

Examining Career Plateau in the Public Service

by

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MA, University of Victoria, 1996

BSN, University of Victoria, 1992

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the School of Public Administration

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Abstract

Career plateau research is heavily focused on the private sector at the management level. There are few studies which examine career plateau in the public sector and no studies of career plateau in the Canadian core public sector. This qualitative research study is the first career plateau study focused on the core public sector in Canada. The systematic review study includes a map of the career plateau research and completed a synthesis analysis to provide new insights into career plateau. The second study involved an initial 67 participants with further data being gathered from focused interviews of 48 participants who were classified as career plateaued. Echo sorting and content analysis of the resulting data was completed to explore the perceived causes of career plateau; identify the affective impacts of career plateau on public servants; examine the behavioural responses of public servants to being career plateaued; and identify organizational implications.

The study results indicate that public servants perceive the causes and affective impacts of career plateau generally consistent with existing research findings while some of the perceived causes categories may possibly be unique to the public service setting. However, public servants may respond to career plateau in two unique ways involving public service value responses and responses based on public sector organizational characteristics.

Given that this is the first study to be completed on career plateau in the Canadian public service, all the findings must be considered tentative. The categories developed throughout the study describing how public servants feel and respond to career plateau as well as the organizational implications all require further refinement and more empirical testing.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Bart Cunningham for his continued support over the course of my PhD program. His advice, guidance and encouragement were instrumental in my completing the program and research. Bart's humble nature and support of learning are inspirational. I would also like to thank all the members of my committee, Dr. Kim Spears, Dr. Ignace Ng and Dr. Mark Harcourt. Your support, guidance and generous willingness to give of your time was greatly appreciated. My Darling encouraged me to pursue my PhD and made sacrifices in support of its achievement. Thank you. A debt of thanks is also owed to my primary school teachers who helped me to live and learn with dyslexia. In my early school years, it was not anticipated that I would complete grade 10 and I am very grateful that these teachers helped me overcome my learning challenges.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters Kaesha and Naomi whom I love dearly and who give me hope for the future. Thank you for bringing such joy into my life. And to my friends Mike and Sophie who encouraged me and made me laugh. Thank you both for being such wonderful, supportive friends and being with me in the good times and bad.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Career plateau has been identified as a challenge impacting organizations since it was first explored by Ferrence et al. in 1977. In the Canadian core public service career plateau has not been explored, despite the fact that it impacts public servants' decisions to stay or leave the public service. For example, career plateau is the top reason given by public servants leaving the BC public service every year with over sixty percent of resigning employees saying their departure could have been prevented (BC Stats 2014). Hausknecht and Trevor (2011) found that the negative relationship between turnover and organizational performance outcomes are widely documented in the literature and supported by research. If perceptions of career plateau can be effectively responded to, employee departures from the public service could be prevented, potentially resulting in improved organizational performance and retention of talent. Furthermore, the impacts of career plateau on employee perceptions can lead to concern with the hiring and promotion processes in the public service. For example, the B.C. Auditor General's 2017 report "An Audit of B.C. Public Service Ethics Management" finds that almost 40% of respondents felt there was some likelihood that hiring managers would not adhere to the principle of merit when hiring and promoting staff.

Most research on career plateauing occurs in the private sector (e.g. Carnazza et al. 1981; Corzine et. al. 1994; Ettington 1998; Hall 1985; Lee 2003; Nicholson 1993; Veiga 1981 etc.), there are only three studies (Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrew 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986) focused on the core public service. Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) completed a survey of 57 mid-level rehab managers in a US state public service agency to

examine the effects of career plateauing on attitudes towards career advancement. Rotondo and Perrew (2000) undertook a survey of a US state-agency water-management plant involving 120 plateaued and 75 non-plateaued managers, technical and operational staff. Lentze and Allen (2009) completed a survey involving 306 state employees (such as engineering managers, planners, and building inspectors) located in the southeastern US to investigate relationships between mentoring others, perceptions of career plateauing, and job attitudes. The few studies focused solely on the core public sector leaves gaps in the career plateau knowledge as it relates to the public service as all three studies took place in the United States at the state level of government. How career plateau is experienced and the impacts of career plateau in other government organizations outside the US or at other levels of government has not been examined. In addition, two of the studies focused on a narrow area of government service, rehab services in Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) and water management services in Rotondo and Perrew (2000), which limits the generalizability of the findings to other areas of government service.

Career plateauing in public sector organizations is unique. Differences have been identified between the private and public sectors in general (e.g. Dye 1995; Ghobadian et al. 2007; Perry and Wise 1990; Rainey 2003) with the likelihood of experiencing career plateau believed to be greater in the public service because of career stability and other factors unique to the public service (Sylvia and Sylvia 1986, Lemire et al. 1999). It is possible that many public servants remain in the work force after they have reached a career plateau and it is important to consider how being career plateaued impacts the engagement, productivity and life experience of public servants. Lentze and Allen (2009), Rotondo and Perrew (2000) and Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) have all pointed out that career plateau may be

experienced differently in the public sector when compared to the private sector, although this has not been explored in detail.

There are research findings linking career plateau to decreased job and organizational commitment (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Chay et al. 1995; Drucker-Godard et al. 2015; Helimen et al. 2008; Jung and Tak 2008; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; Milliman 1992 etc.) which can result in decreased employee engagement. This is a potentially important finding in relation to the public service as employee engagement has a positive relationship on job performance (Baker and Bal, 2010; Baker and Demerouti, 2008; Rich et al., 2010; Demerouti and Cropanzano, 2010). Engaged employees have energy, are enthusiastic and immersed in their work (Macey and Schnieder, 2008; May et al. 2004). This engagement has a positive impact on employee's clients (Vigoda-Godat et al. 2012). Research has also shown that the perceived high quality of service received is the essence of citizen satisfaction with public services (Bei and Shang, 2006; Wisniewski, 2001) and contributes to elevated citizen trust in government (Vigoda-Godat et al. 2012).

The purpose of the study is to develop a better understanding of the unique features of career plateauing in the Canadian public sector and the reasons individual employees perceive as the key causes and impacts. Initially a secondary analysis of the existing research through a systematic review is completed which reveals the negative impacts of career plateau including decreased commitment, decreased satisfaction, increased intention to leave, decreased perceived support and increased stress. The secondary analysis also uncovers the individual responses to career plateau which can be categorized as internal changes to thinking about career plateau, working differently, and avoiding career plateau. The synthesis in the systematic review also indicates organizational responses to career

plateau can be categorized as actions to change plateau status, actions to mitigate negative impacts, and actions to manage employee expectations.

Building on the results of the systematic review study, a study of career plateau in the public service was completed. The study involved 67 participants with data being gathered from focused interviews of 48 of the participants classified as career plateaued. The study helps address the following research gaps: a lack of research in the public service including examining the affective impacts of career plateau and public servants' behavioural responses; examining career plateau taking into account the participants position level; and identifying actions that public sector organizations can take to respond to career plateau. The study findings provide insight into the experience of career plateauing based on a strong interpretive value of the data collected consistent with effective qualitative research which aims to demonstrate transparency of methodological procedures and offers a compelling, vivid and insightful narrative that is grounded in the data (Dixon-Woods et. al. 2004).

Chapters Overview

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework guides the interpretation of the research findings and adds to the broader understanding of career plateau. Career plateau concepts and variables are developed from the existing career plateau research. Career systems model theory is called upon to help guide the analysis of the public service work environment in which the study takes place in order to ground the research findings within the organizational context. Career systems model theory is also used to guide and interpret study findings. Finally, attributional theory is used as a theoretical lens to aid in interpreting the meaning of the

findings of the research in relation to the affective and behavioural responses to being career plateaued. The theoretical approach outlined in this chapter involving attributional theory, combined with the existing empirical findings and approach to career plateau and the context setting from career systems model theory provides a robust and tailored theoretical framework for the dissertation research.

Chapter 3 Systematic Review Study Methodology

The systematic review study advances the understanding of career plateau by completing a secondary analysis synthesis representing an initial effort to integrate empirical studies and reveal new findings. The systematic review also illustrates the extent of the career plateau research, exploring the research methods used and developing an overview map of the research field. This systematic review study presents a state-of-the-art of the existing empirical research on career plateau; provides new insights, analysis and interpretations through secondary analysis of the published data and findings; and suggests a series of actions that, based on the systematization of empirical findings, help increase the effectiveness of individual and organizational attempts to prevent or mitigate the negative impacts of career plateau.

This chapter details the methodology and approach used in conducting the systematic review study. Examples of the forms used for the appraisal of sources for inclusion and exclusion in the systematic review are included in Appendix B and C. The forms illustrate the work undertaken as part of the appraisal of sources. The strengths and weaknesses of the systematic review methodology are discussed.

Chapter 4: Systematic Review Study Findings

The systematic review study uncovers findings related to the impacts of career plateau which reveal greater consistency than is generally stated in the literature. A synthesizes of recommended individual and organizational actions is also included in this chapter. The review establishes an empirically grounded framework to guide the future study of career plateau based on a synthesis of the existing research approaches.

Chapter 5: Career Plateau in the Public Service

Details the methodology and approach used in completing the study of career plateau in the public service. The study purpose, research questions and propositions are identified and briefly described. An overview of the focused interview approach and the methodology of sorting and theming of the resulting data is presented. Appendix E contains the focused interview questions used in the study. The study uses a purposive sampling technique and the sampling strategy is discussed in this chapter. The echo sorting technique and content analysis methodology used in the analysis of the data are also covered.

Chapter 6 Career Models in the Public Service Findings

Examining the legislative, regulatory, policy and program HR framework in a sample Canadian public service identifies the institutional basis for the career systems model of the public service. This chapter also explores the study findings in relation to the career systems model perceptions of the participants from multiple Canadian public services and explores the interaction of hierarchical position level on the perceived career systems model.

Chapter 7 Causes of Career Plateau

Chapter 7 takes the participant data and, using the echo sorting technique, themes the perceived causes of career plateau into categories. These categories represent a first attempt to develop a glossary of the perceived causes of career plateau in the core public

service in Canada. The data provides insight into the causes of career plateau which are compared with the existing empirical findings from the systematic review study. While most of the perceived causes are consistent with the existing findings, some of the perceived causes categories may possibly be unique to the public service setting. However, as career plateau research focused on the public service has only involved three studies (Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrewe 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986) these causes may not be unique to the public service but may represent a public service ‘flavour’ to the experience of career plateau.

Chapter 8 Affective Impacts of Career Plateau

The study findings related to the feeling’s participants experience in response to being career plateaued are analyzed in this chapter. The participants responses are grouped into themes which demonstrate a wide range of emotions are experienced by public servants who face career plateau. These study findings represent a first attempt to categorise the feelings associated with career plateau in the Canadian public service.

Chapter 9 Behavioural Response to Career Plateau

Examines the behavioural responses study participants identify when facing career plateau. These findings are compared to the responses identified in the existing empirical research. Public servants appear to respond to career plateau in ways that are consistent with existing research findings, as well as in entirely unique ways, some of which are likely related to differences between public servants and private sector employees in terms of their values. Other potentially unique reactions are likely related to the structures of government and the policies which govern public sector organizations.

Chapter 10 Organizational Findings

This chapter organizes the participant data regarding actions public organizations can take in responding to career plateau. Categories are developed and compared to recommendations found in the broader career plateau research. Most of the categories of recommendations are consistent with existing research but there is one new category revealed termed “changing public organizational culture”. The recommendations provide useful data for public organizations wishing to address challenges related to career plateau in the public service.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

This final chapter presents the overall dissertation conclusions, summary of study contributions and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The previous chapter briefly outlined the need for research on career plateau in the public service and provided a short overview of the chapters of the dissertation. This chapter outlines a theoretical approach to guide the collection of data and interpretations of the findings founded on typologies and concepts derived from career plateau research; the grounding of study findings within the public service work environment analyzed using career systems model theory; and interpretation of the meaning attached to being career plateaued as explored using attributional theory.

Introduction

The importance of having an appropriate theoretical lens for research is highlighted by Bacharach's (1989) statement that, just as a collection of words does not necessarily make a sentence, a collection of constructs and variables does not necessarily make a theory. Expanding on Bacharach's metaphor, the use of a theoretical framework to guide the study of career plateau establishes the words, sentences and paragraphs of meaning.

In the proposed theoretical framework for this dissertation, the "words" are the concepts and variables taken from the existing career plateau research. Concepts, such as hierarchical plateau and content plateau have been refined, studied and operationalized in existing career plateau research, so that these "words" have an understood meaning. Career plateau theory also establishes the ways in which the "words" can be used with confidence. But these words (concepts and variables) can only be understood within the sentence in which they occur. In this case, the organizational meaning and experience of career plateau occurs within sentences framed by career systems models.

Career plateau cannot be understood without an understanding of the career systems models that exist in the organization in which the individual is experiencing career plateau (Nicholson 1993). The organizational context represents the ‘sentences’ in which the ‘words’ of career plateau theory are expressed. While Sonnenfeld and Peiperl (1988) indicate that there is no uniform model of career systems because a single model would be either too generic to capture the variations of different career systems or too cumbersome to offer clarity, there are a number of career systems that have been identified and researched that provide a basis for understanding the public service environment in which career plateau occurs. Career systems model “sentences” influence how career plateau is experienced or perceived as different career systems models frame the understanding of how the organization works. The very definition of career plateau will change in the context of the career system model the worker finds themselves in. To understand the meaning of these ‘sentences’ in terms of the emotional impacts of career plateau and the behavioural responses to being career plateaued, a metaphorical “paragraph” is structured on attributional theory.

Attributional theory is particularly well suited to the study of career plateau as the empirical studies from which attributional theory developed occurred within achievement-related contexts (Weirner 1985). The dependent variable in career plateau research involves job promotion and/or job change, an achievement related outcome. Attributional theory provides an ideal theoretical lens for analyzing career plateau as it consists of a comprehensive model for understanding the affective and behavioural response to success or failure (Weirner 1985), thus providing the “paragraphs” of meaning within this study.

Career Plateau Theory (The Words)

The first conceptualization of career plateau was outlined by Ference et al. (1977). A plateau was defined as the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low. This definition and the typology proposed by Ference et al. (1977) would guide subsequent work on hierarchical career plateau, although the operationalization and measurement of hierarchical plateau would vary. Career plateaus were viewed by Ference et al. (1977) as a natural consequence of the way organizations are shaped. As argued by the authors, the pyramidal structure of organizations with fewer senior positions and ultimately one single position heading the organization, results in an almost certainty that most people will plateau at some point during their careers. Bardwick (1986) introduced the rule of 99% when considering career plateau as the final state of the workers career, in that virtually everyone will plateau, excepting only the 1% who ultimately reach the very highest level of their organization. The proposition that plateau was a natural consequence of organizational structure was in opposition to the concept of the 'peter principle' published almost a decade earlier (Peter and Hull 1969) which viewed promotion to the level of one's incompetence as a management norm. Inherent in the Peter Principle is the concept that employees fail to advance further in the organization due to inability or personal failings. Identifying the pyramidal structure as the foundational cause of career plateau opened the search for other contributing factors that could be explored beyond simply placing the blame on the personal abilities of the individual and offered the prospect of a focus on the broader organizational environment as well as the individual.

Rejecting the limited perspective of Peter and Hull (1969), Ference et al. (1977) divided career plateaued workers into two distinct categories. The first they termed "solid

citizens” if their current performance is high, but they are unlikely to be promoted because of *organizational* plateau reasons. Ference et al. (1977) indicate that while the organizational reason for plateau most likely involves the pyramidal structure of the organization, there are a number of other organizational plateau causes such as: the fierce competition for limited senior positions resulting in capable managers not gaining a promotion simply because a more capable person is promoted despite the fact that the passed over manager would be effective in the job; older workers passed over as a younger manager is viewed as having the potential to contribute to the organizations success for a longer period of time; and the individual may be seen as too important in their current position to be promoted further despite being capable of working at a higher level. Solid citizens can also be *personally* plateaued if they lack the personal characteristics required for further promotion or they do not desire further promotion. Solid citizens are considered effectively plateaued employees in that they are still engaged at work and productive.

While solid citizens were identified as the most common employee in an organization, the least common employees were identified as career plateaued employees termed “dead wood” (Ference et al. 1977). Dead wood employees are poor performers who are unlikely to be promoted and were identified as ineffectively plateaued employees. In addition to the plateaued employees, two categories of non-plateaued employees are identified by Ference et al. (1977), “stars”, who are high performers with a high likelihood of promotion, and “learners” (comers) who are low performers with a high probability for future promotions.

The fast track “stars” have been specifically examined in the career derailment literature which focuses on why these “stars” sometimes fail to meet the organizational

expectations for their advancement (Furnham 2010). Career derailment research is focused on the failure to achieve anticipated leadership potential and is narrower in scope than career plateau. Ference et al. (1977) also suggest that organizations focus too much of their energy on stars and deadwood at the expense of solid citizens. In addition, Ference et al. (1977) realized their model of career plateau only provided a snap shot in time and that careers take place over extended periods. They suggest that managers move between the star and learner categories as they progress in the organization and eventually level off into the roles of solid citizen or deadwood after which they exit the organization.

Later researchers realized there were limitations to conceptualizing career plateau strictly as upward organizational movement and they broadened the concept beyond hierarchical plateau to include lateral position movement within an organization. Lateral position movement incorporates the concept of 'content plateau' or becoming plateaued in terms of the nature of the work, with a corresponding lack of opportunities to learn new skills (Veiga 1981). Given the pyramidal structure of organizations and the almost inevitability of arriving at a hierarchical plateau, the need for employees to learn new skills and maintain lateral mobility was recognized as being one way to avoid the worst outcomes of being hierarchically plateaued. Research would also reveal that employees viewed content plateau in a more negative light than hierarchical plateau as employees believed the organization could take more action related to content plateau as opposed to hierarchical plateau.

The concepts of hierarchical and content plateau were further refined conceptually by Bardwick (1986) in her seminal book which identified three types of plateauing: structural (hierarchical), content and life. Bardwick's new concept of life plateauing was

described by Bardwick as resulting from work-committed individuals feeling unsuccessful at work when they are plateaued, which spreads to feelings of being plateaued and trapped in life. Although identified early in the career plateau research, life plateau has rarely been studied. Bardwick (1986) also suggested that career plateau is experienced in two distinct stages. In the first stage, resistance, the individual still believes they have an opportunity for promotion and continues to focus on work and remains committed to the organization in the hopes of achieving a new position. Once they realize this is not going to happen, they move into the resignation stage. The resignation stage is characterized by a gradual withdrawal from work and increasing passivity in the work place (Bardwick, 1986). Theoretical development and empirical testing of the concept of career plateau led to a fourth type of career plateau being identified, 'double' plateau, that is being both hierarchically and content plateaued at the same time (Allen and Poteet 1998; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; McCleese and Eby, 2006; McCleese et al. 2007).

Another form of plateauing to be identified in the literature is professional plateau. According to Lee (2003), professional plateau is concerned not only with the content of the job but whether the job enables employees to master new skills to enhance their employability and marketability within their profession and over all careers. This definition moves beyond a single organization and considers the broader impacts of plateau on the careers of professionals who have the option of moving readily to new organizations. Lee recognized that content plateau as originally proposed by Bardwick (1986) includes professional plateau but felt that the professional plateau concept better dealt with the potential impacts of the boundaryless career on plateau status. However, the results of the career plateau research do not support the existence of boundaryless careers, at least in terms

of the employee's expectations of being responsible for their own careers and having limited expectations of the organizations responsibilities to support them with career advancement or learning (Godshalk and Fender 2015; Smith-Ruig 2009). Although, professional plateau was proposed by Lee almost two decades ago to advance the theoretical understanding of career plateau, no other researcher has explored this concept.

Studies have analyzed the concepts of hierarchical and content plateau empirically to determine if they represent different phenomenon. Milliman's (1992) research provides empirical and statistical evidence for hierarchical and job content plateau as being distinct phenomena. These findings were subsequently supported by the findings of Allen et al. (1999) and Lentz (2009). In addition to these three studies which focused on hierarchical and content plateau, Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) tested double plateau as well as hierarchical and content plateau suggesting their data confirms the independence of all three concepts.

Unfortunately, there has been a great deal of variety in applying different theoretical lenses to the study of career plateau or the research has not been guided by any theoretical perspective (Gerpott and Domsch 1987). Gerpott and Domsch (1987) in explaining the inconsistent findings in the literature claim the atheoretical basis of the career plateau research leads to a failure to provide explicit explanations of how plateauing causes changes in attitudes and behaviours. While the systematic review study results in Chapter 4 suggest that there is greater consistency in research findings than Gerpott and Domsch (1987) suggest, the underlying understanding of how the impacts of career plateau occur is impacted by theoretical and methodological differences in the study approaches. For example, the systematic review study uncovered consistency in finding career plateau

impacts on job, career and work satisfaction (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chao 1990; Chay et al. 1995; Drucker-Godard et al. 2015; Ettington 1997 etc.). However, the explanation for why career plateau impacts satisfaction is obscured by the theoretical variety represented in the research.

Another area of weakness is that career plateau research has lacked a consensus on how the concepts are defined and operationalized. As can be seen in Appendix D, the studies included in the systematic review considered a total of 93 different concepts involving 160 different measurement scales or approaches to operationalization and measurement of the 93 concepts. Most studies included in the systematic review do not cover more than a few of the 93 concepts. However, even the measurement of the same concept can be quite diverse across studies.

Career plateau research is also heavily focused on the private sector and at the management level. Over 70% of the total research base (see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the following) involves samples drawn exclusively from the private sector or in combination with other sectors of the economy. Most of the research that combines a sample from the private sector with another sector involves greater representation from the private sector in the total sample for the individual study. Very few studies control for the sector representation in the study sample but treat the entire sample as heterogeneous. The findings of the career plateau research over all are therefore more representative of how career plateau manifests in the private sector. Applying these findings to other sectors must be done with caution, as the literature has identified several differences between the sectors (e.g. Dye 1995; Ghobadian et al. 2007; Perry and Wise 1990; Rainey 2003). A similar situation exists in terms of the focus on management positions. With only 18% the career

plateau research to date involving samples without management representation, the impacts of career plateau outside of the management ranks are less well understood (see Chapter 4). Developing programs and responses to career plateau based on the existing research that will be applied in the most part to those who are not managers may not be the best use of organizational resources. A focus on the non-management experience of career plateauing is required to close a gap in the existing research.

Career Systems Models Theory (The Sentences)

Career systems are dynamic, focusing on the creation and maintenance of organizational membership via three functions: entry into the organization; development within the organization and exit from the organization (Sonnenfeld 1989). In order to be successful, employees must understand the career system in their organization as career systems define how many advancement winners there are, as well as how participants are tested for advancement and when and if losers can compete again (Sonnenfeld 1989). Without a realistic understanding of the career model in their organization, employees will be more likely to plateau as they will be unable to effectively plan and manage their careers.

Furthermore, (Sonnenfeld 1989) indicates that differences in human resource practices that exist between organizations are not arbitrary but reflect the different strategies of those organizations. By understanding the organizational strategies an employee can better align their career efforts with the organization and further decrease the likelihood of career plateauing. Human resource practices also provide an indication of how the organization wishes to be perceived by its employees as well as the overall goals of the organization in a broader social context. In the case of the public service, with expectations

for fairness, accountability and merit, the organization must present a human resources practices framework that appears legitimate to the broader public.

