

An Empirical Research on Causes and Effects of Career Plateau

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Abstract Based on a sample of 288 people from enterprises and MBA classes, this paper examines the effects of career plateau on the employee's job satisfaction, organizational commitment and quit intention. The paper also examines the individual and organizational causes of career plateau. The results shows that the two dimensions of career plateau both significantly influence employees work attitudes, and job tenure and career path significantly affectes the career plateau.

Key words Career plateau; Individual and organizational causes; Work attitudes

1 Introduction

One of the major questions facing the tomorrow organizations is how to plan and manage careers in a way that reconcile individual aspirations and need with the challenges confronting the firms themselves. When industrial organizations experience less growth and an increasing number of well-educated people with high career expectations enter organizational tournaments, a large number of employees experience longer assignments to the same position with lower prospects for future mobility within their firm. With the trend towards the flatter organization, the number of employees forced to stay at the same level and in the same job are increasing, and plateau occurs earlier and earlier in their career. This situation can lead to frustration and loss of motivation of the employees. Therefore, career plateau has been the focus of attention of a larger number of researchers trying to help organizations to solve these potential problems.

Some researchers have studied the causes of career plateau. The model of plateaus theoretically explained the causes of career plateau (Feldman & Weitz, 1988). Recently, the three-factor casual model has been obtained the recognition (Tremblay & Roger, 1993). This model thought that the determinants of hierarchical plateau could be divided into three broad categories: individual, familial and organizational factors. The first are linked to the specific situations of the individuals themselves: age, tenure, focus of control, education level, a lack of skills or ambition et.al. The second set of factors include family satisfaction, family scale, family load, the spouse's type of work et.al. The third set of factors involve structural characteristics and career path (staff or line position). Tremblay and Roger empirically validated the three-factor casual model (Tremblay & Roger, 1993).

A larger number of literatures have also studied the effects of career plateau on the work attitudes and behaviors. But the literature in this area includes a multitude of contradictory conclusions about the attitudes of those who have attained a career plateau and those who have not. (Chao, 1990; Tremblay, et.al., 2004). Also, many empirical studies in this area have treated career plateau as one dimension conception. Career plateau may have more extensive connotation. Milliman (1992) divided career plateau into two dimensions: hierarchical plateau and job content plateau. Hierarchical plateau was defined as the end of promotions. On the other hand, job content plateau was said to occur when work has been mastered and the job has become boring. At the age of knowledge economy and flatter organization, distinguishing between hierarchical and job content plateau is important and useful. Therefore, to indentify the causes and effects of hierarchical plateau and job content plateau respectively is useful to organizational career management.

2 Method

2.1 Sample

The participants were 288 people from 4 enterprises and MBA. Of those respondents, 61.46 % were male, 35.42% were female. In terms of educational level, 8.68% were primary and higher level, 25.00% were associate level, 52.08% were bachelor level, 12.15% were master and doctor level. 36.11% were managers, 47.22% were professionals, 16.67% were logistic personnel. 39.24% were from the state-owned enterprises, 20.48% were from foreign-funded enterprises, 40.28% were from private enterprises. The average age of the participants was 31.02 years (SD=6.23). The average seniority

in the same organization was 6.09 years (SD=5.45) and job tenure was 3.09 years (SD=3.39).

2.2 Measures

Career plateau. Perceptions of career plateau were measured by the career plateau questionnaire developed by authors, based on the Chinese culture. Career plateau was divided into hierarchical plateau and job content plateau. Hierarchical plateau was defined as the end of promotion in the current organization. Job content plateau was defined as the impossibility to learn new knowledge and skills from the current job. The hierarchical plateau subscale was a five-item measure (e.g., “I am unlikely to obtain a much higher job title in the current organization”). In the current study, the Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.84. The job content plateau subscale was a six-item measure (e.g., “My job tasks and activities have become routine for me”). In the current study, the Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.87. Career plateau scale was measured based on six-point Likert scales (1. “strongly disagree” to 6. “strongly agree”). For each subscale, the higher score was obtained, the greater degree of plateau was perceived by the subjects.

Cause measures. Causal variables were divided into two set of factors: individual and organizational. Individual variables included gender, job tenure, seniority, age and educational level. Organizational variables included career path (management, professional and personnel) and the ownership of enterprises (state-owned, foreign-funded and private).

Outcome measures. Outcome variables included intrinsic job satisfaction, extrinsic job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Intrinsic job satisfaction was measured by 12 items from Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Fields, 2004). In current study, Cronbach’s α coefficient for this subscale was 0.84. Extrinsic job satisfaction was measured by 8 items from MSQ (Fields, 2004). In current study, Cronbach’s α coefficient for this subscale was 0.82. The Organization Commitment Questionnaire was used to measured employees’ affective commitment to the organization (Long, 2002). OCQ contained 9 items, and its Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.91 in the current study. Intention to quit was measured by 4 items from the Turnover Intention Questionnaire (Chen & Francesco, 2000). In the current study, Cronbach’s α coefficient for this scale was 0.88.

Controlling for Common method biases. Method biases are a problem because they are one of the main sources of measurement error. Procedural and statistical techniques can be used to control common method biases (Podsakoff, 2003). According to Podsakoff’s suggestions, different scale formats were used to procedurally remedy the common method biases. Finally, Harman’s single-factor test and controlling for effects of an unmeasured latent method factor were used to statistically test common method bias. The test findings showed there was no serious problem of common method bias in the study.

