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Abstract

A considerable amount of research has been published on career plateau since its first appearance in the careers literature in the 1970s. There is therefore a need to summarise what is known about the field in its entirety and what remains unanswered. The paper presents a review of career plateau research published between 1977 and 2017 and includes 72 empirical sources. Focusing on hierarchical and job content plateau, the review adopts a social exchange perspective in explaining why the two types of plateau are linked with various unfavourable work outcomes, what the mechanisms and moderators of these relationships may be, and the possible antecedents of career plateau. The 72 sources included in the review revealed that career plateaued individuals generally report unfavourable affective outcomes (e.g., poorer satisfaction and well-being) as well as other undesirable work outcomes (e.g., poorer job performance and organisational commitment, and enhanced turnover intentions), and that these outcomes can be explained by the fact plateaued individuals perceive a lack of support from their organisation. Furthermore, our review suggests that the effects of career plateau are moderated by several key factors, namely, the extent to which both the organisation and individual adopt strategies to counteract plateau, and the extent to which individuals care about being promoted. In terms of antecedents of plateau, proactivity and additional responsibilities given by the organisation are negatively related to career plateau. Based on these findings, our review offers managerial implications and suggestions of future research directions.

Keywords: Career plateau, hierarchical plateau, job content plateau, review

CAREER PLATEAU: A REVIEW OF 40 YEARS OF RESEARCH

Many would agree that one of the most uncomfortable and frustrating career experiences is to be unwillingly stuck in a job role for a long period of time. The concept of a career plateau depicts this experience well. Introduced around 40 years ago, Ference, Stoner, and Warren (1977) referred to career plateau as a stage where the probability of receiving promotion in the future is unlikely. Since its introduction, interest in the concept has grown rapidly but researchers have yet to take stock of the accumulating evidence to review what is known about career plateau and what key questions about the topic remain unanswered.

This paper addresses this omission by presenting a systematic review of the empirical research, focusing on career plateau studies published between 1977 and 2017.[1] Key studies of career plateau were identified using several methods. First, a computerised search was conducted on the databases PsychINFO, ABI/INFORM and Global ProQuest, using a combination of key terms such as *career plateau/plateauing*, *hierarchical plateau*, *job content plateau,* and *professional plateau* in the titles or the abstracts. The search was set to include only peer-reviewed papers in English. Dissertations published in English were also returned in our searches and were included in the review if their content was not published in subsequent journal articles that featured in the review. Second, a manual search was performed on journals that commonly published articles on career plateau (e.g., Journal of Vocational Behavior, International Journal of Human Resource Management, and Journal of Career Development). Finally, articles were also found through reference lists in key published papers, as well as publication lists of key authors who have multiple publications on career plateau. These searches yielded a total of 141 sources, which were then screened and read to see if the content was in congruence with the purpose of this review. Sources that were irrelevant to the topic (*k*

[1] Note that sources published online but not assigned to journal issues were included in this review, meaning that some sources have publication dates of 2018.

= 34), not empirically based (*k* = 22), or in which career plateau was not the primary focus (*k* = 13) were excluded. The result was 72 empirical sources (see Table 1), comprising 67 journal articles and 5 dissertations, all of which were quantitative in approach with the exceptions of two qualitative (i.e., Ference et al., 1977; Smith-Ruig, 2009) and three mixed-method studies (i.e., Lim & Teo, 1998; McCleese, Eby, Schlarlau, & Hoffman, 2007; Milstein & Bader, 1992).

This review is structured into three major sections. In the first section, we review the conceptualisation and operationalisation of career plateau and narrow down the review to focus on the two most-studied categories of career plateau (namely, hierarchical and job content plateau). In the second section, we establish a research framework that is grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and review the literature concerning career plateau guided by this framework. Briefly, our framework proposes that becoming plateaued creates an imbalance in the exchange of resources between employer and employees, which causes the employee to perceive a lack of support and in turn experience a loss in obligation towards the organisation, resulting in negative work outcomes. It also proposes that perceptions or career plateau may be reduced or prevented, if either the employer or employee are more active in contributing to their relationship. Finally, in the third section, we conclude our review by elaborating on the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings and offer suggestions for future research. Our paper contributes to the careers literatures as it presents the first review in the field to cover such a comprehensive summary of the career plateau literature which has amassed over a 40-year period. This is valuable for taking stock of existing knowledge, identifying important research gaps, offering potential directions for future studies, and enabling evidence-based suggestions for managers.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Career Plateau: Conceptualisation and Operationalisation

Conceptualisation of career plateau

Career plateau was initially defined by Ference et al. (1977) as "the point in a career where the likelihood of additional promotion is very low" (p.602). In the early studies, it was regarded by scholars as a career status that can be identified using objective criteria, such as age and job tenure (Veiga, 1981). However, this understanding was reshaped by Chao (1990), who proposed that a person should be considered to be career plateaued when he or she *believes* that the likelihood of future promotion is low, regardless of objective criteria such as hierarchical position or length of time spent in a particular role. The subjective definition of career plateau has become gradually more accepted and now dominates the literature, with several studies demonstrating that subjective measures explain more variance in work outcomes than objective measures (e.g., Chao, 1990; Chay, Aryee, & Chew, 1995; Tremblay, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995).

Different categories of career plateau have also evolved over time (see Table 2), but research attention has not been distributed evenly across all of these categories. In fact, from Table 1, it is evident that research within the field has focused on just two types of plateau: hierarchical and job content plateaus. *Hierarchical plateau* illustrates the same concept as the initially proposed career plateau, which refers to a lack of promotion in an organisation. *Job content plateau* refers to a lateral stagnation in which individuals do not receive further job responsibilities or they feel that their job is unchallenging (Bardwick, 1986; Feldman & Weitz, 1988; Veiga, 1981). Most of the categories of career plateau are formed on the basis that individuals' careers are bounded within a single organisation, but there are also types of plateau that go beyond organisational boundaries. For example, Lee (2003) and Hurst, Butts, and Eby (2011) describe *professional plateau* and *employment plateau*, respectively, which concern lack of opportunities to develop professional and employability skills in one's job.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Operationalisation of career plateau

Table 1 shows that early career plateau literature operationalised career plateau as a dichotomous variable (plateaued vs. non-plateaued), and classed people into one of the two groups using objective criteria, such as age, job or industry tenure, or number of years without promotion. For instance, in Veiga's (1981) study plateaued managers were those over 40 years old with more than seven years of position tenure. Other criteria used include having remained in the same job position for over five years (e.g., Savery, 1989; Slocum Jr., Cron, Hansen, & Rawlings, 1985; Slocum Jr., Cron, & Yows, 1987), and having 15 years or more of industry tenure (e.g., Burke, 1989).

One limitation of dichotomised classification using objective measures is that there is no evidence to conclude that a plateau exists when certain criteria are satisfied. For instance, Veiga (1981) admitted in his study that there was no solid evidence to prove that managers under the age of 40 years were not plateaued; this age was selected as a criterion based on previous career models. Another limitation is that people's subjective views about their career are more predictive of their work outcomes than their objective career stage; as argued by Chao (1990), plateau is likely to be a gradual process rather than an 'either or'. For these reasons, Milliman's (1992) measuring scales, which capture people's self-reported perceptions of both hierarchical and job content plateau as continuous variables, have been adopted almost universally in later career plateau studies, as indicated in Table 1.

The popularity of using subjective measures does not, however, mean that objective criteria, such as age and tenure, are irrelevant to career plateau. Rather, later research has tended to conceive these variables as covariates of career plateau, especially those of hierarchical plateau. This is due to findings from several studies that older and more experienced workers do typically receive fewer promotion opportunities as they move towards retirement age (e.g., Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999; Hurst & Eby, 2010; Lemire, Saba, & Gagnon, 1999;

Patterson, Sutton, & Schuttenberg, 1987; Tremblay & Roger, 1993). For this reason, such demographic variables are now commonly treated as control variables in career plateau studies.

From the inception of the concept in the late 1970s, multiple types of career plateau have been proposed and argued to be conceptually distinct. Nevertheless, as noted above, research within the field has focused heavily, almost to the point of exclusion, on hierarchical and job content plateaus. In establishing our theoretical framework in the next section, we therefore focus our discussions specifically on these two most-studied types of plateau.