The most relevant career models that are likely to apply to the public service are the human capital model, the power/politics systems model and the tournament model (see Chapter 5). The human capital model involves individuals being selected and allocated according to rational matching of their qualities with position requirements (Nicholson 1993). The power/politics model involves career advantage being transacted based on sponsorship, leverage, coalition-building, and power-broking (IBID). The tournament system involves cohort competition for advancement with losses having the characteristic of being sudden and irreversible (IBID).

Human Capital Career Model

Human capital theory posits that labour markets offer open opportunity for individuals to advance based on their hard work, ability, education and training (Rosenbaum 1984). Individuals can invest in their human “capital” by pursuing education and training to augment their work effort. Barney and Lawrence (1989) indicate that human capital includes general human capital such as skills, literacy, training, or education that possess value in virtually all work settings. In addition to general human capital, there is specific human capital which includes skills, training, experience, or education that possesses value in a restricted set of work settings. Sonnenfeld (1989) suggests that the individual makes investments in their human capital with an expected return over time in the form of work promotions and pay increases. According to Sonnenfeld, without the anticipated return on investment, individuals are less likely to pursue education and training opportunities. From an investment return perspective, general human capital investment provides an increased

likelihood of some benefit to the individuals' career over all but may not provide the same amount of immediate benefit as specific human capital investments.

Within a human capital career model, public organizations are engaged in finding employees that fit with the strategic mission of the organization while having the right knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies to support the organization in achieving its goals (Selden 2014). According to Selden (2014), a key aspect of a human capital career model includes competitive processes for selection that benefit from larger candidate pools. Selden (2014) indicates that the quality of new hires in government is significantly higher when more applications are received per opening. Failures in hiring and promotion within a human capital career model are seen to be rational errors such as the failure to use appropriate job profiles, recruiting sources or poor employee selection devices (Lermusiaux and Snell 2005). This perspective helps explain the emphasis that the public service places on its hiring and recruitment.

The human capital career model theory contains several assumptions about the nature of labour markets, such as employee mobility and compensation that is reflective of the value of the employee. One obvious challenge with the human capital approach is that performance is difficult to assess with most jobs and ability is even more difficult to assess since it is based on an inference from past performance (Rosenbaum 1984). As ability is difficult to assess, past position attainment is used as a signal of ability. Although career models that use a competency approach to assessing employee ability appear to provide an alternative approach that allows for the direct assessment of ability, recruiters use different aspects of applicant work experience to infer different dimensions of applicant job competencies (Huang et. al. 2013).

For example, candidates are typically asked during interviews to describe a time when they demonstrated a certain competency, such as budget projection and allocation. In such cases the experience required to gain the competency to have an example to discuss in the interview can only be gained by attaining a certain level of position in the organization. While it may seem fairer to ask a candidate to describe a time when they had to manage an organizational budget, what is really being asked is to describe how they managed a budget in the past. The framing of the question as a competency question simply masks the real question being asked which is based on positional attainment. Managers with budget responsibilities will have competency examples while those without management experience are forced to be creative in trying to make a case to hide the fact that their lack of positional attainment is a barrier to promotion.

Despite the limitations and assumptions in the human capital career model, there are advantages and an appeal for public organizations to adopt this career model. The logic of this approach, which is to find the right person with the right skills to do the job and match them in a rational way, creates an impression of rationality and objectivity. The approach also leads to rigour in the attempts to use competencies and other forms of matching with considerable effort put into the system of hiring and promotion. It also resonates well with employees who, understandably, would prefer to be part of an organization where positional achievement is not earned from favoritism or political considerations. As well, this career model keeps employee's hopeful for the future because of their belief that if they just invest in themselves (their human capital) and work hard, good things will come. The human capital career model promotes the idea of equality as the attainment of success in the organization is open to all and based on defensible principles (Rosenbaum 1984).

Power/Politic Career Model

The power/politic career model focuses on the role power plays in organizations both in terms of the influence that organizational members exercise over the direction and control of the organization, as well as how power is instrumental in career advancement. In his book on power in organizations, Pfeffer (1981) indicates that organizational politics involve activities of acquiring and developing power. Pfeffer identifies power as a potential force when the organization is at rest and politics as the use of power when the organization is in action. It is the accumulation and use of power that is of primary importance in understanding organizational dynamics. According to Pfeffer, power is used to overcome the resistance of others and attain one's own way in controlling and influencing the organization.

To understand organizational choices in a political model, it is necessary to understand who participates in the decision process, what determines their stand on any issue (legislation, mandate, resources etc.), what determines their power and what the decision process is (Pfeffer 1981). Within a government context, the exercise of power plays out at all levels of the organization. For example, when drafting a decision note, a policy analyst must gain the approval of their manager for the choices identified. There is a power relationship that exists between the policy analysts and manager that will heavily influence the decisions and recommendations put forward. Power relationships continue up the hierarchical ladder to the very top where the DM will exercise the ultimate authority in determining direction when the decision is theirs to make or will have the final say in framing the choices if the decision vests with an elected official. Power is not only key to

organizational advancement and opportunity, it is key to the framing of problems and solutions that will be considered by public organizations.

In terms of hiring and promotion within a power/politic career model system in the public service, the overall focus and intent of the process is like most organization. For example, defining the relevant abilities required of the candidate based on the technical requirements of the work, devising screening and selection processes and then completing screening and selection are all key processes. Once an employee enters the organization, the training and promotion process supports further career development; however, hiring and promotion in a power/politic career model results in the hiring and promotion of employees who have a greater affinity to accumulate and use power (Vigoda-Gadot and Dray 2006). This results in the hiring and promotion of people who also have power/politic skills that are like those doing the hiring through a process known as homosocial reproduction (Pfeffer 1981).

Pfeffer (1981) points out that political systems of organization have a challenge in relation to selection for advancement and the provision of training. If an organizational career model system is political in nature, the provision of analytical and decision-making training will not in reality be linked to the skills and abilities required to perform as a manager or leader in the organization. Bargaining and negotiating skills, along with a more cynical view of how to acquire power, would be of greater benefit to managers in a political career environment than analytical skills. A tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity and the ability to confront and manage conflict, and advocacy will also be beneficial for those hoping for advancement in an organization with a political/power career systems model (Pfeffer 1981, Vigoda-Gadot and Dray 2006). While these political skills may be necessary

for functioning at a senior level of public organizations, it may not look good for public organizations to offer employee training in the acquisition and use of political power, though it might be described in a different way that is more palatable.

Tournament Career Model

Despite the promise of the human capital model as a means of supporting equity and rationality in public organizations, as pointed out by Rosenbaum (1984), citizens live within systems that demonstrate unequal attainment that are supposed to preserve equality of opportunity. Because of legal requirements and societal expectations, organizations must state that they are committed to equality and fairness, yet their personnel systems and policies aimed at selecting the best candidate are likely going to contain biases and privileged positions of thinking and understanding that do not match with equality. Organizations have competing priorities and principles that are not easily reconciled (Rosenbaum 1984). The conflicted organization is therefore tempted to hide the career model in as much as it does not conform to expectations of fairness and equality.

In his seminal book, *Career Mobility in a Corporate Hierarchy*, Rosenbaum (1984) details the tournament career model system. In this system, participants compete against others in contests for higher level positions. There can be different means and ways to assess the participants in these competitions and this career model does not focus on the methods of selection in the same way as the human capital model. Rather the tournament model is more of a description of the overall process by which winners of competitive tournaments are successively limited to fewer and fewer participants. Rosenbaum (1984) suggests that there are irreversible consequences for losers of tournament selections. While winners continue to enjoy opportunities for further advancement, losers are shunted into a

stream of “minor” tournaments. In this scenario, they can no longer compete for the higher-level positions and keep up with the tournaments for top positions but can still participate for positions at a lower level. The hierarchical level at which the loser of a tournament finds they are now competing within is dependent on what level the first tournament losses occur and it could be anywhere from an entry level position up to senior executive. This conceptualization of career success reflects a similar reality pointed out by the career plateau literature in that almost all employees will eventually reach a point at which they will lose the tournament and further advancement disappears. There can be only one leader in any organization with a pyramidal structure.

Rosenbaum (1984) indicates that most employees are unaware of the career model system they are working in. Employees have usually been led to believe that they are working within a human capital system with its rationality and merit. Within the human capital system, it is always possible for an employee to pursue further opportunities for advancement in the organization if they invest in their human capital and continue to work hard. The tournament model recognizes a different reality in that, once the tournament is lost, employee investment in their own human capital will not lead to future opportunities. At best, these investments in human capital may aid employees who engage in minor tournaments, but the real opportunities have passed them by. The false perceptions of employees may be the result of intentional deception on the part of the organization or it could simply be the result of the organization and its senior members not being aware of the career model they are operating within (Rosenbaum 1984). Rosenbaum suggests that in the case of intentional deception, it can be undertaken to hide the implications of limited opportunities for advancement in order to maintain morale and productivity, or it could be

the result of reluctance on the part of supervisors to make employees fully aware of the implications of the career model of the organization.

Just as with the human capital career model, there are challenges associated with the tournament career model. Rosenbaum (1984) indicates that there are theoretical preconditions to the tournament model including: employees knowing the rules; starting in a similar place and being allowed to begin tournaments when they are ready which are often not met. As well, the model does not place the same emphasis on the selection processes used in the individual tournaments as does the human capital model and therefore does not offer as much direction to the organization in establishing human resource practices and policies. In addition to these challenges, the tournament model may not be an accurate description of how women in the work place advance (Hurley and Sonnenfeld 1997).

The tournament model does have strengths when implemented well. For example, repeated tournaments select the fittest managers in a form of social Darwinism that creates the image of winners which enhances authority over subordinates (Rosenbaum 1984). Yet, as Rosenbaum points out, the system may also create self-fulfilling prophecies where early winners are high potential people who can do no wrong and gain social and organizational benefits and investment that the losers will not receive. Even the winners in a tournament system face pressure to continue to win because any loss may put them into the minor tournament system and their future career prospects will suffer. The main benefit of the tournament model as a theoretical approach is that it ties the macro considerations of the structure of the organization (pyramid) into the micro activities (the tournaments) and provides a lens for employees to understand the career system within the organization and make sense of the promotion model (Rosenbaum 1984).

The public service demonstrates the characteristics of an organization in which the candidates work history is easily assessed in the case of existing employees and position requirements are clearly understood as all public service positions require job descriptions and statements of job duties which candidates can view. Another reason the tournament career model is well suited for analyzing the public service is that the tournament model contemplates greater openness at more junior levels with decreasing opportunities for an open competitive process at senior levels. Yet to fully understand the meaning of career plateau, consideration of a theory of motivation and affect in the achievement context needs to take place, in other words, attributional theory needs to be considered.

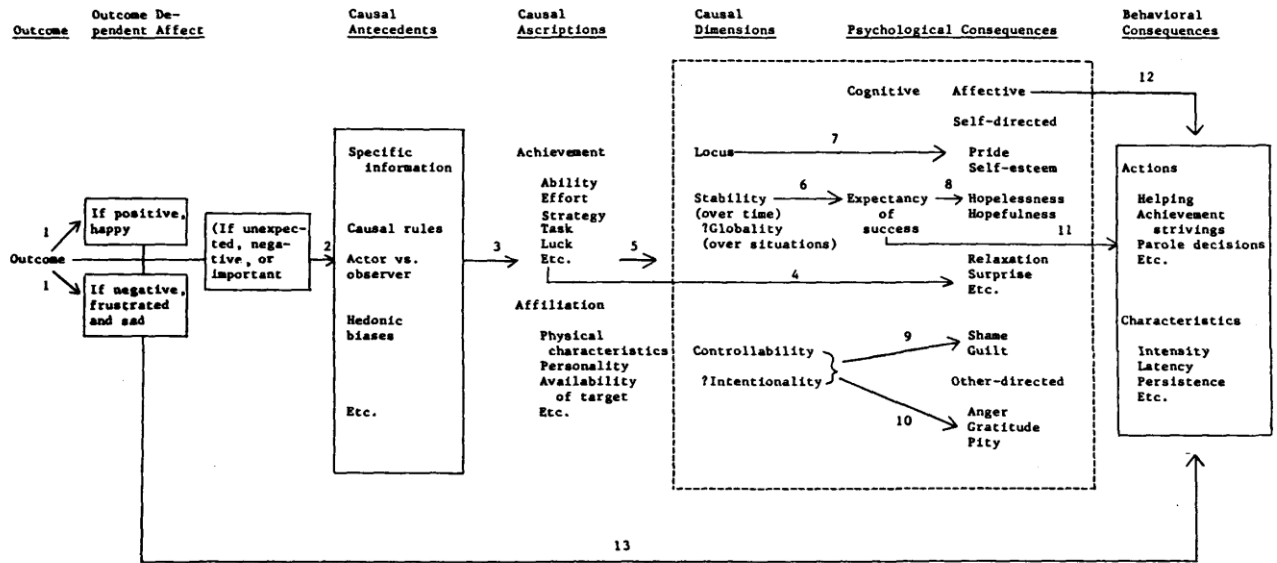
Attributional Theory (The Paragraphs)

This theoretical framework developed and articulated by Weirner (1985) recognizes that the sense making that occurs following an achievement event occurs over time. An initial effective response generally follows the pattern of success resulting in positive feelings and failure resulting in negative feelings, but this initial response is limited in terms of the impact on future feelings and behaviour as a deeper cognitive process follows the initial reaction. The initial response is followed by a more detailed search for understanding the “why” of how the success or failure occurs (the causal ascriptions). The theory proposes that despite there being an almost infinite number of ascriptions for success or failure, these ascriptions have certain key characteristics (causal dimensions). How the causal dimensions are perceived by the individual determines the emotional response to the success or failure. The causal dimensions as well as the effective response impacts the motivational and behavioural consequences of success or failure based on changes in expectancy related to the likelihood of future success or failures (Weirner 1985).

The theory also recognizes that there are many antecedents that influence the causal explanations such as the history of the individual and comparisons to others. The theory does not focus on these antecedents as the responses to success and failure are not determined by the antecedents themselves but rather the attributions that explain success or failure (Weirner 1985). For example, an individual who determines they are not advancing quickly in their organization may view their advancement ambitions as unmet and thus a failure. If the individual makes this determination by comparing themselves to others of the same organizational tenure, or they just determine they are not progressing quickly based on an assumption in their own thinking of how quickly they should progress, the judgment that a failure has occurred will be the same. The cause of the failure (the ascription) and the characteristics of the failure, such as the stability of the cause continuing in the future (the causal domain) will impact the affective and behavioural response (see Figure 1).

Attribution theorists emphasize that individuals' perceptions of achievements or their causal attributions, rather than actual outcomes, determine future achievement effort and motivation (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Weirner, 1985, 1992).

Figure 1: Attribution Theory Diagram



Source: Weirner 1985

While the human search for the cause of failure or success appears self-evident, attributional theory provides structure to interpret and understand the process that individuals undertake (Weirner 1985). The causes of success or failure are known as ‘causal ascriptions’. Causal ascriptions include ability, effort, task difficulty, luck, personal characteristics such as aptitude, personality traits, availability of time and resources etc. With a virtually infinite number of possible causes for success or failure, the identification of common elements in a typology of meaning associated with achievement allows investigators to compare and contrast causes (Weirner 1985). While the number of causal ascriptions is virtually limitless, in the achievement domain there are a much smaller number of salient ascriptions with the most dominant being high ability and effort being linked to success and their opposites being linked to failure (Weiner 1985). Triandis (1972) indicates

that success is dominantly ascribed to hard work and ability while failure is ascribed to a lack of effort and ability and this pattern holds up across cultures.

While the result of the search to identify the causes of success or failure may identify a great range of causal ascriptions, such as a lack of strength leading to athletic failure or poor charisma leading to political failure, these ascriptions have common features termed “causal dimensions.”. The first dimension in relation to causal ascriptions of success and failure was identified by Hieder (1958) as being the result of conditions that are factors within the person as well as factors in the environment. Internal factors include aspects that are perceived to be part of the individual such as ability or effort and external factors which exist outside the individual such as the difficulty of the task.

The division into internal and external causes of success provides a means of classifying the attribution of outcomes at a high level and begins the process of making sense of how individuals assign meaning to achievement outcomes. In the context of career plateau, external reasons for plateau could involve the hiring policies and practices of the organization. The individual does not create these policies but is subject to them. The human resource policies and practices, as well as the cultural norms and the broader ecosystem in which the organization functions are all part of the external environment in which the career plateaued individual lives. On the other hand, the internal reasons for career plateau could be viewed as being composed of those characteristics, traits, actions and abilities that are within the individual. In the case of attributional theory, locus of causality is the term to describe the internal/external divide (Weirner 1985).

However, Wiener et al. (1971) argued for needing a second dimension in causality as internal causes fluctuate (effort) and others are relatively constant (aptitude). While it might

be possible to change an individual's aptitude for success in a given achievement event through repeated practice, training, or education, individuals have different abilities across different areas and therefore some internal characteristics are simply harder to change.

Take for example a person with dyslexia. While the dyslexic may improve their ability to spell with time and effort, it is harder to change spelling ability (aptitude) than it would be to change other internal dimensions such as effort. The individual could change their effort in preparing for a spelling test, but the dyslexia would still represent an individual ability trait that is relatively constant. Weirner (1985) classifies ability as a stable, internal cause and effort as an unstable, internal cause. Weirner et al. (1971) also suggest that the external causes of success and failure are also subject to classification in terms of stability. Weirner (1985) gives the example that the crossing of a lake involves constant characteristics such as the width of the lake, as well as fluctuating characteristics such as the wind conditions when the lake crossing is attempted.

The stability of the causal ascription is important in the career plateau context. If an individual believes they lack the fortitude required to be a manager in their organization and they view their fortitude as a stable characteristic, they will be less likely to stay engaged in a job search for a manager's position. If, on the other hand, they believe their failure to win a management position is related to the effort they have made in preparing for past job interviews, and that effort is not a constant internal trait, they are more likely to continue to pursue opportunities to become a manager believing they can make a greater effort in preparing for the next competition with the possibility of attaining a different result.

In addition to stability as the second dimension of causality, a third dimension in attributional theory is controllability. Controllability entered consideration when it was

noted that regardless of the location of the causes of success in terms of being internal to the individual or external in the environment, or the stability of the condition over time, the ability to do something about the conditions, or controllability, is key to predicting future effort and expectation. Controllability is different than stability as a dimension in causality. For example, the crossing of a lake can be a stable condition, that is the distance from shore to shore, and involve an unstable condition, would be the wind, both these conditions are outside the control of the individual attempting to cross the lake. The effort expended by the individual to cross the lake could be categorized as a controllable dimension, depending on how the individual views effort. In terms of career plateau, controllability will also enter the causal explanations and meaning of success or failure. For example, while the individual can control their job search activities, they cannot control the position requirements of the job they are interested in. The position requirements are outside of the control of the individual even though the individual could look for different positions with requirements more suited to their background and ability, they could not directly change the requirements themselves. Perceived controllability affects the emotional response to success or failure as well as motivation and future behaviour.

Weiner (1985) links cognitive processes and specific feelings to increasingly complex cognitions. From an initial “primitive” response, success being positive and failure being negative, the search for the causes of success or failure and the classification of the causal dimensions determine how the initial response will be further filtered and what the longer-term emotional response will be. Weiner (1985) termed the initial emotional response “outcome dependent-attribution independent” as the outcome is known so the outcome response has at least initially been fixed. However, what success or failure is

attributed to has not yet occurred and the detailed affective response cannot be predicted. The affective response that is arrived at following the cognitive process of determining the causes of success or failure is termed “outcome dependent-attributional dependent”. The empirical research on attribution theory allows for the “attribution dependent” responses to be predicted. The prediction of affect is determined by the causal dimensions associated with the causal ascription, that is the dimensions of locus, stability and controllability all enter the affective response. For example, an individual who attributes a successful achievement as due to effort (the causal ascription) and who views effort as a stable aspect of their personality (causal dimension) is likely to feel pride at their achievement. Weirner (1985) suggests that these associations form powerful and general laws that predict affective outcome, expectancy of future success and motivate behaviour.

As pointed out by Weirner (1985) it is the causal dimension rather than the specific causes of success and failure that determine affect. For example, pride is predominantly linked to locus of causality; anger, guilt, pity and gratitude are predominantly linked to controllability and hopelessness is predominantly linked to causal stability. However, it is important to note that attributional theory recognizes that these ‘laws’ of affect and causal dimension do not always manifest in all individuals. While some of the differences may be related to how the individual interprets the causal dimension related to the achievement outcome, some individuals simply do not experience the same emotional reactions as predicted. For example, not everyone feels guilty even if they fail at something over which they have control and they are aware that their efforts might have made a difference. Similarly, people can feel guilty for something over which they have no control and did make their best effort. The affective response of the individual in an achievement context is

complex but there is value in the predictive and explanatory guidelines provided by attributional theory.

Weirner (1985) indicates that motivation is believed to be determined by what one can get (incentive) as well as by the likelihood of getting it (expectancy) which is the essence of expectancy value theories. Weirner specifically uses the term incentive instead of the term value as he argues that the objective value of an outcome is not influenced by the reason why the outcome was reached. Value is not determined objectively but is influenced and modified by the causal ascriptions and causal dimensions used to analyze the value of a success or failure. Weirner (1985) gives the example of obtaining a dollar, which has the same objective value if you find it or earn it. How you feel, lucky to find, proud to earn, and the impact on your motivation, i.e. you are unlikely to walk around more hoping to find random dollars, versus your motivation to work more in order to earn more, is really dependent on if you see the outcome as stable and controllable. However, the importance, meaning and resultant affective reaction to the attainment of an outcome is also impacted by the causal ascriptions for the outcome. The incentive involves the subjective valuation as well as the consequences of the outcome for the individual.

Expectancy is related to the perception of the likelihood of the success or failure occurring again. To reflect this, Weirner (1985) proposed an expectancy principle in that changes in expectancy of success following an outcome are influenced by the perceived stability of the cause of the event. It is important to note that from an expectancy perspective, the only causal domain that Weirner identified was stability. This makes sense as ascriptions for failure that are seen as outside the individual, that is it is part of the environment, or within the individual, will not matter if the causal domain is stable. A

stable failure due to the individual or the environment is still a stable failure. Unless the stability domain is seen as being different in a new situation, such as the environment changing or a different internal trait being responsible for success, the causal location will not be important in terms of anticipating a different result in the future. The same situation applies with the causal domain of controllability. If the cause of failure is controllable or not controllable, but is considered stable, there is no reason to expect future outcomes to be different.

Actions and behaviours are then predicted based on causes. If the causal domain is considered stable and the outcome negative, it is expected that the individual will lack motivation as they have no hope of changing the future. If the causal domain is not seen as stable, the individual is likely to try and do things differently in the future hoping for a different outcome. What the individual's action will be depends on what they ascribe the success or failure to. If the individual believes a lack of effort in preparing for a job interview led to failure, they may work harder for their next interview.

Conclusion

Building on Bacharach's (1989) metaphor that just as a collection of words does not necessarily make a sentence, a collection of constructs and variables does not necessarily make a theory, a theoretical lens to guide the dissertation is proposed. "Words" are taken from career plateau research. These words are placed within "sentences" of meaning which are set in the organizational context assessed using career systems model theory. The attributional theory lens metaphorically composes the "paragraphs" in which the employee's feelings and responses to being career plateaued can be understood.

