as overly demanding and confusing for individuals (Kauppila, 2014; Wageman et al., 2012). In one of the few empirical studies on the psychological consequences of individual MTM, Pluut et al. (2014) have found, accordingly, that MTM increased employees' perceived job demands and stress experiences and decreased their overall engagement at work. On the other hand, other theoretical (O'Leary et al., 2011a, 2011b) and qualitative investigations (Matthews et al., 2012; Mortensen et al., 2007) have emphasized MTM's potential psychological benefits, suggesting that MTM may improve an employee's perceived opportunities for personal growth, learning, and career advancement. Taken together, these seemingly inconsistent perspectives suggest that employees may differ markedly in how they experience their involvement in multiple simultaneous teams. Importantly, however, the few empirical studies on this issue cannot confidently ascertain whether individual MTM indeed generates such opposing psychological outcomes and, if so, under which circumstances MTM's respective advantages or disadvantages may prevail.

Extrapolating from this ambiguity, the downstream consequences of MTM for individual employees' tangible work behaviours are also uncertain. It is clear that MTM's individual-level effects are unlikely to pertain only to employees' psychological reactions. Rather, through such reactions, MTM may critically shape an employee's productive

and counterproductive behaviours at work (e.g., his or her job performance and absenteeism/withdrawal; LePine et al., 2004; Rapp and Mathieu, 2019). Nevertheless, the scarce empirical research on individual MTM has largely focused on psychological and attitudinal (rather than behavioural) consequences (Pluut et al., 2014) or has examined direct linkages between MTM and positive performance outcomes (i.e., without considering psychological mechanisms and detrimental work behaviours; Van de Brake et al., 2018). Hence, important questions remain as to how the potentially diverse psychological consequences associated with MTM may translate into an employee's desirable and undesirable behaviours at work.

The present study addresses these issues by developing and empirically testing an overarching theoretical model that (a) explains individual employees' complex (i.e., positive and negative) psychological reactions toward MTM, and (b) highlights how these psychological responses may ultimately shape multi-teamers' job performance and absenteeism. Specifically, we draw from the challenge-hindrance stressor framework (LePine et al., 2004, 2005) to suggest that high MTM may trigger both favourable work challenge perceptions (i.e., perceived opportunities for personal growth and gain at work; LePine et al., 2004) and unfavourable perceptions of role ambiguity (i.e., confusion about core responsibilities at work; Rizzo et al., 1970), with tangible consequences for an employee's job performance and absenteeism. Moreover, we build on prior research that has integrated this framework with insights from the job demands-resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Dawson et al., 2016) to propose that an employee's perceptions of MTM as either a challenge or a hindrance may hinge on his or her access to organization-specific resources. Such resource access critically changes over the length of an individual's employment with an organization, as employees increasingly acquire relevant human and social capital (McDaniel et al., 1988; Ng and Feldman, 2011, 2010). On this basis, we predict that MTM's psychological implications and – by extension – its resulting downstream consequences crucially depend on an individual employee's organizational tenure (i.e., the number of years that he or she has worked within the organization; Quiñones et al., 1995).

We empirically test this conceptual model, as depicted in Figure 1, using time-lagged multi-source data from a large organization in the Netherlands, comprising 1211 knowledge workers with differing degrees of MTM. In doing so, we aim to advance theory and research on MTM's potential benefits and disadvantages for individual employees. Specifically, our study responds to recent calls for more research on 'process variables and contingency factors' related to MTM's individual-level consequences (Pluut et al., 2014, p. 345; see also Van de Brake et al., 2018). Our first goal, in this regard, is to illustrate *why* this type of work arrangement may be either detrimental or beneficial for an employee's job performance and absenteeism. We advance theory on individual MTM by explicating the underlying psychological processes that shape these downstream consequences, thus providing valuable new insights that may help organizations to optimize the benefits and minimize the disadvantages of MTM. Second, we strive to resolve important theoretical ambiguities in the MTM literature by illustrating *when* these specific consequences are most likely to unfold. By highlighting an employee's organizational tenure as a key boundary condition, we aim to reconcile previous, seemingly contradictory theory and research that have emphasized either the beneficial or the detrimental consequences of individual MTM. Taken together, this study aims to provide a novel,

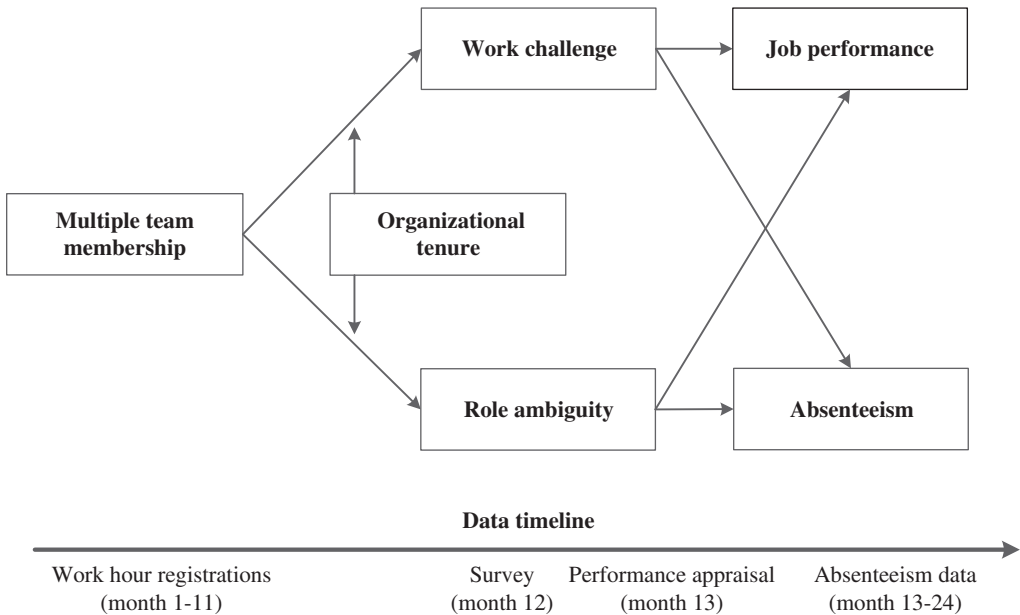


Figure 1. Conceptual model and study design

more complete picture of the psychological and behavioural consequences of MTM that sheds new light on the advantages and disadvantages of this work practice for individual employees.

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Following Pluut et al. (2014) and Van de Brake et al. (2018), we define individual MTM as an employee's number of simultaneous and active team memberships, as reflected in the number of teams to which he or she allocates working time during a certain period (e.g., per week; O'Leary et al., 2011a). With higher MTM, an employee spreads his or her working time across a greater number of teams within the respective period, whereas employees with lower MTM focus their working time on a smaller number of concurrent teams. We note that this definition excludes 'inactive' teams to which employees do not dedicate at least some of their working time (e.g., temporarily discontinued teams), such that it only covers teams that are directly relevant for an individual's work (Pluut et al., 2014).

### A Challenge-Hindrance Perspective on MTM's Individual Consequences

The challenge-hindrance framework posits that employees' psychological responses towards complex and demanding work arrangements depend on their appraisal of the respective situation (Lepine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007). When a work practice is appraised as a challenge, it is seen as a situation that can be dealt with through persistence and increased work effort and that offers the potential for personal gains (e.g., task mastery, career development, and personal growth). When a work situation is

appraised as a hindrance, by contrast, it is seen as harmful to an employee's well-being, threatening his or her goal attainment and personal development (LePine et al., 2005). These psychological reactions associated with an individual's challenge or hindrance appraisals, in turn, may critically shape an employee's work-related behaviours, including his or her job performance and absenteeism (LePine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007).

