

# **CAREER PLATEAUS AND CAREER PINNACLES**

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## CAREER PLATEAUS AND CAREER PINNACLES

The Collegiate Employment Research Institute has supported research on career issues of importance to the college educated workforce for several years. Data from the career history study allowed us to explore the impact of career plateaus on a general population of university graduates and those that indicated they were in managerial positions. These results stimulated further exploration into the career plateau issue. A smaller group of individuals who participated in the career history study volunteered to participate in this study. This report extends our understanding of career plateaus and the study's findings challenge career counselors to think of career plateaus from a new perspective.

Workers in the three decades following World War II strove to advance their careers by seeking promotions within their organizations. An individual tried to avoid being plateaued; a situation described as a stable level of career development in which an individual is unlikely to receive future promotions (Stoner, Ference, Warren, & Christensen, 1980). A plateaued label, hung on an employee, reflected negatively upon the worker's performance. During the latter part of the 1980's, however, career plateaus could not be avoided.

Two events occurred simultaneously that caused people to face the possibility that their careers are or will be plateaued. First, many organizations have restructured, reducing (downsizing) their management and labor forces, to enhance their competitive edge. These structural changes closed promotion opportunities, forcing many people into plateaued careers. Second, the number of baby boomers entering middle-age dramatically increased competition for promotions. People with experience and seniority were not able to advance to higher level positions. In some cases, they have accepted plateaued careers. These changes in the workplace have rekindled an interest in the career phenomenon of plateauing.

### Summary

A distinction was made in this study between careers that had been forced to plateau because of organizational reasons or personal abilities and careers that were plateaued as a result of personal choice. The latter situation was labeled a career pinnacle; the highest position a person wished to attain in an organization. Comparisons were made between these two groups on their level of job satisfaction, job involvement, and life-style habits.

Results found that individuals in a plateaued career had lower levels of job satisfaction and lower levels of job involvement. For individuals whose careers had pinnaced, job satisfaction and job involvement remained high.

Career plateaus were further characterized as possessing lower career ambitions, having less interest in helping co-workers, and having more involvement in drug consumption. These traits could all be viewed as negative for both the individual and the organization.

Individuals who had accepted their career as pinnaced were highly involved in helping co-workers, smoked less, reported fewer family problems and traveled on vacations more than career plateaued individuals. These characteristics were considered favorable for the individual and the organization.

### Defining a Career Plateau

The majority of empirical research on plateaus has used length of job tenure as the criterion for defining a plateau (Gerpott & Domsch, 1987; Gould & Penley, 1984; Slocum, Cron, Hansen, & Rawlings, 1985; Stout, Slocum, & Cron, 1988). These studies have defined all people with a specific number of years on the job (typically 5 to 7 years) as plateaued. Several additional studies have employed self-ratings on the likelihood of future promotions to define a plateau (Near, 1980).

Within the career literature, plateaued employees are commonly stereotyped as less successful and on a slower career track. Stoner and his associates (1980) have described people who have plateaued as either solid citizens or deadwood. These labels distinguished two types of plateaus according to job performance levels. Poor performers, labeled "deadwoods," posed problems for the organization while high performers, or "solid citizens," remained valuable contributors to the organization. To an individual, these labels are typically less desirable than names assigned to non-plateaued people (e.g., "stars" and "learners"). A career plateaued worker is assumed to have low job satisfaction, to have poor company identification, and to have spent little time with career planning.

Recent evaluations of plateaued employees have challenged these accepted definitions and inferences. Stoner, et al. (1980) has identified different sources of career plateaus. Organizational sources involved limited promotion opportunities due to the organization's structure, promotion requirements, and other personnel policies that are not under the individual's control. Personal sources included limited abilities and skills that would disqualify an individual from further promotions. Additional personal sources encompassed factors that caused an individual to refuse additional promotions. These factors included an unwillingness to leave the type of work involved in the individual's present position or to make necessary work and nonwork adjustments for a promotion.

Feldman and Weitz (1988) argued that increased responsibilities on the job can forestall the stagnation and deleterious effects of blocked upward mobility. An individual who may not receive additional promotions may not be identified as one who is career plateaued if constantly challenged by new tasks and responsibilities on his or her present job. Also the examination of a career plateau should consider the consequences of pursuing opportunities outside the organization. An individual may prefer a career plateau in one organization as opposed to the uncertainty and disruption to nonwork life that a new job and new employer may bring.