The systematic review study outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 is undertaken to clarify the ‘words’ in the career plateau research. The words are the concepts of the study, such as content plateau or hierarchical plateau. By using these words, it is not necessary to recreate the concepts of the study and test them. The meanings are understood within the career plateau research and already tested. But to set these words into “sentences” of meaning, the organizational context must be understood, and career systems model theory is proposed as the means of doing so.

The career systems model operating in the public service is uncovered in Chapter 6 and is necessary as the employee who is experiencing career plateau does so in a comparative sense within their organization. What is considered valuable when assessing competition is determined by the career systems model within the organization. In a human capital career system model the employee may feel career plateaued if they lack the skills and education they perceive as necessary to move up. In a power/politic career system model they may feel career plateaued if they lack the political connections to advance. In both cases the “words” or concept of career plateau is developed in the career plateau research, is understood and assessed within the context of the career systems model. How the employee feels and reacts can be considered with an attributional theory lens.

The findings in Chapters 8 and 9 are guided in part by attributional theory. For example, an employees’ perception that the situation will not change is more likely to lead to feelings of despair than if the situation is perceived to be changeable. Similarly, the motivational response of the employee will reflect their perception of the stability of the cause. If they view the cause of their plateau as stable, they are less likely to be motivated to

try and change the situation. Taken together career plateau theory, career systems model theory and attributional theory provide a robust lens for analysis.

CHAPTER 3: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW STUDY METHODOLOGY

In the previous section, a theoretical framework was outlined to guide the dissertation research. That framework metaphorically proposed that “words” be used which are derived from career plateau research. In the next two chapters the career plateau research “words” are analyzed and refined by a systematic review study. The systematic review provides a review of the literature to develop an understanding of the definitions and measures used in career plateau research and as well as providing a baseline for defining the impacts of career plateau. As such, the review revealed how career plateauing might best be studied and provided direction in forming the content of the interview questions and analysis.

Introduction

The career plateau literature involves scores of articles written over decades (e.g. Allen et al. 1999; Ference et al. 1977; Bardwick 1986; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chay et al. 1995; Ettington 1997; Hurst et al. 2017; McCleese et al. 2007; Milliman 1992; Orpen 1983; Stout et al. 1988 etc.). The empirical data is extensive and provides a solid basis on which to undertake further research on career plateau. However, as will be seen in the next chapter, the findings and learnings from this body of research are impacted by the different approaches used in the operationalization and selection of study variables. A systematic review study provides one means of consolidating the findings to date and analyzing them to gain new insight and understanding.

The systematic review study contributes to the advancement of the understanding of career plateau by illustrating the extent of career plateau research, exploring the research methods used and developing an overview map of the research field but most significantly

by providing a synthesis representing an initial effort to integrate empirical studies. This systematic review study has three secondary goals:

- (i) to present a state-of-the-art of the existing empirical research on career plateau;
- (ii) to provide new insights, analysis and interpretations through secondary analysis of the published data and findings; and
- (iii) to suggest a series of actions that, based on the systematization of empirical findings, help increase the effectiveness of individual and organizational attempts to prevent or mitigate the negative impacts of career plateau.

Following a description of the methodology used to conduct the systematic review, key findings from the exploration of research methods and development of a map of empirical studies on career plateau is presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 also contains a syntheses and secondary analysis of the empirical studies to answer the three review questions: How is career plateau conceptualized and operationalized?; What are the individual and organizational impacts of career plateau?; and what are individual and organizational responses to career plateau?

Systematic Review Methodology

Systematic reviews are a form of secondary research which uses rigorous methods to bring together the results of individual primary studies (Gough et al. 2013). Gough et al. (2013) recommend systematic reviews be conducted prior to undertaking any new primary research to determine if further research is necessary and informed by the knowledge of previous research. The systematic review approach grew out of the evidence-based policy and practice movement from the 1990s (Dixon-Wood et al. 2006). While systematic reviews have been questioned by some in relation to its use in examining qualitative

research (Dixon-Wood et al. 2006), others have noted that systematic reviews provide a rigorous process for reviewing empirical literature that is reproducible (Gough et al. 2013; Greenhaus et al. 2005). The current study adapts and expands upon the systematic review process outlined by Gough et al. (2013), by undertaking the following review steps:

- Step 1: Develop review questions
- Step 2: Complete search queries and record results
- Step 3: Validate query results
- Step 4: Consolidate results from multiple databases
- Step 5: Eliminate redundancies and assess sources against research questions
- Step 6: Appraise sources for inclusion
- Step 7: Map, describe and explore data
- Step 8: Synthesize findings and conduct secondary analysis
- Step 9: Develop framework to guide future research and responses to career plateau

Advantages and limitations of systematic reviews

While findings in the career plateau research demonstrate a lack of consistency, this is not surprising given the diversity of research conducted across different sectors of the economy, the differing hierarchical levels of the participants involved in the studies and the type of plateau researched. In addition, not all studies use the same methodology and there is diversity in the conceptual constructs and variable measurement approaches demonstrated within the studies reviewed. The 46 studies included in the systematic review use a total of 93 different concepts involving 160 different measurement scales and approaches to the operationalization of variables (see Appendix D). This conceptual variability may contribute to differences in research results; however, a systematic review study of the

empirical research on career plateau helps clarify results that improve the understanding of the breadth of empirical findings and allows for tentative conclusions on the impacts of career plateau and suggests actions that can be taken to respond to career plateau.

Systematic reviews allow for the combination of the findings of different types of study designs and research approaches (Gough et al. 2013; Dixon-Wood et al. 2006). Mapping study results and synthesizing the research are integral to the systematic review process, offering a rigorous and detailed consideration of the evidence that is lacking in a traditional literature review (Gough et al. 2013). The inclusive character of this research method assists in dealing with the diversity of variables and concepts that exist in the career plateau literature.

There are several limitations with the systematic review approach. Systematic reviews are not typically undertaken by an individual researcher but rather involve a team in order to improve the accuracy and quality of the study. Having a group of reviewers or coders is useful to explore and explain differences in findings and determine the importance or significance of a theory or concept that appears recurrently in the reviewed literature (Gough et al. 2013). The current systematic review was mainly limited to three databases that are extensive in their journal coverage but may not capture the full empirical research base to date. As discussed in the mapping section of the review, limitations arise from the reliance on English studies predominately based in the United States or other Western democracies. Study findings might be different in other jurisdictions given the social and cultural norms that impact and constrain organizations and those working in them.

Review Questions

According to Gough et al. (2013), the review questions are key to deciding what studies to include in the review as well as how the studies are assessed, and the findings pooled. A detailed understanding of the career plateau concept is needed for the dissertation, grounded in the empirical findings and the existing literature. Additionally, the implications and impacts of career plateau need clarifying as do the individual and organizational actions in response to career plateau in order to support the broader dissertation work. The empirical evidence also grounds the operationalization of various concepts within the dissertation. The following review questions were developed to guide the systematic review study:

1. How is career plateau conceptualized and operationalized?
2. What are the individual and organizational impacts of career plateau?
3. What are individual and organizational responses to career plateau?

The research questions guide the assessment of data sources for inclusion in the systematic review. Sources are only considered for inclusion in the study if they provide direct empirical data that contributes towards providing an answer to one or more of the above review questions. More detail on the assessment process is included later in this chapter.

Scoping Criteria

There are two types of systematic reviews, configurative and aggregative. The configurative review focuses on exploring and developing theory through the exploration of phenomena without specifying concepts in advance. The emphasis of configurative reviews is on the interpretation of the meaning of phenomena and falls in the general perspective of qualitative research. Configurative synthesis may rely on a small number of detailed cases

to develop an understanding of meaning with heterogeneity between studies being valuable in that greater insights may be provided than what a representative sample of typical cases can reveal (Gough et al. 2013; Gough 2013; Dixon-Woods et al. 2005 and 2006).

The aggregative systematic review focuses on taking information from studies on well determined concepts in order to test theories related to specific phenomena and falls within the general category of quantitative research. These reviews often specify concepts and variables in advance and involve deductive reasoning. Theory development is supported through empirical testing of theoretical assumptions with homogeneity sought between studies (Gough et al. 2013; Gough 2013; Dixon-Woods et al. 2005 and 2006). The synthesis step of the systematic review involves a broad consideration of the operationalization of concepts related to career plateau. The current study falls mostly into the aggregative systematic review approach with its focus on quantitative research but does contain elements of a configurative review, especially in the synthesis portion of the review which explores the phenomena of career plateau in detail.

Scoping involves the establishment of the criteria used to select studies for inclusion in the systematic review (Gough et al. 2013). As this review is primarily focused on understanding what has been learned from the quantitative empirical research and evidence, only empirical studies are scoped into the systematic review. The three review questions listed above guide the scoping which leads to the selection/search criteria outlined next.

Search Strategy

The purpose of the search strategy is to design and run a search to find promising sources with the inclusion criteria and purpose of the study determining the strategy used to search for potentially relevant studies for the review (Gough et al. 2013). The search

strategy that guides this study does not place restrictions for inclusion based on location of the study or date of the study, however, only English language studies are included. The queries are built to search and identify: 1) traditionally published material (i.e., electronic books, articles, editorials and book chapters) and grey literature (i.e., conference proceedings, presentations, white and policy papers); 2) records not limited by discipline, study design, date, country or geographic region; and 3) full-text items that can be downloaded for free or borrowed from the University of Victoria Libraries. The following steps were undertaken as part of the search strategy:

1. Electronic database searches (Web of Science, EBSCO and JSTOR). A general search using broad queries (i.e. career plateau) was completed to get a general overview of the topic. The queries were then refined by including more specific terms (e.g. government, public administration and synonyms) as a search is required to strike a balance between finding all articles in a topic area and finding relevant articles (Gough et al. 2013). Queries were also run in the Directory of Open Access Journal.
2. An alert on Web of Science (expired on June 20, 2018) was created to identify new records on career plateau uploaded to that database.
3. Some additional items were 'hand-searched' as they could not be found in the selected bibliographic databases. These items were attained through inter library loans and involved books not available electronically.

Screening

Following the initial phase when a broad breadth of potential sources was identified, the narrowing of the sources for relevance was undertaken. For this stage of the systematic review process the title and abstract for each source was screened followed by a full text

assessment for those sources that met the inclusion criteria. This approach is consistent with that recommended by Gough et al. (2013). However, it was not necessary in every case during this initial phase to read the entire abstract. Several of the sources examined in this initial phase resulted in the immediate rejection of the source from the systematic review as the source had nothing to do with career plateau, despite being filtered by the electronic search engine as relevant. For example, when results were returned for the search term of career stall, articles that included the word stallion were filtered in as relevant with articles focused on the health of horses. In order to address this phenomenon, which occurred more frequently than anticipated, a simple validation of query results involving a short scan of the article title or glance at the abstract was completed prior to a more detailed assessment of the abstract. Obvious sources that were not relevant were removed following this quick assessment.

More detailed abstract reviews were required on a much larger portion of the search results in order to determine relevance when the source appeared to have a greater potential to contain appropriate material for the study. For example, the search term “ceiling” and “career” when entered into the WoS data base returned 251 potential sources for inclusion in the review (see Table 1). Most of these sources addressed the ‘glass’ ceiling phenomena. Glass ceiling is a distinct phenomenon from career plateau and can be defined as those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent women as a group from advancing upward in the organization (Caparas 2001). However, some of the glass ceiling articles identified in the search also included terms and concepts directly relevant to career plateau or career plateau might have been one of the variables measured or controlled for in the glass ceiling study. For many of these articles it was necessary to open an

electronic copy of the article and complete a scan of the entire article to determine the potential relevance. Using this approach, from the 251 'ceiling' articles identified by the data search engines, 20 were screened as requiring further detailed assessment. Following this initial screening phase of all the data bases and other items collected, there were 211 potential sources identified for further appraisal.

A consolidated list of sources was compiled after the source title and abstract screenings had been completed across the databases and additional items found in hand searches. As part of compiling this list, redundancies between the databases had to be eliminated as numerous potential sources appeared in more than one data base search. As can be seen in Table 1 Search Queries and Results, 118 items from the 211 potential sources were identified for inclusion in the detailed appraisal phase of the systematic review study.

Table 1: Search Queries and Results

| Database | Date | Key Terms | Search field | Results |
|---------------|------------|--|--------------|---------|
| WoS | 2017-09-05 | career AND plateau* | All Text | 146 |
| | | career AND derailment | | 0 |
| | | career AND plateau* AND public organization* | | 3 |
| | 2017-09-08 | career AND plateau* (Validated) | | 90 |
| | 2017-09-07 | career AND stall* | | 68 |
| | | career AND stall* validated | | 10 |
| | 2017-09-09 | career AND ceiling* | | 251 |
| | | career AND ceiling* validated (contributes to research question) | | 20 |
| | 2017-09-25 | WOS Total for Screening and Assessment | | 120 |
| EBSCO | 2017-09-06 | career AND plateau* | All Text | 105 |
| | | career AND plateau* validated | | 45 |
| | 2017-09-08 | career AND derailment* | | 3 |
| | | career AND stall* | | 3 |
| | | career AND ceiling* | | 122 |
| | | career AND ceiling* validated (contributes to research question) | | 11 |
| | 2017-09-25 | EBSCO Total for Screening and Assessment | | 56 |
| JSTOR | 2017-09-08 | career Near 5 plateau* | Full Text | 206 |
| | | career Near 5 plateau* validated | | 25 |
| | | career Near 5 derailment* | | 28 |
| | | career Near 5 derailment* validated | | 4 |
| | | career Near 5 stall* | | 26 |
| | | career Near 5 stall* validated | | 0 |
| | | career Near 5 ceiling* | | 168 |
| | | career AND ceiling* validated (contributes to research question) | | 6 |
| | | JSTOR Total for Screening and Assessment | | 35 |
| All databases | 2017-09-25 | Potential sources assessed | | 211 |
| | | Total for Screening and Assessment | | 118 |

Appraisal

Following the screening of studies for inclusion in the systematic review, their quality and relevance to addressing the review questions are assessed (Gough et al. 2013). The assessment is undertaken to determine if the data from a study will be used in the synthesis phase of the systematic review. Gough (2007) recommends that the three components involved in the appraisal are: relevance to the review questions, appropriateness of methods, and the quality of the execution of methods. For the current study, each of the 118 sources that screened in were reviewed in their entirety and assessed on the three components identified by Gough (2007). Of the 118 sources appraised, only 46 were assessed for inclusion in the study.

The appraisal of the studies in relation to the first review question involves assessing the study and its findings to determine if the data contributed to understanding how career plateau is conceptualized and/or operationalized in empirically based research. Some studies were appraised and determined to be appropriate for inclusion as they clearly conceptualized and/or operationalized career plateau. The research on career plateau adopts several different approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing career plateau. For example, some studies treat career plateau as a dichotomous variable while others treated it as a continuous variable. Regardless of how the study operationalized a specific variable, studies appraised for inclusion into the systematic review provide data that increases our understanding of how career plateau is researched and helps make sense of the research findings.

To appraise studies for the second review question involved assessing the study and its findings to determine if the data contributes to understanding the impact of career plateau on the individual and/or organization. 37 of the 46 studies appraised for inclusion into the

systematic review explore the impact of career plateau on the individual employee. This data is used in the synthesis component of the systematic review to provide new insights concerning the impact of career plateau on the individual. While it was hoped that there would be empirical data directly measuring the impact of career plateau on organizations, this was not the case with not even a single study that screened into the systematic review directly measuring the impact of career plateau on the organization. As discussed in Chapter 4, the organizational impacts of career plateau are deduced from the findings of the impacts on the individual or are discussed as the logical consequences of organizations having career plateaued staff.

Study appraisal in relation to the third review question involved assessing the study and its findings to determine if the data contribute to understanding what the individual and/or organization can do to respond to career plateau. Fewer studies discuss the actions that can be taken in response to career plateau than focus on the impacts of career plateau. While studies focused on the impacts of career plateau emphasize the impacts of career plateau on the individual, studies exploring actions to respond to career plateau place a greater emphasis on the actions that can be taken by the organization as opposed to the individual.

Not every study appraised as being appropriate for inclusion in the systematic review provided data to answer all three of the systematic review research questions. Some studies did not consider the impacts of career plateau on the employee or these studies may not have considered what can be done by the organization to support career plateaued employees. However, every study appraised for inclusion in the systematic review is empirically based

and provides data that can be used in answering at least one of the three review questions and sometimes all three.

For those studies appraised and excluded from the study, there were three primary reasons for exclusion. Firstly, there were those studies which made it through the screening phase but on subsequent consideration it was determined that they were too peripheral to the study purpose to be included. For example, a self-help book that touched upon career plateau, but only referenced other empirical findings on career plateau and focused more on helping people in their job search efforts, was appraised out of the study once it was reviewed. Secondly, there were several sources that were not empirical studies in themselves but contained theoretical discussions, explored ideas or proposed taxonomies that aid in understanding career plateau. These sources were screened out of the systematic review study but help inform the broader dissertation research and some were used in the development of the Theoretical Framework which guides the dissertation (see Chapter 2). A good example of this type of source is the seminal work of Bardwick (1986). While this book provides a great deal of information on the concept of career plateau and is foundational to the later development and study of career plateau, it is not an empirical study itself. The third type of source that was appraised and excluded from the study involves empirical research which includes career plateau as a concept that was not central to the study and the study does not provide information useful to answering the research questions guiding the systematic review.

Mapping and Sampling

In order to create a research findings map, 'codes' that describe the research data and begin to organize the data for analysis in the synthesis stage were developed. The studies

appraised for inclusion were coded on the following variables: year of publication; source (e.g., name of the journal and area of research focus); country (based on the location where the research data was gathered); sector focus (private or public); and organizational level of participants involved in the research (management, union, professional etc.) as well as a brief discussion of the interaction of age, tenure and career plateau. Map codes provide an opportunity to sample a sub-group of studies for synthesis, which helps reduce the number of studies, their methodological complexity and increases the heterogeneity of studies as well as address challenges such as the lack of time and resources available to conduct the systematic review (Gough et al., 2013). The map codes guide the analysis of the research and aid the synthesis in presenting the full understanding and challenges that exist with the career plateau research.

Aggregative reviews, such as the current study, are as exhaustive as possible to avoid bias and increase confidence in their findings (Gough et al., 2013). The sample of studies used in this systematic review includes all empirical studies on career plateau that were identified in the screening and appraisal stages in order to capture the entirety of the empirical data to-date. Aggregative approaches have an instrumental effect, involving a focus on the measurement of concepts (Weiss 1979) as opposed to the enlightenment perspective, or focus on understanding and exploring the concepts themselves as demonstrated in configurative reviews.

Synthesis

Gough et al. (2013) indicate that the synthesis phase of the systematic review is the process of integrating the findings from studies by examining the available data, looking for patterns and interpreting them. Synthesis is not a list of findings but an attempt to integrate

information and provide more definitive answers than individual studies included in the review can provide. Differences in the individual studies can prevent the use of statistical techniques such as meta-analysis and simple counts of positive or negative impacts are not enough to fully understand the research (Gough et al. 2013). However, Gough et al. (2013) argue that identifying patterns in the primary studies can lend greater weight to conclusions. The variation that exists across the career plateau research prevents the use of meta-analysis techniques, but it does not prevent the use of the synthesis methodology. Aggregating primary studies with similarities across various characteristics, such as treatment of variables, sample composition and the nature of employment, strengthens the value of the individual study results (Gough et al. 2013).

Conclusion

Systematic reviews are a form of secondary research which uses rigorous methods to bring together the results of individual primary studies (Gough et al. 2013). This systematic review was undertaken to: present a state-of-the-art of the existing empirical research on career plateau; to provide new insights, analysis and interpretations through secondary analysis of the published data and findings; and to suggest a series of actions that, based on the systematization of empirical findings, help increase the effectiveness of individual and organizational attempts to prevent or mitigate the negative impacts of career plateau. The systematic review was guided by three review questions: How is career plateau conceptualized and operationalized?; What are the individual and organizational impacts of career plateau?; and What are individual and organizational responses to career plateau?

The results of the systematic review detailed in the next chapter inform the operationalization of the career plateau variables in the second study. This information is

gained directly from the data analysis in response to the first review question exploring how career plateau is operationalized. This analysis establishes the empirical evidence upon which it can be said with confidence the approach adopted in the second study is sound. The analysis completed in answering the second and third research question is used in the analysis of the second study data regarding the individual impacts from career plateau identified by study participants. As well, the organizational and individual behavioural responses identified by study participants in the second study are analyzed in light of the findings to the third review question.

The collection and appraisal of data for inclusion into the systematic review was designed to determine if the data from the systematic review study could be used in the synthesis phase. Gough (2007) recommends that the three components involved in the appraisal are: relevance to the review questions, appropriateness of methods, and the quality of the execution of methods. Of the 118 sources appraised, only 46 were assessed for inclusion in the study. These sources represent a broad but carefully selected set of data on which to build the research findings map and complete the synthesis.

The research findings map developed 'codes' that describe the research data and begin to organize the data for analysis in the synthesis stage. There is value in the mapping exercise even if it were not taken further in the synthesis phase. As indicated by Gough et al. (2013), the synthesis phase of the systematic review is the process of integrating the findings from studies by examining the available data, looking for patterns and interpreting them. Synthesis goes beyond being a list of findings in an attempt to integrate information and provide more definitive answers than individual studies included in the review can provide. Differences in the individual studies can prevent the use of statistical techniques

such as meta-analysis and simple counts of positive or negative impacts are not enough to fully understand the research (Gough et al. 2013). However, Gough et al. (2013) argues that identifying patterns in the primary studies can lend greater weight to conclusions. The variation that exists across the career plateau research prevents the use of meta-analysis techniques, but it does not prevent the use of the synthesis methodology.

The next chapter presents the findings of the systematic review study which help advance the understanding of career plateau, as well as informing the second dissertation study.

CHAPTER 4: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW STUDY FINDINGS

Building on the previous section describing the methodology for the systematic review study, this chapter presents the findings of the systematic review with the purpose of advancing the understanding of career plateau in terms of mapping out the extent of the research and its focus, as well as completing a secondary analysis of the research in order to identify the methodological themes used in studies as well as the individual and organizational impacts uncovered in the research. The systematic review study identifies some existing gaps, the limitations of systematic review studies discussed in the previous chapter prevents the drawing of clear conclusions. The findings from the systematic review illustrate (i) a map of career plateau research, and (ii) a synthesis of the key impacts.

Map of Career Plateau Empirical Findings

The map of the research is built to reflect the descriptive features of the body of empirical literature on career plateau. The map is developed from the data contained in the 46 studies appraised into the review. Please note that in the map of the research the total number of studies in each table does not always add up to 46. Not all the studies focus on or cover each of the concepts described in the map tables and the totals in each table reflects the total number of studies that considered or operationalized the concepts specified in the table headings.

Studies of Career Plateau Over Time

The first empirical studies on career plateau were published within three years of Ference et al.'s 1977 study which introduced and established the first definition of the term career plateau as being the point at which the employee considers future advancement is unlikely. Following Ference et al.'s (1977) publication, empirical research has been limited

in terms of the number of publications annually, resulting in a maximum of twelve studies in any decade between 1980 and the present. While the number of studies has been low, the level of publication over the decades has been consistent. There has not been a single five-year span without at least two studies being published.