Notably, research on the challenge-hindrance framework has demonstrated considerable variation in individual employees' perceptions of the same work situation (LePine et al., 2016). A work arrangement perceived as favourable and challenging by some individuals may be seen as an unfavourable type of hindrance by others (Webster et al., 2011). In order to explain these differential psychological responses, recent studies have integrated the challenge-hindrance framework with insights from the job-demands resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). The job-demands resources model posits that an employee's psychological responses to demanding work practices (like MTM) depend on his or her resources on the job. Job resources refer to psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that (a) reduce the psychological and physiological costs associated with highly demanding work practices, and/or (b) stimulate personal growth and development in such situations (Pluut et al., 2014; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Research on the job demands-resources model has frequently illustrated that access to such resources can enable individuals to more productively cope with difficult work situations (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Hence, it is plausible that individuals will lean more towards interpreting a specific, demanding work situation as a positive challenge when they have abundant resources, whereas a lack of resources is more likely to evoke hindrance appraisals in such contexts (Dawson et al., 2016).

Scholars have long argued that the length of an individual's organizational tenure is particularly important in determining his or her access to relevant job-specific and organization-specific resources (Katz, 1978; Ng and Feldman, 2010, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Due to the longer time they have worked within a specific organization, employees with higher (rather than lower) tenure may gain superior knowledge about organizational goals, procedures, principles, and power structures (i.e., human capital resources; Jones, 1986), and they may establish stronger relationships with relevant co-workers, supervisors, and clients (i.e., social capital resources; Lin, 1999; Ng and Feldman, 2011). Consequently, high-tenure employees may be able to draw from relevant organizational resources that allow them to successfully handle diverse problems and requirements and to circumvent key obstacles toward goal attainment (Ng and Feldman, 2013). In what follows, we build on these theoretical notions to suggest that an employee's psychological (and subsequent behavioural) reactions toward MTM (as a complex type of work arrangement that imposes unique demands on individuals) hinge on his or her tenure with the organization. Depending on an employee's respective tenure, we hold that MTM may appear both as a potential challenge (i.e., a source of positive work challenge perceptions) and as a potential hindrance (i.e., a source of role ambiguity) for an individual employee.

## Individual MTM as a Challenge

*MTM and work challenge perceptions.* The challenge-hindrances literature posits that employees are most likely to appraise a stressful situation as a positive challenge when they perceive the respective task requirements (a) as difficult but manageable and (b) as offering the potential for personal growth or gain (Lepine et al., 2005). Following this rationale, there are two important reasons why individual MTM may increase an employee's work challenge perceptions.

First, work arrangements with high MTM typically are relatively demanding and difficult because they require individual employees to regularly relocate their time and attention to different team tools, tasks, and technologies (Leroy, 2009; O'Leary et al., 2011b) and subject an employee to more diverse job requirements across various team settings (O'Leary et al., 2011a). Although this may increase an employee's perceived job strain (Pluut et al., 2014), research also suggests that employees can learn how to be successful in managing these MTM demands over time (Van de Brake et al., 2018). An in-depth qualitative study among 13 employees concurrently involved in multiple teams, for example, found that employees developed more efficient task and time management practices to ease the difficulties associated with multi-teaming (Mortensen et al., 2007). In other words, the MTM literature suggests that employees may use various strategies to effectively navigate this type of work arrangement. Consequently, employees may perceive situations with high MTM as difficult-yet-manageable, possibly evoking positive work challenge appraisals (see Lepine et al., 2005). With lower MTM, by contrast, employees' work demands are likely to be less diverse, difficult, and demanding (Pluut et al., 2014). As such, employees do not need to develop novel task-strategies to successfully cope with their work arrangements and, thus, they are likely to perceive low-MTM situations as less challenging than work arrangements with higher MTM.

Second, higher MTM may promote an employee's perceived potential for personal growth and gain. As O'Leary et al. (2011a, p. 469) noted, MTM exposes an individual to diverse team contexts that allow for 'concurrent and serendipitous variation in the information one has ready access to'. Employees with higher MTM are, thus, in a unique position to sample information from multiple teams, to integrate this information into a new set of behavioural repertoires, and to flexibly apply this knowledge across a variety of team contexts (Lepine et al., 2005). Relatedly, such employees may experience distinct gains from their MTM as it provides them 'with the opportunity to shape their careers by joining projects related to expertise they have or want to develop' (Mortensen et al., 2007, p. 5). By contrast, employees with lower MTM may find it more difficult to directly access diverse teams' information sources (i.e., beyond the confines of their immediate, relatively limited work environment). As such, these latter individuals are less likely to experience challenging opportunities for personal gain and growth at work, as compared with employees in high-MTM arrangements. Hence:

*Hypothesis 1:* An employee's multiple team membership is positively related to his or her work challenge perceptions.

*Organizational tenure and the MTM – work challenge linkage.* As indicated earlier, recent research on the challenge-hindrances framework strongly suggests that individuals differ in how they appraise a specific work situation (Webster et al., 2011). Hence, although we believe MTM has the potential to elicit positive work challenge perceptions, it seems likely that this potential is not equally realized among all employees. Combining insights from the previous argumentation, as drawn from the challenge-hindrances framework (Lepine et al., 2004, 2005) and theory and research on the job-demands resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Dawson et al., 2016), we propose that an employee's organizational tenure may distinctly shape his or her responses to MTM.

Specifically, we argue that employees with higher organizational tenure are particularly likely to appraise high-MTM situations as difficult-yet-manageable and as an opportunity for personal growth and, thus, to perceive MTM as a favourable work challenge. Such employees should have access to important human capital resources that increase their ability to deal with the diverse work processes and task requirements associated with higher MTM (O'Leary et al., 2011a). High-tenure employees' extensive knowledge about organizational procedures and work processes (Bauer et al., 2007; Ng and Feldman, 2010), for example, may enable them to effectively handle their various team tasks across different parts of the organization. Similarly, individuals with higher organizational tenure are likely to have established stronger connections with relevant colleagues and project leaders throughout the organization (Ng and Feldman, 2011). These social capital resources may offer critical support in difficult MTM situations (Hargrove et al., 2015; Lin, 1999), for example when multiple teams overload employees with requests (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006) or impose incompatible or unattainable demands (Pluut et al., 2014). In fact, higher MTM may offer unique growth opportunities for employees with higher tenure because it may help these employees to expand their knowledge and build new relationships, rather than tediously working on the same task and/or in the same interpersonal setting throughout their prolonged time with the organization. Consequently, we anticipate that employees with relatively high tenure in the organization will react particularly favourably toward high-MTM settings, perceiving their work as more challenging when their individual MTM is more rather than less pronounced.

Employees with shorter organizational tenure, by contrast, typically have had fewer opportunities to build relevant human and social capital resources within their organization (Ng and Feldman, 2010, 2011). These relatively inexperienced employees are less familiar with relevant work processes and regulations, and they may still be in the process of learning how to work with a diverse set of co-workers and team leaders (Bauer et al., 2007; Jones, 1986). Accordingly, we anticipate that employees with lower organizational tenure may find it more difficult to have a positive outlook on MTM because they lack the resources required to benefit from their involvement in multiple simultaneous teams. Hence, higher MTM is unlikely to represent an additional, challenging growth opportunity for employees with lower organizational tenure. We therefore propose:

*Hypothesis 2:* Organizational tenure moderates the positive relationship between an employee's multiple team membership and his or her work challenge perceptions. This relationship is significant only among employees with higher (rather than lower) organizational tenure.



*Downstream consequences of individual MTM and work challenge perceptions.* Extending our prior argumentation, we propose that an individual employee's MTM will indirectly relate to his or her tangible work behaviours, via the employee's work challenge perceptions. When work circumstances offer opportunities for personal growth and career progress, in particular, employees are typically motivated to work hard and improve their skills (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Nicholls, 1984). Accordingly, research has shown that appraising a work situation as challenging increases employees' effort and productivity (Podsakoff et al., 2007), and, thus, positively relates with individual employees' job performance (Amabile et al., 1996). Employees in less challenging task environments, by contrast, are generally less inclined to exert effort and improve their expertise and productivity, thus lowering these employee's performance levels (Lepine et al., 2005).