A Framework for Examining Career Plateau

Our theoretical framework is established based on social exchange theory, which proposes that two parties are influenced by the norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and interact by exchanging resources. In the work setting, with employees and employers as the two parties, employees work hard and offer their services, with the expectation of being reciprocated with resources such as money, benefits, or status. Employers may offer support, such as showing clear signs of valuing employees' contribution or caring about their well-being, with the expectation that employees remain committed to the company and perform to the best of their ability. Favourable outcomes of social exchange include mutual trust, gratitude, and felt obligations (Blau, 1964). However, if deeds from one party are not reciprocated as expected, an imbalance occurs and both parties readjust their resources and behaviours to reach a new equilibrium. Blau (1964) offers an example of how employees may readjust from imbalance: "(i)nitially, dissatisfaction with achievements and rewards is likely to be a spur to greater effort, but continuing inability to attain important objectives tends to lead to resignation and embitterment." (p.146). In other words, initial outcomes towards the imbalance seem to be more affective, including feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction, whereas a lack of reciprocation over time will lead to more behavioural outcomes.

Social exchange theory has been commonly applied to explain the attitudes and behaviours of hierarchical and job content plateaued individuals (see Table 1). Being plateaued in either manner generates an imbalance in reciprocity. Beginning with hierarchical plateau, it is well-established that getting promoted is one of the major factors to increase work motivation (Ettington, 1998). Individuals make contributions at work with the expectation that they will be reciprocated with rewards such as promotions (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Thus, when employees are hierarchically plateaued, they receive a negative message that the company is not showing support or recognising their efforts, which generates an imbalance in reciprocity. As for job content plateau, the challenge-hindrance stressor theory argues that employees expect to receive challenging work (e.g., work that involves high complexity and responsibility, and that requires completion with some time pressure) because, although stressful, such work is beneficial and necessary for personal growth (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). Linking this expectation with the social exchange theory, Zhang, Lepine, Buckman, and Feng (2014) proposed that if employees perceive job content plateau, due to a lack of challenging work offered by the organisation, the norm of reciprocity is disrupted and employees will feel unsupported by their companies. Both of these types of plateau therefore represent cases in the theory where the employer is not reciprocating employees' efforts, which will lead to short-term affective outcomes such as dissatisfaction or poorer well-being. While employees might initially make greater efforts towards getting promoted or striving for more challenging work, if they continue to experience a lack of reciprocity from their employers, they will reduce their effort and ultimately demonstrate outcomes such as lower organisational commitment, higher turnover intentions and poorer job performance.

Given this theoretical foundation, we propose that plateaued employees go through two serial pathways that explain their work attitudes and behaviours. Perceptions of lack of support

from their organisation serve as an initial pathway to explain the negative affective outcomes of plateaued employees (e.g., lower job satisfaction or poorer well-being). In turn, perceived lack of support generates a loss of obligation from the employee towards the organisation, which is the second pathway, resulting in a decrease in input to the company, as exemplified by poorer job performance, lower organisational commitment and higher turnover intentions, among other possible consequences.

We also propose three key moderators that influence the effects of plateau. The first moderator is employees' motivation towards promotion or job challenge. Put simply, the extent to which plateaued employees feel unsupported by their organisation when they receive a lack of promotion or lack of challenge is likely to depend on how much they value and are motivated towards these outcomes. This is in line with Silbert's (2005) argument that the degree to which employees perceive organisational support is affected by how much they desire the rewards that an organisation offers. Applying this to our research framework, plateaued employees with greater desires to be promoted or to receive challenge in their roles are likely to feel more intensely unsupported than those who are indifferent to these rewards. Thus, plateaued employees' motivation towards promotions or work challenge should moderate the impact of plateau on their attitudes and behaviours.

The second moderator is organisational approaches to counteract career plateau. This concerns whether the organisation has offered anything to plateaued employees to compensate for their loss of promotion or job challenge. We take the perspective that by offering alternatives to employees (e.g., offering challenges instead of a promotion), the employer at least gives something in return for their efforts, thereby following the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). This view is supported by the idea of generalised reciprocity, which suggest that members in groups accept reciprocation from other sources (Das & Teng, 2002; Sahlins, 1965). Given this, we expect that organisational approaches to counteracting plateau should buffer the relationship

between perceived career plateau and lack of organisational support, and ultimately reduce the negative effects of plateau.

The final moderator stems from Bardwick's (1986) view that individuals, like organisations, may be in a position to enact approaches to counteract plateau. From a social exchange perspective, we propose that such approaches are likely to be used after an individual has experienced little or no support from the organisation. As discussed previously, employees expect to be rewarded with promotions or to receive challenging assignments throughout their career. When plateaued, they would hold the organisation to be responsible for this result (Bardwick, 1986) and expect actions to be taken by the organisation. However, if their employer is not enacting strategies to counteract plateau, or if the strategies enacted are insufficient, individuals may then adopt approaches to counteract career plateau themselves. Thus, individual approaches to manage career plateau could play a moderating role, by buffering the negative relationship between perceived lack of organisational support and work outcomes.

In addition to the mediators and moderators, social exchange theory also helps to identify likely antecedents of career plateau. The first such antecedent is employees' proactive tendencies and behaviours. Evidence suggests that individuals with proactive personalities put more into their exchange relationships and as a result draw more out of them, leading to lesser chance of reaching a stage of career plateau. With regards to input into the social exchange relationship, proactive people are quicker in identifying opportunities to improve things at work and to take actions to achieve their goals, rather than passively waiting for instructions on solving issues (Crant, 2000). They also seek feedback or information from supervisors on how to best resolve problems, leading to better performance (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010). As a consequence, employers tend to reciprocate these signs of dedication with rewards such as granting promotions or assigning more challenging work; hence proactive personality is positively related to career success, both subjectively (i.e., career satisfaction or

job satisfaction) and objectively (i.e., promotion and salary) (e.g., Fuller & Marler, 2009; Li et al., 2010; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert, Crant, & Krainer, 1999). As such, it seems probable that individuals with proactive tendencies and behaviours will be less likely to reach a plateaued status.

The second such antecedent is additional responsibilities from the organisation, such as inviting employees to take on supervisory or mentoring roles. While the gesture is not as straightforward as offering rewards like promotions, such responsibilities are indicative of a contribution to the exchange relationship; they represent the organisation recognising the worker's skills and abilities and therefore may be perceived as a reciprocation of input. Mentoring, for instance, entails offering experience, support and guidance to a junior employee (Kram, 1985). These additional responsibilities may alleviate the perception of both forms of plateau. They may reduce job content plateau because they add variety to work and may pose new challenges to overcome. They might also reduce hierarchical plateau because they create valuable experiences which could eventually lead to promotions (e.g., Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004).

In the following sub-sections, evidence for the impact of career plateau on the affective and other work outcomes is reviewed, followed by the literature concerning the mechanisms and moderators of the effects of plateau and its antecedents. The findings of our review, guided by our theoretical framework, are summarised in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Effects of career plateau on affective outcomes

Job satisfaction. A large proportion of empirical research has focused on the impact of plateau on job satisfaction. In early studies, where hierarchical plateau was measured objectively, findings about the plateau-satisfaction relationship were inconsistent. For example,

Burke (1989), Orpen (1986) and Choy and Savery (1998) all reported that plateaued workers were less satisfied with their job than non-plateaued colleagues, yet several other researchers reported no differences in satisfaction between plateaued and non-plateaued workers (e.g., Evans & Gilbert, 1984; Slocum Jr. et al., 1985). The possible misclassification of participants into plateaued or non-plateaued groups, owing to the objective operationalisation of career plateau (Chao, 1990), may account for these inconsistencies, however, as later studies using subjective hierarchical plateau have consistently reported negative associations between hierarchical plateau and job satisfaction (e.g., Chao, 1990; Chay et al., 1995; Ettington, 1998; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Tremblay et al., 1995). Likewise, there is consistent evidence that job content plateau is negatively related to job satisfaction (e.g., McCleese & Eby, 2006; Nachbagauer & Riedl, 2002; Salami, 2010).

