

# Career Plateau

Subjects: Management

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Career plateau is a situation in which an employee has less to no possibility of a vertical promotion or a horizontal movement. Ze can feel to be stuck in your current position without room to develop.

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## 1. Career Plateau

A career is the total experience that an individual develops throughout his or her life in relation to work, including attitudes and behaviors <sup>[1][2]</sup>. From an individual's point of view, a career is an experience accumulated in the socio-economic space and time of an occupational society, and it can be said that this goes beyond just work experience, but consists of life itself <sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, career development as a function of traditional human resource management has been treated as crucial <sup>[4]</sup>.

In the early days, career development focused on the pursuit of vertical movement within an organization. This presupposes the stability of lifelong employment. However, as the employment environment has destabilized and jobs have frequently been created and destroyed, it has become difficult to maintain this premise. Accordingly, the leading subject of career planning and management is shifting from being organization-focused to being focused on the individual. In other words, the idea that organizational members should lead career development by themselves, rather than designing and managing individual career paths through individual promotion and transfer placement, is being established in the corporate field <sup>[5]</sup>. The career construction theory advocated by Savickas <sup>[6][7]</sup> can be seen as a kind of paradigm shift. He views individuals as constructing their own career paths by ascribing meaning to their career-related behaviors and professional experiences.

On the other hand, the rapid obsolescence of acquired skills and knowledge is making it difficult for the individual to maintain a stable career in one organization or one job. When the rate of career development does not keep pace with the rate of obsolescence, a career plateau may be experienced. Furthermore, due to the low-growth economy and downsizing that has become the new normal under COVID-19, members of organizations are experiencing job instability and intensified competition, increasing the prevalence of career plateau <sup>[8]</sup>.

Most of the early studies on career plateau focus on the vertical and horizontal movement of jobs as a core concept. Ference, Stoner, and Warren <sup>[9]</sup> define a career plateau as the perception that the possibility of increased responsibility and authority or the possibility of promotion in the near future is slim. Veiga <sup>[10]</sup> views career plateau as a state in which the possibility of horizontal or vertical promotion is lacking. Hall <sup>[2]</sup> defines a career plateau as a state in which an individual's current career is not commensurate with ones' age and length of service. Near <sup>[11]</sup> uses an estimate of the time expected until the next promotion, and Chao <sup>[12]</sup> uses the time spent at the current job as an objective criterion for career plateau.

On the other hand, Ettington <sup>[13]</sup> points out that, even if an individual achieves career success such as being promoted faster than others on an objective basis, they may feel that their career has plateaued, or conversely, even if an individual has reached a career plateau according to an objective condition, he or she may not regard this as stagnant. Chao <sup>[12]</sup> advocated the concept of a "subjective plateau" and argued that the perception of career plateau can vary depending on how organizational members perceive their future careers. The noteworthy implication of Chao's claim is that the degree of the subjectively perceived plateau can differ even if two employees are objectively in the same career plateau situation <sup>[14]</sup>. Allen, et al. <sup>[15]</sup> argued that career plateau is based on an individual's subjective perception of future possibilities. Even the same two years may feel long to some but short to others depending on the person's subjective perception of career plateau.

The concept of career plateau consists of a hierarchical plateau and job content plateau <sup>[16]</sup>. Hierarchical career plateau recognizes the possibility of future promotion as the essence of a plateau and appears frequently in early career plateau studies. Content career plateau is an attitude via which one feels that the possibility of increased challenge and responsibility is slim due to no longer being interested in the current job or having no discretion over the job contents <sup>[17]</sup>. This perspective approaches career plateau as a multi-dimensional construct not limited to the possibility of promotion within the organization, but also includes other job-related factors <sup>[18][19]</sup>. This means that, as suggested by Feldman and Weitz <sup>[20]</sup>, a person who has increased job responsibility while still working within the same structural position for a long time may not perceive themselves as being stagnant. Yet, for the same reason, an individual promoted from a structural point of view while retaining the same level of job responsibility may view this as stagnation in terms of content.