Moreover, research suggests that work challenge perceptions may negatively relate to employees' absenteeism, both voluntary (i.e., as a type of avoidance) and involuntary (i.e., due to health-related issues; Johns and Hajj, 2015). When individual employees perceive their work as favourable and challenging, in particular, they are highly motivated to invest time and energy into their job, decreasing the likelihood of voluntary absenteeism among these individuals (Johns and Hajj, 2015; Lepine et al., 2005) and increasing their willingness to appear at work even when they suffer from minor indispositions (Michie et al., 1989). In addition, positive work experiences tend to buffer feelings of anxiety and depression, which are known to promote involuntary absenteeism (Wedegaertner et al., 2013). Accordingly, prior research has illustrated negative linkages between work challenge appraisals and employees' involuntary absenteeism (Spencer and Steers, 1980). Employees with relatively low work challenge perceptions, by contrast, may try to avoid their work whenever possible (Johns and Hajj, 2015), and they are more likely to experience mental health issues due to boredom and work monotony (Kass et al., 2001), thus promoting absenteeism.

Combined with the reasoning leading up to Hypothesis 1, these arguments cast work challenge perceptions as an important psychological mechanism that links an individual employee's MTM with his or her increased job performance and reduced absenteeism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, our rationale for Hypothesis 2 suggests that the positive linkage between MTM and perceived work challenge only exists among employees with higher rather than lower organizational tenure. Logically, then, we would also expect the indirect linkages between MTM and enhanced job performance as well as reduced absenteeism, as transferred by an employee's challenge perceptions, to be stronger among employees with higher rather than lower tenure (i.e., a pattern of mediated moderation; Preacher et al., 2006).

*Hypothesis 3a:* An employee's MTM is indirectly and positively related to his or her job performance, through work challenge perceptions. This relationship is significant only among employees with higher (rather than lower) organizational tenure.

*Hypothesis 3b:* An employee's MTM is indirectly and negatively related to his or her absenteeism, through work challenge perceptions. This relationship is significant only among employees with higher (rather than lower) organizational tenure.

### **Individual MTM as a Hindrance**

*MTM and role ambiguity.* So far, we have argued that employees (at least those with relatively high organizational tenure) may appraise their individual MTM as a challenge that, consequently, relates positively with their job performance and negatively with their absenteeism. Nevertheless, there are also good reasons to expect that employees may perceive high MTM as a relevant hindrance stressor. Kauppila (2014, p. 737) has noted, in this regard, that when ‘employees work in several teams and report to several managers, role clarity can easily be compromised’. Indeed, relatively high MTM may cause employees to experience ambiguity about their core responsibilities on the job, the value of their work efforts, and the consequences of their actions (Pluut et al., 2014; Van de Brake et al., 2018). A number of studies have demonstrated that such role ambiguities are among the most important sources of hindrance stress perceptions (Lepine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007).

Specifically, employees who are involved in multiple teams at the same time cooperate with numerous supervisors and co-workers across diverse team contexts, and they have limited time to spend within each team (Mortensen et al., 2007; O’Leary et al., 2011a). Employees with higher MTM, therefore, have fewer opportunities to get acquainted with their supervisors’ and teammates’ expertise, expectations, and social characteristics (Mortensen, 2014), and with the specific languages and work values associated with working in each of their teams (Biddle, 2013; Chao et al., 1994). As a result, these employees may lack critical knowledge about how to evaluate their multiple work roles (Kauppila, 2014) and may encounter difficulties in prioritizing what tasks, responsibilities, and opportunities are most important in each of their teams (Biddle, 2013; Sundstrom et al., 1990). By contrast, employees with lower MTM may find it easier to grasp these issues because they can spend a greater share of their working time to familiarize themselves with their colleagues and specific job responsibilities (Mortensen, 2014). Hence:

*Hypothesis 4:* An employee’s multiple team membership is positively related to his or her perceived role ambiguity.

*Organizational tenure and the MTM – role ambiguity linkage.* Again, we combine the above reasoning (based on the challenge-hindrance framework) with insights from the job-demands resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) to suggest that an employee’s organizational tenure will shape the relationship between individual MTM and perceived role ambiguity. Employees with relatively high organizational tenure, on the one hand, can draw from their accumulated human capital resources (e.g., knowledge of organization-wide task procedures, work goals, and power structures; Ng and Feldman, 2011, 2013) to increase their understanding of relevant task expectations even in highly complex work settings (Ferris et al., 2009). Hence, they should find it easier to grasp different task requirements and work processes across multiple simultaneous teams and adapt their work behaviours accordingly. Moreover, high-tenure employees typically have had ample opportunity to familiarize themselves with a relatively large number of

colleagues, supervisors, and/or subordinates over time (Louis, 1980; Ng and Feldman, 2010). Hence, they are likely to have developed a sufficient amount of organization-specific social capital (e.g., in terms of the number and quality of their relationships on the job; Lin, 1999) to correctly understand and prioritize the complex interpersonal demands and responsibilities associated with higher MTM (Chao et al., 1994). As such, organizational tenure may buffer MTM's potentially detrimental consequences for perceived role ambiguity among these employees.

Employees with shorter organizational tenure, on the other hand, should be less familiar with the organization's culture, regulations, and procedures for task accomplishment (Sawyer, 1992). Consequently, these employees may find it difficult to adapt to and prioritize multiple simultaneous teams' demands and activities, particularly when they can only spend relatively small amounts of their working time within each team (as is common with pronounced MTM; O'Leary et al., 2011b). Hence, when faced with high MTM, these employees may have insufficient human and social capital resources to fully understand their diverse clients' and teammates' task demands and social expectations, and to recognize potential synergies between their tasks across different teams (O'Leary et al., 2011a). Consequently, we anticipate that higher MTM will trigger pronounced role ambiguity perceptions for employees with relatively low organizational tenure. In sum, we therefore propose:

*Hypothesis 5:* Organizational tenure moderates the positive relationship between an employee's multiple team membership and his or her perceived role ambiguity. This relationship is significant only among employees with lower (rather than higher) organizational tenure.

*Downstream consequences of individual MTM and role ambiguity.* By promoting perceptions of role ambiguity, we anticipate that the potentially negative consequences of individual MTM may extend toward an employee's relevant work behaviours (i.e., job performance and absenteeism). Meta-analytic evidence suggests, accordingly, that role ambiguity hinders employees' ability to comprehend their task demands and meet performance expectations, thereby decreasing employees' performance on the job (LePine et al., 2005; Tubre and Collins, 2000). Moreover, research has shown that role ambiguity consistently relates to individuals' depression, burnout, and lowered job satisfaction (e.g., Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Schmidt et al., 2014). Hence, role ambiguity may trigger a number of negative attitudes and unpleasant experiences at work, reducing an employee's motivation to invest effort into his or her job and, thus, diminishing his or her effectiveness.

Similarly, prior studies have repeatedly shown positive associations between an employee's perceived role ambiguity and his or her absenteeism (Michie et al., 1989; Michie and Williams, 2003). On the one hand, individuals tend to withdraw from their work to avoid the strain associated with experiences of role ambiguity, contributing to their voluntary absenteeism (Biddle, 2013; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). On the other hand, the type of continuous and prolonged stress experience originating from role ambiguity has been shown to impose extensive psychological and physiological demands that can cause severe

health complaints, ultimately preventing the respective employees' regular work attendance and, thus, promoting involuntary absenteeism (Michie et al., 1989; Selye, 2013).

