



Determinants of subjective career plateau

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Abstract

Many employees in their mid career stage experience the career plateau. The plateau is the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low. Executives, who are practicing in different industries in Sri Lanka, now, have confronted challenge of less promotional opportunities available in the organization. This initially leads them to become plateau with their career and it explicitly influence to decrease job satisfaction and organizational commitment while increasing job stress and labor turnover. The study was aimed at identifying contributing factors of the career plateau and its significance among selected executives in Sri Lanka. The study used survey method, where data were collected through conducting personal interviews using a structured questionnaire. The sample of 172 executives, employed in different industries in Sri Lanka namely, Banking, Insurance, Textiles, Hotel and Tourism, Food Processing and Engineering, in the southern and western province was selected for the study. The impact of Demographic, organizational and job related variables to determine executives' subjective career plateau were measured by multiple regression analysis. Results indicated that respondents' gender, business strategies, supervisory and peer support, employees' motivation to learn and role ambiguity were significantly related to subjective career plateau.

Keywords: Career Plateau; Determinants of Career Plateau; Mid Career

Introduction

The changes in the business environment such as technological advancement, restructuring and reengineering have resulted in greater numbers of people competing for fewer promotional opportunities (Allen, et. al, 1999). In today's context, many managers are more likely to plateau at an earlier age than those a generation ago, and also earlier than they might expect. (Ettington, 1997) As such, one of the major challenges confronting today's organization is that identify the most critical factors contributing to career plateau and how to deal with negative consequences of it.

Career plateau, defined as "the point in a career beyond which further promotion is low (FERENCE, Stoner and Warren, 1977) has become the most vital concept in the career management literature and many researchers has attempted to explore the determinants of career plateau. As suggested by the career management literature, various factors may lead to career plateau and several of them consist of lack of individual skills and abilities, lack of individual needs and values, lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of extrinsic rewards, stress and burnout, and slow

organizational growth (Feldman and Weitz), and demographic variables, personal orientation factors, and work environment perception (Allen, et al, 1999).

Career plateau obviously has detrimental effect on individual morale and organizational performance. Greenhaus, et al., (2000) argue that the overall implication of being plateau is that plateau employees may become angry, frustrated, bored, stagnant, and less involved and motivated in their work. Further, plateau employees may exhibit deteriorated performance and cause a decline in the performance of their unit and overall organization. Thus, career plateau has become most critical aspect in an organizational setting and it is necessarily vital for organizations to explore the significant factors contribute to career plateau and the means of effectively dealing with the negative impact of it. In the light of above, the emphasis of this study is mainly on career plateau aspects with special reference to Sri Lankan managerial employees attached to different kinds of industries. This study explores more specifically, the most critical determinants of subjective career plateau.

Though empirical researches have not been conducted in Sri Lankan context, In Sri Lanka, at present, there are many executives in different industries who have

experienced plateau in their positions. A number of factors may directly and indirectly influence to plateau circumstances and each factor creates a different degree of importance as well. Especially, Today's sluggish business environment in the Sri Lanka and the unpredictability of market forces make career plateau an increasingly important issue for midlevel managers and professionals, and for their employing organizations. Given these events and other factors, it is clear that career plateau can be treated as a major human resources issue which must be further explored and find alternative solutions for effectively deal with the issue in Sri Lankan context. Since there is little published research in this aspect based on the Sri Lankan employee perspective, this study attempts to address the following research question: Which factors determine career plateau among Sri Lankan managerial employees.

Literature Review

The definition and operationalization of career plateau has evolved over the years. Initially, the most widely used definition of career plateau was suggested by Ference, Stoner, and Warren (1977) who defined it as "the point in a career when the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low".