Well-being. Empirical research has generally supported a link between hierarchical plateau and poor well-being. For instance, Burke (1989) and Allen, Poteet, and Russell (1998) compared well-being levels of plateaued and non-plateaued workers and found hierarchical plateaued managers had higher stress levels than the non-plateaued. Subsequent studies using subjectively measured hierarchical plateau also reported links with job stress (e.g., Davenport, 1993; Godshalk, 1997; Joseph, 1992) and other indicators of poor well-being (e.g., depression, Lemire, Saba, & Gagnon, 1999; psychological distress, Hurst, Kungu, & Flott, 2012; Lapalme, Tremblay & Simard, 2009; and emotional exhaustion, Wang, Hu, Hurst, & Yang, 2014) . Only one study, by Burke and Mikkelsen (2006), found no significant difference between plateaued and non-plateaued police officers in terms of anxiety or depression. In explaining the reasons for this null-effect, the authors suggested that perhaps the police officers had learned quickly to adapt to and to cope with their plateaued career status without letting it have an impact on their well-being. Regarding job content plateau and well-being, however, the findings are more mixed. McCleese et al. (2007) reported that both hierarchical and content plateaued

employees had higher stress and depression levels than general US population norms and Lapalme et al. (2009) showed a significant negative association between job content plateau and well-being. However, Hurst et al. (2012) and Wang et al. (2014) have both reported null effects of job content plateau on stress.

Effects of career plateau on other work outcomes

Organisational commitment. The findings about career plateau's influence on organisational commitment are consistently negative. One of the first studies to investigate career plateau and organisational commitment was a longitudinal study conducted at two waves across three years by Stout, Slocum Jr, and Cron (1988), who compared three groups of people, classified using objective criteria according to whether or not they were hierarchically plateaued in both waves of the study, in the second wave only, or in neither of the waves of the study. Results showed that both of plateaued groups displayed a significant decrease in organisational commitment over the study period.

Milliman (1992), Chay et al. (1995) and Lemire et al. (1999) have all examined the relationship between subjective hierarchical plateau and organisational commitment among groups of managers and employees with supervisory responsibilities, and similarly found a negative association between the two variables. Several other studies revealed that this negative relationship is also applicable to hierarchically plateaued and job content plateaued employees. For instance, McCleese and Eby (2006), Jung and Tak (2008), Lapalme et al. (2009), Lentz and Allen (2009), and Drucker-Godard, Fouque, Gollety, and Le Flanchec (2015) all observed negative effects of either hierarchical or job content plateau on employees' organisational commitment. Together these findings confirm that reaching a career plateau is damaging to employees' dedication to their companies.

Turnover intentions. There is also relatively strong evidence that individuals who perceive career plateau have a greater intention to leave their organisations. Early studies using

objective criteria have reported that hierarchically plateaued managers and workers have higher intention to leave their organisation than their non-plateaued colleagues (e.g., Burke, 1989; Orpen, 1983). In a couple of studies, however, mixed effects on turnover intentions have been found when scholars have used different operationalisations of plateau. Tremblay and Roger (2004), for example, measured hierarchical plateau using both objective and subjective measures among managers, and the two relationships with intention to quit were in opposite directions. Objective hierarchical plateau, represented by job tenure over five years, was negatively associated with intention to quit, whereas subjective hierarchical plateau was significantly positively related. Heilmann, Holt, and Rilovick (2008) also used objective and subjective methods to measure plateau and examine the turnover intention of servicemen. Their objective measure (based on tenure and military rank) was unrelated to turnover intentions, while subjective plateau (measuring by combining indicators of both hierarchical and job content plateau) was positively related to turnover intentions.

Other research that has measured both career plateau subjectively has reported consistent findings on the relationships between career plateau and turnover intentions. For instance, Tremblay et al. (1995) found that the more hierarchically plateaued the employee, the higher their turnover intentions. Similar findings were reported in studies by Lemire et al. (1999), Foster, Lonial, and Shastri (2011), Xie, Lu, and Zhou (2015), and Xie, Xin, and Bai (2016). Additionally, Lentz and Allen (2009), Wang et al. (2014) and Drucker-Godard et al. (2015) all reported a positive relationship between both forms of plateaus and turnover intention.

Job performance. Finally, in terms of the influence of career plateau on job performance, empirical research on this outcome is more complex and findings are mixed. Ference et al. (1977) first theorised in their work that plateau need not necessarily lead to poor job performance. Instead, they contrasted two types of hierarchically plateaued people: those who have poor performance ('deadwood'); and those who have maintained good performance ('solid

citizens'). Near's (1985) study concurs with this perspective. Using secondary interview data, she found no performance difference between plateaued and non-plateaued managers. While there are limitations with Near's findings (e.g., the lack of primary data and possible mis-categorisation of plateaued and non-plateaued employees), she is not the only one to report a lack of effects of plateau on performance. For example, Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) similarly reported a null relationship between hierarchical plateau (measured both objectively and subjectively) and job content plateau with job performance. However, their indicator of job performance included various components (e.g., weekly work hours, self-assessed performance and recent change in performance level) and may have had drawbacks (e.g., hours worked does not necessarily indicate efficiency).

A different picture can be gleaned when consulting research that focuses on objective measures of performance. In Stout et al.'s (1988) longitudinal study on salespeople, both plateau and performance were measured objectively. Their results showed that non-plateaued salespeople had increasingly better performance (presented by annual sales volume) during the three year study period, whereas those who became plateaued throughout the period did not report any change (for better or worse) in job performance, thus suggesting a decline relative to their non-plateaued counterparts. Gerpott and Domsch (1987) examined performance of R&D professionals, comparing hierarchically plateaued versus non-plateaued workers. Although there was no difference in self-assessed job performance, plateaued individuals had lower objective productivity (number of publications) than their non-plateaued peers. Research using other-reports of performance likewise suggests that plateau is associated with poorer performance. For example, Milliman (1992) and Ettington (1997, 1998) reported that subjectively-measured hierarchical plateau was negatively associated with manager's performance ratings. Similarly, Orpen (1986) found no between-group differences in self-

assessed job performance, but that hierarchically plateaued managers had lower supervisor-rated job performance than non-plateaued managers.

Moreover, some studies that use subjective measures of both career plateau and job performance show a negative relationship between the constructs. Chay et al. (1995) found that hierarchical plateau was negatively related with extra-role behaviour (i.e., looking for other responsibilities), although not with in-role behaviour (i.e., managing only assigned tasks). Lemire et al. (1999) found that hierarchical plateau was negatively associated with perceived work performance, and Allen et al. (1998) found that job content plateau managers had lower self-assessed job performance than their non-plateaued colleagues. Hurst et al. (2012) and Hurst, Baranik, and Clark (2017) also observed negative relationships between job content plateau and organisational citizenship behaviour as a proxy indicator of performance.

Evidence about the influence of career plateau on job performance therefore seems to be mixed, most likely due to different approaches to operationalise both plateau and performance. We believe that the most rigorous study design would measure career plateau subjectively (as previously outlined) and job performance objectively (e.g., due to self-representation and attributional biases; Parker & Kulik, 1995). The studies that have adopted this rigorous design (e.g., Ettington, 1997; Ettington, 1998; Milliman, 1992) all indicated that hierarchical plateau negatively affects performance, which offers support for our theoretical framework. Notably, however, there are no studies, to our knowledge, examining the effects of job content plateau on objective performance. Given this, there is insufficient evidence to fully evaluate the impact of job content plateau on job performance.

To summarise, while early research adopting objective measures of hierarchical plateau produced some inconsistent findings, these inconsistencies could potentially be attributed to measurement limitations. In support of this proposition, more recent research, which has adopted perceptual, continuous measures, has produced relatively consistent results about the

detriments associated with becoming hierarchically plateaued, across the five work outcomes in our theoretical framework. On the whole, the evidence regarding job content plateau is also suggestive of negative outcomes, although the evidence is mixed regarding well-being and lacking altogether regarding performance. Thus, it is possible that not having any promotion (or being rejected for a promotion) is more damaging to one's well-being and performance than remaining with the same work content, although more research on the consequences of job content plateau is needed before such a conclusion could be reached.