Assuming that career plateau is observed when there are no more challenges encountered in relation to job proficiency and when a sense of pervading boredom accompanies job-related tasks, job content plateau will be at the foundation of the career plateau <sup>[5][21]</sup>. The content career plateau that employees perceive when they feel bored or frustrated because they are already proficient at their job causes them to lose curiosity and interest in their job and often feel hopeless <sup>[22]</sup>. Career plateau is linked to psychological exhaustion in which people no longer find interest in what they do <sup>[3]</sup>. Considering the characteristics of the content career plateau, it is possible that it could cause job burnout while performing no-contact teleworking due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is worth examining.

A perceived career plateau promotes the formation of negative attitudes such as decreased motivation for job performance, decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, low morale, frequent absenteeism, and elevated turnover intention <sup>[23][24][25]</sup>. The greater the difference between the ideal roles, envisioned by the members of the organization, and the reality perceived by the individual, the lower the level of job satisfaction. Conversely, the smaller the difference between the expectation of the role and the perception of the actual career, the higher the job satisfaction. The results of a study occupy the same context as a study showing a significant correlation between career growth opportunities and job satisfaction <sup>[26]</sup>. According to some studies e.g., <sup>[27]</sup>, people who can no longer learn new things through a job after doing it continuously for two to five years, experience a decrease in their will to achieve.

## **2. Job Burnout**

Job burnout generally refers to negative psychological experiences that occur as a result of repeated exposure to stress for a long time <sup>[28]</sup>. The academic concept of 'burnout' has been a research topic since the 1960s. The concept of job burnout related to personal work, however, was first proposed by Freudenberger <sup>[29]</sup>, a psychiatrist who paid attention to a phenomenon in which medical staff, including himself, lost motivation for no obvious apparent reason. He defined it as a state in which a person experiences skepticism or frustration due to the unsatisfactory performance and reward of a given task, even though he or she has performed the task devotedly.

The study of job burnout was able to be conducted more systematically with developing MBI: Maslach Burnout Inventory <sup>[30]</sup>. Three main phenomena that negatively affect one's mental and physical aspects, as a result of accumulating work-related stress for a considerable period of time, were accepted as a universal concept for the description and identification of job burnout. The first, emotional exhaustion, refers to the exhaustion of certain mental faculties. Mentally exhausted employees often become less adaptive and depleted of energy resulting in an inability to continue working <sup>[31]</sup>. Second, depersonalization refers to the process via which employees feel separated from the workplace or begin to show indifferent attitudes in regard to their work and duties. Job burnout refers to a state in which an individual cannot put in the energy necessary to perform his or her work-related tasks, and at the same time, to being persistently cynical with regards to colleagues <sup>[32]</sup>. Individuals experiencing job burnout tend to minimize contact with others <sup>[33]</sup>. Third, reduced personal accomplishment means that an individual no longer finds meaning in their work and that it feels meaningless to achieve what they want. Decreased sense of accomplishment as a negative evaluation of one's competence leads to a loss of self-esteem or a decline in work ability <sup>[34]</sup>.

The mental and physical exhaustion that occurs mainly in interpersonal workers in the medical or educational services industries (teachers, nurses, police, hotel workers, etc.) was studied for job burnout e.g., <sup>[35][36][37][38]</sup>. After that, the research was expanded to general occupations, demonstrating that job burnout was experienced when exposed to emotionally excessive demands for a long period of time even in occupations that deal with objects or information without necessitating the formation of close relationships between people. Job burnout is also highly related to depression and anxiety and lowers work and learning abilities <sup>[39]</sup>. In addition, job burnout increases the absenteeism rate and turnover intention, reinforcing dissatisfaction with the organization, and ultimately negatively affecting the organization <sup>[31][38]</sup>.

This study hypothesized that job burnout may expand under no-contact teleworking, enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the barriers to self-development and that relative deprivation caused by a perceived career plateau would affect this process. According to the social comparison theory <sup>[40]</sup>, self-evaluation is not done alone, but in the context of relationships with others. That is, when individuals judge their own thoughts, attitudes, and abilities, they are constructed and evaluated through exchanges and comparisons with others <sup>[41]</sup>. From this perspective, the perception of career development and plateau is also formed by comparison with others. When telecommuting non-face-to-face and alone due to the COVID-19 pandemic, isolated individuals may lose their standard of comparison and increase their sense of career plateau. An increase in the sense of career plateau in the performance of a job strengthens the awareness that self-development can no longer be expected at work, and interaction with people in the workplace is also reduced <sup>[34][42]</sup>. Furthermore, they will experience job burnout more seriously due to the anxiety and helplessness that result from career plateau.