Different types of career plateau are found in the career management literature. Bradwick (1986) described three types of plateau: structural, content and personal plateau. As suggested Bradwick (1986) structural plateau results from the combined effects of organizational structure where as content plateau occur when an employee becomes saturated with all available job related information and consequently lacks further challenges to expand vocational expertise. Further, personal plateau refers to employees' personal life and often corresponds to a period in one's life stage development. In addition there are other two types of plateau scenario such as objective and subjective career plateau. Tremblay and Roger (1993) contended objective plateau refers to structural and observable aspects and associated with the time in the current position where as subjective plateau tend to the feeling of having been in one's level for too long and of having reached a dead end in one's progress. Determination and measuring of objective career plateau is mainly done by considering number of years a particular employee has been in the same position. The ideal time period may vary from one research to another. Some researches consider 5 years (Slocum, et al., 1985), others use 7 years (Veiga, 1981), and also another authors use 10 years (Gerpott and Domsch, 1987) to

define objective career plateau. Tremblay, et al., (1995) contend that the norm of 5 to 6 years in the same job frequently used to measure objective career plateau. Since subjective plateau entirely refers to the employees' perception on lack of promotional opportunities in the organization; it is relatively difficult to measure. Some time there may be certain employees who have been in the same position just below the 5 years time period in the same position without receiving any hierarchal promotions, but perceiving that he/she stucked in the career path. On the other hand, we could find employees who have been in the current position for longer period for instances, more than 5 years but never perceived that they have plateau in their career ladder.

Various factors may contribute for employees becoming plateau. Determinants of career progress or stagnation may be divided in to several categories: Individual and familial factors and organizational factors (Tremblay and Roger, 1993), demographical factors, personal orientation factors and work environment perception (Allen, et al., 1999), and organizational factors, job related factors.

Demographic variables

Demographic variables can influence both objective and subjective career plateau. Virtually every one plateaus at one time or another. Greenhaus, et al., (2000) suggest that although plateau can occur at any stage of a career, it is particularly relevant to employees older than 40. Latack, (1984), has observed negative relationship between age and career mobility. Allen, et al., (1998) found that men were more likely to be classified as double plateau (content and hierarchical plateau) or non-plateau than *women*. In contrast, they found that women were more likely to be classified as hierarchical or job content plateau than men. Gallos (1989) found that greater percentage of women perceived that there were fewer advancement opportunities (subjective plateau) available to them than men and they may become plateau sooner than men.

Insufficient *education* can block vertical progression and restrict the possibilities of moving into a different position (Becker and Strauss, 1959). Grandjean, (1981) argue that effect of education on horizontal and vertical mobility will be felt throughout the entire career. "Considering the literature, the conclusions pertaining to the influence of education on career stability and plateau have been mixed, and some

researchers have observed no significant difference in the subjects studied" (Veiga, 1981). Moreover (1985) revealed data from 199 managers, higher education for instance Master Degree, decrease the likelihood of becoming plateau, and she suggest that managers should pursue higher level education in order to prevent negative consequences of career plateau.

Organizational variables

Greenhaus, et al., (2000) indicated that at the basic level, the *pyramidal structure* of most organizations provides fewer positions at higher levels of the hierarchy. Further, they explain that the higher a person rises in the organizational structure, the smaller the number of positions that are available for further advancement. Thus it is obvious that the many employees experience career plateau in their career path mainly due to the pyramidal shape of the organization. *Business strategies* pursued by the organization also critically influence to increase the occurrence of the career plateau among individuals. Greenhaus, et al., (2000) argue that the problem of career plateau is aggravated in organizations that are growing slowly, not growing at all, or contracting their operations and work force. Furthermore, they indicated that a company's business strategy can affect the number and type of growth opportunities and, hence, the incidence of plateau in certain career paths.