These refinements in conceptualizing career plateaus raised important distinctions among factors that can cause a plateau. To account for different individual situations, a new definition was introduced for those situations where an employee may choose to accept a plateaued position. A career pinnacle has been defined as "the highest organizational level or job an individual aspires to" (Chao, 1990). This definition when used with Stoner's earlier definition recognizes plateau differences between those who choose to be plateaued (i.e., pinnacle), and those who are forced into plateaus. Thus, the attractiveness of an individual's current position may define a career pinnacle for that person.

This distinction in plateaus allows researchers to explore the reasons that a particular individual's likelihood of future promotions may be low. This distinction overcomes a major shortcoming of earlier studies. Results may be more conclusive if the constructs of plateaus and pinnacles are treated separately.

#### **Purpose**

The research reported in this paper draws distinctions between plateaued and pinnacled employees. Both situations can be characterized by limited growth in the organization's hierarchy. The extent to which an individual perceives this limitation as a plateau or a pinnacle will have a direct bearing on career plans and behavior within the organization.

Plateau and pinnacle as used in this study do not match Stoner's et al., (1980) labels of "deadwood" and "solid citizens." No inference on the individual's performance level is implied by the definitions of plateaued and pinnacled careers. The basic distinction lies in the individual's perception of his or her career development. A subjective evaluation of future career development emphasizes how the individual perceives, assesses, and reacts to the present work situation. If an individual believes that future promotions will be withheld, it will be that perception, and not an eventual reality of the future that will affect current attitudes and behaviors. Conversely, if an individual believes that future promotions are undesirable that perception will shape future attitudes, behaviors, and career plans.

From the negative connotations associated with being plateaued, plateaued individuals are believed to be less satisfied with their jobs, to hold a poor identity with their organizations, and have developed poor career plans. The first hypothesis examined these relationships using a perceptual measure of career plateau rather than job tenure.

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of a career plateau will be negatively related to job outcomes such as job satisfaction and job involvement.

The relationship between career pinnacles and job outcomes is likely to be positive. Feldman (1986) suggested that pinnacles can provide a sense of security for the individual who knows his or her job well, feels confident when performing that job, and is not interested in the stress and uncertainty associated with a promotion. Job security may also free up time and allow the individual to concentrate on other interests, such as family and recreation. The second hypothesis examined the relationships between perceptions of a career pinnacle and job outcomes.

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of a career pinnacle will be positively related to job outcomes such as job satisfaction and job involvement.

In addition to job outcomes, a career plateau or pinnacle may affect job and life-style changes. Feldman and Brett (1983) described how job changers used various coping strategies to help adjust to a new job. One particular coping mechanism, palliation, distracts an individual from the stress or other negative aspects associated with the new job. Distractions may include nonwork behaviors such as excessive smoking, eating,

or drug use. Positive reactions to career change may be associated with work behaviors such as helping others or nonwork behaviors such as vacations and hobby interests. The changes in a job and general lifestyle of an individual may be symptoms of positive or negative coping efforts to being plateaued. The third hypothesis examined these relationships.

**Hypothesis 3:** Career plateaus will be associated with negative changes in work and lifestyle habits. Career pinnacles will be associated with positive changes in work and lifestyle habits.

## METHOD

### Sample and Procedure

The participants in this study were baccalaureate alumni of Michigan State University. These alumni represented a wide variety of majors who had graduated between the years 1952 and 1985. These participants had responded to an earlier career history survey and had volunteered to be part of this focused study on plateaus. Questionnaires were mailed to 198 alumni and 168 were returned for a response rate of 84.8%. Of these respondents, 11 did not report full-time employment and were excluded from further analyses. Of the 157 full-time employed respondents, most reported occupations as managers, professionals, teachers, or sales representatives. The sample was a white (99.0%), male (62.0%), married (71.0%), upper middle-class group with a median family income between \$40,000-\$50,000. The respondents' ages ranged from 24 to 63 with a mean age of 39.8.

### Measures

**Career plateau and pinnacle.** Perceptions of a career plateau and career pinnacle were measured by six items related to promotion opportunities and career future. These items were developed based on definitions of a career plateau and a career pinnacle. Items also included career advancement opportunities outside the individual's current organization as well as job enrichment opportunities within the individual's current job. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which each item described their career evaluation. Items were rated by a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very little extent" to "very great extent."

**Outcome measures.** Job satisfaction and job involvement were used to assess the relationships between job outcomes and plateaus and pinnacles. Job satisfaction was measured by the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969). The JDI measures satisfaction on five job facets: the work itself, pay, promotion, supervision, and people. The reliabilities of these scales as measured by Cronbach's coefficient alpha were .79, .77, .87, .88, .79, respectively. Job involvement was measured by the six-item Job Involvement scale (Lodahl & Kejner, 1965). The reliability of this scale yielded an alpha coefficient of .74.