Mechanisms of the effects of career plateau

Perceived lack of support from the organisation. As explained in our theoretical framework, it is expected that two pathways are responsible for the negative effects of career plateau. The first pathway is a perceived lack of support from the organisation. Plateaued individuals are expected to feel neglected by their organisations and supervisors, and this perceived lack of support ought to affect their performance and attitudes negatively (Bardwick, 1986). We found three studies that offer support for this proposition. Firstly, Gerpott and Domsch (1987) reported evidence that a lack of supervisor and organisational support mediated the negative relationship between hierarchical plateau and outcomes including job performance and satisfaction. Secondly, Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009) reported evidence that organisational support mediated the relationship between both hierarchical and job content plateau with intention to remain in the organisation (which indicates a lack of turnover intention), among a sample of older workers. Finally, Lapalme et al. (2009) observed that perceived organisational support mediated effects on commitment to the organisation and psychological distress among hospital employees, although this mediation was only found for hierarchical and not job content plateau. Together, these results provide relatively consistent evidence suggesting that perceptions of a lack of support from their organisations and supervisors may help to explain why plateaued workers develop poorer work outcomes; not

only negative affective outcomes, but also other work outcomes such as poorer performance and greater turnover intentions.

Perceived loss of obligation towards organisation. The second pathway proposed in our theoretical framework is plateaued individuals' perceived loss of obligation towards organisation. We theorised that the lack of support perceived from the organisation by plateaued individuals would over time translate into reduced feelings of obligation towards the organisation and that this would ultimately explain longer-term outcomes of plateau, such as lower organisational commitment, poorer performance, and higher turnover intentions. However, our review of the empirical evidence suggested that to date no studies have specifically examined plateaued employees' perceived loss of obligations, whether as a standalone outcome or as a pathway of the effects of plateau.

Job satisfaction. Although not included in our a priori theoretical framework, our review revealed an additional mechanistic pathway that has received attention from multiple research teams: the level of satisfaction with one's job or career. While we have conceptualised satisfaction as an outcome of plateau, some researchers have extended this position, arguing that the effects of plateau on satisfaction may help to explain why plateau goes on to have negative consequences for other outcomes. Such claims stem from the evidence that satisfaction is highly predictive of job performance and other attitudinal variables such as turnover intentions (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Tett & Meyer, 1993). For example, Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009) and Xie et al. (2016) both found that career satisfaction was a mediator of the effects of job content, but not hierarchical, plateau on intention to remain in the organisation. More recently, Hurst et al. (2017) demonstrated that job satisfaction mediated the relationship between job content plateau and organisational citizenship behaviour (as a form of job performance) among hospital workers. Job satisfaction may therefore be considered a more proximal outcome of career plateau that helps to explain why plateaued

workers (at least those who are job content plateaued) may perform more poorly or choose to leave their organisation.

To summarise, while we found much evidence for perceived lack of support from the organisation as a pathway of the effects of career plateau, this was not the case for perceived loss of obligation towards the organisation. Unexpectedly, we found several studies that suggest employee satisfaction as an additional pathway to explain long-term work outcomes.

Moderators of the effects of career plateau

Motivation towards promotion or job challenge. The first moderator we expected to vary the effects of career plateau was the individual's motivation towards promotion or job challenge. Our review of the literature suggested some support for the premise that a person's desire towards receiving promotions would influence the extent to which they experienced negative outcomes when reaching hierarchical plateau. For instance, both Milliman (1992) and Davenport (1993) found evidence that greater promotion aspiration strengthened the negative effects of hierarchical plateau on outcomes such as organisational commitment, turnover intentions, and job satisfaction. Similarly, Palmero, Roger, and Tremblay (2001) found that part-time workers who reported career progression to be more important had stronger negative associations between hierarchical plateau and job satisfaction than those who reported this to be less important. In addition to affecting hierarchical plateau, Davenport (1993) also reported promotion aspiration to exacerbate the negative effects of job content plateau on outcomes including stress, turnover intentions and satisfaction. Given the ample amount of research evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that personal desires toward promotion strengthen the negative outcomes of plateau. This is presumably because such desires and motivations enhance the feeling of lack of support from the organisation that plateaued employees experience, although this mechanistic explanation has not yet been tested. By contrast, no study was found to examine whether personal desire toward job challenge also has this moderating effect.

Organisational approaches to counteract career plateau. We theorised that if companies offer approaches to compensate plateaued employees (e.g., offering something else valued), those employees will feel more supported by their companies and therefore be less negatively affected by imbalanced reciprocity in the experience of career plateau. Our review found this suggestion to be well-supported, with three main kinds of organisational approaches identified. The first type of approach is offering job challenge to hierarchically plateaued employees. Two studies have directly measured job challenge as a moderator, both showing the expected buffering effects (on performance, Chay et al., 1995; and on job satisfaction, Ettington, 1998). Two further studies have used job content plateau as a moderator of the effects of hierarchical plateau, drawing from the similar assumption that if people have *low* content plateau (and therefore feel they receive sufficient challenge in their role), they will be less negatively affected by a lack of promotion opportunity, both finding the expected moderation effect (e.g., Milliman, 1992; Xie et al., 2015).

The second kind of organisational approach to counteract plateau is mentoring. Elsass and Ralston (1989) theorised that mentoring may serve as a way of adding variety into one's role, and therefore could be an alternative to compensate for lack of promotion or challenge. Both Lentz and Allen (2009) and Salami (2010) reported mentoring experience as a significant buffer in the relationship between both hierarchical and job content plateau with job satisfaction and organisational commitment. The final type of approach we found is the use of social support. To compensate for the lack of promotion or challenge, companies may show other visible signs that they care about employees' needs. Ettington (1998) reported that supervisory support reduced the negative effects of hierarchical plateau on job performance. Moreover, Jung and Tak (2008) found that supervisor support moderated the effects of hierarchical plateau on job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Milliman (1992) further reported that supervisor career discussions (an indicator of supportive behaviour) buffered negative relationships

between hierarchical plateau and organisational commitment and satisfaction. By contrast, Joseph (1992) reported a null moderating effect on social support between both plateaus and work outcomes. On the whole then, there is good evidence to conclude social support as an effective approach for hierarchical plateaued employees, although there is a lack of evidence in relation to job content plateaued employees.

Individual approaches to counteract career plateau. In addition to organisational strategies, we proposed individuals could also adopt approaches to counteract plateau. A few studies have supported this and suggested that – via the use of coping strategies – individuals might be able to compensate for plateau, and thus alleviate its negative effects. We identified five studies that examined links between plateau and coping. While two of these examined the links in a more descriptive fashion (e.g., McCleese et al., 2007; Rotondo, 1999), three studies explicitly tested moderation of coping strategies on the relationship between plateau and its outcomes. Joseph (1992) examined whether the use of physical or recreational coping strategies buffered the plateau-outcome relationship, but neither was supported. In contrast, Rotondo and Perrewe (2000) found that hierarchically plateaued individuals who adopted adaptive coping strategies (e.g., taking other assignments) had higher satisfaction, commitment, and performance compared with those who adopted maladaptive strategies (e.g., blaming the organisation for the lack of promotions, withdrawing from the job). Hurst et al. (2012) further found that engaging in non-work activities and job involvement were effective coping strategies for reducing hierarchical plateau stress. The results confirm that it is not only the organisation that can enact approaches to compensate for career plateau, but also the plateaued individual.

To summarise, our proposed moderators have been mainly supported by empirical research, although the evidence so far mostly concerns the moderation of effects of hierarchical plateau. Whereas having greater desires towards promotion leads to more intense negative outcomes for plateaued employees, organisations and individuals appear to be able to

counteract the negative effects of plateau through the use of effective strategies. Whether the strategies that buffer the effects of hierarchical plateau apply equally to job content plateau, however, is a question that remains largely unanswered.