Job related variables

Allen, et al., (1999) argue that perceived social *support from the top management, supervisors, and peers* can reinforce the importance and value of learning and development activities and thus foster a positive learning environment among employees, and ultimately, it could lead to decrease the subjective career plateau among the employees. Near (1985) indicates that unsupportive supervisors may cause their subordinates to become plateau or supervisors may become unsupportive for learning that their subordinates have become plateau. Further she found that managers who have not reached a career plateau reported better working relationships with their supervisors and longer job tenure than did their plateau counterparts. *Training opportunities* available within the organization also link with the career plateau. Feldman and Weitz (1988) found that plateau managers reported having received similar levels of training to that of fast-track managers. *Role ambiguity* refers to 'the extent to which a worker understands the requirements of his or her job'

(Rousseau, 1978) or 'lack of clarity with respect to expected performance, to the methods to be used to do the work, and to the consequences of the performance' (Graen, 1976). Many studies have concluded that employees often feel uncomfortable when they suffering from lack of precise knowledge of the duties, responsibilities and goal and objectives of their job. Cited from Tremblay (2004), Cummings et al., (1989) suggested that "role ambiguity reduces satisfaction with the immediate supervisor, colleagues, salary, opportunities for advancement and with work itself". Fewer studies have been conducted to understand the implication of role ambiguity towards career plateau.

Psychological variables

Noe and Wilk (1993) found that motivation to learn had a consistent, significant, and positive influence on employees' development activities and in turn lead to more promotional opportunities. Seeking additional career relevant information (Career Exploration) is also related to learning and development with resemblance to getting career movement. "Individuals who are more likely to engage in *career exploration and career planning* activities should recognize and be more aware of their own developmental needs and the importance of developing different skills" (Allen, et al., 1999). Consequently individuals who are more concerned about career exploration activities have more opportunities to find attractive job opportunities than those who do not. Chao (1990) found a relationship between career planning and career exploration with the occurrence of subjective plateau such that individuals who report engaging in more career planning and career exploration indicate that they are less likely to feel plateau.

The main purpose of this research is to explore the concurrent human resources issue of managerial career plateau among Sri Lankan managerial employees. Specifically the objective of this study is to identify the nature and determinants of managerial career plateau in a broad way.

Methodology

In the initial stage pilot study was conducted. Using personal network, twelve managers were selected from the southern and western province of Sri Lanka. Managers from different industries such as: Banking, Insurance, Textiles, Hotel and Tourism, Food Processing and Engineering, were selected to perform the pilot study. A Semi structured interview was conducted to gather exploratory data on the study variables. This usually began as an un-structured style

of interview, which later turns to semi structured through focusing on specific issues. The interviews were conducted among twelve managers at the offices of the respective managers and interviews lasted half an hour. During the interview, the interviewer written down information and if needed, the managers were contacted via telephone for further information. A structured questionnaire was used to collect the primary data from the sample of 200 managers. The variables in the study were tested using a structured questionnaire by means of self administered sample of 200 managers in the significant industries of Sri Lanka.

The sample of 200 managers was selected so as to cover different industries. Following criteria were taken in to account when selecting managers: Remaining in the same position for more than five years, Over and above twenty five years of age, Subordinate per manager is more than five. In the survey, 200 managers were contacted, and the questionnaires were delivered using E-mail (n = 83), post (n = 74), and direct contact (n = 31). After accounting for refusals, and badly filled out questionnaire and a working sample of 160 (82% response rate) were produced. The workable sample of managers consists of different industries: Banking (n =33), Insurance (n =18), Textiles (n =31), Hotel and Tourism (n = 26), Education (n= 20), Food Processing (14), Engineering (n = 18). The sample (surveyed and interviewed) comprises managers who belong to the age category of over twenty five. This was due to the fact that most managers who are practising in Sri Lankan organizations are over age of twenty five.