Empirical Research Publications on Career Plateau by Country

More studies have occurred within the United States of America than any other country with 20 studies accounting for more than 40% of the published studies in the review. Only two other countries, Canada with 6 studies (13 %) and China with 4 studies (9 %), involved more than two studies. Of the 16 other studies, no data from any one country has been included in more than two studies, although three studies did occur in multiple jurisdictions. This geographical disparity may be explained partially by the inclusion only of English sources in the systematic review as other research may have occurred in non-English speaking countries and the resulting publications were not in English.

The meaning of career plateauing may be impacted by culture

The national composition of the study sample is important as the realization that career plateau may impact workers in different cultures in different ways was recognized early in the career plateau research. Carnazza et al. (1981) point out that the opportunity for vertical mobility is seen as crucial for one's psychological health and life satisfaction in the American culture. These authors suggest that there are culturally expected negative patterns of behaviour that occur in response to career plateau in an American context. A few years later, Near (1984) also pointed out that one major incentive offered to managers by American firms is the opportunity for advancement. Near indicates that rapid advancement

may be less important to managers in other cultures such as Japan, while a hierarchical career plateau is a significant event for most American managers.

The authors of studies in non-western countries have noted differences in cultural perceptions of career plateau. Xie, Lu and Zhou (2015) indicate that few studies have analyzed the relationship between plateau and turnover intention in China, which has different economic and social conditions than Western countries. Jung and Tak (2008) indicate Korean employees may not be used to tolerating perceived career plateau and might think that they are being forced to leave their organization and become frustrated more easily than people in other cultures. Hurst et al. (2017) note differences in culture may impact African workers experience of career plateau in comparison to the same experience in other cultures. Even for studies based in Western cultures, the individual study participants may bring different cultural perspectives which impact the generalizability of study findings. For example, Tremblay and Roger (1993) warn that the data collected within Quebec for their study limits generalizing the results to non-French speaking areas even within Canada. Recognizing the importance of cultural differences, Deondra (2013) recommended that future research consider career plateau from a cultural, race or ethnic perspective. Despite this awareness of the potential cultural differences on perceptions of career plateau as well as cultural differences in how career plateau is experienced at an individual level, no study in the review attempted to control for cultural differences.

Journal Source

Table 2.0 shows the journals which have published research on career plateau. There are 26 journals with published studies representing a breadth of academic and research focus. The research areas of focus in the journals appraised into the systematic review

included: 12 studies published in 6 journals with a behavioural or psychological focus; 11 studies published in 6 journals with a management focus; 11 studies published in 5 journals with a human resource focus; 7 studies published in 3 journals with a focus on career; and 4 studies published in 4 journals with a public policy or administration focus with all other types of journals containing only two published studies. While the interest in career plateau is diverse across fields of study, when the time frame of almost five decades of research is considered, a sustained and prolific focus on career plateau has not occurred within any one field of study.

Table 2: Journal Sources

| Journal | Impact Factor* | Total |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|
| Journal of Vocational Behavior | 2.555 | 6 |
| Group and Organization Management | 1.846 | 3 |
| International Journal of Human Resource Management | 2.147 | 3 |
| Journal of Career Development | 1.650 | 3 |
| Journal of Management | 2.608 | 2 |
| Academy of Management Journal | 3.796 | 2 |
| Business Horizons | 2.157 | 2 |
| Career Development Quarterly | 1.180 | 2 |
| Career Development International | 1.038 | 2 |
| International Journal of Manpower | 0.641 | 2 |
| Journal of Human Relations | 3.860 | 2 |
| Journal of Management Studies | 3.962 | 2 |
| Human Resource Management | 1.817 | 2 |
| Journal of Management Development | 1.280 | 1 |
| Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business | - | 1 |
| International Journal of Public Administration | 0.640 | 1 |
| International Journal of Police Strategies and Management | 0.330 | 1 |
| Journal of Applied Social Psychology | 1.231 | 1 |
| Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies | 1.242 | 1 |
| Journal of Organizational Behavior | 3.607 | 1 |
| Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology | 3.139 | 1 |
| Journal of Social Behavior and Personality | 5.920 | 1 |
| Military Psychology | 1.174 | 1 |
| Public Organization Review | 0.090 | 1 |
| Public Personnel Management | 0.591 | 1 |
| Research and Development Management | 2.444 | 1 |

* Five-year average impact factor was used when available

Sector Focus of Career Plateau Empirical Research

An area of importance in terms of understanding, interpreting and generalizing the findings of the career plateau research involves the sector in which the research occurred. Most of the studies (23) occurred within the private sector, representing 51 % of the studies included in the systematic review for which it could be determined which sector was focused on. These studies gathered their data and interpreted their findings entirely within the

private sector context. The next largest sector focus consisted of 9 studies that collected data from a mix of private and public sector organizations which comprised 20% of the studies included in the systematic review. While these studies included data from both the public and private sector, most of these studies gathered the largest portion of their data from the private sector without attempting to control for the sector differences that could impact the findings. Only one of the nine studies (McCleese and Eby 2006) controlled for industry type by dummy coding a variable to distinguish between the public and private organizations within the study. While McCleese and Eby (2006) did not find differences between the sectors in terms of the study outcomes, it is important to note that this was a single study focused only on the moderating impact of role ambiguity on career plateau and the outcome measures of job satisfaction and commitment. Other career plateau researchers (Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrewe 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986) have pointed out that career plateau may be different in the public and private sector. Over 70% of the research involves data taken entirely from the private sector or mostly from the private sector.

The broad public sector category comprised 8 studies and represented 17 % of the total research. Studies sampling teachers, nurses, police, librarians etc. or any groups of employees whose salaries are predominately supported through tax dollars, are included in this category. The category is treated as distinct from the core public sector category within the review for several reasons. The first being the dissertation research focuses on the core civil service. The core civil service for the purposes of the dissertation is defined as those government Ministries and organizations for which an elected official has direct control and accountability. The nurses, police officers, teachers etc. included in the studies of the broad

public sector category operate at a considerable arm's length from elected official control. A second reason to treat these studies distinctly from the core public sector relates to their legislative and organizational structures. Across government, ministry organizations are governed in their relationships with their employees by a shared legislative framework. These provincial organizations also generally take advice from or receive policy direction from specified public agencies such as the Public Service Agency of British Columbia (PSA). While organizational cultures may vary across government agencies, the overall nature and functioning of the organizations are similar. Studies in the broad public service category lack heterogeneity to be grouped with the core public sector studies for the purposes of the dissertation.

Similarly, the military category involving 2 studies or 4% of the studies appraised into the systematic review, is treated distinctly from the other categories. As argued by the authors of these studies (Cheng and Su 2013; Helimen et al. 2008), the military has unique cultural and organizational considerations which make the experience of career plateau very different from other sectors. As pointed out by Helimen et al. (2008), the approach to the provision of pensions in the US military is unlike any other US organization and this difference alone required the authors to consider the plateau experience differently than other studies. Despite being publicly funded, the inclusion of the military studies in the core public sector category would only further exacerbate challenges of heterogeneity.

Treating the core public service as a unique and distinct sector category is consistent with the literature which has identified differences between the sectors (e.g. Dye 1995; Ghobadian et al. 2007; Perry and Wise 1990; Rainey 2003). Furthermore, in relation to career plateau, the public sector is thought to be distinct from the private sector. Nicholson

(1993) has pointed out that elaborate corporate bureaucracies present career system maladies including: neglect of non-fast track staff; restriction of movement due to organizational segmentation; mechanistic movement based on formalistic considerations; and political considerations where performance carries less weight than interpersonal alliances and self-presentation. The maladies described by Nicholson are likely to exist within government as an ideal type of elaborate organizational bureaucracy. The likelihood of experiencing career plateau is also believed to be greater in the public service because of career stability, government downsizing and withdrawal of government services in key areas of the economy (Sylvia and Sylvia 1986; Lemire et al. 1999). These unique pressures leading to career plateau are being faced by public servants who are better educated and more career-oriented than their predecessors (Lemire et al. 1999). Finally, it is important to consider career plateau from a public sector perspective as the ability to take learnings from the private sector career plateau research has been questioned (Sylvia and Sylvia 1986).

There are only 3 studies (Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrewé 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986) in the review, representing 6.5 % of the total number of studies, which are focused on the core public service. Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) completed a survey of 57 mid-level rehab managers in a US state public service agency to examine the effects of career plateauing on attitudes towards career advancement. Rotondo and Perrewé (2000) undertook a survey of a US state-agency water-management plant involving 120 plateaued and 75 non-plateaued managers, technical and operational staff. Lentze and Allen (2009) completed a survey involving 306 state employees (such as engineering managers, planners, and building inspectors) located in the southeastern US to investigate relationships between mentoring others, perceptions of career plateauing, and job attitudes. The small number of

studies focused solely on the core public sector results in a gap in the understanding of career plateau with further research focused on government needed for a better understanding of the nature and impacts of career plateau on government organizations.

Empirical Research of Career Plateau by Position Level

Most of the plateau research that focuses exclusively on one specific level within an organization's hierarchy has focused on the management level, made up of 14 studies representing 30 % of the plateau research. In addition, there have been 16 studies which included management positions within the sample pool, representing 34 % of the plateau research. For these studies focused on multiple position levels, the studies do not control for the position level or analyze the results by considering the specific hierarchical levels of the participants except for Jung and Tak (2008) and Corzine et. al. (1994). Given that the 9 studies involving professionals, such as nurses and police etc. may include participants with management responsibilities, there are only 8 studies or 17 % of the total career plateau research which excluded management representation from the sample base. An over representation of management in the career plateau research results in limited understanding of the causes and impacts of career plateau for non-management employees.

The nine studies focusing on a diverse set of professionals such as teachers, nurses, police, soldiers, accountants etc. are treated as distinct from other categories of workers as these professionals have different duties, obligations and professional standards that are not necessarily shared with non-professionals and could be anticipated to impact their experience of career plateau (e.g. Burke 1989; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Godshalk and Fender 2015; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Neville and Henry 2017). For example, Drucker-Godard et. al.'s (2015) study of scholars in France identified a number of specific

considerations arising from the unique features of the academic work place which are different from those experienced by non-professionals in private or public organizations.

Union members are the most under represented sample of workers in the existing research with no study in the systematic review examining union members specifically. A single career plateau study (Hofstetter and Cohen 2014) does exist which focused exclusively on union members and involved a sample size of only 170 participants but contained methodological issues which resulted in exclusion from the systematic review study. The small union sample size of this study is even more striking when compared to the total of over 30,000 participants from the combined career plateau research data contained in the studies covered in this systematic review. While teachers are often unionized and have been the focus of several studies included in the systematic review, as pointed out above, these professionals have differing work, organizational and professional considerations associated with their careers that other unionized employees may not share. As well, not all teachers are union members. Other studies in the systematic review did not report on or measure the union status of participants, with the exception of those studies focused on management which does not normally include union members. It is possible that several studies screened into the systematic review may have included union members in their sample population but did not explicitly state this, but the actual number of union members represented in the broad career plateau research is unknown.

This lack of union specific research is particularly important for the broader dissertation research for two specific reasons. The first being this dissertation focuses on the public service. Canadian public services are dominated by union members. Given this high proportion of union membership, the career plateau research to date may not adequately

describe the experience and consequences of career plateau in the public service. The second issue of concern when looking to the empirical findings to guide the dissertation research is related to one of the guiding dissertation propositions for the second study, people plateau for different reasons and experience plateauing differently at distinct hierarchical levels. Two of the four hierarchical categories in the second study (clerical/administrative and professional staff) are composed predominantly of unionized employees.

Review Synthesis

The review synthesis takes the evidence provided by the sampled items and identifies and interprets common themes and patterns and integrates these findings to answer the review questions (Gough et al. 2013). For each question, the central themes, insights and arguments that recur throughout the research are presented. There is some overlap between themes, but for the sake of clarity and simplicity they are presented separately.

How is Career Plateau Operationalized

Most of the plateau research has focused on studying both hierarchical and content plateau in the same study involving 22 studies comprising 49% of the plateau research. Hierarchical plateau is the next most commonly studied form of plateau with 16 studies focused on hierarchical plateau comprising 36 % of the studies to date. A smaller number of studies have focused solely on content plateaus (3 studies), hierarchical, content and double plateau (3 studies) as well as one study involving the concepts of hierarchical and professional plateau.

Individual or Organizational Assessment of Career Plateau Status

The assessment of career plateau status has been based on individually reported assessment, organizational assessment or a combination of the two. Most of the research (87%) has relied on individual self-assessments in determining career plateau status. It is important to note that this does not mean the assessment is subjective, an issue that is covered more fully later, but rather that the researchers relied on the individual employee to provide the information used to determine plateau status. For example, an individual participant may be asked to rate the perceived likelihood of their promotion chances in the next five years (a perceptual measure of plateau status) or the study participant may be asked if they have been in the same position for five or more years (an objective measure of plateau status). In either case it is the individual and not the organization that is the data source. This is contrasted with the small number of studies (2) which relied upon the organization to provide the information used to determine career plateau status. Orpen (1983) relied upon personnel records from the organization studied to determine position stability and previous tenure when classifying plateau status while Hall (1985) relied upon department personnel specialists to classify participants as plateaued or non-plateaued.

Four studies representing 9 % of the studies which specified the assessment method used both an individually reported measure and an organizationally reported measure to determine plateau status. In these studies, organizational data was matched with the individual response, usually to verify or improve the accuracy of the determination of plateau status. For example, Slocum et al. (1985; 1987) combined individual assessment of plateau status with supervisors' assessments as a way of avoiding individual bias regarding assessing the likelihood of promotion. Carnazza et al. (1981) indicate that the assessment of

the likelihood of promotion has two dimensions: the source of the assessment (self or organization) and the content of the assessment (likely or not likely). In addition, Carnazza et al. (1981) point out that the assessments between self and organization may or may not be congruent. To address this challenge Carnazza et al. (1981) develop the criteria of 'mutuality', or the congruence between the assessments of the likelihood of promotion between the individual and the organization in order to provide greater certainty regarding this variable. Comparisons between the managers' self-classifications and their superiors' classifications showed only 50% of the classifications matched. While not following as complex an approach as Carnazza et al. (1981), Stout et al. (1988) did check for correlation between the employee's and manager's assessment of future promotions and found less than a 50% correlation between the two responses.

The studies that rely upon a self-reported measure to determine plateau status would be subject to the concerns of any research relying on self-reporting, such as reporting bias, error by participant, etc. (Carnazza et al. 1981; Stout et al. 1988). While those studies relying on organizational determination of plateau status could be subject to reporting bias by other members of the organization providing the assessment of plateau status or errors in systems relied upon in determining plateau status such as errors in file systems with dates of hire. Relying on other members of the organization to determine the plateau status of an individual is potentially more troubling as research has demonstrated that appraisals and assessments of plateaued staff are less likely to be unbiased when compared to assessments of non-plateaued staff (Near 1985; Ettington 1997; Ettington 1998).

Subjective or Objective Measurement of Career Plateau

The most highly debated aspect of career plateau research before the mid 1990's, was the operationalization of plateau status as an objective or subjective variable. Herriot et al. (1993) in exploring the broader research on theories of career suggest one of the major tasks in career theory is to relate objective career data to subjective perceptions of career. Herriot et al. (1993) suggest that subjective perceptions often fail to match the facts in terms of career advancement and future opportunities as many people believe themselves to be behind in terms of advancement when they are not. Herriot et al. (1993) suggest that frequent moves earlier in the career may lead individuals to believe they are behind when later in their career they do not move as much, even though there are fewer opportunities to move about higher in the organization due to the pyramidal structure of organizations. However, perception is still recognized by Herriot et al. (1993) as an important consideration when measuring career advancement despite this challenge.

Researchers who have chosen to objectively measure career plateau have put forward several arguments to support this approach. Arguing that models proposed by career researchers in the broader career literature suggest that career stagnation, and thus possible plateau occur around age 40, Veiga (1981) in a study focused on career plateau only included managers aged 40 or over. In addition to being 40 or over, subjects were considered as plateaued if their tenure in their present position was equal to, or greater than, seven years duration which was twice the average job tenure for participants in the study. Stout et al. (1988) set the objective measurement of plateau as being in the same position for the past five years. The measure was tested against the subjective measure of likelihood of promotion used in the study and compared to the supervisors' assessment of the likelihood

of an employee's promotion. Stout et al. (1988) found statistically significant differences between the plateaued and non-plateaued group which the authors argued supported the five-year time period as an appropriate measure for classifying a subject as plateaued.

Ettington (1998) in choosing to use objective measurement criteria, disagreed with Chao (1990) and Tremblay et al. (1995) that a subjective measure of career plateau is more important than an objective measure as Ettington argued the negative effects of plateau are social as well as psychological. For example, not having access to training may prevent plateaued employees from updating their skills, eventually hurting job performance. Ettington (1998) also suggested that subjective measures of career plateau status may suffer from self-report bias.

An interesting approach taken to the objective versus subjective assessment of career plateau debate was adopted by Nicholson (1993). Nicholson suggests that "agegrade", the relative standing in a status hierarchy relative to perceived or actual norms for one's age group, is better than objective measures such as tenure and subjective perceptual measures. Nicholson confirms this hypothesis with a large private sector sample, however he used job tenure as the objective measure (a measure which other research as discussed below has found wanting) and used his own scale to measure subjective plateau instead of other scales which were available and empirically tested by the time of his study (see Milliman 1991 and Chao 1990). Nicholson's (1993) research suggested age is associated with the measures of objective and subjective career plateau used in his study, but age has been consistently shown to be a separate phenomenon from plateau as will also be shown shortly. The agegrade approach suggested by Nicholson was never used again in the career plateau

research. After the 1990's only Burke and Mikkelsen (2006) determined career plateau status using solely an objective plateau criterion.

Subjective or perceptual measures of career plateau have been the dominate method of classifying career plateau from the mid-1990s. Subjective assessment involves the individual employee perceiving they are at a dead end in terms of learning new job skills and knowledge or having advancement opportunities. Chao (1990) argues that subjective evaluation of future career opportunities emphasizes how the individual perceives, assesses, and reacts to the present work situation. It is this perception and not the eventual reality of the future that impacts attitudes and behaviors. Chao's data showed that the perceptually based measure of career plateau accounts for significantly more variance on outcomes than the job tenure-based measure. Together, age and tenure accounted for less than 5% of the variance in the dependent measures while the addition of the perceptual measure of career plateau into the regression equation resulted in a significant increase in explained variance in all four dependent variables.

Milliman (1992) undertook similar analysis of the explained variance of subjective and objective measures of career plateau on outcomes and found that perceptual measures of career plateauing explain more variance than non-perceptual or objective measures. Tremblay et al. (1995) also found that the explanatory power of the subjective career plateau is significantly greater than that of objective career plateau which could only increase explained variance in the outcome measures by at most 1% compared to 12% of explained variance with perceptual measures of plateau. Chay et al. (1995) adopted a subjective measurement of career plateau as conceptually more consistent with the definition of career plateauing as 'the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical

promotion is low'. Chay et al. (1995) also found that subjective measures were more predictive of outcomes than job tenure. Lee's (2003) research found that together, age and tenure could only account for at most 4 % of the variance in the study's dependent measures. When the perceptual measure of career plateau was included in the analysis it significantly increased the amount of explained variance on all dependent variables.

In addition to the research directly comparing the objective and subjective measurements of plateau status on outcomes, several studies have confirmed that the subjective and objective concepts are independent. Heliminen et al. (2008) found that the perceived measure of career plateau and the calculated measure of career plateau were not significantly related. Drucker et al.'s (2015) research suggests that individual perceptions and real measures of hierarchical success are separate constructs.

Despite the dominance of subjective measurements of career plateau, researchers have argued that there is still an objective and subjective component to career plateau. For example, Tremblay and Roger (1993), Smith-Ruig (2009), and Tremblay et al. (1995) suggest that careers have an objective side (structural and observable component involving excessive time at one level) and a subjective side (personal aspects and meanings associated with being in a plateau). Korman (1980) shows that managers can feel alienated regarding their career, although it is objectively successful. On the other hand, managers may not feel plateaued and be happy with their careers, although they have reached a plateau in that they will never advance again or assume a new role. Nachbagaue and Riedl (2002) suggested that objective measurements of career plateau must be treated as an independent dimension from subjective measurement. The objective aspect of career plateaus is determined by past decisions whereas the subjective dimension is driven by further

expectations at work. Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) tested the subjective hierarchical and content measures of plateau against objective measures and found only a weak but significant correlation with subjective hierarchical and objective plateau measures and no correlation with content and objective plateau.

Even some researchers who have developed and argued for the value of subjective perceptual measurement of career plateau have recognized the value of combining this with other objective measures (i.e. Chao 1990, Milliman 1992). Chao (1990) suggests that time-based considerations of career plateau must be taken into account as the longer the tenure in the same position the more a perceived career plateau can be objectively supported. However, following a review of the existing research and his own study, Lentz (2009) indicates that his findings and the past research taken together are generally supportive of examining career plateauing as a continuous, subjective multidimensional construct.

Objective Measurement Approaches Used in Career Plateau Research

As can be seen in Table 3, there have been several different approaches used to define objective criteria for determining career plateau status. The authors of these studies will usually offer a rationale for selecting the objective criteria used. For example, Ettington (1998) determined that the objective measurement criteria of not having a promotion within the last five years that was used in the study to determine career plateau status was supported by calculating the congruence between the objective and the subjective measures of plateau for different break points plotted on a graph. Congruent respondents were either plateaued or non-plateaued on both measures (objective and subjective) with greatest congruence (67%) occurring when managers were without a promotion after 5 years. Ettington (1998) argued another test of the validity of this break

point was provided by responses to the survey item: “If you have not had a promotion in five or more years, your chances of being promoted again are low.” Response options ranged from 1 (definitely false) to 5 (definitely true). Most respondents (59%) agreed with the statement (rating of 4 or 5), with a greater proportion (68%) of respondents who had not been promoted in more than 5 years in agreement. For all the above reasons, Ettington (1988) was confident in the validity of the objective measure of career plateau being five years in the same position. Despite the different rationales for the objective criteria selected, there is no agreed upon objective measure although the most common objective criteria used in the research involves a five-year time period spent in the same position.