Antecedents of Career Plateau

Proactive tendencies and behaviours. Several studies have examined whether individuals' proactivity could prevent them from reaching a plateau in the first place. Beginning with proactive tendencies, several individual differences that would be expected to enhance proactive behaviour have been negatively associated with career plateau. For example, both Tremblay and Roger (1993) and Lemire et al. (1999) reported internal locus of control to be negatively associated with hierarchical plateau, suggesting that people who believe they have control over their fate and work achievements are less likely to feel hierarchically plateaued. Furthermore, Tremblay and Roger (1993) reported individuals' promotion aspiration to be negatively associated with hierarchical plateau. Finally, Allen et al. (1999) found that people with higher motivation to learn have lower perceptions of hierarchical plateau. Together the findings mostly support that people with a more proactive personality (e.g., believing that they have control over work outcomes, being active in learning, and aspiring towards rewards such as promotion) are less likely to reach hierarchical plateau.

In terms of proactive behaviours, there is support that those who are more engaged in career-related activities or more involved at work are less likely to perceive career plateau. For example, Allen et al. (1999) found career planning and job involvement to be negatively related with both hierarchical and job content plateau, and career exploration to be negatively associated with hierarchical plateau. Lemire et al. (1999) further found work perseverance to be negatively related to hierarchal plateau. Additionally, recent studies by Jiang (2016) and Jiang, Hu, and Wang (2018) showed career adaptability to be negatively associated with job

content plateau, suggesting that individuals who consciously adjust themselves to the work conditions through self-regulation are less likely to perceive stagnation in job challenge.

Additional responsibilities from the organisation. Significant associations have been found between supervision responsibilities and both types of plateau. Tremblay and Roger (1993), for instance, found a negative relationship between supervisory responsibility and hierarchical plateau. Lemire et al. (1999) further found that this relationship strengthened with increasing number of supervisees. Two studies have also measured mentoring responsibilities as antecedents of plateau. Foster et al. (2011) found that mentoring can reduce perceptions of both hierarchical and content plateau among accountants, and Wang et al. (2014) found the same among bank employees.

In summary, the two proposed antecedents have found support in existing literature. Namely, antecedents that (negatively) influence perceptions of both plateaus include proactive tendencies and behaviours and additional responsibilities from the organisation, such as assigning supervisory or mentoring roles.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This review offers several important theoretical contributions. First, it offers a theoretical framework for understanding why career plateau has negative work-related outcomes. By drawing on social exchange theory, we explain that career plateau ought to impair work outcomes because: (a) it should reduce workers' perceptions of support from the organisation; and (b) in turn it should reduce their sense of obligation to the organisation. The findings of our review provide support for the former of these pathways and additionally highlights job satisfaction as a proximate mechanism explaining why career plateau translates into longer-term detriments for performance and job-related attitudes. While our findings concerning job satisfaction were not theorised a priori, they are actually in line with Blau's (1964) original

explanation of how employees respond to imbalances in exchange relationships. He suggested that dissatisfaction is an initial reaction to an imbalance, followed by more intense outcomes such as turnover and poorer performance if employees continually fail to reach their objectives. Given this, plateaued individuals may first experience lower job satisfaction, and if their efforts to get out of the stagnation are repeatedly met with rejection of promotion or challenging tasks, their dissatisfaction is likely to increase and will eventually lead to other long-term work outcomes like enhanced turnover intentions, poorer organisational commitment and job performance.

Second, our review contributes by identifying key moderators that provide insight into when career plateau is most likely to lead to negative outcomes. Again, drawing from the social exchange perspective, we expected that individuals' motivation towards promotion and job challenge would influence the extent to which hierarchical and job content plateau, respectively, would make employees feel unsupported and uncared for by their organisation and would thereby affect the consequences of plateau. Our findings suggested that the desire for promotion was highly relevant in this regard, but there was no evidence concerning how much employees are motivated towards or value job challenge. We further theorised that both organisations and the individual might adopt approaches to counteract plateau. Specifically, organisations may offer alternative rewards, which would prevent employees from feeling unsupported in the case that they perceived themselves to be plateaued. If plateaued individuals feel uncared for by their organisation, prudent use of adaptive coping strategies might also enable them to prevent the sense of being unsupported from translating into negative outcomes. Here, our findings supported these views, revealing that both organisations and plateaued individuals themselves can do something to counteract the negative effects of career plateau.

Third, our review contributes by shedding light on some of the antecedents of career plateau. There is generally a lack of theory in speculating what would make workers more or

less susceptible to become plateaued and our review identifies two forms of antecedents from a social exchange perspective, which are individuals' proactive tendencies and behaviours and additional responsibilities given by the organisation. Identifying these antecedents offers an encouraging message that perceptions of plateau could be effectively prevented if either the employee or the employer takes the initiative to offer more resources to the other in their relationship.

Finally, our review contributes by highlighting some of the possible differences between core types of career plateau. While only two types of plateau have been studied intensely, as this review notes, the findings here suggest that there may be differences in terms of the effects that these types of plateau have (e.g., hierarchical plateau has clearer, more negative effects on individuals' well-being and job performance), as well as the mechanisms and moderators of those effects, and their antecedents. It remains to be determined whether some of the differences that emerged from the review are a product of differences in the focus of studies in this area (e.g., there have been more studies of hierarchical plateau, so it is possible that its apparently stronger effects on some outcomes are simply due to a larger body of evidence) or whether there are fundamental differences in how these types of plateau function that need to be considered in greater depth in future theorising in this area.

Practical implications

This review offers substantive managerial implications (see Table 3). First, the agreement that career plateau is a perceptual and continuous variable and that subjective measurement explains more variance on work outcomes than objective ones is encouraging for companies. This means that organisations *can* take positive actions in managing plateaued employees through changing their perceptions and, ultimately, their negative job attitudes.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Second, the consistent evidence showing that both hierarchical and job content plateau are detrimental to employee job attitudes, and that hierarchical plateau is a stressful experience, highlight the importance of finding solutions to overcome plateau. The evidence of significant moderators reviewed in this paper therefore offers guidelines on how companies can achieve solutions to the issue of career plateau. One such solution draws from the findings that promotion aspiration worsens the plateau-outcome relationship; on this basis, companies can think about redefining rewards. Promotion and money need not be the only rewards organisations can offer. Rather, "(a)nything can become a reward if it's something that people compete for, earn, and value" (Bardwick, 1986, p. 157). Another possible solution concerns the use of organisational approaches to counteract plateau, in the form of offering alternative work that is more challenging or showing social support. Practically, organisations can encourage supervisors to show visible support for plateaued employees, and introduce job rotation, job enrichment, or job enlargement in managing hierarchical plateau (Chay et al., 1995; Ettington, 1998). Organisations can also offer support by showing respect and appreciation to plateaued individuals by informing them of the necessity and importance of their contribution (Bardwick, 1986). Another way of adding challenge and variety into the job is mentoring, which has been supported as a form of compensation as well as an antecedent (i.e., additional responsibility from the organisation) of both hierarchical and job content plateau.

Third, our finding that individuals themselves also counteract plateau through their use of coping strategies suggests that organisations can take active steps in preventing plateaued employees from using negative coping responses (e.g., blaming the employer for the lack of opportunities) and in promoting positive coping activities (e.g., learning new skills, taking on other assignments).

Recommended future directions

We now turn our focus to recommended future directions for career plateau research, derived from our review (see Table 3). Beginning with the categorisation and operationalisation of career plateau, the majority of studies on career plateau to date are either focused on hierarchical or job content plateau. Although this focus enhances our understanding of their impact, there are concerns as to whether these types of plateau fully represent the contemporary career, as they are clearly based on the traditional concept that careers are bounded within an organisation. As concepts like the boundaryless and protean career have become more relevant to the working environment, future studies should focus more on investigating other forms of plateau that draw from these career concepts. These include professional plateau, and its subcategories such as employment and occupational plateau, which by definition go beyond organisational boundaries to consider whether jobs provide individuals with skills that allow them to increase their external employability. The first step would be to develop new measures for these types of plateaus, so that empirical evidence of their distinctiveness could be confirmed, followed by extended research on the antecedents, consequences, mediators, and moderators of these types of plateau.