Subjective plateau was measured with items based on five-point Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). The questions asked to measure subjective plateau consist "I believe that I have been in the same level for much too long, "I believe that I am not getting ahead in the organization". Lack of promotional opportunities was measured by five point Likert scale and "There is not enough promotional opportunities in my organization", "Current organizational structure in my organization block my promotions", were the examples for the items used in the study. Business strategy was measured by five point Likert scale items and the items used in the questionnaire include, "Top management often formulates business strategy after some problem occurred", "Organizational strategy focuses on growth rather than survival in the industry", In order to measure the role ambiguity, three items were used from the instruments developed by Rizzo, et al., (1970). The

sample questions are "I feel certain about how much authority I have at work", "I know what my responsibilities are at work", "Clear, planned goals and objectives exist for my job". A 5 item scale was used to measure supervisory and peer support. Sample items include "My supervisor informs me about different career opportunities in the organization", "I have a close relationship with other employees of this company". Intrinsic reward was measured by five point Likert scale and sample of items include "My job requires creativity", "My job helps me to develop special abilities". Compensation system was measured with two items scale and the items used in the study consist "I do not want to take promotion due to no significant difference in salary level", "I do not want to be promoted because my effort in the new job will not be compensated by higher wage". Existence of less training opportunities was measured by 5 point scale with four items. (e.g. "There is not enough training opportunities for me inside the organization", "I am not interested in taking outside training because the training cost"). Motivation to learn was assessed with three items modified from scales used in past research (Baldwin and Karl, 1987). (e.g., "I often expect additional responsibilities in my job", "I value my leisure higher than promotions").

Age was obtained through a scale encompassing five categories, starting from under 25 to over 54 years. Educational level of the respondents were collected through six groups, ranging from primary level = 1 to professional level = 6. In order to measure marital status two categories were used. Married = 1 and Single = 2. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between contributing factors of the career plateau and subjective plateau. Factor analysis was preformed to assess the validity of the items, which used to measure the determinants of the career plateau.

Results and Discussion

A multiple Regression analysis was used to test and examine the relative contribution of each of the independent variables (Demographic, Organizational, Job related and Psychological variables) toward explaining variance in the dependant variable (Subjective Plateau). The adjusted R square of 0.503 describes that the regression model explains 50 percent of the variance of subjective plateau variable. Standard error of estimation is 0.705. The F- ratio is 10.6 with a significance level of .000, so the model is significant at 1 percent level.

Since the majority of the variables studied were psychological and were measured simultaneously, the tolerance and the variance inflation factor (VIF) were used to assess the degree of multicollinearity among the variables. In the present study tolerance ranged from 0.410 to 0.731. In this study the VIF for each of the independent variables ranged from 1.53 to 2.43, which is well below the rule-of-thumb suggested by Hair, et al., which states that the largest VIF should not be larger than 10. The results of these diagnostic indicators suggest that multicollinearity is not a serious issue of concern in the study.

Subjective Career Plateau and Demographic Factors

First, the impact of the demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, marital and educational level) toward subjective plateau is measured and Table 1 shows the results. The standardized regression coefficients from the regression results are examined to determine the impact of each independent variable towards dependant variable. Managers representing age category of 45-54 are considered as the reference group for age while attained a master degree qualification is considered as the reference group for educational level. The reference group for gender is

male. Since married managers are the large group, they are considered as the reference group for the marital. Subjective plateau was negatively related to managers who belongs to age category of 25-34 ($\beta = -0.363, P \leq 0.01$). Consistent with the literature the managers who belongs to the age group over 54 is positively related to subjective plateau ($\beta = 0.210, P \leq 0.01$). This means that young managers are less likely to perceive themselves as plateau compared to matured managers. Further, a significant positive relationship is found between women managers and subjective plateau ($\beta = 0.152, P \leq 0.05$). This means that women managers are more susceptible to being subjectively plateau than male managers.

As in Table 1, managers who attained professional educational qualification are positively related to subjective plateau ($\beta = 0.221, P \leq 0.01$). Attained secondary education also negatively and significantly related to the subjective plateau ($\beta = 0.107, P \leq 0.10$). No significant relationships are found between subjective plateau and managers belongs to age category of 35-44 years ($\beta = -0.072, n.s$), married managers ($\beta = 0.055, n.s$), bachelor ($\beta = 0.045, n.s$) and Doctoral educational level ($\beta = -0.103, n.s$).