Table 3: Objective Measurement Approaches

| Measurement | Study |
|--|---|
| Ten or more years in same position are plateaued with those under six years being non-plateaued. | Gerpott and Domsch 1987 |
| Seven years or greater in current position and over 40 | Veiga 1981 |
| 15 years or more without promotion as a police constable. | Burke and Mikkelsen 2006 |
| Number of years in position as a continuous variable. | Chao 1990; Allen et al. 1999 |
| Tenure in position longer than average for position and location. | Ettington 1997 |
| 7 years in same position. | Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera 2010 |
| Career plateaued based on age and organizational level. | Evans and Gilbert 1984 |
| 15 years or more in company with 5 plus years in current position. | Hall 1985 |
| Structural objective career plateau computed as tenure above average for position. | Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002 |
| Objective fast track (attained a rank more quickly than expected), median track (attained a rank as expected), or slow track (lagging the average performer) as measured by time in service and rank against published norms. | Helimen et al. 2008 |
| Age 39-45 (concept of midlife crises), tenure greater than seven years in current position, longer in position than previous occupant of position and superior indicates they have not had an increase in responsibilities. | Orpen 1983 |
| Plateau defined as no promotion or lateral job movement in five years. | Ettington 1998; Milliman 1992; Slocum et al. 1987; Tremblay et al. 1995 |
| Plateau defined as no promotion in five years. Supplemented with question to employee and supervisor on promotion probability. Further, as this was a longitudinal study plateau status was determined at time one and time two set three years apart. | Stout, Slocum and Cron 1988 |
| Continuous variable of number of years in position (with five or more years in organization). | Tremblay and Roger 1993; Tremblay and Roger 2004 |
| Job tenure as a continuous variable in years. | Nicholson 1993 |
| Tenure and age as continuous variables. | Lee 2003 |
| Over 30 years of age plus Milliman's (1991) scale | Jung and Tak 2008 |
| Respondents were classified as being plateaued if they estimated that they would not receive a promotion in the next 20 years. | Near 1985 |

Subjective Measurement Scales of Plateau Status

Table 4 illustrates the various study approaches used in research to measure subjective perceptions of career plateau. As can be seen, by far the most common subjective assessment tool used to identify career plateau status is the scale developed by Milliman (1992) as part of his dissertation work. A major goal of Milliman's research was to develop psychometrically sound perceptual measures of hierarchical career plateau and content plateau. To do this Milliman developed 12 questions with six questions focused on hierarchical plateau and six questions focused on content plateau. Each question was measured on a 7-point likert scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Examples of the questions related to hierarchical plateau include: my opportunities for upward movement are limited in my present organization; I expect to be promoted frequently in the future in my company (reverse scored). Examples of the content plateau questions include: I expect to be constantly challenged in my job in the future (reverse scored); My job tasks and activities will become routine for me in the future. Milliman completed internal reliability testing as well as variance explanation power for his scales as part of his regression analysis to establish the statistical validity of his measures. Milliman reported Internal reliabilities, as measured by Cronbach's alpha for hierarchical career plateauing (.90) and job-content plateauing (.87) with test/retest reliabilities for hierarchical career plateauing of .88 for a sample of 49 and .77 for job-content plateauing for 22 respondents taken 4 weeks apart. Several studies (e.g. Allen and Poteet and Russel 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Chay, Aryee and Chew 1995) have subsequently statistically confirmed the reliability of Milliman's scales.

While Table 4 shows that Tremblay and Rogers (1993) subjective operationalization approach to determining plateau status has been used in three separate studies of career plateau, all three of these studies involved Tremblay as the lead researcher. There is no other study in the systematic review that opted to use this scale. Tremblay and Rogers (1993) operationalize the subjective career plateau variable through two questions: do you think that you have been on your level for much too long?; and I occupy a dead-end position. As can be seen the structure of these questions create a dichotomous career plateau status variable as no scale for measuring the response was used. Managers who answered yes to both questions were said to be plateaued, managers who answered no to one or both questions were categorized as non-plateaued.

Chao's (1990) approach is the only other operationalization method used in more than one study in the systematic review. Like Tremblay and Rogers (1993), Chao used a two-item measurement tool for career plateau (in Chao's case hierarchical plateau was being examined). The first item asked: do you believe your promotion opportunities have been limited in your organization? with responses being rated on a 5-point likert scale ranging from not limited at all to limited to a great extent. The second item Chao used was modified from Smith's (1976) career future scale of the Index of Organizational Reactions and used a 5-point scale indicating agreement with a statement that the respondent is not getting ahead in the organization.

Other scales used to measure subjective career plateau tend to involve single-item ratings on the likelihood of future promotions. For example, Stout et al. (1988) determined career plateau status among salespeople by asking, are you likely to be promoted within the next five years? Responses were measured on a 7-point likert scale where 1 corresponded to

very unlikely and 7 corresponded to very likely. Milliman's (1992) scale has been empirically tested and replicated more than any other career plateau subjective measurement approach and is therefore an appropriate method of measuring career plateau status.

Table 4: Subjective Measurement Scales

| Scale | Total | Percentage | Study |
|--|-------|------------|--|
| Milliman 1992 (similar or derivative) | 22 | 61 % | Allen and Poteet 1998; Allen et al. 1999; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Drucker-Godard et al. 2015; Cheng and Su 2013; Ettington 1997; Ettington 1998; Godshalk and Fender 2015; Helimen et al. 2008; Hurst et al. 2017; Jiang 2016; Jung and Tak 2008; Lapalme et al. 2009; Lentz 2009; McCleese et al. 2007; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Wang et al. 2014; Wen and Liu 2015; Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera 2010; Xie et al. 2015; Xie et al. 2016 |
| Tremblay 1993 | 3 | 8 % | Tremblay and Roger 1993; Tremblay et al. 1995; Tremblay and Roger 2004 |
| Chao 1990 | 3 | 8 % | Chao 1990; Lee 2003; Lemire et al. 1999 |
| Corzine 1992 | 1 | 3 % | Corzine et al. 1994 |
| Nachbagauer 2002 | 1 | 3 % | Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002 |
| Carnazza 1981 | 1 | 3 % | Carnazza et al. 1981 |
| Chay 1995 | 1 | 3 % | Chay et al. 1995 |
| Rotondo 2000 | 1 | 3 % | Rotondo and Perrew 2000 |
| Sylvia 1986 | 1 | 3 % | Sylvia and Sylvia 1986 |
| Unclear | 2 | 6 % | Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Ettington 1997 |

Dichotomous or Continuous Career Plateau Measurement

Studies have treated the career plateau variable as a dichotomous variable (plateaued or non-plateaued) or a continuous variable (some scale measuring the level of plateau, that of being more or less plateaued). Most studies (61%) use a continuous measure of plateau status with 8 (22%) studies treating the plateau variable as dichotomous while 6 (17%) studies used both a continuous measure and dichotomous measure of plateau status within the same study. The studies that use both a continuous and dichotomous approach to measuring plateau status will usually measure hierarchical plateau as a dichotomous variable and content plateau as a continuous variable.

As pointed out by Chao (1990), one challenge with treating career plateau as a dichotomous outcome is that an employee is either plateaued or non-plateaued with no consideration of the possibility that perceptions of plateau status are likely to occur on a continuum. Chao suggests that treating people with 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25 years of job tenure as a homogeneous "plateaued" group may confound results regarding the impacts of plateau as these outcomes may be affected by the extent to which the individual perceives a plateau and the duration of the plateau. Chao also points out that perceptions of plateau status may occur over time and not be single defining moments. Tremblay and Roger (1993) raise similar concerns in terms of the dichotomous and continuous approach to plateau status. Understanding the implications of plateau and the responses to plateau will likely be enhanced if a more detailed understanding of the phenomena is developed using a continuum approach.

Age and Tenure Associated with Career Plateau

Five researchers have found that older workers are more likely to be plateaued (Corzine et. al. 1994; Near 1984; Jung and Tak 2008; Nicholson 1993; Savery and Wingham 1991). However, the relationship between age and plateau is complex. Some studies that point to age and tenure as being significantly associated with career plateau do not explore the concepts independently to examine the differences in explained variance on an outcome measure. For example, Near (1984) in reporting significant differences in age between plateaued and non-plateaued managers did not attempt to account for interactions among these variables when completing a regression analysis. While Evans and Gilbert (1984) found that the negative impacts associated with career plateau were caused by the age variable in their study, they felt the lack of significant findings in terms of career plateau

separate from age had more to do with their sampling technique than an indication that plateau and age were the same concept.

Other studies explore the relationship between age/tenure and career plateau in greater detail. For example, Jung and Tak (2008) found that perceived career plateau was significantly related to age using correlational analysis. Corzine et. al. (1994) indicated that older workers are more likely to career plateau by demonstrating the relationship using Pearson product-moment correlations and latter entering age into the analysis as a covariate. These studies tend to treat age as a covariate that is possibly predictive of the impact on the dependent variable (usually a variable considered to be impacted by career plateau such as work satisfaction) or age may be analyzed as a confounding or interacting variable used in a regression analysis procedure.

Reviewing studies that consider the relationship between age and plateau in a more rigorous fashion reveals more consistent findings. Tremblay and Roger (1993) analyzed the relationship between age and objective and subjective career plateau and found it was relatively weak. Orpen (1983) also found no significant relationship between age and plateau. In a later study, Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse (1995) found that career plateau is responsible for several consequences even after controlling for age, despite subjective plateau being positively correlated to age. Similarly, Stout, Slocum and Cron (1988) found that age and tenure were covariates with plateau but neither variable having a significant impact on outcome results even though plateau status did. Helimien et al. (2008) found that career plateaus explained unique variation in turnover intentions after considering job satisfaction, turnover intentions, job search behavior, and several demographic characteristics, including age. Chao's (1990) research showed that together age and tenure

accounted for less than 5% of the variance in the dependent measures while the addition of the perceptual measure of career plateau into the regression equation resulted in a significant increase in explained variance. Milliman (1992) also found that career plateau explained significantly more of the variance in outcome variables than did job tenure. Gerpott and Domsch (1987) found that the plateaued hierarchical and content, and non-plateaued participants in their study differed significantly in terms of work behaviours and attitudes after controlling for age. Chay, Aryee and Chew (1995), Ettington (1998) and Hall (1985) all found that the concepts of age and plateau are distinct. Plateaued workers may indeed be older and have longer tenure than non-plateaued workers, but the research indicates it is not age or tenure but career plateau status that is more predictive of the outcomes studied.

Synthesis of Research Methodological Themes

There are two predominate themes that arise from the synthesis of the methodological approaches used to study career plateau. Theme 1: Empirical evidence from the research suggests a specific research approach to career plateau, and Theme 2: Research is Heavily Focused on the Private Sector and Management.

Theme 1: Empirically Based Research Approach to Career Plateau

The most salient aspect of career plateau is the lack of consensus on how the concept is defined and operationalized, however there are dominate patterns supported by significant empirical evidence. Researchers have adopted very different approaches to the treatment of career plateau as a variable of interest including differences in how plateau is conceived (hierarchical or content etc.) and operationalized (objective or subjective etc.). While often (though not always) researchers will provide a rational or some evidence for why they select the approach they do, none of the studies reviewed completed a rigours synthesis of the

research to date to explain the approach used in the study. Empirical evidence from the research suggests specific approaches to career plateau conceptualization and operationalization when undertaking further research as follows:

In terms of the type of plateau, there is no empirical based rationale to choose to study hierarchical plateau over content plateau. As pointed out by several researchers (e.g. Allen et al. 1999 and Milliman 1992), hierarchical and content plateau are distinct concepts that can both benefit from further research and exploration as the total number of studies is not so great as to suggest that further study of either type of plateau is unwarranted.

The career plateau research is clear in terms of selecting the individual over the organization in terms of who should provide the information used to assess career plateau status. Only two studies (Hall 1985 and Orpen 1983) relied entirely upon information provided by the organization when attempting to classify a participant as being career plateaued. Both studies occurred within the first five years of the start of the career plateau research and all future studies relied on information provided by the individual, sometimes supplemented by information provided by the organization. Near (1985) and Ettington (1997) have pointed out some of the challenges of relying on organizational assessments related to career plateaued employees. Although self-report measures have been shown to have limitations such as common method variance bias (see for example Allen, Poteet and Russell 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006) most of the research undertaken attempts to control for the risk of common method variance statistically (see Allen, et al. 1999). Over all the research in the field of career plateau has demonstrated that reliance upon self-reporting measures is an appropriate approach. This can be

supplemented with an organizational assessment if desired and the researcher has the wherewithal.

The methodological approach for determining career plateau status is broken into two broad categories, subjective and objective as discussed previously. While the research on career plateau has not been consistent in its use of objective or subjective measurements of career plateau, the overall research suggests that subjective measures explain and predict more variance in outcomes (see Chao 1990; Milliman 1992; Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse 1995; Helimen et al. 2008). A perceptual measure of career plateau status is an appropriate approach to classifying a participant as being career plateaued. The subjective measure can potentially be bolstered with an objective measure should the researcher have the means and interest in doing so. There are several 'objective' measurement approaches that could be used, and the empirical evidence does not strongly favour one approach over another, however, taking into account the job setting is likely to result in an objective measure more relevant to the specific study. For example, if research is being undertaken in an organization with average tenure being a decade or more with limited job mobility, perceptions of career plateau are less likely to occur after a few years tenure than might be the case in an organization wherein people change positions every few years.

Career plateau status has been treated as an all or nothing variable (dichotomous) as well as a continuous variable (scale measuring the state or amount of career plateau being experienced). While most studies have operationalized career plateau as a scale measurement, either alone or in combination with a dichotomous measure of career plateau status, the evidence is less clear regarding this treatment of the career plateau variable than it is in regard to individual and subjective assessments. Dichotomous measurement tends to

be combined with an ‘objective’ measure of career plateau status, while continuous measurement tends to be combined with subjective/perceptual measures of career plateau. With only a few exceptions (see Chao 1990) most of the research has not focused on determining the relative strengths of dichotomous versus continuous operationalization of plateau status. However, given the link between subjective plateau measurement (which is generally superior to objective measurement) and the operationalization of career plateau as a continuous variable in most studies using a subjective measurement approach, research using a subjective continuous measurement of career plateau has the greatest empirical support. Milliman’s (1992) subjective scale to measure career plateau has been used the most and has been found to be a reliable measure of plateau status.

To summarize, the empirical findings suggest the following approach to career plateau research is most appropriate:

- Hierarchical and content plateau are unique phenomena which can be studied alone, together or in combination with other measures of plateau such as “double” plateau.
- Individual assessment of plateau status is an appropriate approach to determining career plateau status.
- Subjective criteria for determining career plateau status offers a better approach than objective criterion.
- Continuous measurement of career plateau status is superior to treating career plateau as a dichotomous variable.
- Milliman’s (1992) scale has been subject to the greatest amount of empirical testing.

Theme 2: Research is Heavily Focused on the Private Sector and Management

Career plateau research has been focused on the private sector and at the management level. Over 70% of the total research base involves samples drawn exclusively from the private sector or in combination with other sectors of the economy. Most of the research that combines a sample from the private sector with another sector involves greater representation from the private sector in the total sample for the individual study. Very few studies control for the sector representation in the study sample but treat the entire sample as heterogeneous. The findings of the career plateau research over all are therefore more representative of how career plateau manifests in the private sector. Applying these findings to other sectors must be done with caution, as the literature has identified several differences between the sectors (e.g. Dye 1995; Ghobadian et al. 2007; Perry and Wise 1990; Rainey 2003). With only three studies within the research base made up of sample populations from the core public service and given the differences in the public service experience of career plateau noted by several researchers (Sylvia and Sylvia 1986; Lemire et al. 1999), our understanding of career plateau within the public service is limited. It is possible that the experience of career plateau may not be found to be greatly different inside or outside of the private sector. However more research is required outside of the private sector before we will understand what the differences are, if any.

A similar situation exists in terms of the focus on management positions. With only 17 % the career plateau research to date involving samples without management representation, the impacts of career plateau outside of the management ranks are clearly under researched. The research focus is especially limited in terms of union members experience of career plateau. With most of the research focused on managers, the needs of non-managers in relation to career plateau are not empirically understood and suggestions

for action must be considered recognizing this is the situation. Developing programs and responses to career plateau based on the existing research that will be applied in the most part to those who are not managers may not be the best use of organizational resources. A focus on the non-management experience of career plateauing is required to close a gap in the existing research.

Career Plateau Impacts

Impacts on Individuals

As can be seen in Table 5, there have been 37 studies in the systematic review that explore the impacts of career plateau on the individual. While this systematic review reveals consistencies in the findings of the impacts of career plateau on the individual, some of the differences in findings that do exist may be explained by the diversity of concepts and measurements used in the studies of career plateau (see Appendix D). Because of the variety involved in the research approaches, we cannot be sure that differences in findings related to the impacts of career plateau are not due in part to the differences in the tools and measurement scales used, let alone differences in the samples involved in the individual study populations.

Table 5: Career Plateau Impacts on Individuals

| Findings | Total | Percentage | Study |
|------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--|
| Predominantly negative | 27 | 73 % | Allen et al. 1998; Allen et al. 1999; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chay et al. 1995; Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Ettington 1997; Ettington 1998; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Helimen at al. 2008; Hurst et al. 2017; Jung and Tak 2008; Lapalme et al. 2009; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; Lee 2003; McCleese et al. 2007; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Orpen 1983; Stout et al. 1988; Tremblay et al. 1995; Wang et al. 2014; Wen and Liu 2015; Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015; Xie, Xin and Bai 2016 |
| Mixed impacts | 8 | 22 % | Carnazza et al. 1981; Godshalk and Fender 2015; Hall 1985; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Near 1985; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986; Veiga 1981; Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015 |
| Predominantly positive | 0 | 0% | |
| No differences | 2 | 5 % | Evans and Gilbert 1984; Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera 2010 |

Despite the challenges associated with so many different approaches, Table 5, reveals that out of the 37 studies in the systematic review that examined the impacts of career plateau on the individual as measured on various outcomes, such as job satisfaction, 27 of the studies or fully 73 % of the research found predominately negative impacts associated with career plateau. A further 8 studies (22%) had results that were mixed, that is the data revealed some negative, positive and non-significant impacts from career plateau within the same study. In combination, 95% of the research uncovered at least some negative impacts associated with career plateau. In addition, there were 2 studies that found no differences on the outcomes measured between plateaued and non-plateaued participants. There was not a single study that found only positive impacts for the individual who is career plateaued. This finding is important because it indicates there is no empirical

evidence to suggest that career plateau is a strictly positive phenomenon in terms of the impacts on the individual employee. At the very least there are risks of negative outcomes associated with career plateau.

Completing a detailed analysis of the data measuring the impacts of career plateau, it is possible to identify consistent differences across several outcomes as identified in Table 6. One means of synthesising the research is to consider the consistency in findings. The greatest consistency is demonstrated when several studies find the same result in the absence of any study finding a contradictory result involving the same outcome measure. It is important to note that Table 6 only includes those outcome measures that have been tested by more than three studies as it was felt that research which has not been replicated in multiple studies must be viewed with greater caution.

Career plateau is associated with decreased commitment to the job or organization as demonstrated in 12 studies. Every study that analyzed the impact of career plateau on commitment found a negative association. As there has not been a single study which failed to find an impact from career plateau on decreased commitment and the results have been replicated across sectors, over time and using different methods to operationalize the dependent variable, being career plateaued appears to decrease the individual employees' commitment. It is important to note that this conclusion, as all other conclusions in this section of the systematic review, is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the research which can not determine cause and effect and the limitation that systematic reviews are used in studies when other meta analysis techniques can not be used (Gough et al. 2013). Despite this limitation the data indicates there is a clear correlation between plateau status and commitment.

Decreased perceived support was found to be associated with career plateau in six studies, again with no study that explored this outcome finding a contrary result. It is likely that being career plateaued is associated with decreased perceptions of support from management or supervisors. However, as the number of studies analyzing the specific outcome declines, the level of confidence in the results due to a lack of replicating studies also declines. Four studies indicate that career plateau leads to increased stress without any study finding a contrary result. These results are certainly suggestive of an impact of career plateau on stress, but similar research findings would strengthen the confidence in the association.

Job/work satisfaction is the outcome measure most frequently studied in the career plateau literature with 25 studies analyzing this outcome. Career plateau was associated with decreased satisfaction with work or the organization in 21 of the studies. Therefore, while 84 % of the research exploring satisfaction found negative outcomes associated with career plateau, contrary findings do exist. Evans and Gilbert (1984) found no differences with job satisfaction (with the exception of decreased satisfaction with pay among those participants who were career plateaued) between plateaued and non-plateaued managers, however, the authors state that the lack of significant results is very likely the consequence of the classification procedures of their study as career plateau confounding with age in the study left little variance for the plateauing concept which was entered into the regression modeling following age. Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera's (2010) study examined IT professionals working in Sri Lanka finding no impact on work satisfaction from being career plateaued. However, the researchers noted that the IT professionals in their study operated

within a unique job and geographical environment. The generalizability to other settings according to the researchers is unclear.

Godshalk and Fender (2015) found that the impacts of career plateau on satisfaction depended on why the participant was plateaued. For example, people who plateau by choice, that is they chose not to move up in the organization, do not show the same decreases in satisfaction as those who want to move up but can't or don't have the opportunity. In this case career plateau is associated with decreased satisfaction under specific circumstances. Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) found that dissatisfied plateaued managers indicate their career does not provide them the advancement opportunities they want while those managers who were less dissatisfied are less concerned with advancement, placing greater importance on intrinsic rewards such as social relationships at work. Advancement as a necessity for job satisfaction was only evidenced in a handful of responses. The findings of Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) and Godshalk and Fender (2015) indicate that the specific characteristics of the plateaued employee likely moderate the effect of plateau on satisfaction. Given the specific limitations of both studies that failed to find differences in satisfaction between plateaued and none plateaued employees, and the large number of studies that found differences, the empirical evidence suggests that experiencing a career plateau will decrease satisfaction.

Increased intention to turn over was found to be associated with career plateau in 15 studies in the systematic review with only one study failing to find the same consistency in terms of results. Xie, Lu and Zhou (2015) found hierarchical plateau was positively related to turnover intention but the moderating variable of effective commitment fully mediated the relationship between hierarchical plateau and turnover intention. In other words, those who

have a high level of effective commitment will not be more likely to leave their position even if they are career plateaued. However, those who do not have a high level of effective commitment will be more likely to leave their position if they are career plateaued. As with the findings on job satisfaction, Godshalk and Fender (2015) did find intention to turnover to be associated with career plateau, but the reasons for career plateauing mitigated the impact of career plateau on turnover intentions. People who plateau by choice do not show the same increased intention to turn over as those who are not plateaued by choice. Intention to turnover is clearly related to career plateau status although specific individual characteristics may moderate the relationship.

Psychological distress/depression/alienation was found to be associated with career plateau in three separate studies. However, Burke and Mikkelsen (2006) did not find psychological distress as an outcome of career plateau amongst their sample, though they did find increased stress. The three studies that found a positive association between career plateau and the psychological outcomes all used a subjective measure of career plateau while Burke and Mikkelsen (2006) used an objective measure of career plateau. This was the only consistent difference in the treatment of the variables between the studies as the studies did not share common sector or hierarchical focuses etc. It is possible the differences in findings are due to the treatment of the career plateau variable as a subjective measure versus an objective measure; however, with such a small number of studies examining this outcome no conclusions are possible.

In terms of performance and career plateau, five studies have failed to find an association with decreased performance and plateau status while six studies found an impact on performance. It is possible that these findings reflect the differences between those who

successfully career plateau, the ‘solid citizens versus the unsuccessfully plateaued ‘deadwood’. As suggested by Ference et al. (1977) most employees in any organization are the solid citizens. It is possible that the larger number of successfully plateaued employees is mitigating the performance impacts of those who are not successfully plateaued. The empirical evidence does not support the contention that career plateau impacts the performance of the individual employee.