Integrating this argumentation with the previous hypotheses points toward a pattern of conditional indirect relationships that emphasizes a potentially problematic side of MTM. Combined with our reasoning for Hypothesis 4, in particular, the present rationale suggests a negative indirect relationship between an individual employee's MTM and his or her job performance, and a positive indirect relationship between MTM and absenteeism, with role ambiguity representing a key mediating mechanism. Furthermore, as noted in Hypothesis 5, the positive MTM-role ambiguity linkage should only apply for employees with relatively low (but not relatively high) organizational tenure. Logically, then, organizational tenure should also moderate the indirect MTM-job performance and MTM-absenteeism linkages, through perceived role ambiguity (i.e., mediated moderation). We therefore suggest:

*Hypothesis 6a:* An employee's MTM is indirectly and negatively related to his or her job performance, through perceived role ambiguity. This relationship is significant only among employees with lower (rather than higher) organizational tenure.

*Hypothesis 6b:* An employee's MTM is indirectly and positively related to his or her absenteeism, through perceived role ambiguity. This relationship is significant only among employees with lower (rather than higher) organizational tenure.

## METHOD

### Data and Study Design

We tested our predictions using time-lagged multi-source data from a large organization in the Netherlands that conducts applied contract research in a wide variety of areas (e.g., defence, engineering, transportation, organizational innovation). Work within this organization is primarily structured in team-based research projects, with project managers attracting funding and subsequently staffing project teams with suitable employees. These research projects generally last between 6 and 24 months, typically comprise between 2 and 25 employees, and require extensive exchange of information and materials among team members. Individual employees participate in around 5 to 25 (often concurrent) projects per year. As such, MTM was a relatively common phenomenon within the host organization, providing a viable context for examining our conceptual model.

We used archival sources to measure the study variables. Specifically, we operationalized MTM using employees' official work hour registrations from the first 11 months of 2010, and we drew from the host organization's employee satisfaction survey, as conducted in the final month of 2010, to capture employees' work challenge and role ambiguity perceptions (see Figure 1). In doing so, we ensured that our MTM measure (1) reflected participants' prolonged (rather than temporary) participation in multiple teams (see Van de Brake et al., 2018), and (2) captured relevant experiences that occurred before the measurement of MTM's psychological implications (see also Arjas and Parner,

2004; Shin and Konrad, 2014). Regarding MTM's downstream consequences, an employee's job performance was rated by his or her supervisor at the beginning of 2011. As is common for such performance ratings (see Quiñones et al., 1995), these evaluations referred to the preceding year (i.e., the same period covered by our MTM measure). Absenteeism, by contrast, was tracked over the course of 2011 (i.e., the subsequent year). This timing of measurement is consistent with prior research that has conceptualized absenteeism as a time-lagged response to a prolonged period of highly demanding work (e.g., Johns and Al Hajj, 2015; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Moreover, the respective time lag was necessary to avoid confounding the MTM and absenteeism measures and, thus, artificially inflating their relationship. After all, higher absenteeism during a specific period necessarily implies that employees can spend less time across different work teams during that same period, thus decreasing their MTM (see also Arjas and Parner, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

### Sample

We obtained data for all 1706 research employees that had worked for the organization during the study period (i.e., 2010–11). These employees' jobs were knowledge-intensive (e.g., software development, civil engineering, policy analysis) and highly collaborative because tasks were performed within interdependent project teams. After omitting individuals that had not responded to the organization's employee satisfaction survey, we retained a usable sample of 1211 employees (effective response rate = 71 per cent).

Participants in our final sample were mostly male (73 per cent), their average age was 42 years (SD = 10 years), and they had worked with the organization for an average of 11 years (SD = 9.5 years). Most of these employees were employed fulltime (average working time = 0.94 full-time equivalents), and 87 per cent had permanent working contracts with the host organization. On average, employees worked on 15 projects per year. This illustrates that MTM was highly common in this organization, with almost all of the employees in our final sample (98 per cent) working on more than one project per week at some time during the study period.

### Measures

*Multiple team membership.* The host organization required its employees to digitally register the time they had spent working on different project teams on a weekly basis to determine project costs, billable hours, and capacity utilization. Consistent with our definition of individual MTM as the number of concurrent teams to which an employee allocates working time within a certain period (see also O'Leary et al., 2011a, 2011b; Pluut et al., 2014), we used these work hour registrations to capture the number of teams in which an employee was involved during any given week. To operationalize an individual's MTM, we averaged these measures across the first 11 months of 2010. We omitted projects with less than 3 members to exclude individual-based work and dyadic (rather than team) cooperation (Sundstrom et al., 1990).<sup>4</sup> On average, the employees in our sample distributed their working time across 2.92 teams per week during the study period.

*Work challenge.* We used three items from the organization's employee satisfaction survey to measure work challenge perceptions. Employees rated, on a scale from 1 (*low*) to 10

(*high*), their satisfaction with ‘the amount of challenge in your work’, ‘the extent to which your work is useful’ and ‘the extent to which you can use your creativity in your work’. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.81. We note that these items closely mirror prior definitions of perceived work challenge. Amabile et al. (1996, p. 1166), for example, define work challenge as ‘a sense of having to work hard on challenging tasks and important projects’. Furthermore, we conducted a separate validation study to establish the viability of the present measure (see Appendix).

*Role ambiguity.* We used three additional items from the organization’s employee satisfaction survey to capture perceived role ambiguity. On a scale from 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*), employees were asked to rate how satisfied they were with ‘the extent to which I know what is expected of me’, ‘the extent to which I have a clear understanding of what is going on in the organization’, and ‘the extent to which it is clear how my performance is evaluated’. These items closely resemble items from existing role ambiguity measures (e.g., Rizzo et al., 1970; see Appendix for validity information). Cronbach’s alpha was 0.72. We reverse coded all items so that higher scores indicate greater role ambiguity.

*Organizational tenure.* We used the number of years an employee had worked for the organization to measure organizational tenure (Ng and Feldman, 2011). This information, along with other demographic data, was obtained from the host organization’s department of human resources.

*Job performance.* At the beginning of each year, the host organization’s human resource management system requires department-level supervisors to assess each of their direct subordinates’ overall job performance during the past year. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Bommer et al., 1995; Cross and Cummings, 2004), we used these formal appraisal scores to capture employees’ job performance. Supervisors were asked to base their respective evaluations on (1) feedback provided by project leaders about the quality and innovativeness of an employee’s respective output, (2) the supervisor’s own assessment of an employee’s overall functioning, and (3) annual peer-assessments by direct colleagues and/or customers (if available). A standardized evaluation form was used to assess each individual with an overall performance rating on a five-point scale, with 1 representing the worst possible evaluation (i.e., *a substantial need for improvement*) and 5 indicating the best possible evaluation (i.e., *highly effective and well-functioning*). The appraisal outcomes had direct practical relevance for the employees in our sample as the organization used these scores, in part, to determine employees’ salary increases and promotions.

*Absenteeism.* To operationalize absenteeism, we used an individual employee’s total number of hours registered as ‘sick leave’ in the organization’s digital human resource management system during the year 2011 (see Van Poppel et al., 2002). These registrations included any instance when an employee called in sick, and it did not contain more specific reasons for an employee’s respective absenteeism. As such, our operationalization reflects a ‘combined’ measure (Berry et al., 2012, p. 684) that contains both voluntary and involuntary types of absenteeism.

*Control variables.* Research on MTM, absenteeism, and job performance suggests that several control variables should be considered in the present investigation. Female and older employees, for example, tend to have slightly higher absenteeism levels and may be subject to biased performance evaluations (Linton et al., 1998; Mobley, 1982). Because age was highly correlated with organizational tenure ( $r = 0.74$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ), however, we did not include age in our hypotheses tests to avoid multicollinearity problems – although we note, parenthetically, that all subsequent results remained robust when age was included. Additionally, we controlled for individuals' general workload, as measured through an employee's overall contractual working time (in full-time equivalents [FTE]), because employees with higher workloads (a) may be involved in a greater number of teams and (b) typically have higher absenteeism levels (Rotchford and Roberts, 1982). Following Becker's (2005) recommendations, we repeated all hypotheses tests both with and without the control variables, and we note that the results and conclusions remained virtually identical across these analyses, supporting the robustness of our findings.