Reviewing the consequences of career plateau indicates two further important research gaps around job performance. First, there is a clear need for further research on the performance effects of job content plateau. Some researchers have debated whether job content plateau may have a worse impact on individuals than hierarchical plateau (Allen et al., 1998; Bardwick, 1986; McCleese & Eby, 2006), yet our review suggested that not only might this not be the case, but that no studies examined the performance effects of job content plateau using objective measures, which are likely to be more reliable indicators of employees' performance than self-ratings. More rigorous research is therefore needed to assess the effect of content plateau on individuals' performance. Second, studies of job performance in the reviewed evidence have focused primarily on individuals' behaviour in fulfilling their required responsibilities under a

stable working environment. However, given the current, fast-changing work climate, employees are expected to extend their performance beyond their assigned duties and demonstrate "an active style of work behaviour" (Ghitulescu, 2013, p. 207). This behaviour includes being capable of adapting and responding to change appropriately, as well as being proactive to initiate change in certain situations (Griffin, Parker, & Mason, 2010). In spite of this important trend, very few studies have investigated career plateaued employees' job performance in relation to active work behaviour. To our knowledge, only Hurst et al. (2012) and Hurst et al. (2017) have tapped into this by examining the effect of career plateau on organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB). Both studies found that job content plateau is negatively associated with OCB, suggesting the importance of investigating plateaued individuals' performance in greater breadth.

We found no studies that examined employees' loss of obligation towards organisation as a pathway to explain the work outcomes of career plateau, despite theoretical reasons to believe that this might be an important factor to consider. A continued failure of the organisation to meet an employee's needs for promotion or job challenge might result in the employee feeling less obligation towards the organisation due to this change in the social exchange relationship. Decrease in felt obligation in turn reduces organisation commitment and job performance (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Given this, we recommend future studies to address this research gap by examining employees' felt obligations towards the organisation as a mediator. Studies examining both of the pathways proposed in our framework and testing these as serial mechanisms would be particularly valuable.

Another variable that we expected to be theoretically relevant to career plateau but that has not been tested empirically in any of the studies is individuals' desire towards work challenge. Studies clearly suggest that the extent to which individuals desire promotion affects the consequences of becoming hierarchically plateaued, presumably because it affects the

degree to which individuals feel unsupported by their organisation in a situation of plateau. Likewise, it seems plausible that individuals who strongly desire job challenge ought to be more negatively affected if they perceive themselves to be job content plateaued. Future studies should therefore investigate this potential moderator further. Our findings further revealed that individuals' use of coping strategies can overcome the negative effects of hierarchical plateau. Future research should examine whether similar types of coping can also buffer the consequences of becoming content plateaued.

Even for moderator variables that have been relatively consistently supported in our review, it is noteworthy that there is a paucity of studies testing more complex moderated-mediation models of the type featured in our theoretical framework (see Xie et al., 2015 and Xie et al., 2016, for exceptions). Future research should therefore seek to integrate tests of moderators with measures of mechanisms in order to ascertain *why* the effects of career plateau vary according to certain individual characteristics or features of the work environment and if the reasons for such variations conform to our theoretical framework. The case of organisational and individual approaches to counteract plateau is particularly interesting, as theoretically we would expect each of these moderators to affect a different stage of the mediation process between plateau and its outcomes. It will therefore be valuable for future studies to adopt longitudinal designs tracking participants over time to establish how the effects of plateau unfold and the stages at which different moderators become salient.

Finally, our review of the antecedents of career plateau suggests that future studies should take into account mediators and moderators of antecedent-plateau relationships to understand more about when and why particular conditions make career plateau more likely to occur. Finding factors that influence the antecedent-plateau relationship is beginning to receive some attention, as evidenced in Wang et al.'s (2014), Jiang's (2016) and Jiang et al.'s (2018) studies, but more such research is encouraged in the future.

Conclusion

This systematic review captures 40 years of research on career plateau and reflects what has been investigated in the field and where further investigation is needed. Based on social exchange theory, we offered a theoretical framework to explain how career plateau (with the focus on hierarchical and job content plateaus) relates to work outcomes such as job satisfaction, well-being, organisational commitment, turnover intentions and job performance. Our subsequent review of the literature, guided by this review, offered likely explanations for the effects of career plateau, and highlighted conditions under which these effects are strengthened or weakened, as well as noting factors that predict career plateau. Based on the review's findings, we encourage scholars to concentrate on investigating other forms of career plateau, to look into other potential mediators and moderators, and to explore other factors that might help explain the relationships between the antecedents and career plateau.

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Table 1

Summary of Empirical Career Plateau Studies Published between 1977 and 2017

Author(s) / Year	Plateau types	Sample characteristics	Country	Measurement of plateau	Investigated outcome variables/topics	Other investigated variables
Ference et al. (1977)[QL]	HP	55 senior executives	US	Not stated	Job performance	
Veiga (1981)	HP	1,243 managers in manufacturing companies	US	Age (40 years) and position tenure (7 years)	Career movement histories, career paths potentials, career attitudes	
Carnazza, Korman, Ference, and Stoner (1981)	HP	384 middle-level managers	US	Organisation and individual perceptions on likelihood of future promotion	Factors relevant to job performance	
Orpen (1983)	HP	326 middle-managers	Australia	1. Job tenure (plateaued: over 7 years, non-plateaued: less than 3 years) 2. Relative occupancy time 3. Changes in authority and responsibility	Job satisfaction, intention to leave	
Evans and Gilbert (1984)	HP	70 middle-managers in a financial organisation	UK	Age (45 years) and organisational rank	Need satisfaction, future satisfaction,	
Near (1985)	HP	119 managers from various industries	US	Expects no promotion in the next 20 years	Job performance, motivation, job characteristics	
Slocum Jr. et al. (1985)	HP	499 salespersons from industrial product companies	US	No promotion or lateral job change for over 5 years	Job performance, job satisfaction, career attitudes, company strategy, career stages	
Orpen (1986)	HP	326 middle-managers	Australia	1. Job tenure (plateaued: over 7 years, non-plateaued: less than 3 years) 2. Relative occupancy time	Job satisfaction, job performance, job characteristics, growth need strength	
Gerpott and Domsch (1987)	HP	618 R&D professionals	Germany	Job tenure (10 years)	Job performance, work motivation, overall satisfaction	Mediators: Supervisory behaviour, job characteristics
Patterson et al. (1987)	HP	387 academic staffs	US	SUBJ	Hierarchical plateau, productivity, career satisfaction (all outcome variables)	
Slocum Jr. et al. (1987)	HP	187 sales employees in a large chemical-agricultural company	US	No promotion or lateral job change for over 5 years	Job performance, job change	
Stout et al. (1988)[L]	HP	122 salespersons in an industrial building products firm	US	In the same position for over 5 years	Job performance, organisational commitment, career intention, career issues	
Burke (1989)	HP	188 police officers	Canada	Industry tenure (15 years)	Job satisfaction, intention to turnover, career orientation, burnout, individual well-being and health, impact of job on home and family	
Savery (1989)	HP	158 governmental employees	Australia	No promotion or lateral job change for over 5 years	Job satisfaction, desire for promotion/career development	
Chao (1990)	HP	1,755 managers	US	1. SUBJ 2. Job tenure (continuous variable)	Intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction, career planning, company identification	Moderator: Job tenure
Milstein (1990)	HP, JP	216 school faculty	US	SUBJ	Strategies to manage career plateau, satisfaction, absenteeism, feeling about supervisor	
Savery and Wingham (1991)	HP	54 female directors at child-care centres	Australia	No promotion or lateral job change in the past 3 years	Job satisfaction	