Table 6: Impacts of Career Plateau Measured in Multiple Studies

| Outcome | Positive finding | No reported impact |
|---|--|---|
| Decreased Satisfaction | Allen et al. 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chao 1990; Chay et al. 1995; Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Ettington 1997 and 98; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Helimen at al. 2008; Hurst et al. 2017; Jung and Tak 2008; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lee 2003; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Near 1985; Orpen 1983; Tremblay et al. 1995; Veiga 1981 | Evans and Gilbert 1984; Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera 2010; Sylvia and Sylvia 1979*; Godshalk and Fender 2015* |
| Increased Intention to Turn Over | Allen et al. 1998; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Helimen at al. 2008; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; Lee 2003; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Orpen 1983; Stout et al. 1988; Tremblay et al. 1995; Wang et al. 2014; Wen and Liu 2015; Xie, Xin and Bai 2016 | Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015; Godshalk and Fender 2015* |
| Decreased Commitment | Allen et al. 1998; Chay et al. 1995; Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Helimen at al. 2008; Jung and Tak 2008; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Stout et al. 1988; Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015 | |
| Decreased Performance | Allen et al. 1998; Chay et al. 1995; Ettington 1997 and 98; Lemire et al. 1999; Milliman 1992 | Chay et al. 1995; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Near 1985; Stout et al. 1988; Carnazza et al. 1981 |
| Increased Stress | Allen et al. 1998; Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; McCleese et al. 2007 | |
| Decreased Perceived Support | Allen et al. 1999; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Lapalme et al. 2009; Milliman 1992; Near 1985 | |
| Psychological Distress | Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese et al. 2007; Wang et al. 2014 | Burke and Mikkelsen 2006 |

* Godshalk and Fender (2015) and Sylvia and Sylvia (1979) found an impact under specific conditions as discussed.

Effects of career plateau on organizations

No study in the systematic review empirically measured the impacts of career plateau on organizations (i.e. a performance comparison between organizations with high numbers of career plateaued employees and low numbers of career plateaued employees was not completed). Several studies discuss from a theoretical perspective the potential impacts of career plateau on organizations but do not empirically test these impacts. For example, in regards to the finding that career plateau is linked to intention to job turnover, Heliminen et al. (2008) suggest that organizational effectiveness declines when people turn over for three reasons: the organization loses the knowledge of departing employees; time, money, and resources are required to recruit and select replacements; and time, money and resources are required to train the replacements. A decline in the effectiveness of the new employee would have to be anticipated while the new employee is brought up to speed. If a significant number of positions are subject to this turn over lag in performance, the effectiveness of the organization could reasonably be anticipated to decline. Although not specifically dealing with career plateau or being included in this systematic review, Hausknecht and Trevor (2011) found that employee turnover and negative impacts on organizational performance outcomes are widely documented in the literature and empirically supported by research. Thus, it is likely that when employees leave an organization because of being career plateaued, the organizational performance may suffer, even though the empirical evidence in the career plateau research does not exist to support this claim.

While several other researchers (e.g. Rotondo and Perrewé 2000; Slocum et al. 1985; Stout et al. 1988) also raise the issue of decreased organizational effectiveness based on the potential for decreased performance by plateaued employees, as stated prior, this claim is not supported by the empirical evidence of the impacts of career plateau on individual

employees. However, Gerpott and Domsch (1987) did find that career plateaued employees work fewer hours, a finding shared by Near (1985) who also found that career plateau was associated with increased absenteeism. Employees working less and being absent more because of career plateau could potentially impact organizational effectiveness, but again this is not tested empirically in the career plateau literature.

Connor (2013) developed a set of propositions for a model of the impacts of career plateau on organizations. The basis for the development of the propositions involved a focus on the impacts on organizational climate from an influential employee who is career plateaued. Connor suggests that the career plateaued individual's productivity declines (a contention that doesn't appear to be supported by the findings of this systematic review) while behaviours such as absenteeism increase, which can affect the attitudes and behaviours of other group members. The more interaction that occurs between other employees and the career plateaued employee, the greater the likelihood other employees will notice the negative behaviours. If these employees identify more with the individual who is career plateaued rather than the organization itself, the greater the likelihood that their own behaviours will be modified in a negative fashion (Connor 2013). To counter the potential negative impacts of a career plateaued individual, Connor proposes the organizational socialization process should promote an environment where career progress, performance expectations and role expectations are clear. Connor (2013) indicates the effectiveness of the socialization process is a counter measure to the negativity of an influential career plateaued employee but this is modified by the individual characteristics of the non-plateaued employees. Connor also proposes that a passive response by a career

plateaued employee has less of an impact on the organizational culture than an active response aimed at undermining the organization.

Although it was assessed and excluded from the systematic review as career plateau was not central to the research, a study by Rosen and Jerdee (1990) gathered data from human resource managers and did attempt to measure the impacts of career plateau and other variables on organizational effectiveness. Survey participants indicated plateauing and skills obsolescence lead to clogging promotion channels, lowering morale and hurting productivity. However, these consequences identified by HR managers were not tested against the actual performance of the organizations that the HR managers belonged to, so it is uncertain if the organizational productivity decline is real. While these studies are useful in suggesting theoretically how organizational effectiveness may be impacted by career plateau, the lack of empirical evidence represents a limitation in the career plateau research.

Synthesis of Career Plateau Impacts

There are two themes that arise from the synthesis of the research findings on the impacts of career plateau. Theme 1: Negative individual outcomes are associated with career plateau, and Theme 2: Increased consistency in the approach to measuring the impacts of career plateau are required if a better understanding is to be arrived at.

Theme 1: Negative Individual Outcomes and Career Plateau

The research establishes the link between career plateau and negative outcomes across several measures. There are inconsistent findings especially with outcomes that have only been measured by a few studies or a single study. Outcome measures by studies which have not been replicated must be considered as tentative findings. This is especially the case given that outcome measures that have been measured across a larger number of studies

show increasingly consistent results. Regardless, career plateau has consistently been linked to:

- Decreased commitment
- Decreased satisfaction
- Increased intention to turnover
- Decreased perceived support
- Increased stress

The empirical evidence does not support the contention that career plateau impacts the performance of the individual employee. Additionally, there have not been enough studies completed regarding the impact of career plateau on some outcome measures, such as pay satisfaction, to have confidence regarding findings to date.

It appears to be the case that not all career plateau outcomes are negative, especially given the moderating influence of individual personality characteristics on the outcomes of career plateau that have been identified by researchers such as Godshalk and Fender (2015) and Sylvia and Sylvia (1979). Regardless, there has been no study that has shown the impacts of career plateau are only positive. Research over all suggests there is value in studying and exploring ways in which the negative outcomes of career plateau can be mitigated.

Theme 2: Increased Consistency in Measuring Impacts is Required

With so many different outcome concepts in the career plateau research, and so many ways to operationalize the concepts, the accumulation of knowledge to increase the understanding of career plateau would benefit from greater conceptual consistency.

Findings are not being replicated and the accumulation of evidence is impacted by each

researcher choosing to study new outcome variables and/or operationalizing the outcome measure in a way that is different from existing research. This limitation can be especially troubling to an organization which must prioritize the use of resources and money invested in organizational improvement.

As indicated previously, a more consistent approach to the study of career plateau may never occur given the diversity of academic fields engaged in career plateau research. Management studies and public policy studies will not come together to develop consistent approaches and measurements for analyzing career plateau. The likely best-case scenario is simply to have empirically based research knowledge accumulate over time which may then be utilized by organizations in their attempts to address career plateau. However, the accumulation of data does provide some general direction to increasing the effectiveness of further research on career plateau. The increased reliance on subjective measurement of career plateau status since the mid 1990's and the accumulated statistical testing and verification of these measures as an appropriate approach to studying career plateau is a case in point and provides hope for the future.

Responses to Career Plateau

Individual Actions in Response to Career Plateau

41 studies in the systematic review have included recommended actions to be taken in response to career plateau. Responses to career plateau can be categorized into two overarching categories. Individually actions involve those actions that the individual can take to respond to being career plateaued or to avoid a career plateau. Organizational actions are the management activities, cultural practices or programs etc. that can be put in place by the organization in response to career plateau amongst employees. The

recommended actions also can be further sub divided based upon which type of career plateau is the focus of the recommendation for action such as content, hierarchical or double plateau. The following tables and discussion are organized within these two broad categories and the type of plateau is also considered within the tables.

Most of these recommendations identified by researchers are developed from deductively applying the findings of the study in terms of the impacts of career plateau on the individual or organization, to the recommended actions that can be taken by the individual or organization. For example, Drucker-Godard et. al. (2015) in finding that career plateau is linked with decreased satisfaction amongst university professors, recommended that universities promote mobility and facilitate movement between universities in addition to other actions. The rationale for proposing increased mobility is that professors will increase their levels of satisfaction as they face new challenges. Drucker-Godard et. al. (2015) did not gather data to measure the effectiveness of increased mobility on satisfaction for those who were career plateaued by comparing the impacts of increased mobility on satisfaction outcomes. However, the recommendation can logically be deduced and there is an intuitive validity in terms of an organizational response to career plateau.

Other studies are more rigorous in that they empirically explore the responses to career plateau. For example, Rotondo and Perrew (2000) examined the relationships between coping responses and organizational outcomes for career-plateaued and non-plateaued employees. Coping as used in this study refers to efforts directed at reducing or eliminating stress which can be divided into problem-focused coping (directly addressing the source of stress) and emotion focused coping (dealing with the emotions created by stress). Problem-focused strategies mentioned by the researchers related to plateauing

include lateral transfers, new job assignments or duties, serving as a mentor, becoming a technical expert, and working on special projects or teams. Emotion focused coping includes seeking social support and reappraisal (re-evaluating career situation and placing less importance on promotion). Positive responses included such actions as lateral transfers and mentoring while negative responses include actions such as blaming the organization and lowering work quality. The positive activities were associated with more positive attitudes and higher perceived performance among plateaued employees. Negative behavioral responses, such as lowering the quality or quantity of work, psychological withdrawal and lateral transfers, were associated with lower attitudes among both groups of employees and lower perceived performance among plateaued employees. Based on these findings Rotondo and Perrewe (2000) recommend organizations should focus on supporting positive coping responses.

In Table 7 it can be noted that there are three distinct types of individual responses to career plateau recommended in the research. The first involves *internal thinking* the individual needs to take to respond to a career plateau. These actions include such things as having a strong personal responsibility for improving job satisfaction; focusing energies into activities outside of work; adopting a tolerance of ambiguity and flexibility; improving mental coping strategies and lowering expectations (e.g. Allen et al. 1999; Chao 1990; Duffy 2000; McCleese et al. 2007 and Milliman 1992). These responses require a change in the thinking of the individual in order to decrease the impacts of being career plateaued. These actions do nothing to address the career plateau itself. The actions are premised on assisting the employee to feel better about the situation they find themselves in. While lowering expectations or focusing on life outside of work doesn't improve the job, the employee

might avoid the negative stress and decreased psychological wellbeing associated with being career plateaued. Changing thought patterns is part of the cognitive behavioural therapy approach to mental health with a long history of clinical use where its effectiveness has been well established (Burns 1999).

The next set of actions involves *doing things differently at work* such as: mentoring; requesting transfers to new positions; clarifying job objectives, responsibilities, and expectations; having an individual career and development plan; and working with the direct supervisor while also increasing visibility, reputation and networking (e.g. Allen et al. 1999; McCleese and Eby 2006; McCleese et al. 2007; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Near 1985; Stout, Slocum and Cron 1988). These actions directly address the career plateau situation and engage the individual in trying to find solutions within the work environment. Some of the actions, such as mentoring, can lead to new areas of fulfilment that benefit both the individual and the organization (Stout, Slocum and Cron 1988). While the base position may not change, the work environment is modified and the employee becomes more engaged, thus avoiding the common finding of decreased work commitment associated with career plateau (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Chay et al. 1995; Drucker-Godard et al. 2015; Helimen et al. 2008). Actions such as increasing visibility and gaining supervisors support may result in the employee gaining a new promotion and thus getting out of their plateau situation. These actions deal directly with the plateau situation to change it, be it content, hierarchical or double plateau, rather than just accepting the situation and learning to live with it.

The final set of actions focuses on *avoiding career plateau* altogether such as: not moving frequently during the early career; and changing organizations to avoid plateau (e.g.

McCleese et al. 2007; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Orpen 1983; Near 1985). These actions are proactive in nature and may allow an individual to avoid or delay the onset of career plateau. However, as previously discussed, hierarchical plateau is an almost inevitable career event so these actions will most likely be effective in avoiding content plateau and perhaps delaying the onset of hierarchical plateau. In addition to the individual actions to be taken, organizational responses to career plateau are covered more extensively in the career plateau research and are explored next.

Table 7: Individual Actions in Response to Career Plateau

| Study | Action |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Allen et al. 1999 | A learning and development orientation will help individuals avoid plateauing. Career planning and exploration activities can be especially important when facing hierarchical plateau. |
| Chao 1990 | Lowered expectations and less stress full work can decrease negative outcomes of hierarchical plateau. |
| Duffy 2000 | Maintain a tolerance of ambiguity, flexibility and appreciation of novel responses to adapt to hierarchical and content plateau. |
| McCleese and Eby 2006 | Individuals experiencing role ambiguity combined with content plateau should proactively clarify job objectives, responsibilities, and expectations. |
| McCleese et al. 2007 | Individuals facing plateau were found to be using 27 distinct coping strategies representing 7 coping meta-themes. The most frequently occurring meta-themes were: discuss problem, job withdrawal, and mental coping. Hierarchically plateaued employees reported slightly greater use of mental coping strategies than job content and double plateaued employees. |
| Milliman 1992 | Solutions to career plateau must be specific to the nature of the organization and individual and not be attempted to apply universally. The individual employee's motivation in relation to proposed interventions must be considered. The individual's career stage will impact the benefits derived from content and enrichment strategies. The individual's perceived competence or other characteristics will impact their ability to respond to intervention. |
| Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002 | Plateaued employees should consider changing organizations as well as having an individual career and development plan. They should work with their direct supervisor while also increasing their visibility, reputation and networking opportunities. |
| Near 1985 | Managers should pursue higher education to avoid plateau. Managers should seek out supportive supervisors or focusing work efforts on gaining supervisor support. |
| Orpen 1983 | To avoid plateau in mid-career, managers should not change jobs rapidly early in their careers. |
| Stout, Slocum and Cron 1988 | Plateaued sales people should consider being mentors, making presentations at sales meetings, and getting involved in sales training. |

Organizational Actions in Response to Career Plateau

As can be seen in Tables 8, 9, 10, and 11 there are several common themes when recommending organizational action to address the potential negative impacts of career plateau. Organizational actions in response to career plateau can be categorized into three

distinct types of action: those *actions that address plateau* directly by trying to change the plateau state, such as offering job enrichment programs to address content plateau; *actions which mitigate the negative impacts* of career plateau such as mentoring programs to keep plateaued employees engaged and contributing to the organization, and; *actions that manage employee expectations* related to careers and career plateau such as being upfront with employees regarding the possibilities for advancement from the start of their careers. Each of these categories is discussed separately.

Actions aimed at changing the career plateau status

The most common recommended action for organizations to take is to increase job mobility (Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Ettington 1997; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Godshalk and Fender 2015; Jung and Tak 2008; Hall 1985; Heliman et al. 2008; Lemire et al. 1999; Lapalme 2009; McCleese et al. 2007; Orpen 1983; Tremblay and Rogers 2004; Wen and Liu 2015). Essentially this recommendation keeps the employee engaged by helping to prevent them from becoming content plateaued. As several researchers have suggested that content plateau is more strongly associated with negative outcomes than hierarchical plateau (Allen and Poteet 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Lentz and Allen 2009) keeping the individual employee focused on learning new roles and responsibilities may address the form of career plateau most likely associated with negative outcomes. Job mobility can also include opportunities for advancement as well as lateral movement. In this way organizations which focus on job mobility through career ladders etc. can address both content and hierarchical plateau.

Increasing work challenges is another action that is recommended in the career plateau research as a means of changing content plateau status and does not necessarily

require moving from the existing position to a new job (Chay et. al 1995; Hofstetter and Cohen 2014; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Lee 2003; Slocum et al. 1985; Tremblay and Rogers 2004). However, Tremblay and Rogers (2004) indicate that increasing work challenge in the employees' base position must be undertaken with caution as it may result in resentment and increased negativity. Also, as pointed out by Xie, Lu and Zhou (2015), lateral movement cannot always be relied upon to counter the negative effects of a lack of upward mobility and may even lead to a greater negative impact as the employee deprived of upward opportunities may resent the additional work challenge.

Offering training and learning opportunities to plateaued employees has been recommended by several researchers (Allen et al. 1999; Allen and Poteet 1998; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Ettington 1997; Jung and Tak 2008; Hofstetter and Cohen 2014; Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese et al. 2007; Wen and Liu 2015). The premise behind these recommendations is that the learning of new skills will engage the employee and provide intellectual stimulation. These actions can directly address content plateau by again changing the perception of the employee that they are content plateaued with little to learn and be engaged with. Learning new skills may also help address the underlying reasons for hierarchical plateau in the case of plateau caused by skill deficiencies. These opportunities to support learning can take several forms from formal training programs delivered or paid for by the organization to simply cultivating a culture that promotes learning within the organization. Formal training programs involve the commitment of organizational resources and need to be considered in terms of the potential benefits versus the costs. Milliman's (1992) advice to consider the costs and benefits of any career plateau intervention should always be followed.

Job enrichment opportunities, job redesign, promoting stimulating jobs and job scope increases etc. can all address content plateau (Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Hofstetter and Cohen 2014; Lee 2003; Tremblay and Roger 1993; Xie, Xin and Bai 2016). Essentially these actions will increase the complexity of the job or provide new opportunities to learn. In some cases, these actions can assist the organization and employee in improving the person job fit and promoting work engagement (Xie, Xin and Bai 2016). It is important to note that Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) indicate that job enrichment isn't necessary in the case of public service organizations. Also, as these actions may lead to increased challenge, it is important to keep in mind that increasing challenge and complexity can be detrimental to employee engagement in specific circumstances (Xie et al. 2015) and when disempowered employees are given more decision-making responsibilities (Tremblay and Rogers 2004).

Another recommendation that can help eliminate hierarchical plateau is the creation of dual career ladders for technical specialists. Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) indicate that dual career ladders create another hierarchy which comprises special ranks, titles, tasks and rewards, but does not include management functions. These ladders help technical specialists who wish to move up in the organization are not forced to pursue management activities that they may not enjoy or have the training to undertake. At the same time these specialists can continue to perceive themselves as not being plateaued as there are more senior positions available within their profession. However, not all researchers suggest that this approach is helpful. Hall (1985) indicates these formal systems are not helpful in that they can also lead to immobility as senior technical specialists may encounter formal barriers to continued advancement, such as the pay differences between the senior technical

specialists being too small to consider a switch to a management stream for further advancement.

Actions to mitigate negative impacts of career plateau

A commonly recommended organizational response to mitigating the negative impacts on employees who are plateaued involves mentoring (Corzine et. al. 1994; Evans and Gilbert 1984; Hurst et al. 2017; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Lentze and Allen 2009; Wang 2014; Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015). These recommendations are focused on the role of the career plateaued employee acting as a mentor as a way of staying positively engaged at work. This is distinct from the potential role that being mentored may have in preventing the employee from becoming career plateaued in the first place. Mentoring programs are also less likely to have the same type of direct costs to the organization associated with them as formal training programs and may offer a relatively cost-effective means of responding to career plateau. As pointed out by Evans and Gilbert (1984), mentoring programs must have the support of senior management if they are to be effective. However, as noted by (Connor 2013) the individual who is career plateaued may impact the organizational culture and having career plateaued employees acting as a mentor could present a risk to the work unit from a cultural perspective.

There are also communication activities that can be undertaken by the organization that may assist in decreasing the negative impacts of hierarchical plateau. Feedback to plateaued employees, even if effectively plateaued, is an important organizational response to plateau (Allen and Poteet 1998; Carnazza et. al 1981; Chay, Aryee and Chew 1995; Ettington 1997; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Jung and Tak 2008; Hurst et al. 2017). The provision of feedback may help the employee feel the leadership of the organization is still

invested in them and help to counter the perceptions of lack of support. Being clear about the causes of plateau may assist employees in accepting the limited role the organization may have in addressing plateaus. In this way it is hoped the organization will not be blamed for the plateau and the employee will continue to be engaged.

McCleese and Eby (2006) as well as Tremblay and Rogers (2004) suggest that decreasing role ambiguity and promoting job clarity can also assist those individuals facing a hierarchical plateau. The ability of the individual to understand what is expected of them and to have clarity in their role may mitigate some of the stress associated with being career plateaued. As role ambiguity is itself a stressful event, combining this with the stress of career plateau will likely lead to increased negative outcomes.

Finally, there are those actions the organization can undertake in support of the individual employees' efforts to change their internal thinking associated with career plateau. Jiang (2016) indicates the organization can support employees in thinking positively about their career futures, developing decision-making skills, increasing inquisitive behaviors, and motivating themselves. These actions if undertaken by the organization would support the individual actions recommended by Allen et al. 1999; Chao 1990; Duffy 2000; McCleese et al. 2007; and Milliman 1992.

Actions to manage employee expectations related to career

As part of the provision of feedback for plateaued employees, it is recommended that organizations establish realistic expectations for promotion among their employees, especially early in the career (Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Orpen 1983; Slocum et al. 1987). As pointed out by Bardwick (1986), almost every person will experience a career plateau given the pyramidal

structure of organizations. Recognizing this reality may assist employees in dealing with their own career plateau when it inevitable arrives. Organizations may market upward mobility and opportunity as a means of recruitment, but this can create expectations that cannot be met. With decreased expectations and advance notice that plateau will occur the employee may be able to more effectively deal with the situation. However, Ettington (1997) cautions it may not be best to be realistic about promotional expectations as not being realistic may allow some employees to remain engaged at work and fail to perceive themselves as being career plateaued. Consistent with the findings related to perceived career plateau as opposed to objective career plateau, an employee who never perceives a plateau will continue to behave and act in the same manner as a non-plateaued employee.