### Data Analyses

We used structural equation modelling in Mplus version 7.31 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2011) to examine the hypothesized relationships, as depicted in Figure 1, with perceived work challenge and role ambiguity as three-item latent constructs. We simultaneously tested all hypothesized direct and indirect effects, including the control variables, in one structural equation model (see Grewal et al., 2004). Within this model, we employed two estimation procedures to test the hypotheses. When examining perceived work challenge, role ambiguity, and job performance as dependent variables (Hypotheses 1-3a and 4-6a), we used an ordinary regression estimator. When examining absenteeism as a dependent variable (Hypotheses 3b and 6b), however, a different analytical approach was necessary. As is typical for count data, the absenteeism variable had a non-normal and zero-inflated distribution (i.e., 376 of 1211 employees had not been absent during the study period), thus violating normality assumptions (Cameron and Trivedi, 1998). In line with prior absenteeism studies (e.g., Johns and Hajj, 2015), we therefore used a zero-inflated negative binomial estimator when examining this dependent variable (Cameron and Trivedi, 1998; Hilbe, 2011).

Usable job performance information was available for 1156 of the 1211 individuals in our sample. We used full-information maximum likelihood estimation to handle missing data because scholars have shown this procedure to result in more accurate parameter estimates and standard errors (as compared to listwise deletion; Enders and Bandalos, 2001).

Because individual employees worked within departments, our data had a nested structure. To assess the extent to which this may affect our estimates, we calculated intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC1) for each dependent variable ( $ICC1_{\text{perceived work challenge}} = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ;  $ICC1_{\text{perceived role ambiguity}} = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ;  $ICC1_{\text{job performance}} = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ;  $ICC1_{\text{absenteeism}} = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.33$ ; Heck and Thomas, 2015). As shown, these ICCs were relatively low, indicating that an individual's membership in a specific department had only a small influence on the respective variables. Nevertheless, we took several steps to ensure that these nesting patterns did not bias our results. First, we attempted

to estimate a multilevel structural equation model with random intercepts (on the department level) for the variables that had a significant ICC. This multilevel structural equation model did not converge due to the large number of estimated parameters (see Cameron and Trivedi, 1998; Vittinghoff and McCulloch, 2007). We therefore estimated separate multilevel models for each dependent variable. This allowed us to compare the direct effects estimates between ordinary and multilevel models (although we could not examine indirect effects within these separate models; Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2011). In addition, we examined our complete structural equation model with group-mean-centred work challenge, role ambiguity, and job performance scores – a procedure that removes the statistical dependence in the data by subtracting the department average from each individual score (Hofmann and Gavin, 1998). Importantly, the alternative models produced virtually identical estimates, as compared to those from the ordinary structural equation model. To reduce the complexity of the analyses, we therefore report ordinary structural equation modelling results in the following.

Finally, to assess the conditional indirect associations predicted in our model, we calculated the respective indirect relationships between MTM, job performance, and absenteeism through perceived work challenge (Hypotheses 3a and 3b) and perceived role ambiguity (Hypotheses 6a and 6b) at both higher (+ 1SD) and lower (– 1SD) levels of organizational tenure, using 10,000 bootstrap samples to estimate associated 95% confidence intervals (see Hayes, 2009). We standardized all independent variables (i.e., MTM, tenure, and all control variables) to facilitate interpretation of the coefficients (Grewal et al., 2004).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table I presents means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables. As shown, MTM was positively related to organizational tenure ( $r = 0.08$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ). Importantly, however, exploratory analyses indicated that MTM was a relatively common occurrence even among low-tenure employees in our sample. Employees with less than one year of organizational tenure were, on average, involved in 2.03 teams per week, whereas the respective averages were 2.88 teams per week for medium-tenure employees (between one and ten years) and 3.09 teams per week for employees with more than 10 years of organizational tenure.

### Confirmatory Factor Analyses

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses using Mplus to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the items used to measure perceived work challenge and role ambiguity. A two-factor model with separate latent factors for work challenge and role ambiguity perceptions provided adequate fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 38.44$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ; RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.03), and all standardized factor loadings were above 0.72 in this model. Furthermore, the two-factor model provided significantly



Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Workload (FTE)	94.39	11.61							
2. Gender ( <i>Female</i> = 0, <i>Male</i> = 1)	0.73	0.44	0.25**						
3. Tenure	10.84	9.53	0.03	0.23**					
4. MTM	2.92	1.25							
5. Work challenge	0.05	0.00	0.08**						
6. Role ambiguity	7.55	1.11	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.03			
7. Job performance	4.01	1.38	0.07*	0.04	0.01	0.09**	-0.42**		
8. Absentecism	3.37	0.62	0.14**	-0.05	-0.24**	0.03	0.20**	-0.19**	
	54.13	143.93	0.03	-0.03	0.07*	-0.01	-0.04	0.06	-0.10**

Note: N = 1156 – 1211 individuals.

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.

better fit than a single-factor model ( $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 338.40$ ,  $df_{\text{difference}} = 1$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ; see Hu and Bentler, 1999).

### Hypotheses Testing

As shown in Table II, we found no support for the positive association between an employee's MTM and perceived work challenge, as suggested in Hypothesis 1 ( $B = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.66$ ). Furthermore, although the interactive relationship of individuals' MTM and organizational tenure with perceived work challenge was significant ( $B = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), the respective interaction pattern did not fully match our prediction in Hypothesis 2. As shown in Figure 2, the linkage between MTM and challenge perceptions was positive among employees with higher organizational tenure, but this linkage only reached marginal significance at 1 SD above the mean value of organizational tenure (at +1 SD: simple slope = 0.08,  $p = 0.095$ , 95 per cent CI =  $-0.01$  to 0.18). We further examined this interactive relationship using a regions-of-significance approach (i.e., the Johnson-Neyman technique; Preacher et al., 2006). These additional analyses revealed that the positive relationship between MTM and work challenge perceptions reached conventional significance levels at any value of organizational tenure greater than 1.3 SD above the mean (i.e., more than 23.2 years). Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, MTM appeared as a risk factor for employees with lower tenure, such that these employees' work challenge perceptions were more pronounced with lower MTM (at  $-1$  SD: simple slope =  $-0.12$ , 95 per cent CI =  $-0.23$  to  $-0.01$ ). In fact, the linkage between MTM and work challenge perceptions was negative and significant at any value of organizational tenure smaller than  $-0.9$  SD below the mean (i.e., less than 2.3 years). Hence, contrary to our prediction, the association between MTM and work challenge was negative (rather than non-significant) among employees with relatively low organizational tenure, and this association was only positive among individuals with very high levels of organizational tenure.

As shown in Table II, we found a positive association between individual employees' work challenge perceptions and job performance ( $B = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ), whereas such challenge perceptions were not significantly related to employees' absenteeism ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.49$ ). Considering perceived work challenge as a mediating mechanism, the unconditional indirect linkages between MTM and job performance (estimate = 0.00, 95 per cent CI =  $-0.01$  to 0.00) as well as MTM and absenteeism (estimate = 0.00, 95 per cent CI =  $-0.01$  to 0.01) were not significant. Given the expected patterns of mediated moderation, we note that these latter findings do not contradict our predictions. Hence, we further examined whether organizational tenure moderated these indirect effects. Mirroring the pattern for the moderation hypotheses described above, the conditional indirect relationship between MTM and job performance predicted in Hypothesis 3a (through perceived work challenge) was positive among employees with higher organizational tenure (+1 SD; estimate = 0.01, 95 per cent CI =  $-0.001$  to 0.02), and this relationship was significant at any value of organizational tenure greater than 1.3 SD above the mean (i.e., more than 23.2 years). Unexpectedly, when organizational tenure was lower, MTM was indirectly and negatively related to job performance (through lower work challenge perceptions;  $-1$  SD; estimate =  $-0.01$ ,

Table II. Conditional indirect relationships between multiple team membership, work challenge, role ambiguity, job performance, and absenteeism