Author(s) / Year	Plateau types	Sample characteristics	Country	Measurement of plateau	Investigated outcome variables/topics	Other investigated variables
Milliman (1992)	HP, JP	443 employees in various industries	US	SUBJ	Satisfaction (with job, company, supervisor, pay and promotion), organisational commitment, turnover intentions, promotional aspiration, job performance, job involvement, work hours,	Moderator: Promotion aspiration, job tenure, supervisor's discussion and planning, ability, willingness to relocate, job content plateau, growth need strength
Milstein and Bader (1992) [MX]	HP, JP, LP	120 educators	US	SUBJ	Plateauing at school and environmental factors	
Joseph (1992)	HP, JP	514 sales marketing managers	US	SUBJ	Stress	Moderators: Personal resource (self-care, social support, physical and recreational coping), career motivation (career insight, career resilience, career identity)
Davenport (1993)	HP, JP	953 employees in healthcare industry	US	SUBJ*	Organisational commitment, turnover intentions, number of work hours, educational level, job-induced tension	Moderators: Promotion aspiration, job tenure, age
Nicholson (1993)	HP	4,004 managers	UK	Age-grading (based on age and job tenure)	Career and job satisfaction, desired/ expected job moves, person-job fit, pride in membership	
Tremblay and Roger (1993)	HP	2,183 managers	Canada	1. SUBJ 2. Job seniority (5 years)		Antecedents: Aspiration for advancement, education, past success, supervision role
Corzine, Buntzman, and Busch (1994)	HP	208 bank officers	US	SUBJ	Hierarchical plateau, job satisfaction, salary (all outcome variables)	Antecedent: Being mentored
Zaremba (1994)	HP	425 managers in the national post service	UK	Not stated	Satisfaction, pride in membership and commitment, career guidance, reward and benefits	
Chay et al. (1995)	HP	141 managerial and professional employees	Singapore	SUBJ	Job satisfaction, organisational commitment, job involvement, in-role behaviours, extra-role behaviours, career satisfaction	Moderators: Job tenure, job challenge, supervisory support
Tremblay et al. (1995)	HP	2,183 managers	Canada	1. SUBJ 2. Job seniority (5 years)	Satisfaction, intention to turnover, perception of instrumentality of the relationship between performance and promotion	
Ettington (1997)	HP	373 middle managers	US and Europe	1. SUBJ 2. Length of time since previous promotion	Job satisfaction, job performance, life satisfaction	
Godshalk (1997)	HP, JP	330 accountants	US	SUBJ*	Reasons for plateauing, work motivation, career and job satisfaction, turnover intention, off-job satisfaction	Mediators: Felt stress, job involvement, off-job involvement
Allen et al. (1998)	HP, JP, DP	607 state-owned government managers	US	SUBJ*	Job involvement, intent to turnover, organisational commitment, job stress, job satisfaction, job performance	
Choy and Savery (1998)	HP	230 federal government agency employees	Australia	No promotion or lateral job change for over 7 years	Job satisfaction, organisational commitment	
Ettington (1998)	HP	373 middle managers	US and Europe	1. SUBJ 2. Time in current salary grade level (time since promotion over 5 years)	job satisfaction, job performance	Moderators: Career orientation, work challenge, supervisor / co-worker support, perceptions of plateau consequence
Lim and Teo (1998) [MX]	HP	467 police officers	Singapore	SUBJ	Job satisfaction, intention to quit, organisational commitment, hierarchical plateau (all outcome variables)	

Author(s) / Year	Plateau types	Sample characteristics	Country	Measurement of plateau	Investigated outcome variables/topics	Other investigated variables
Allen et al. (1999)	HP, JP	1,189 non-managerial employees from state government	US	SUBJ*		Antecedents: Education, social support, motivation to learn, career exploration, career planning, job involvement
Corzine, Buntzman, and Busch (1999)	HP	212 bank officers	US	SUBJ	Hierarchical plateau, job satisfaction, salary (all outcome variables)	Antecedent: Machiavellian behaviour
Lemire et al. (1999)	HP	192 managers and professionals in the public sector	Canada	SUBJ	Organisational commitment, intention to turnover, work performance, depressive state	Antecedents: career stage, supervisee numbers, locus of control, work perseverance
Rotondo (1999)	HP	120 employees from state-owned plant	US	SUBJ	Coping strategies, need for achievement, job involvement, negative affinity, age and tenure	
Rotondo and Perrewe (2000)	HP	224 employees from state-owned plant	US	SUBJ	Coping responses, job satisfaction, commitment, perception of current performance level, career-related strain	
Palmero et al. (2001)	HP	155 part-time employees	France	1. SUBJ 2. Position tenure (5 or 10 years)	Job satisfaction	Moderators: Work centrality, importance of career progression, importance of relationship, and other working part-time choices
Crockford (2001)	HP, JP, DP	60 middle-aged male employees	US	SUBJ*	Self-esteem, demographics	
Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002)	HP, JP	165 university staff and 77 teachers	Austria	1. SUBJ 2. Tenure (above average group)	Job satisfaction, organisational commitment, job performance	
Lee (2003)	HP, PP	170 engineers	Singapore	SUBJ	Turnover intention, job satisfaction, career satisfaction	
Tremblay and Roger (2004)[S]	HP	3,065 managers	Canada	1. SUBJ 2.Organisational tenure (5 years)	Satisfaction, work intensity, intention to turnover	Moderators: Role ambiguity, participation in decision making, job scope
Burke and Mikkelsen (2006)	HP	766 police officers	Norway	Industry tenure (15 years)	Psychological health, suicidal ideation, burnout, work and family and other work outcomes	
McCleese and Eby (2006)	JP	1,708 employees from various industries	US	SUBJ*	Job satisfaction, organisational commitment	Moderators: Hierarchical plateau, role ambiguity
McCleese et al. (2007)[MX]	HP, JP, DP	77 employees from various industries	US	SUBJ*	Stress, depression, coping strategies	
Armstrong-Stassen (2008)[S]	JP	Study 1: 239 HR managers Study 2: 419 nurses	Canada	SUBJ*		Antecedents: Self-efficacy, work-centrality, organisational support
Heilmann et al. (2008)	HP, JP combined	223 military members	US	1. SUBJ* 2. Military rank and tenure	Turnover intention	Mediator: Job search behaviours
Jung and Tak (2008)	HP	209 white collar workers from various industries	Korea	SUBJ*	Job satisfaction, organisational commitment	Moderators: Supervisory support, career motivation
Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009)[S]	HP, JP	Study 1: 239 HR managers Study 2: 419 nurses	Canada	SUBJ*	Intention to remain	Mediators: Organisational support, career satisfaction
Lapalme et al. (2009)	HP, JP	575 hospital employees	Canada	SUBJ	affective commitment, psychological distress, supervisor support	Mediator: Organisational support
Lentz and Allen (2009)	HP, JP	306 government employees	US	SUBJ*	Job satisfaction, affective organisational commitment, intention to turnover	Moderator: Mentoring experience
Smith-Ruig (2009)[QL]	HP, JP, LP	52 accounting professionals	Australia	Age (over 30 years old)	Career plateau experiences	

Author(s) / Year	Plateau types	Sample characteristics	Country	Measurement of plateau	Investigated outcome variables/topics	Other investigated variables
Hurst and Eby (2010)	HP, JP	77 employees from various industries	US	SUBJ*	Career plateau appraisals	Antecedents: Educational level
Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera (2010)	HP, JP	119 IT employees	Sri Lanka	HP: tenure (7 years) JP: SUBJ*	Supervisory support, career satisfaction	
Salami (2010)	HP, JP combined	280 government employees	Nigeria	SUBJ*	Job satisfaction, affective organisational commitment, intention to turnover	Moderator: Mentoring experience
Foster et al. (2011)	HP, JP combined	235 accountants	Canada	SUBJ	Mentoring, gender, turnover intentions	Antecedent: Mentoring
Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera (2011)	HP, JP	119 IT employees	Sri Lanka	HP: tenure (7 years) JP: SUBJ*	Career management strategies	
Hurst et al. (2012)[S]	HP, JP, DP	123 employees from various industries	US	SUBJ*	Organisational citizenship behaviour, coping strategies, stress	
Miles, Gordon, and Storlie (2013)	HP, JP	83 employees from television media organisations	US	SUBJ*	Job satisfaction	
Cheng and Su (2013)	HP, JP	632 military career officers	Taiwan	SUBJ*	Institutional intention, occupational intention	Mediator: Regulatory focus
Hofstetter and Cohen (2014)	JP	170 employees from various industries	Israel	SUBJ*	Turnover intentions, early retirement	
Wang et al. (2014)	HP, JP	188 bank employees	Taiwan	SUBJ*	Emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions	Antecedent: Mentoring Moderator (for antecedent-plateau): proactive personality
Xie, Lu, Zhou, and Xin (2014)[S]	HP, JP, IP	288 employees from various industries	China	SUBJ	Organisational commitment	Mediators: Extrinsic job satisfaction, intrinsic job satisfaction
Drucker-Godard et al. (2015)	HP, JP	2,028 French scholars	France	SUBJ*	Job satisfaction, organisational and occupational commitment, intention to leave organisation	
Godshalk and Fender (2015)	HP, JP	247 accountants	US	SUBJ	Job satisfaction, career satisfaction, intention to leave, reasons for plateauing	Mediators: Work motivation, job involvement,
Wen and Liu (2015)[S]	HP	147 IT employees	China	SUBJ	Turnover intention	Moderator: Career anchor in challenge
Xie et al. (2015)	HP, JP	288 employees from various industries	China	SUBJ*	Turnover intentions, organisational commitment	Moderator: Job content plateau
Jiang (2016)	JP	270 employees from various industries	China	SUBJ*		Antecedent: Career adaptability Mediators (for antecedent-plateau): Person-job fit, person-organisation fit
Xie et al. (2016)	HP	284 employees	China	SUBJ*	Turnover intentions	Mediator: Job satisfaction Moderator: Person-job fit
Hurst et al. (2017)	JP	118 hospital employees	Kenya	SUBJ*	Organisational citizenship behaviour	Mediators: Organisational justice, job satisfaction
Jiang et al. (2018)	JP	Study 1: 184 adults Study 2: 154 employees from various industries	China	SUBJ*		Antecedent: Career adaptability Moderators (for antecedent-plateau): Job tenure, job self-efficacy