Table 8: Recommended Organizational Actions

| Study | Action |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Allen et al. 1999 | Provide training and an organizational environment supportive of learning and skills transfer. Provide career planning workshops and programmes supported by the employees' supervisor. |
| Allen and Poteet 1998 | Train supervisors to recognize content plateau and provide support and feedback for those who are content plateaued. |
| Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013 | Provide job enrichment opportunities and job redesign to reduce stress conditions for plateaued employees. |
| Burke and Mikkelsen 2006 | Promote a learning environment and the development of new skills. Train supervisors to reduce employee perceptions of career plateauing. Senior management must take steps to make promotion expectations realistic and examine ways to enlarge jobs as well as linking advancement to performance. |
| Carnazza et. al 1981 | Provide specific and ongoing feedback to plateaued employees even if effectively plateaued. Promote positive organizational messaging around plateaued managers. |
| Chay et. al 1995 | Do not neglect plateaued employees and provide them with feedback and challenging jobs. |
| Corzine et. al. 1994 | Promote mentoring as a means of avoiding career plateau. |
| Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015 | Promote mobility, facilitate movement between universities, encourage inter disciplinary research and exchanges between the academic and professional worlds. |
| Ettington 1997 | Do not promote realistic expectations about career advancement or shift interests away from work as it may lead to employee withdrawal. Show appreciation for contributions. Provide early and accurate feedback while providing training for the future, not for advancement. Train everyone not only stars. Support job growth, lateral and downward movement. Pay for performance, knowledge, or teamwork. Look beyond financial compensation such as sabbaticals as rewards. |
| Ettington 1998 | Support plateaued employees and realize successful plateau is possible. |
| Evans and Gilbert 1984 | Mentoring can only be effective if it is organizationally valued by senior management. |
| Godshalk and Fender 2015 | Promote lateral job rotations. If there are external reasons for content plateau ensure that employees are aware. |
| Gerpott and Domsch 1987 | Improve feedback and goal-setting behaviours of supervisors. Involve plateaued employees in special projects, mentoring activities etc. Be realistic about internal job change opportunities. |
| Jung and Tak 2008 | Facilitate lateral or cross-functional moves and provide honest feedback. Develop programs to increase employee career motivation. Train managers to provide feedback to improve competencies, set career goals and implement action plans. |

Table 9: Recommended Organizational Actions (Continued)

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Hall 1985 | Do not use formal rewards to address technical professional plateau but reward with experiences such as working with elite customers. Facilitate lateral, cross functional moves consider using temporary assignments, downward movement or internal consulting projects. Consider loaning employees from over staffed areas to understaffed areas. Adopt a skill-based approach to staffing not position based career paths. Put pay in person, not position as pay and position coupling is responsible for immobility. |
| Heliman et al. 2008 | Provide opportunities to move before employees consider leaving. |
| Hofstetter and Cohen 2014 | Ensure jobs are challenging and meaningful. Provide opportunities for learning and development. Human resource practices ensure continued growth and development opportunities are available for mature workers. |
| Hurst et al. 2017 | Provide mentoring opportunities. Explain why plateaus occur and the likely duration in order to improve justice perceptions. |
| Jiang 2016 | Support employees in thinking positively about their career futures, developing decision-making skills, increasing inquisitive behaviors, and motivating themselves. |
| Lee 2003 | Communicate available career paths. Managers should not equate age and job tenure with perceptions of career plateau. Managers seek employees' feedback on perceptions of career plateau. Promote stimulating jobs that upgrade skills and maintain professional currency. |
| Lentze and Allen 2009 | Support mentoring especially when increasing job scope is not feasible. Do not assume employees with fewer promotions or minimal job responsibility are more plateaued than other employees. |
| Lemire et al. 1999 | Assist employees with identifying training needs and developing career plans. Support opportunities to play new roles such as through job rotations. Perceptions of career plateau are linked to: lack of assistance from superiors to identify training needs and define career plans; absence of career development practices and programs; lack of opportunities such as job rotation systems; lack of opportunities to participate in work groups. |
| Lapalme 2009 | Promote career discussions with the immediate supervisor and encourage horizontal or inter-functional mobility. |
| McCleese et al. 2007 | Organizations should consider providing developmental opportunities, training, lateral job movement, special project work, and education to address plateauing. Stress management training and employee assistance programs may also help employees cope with the psychological impacts of plateauing. |

Table 10: Recommended Organizational Actions (Continued)

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| McCleese and Eby 2006 | Reduce role ambiguity through clear job descriptions and performance appraisal systems. |
| Milliman 1992 | Organizations must consider how common career plateau is within the organization as well as attempting to determine the impacts on attitudes and organizational effectiveness. The cost/benefit of any career plateau program should be assessed. Do not apply career plateau programs universally. |
| Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002 | Do not create unfulfilled expectations for advancement; consider compensation effects between promotions and work content, and distinguishing between past experiences and future expectations. Dual career ladders should be considered to create another hierarchy which comprises special ranks, titles, tasks and rewards, but does not include management functions like responsibility for personnel or resources. |
| Near 1985 | Performance evaluation systems must not rely heavily on the appraisal of one supervisor and managers should shuffle supervisors and plateaued subordinates. |
| Orpen 1983 | Instill realistic expectations about advancement opportunities. Create more lateral and vertical openings for mobility through project teams, job rotation schemes or decentralised authority networks. |
| Slocum et al. 1987 | Establish realistic expectations for promotion at the start of the career. Don't motivate staff with promotions and money. Provide honest feedback even if it is negative to promote realistic expectations. |
| Slocum et al. 1985 | Assign challenging work to comers and offer them exposure and visibility to senior management. |
| Sylvia and Sylvia 1986 | Job enrichment and flex time programs are not needed to offset the effects of career plateau upon mid-level public employees. |
| Tremblay and Roger 1993 | Offer job enrichment opportunities and clarity regarding promotion criteria. |
| Tremblay and Rogers 2004 | Decentralized decision-making and empowerment to those deprived of challenging roles may have negative impacts. Promote job challenge via project management, ad hoc work committees, etc. with decision making increases for best results. Take an integrative approach to career plateau. Role clarification may help address reactions to career plateau. Both plateaued and non-plateaued managers have more positive attitudes and behaviours when they are psychologically empowered in high-scope jobs and when they perceive little role ambiguity. |
| Wang 2014 | Provide mentoring opportunities. |

Table 11: Recommended Organizational Actions (Continued)

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Wen and Liu 2015 | Provide training and work rotation opportunities for career plateaued individuals. |
| Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015 | Horizontal movement does not substitute for vertical movement. While career planning programs such as mentoring may be helpful the hierarchically plateaued may respond negatively to increased job challenge. |
| Xie, Xin and Bai 2016 | Facilitate person-job fit by supporting employees to engage in job crafting through giving them more job autonomy. Managers can help plateaued employees through facilitating person-job fit by giving them more job autonomy. |

Synthesis of Individual and Organizational Actions

There are four themes that arise from the synthesis of the research findings regarding the individual and organizational actions that can be taken in response to career plateau.

Theme 1: The effectiveness of recommended employee responses has not been measured.

Theme 2: Individual responses to career plateau can be categorized as internal changes to thinking about career plateau, working differently, and avoiding career plateau. Theme 3:

Organizational responses to career plateau can be categorized as actions to change plateau status, actions to mitigate negative impacts, and actions to manage employee expectations.

Theme 4: The impact of career plateau on the organization has not been empirically tested.

Theme 1: Effectiveness of Recommended Employee Responses has not Been Measured.

There is a gap in the existing research in terms of measuring the effectiveness of the above recommendations. Published research simply asserts that these actions should assist the individual with dealing with their career plateau situation. Empirical research has not been completed to test the validity of these recommended actions in accomplishing what is hoped for.

Theme 2: Individual Responses Fall into Three Categories

The individual responses to career plateau can be categorized as internal changes to thinking about career plateau, working differently, and avoiding career plateau. The first category of response involves internal actions the individual needs to take to respond to a career plateau. The actions are premised on assisting the employee to feel better about the situation they find themselves in but do not change the career plateau status. The second set of actions involves the individual doing things differently at work. These actions directly address the career plateau situation and engage the individual in trying to find solutions within the work environment. The final set of actions focuses on avoiding career plateau altogether. These actions are proactive in nature and may allow an individual to avoid or delay the experience of career plateau.

Theme 3: Organizational Responses Fall into Two Categories.

Organizational responses to career plateau can be categorized as actions to change plateau status, actions to mitigate negative impacts, and actions to manage employee expectations. The actions to change plateau status are focused on moving the employee out of a plateau such as increasing job mobility to avoid content plateau. These actions deal directly with the plateau and thereby help eliminate the known negative impacts of being career plateaued. Actions to mitigate negative impacts of career plateau, such as providing clear feedback to plateaued employees, are aimed at keeping the employee motivated and engaged while plateaued. These actions do not seek to change the employees plateau status. Finally, there are those actions designed to manage employees' expectations. Essentially these actions are all about making sure the employee has a realistic expectation about the likelihood of career plateau in the hopes that they will not blame the organization for career plateau and will continue to be motivated and engaged when they become career plateaued.

Theme 4: Impacts on Organizations Have not Been Tested

The lack of empirical research directly measuring the impact of career plateau on organizations makes it impossible to say with certainty how career plateau is impacting organizations and therefore how it compares to other organizational priorities. Theoretical arguments have been put forward by many career plateau researchers that career plateaued employees have a potential negative impact on organizations (e.g. Carnazza 1981; Connor 2013; Rotondo and Perrew 2000; Slocum et al. 1985; Stout et al. 1988). However, quantifying the impact or determining how much organizational effort should be applied to addressing the challenges associated with career plateau is not possible. While the costs associated with a program to respond to career plateau can be determined by the organization, the effectiveness of the program to improve organizational performance has no basis in empirical evidence on which to draw.

Conclusion

This systematic review uncovers several findings in terms of the focus and nature of career plateau research as well as the impacts of career plateau and recommended responses to career plateau. Over 70% of the career plateau research is private sector based or private sector dominated leaving potential gaps in relation to understanding career plateau in the public sector. There are only 8 studies (17 %) of the total career plateau research which excluded management from the sample creating a potential gap in the understanding of the causes and impacts of career plateau on non-management employees. Despite the gaps that exist in the career plateau research there are consistencies in terms of how career plateau is researched. The empirical findings support an approach to career plateau research involving individual assessment of plateau status using subjective criteria.

The systematic review indicates that empirical evidence suggests Career plateau is linked at an individual level to decreased commitment, decreased satisfaction, increased intention to turnover, decreased perceived support and increased stress. Career plateau's negative impact on individual performance has not been demonstrated in the research.

The impacts of career plateau on organizations have not been examined empirically. There is only a single study uncovered that failed to screen into the systematic review which attempted to measure the organizational impact of career plateau. Despite the lack of studies directly measuring the impact of career plateaued employees on organizations, researchers have presented theoretical arguments suggesting career plateau negatively impacts organizations.

While researchers recommend actions be taken by individuals and organizations in responding to career plateau, the effectiveness of these recommendations has not been measured empirically. Individual responses to career plateau can be categorized as internal changes to thinking about career plateau, working differently, and avoiding career plateau. Organizational responses to career plateau can be categorized as actions to change plateau status, actions to mitigate negative impacts, and actions to manage employee expectations.

CHAPTER 5: CAREER PLATEAU IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

The systematic review in the previous section explored the impacts of career plateau and revealed there are few public sector studies of career plateau. This chapter introduces the career plateau in the public sector study which is the main study of this dissertation and outlines the study methodology.

Introduction

The public service is the fifth largest sector of employment in Canada, comprising 7.3% of the total work force (Stats Canada 2011). As previously indicated, career plateau research has been focused on the private sector and understanding of career plateau in public organizations cannot rely on organizational knowledge from the private (Vigoda-Godat et al. 2003; Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrewe 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986). Gathering data from a series of 48 focused interviews, this study helps address existing gaps in the career plateau research such as: a lack of research focused on the public service including the affective impacts of career plateau on public servants and their behavioural responses to being career plateaued; a failure to examine career plateau taking into account the hierarchical position level of workers; and identifying actions that public sector organizations can take to respond to career plateau as indicated by public servants who are career plateaued. The study findings provide insight into the experience of career plateauing based on a strong interpretive value of the data collected consistent with effective qualitative research which aims to demonstrate transparency of methodological procedures and offers a compelling, vivid and insightful narrative that is grounded in the data (Dixon-Woods et. al. 2004).

This chapter outlines the study general approach, covering off the study purpose, research questions and propositions. The methodology is covered next including the research design, study sample and sampling strategy. This is followed by a review of the focused interview approach including how career plateau status is determined, exploration of participants perceptions of the dominate career systems model in the public service, as well as the impacts and responses to being career plateaued. Identification of public organization responses to career plateau are also solicited from participants in the focused interviews. The approach to analyzing the data through the echo sorting and content analysis technique is also detailed.

Approach

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore career plateau in the public service. The secondary purposes of the study are to identify the dominant career systems model at each of four hierarchical levels of the public service and explore how position level impacts career plateau; determine the perceived causes of career plateau; explore the affective impacts and behavioural consequences of being career plateaued on individual public servants; and identify actions that study participants believe public service organizations can undertake to support public servants who are career plateaued.

Research Questions

Focused interviews are used to gather data for the study which is designed to answer four main questions relating to career plateau in the public service:

1. What is the dominate career systems model in the public service at different hierarchical levels?

2. What do public servants perceive to be the reasons for their career plateau?
3. What are the affective and behavioural impacts of career plateau on public servants?
4. What can public organizations do to support employees experiencing career plateau?

Propositions Guiding the Research

A detailed analysis of the research on career plateau, attributional theory and career systems models (see Chapter 2) led to the development of the following propositions. These propositions inform the design of the questions used in the focused interviews (see Appendix E) and aid in the interpretation of the findings and recommendations. The research propositions are detailed further below and are summarised in Table 12.

Proposition 1: The dominant career systems model is different at different hierarchical levels of the public service.

Although researchers (Rosenbaum 1984; Pfeffer 1981) did not specifically consider the career systems model through the lens of positional hierarchy, there are reasons to suspect that the career systems model is different at different levels of the public service. As will be seen later in Chapter 6, the process for hiring and promoting staff within the public service is guided by existing organizational structures and institutions derived from a legislative and policy framework which functions generally consistent with the human capital career systems approach. However, the use of Order in Council appointments without competition at the senior level of government is not consistent with Rosenbaum's (1984) human capital or tournament model but may be more aligned with Pfeffer (1981) power/politic career systems model. Therefore, at the administrative and professional levels, a human capital career systems model is believed to be more prevalent with a power/politic career systems model becoming more common as one moves up in the organization. At the

executive level it is anticipated that the power/political career systems model will be the dominate career systems model.

Proposition 2: Career plateau occurs for different reasons depending on the position level within the hierarchy of the public service.

Four distinct hierarchical groupings are identified in the study based on job classifications used in the public service that have distinct educational, experience and competency requirements as well as different job characteristics. The study categories are administrative, professional, management and executive.

Administrative positions are made up of those positions classified as clerks, secretaries, assistants or other positions that provide direct administrative support services for more senior positions in the organization. These positions generally require a high school diploma or equivalent, experience performing administrative services in an office environment, as well as proficiency with computers and computer software such as Microsoft Office and Outlook. Overall these positions are the most junior within the government hierarchy and are generally covered by generic job descriptions. These positions are often required to demonstrate competencies covering awareness and attention to detail, customer service focus, prioritization of work files, effectively managing workloads, maintaining organizational processes etc. These requirements for hiring and advancement appear to be aligned with the human capital model as outlined by Sonnenfeld (1989) and Rosenbaum (1984) and reflect the hiring processes within government as explored by Selden (2014).

In terms of content plateau, lateral movement within the administrative category is probably enabled by the common administrative systems used across government.

Correspondence, briefing notes and decision-support materials are all tracked using the same computer system across core government agencies. In addition, the generic job descriptions with shared educational, knowledge and competency requirements allow a candidate with knowledge and familiarity of government systems and experience in similar work settings to move laterally or be promoted within this category. Lateral movement barriers may exist within this category related to the unique requirements of some program areas as well as differing levels of responsibility across the hierarchical levels contained within this category. In addition, the social connections required for lateral movement may not exist for those administrative support staff that only function within one team or branch as they may lack the exposure to other area hiring managers.

In terms of the barriers related to hierarchical advancement within this category, the complexity of the administrative duties or the size and workload of the unit may impact upward mobility. While moving up within the administrative assistant category may be impacted by the requirement for more senior levels within this category, these barriers are not likely as great as barriers preventing movement into the professional category. To enter the professional category the employee is usually required to have a degree and even if this requirement is waived, their competitors will likely possess a degree. The administrative professional will also be less likely to have the direct experience and competencies required to move into the professional category such as briefing note writing.

Professional positions provide expert policy or program advice and include the most senior level of unionized positions within the public service. These positions usually require a university degree or equivalent and experience in a professional capacity such as an engineer, biologist, policy analyst or else performance of complex and/or senior

administrative organizational activities. These positions are often required to demonstrate competencies related to analytical thinking, strategic orientation, holding people accountable, or problem solving and judgement. These position hiring requirements and competitive processes appear to be aligned with the human capital model as outlined by Sonnenfeld (1989) and Rosenbaum (1984) and reflect the hiring processes within government as explored by Selden (2014).

In terms of content plateau, lateral movement within the professional category is likely enhanced by the educational qualifications of the professionals for those organizational functions that are common across several government program areas, for example policy analysis. While the acquiring of policy analytical skills involves significant study, education and experience, the policy analysis process is transferable across government and detailed program or area knowledge can often be acquired on the job. At the same time the professional skills and educational requirements can act as a barrier to movement within this category in the case where professional designations are required as part of the job. For example, a Registered Professional Forester's position cannot be filled by a policy analyst or Registered Biologist even if the latter were to possess higher level degrees than the former as they do not possess the appropriate professional background. However, within the professional category there are far more positions of a generic professional nature (e.g. research officer, financial analyst, policy analyst, administrative officer, etc.) than specific professional nature (e.g. engineer, economist, professional forester etc.). In addition, staff working at the professional level are also more likely to be involved in cross government working groups than staff in the administrative level and are more likely to form the social and work relationships to support them in future job searches.

As with the administrative support category, there are different hierarchical levels within this category. A policy analyst could function at an entry level as an N 12 or at a senior N 30 level depending on the requirements of the job. The more senior the position within this category the greater the likelihood the employee will possess advanced degrees as well as more experience with increasingly complex issues.

Movement from this category into the management category is likely harder than movement upwards within this category given the requirement to possess new skills and competencies which are difficult to acquire while working within this category. In addition, the advanced and specialized educational requirements that enable movement across and upwards within the professional category do not carry over into the management category. Managers are unlikely required to possess the same advanced educational qualifications as professionals.

There are also organizational disincentives for senior professionals to move into management such as the loss of flex time and overtime pay. Professional staff positions are almost always part of a collective agreement which mandates overtime pay. Professional staff looking for work life balance are also in a stronger position to refuse extra work than their management superiors. Finally, the high base salary of senior professional staff, especially when combined with overtime pay, results in salary compression between senior professional staff and entry and even mid-level management.

Management positions include managers, senior managers and directors or excluded (non-union) senior advisors who perform a variety of organizational leadership, strategic operational or advisory roles. These positions are responsible for most of the organization's management activities. They organize and provide leadership to the individual work units

and smaller branches of the Ministries. They are often the face of the organization's executive as the most senior person that employees will normally interact with. These managers generally have degrees, often at the master's level, but there is considerable flexibility in terms of the educational requirements. Generally, the most significant requirement for these employees is to have management experience and competencies related to leadership, HR and/or budgeting. If proposition one is accurate, at this level and above the power/politic career systems model (Pfeffer 1981) may become more prevalent.

In terms of content plateau, movement within this category is likely amongst the easiest of all four hierarchical categories in the study, at least up to the manager level. As the competencies and experience requirements are mostly generic at this level, movement within the entry levels of management is facilitated by the generic skill sets and not yet constrained by the decreasing number of positions higher up in the organization due to the pyramidal structure of the public service. Lateral movement within this category is further enhanced by the increasing importance of networks and networking opportunities that occur within management teams that exist in each Ministry, as well as cross ministry management teams. An increasing amount of an employee's time is taken up on management team meetings and shared management functions.

Hierarchical advancement opportunities from the management level to the executive level are significantly constrained for three reasons. The first barrier involves the experience and competency requirements that employees at the management level do not typically have, such as experience directly supporting elected officials in Cabinet or Treasury Board. The second barrier to advancement from manager likely involves the social relations at the executive level that are often required to be 'appointed' to more senior positions. A

power/politic career systems model (Pfeffer 1981) prevalent at the executive level would likely require an increased reliance on social networks as a form of power within the organization. The third challenge relates to the number of positions available at the most senior level of government. There are only a few dozen DM level positions across any Canadian public service, with only a few hundred more ADMs and Executive Directors (ED). There are correspondingly fewer opportunities to rise into the most senior ranks of the public service.

Executive management positions are made up of the DM, ADM and ED ranks and are the most senior level of positions in the public service with the most significant authority and accountability across government. There is a significant jump between the ED and the ADM level as ED positions are posted and competed for and ADM positions and DM positions are usually not. In terms of career plateau, members at this level face significant content plateau challenges. Moving between organizations is difficult as there are very few positions posted at this level and in the case of the ED positions which are posted, support from the new organizations ADM or DM will likely be required. At the ADM level movement is far more constrained with ADMs typically moved by appointment to new areas. DM's are not technically hierarchically plateaued as they have reached the very highest level of the organization and there are no more senior positions to aspire to.

In addition to unique reasons for career plateau that likely occur at each of the four hierarchical levels, there are likely shared reasons for career plateau amongst the four hierarchical levels. It is likely that some individuals will plateau for personal reasons. In these situations, the employee no longer wishes to advance within the organization as they may be focused on life outside of the organization or they do not see the benefits of further

promotion as outweighing the costs in terms of the amount of work they must do to be successful. Such reasoning could also apply to content plateau in that not all employees wish to keep learning and growing at the current level. These individuals may not want to try new things or advance further as they are content with the role they play.

Another likely common reason for plateau across all four hierarchical levels involves the perceived lack of ability to advance to the next level. These individuals may not possess or are not seen to possess the attributes required to contribute effectively at the next level of the organization. The individual could be very good at their current job, but they simply don't have the aptitude or characteristics required to function at the next level of the organization. Some individuals may be labelled as plateaued and perceive they have been given up on by the organization. These individuals are not likely to continue to pursue new job opportunities.

Table 12: Study Propositions Summary

| Proposition | Predicted Findings |
|---|--|
| The dominant career systems model is different at different hierarchical levels of the public service. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The human capital career systems model is the dominate career model in the public service. The power/politic career systems model becomes increasingly common as one moves up in the hierarchy until it becomes the dominate model at the executive level but never entirely replaces the human capital model. • The tournament systems model exists at all levels of the organization. |
| Career plateau occurs for different reasons depending on the position level within the hierarchy of the public service. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative staff plateau because they lack the educational qualifications and specific experience, such as writing briefing notes, required to advance. • Professional staff plateau because they lack direct management experience, such as supervision or budgeting. Position benefits at the senior professional level also act as disincentives to advancement, such as receiving flex time and overtime pay. There are also minimal compensation benefits for further advancement to entry and mid-level management. • Managers plateau because they lack senior executive experience such as making presentations to Cabinet or briefing elected officials. They may lack an executive champion to support their bid for further advancement. • Executives plateau because they lack the political connections and support from the most senior public officials. Failure to advance is no longer related to experience or education but is a power/politic game. |

Research Design

This qualitative study uses focused interviews to gather data from a sample of public servants who are currently experiencing career plateau. Participants in the study were identified using a purposeful deductive theoretical sampling strategy intended to find participants who are career plateaued to examine and elaborate the implications of being career plateaued. The data is sorted and analyzed using the echo sorting technique and content analysis. Themes are developed and compared to the literature.

Sample

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify 67 potential study participants. All participants were employees of a Canadian public service, either federal or provincial. Using Milliman's (1991) questionnaire, 48 participants were classified as being career plateaued and accepted into the study. Participants who were not career plateaued did not participate further. Therefore, the study sample was N=48. The average age of the study participants was 49.1 years. 20 Participants were male (42%) and 28 were female (58%). Job tenure was divided into four categories: category 1 (0-5 years) N = 29; category 2 (6-10 years) N = 18; category 3 (10-20 years) N = 1; and category 4 (20+ years) N = 0. The participants average current job tenure was 5 years. Public Service job tenure was divided into four categories: category 1 (0-5 years) N = 1; category 2 (6-10 years) N = 6; category 3 (10-20 years) N = 18; and category 4 (20+ years) N = 23. The participants average public service career tenure was 19.3 years. Position level was divided into 4 categories administrative, professional, management and executive with 12 participants in each category.

