

## **Toy gaaCareer Plateauing**

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A career plateau can be defined as a phenomenon in which an individual's career becomes stagnant. It is imperative to distinguish the two types of career plateaus: (1) content (job content) plateauing and (2) structural (hierarchical) plateauing. Content plateauing refers to a situation in which an individual's job content (i.e., knowledge, skills, duties, responsibilities, etc.) stops changing. While structural plateauing assumes content plateauing, it also refers to a situation in which an individual can no longer progress, advance, or be promoted within the hierarchical framework of an organization. Career plateauing is not a novel phenomenon; however, it has progressively become a more prominent societal and organizational area of concern. The Baby Boomers in the US have been highly linked to career plateauing as this generation of individuals is living with the repercussions of the economic, technological, and societal developments made by prior generations.

During the 1950's and 1960's, several key developments contributed to the current career plateau predicament: (a) the US's economic prosperity created a high demand for individuals to fill management positions; (b) historical and societal factors within the country meant predominantly, only white males were allowed to fill those management positions; and (c) the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission allowed minorities and women to enter the American workforce. Considering those key developments and the fact that corporate growth has slowed significantly, the US is now faced with a very large supply of qualified American workers but an unfortunate dearth of management positions. Thus,

a significant number of American workers are confronted with the reality that their career trajectories are limited, not necessarily leading to the top of organizations. The serious concerns which arise from the presence of career plateau within an organization occur both on the micro- and macro- levels.

On the micro- level, individuals faced with career plateau are more likely to become stressed, less interested, less motivated, less productive, and quit jobs. Stressed-out individuals are more susceptible to emotional distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, irritability), health concerns (e.g., headaches, weight gain, cardiovascular disease, etc.), and behavioral problems (e.g., social withdrawal, drug/alcohol abuse, etc.). On the macro- level, efficiently run organizations cannot afford to continue employing and are more likely to dismiss individuals who maladaptively cope with their career plateau.

A career plateau need not be detrimental to either the individual or the organization. Career plateaued individuals can take personal responsibility by recognizing that they have a problem, reevaluating their definitions of success, analyzing the pros and cons of their current job, examining their life goals, and maintaining open communication with their employers. Most crucially, career plateaued individuals have to assume personal responsibility and not focus on uncontrollable, external circumstances. On the other hand, organizations can also offer solutions/interventions to alleviate the impact of career plateau on their employees.

An organization, with the assistance of an industrial and organizational psychologist, can provide psycho-education about career plateauing; this information may facilitate the individual's understanding of his/her current experiences and alleviate the feelings that he/she has become a failure. Organizations can provide highly-valued employees, who, while not suitable for vertical promotion, may benefit from lateral promotion. A lateral promotion can

potentially directly address an individual's content plateau and indirectly address the structural plateau. Lateral promotions essentially involve transitioning an employee already in a management position to a management position within another domain/department of the organization. With these types of promotions, career plateaued individuals are retrained, thus exposed to new knowledge, new skills, new opportunities, new responsibilities, and new people. If perceived adaptively, a lateral promotion is an opportunity for the career plateaued individual to expand his/her resume. In addition to lateral promotions, organizations can host ceremonies in which employees, including those who are experiencing career plateau, can be recognized for their respective contributions. There are many alternative solutions, other than the ones already mentioned, which can alleviate the impact of career plateau on an individual and in an organization. Nevertheless, career plateauing is a significant issue within the American work environment and inevitable for the majority of American employees. Consequently, the manner in which organizations and individuals within them process and cope with career plateaus determine the long-term impact of career plateaus.

### **Further Reading**

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