Predictors	Dependent variables															
	Work challenge				Role ambiguity				Job performance				Absenteeism			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2		Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2	
B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	
Workload	-0.02	0.04	-0.03	0.04	0.08	0.04	0.08*	0.04	0.12**	0.02	0.13**	0.02	0.13**	0.06	0.09	0.06
Gender	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.11*	0.05	-0.14**	0.05
Tenure	-0.05	0.04	-0.08	0.04	-0.03	0.04	-0.01	0.03	-0.18**	0.02	-0.18**	0.02	-0.17**	0.06	0.30**	0.06
MTM	-0.02	0.04	-0.02	0.04	0.10**	0.04	0.09**	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.04*	0.02	0.04	0.06	-0.09	0.05
MTM × Tenure	0.10*	0.04					-0.10*	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.06	0.09	0.06
Work challenge									0.12**	0.02			0.07**	0.02	-0.21**	0.08
Role ambiguity											-0.18**	0.03	-0.14**	0.02	0.49**	0.08
																0.53**

Predictors	Conditional indirect relationships															
	MTM to job performance, via work challenge				MTM to absenteeism, via work challenge				MTM to job performance, via role ambiguity				MTM to absenteeism, via role ambiguity			
	Estimate	95% CI: Lower bound	95% CI: Upper bound	Estimate	95% CI: Lower bound	95% CI: Upper bound	Estimate	95% CI: Lower bound	95% CI: Upper bound	Estimate	95% CI: Lower bound	95% CI: Upper bound				
Tenure -1SD	-0.01	-0.02	-0.001	0.00	-0.02	-0.00	-0.03	-0.05	-0.02	-0.03	-0.05	-0.02	0.10	0.04	0.18	
Average Tenure	0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.00	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.05	0.02	0.10	0.10	
Tenure + 1SD	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	-0.04	0.04	0.04	

Note: N = 1156 - 1211 individuals, WC = work challenge, RA = role ambiguity. Predictors were standardized. A zero-inflated negative binomial estimator was used to predict absenteeism. The Model 1a and Model 1b estimates are based on separate calculations that show how our results change when we exclude or include certain predictor variables. All Model 2 estimates, including the conditional indirect relationships, come from one structural equation model that simultaneously tests all study hypotheses.  
\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01.

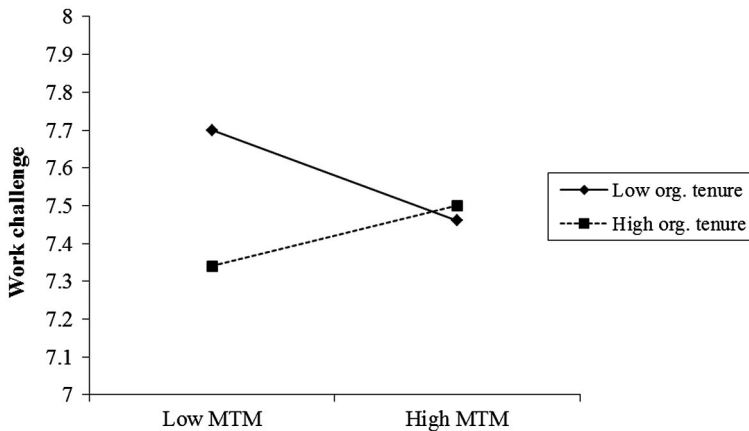


Figure 2. Interaction between MTM and organizational tenure in predicting work challenge  
 Note: Solid line simple slope =  $-0.12$  ( $p = 0.03$ ), dashed line simple slope =  $0.08$  ( $p = 0.095$ ).

95 per cent CI =  $-0.02$  to  $-0.001$ ). This relationship was significant at any value of organizational tenure smaller than  $-0.9$  SD below the mean (i.e., less than 2.3 years). In addition, we found no support for a conditional indirect relationship between MTM and absenteeism, through perceived work challenge. Contrary to Hypothesis 3b, this indirect relation was non-significant for employees with both higher ( $+1$  SD; estimate =  $0.00$ , 95 per cent CI =  $0.00$  to  $0.02$ ) and lower organizational tenure ( $-1$  SD; estimate =  $0.00$ , 95 per cent CI =  $-0.02$  to  $0.00$ ), and these relationships did not become significant at any organizational tenure value observed in the sample. In sum, these findings provide only limited support for our mediated moderation hypotheses around individual employees' work challenge perceptions. We will return to these findings in the Discussion section.

Considering individual employees' role ambiguity perceptions as a mediating variable, the present findings corroborate our theoretical reasoning. In support of Hypothesis 4, individual MTM was positively related to employees' perceived role ambiguity ( $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), even after incorporating both organizational tenure and the control variables (see Table II). Moreover, we found a significant interactive relationship of MTM and organizational tenure with perceived role ambiguity ( $B = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Corroborating Hypothesis 5, Figure 3 shows that the MTM-role ambiguity linkage was positive for employees with lower organizational tenure ( $-1$  SD; simple slope =  $0.19$ , 95% CI =  $0.06$  to  $0.35$ ), and not significant for employees with higher organizational tenure ( $+1$  SD; simple slope =  $0.00$ , 95 per cent CI =  $-0.11$  to  $0.11$ ). Further analyses illustrated that the positive association between MTM and role ambiguity was statistically significant for any value of organizational tenure smaller than  $0.2$  SD above the mean (i.e., at less than 12.7 years of organizational tenure).

As expected, we found significant associations between role ambiguity and both job performance ( $B = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ) and absenteeism ( $B = 0.53$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ; see Table II). Furthermore, unconditional mediation analyses revealed that MTM was indirectly related to both job performance (estimate =  $-0.01$ , 95 per cent CI =  $-0.03$  to  $-0.004$ ) and absenteeism (estimate =  $0.05$ , 95 per cent CI =  $0.01$  to  $0.11$ ),

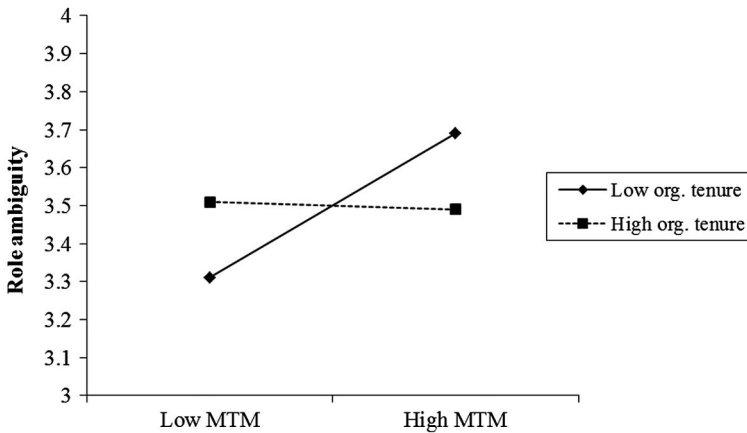


Figure 3. Interaction between MTM and organizational tenure in predicting role ambiguity

Note: Solid line simple slope = 0.19 ( $p = 0.00$ ), dashed line simple slope = 0.00 ( $p = 0.95$ ).

via an employee's role ambiguity perceptions. Supporting the mediated moderation pattern predicted in Hypothesis 6a, our results further indicated that the negative indirect relationship between MTM and job performance, via perceived role ambiguity, was significant only when organizational tenure was relatively low ( $-1$  SD; estimate =  $-0.03$ , 95 per cent CI =  $-0.05$  to  $-0.02$ ). Mirroring the above findings, this negative indirect relationship was significant for any value of organizational tenure smaller than 0.02 SD above the mean (i.e., at less than 12.7 years). The respective indirect linkage was not significant, by contrast, when organizational tenure was higher ( $+1$  SD; estimate = 0.00, 95 per cent CI =  $-0.01$  to 0.01). Similarly, as predicted in Hypothesis 6b, we found a significant and positive indirect relationship between MTM and absenteeism (through perceived role ambiguity) among employees with lower organizational tenure ( $-1$  SD; estimate = 0.10; 95 per cent CI = 0.04 to 0.18), but not among employees with higher tenure ( $+1$  SD; estimate = 0.00; 95 per cent CI =  $-0.04$  to 0.04). Again, this indirect association was significant at any value of organizational tenure smaller than 0.2 SD above the mean (i.e., at less than 12.7 years).