### **3. Regulatory Foci**

Regulatory focus theory was advocated by Higgins <sup>[43]</sup> as a concept to explain motivational duality. According to Higgins, humans have a specific motivational system that self-regulates their actions to achieve goals. Human motivation is divided into the tendency to seek gain for pleasure and the tendency to avoid pain by preventing it in advance. This is in line with the hedonic principle, which is summarized in the two principles presupposed in traditional motivation theory: the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain <sup>[44]</sup>.

This motivational system is divided into promotion focus and prevention focus <sup>[43][45]</sup>. Although both have the same goal of ultimately achieving desired end-states, the strategies, means, and methods used to achieve these end-states differ. In other words, the pattern of behavior changes according to the focus type of self-regulation, which is a specific psychological need in an individual. Promotion focus, a self-regulation type that seeks to pursue pleasure, tends to improve one's current status in order to achieve the desired outcome and is a motivator sensitive to positive outcomes <sup>[46]</sup> <sup>[47]</sup>. The focus on promotion is deeply related to advancement, growth, accomplishment, and enhancement. It is rooted in the motivation to reduce the difference between the desirable ideal self and the actual self. Promotion focus prefers eagerness, and approaching goals with a challenging attitude, despite the inherent risk <sup>[48]</sup>. Whereas, prevention focus, which is the self-regulating type that avoids pain, tends to minimize risks and losses and prevent unwanted negative consequences <sup>[49]</sup>. It is rooted in the motivation to reduce the difference between the "ought self" and the "actual self," which values fulfillment of obligations and compliance with norms. Prevention focus is sensitive to security, safety, and responsibilities. Prevention focus aids in goal attainment by use of vigilant means to carefully identify and avoid possible problems <sup>[48]</sup>.

According to the regulatory focus theory, there is a clear difference in the formation and expression of motivation in humans, and this is the result of two different psychological inclinations working together. The theory states that it is one step further from the hedonic principle of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance, where people self-regulate pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance through their own strategies <sup>[50]</sup>. As a result, the regulatory focus theory encompasses the core concepts of traditional motivational theories (e.g., McClelland's acquired-needs theory) and has a robust explanatory power for the effects of the two regulatory foci on the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals who respond accordingly <sup>[51]</sup>.

The use of access and avoidance strategies can fundamentally influence information processing <sup>[52]</sup>. Therefore, people who focus predominantly on promotion focus or prevention focus show different psychological states in the process of goal achievement. That is, people with a heightened promotion focus seek after their goals eagerly, while those with a more preventive focus pursue them with vigilance. In addition, Higgins <sup>[53]</sup> reports that the intensity of regulatory focus plays a moderating role in the study of emotional response.

Self-regulation is the motivation to consciously change one's thoughts or behavioral responses in pursuit of goals or ideals. Many previous studies e.g., <sup>[44][47][54]</sup> have demonstrated that these regulatory motivations affect a wide range of psychological processes, such as emotions, memory, and approaches to problem-solving. There are various cases where self-regulation is needed in daily life, such as resistance to temptation, suppression of impulses to give up difficult tasks, and patience while experiencing psychological pain <sup>[46]</sup>. Not expressing emotions or thoughts as they exist also requires self-regulation.

As such, self-regulation can be said to be a contextual condition that affects overall human behavior <sup>[55][56][57][58]</sup>. The effect of self-regulation, should therefore also work on changes in human behavior in the negative case of career plateau. Based on the above discussion, the research hypothesis was established that the influence of career plateau on job

burnout would be different determined by the type and intensity of the regulatory foci. In particular, regarding the promotion focus can be understood as an extension of the job characteristics model <sup>[59]</sup> that growth need play a role as a moderator in processes where the five job characteristics affect intrinsic work motivation.

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