Table 1. Results of Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	B	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Value	Significance Level (p)
Demographic Variables					
Age 25-34	-0.792	-0.363***	0.195	-4.066	0.000
Age 35-44	-0.153	-0.072	0.153	-1.001	0.319
Age 45-54(Ref. Group)	-	-	-	-	-
Age over 54	0.857	0.210***	0.288	2.979	0.003
Female	0.308	0.152**	0.137	2.240	0.027
Male (Ref. Group)	-	-	-	-	-
Marital	0.135	0.055	0.167	0.807	0.421
Married (Ref. Group)	-	-	-	-	-
Secondary	0.508	0.107*	0.286	1.775	0.078
Bachelor	0.103	0.045	0.152	0.673	0.502
Master (Ref. Group)	-	-	-	-	-
Doctoral	-0.438	-0.103	0.284	-1.540	0.126
Professional	0.481	0.221***	0.155	3.099	0.002
Job related variables					
Supervisory & Peer Support	-0.129	-0.129*	0.078	-1.661	0.099
Compensation System	-0.130	-0.130*	0.068	-1.914	0.058
Role Ambiguity	-0.123	-0.123*	0.071	-1.741	0.084
Intrinsic Reward	0.074	0.074	0.070	1.051	0.295
Training Opportunities	0.133	0.133**	0.063	2.101	0.037
Organizational variables					
Pyramidal Structure	0.443	0.443***	0.084	5.264	0.000
Business Strategy	-0.132	-0.132*	0.071	-1.858	0.065
Psychological variables					
Motivation to Learn	-0.020	-0.020	0.068	-0.292	0.771
Value for Family obligation	-0.344	-0.344***	0.082	-4.214	0.000

*** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.10$

Standardized beta coefficient reflects the relative impact on the dependant variable of a change in one standard deviation in either explanatory variable (Hair, et al., 2005). Comparing the standardized beta coefficients of the different age group it can be concluded that managers who belong to age groups over 54 years are markedly more plateau than the other age category ($\beta = 0.210, P \leq 0.01$). As far as the managers' educational level concerned, those who have attained professional educational qualification ($\beta = 0.221, P \leq 0.01$) are more influenced by a feeling of subjective plateau compared to other educational qualification.

Results confirm the findings of Greenhaus, et al., (2000) showing that prolonged tenure in the same position leads to reduce the chance of further advancement. As Greenhaus et al., (2000) found in their study that plateau is particularly relevant to employees older than 40. Certain career plateau literature explains that age and career plateau is negatively correlated (Kalleberg and Loscocco, 1983; Markham, South, Bonjean, and Corder, 1985). In line with these findings, this study results come up with positive correlation between matured managers and career plateau while the younger managers are negatively correlated with the career plateau. Gallos (1989) found that a greater percentage of women perceived that they had fewer advancement opportunities available to them than men, so that women may become plateau sooner than men. As expected, the present study also revealed that women are more likely to be subjectively plateau than men. The results from interviewing managers revealed that the main reason for women managers being plateau rather than male managers was that intense family responsibilities they are involved in.

The educational level is also linked to the career plateau. Considering educational level, as Near (1985) identified that the length and type of the education influence the likelihood of becoming plateau. This study found that education has an inverse influence on career plateau. Inconsistent with the previous studies' findings, this study found that secondary, bachelor and professional education have significant impact toward career plateau. Compared to the master level of education many managers believe that the degree of education has a profound effect on receiving attractive promotions and challenging assignments. During the interview session with twelve managers, they state that human resource policies of the organizations and the type and length of educational qualification as an important consideration when making promotions

decisions. This, proved that the close relationship between educational level and career plateau.