Note. HP: hierarchical plateau; JP: job content plateau; DP: double plateau; PP: professional plateau; LP: life plateau; IP: inclusive plateau; SUBJ: subjective measures; * adopted Milliman's (1992) career plateau scales;
[L]: longitudinal study; [QL]: qualitative study; [MX]: mix-method study; [S]: applied social exchange theory to understand the work outcomes of career plateau

Table 2

Categories and Definitions of Career Plateau

Author(s) / Year	Categories	Definition
Ference et al. (1977)	• Organisational plateau	Lack of promotion opportunities, although the person is qualified for the position
	• Personal plateau	Lack of qualification, or lack of desire for promotion, although opportunities are available
Bardwick (1986)	• Hierarchical (structural) plateau	Lack of promotion opportunities in the future
	• Job content plateau	Lack of challenge in job, which results from repetitive job responsibilities
	• Life plateau	Feeling stagnated or trapped in all aspects of life due to a lack of fulfilment
Allen et al. (1998)	• Double plateau	Lack of both promotion opportunities and job challenges
Lee (2003)	• Professional plateau	Lack of job challenges and lack of new skills that would increase an individual's future employability and professional development
Hurst et al. (2011)	• Employment plateau	Lack of opportunities for future employability
	• Occupational plateau	Feeling of inability to change occupation or profession due to personal or economic reasons
Xie et al. (2014)	• Inclusive plateau	Lack of authority and power in decision making in an individual's work

Table 3

Summary of Key Conclusions, Implications and Future Directions

Areas of the review	Key conclusions	Practical implications	Future research directions
Career plateau: Conceptualisation and operationalisation	• Many forms of career plateaus have been introduced but the almost all studies focused on either hierarchical or job content plateau • Career plateau is a continuous perceptual variable • Subjective measurement of career plateau is a more rigorous approach than objective measurement	• Companies can play an active role in preventing career plateau because it is perceptual	• Explore other forms of career plateau, (e.g., professional plateau)
Work outcomes of career plateau	• Reaching a hierarchical or job content plateau lowers employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and increases turnover intentions • Hierarchical plateau is linked with poorer well-being but there is little support that job content plateau affects well-being • The influence of hierarchical plateau on job performance is mixed although studies that used subjective measurement of plateau and objective measurement of performance all report a negative relationship • Some support that job content plateau negatively affects self-assessed performance but its impact on objective performance is unclear	• Organisations should take effective steps to manage plateaued employees as a lack of promotion and job challenge lead to poorer job attitudes • Hierarchical plateau is a stressful experience and companies should adopt effective interventions to reduce stress	• Studies using objective measures of performance are needed to provide more insight into the effects of job content plateau • Extra-role performance of plateaued employees should be examined
Mediators of the effects of career plateau	• Mediators include perceptions of organisational and supervisory support and job satisfaction	• The negative impact of career plateau can be reduced by providing constructive feedback and support to employees, and by making efforts to maintain employee satisfaction	• Explore a loss of obligation towards the organisation as an additional potential mechanism • Test the serial mechanism process wherein perceptions of support in turn lead to loss of obligation to predict longer-term work outcomes
Moderators of the effects of career plateau	• Moderators include desire for promotion, organisational strategies (e.g., offering job challenge), and individual approaches to counteract career plateau (e.g., coping strategies)	• Organisations can alleviate the negative outcomes of career plateau through job rotation and adopting mentor schemes • Organisations can also encourage the use of adaptive coping strategies among employees	• More exhaustive models (e.g., moderated mediation models) are needed to understand why the effects of plateau vary according to these moderators • Additional moderators, such as desire for job challenge, should be investigated • Conduct longitudinal studies to understand the order of which organisational and individual approaches for counteracting career plateau affect the process
Antecedents of career plateau	• Proactive tendencies and behaviours and the organisation giving additional responsibilities are negatively related to both hierarchical and job content plateau	• The perception of career plateau may be reduced through giving additional responsibilities	• Explore factors that mediate or moderate the antecedent-plateau relationship

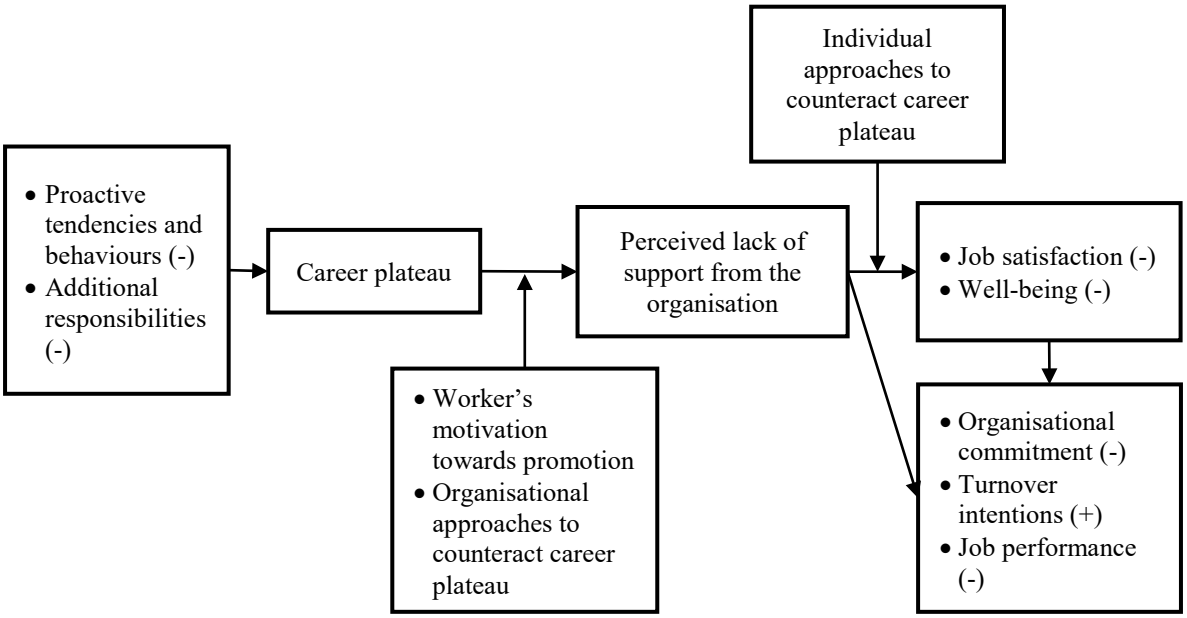

Figure 1. Framework for career plateau

Note. Individual approaches to counteract plateau (a moderator) and poor performance and well-being (outcomes) are applicable to hierarchical plateau, but not to job content plateau.