3 Results

Means, standard deviations and correlations among the career plateau and outcome variables for the sample are presented in Table 1. The correlations show career plateau has potentially effects on job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intentions.

Table 1 Correlation Matrix

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Hierachical Plateau	14.23	5.21	-					
2.Job Content Plateau	16.92	6.62	.403**	-				
3.Intrinsic Satisfaction	33.49	5.04	-.356**	-.639**	-			
4.Extrinsic Satisfaction	20.95	3.91	-.281**	-.544**	.754**	-		
5.Organizational Commitment	24.81	5.56	-.268**	-.581**	.674**	.735**	-	
6.Turnover Intentions	13.57	4.87	.226**	.467**	-.459**	-.611**	-.652**	-

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the effects of career plateau on the outcome variables. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table2 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Completed on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment and Turnover Intentions

Dependant Variables				
Controlled Variables	Intrinsic Job Satisfaction		Extrinsic Job Satisfaction	
R ²	.151**		.168**	
Independent Variables	β	SE	β	SE
Hierarchical Plateau	-.185**	-0.60	-.204**	.053
Job content Plateau	-.524**	.045	-.248**	.037
ΔR ²	.496**		.397**	
Dependant Variables				
Controlled Variables	Organizational Commitment		Turnover Intentions	
R ²	.169**		.092**	
Independent Variables	β	SE	β	SE
Hierarchical Plateau	-.134*	.071	.190**	.069
Job Content Plateau	-.490**	.051	.404**	.058
ΔR ²	.454**		.323**	

Note: Controlled variables are causal variables.

The hierarchical regression analysis and ANOVA were used to test the effects of individual and organizational factors on career plateau. The results are presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 Regression Analysis Completed on Hierarchical Plateau, Job Content Plateau

Casual Variables	Hierarchical Plateau		Job Content Plateau	
	β	SE	β	SE
Age	.115	.060	.007	.082
Seniority	.023	.092	.175	.125
Job Tenure	.264**	.121	.316**	.161
R ²	.112**		.039**	

Table 4 ANOVA Completed on Hierarchical Plateau, Job Content Plateau

Casual Variables	Hierarchical Plateau		Job Content Plateau	
	F	Sig	F	Sig
Gender	.893	.345	.267	.600
Educational Level	1.763	.155	.742	.528
Type of Enterprise	3.63*	.028	2.78	.064
Career Path	6.42**	.002	5.133**	.006

4 Discussion

This study aimed to examine the causes and effects of career plateau, and obtained some meaningful results. It pointed out that the two dimensions of career plateau both can decrease the employee's job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and increase turnover intentions. After controlling irrelevant variables, career plateau explained 32.3% to 49.6% of variances of the outcome variables. Among the two dimensions of career plateau, job contend plateau had greater effects on the employee's work attitudes. The possible one of reasons is that subjects are the average of 29.06 years old. According to Super's career development theory, the subjects are in the establishment stage. For them, the career development task is to develop or advance their skills and expertise in order to prepare for vertical or horizontal career movement. So the fact that the job contend plateau become the main dimension predicting the outcome variables is reasonable. This suggest that the organization should offer more on-job training opportunities for employees being in the establishment stage of career development.

Based on Trembay's three-factor casual model, the current study divided causes of career plateau into individual and organizational factors. The study confirmed the three-factor model in part. Specifically, job tenure and career path have significant effects on career plateau. But gender, age, educational level and seniority have no significant effects on career plateau. Based on the Chinese culture, the study added the type of enterprise. The result showed that mean difference was not

significant on job content plateau($F=2.77$, $P>.05$), but significant on hierarchical plateau($F=3.63$ $P<.05$). The test found that the difference between foreign-funded firms and private firms was significant($T=2.48$, $P<.05$). Although mean difference between state-owned and private enterprises didn't reached significance at the 0.05 level, it was great($T=1.90$, $P<.059$). Descriptive statistics showed private, state-owned and foreign-funded firms' means were 13.29,14.62 and 15.46, respectively. These suggested subjects perceived greater degree of hierarchical plateau in the foreign-funded enterprise. State-owned enterprises were in the next place.

In terms of career path, Post Hoc Tests found that mean difference of hierarchical and job content plateau between managers and logistic personnel, professionals and logistical personnel both reached significance at the 0.01 level. Descriptive statistics showed manager, professional and personnel's means of hierarchical plateau were 13.55, 13.40 and 16.64, respectively. Means of job content plateau were 16.20, 16.83 and 19.56, respectively. These results suggested that logistical personnel more easily encounter career plateau(hierarchical and job content plateau).

5 Conclusion

The most important finding was that job content plateau has dominant effect on work attitudes, comparative to hierarchical plateau. The present results support the assertion that the continual development of new skills and life-long learning have been identified as keys to career management within the context of the changing nature of work (Hall, 1996). The results also suggested that job tenure and career path were the most important factors affecting career plateau. The findings can provide organizations new insights into identifying strategies to help lessen perceptions of plateau. Future research in this important area should inquiry into the process of how the career plateau changes with the job tenure, and put forward more measures for organizational career management.

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