Subjective Career Plateau and Job Related Variables

Considering the sign of the beta coefficient the direction of the relationship can be determined. In accordance with Table 1 it can be noted that compensation system, role ambiguity, and supervisory and peer support are negatively related to the subjective plateau while intrinsic reward is positively associated with. Consistent with prior studies, the lack of training opportunities are positively associated with the managerial subjective plateau. ($\beta = 0.133, P \leq 0.05$). This provides insight that the lack of training programs inside the organization causes managers to limit their scope, and it further impacts to disqualify them for competing for higher level position in the same organization or outside the organization. In line with the previous studies, this study found a significant relationship between supervisory and peer support ($\beta = -0.129, p \leq 0.10$), compensation systems ($\beta = -0.130, p \leq 0.10$), role ambiguity ($\beta = -0.123, p \leq 0.10$) and the subjective plateau. As opposed to prior studies this study fails to identify significant association between subjective plateau and intrinsic reward ($\beta = 0.074, n.s$).

Subjective Career Plateau and Organizational Variables

Not surprisingly, consistent with the career plateau literature the pyramidal organizational structure was positively related with the subjective plateau ($\beta = 0.443, P \leq 0.01$). This means that if the organizational structure is of a more pyramidal shape, it causes managers to compete for fewer upper level positions. In turn it leads to increase the feeling of being plateau among managers who stagnated in the same position. Additionally, a significant negative relationship was observed between organizational business strategies and subjective plateau ($\beta = -0.132, p \leq 0.10$). Allen, et al., (1999) and Near (1985) emphasized that prolonged and strong supervisory and peer support reduce the possibility of being plateau. This study also found that supervisory and peer support significantly contributes to reduce managers' subjective plateau. Availability of adequate training opportunities and managers' willingness to enroll in training critically influences to the degree of employees' plateau. Feldman and Weitz (1988) found that plateau managers reported having received similar levels of training to that of fast-track managers. The survey results reject Weitz's finding and found that lack of training

opportunities received, increased the change of being subjectively plateau. Fewer studies have been conducted to investigate the influence of the role ambiguity towards career plateau. This study found a significant link between role ambiguity and subjective career plateau. Intrinsic rewards are not significantly related to subjective plateau. On the other hand, the type of compensation is significantly related to the subjective plateau.

Psychological Variables and Subjective Career Plateau

As in the table 1, a high value for family obligation or leisure shows a significant negative relationship with subjective plateau ($\beta = -0.344$, $P \leq 0.01$). The motivation to learn was not significantly contributing to explain the variation of subjective plateau ($\beta = -.020$, n.s). Motivation to learn, however, is negatively correlated with the subjective plateau.

Noe and Wilk (1993) contended that motivation to learn has a consistent, significant, and positive influence on developmental activity, and in turn it leads to reduce the likelihood of being plateau. In contrast with these findings, no significant relation is identified with subjective plateau. High value for family obligation was considered as vital factor determining the career plateau in the previous studies. Greenhaus, et al., (2000) found that internal feelings of the individual encompassing with the personal values and believe could tend to increase the likelihood of the plateau. In order to maintain a balanced life style, an increasing number of employees, at present, do not wish to accept further advancement. Many studies confirmed this notion and explain that this basically occurred because of the potential conflicts confronting new promotions family or leisure commitments. Not surprisingly this research also came up with the identical conclusion that the high value for family obligation significantly influenced to subjective career plateau.

Conclusion

This study attempts to identify the most significant factors that may cause subjective career plateau. In the end, based on the primary and secondary data analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn. Age, gender, secondary educational level has a significant contribution to determining subjective career plateau. Further, less training opportunities, compensation system, role ambiguity and supervisory and peer support that are categorized under the job related factors show a significant importance in predicting executives' feeling of subjective plateau. As far as the

organizational variables are concerned pyramidal organization structure in essence, has a profound effect on enhancing the perception of subjective plateau. Finally, employees' value for family obligation is also significantly related with the subjective career plateau. In addition to variables examined in this study other variables such as employees' locus of control, spouses' work aspirations, and span of control also influence to determine the employees' subjective career plateau. Therefore future researches necessarily should focus on this aspect. Since this study attempt to identify factors influence to subjective career plateau, there is still research gap on identifying determinants of objective career plateau in a broad way with special reference to Sri Lankan employees.

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