### Additional Analyses

A potential concern with regard to our findings is that the observed MTM-organizational tenure interactions might be spurious, resulting from curvilinear relationships of MTM with the dependent variables (Edwards, 2008). For example, low to medium levels of MTM might positively associate with employees' work challenge perceptions, but this relationship might eventually turn negative when individuals' MTM passes a certain optimum (i.e., an inverted U-shape; O'Leary et al., 2011a; Cummings and Haas, 2012). In additional analyses not reported in the tables, we therefore re-estimated our structural equation model, including squared terms for MTM beyond this variable's main effects and the hypothesized interactions. None of the coefficients for the squared MTM terms were significant, however (all  $p > 0.05$ ), and the coefficients for the predicted interaction coefficients were virtually identical to the ones obtained in the primary analyses. These

results underscore our model's robustness, rendering it unlikely that the observed interactions are attributable to unobserved curvilinear associations. Detailed results for the supplementary analyses are available from the first author.

## DISCUSSION

### Summary

The present study integrated insights from the challenge-hindrance stressor framework (Podsakoff et al., 2007) with the job-demands resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) to examine how individual employees respond to MTM. On the one hand, we found some evidence for individual MTM as a potentially fruitful work practice that can satisfy employees' intrinsic need for challenging work experiences and strengthen their job performance. Importantly, however, these associations occurred only among employees with relatively high organizational tenure. For employees with relatively low organizational tenure, on the other hand, higher MTM was associated with diminished work challenge perceptions and greater role ambiguity, lowering these employees' work performance and promoting their absenteeism.

### Theoretical Implications

The present study makes important contributions to the literatures on both MTM and work stress. Regarding the MTM literature, our findings enrich existing theory and research by highlighting key psychological mechanisms that link individual MTM to employees' tangible work behaviours (i.e., job performance and absenteeism). In doing so, our study replicates and expands earlier empirical research that has pointed to MTM as a potential *hindrance* that promotes job strain and decreases individuals' work engagement (Pluut et al., 2014). More specifically, our results highlight employees' diminished work challenge and increased role ambiguity perceptions as important psychological mediating factors that can explain MTM's detrimental consequences for their job performance and absenteeism. At the same time, our research extends prior theoretical and qualitative work that has presented MTM as a positive *challenge* that facilitates learning and personal growth (Mortensen et al., 2007; O'Leary et al., 2011a). Indeed, our results suggest that some employees may perceive MTM in such a favourable manner, with positive consequences for their job performance. Taken together, this study illustrates that individual MTM can generate both positive and negative psychological reactions, with both favourable and unfavourable downstream implications for employees' work-related behaviours. More broadly, these results illustrate that despite the clear advantages illustrated by prior MTM studies on higher levels of analysis (e.g., on the organizational or team levels; Bertolotti et al., 2015; Vedres and Stark, 2010), this type of work arrangement appears to be a double-edged sword when examined from an individual perspective.

Importantly, the present research moves beyond illustrating these ambiguous consequences of individual MTM by also illustrating organizational tenure as a critical, heretofore unexamined contingency factor that can explain *when* individual employees' psychological and behavioural reactions may benefit or suffer from this type of work

arrangement. Importantly, our associated findings show that individual MTM's potential benefits (in terms of increased work challenge perceptions and job performance) may remain limited to a relatively small group of employees with many years of organizational tenure (as noted above, these benefits manifested only for employees with more than 23.2 years of organizational tenure in the current sample, representing about 13 of the participants). For a larger group of employees (i.e., with average-to-low organizational tenure), by contrast, the negative consequences of individual MTM prevailed, with these employees' job performance and absenteeism suffering in high-MTM settings due to their higher role ambiguity. Hence, our study offers a nuanced and integrative perspective that reconciles the seemingly contradictory consequences associated with individual MTM, explicating why different employees may differentially assess this work practice and, thus, exhibit differing psychological and behavioural reactions to MTM.

From a more general perspective, our findings provide new insights for theory and research on challenge versus hindrance stressors. Early research on the challenge-hindrance framework has typically used an a-priori categorization of stressors as either hindrances or challenges, assuming that different employees would respond similarly to the same type of work arrangement (e.g., LePine et al., 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2007). More recent studies, however, suggest that certain job demands may appear as positive challenges to some employees and as hindrances to others (LePine et al., 2016; Webster et al., 2011). Scholars have suggested that these differential reactions may depend on employees' ability to draw on relevant resources that help them to overcome the difficulties associated with the respective stressors (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Dawson et al., 2016). Our research highlights the length of an employee's work experiences within the organization as a key source of resources that may shape his or her stress appraisals in demanding work settings. As such, our study points toward an employee's organizational tenure as an important, heretofore underexplored factor that deserves further consideration in the challenge-hindrance stress literature.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite some methodological strengths (e.g., multi-source data collected at different time points; a detailed behavioural, rather than perceptual, measure of MTM; a relatively large sample), we acknowledge a number of study limitations. We used pre-existing items from the organization's employee satisfaction survey, for example, to capture employees' work challenge and role ambiguity perceptions. Although a supplementary study corroborated the respective items' validity (see Appendix), the literature may benefit from further examining the present notions using alternative, more established instruments to capture these constructs (e.g., Pearsall et al., 2009; Rizzo et al., 1970).

Another potential concern is that our data did not contain objective information about employees' job performance (beyond supervisors' respective assessments) and we could not disentangle voluntary from involuntary absenteeism (Michie et al., 1989). It is possible, for example, that supervisors were more positive in their evaluations of employees they saw working in multiple teams, regardless of these employees' actual performance outcomes. Hence, future research might benefit from a more detailed examination of MTM's indirect relationship with both employees' objective and subjective performance

as well as voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. Relatedly, our performance and absenteeism measures referred to different time periods. Although we believe there are viable reasons for our timing of measurement (as outlined in the Methods section), we acknowledge that the respective research design choices were not based on a strong theoretical premise. In fact, drawing from such a premise was not possible in the present case, due to the common problem that ‘virtually no social science theories are precise enough to specify how much time is required for the postulated causes to have their effects’ (Harter et al., 2010, p. 387). Hence, it may be worthwhile for future research to further explore this issue, for example by contrasting MTM’s more immediate vs. more long-term consequences for individual employees’ performance and absenteeism.

Furthermore, we examined the study hypotheses in a sample of employees that all worked at the same organization in one country, the Netherlands. While this may have prevented organization-level and country-level factors (e.g., differing socialization practices or sick leave policies; Bauer et al., 2007) from biasing the findings, it also limits the generalizability of our results. Despite considerable variation in individuals’ MTM scores, for example, MTM was relatively common among the employees within our sample. Consequently, we were unable to compare psychological and behavioural responses between employees *with* MTM and employees *without any* MTM. Compared to an increase from moderate to higher MTM (i.e., among employees who are already familiar with MTM, albeit at a relatively low level), an employee’s first experiences with MTM may more fundamentally alter his or her interpersonal interactions and task requirements (O’Leary et al., 2011b), potentially triggering more pronounced stress responses. Clearly, additional research that constructively replicates the present results in other settings (e.g., where MTM is newly implemented as a work practice) and in alternative cultural and industry contexts would be valuable to explore our findings’ robustness and possibly extend their scope.