In addition to the job satisfaction and involvement outcome measures, twelve items tapping work and nonwork behaviors and interests were presented. For each item, respondents were asked to compare their current state with a previous state defined as the time they began their current job. The comparisons were described on a 5-point rating scale ranging from "greatly decreased" to "greatly increased." Thus, for an item like Family Problems, the respondent was to compare the number of family problems when he or she started in the current job and the number of family problems now. For items that were irrelevant to a respondent (e.g., smoking), a "not applicable" response was available.

## RESULTS

### Development of Career Plateau/Pinnacle Scales

The six items defining career plateaus and pinnacles were subjected to a principle axis factor analysis. An exploratory factor analysis was used instead of a confirmatory procedure because the career plateau and pinnacle concepts are not well developed theoretically. The factor analysis was conducted without specifying the number of factors to be extracted. Based on the Kaiser criterion, two factors were extracted, accounting for 59.6% of the variance. Since career plateaus and pinnacles are conceptually related constructs, the two factors were subject to an oblique rotation. Table 1 presents the item means, standard deviations, and factor loadings for the oblique factor analysis.

TABLE 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Rotated Factor Loadings  
for Career Plateau and Career Pinnacle Items<sup>a</sup>

Item	Factor Loadings			
	X	SD	1	2
1. A person reaches a career plateau when the probability of future promotions is very low. Many people are currently facing career plateaus in organizations that are downsizing and/or reorganizing its structure. To what extent do you believe you have reached a career plateau?	3.62	1.28	.80	-.04
2. A career pinnacle describes the highest level that an individual seeks in his or her career. Further advancements are either not possible because the person is "at the top", or are not valued by the individual for personal reasons. People who have turned down promotions because they like what they are presently doing, and are not seeking other career opportunities, are also at their career pinnacle. To what extent do you believe you have reached your career pinnacle?	2.68	1.40	.63	.48
3. To what extent do you believe you could obtain a position in another company that is as good or better than your present position? (R)	2.61	1.30	.45	.05
4. To what extent would you be willing to leave your present company for a better position in another company? (R)	2.84	1.41	.20	.47
5. To what extent are you frustrated by your assessment of your future career opportunities? (R)	3.10	1.33	-.41	.85
6. To what extent are you likely to get future job assignments with increased responsibility? (R)	2.83	1.23	.64	-.03

<sup>a</sup>N = 152. Higher scores reflect a "very great extent" unless the item was reverse scored (R). The correlation between factors is .09.

The first factor was interpreted as a traditional career plateau factor. It was characterized by a limited probability of future promotion due to either a plateau or pinnacle, a limited belief that a better job in another company was obtainable, and a low likelihood of receiving future job assignments with increased responsibility. The second factor was interpreted as a career pinnacle factor. It was characterized by a limited probability of future promotions due only to a pinnacle, an unwillingness to leave the present company for a better position, and low frustration with future career opportunities.

Two items in this list loaded on both factors. Item 2 which defines a career pinnacle contributed to both concepts. Logically, this item satisfies the basic definition of a career plateau (e.g., limited promotion potential). This finding (joint loading) illustrates the relationship between plateaus and pinnacles. A person who is at his or her career pinnacle is also at a career plateau. However, a person who is plateaued may not be at a career pinnacle.

The other item (#6) with significant loadings on both factors examined the extent to which an individual was frustrated with future career opportunities. The relationships between this item and the two factors were in opposite directions. High levels of frustration were associated with the plateau factor. Low levels of frustration were associated with the pinnacle factor.

#### Relationships between Career Plateau and Pinnacles with Job Outcomes

Using the regression method, factor scores for the plateau and pinnacle factors were calculated. Correlations between these factor scores and the job satisfaction facets and job involvement scales are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2  
Correlations between Career Plateau, Career Pinnacle Factor Scores  
with Job Satisfaction, Job Involvement, and Life Satisfaction

Outcome Measure	Career Plateau	Career Pinnacle
JOB SATISFACTION		
Work Itself	-.29**	.42**
Pay	-.20**	.21**
Promotion	-.60**	.28**
Supervision	-.32**	.24**
People	-.26**	.20**
JOB INVOLVEMENT		
	-.20**	.19**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

The results strongly support Hypotheses 1 and 2. All correlations between the career plateau factor and job satisfaction and involvement outcomes were significant and negative. A career plateau was associated with low levels of all job satisfaction facets, as well as low levels of job involvement.

All correlations between the career pinnacle factor and the outcome measures were significant and positive. A career pinnacle was associated with high levels of all job satisfaction facets as well as high levels of job involvement.

### Relationships between Career Plateau and Pinnacles with Job and Life-style Changes

The scores from the plateau and pinnacle factors were also used to examine the relationship between these factors and job and lifestyle changes. Correlations between these variables are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3  
Correlations between Career Plateau, Career Pinnacle Factor Scores  
with Job and Life-Style Changes

Outcome Measure	Career Plateau	Career Pinnacle
JOB AND LIFE-STYLE CHANGES		
Eating (n=138)	.11	-.06
Sleeping (n=140)	.02	.07
Alcohol consumption (n=119)	-.01	-.04
Career ambitions (n=150)	-.47**	-.04
Interest in helping others at work (n=153)	-.14*	.17*
Job commitment (n=151)	-.30**	.29**
Smoking (n=51)	-.05	-.39**
Drug consumption (n=31)	.36**	.16
Family problems (n=119)	.10	-.20*
Hobby interests (n=150)	.14*	.09
Vacations, pleasure trips (n=150)	.13	.23**
Interests outside of work (n=152)	.10	.05

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

The results provided some support for Hypothesis 3. Factor scores on Career Plateau were significantly correlated with five of the 12 job and lifestyle changes. High scores on the Career Plateau factor were characterized by these changes between the respondent's initial job and current job perceptions: lower career ambitions, lower interest in helping others at work, lower job commitment, higher drug consumption, and greater hobby interests. All the changes could be described as negative changes for the individual or the organization.

In addition, factor scores on Career Pinnacle were significantly correlated with five of the 12 job and lifestyle changes. High scores on the Career Pinnacle factor were characterized by the following changes between the respondent's initial and current job states: higher interest in helping others at work, higher job commitment, less smoking, fewer family problems, and more vacations and pleasure trips. In contrast to the career plateau findings, all the changes associated with the career pinnacle were positive or favorable changes for the individual or the organization.



## DISCUSSION

Current empirical research on career plateaus has been equivocal in its conclusions regarding job attitudes for people who are plateaued versus nonplateaued (Slocum et al., 1985; Stout et al., 1988; Veiga, 1981). The mixed results may be due to the uniform treatment of all people with limited hierarchical career growth as being plateaued. The present study sought to differentiate these people into two categories. Career plateaus were defined as a career state described by limited hierarchical growth, limited career opportunities outside the current organization, and limited opportunities for future job assignments with increased responsibility. Career pinnacles were defined as a career state described by limited hierarchical growth due to personal reasons, unwillingness to leave the current organization for career advancement, and little frustration in handling future career opportunities.

Obviously, the two categories of plateaus are related since both career plateaus and pinnacles can be partially defined by limited hierarchical career growth. The distinguishing characteristics between the two constructs center on the explanation for this limited career growth. People in career pinnacles choose to be plateaued. People in career plateaus may or may not choose this situation for themselves. Those individuals in pinnacle careers have developed coping strategies that reduce the negative consequences of a plateau and remain productive contributors to the organization.

These results could help career counselors determine who is most likely to experience a negative career plateau and to suggest types of interventions and techniques that may prevent or reverse a plateau. For example, if career plateaus are related to stagnation in one's position, human resource managers and counselors should concentrate on those job characteristics that allow one to develop and grow within a job as well as across jobs. Organizational interventions, such as challenging work experiences (McCall, 1988), project management (Hall, 1985; Hall & Louis, 1988), employee involvement (Bartunek & Louis, 1988), mentoring (Kram, 1985), and restructured personnel policies (Feldman, 1988), as well as nonwork interests in family and leisure activities may need to be examined, or re-examined, in light of a more comprehensive definition of a career plateau.

The concern about the negative consequences of a career plateau may be overstated. If plateaued people are also at their career pinnacles, an organization may enjoy a stable workforce that takes satisfaction and pride in their jobs. Understanding people who consider their career plateaus as a pinnacle may help managers and career counselors work with people who are currently frustrated and dissatisfied with the progress of their careers.

Future research needs to operationalize career plateau in more comprehensive terms than simply job tenure. The perceptual measures used in this study represent an initial step in the development of a definition that captures both the career plateau and pinnacle dimensions. Continued work on developing the scale should concentrate on refinements of plateau and pinnacle concepts. These efforts will enable a better distinction to be drawn between the two situations.

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The Collegiate Employment Research Institute was established by Michigan's Legislature in 1984. The Institute is charged with the task of examining issues on career development and employment for college graduates. Various projects are underway, including the study covered in this report, to provide information to educators and counselors for program development. If you have any questions on this study or any Institute project, please contact the Institute directly.

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