Future research could also investigate additional boundary conditions (beyond organizational tenure) that may help employees to capitalize on MTM’s potential opportunities for personal growth and gain and to avoid MTM’s individual detriments. Our study positioned organizational tenure as a *source* of resources (i.e., enabling an employee to build his or her human and social capital; Ng and Feldman, 2010, 2011) that may determine if employees are more likely to perceive high MTM as a challenge rather than a hindrance. Future research could expand on this notion by more directly measuring these resources (e.g., by using social network designs; Lin, 1999) or by manipulating such resources through organizational interventions (e.g., targeted training programs; Bauer et al., 2007; Jones, 1986). Moreover, future research could extend our focus on *organizational* tenure by examining whether employees’ general task experience (i.e., including their work outside the organization), or their years of experience with multiple-team arrangements, may also affect individual MTM’s consequences. Also, employees may be particularly likely to view individual MTM as a growth opportunity if they are highly motivated for continuous improvement and self-development (e.g., due to a pronounced learning orientation; Gong et al., 2009) or if they generally appreciate new and unfamiliar settings and work contexts (e.g., due to high openness to experience; Barrick and Mount, 1991). Studies examining the moderating roles of such individual and organizational



factors may promote a better understanding of possible contingency factors that may emphasize MTM's benefits rather than downsides.

Finally, we focused on employees' role ambiguity perceptions as an important type of hindrance stressor. High MTM may more broadly shape an employee's negative stress experiences at work, however (Kauppila, 2014; Pluut et al., 2014). Employees may perceive role conflicts and role overload, for example, when different teams simultaneously impose incompatible demands (e.g., due to overlapping schedules or deadlines; Biddle, 2013) or when such demands accumulate towards an unmanageable workload (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006) – with potentially detrimental consequences for employees' work behaviours and outcomes (Rizzo et al., 1970; Selye, 2013). Furthermore, akin to the present conceptual model, an employee's organizational tenure may buffer these hindrance stress experiences. Employees with higher organizational tenure may use their established interpersonal relationships within the organization (i.e., organization-specific social capital), for example, to re-negotiate and integrate seemingly incompatible team requirements, and they may draw from their extensive intra-organizational knowledge (i.e., organization-specific human capital) to more efficiently handle demanding workloads (Louis, 1980; Ng and Feldman, 2010). Future research examining these additional types of stress reactions may promote a more comprehensive understanding of MTM's consequences for individual employees.

### **Practical Implications**

The results of this study offer several practical implications. They indicate, in particular, that individual MTM may go along with both opportunities and risks, such that organizations should carefully manage their employees' respective work arrangements. For employees with relatively high organizational tenure, on the one hand, MTM's benefits appear to outweigh its potential disadvantages. In fact, low MTM may represent a risk factor for such employees, because they may perceive a lack of personal growth opportunities and challenges when their work is concentrated within only a few teams (see Figure 2). Managers could therefore assign high-tenure employees to additional teams to help these individuals develop their skills and break away from established work routines, eventually promoting their perceived growth opportunities and performance outcomes.

It is important to note, however, that MTM's potential advantages are limited to relatively few employees with very high organizational tenure. For employees with (below) average organizational tenure, MTM's downsides may prevail over its benefits. MTM may decrease these employees' work challenge perceptions and increase their perceived role ambiguity, eventually diminishing their productivity and promoting absenteeism. Hence, it seems advisable to limit individual MTM for relatively new employees and to only gradually increase employees' number of concurrent team memberships over time.

We acknowledge, however, that this advice may not be practically feasible in all circumstances (e.g., because an organization's procedures and task arrangements may require employees to join multiple teams and projects even in an early stage of their employment). In such instances, organizations could implement HR interventions that ameliorate relatively new employees' role ambiguity and improve their positive work challenge perceptions (for an overview, see Hargrove et al., 2015). Coaching and counselling sessions, for example, enable managers to offer constructive suggestions and help employees to find

solutions to complex issues (Whitaker et al., 2007), and this could aid new employees in understanding their complex work demands in high-MTM settings. Moreover, formal leaders may emphasize the potentials for personal growth and development that such arrangements offer and highlight the significance of an employee's respective work, while at the same time providing tangible help and support (e.g., by providing structure and allocating required resources) for an employee's task execution (see Lepine et al., 2005).

## CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to integrate and expand our understanding of the consequences associated with individuals' MTM as a prominent characteristic of contemporary work. We provide new insights into the psychological mechanisms that may link an employee's MTM with his or her tangible work behaviours (i.e., job performance and absenteeism), and we highlight an employee's organizational tenure as a key boundary condition for these relationships. Our findings demonstrate that MTM offers substantial benefits for some individuals (i.e., with high to very high organizational tenure). For the majority of employees, however, MTM appears to be a highly demanding work practice that comes with clear disadvantages for their psychological wellbeing and work outcomes. We hope these findings will help organizations to more effectively manage complex team arrangements and stimulate further research on the consequences of individual employees' concurrent membership in multiple teams.

## NOTES

- [1] It is important to note that an employee's organizational tenure is different from his or her general work experience. In Sturman's (2003, p. 612) words: 'Take for example two research scientists, both with 10 years' experience. All else equal, one with the experience within the same organization should be more knowledgeable about how to get a project done (e.g., knowing who to contact for help, building upon established relationships with colleagues, locating resources) than the other scientist who is just beginning to work for the organization' (see also Ng and Feldman, 2011). In the present research, we build on this notion to propose that an employee's organizational tenure (rather than his or her general work experience) critically shapes whether he or she perceives MTM as a challenge or a hindrance.
- [2] We note that work challenge perceptions may come with some downsides as well. Meta-analytical evidence suggests, for example, that challenge stressors are associated with individuals' job strain (LePine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007). Ultimately, however, the benefits of perceived work challenges appear to outweigh their potential downsides, as the respective meta-analyses have found the overall effects of challenge stressors on individual employee's work performance to be positive, whereas the respective relationships with withdrawal behaviours were negative.
- [3] We repeated all hypotheses tests with various alternative operationalizations of absenteeism to explore the robustness of this measure's time frame (i.e., the number of absenteeism hours in the first three, six, and nine months of 2011, rather than the full year). These additional analyses all yielded similar parameter estimates and significance levels. We therefore decided to report results based on the annual number of absenteeism hours because this measure had the lowest number of excess zeros (Cameron and Trivedi, 1998).
- [4] The full dataset contained 5529 projects, reflecting 17794 person-project observations (i.e., individual employees working on a distinct project). We omitted 1432 projects that did not fit our team definition (i.e., with fewer than three members). Importantly, these projects only accounted for 1635 person-project observations (i.e., about 9 per cent of the person-project observations used to create our MTM measure). Moreover, we note that supplementary analyses based on an MTM measure that included all available projects yielded virtually identical results and conclusions, as compared with the findings reported in the following. These additional results are available from the first author upon request.

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## APPENDIX

### Validating the Work Challenge and Role Ambiguity Measures

The items used to capture perceived work challenge and role ambiguity in the employee satisfaction survey were selected by the present study's host organization. To examine the respective items' validity, we compared the present measures with existing instruments in an online study using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participation in this supplementary validation study was limited to respondents employed at an organization at the time of data collection. Excluding invalid responses and failed attention checks (see Goodman et al., 2013), our final sample consisted of 113 usable participants (of the 120 individuals that had initially participated; effective response rate = 94 per cent). Of these final sample participants, 60 per cent were male, their average age was 35 years (SD = 10 years), and their average organizational tenure was 7 years (SD = 5 years).

Participants completed five items from Amabile et al.'s (1996) work challenge measure (e.g., 'I feel challenged by the work I am currently doing') as well as the three work challenge items used in the present employee satisfaction survey. Moreover, the participants completed Rizzo et al.'s (1970) six-item role ambiguity measure (e.g., 'the goals of my job are clear and understandable') as well as the three role ambiguity items from the present survey. Results indicated that there was a high bivariate correlation between both the two measures of perceived work challenge measures ( $r = 0.81$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ) and the two measures of perceived role ambiguity ( $r = 0.84$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). The correlations between the two perceived work challenge scales, on the one hand, and the two perceived role ambiguity scales, on the other hand, varied from  $-0.52$  to  $-0.55$  ( $p = 0.00$ ). These results support the validity of the items used in our study.