Sampling Strategy

The purposeful theoretical sampling strategy uses constructs (in this case career plateau) which are based in, derived from and contribute to scholarly literature by deepening or verifying theory (Patton 2015). The lack of research examining career plateau in the public sector as well as a lack of research from a hierarchical perspective, represents a theoretical gap in the career plateau literature for which the purposeful theoretical sampling strategy used in this study is well suited to help address. While purposeful theoretical sampling represents only one of several different approaches to purposeful sampling, all these approaches can compare and contrast in terms of identifying similarities and

differences in the phenomenon being studied (Plinkas et al. 2015). Regardless of the type of purposive sampling methodology employed, the purposive sampling method is aimed at maximizing efficiency and validity (Morse and Niehaus 2009)

Consistent with Patton's (2015) recommendations, participants in the study are selected because they represent information rich "cases" who can illuminate career plateau as opposed to being selected for the purposes of empirical generalization from a sample to a population. The purposeful sampling approach predominately used in qualitative research is very different in terms of purpose and logic from quantitative research sampling approaches such as statistical probability sampling (Patton 2015). The purpose of statistical probability sampling is to support the generalization of research findings from a sample to a broader population while purposeful sampling achieves the purpose of in-depth understanding of information rich cases (Ibid). To achieve generalization, statistical probability sampling seeks to randomize selection and avoid bias in the selection process, whereas purposeful sampling is biased with the intention of selecting information rich cases. What is considered a weakness in statistical probability sampling is a crucial strength for purposeful sampling (Patton 2015). The logical differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches revolve around the scientific ideal of identifying principles which do not depend on context and can be generalized across time and space contrasted with a qualitative research approach that identifies context as critical to understanding (Patton 2015). The emphasis on context allows for the telling of individual stories related to the experience of career plateau. As pointed out by Krueger (2010), stories capture the imagination and the audience's attention which also provides insight that cannot be captured through quantitative data.

There are also challenges in using a purposive sampling strategy. As pointed out by Plinkas et al. (2015) the range in variation in how the phenomena is expressed cannot be known a priori. As you are trying to get an information rich sample, you really cannot be certain if you have achieved your goal. Qualitative methods are intended to achieve depth of understanding while quantitative methods are intended to achieve breadth of understanding (Patton 2002). Qualitative methods place primacy on saturation in terms of sampling until no new substantive information is acquired while quantitative methods emphasize generalizability. Both have different expectations and standards for determining the number of participants to achieve their aims (Plinkas et al. 2015). While it is difficult to determine the size of non-probabilistic purposive sample sizes, there is a theoretical saturation point at which the addition of data would not result in more information about properties within a concept (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) provide experimental evidence that the saturation point can be reached with as few as 12 interviews. Using an iterative approach to sampling and re-sampling while examining the data collected can assist in ensuring a saturation point is indeed achieved and the concepts involved in the phenomena being study can be gleaned from existing research (Plinkas et al. 2015).

Focused Interviews

The following sections provide an overview of the focused interview methodology that was used to gather data for the study. The complete interview package can be found in Appendix E.

Determining career plateau status

Potential participants were asked to complete Milliman's (1992) 12 item questionnaire to assess their career plateau status, both content and hierarchical. To be included in the study participants had to be experiencing at least one type of career plateau.

Most research involving career plateau treats the career plateau variable as a continuous variable, that is the individual is rated on a scale as being more or less plateaued (e.g. Allen et al. 1999; Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Chao 1990; etc.). However, for the purposes of the current study, it is important to use a dichotomous approach, that is the participant is either career plateaued or not career plateaued, as only those career plateaued participants can provide the richness of data necessary to answer the research questions. Fortunately, researchers have used Milliman's scale to decide career plateau status in a dichotomized manner.

Allen et al. (1998 and 1999) classified participants using a version of Milliman's scale as being career plateaued if their results on Milliman's scale were above the median scores attained on the scale. This approach resulted in distinct categories of plateaued versus non-plateaued participants. Using a different approach Godshalk and Fender (2015) treated those participants who estimated their chances of promotion to be less than 50% based on their responses to Milliman's scale as being career plateaued. This decision rule recognized that individuals identify the probability of a chance occurrence happening as either high (greater than a 50% chance) or low (less than a 50% chance) consistent with Howell (1992).

For the purposes of the current study and consistent with Allen et al. (1998 and 1999) and Godshalk and Fender (2015), in determining plateau status, each question is assessed with either a score of 1-3 or 5-7 indicating perceptions of being career plateaued

depending on how the question is worded (see Appendix E for Milliman's scale). As there are six plateau questions for each type of plateau, a participant is deemed to be plateaued when they have identified themselves as being plateaued on four or more of the six questions. For example, a participant that scores a 1-3 on two questions indicating feelings of hierarchical career plateau and a 5-7 on two further questions (reverse ordered) indicating feeling plateaued would be categorized as hierarchically plateaued. It is possible for participants to be categorized as both hierarchically and content plateaued.

Career systems model

Participants were asked questions regarding the career systems model they believe to be in operation within the public service. Each participant was provided with a description of the three different career systems models (tournament, human capital and power/politic) without being given the name of the model and asked to identify which of the models they believe most accurately reflects the dominate model in the public service. They were then asked to indicate which model is the next most prominent, followed by the third or least likely to reflect the public service career model. They were also told they do not have to rank order all three models but can choose one, two, three or none. If participants had indicated none of the three models reflects the career systems model of the public service, they would have been asked to describe the career systems model of the public service, although all participants identified one of the three proposed models. The collection of data on the career systems model allowed the researcher to explore proposition 1.

Causes, Impacts and Responses to Career Plateau

The interviews explored the perceived causes of career plateau and answers the first research question: what do participants perceive to be the reasons for their career plateau as

well as providing data to explore proposition 2. Participants were asked to identify the feelings they experience with being career plateaued in order to answer the second research question: “How does career plateau impact participants?”. The data from this section of the focused interviews were used to compare with the existing research findings regarding the impacts of career plateau on the individual, such as decreased commitment; decreased career or work satisfaction; increased intention to turnover or leave the current job etc. The interviews also explored the behavioural responses to career plateau identified by the participants and answers the third research question: “What do participants do to change their career plateau status or adapt to being career plateaued?”. The themes identified in this section of the interview are compared amongst the four organizational levels as well as exploring the differences in the findings and the broader career plateau literature.

Organizational Implications

This section of the interview explored the implications for organizational action identified by participants. This section of the interview answers the research question, “what can the organization do to support participants in finding new positions or successfully adapting to career plateau?”. The findings were analyzed in light of research findings in the broader career plateau literature.

Analysis

Echo Sorting and Content Analysis

The analysis of the data followed the Echo Sorting and Content Analysis procedures outlined by Cunningham (2001). During the initial preparation, each unique response captured during the focused interviews was typed up and an identification code was assigned. After the codes were assigned and printed onto paper, information cards were

created. This resulted in the creation of 474 Ascription Cards identifying the causes of career plateau; 349 Affective Impacts Cards identifying the emotional impacts of career plateau on participants; 302 Behavioural Response Cards identifying the actions taken by participants in response to being career plateaued; and 236 Organizational Implications Cards with actions participants identified. Examples of these cards can be found in Appendix G, H, I, J.

Following the advice from Cunningham (2001), a pilot categorization of the data was completed by the researcher. The categories emerged directly from the data by reviewing each of the interview transcriptions and attempting to understand the underlying themes. The cards were placed into theme categories by the researcher and set aside. Unsorted cards were then shared with two volunteers to undertake a preliminary test sort to see how long the sort would take and to clarify if anything was problematic. The test sort group were also asked for feedback on the clarity of the sorting task and difficulties encountered which was incorporated into the later reliability sort procedure.

To test the reliability of the researcher's sort, two separate groups of 2 volunteer sorters were asked to sort the cards into the categories identified by the researcher. In keeping with the recommendations of Cunningham the volunteers were all members of the public service. Having members who work in the field involved in the sorting process ensures they understand the nuances and meanings which might not be understood if the sorters are from the outside of the research area (Cunningham 2001). Test reliability was recorded and modifications to the themes and card assignments based on feedback was completed. Specific procedural details on each sort and reliability retesting for the

Ascription, Affective Impacts, Behavioural Response and Organizational Implications Cards are outlined briefly in the appropriate chapters later in the dissertation

Conclusion

This chapter and previous chapters have made the case for the importance of studying career plateau in the public service. As indicated, the public service is a significant employment sector in Canada and provides key services to citizens. Career plateau is believed to be more common in the public sector (Sylvia and Sylvia 1986, Lemire et al. 1999) and research findings link career plateau to decreased job and organizational commitment (e.g. Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Stout et al. 1988; Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015). Decreased commitment could impact the quality of public services linked to citizen satisfaction with public services (Bei and Shang, 2006; Wisniewski, 2001), and contributes to elevated citizen trust in government (Vigoda-Godat et al. 2012).

Despite the importance of the public service and the benefits to society from engaged and committed public organizations, career plateau research has been focused on the private sector (e.g. Carnazza et al. 1981; Corzine et. al. 1994; Ettington 1998; Hall 1985; Lee 2003; Nicholson 1993; Veiga 1981 etc.). There are only 3 studies (Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrew 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986) which focused exclusively on career plateau in the public sector and all three studies are from the US.

Gathering data from a series of 48 focused interviews, this study helps address existing gaps in the career plateau research including: a lack of research focused on the public service including the affective impacts of career plateau on public servants and their behavioural responses to being career plateaued; a failure to examine career plateau taking

into account the hierarchical position level of participants; and identifying actions that public sector organizations can take to respond to career plateau as indicated by public servants who are career plateaued.

CHAPTER 6: CAREER SYSTEMS FINDINGS

The previous chapter detailed the methodology used in completing the study of career plateau in the public service. The study purpose, research questions, propositions, research design, sample, focused interview approach, and analysis techniques were identified and briefly described. This chapter presents the study findings related to career systems models in the public service.

Introduction

As the preceding chapters on career plateau have explored the ‘words’ of the theory to guide the dissertation research, this chapter focusing on career systems model findings explores the ‘sentences’ in which career plateau in the public service makes sense. An analysis of the HR legislation, regulatory, policy, procedural and program context of the public service using the British Columbia public service as an example within the Canadian public service leads to the conclusion that the public service in Canada presents itself as a human capital career systems model. However, the results of this study with a sample from other public services in Canada indicates that the human capital model is not the dominant career systems model at all levels of the Canadian public service. As people move up in government, they face a system that is increasingly a power/politic career model. The changing career model presents both opportunities and challenges for public servants.

Career Systems Model Context of the Public Service

To determine the career model of the public service, the legislative, regulatory, policy and procedural context must be examined. Not only does this complex framework establish how the HR functions of government formally operate, it also provides evidence of how the public service as an organization presents itself to the world and its employees. The

following sections provides a brief overview of the key structures which form the basis of the government career systems model.

Legislative Framework

All BC government organizational activities are guided by an overarching legislative framework. Some of these Acts are not specific to government agencies alone, rather they apply to all organizations in BC, while others are specific to government entities. Key pieces of legislation that apply to all organizations private and public within BC include: The *Employment Standards Act* setting out the minimum standards for vacation requirements, minimum wage etc.; The Human Rights Code establishing equality of rights and opportunities to prevent discrimination and harassment; and the *Workers Compensation Act* addressing matters such as compensation for injury, survivor benefits etc. Key pieces of legislation that apply to government organizations within BC include: The *Public Sector Employers Act* which creates a public sector employers association which coordinates activities related to the sector such as compensation for those not subject to a collective agreement and establishes human resource practices; The *Public Service Act* which facilitates the provision of services to the public by recruiting and developing staff for the public service; and the *Public Service Labour Relations Act* which sets out the legal foundations on which government negotiates with the various employee unions.

Collective Agreements

In addition to the legislative framework which governs HR issues in the public service, the government as an employer is guided in its relationships with its employees through several collective agreements which establish legal obligations and requirements for both government as the employer and its employees. The terms and conditions of

employment spelled out in the various collective agreements differ but generally cover wages, over time, grievance provisions, strike provisions etc.

The main collective bargaining associations are: the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union representing the largest number of unionized employees across the provincial government; the Professional Employees Association of BC representing professional employees, which is defined as an employee typically engaged in exercising a predominantly intellectual skill; the BC Nurses' Union representing nurses across every health authority region in BC; Unifor Local 2000 and Local 780G representing staff at the Queen's Printer in Victoria; and the Crown Counsel Association which is the sole bargaining agent for the 400 plus Crown Counsel members employed by the Ministry of Justice.

Core Policies

In addition to the legislative framework and the collective agreements which govern the operations of BC public service organizations, there are core policies established by the PSA which provide strategic direction and context for HR management practices across the BC public service. The policies are meant to be achieved through an Accountability Framework for Human Resources (Framework).

The Framework contains policy statements that set mandatory requirements for HR practices which must be followed by government employees who exercise HR functions. The head of the PSA delegates authority under the *Public Service Act* to others for human resource management. Accountability in this context includes requirements for reporting and explaining actions in addition to making decisions and acting on HR issues. Responsibilities under the Framework filter down in the organization to those employees

who have HR leadership and management responsibilities. The supervisor's obligations include activities such as directing and managing staff performance, providing regular and ongoing feedback and ensuring laws and collective agreements are complied with.

Employees are in turn responsible for their own work position obligations as well as adhering to the public service standards of conduct, reporting unsafe work conditions etc.

Another area of focus within the Framework involves diversity and inclusion. In this case the goal is to promote a public service that is representative of the diversity of people of BC. Currently 8% of the public service work force is under the age of 30 while 25% of BC's labour force is under age 30 (Where Ideas Work: A Corporate Plan For The BC Public Service 2016). Similarly, 30% of the population of BC self-identifies as visible minority (Stats Canada 2016) while 14% of public sector employees identify themselves as visible minority (PSA 2016). To address issues related to representativeness, the Head of the PSA is accountable for setting the overall direction regarding diversity and Chairs a Diversity and Inclusion Executive Committee which oversees efforts to meet diversity targets.

Career Development Initiatives

"Where Ideas Work: A Corporate Plan For The BC Public Service 2016" sets out the HR priorities for the public service and the Head of the PSA and other DM's are accountable to the DM to the Premier and Cabinet Secretary for implementing the Plan. The Plan identifies six core values that public servants are expected to demonstrate: courage; passion; service; accountability; teamwork; and curiosity with one paramount value of integrity.

Career development support services in the BC public service are organized along five streams: performance assessments and planning; coaching services; career support services; scholarship support and student loan forgiveness; and training and development programs.

Performance Assessments and Planning

The public service uses a performance assessment program which is mandatory for all employees and must be completed on an annual basis. The performance review focuses on work goals, learning and career development goals and a section for rating performance. One of the stated intents and benefits of the program is to encourage conversations between employees and their supervisor. It is hoped that these conversations will lead to an ongoing dialogue whereby the employee can work with their supervisor on issues beyond just how they are performing in their job. The process is to occur over time and the system encourages several iterations of the profile and is flexible enough to accommodate a period of discussion and development.

Key work goals are identified in the first section of the profile. The key work goals are intended to be identified by the employee in discussion with their supervisor and contain a description of the goal and space for comments to add context to the goal and/or its attainment. It is intended that the supervisor and employee will work together in identifying the goal which should, hopefully, encourage the employee's sense of empowerment and control over their work environment.

The next section of the profile focuses on employee learning goals. This allows the employee and supervisor to identify goals for the year related to the employees learning needs. If an employee chooses not to complete a learning goal, they are required to provide a reason in a separate section of the profile on the same page. In this way each employee must identify a learning goal or indicate why they haven't. This further encourages the employee and the supervisor to focus on learning activities.

The last section of the profile involves a rating of the employee's performance. In this section the employee has the option of completing a self-assessment of their performance but is not required to do so. Only the supervisor is required to complete the performance rating and only the supervisor has final say over the performance rating. The employee is required to sign off on the profile but does have the option of signing off on the profile by indicating they do not agree with the information contained in the performance review by a check box.

There are four ratings which can be chosen: not performing; developing; achieves expectations and exceeds expectations. If an employee receives a not performing rating then further action to improve performance will be required. Developing indicates that the employee is not currently achieving all expectations but has the potential and motivation to do so. Achieves expectations indicates the employee is performing and demonstrating solid corporate values while exceeding expectations indicates the employee demonstrates exceptional corporate values. The four ratings are reminiscent of Ference et al.'s (1977) four designations of deadwood, comers, solid citizens and stars respectively.

In the same ratings and sign off section of the appraisal, there are five descriptive categories which can be selected to classify the performance of the employee. A number of these categories reflect the broader career literature in terms of how they are phrased. For example, one of the categories is titled "Valued Mentor" and indicates the employee plays a role in knowledge and/or culture transfer to the benefit of the wider organization. The "subject matter expert" category is reminiscent of the technical career leaders identified in the career plateau literature (Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002). Two other categories, "accomplished contributor" and "valued team member" both contain wording that suggests

the employee is recognized and valued for the role they play in the organization even if they do not change positions or advance in the hierarchy. The language contained in the descriptive categories is positive and may be designed to encourage positive perceptions by the employee regarding their role in the organization.

Coaching services

Coaching services are offered to leaders in the public service. Although the program allows for participation by 'leaders' at all levels of the organization regardless of job title, the focus is geared more towards those in management positions who have staff reports or lead project teams. Three of the five anticipated outcomes are related to activities and competencies that managers are expected to have and demonstrate, such as increased accountability and achievement of business outcomes. The other two anticipated outcomes are broader in application and include conflict resolution and communication skills. The program is designed to appeal to employees interested in career advancement and leadership growth but also those interested in learning and development.

Career Support Services

Career support services are also offered to employees in the BC public service free of charge. The services are offered by telephone on a one on one confidential basis and are not only available to employees but also to family members of employees. There are three types of career support services available. Career advice services provide counselling for employees to assist them in developing career goals and direction. The service is also aimed at assessing the interest and skill set of the employees as well as providing strategies to enhance work satisfaction and manage work-life issues. Work-life resiliency coaching focuses on understanding the employees stress reactions and building coping strategies.

This type of coaching can be augmented by free employee counselling services should the assessment of stressors reveal significant challenges or risks. These counselling services are offered separately under the employee health and wellness program but dovetail nicely with this program when needed. The last program offered under the career support services program involves retirement planning. Under this program employees are supported in exploring retirement issues such as financial considerations and steps involved in the successful transition from work to retirement.

Scholarship Support and Student Loan Forgiveness

As a means of encouraging continuing formal education amongst public servants, the government has established the Pacific Leaders program. This program consists of three distinct interventions for the employee and one initiative aimed at supporting the higher education goals of employee's children. Scholarships are available for public servants pursuing studies in areas related to government priorities and require the support of the supervisor.

Regular and part time employees may be eligible for a loan forgiveness program. The program covers the BC portion of the Canada-B.C. integrated student loan. The employee must have completed their mandatory six-month probationary period and the loan payments must not be in arrears. While enrolled in the program, the interest free status of the BC portion of the loan is in effect and after one year, one third of the BC portion of the loan amount owing is forgiven. After three years the entire BC portion of the loan is forgiven.

Training and Development Programs

In addition to the above programs and activities available in the public service, the province offers an impressive suite of training and development programs. Training and

learning opportunities are offered via several different methods, from on-line course offerings to province wide face to face training seminars held in class room settings. To organize the wide variety of training opportunities available, the province uses an individual structured learning system to track employee enrolment and progress through various offerings. This feature is essential as there are dozens of course offerings across several focus areas.

Each of the study categories contains several individual program or resource offerings. For example, selecting Policy and Government Essentials reveals twelve separate learning offerings. The majority of course offerings are delivered online and can be undertaken by the employee at a time and pace of their choosing. Some of these courses appear in multiple study categories, such as the course Briefing Notes-Writing Good Briefing Notes. Other courses are unique to the individual category such as the Policy and Government Essentials category course offering of POL 100: Policy Essentials in the BC Public Service. Resource offerings in the Policy and Government Essentials category include tools that can assist employees working in the policy area to do a better job.

There are guidelines provided to employees who wish to proceed through the learning materials in a systematic fashion. The Learning Centre has a suggested course matrix guide which can help employees to choose appropriate corporate learning resources. The guide includes timeline and sequence suggestions organized for two distinct groups, all employees and supervisors.

Competency Framework

The public service uses a competency-based approach for the promotion, selection and recruitment of staff. Competency assessment is a common approach to hiring in public

and private organizations. However, most competency research and development occurred within the private sector and as pointed out by McClelland (1973), adapting competency frameworks from one organization to another may not reflect the unique settings of each organization. In addition, there are limitations when attempting to apply competencies derived largely from the private sector to public sector settings (Darling and Cunningham 2015). The public sector environment is quite different from the private sector environment in that work is carried out openly and subject to higher levels of criticism (Cunningham, 2016) and there are different expectations for public organizations to serve citizens versus private sector customers. In addition, public organizations are required to address complex problems that do not have solutions and go far beyond the fiscal bottom line that private corporations face (Darling and Cunningham 2015). These public problems are without solutions as the definitions of what are “problems” and what are the “solutions” are contestable and depend greatly on the views of the individual citizen (Pal 2014). Public organizations also face what are called “wicked” problems that do not have well-described sets of potential solutions as they are not problems of a technical nature (Rittel and Webber, 1973). As well as differences in context between the public and private sector, there are differences in the values of the people who work in these sectors (Perry and Wise, 1990).

Hiring Processes

Most positions in the public service are competed for except for OICs. An employee can also be appointed to a more senior position on a temporary basis for a seven-month term without competition. This temporary appointment can be extended for an additional seven-month term but cannot be extended any further without a competition. In the case of a temporary appointment the employee gains the advantage of having new experiences and the

opportunity to gain new skills which may lead to further promotional opportunities. The flexibility for temporary appointments can be a benefit to an employee experiencing career plateau although those facing a career plateau are less likely to have these opportunities available as it is more likely these opportunities will go to the 'stars' of the organization.

It is also possible to laterally transfer an employee into a position of a similar level without competition. In this case the employee is reassigned, usually with no negative impact in terms of their compensation. Lateral transfers without competition or negative salary impacts offer an excellent vehicle to allow career plateaued employees to have new opportunities.

Positions that are posted for competition are either posted as in-service positions for which only current government employees may apply for, or out of service positions, which are open to members of the broader public. There are generally more positions posted and available in-service. Collective Agreements also govern hiring practices and eligibility requirements for union positions.

All posted positions have corresponding job descriptions. These job descriptions include basic information pertaining to the position such as: the position title; position classification; organization name and work unit; job overview including a description of the job duties, tasks or accountabilities; job requirements; knowledge, skills and abilities required for the position; and the corresponding competencies associated with the position. The position will also be identified as being included or excluded from union membership and will usually contain an indication of the anticipated salary.

Qualification requirements in terms of education and experience as well as required competencies act as both a means of ensuring candidates are qualified for the job but also act

as barriers to employee movement. Job requirements that are grounded in the skills, education, behaviours and competencies to truly be successful in the job will lead to better employee outcomes (Janz et al. 1986). However, careful consideration is required when looking at position requirements to limit biases of a social, cultural or racial basis as candidates who do not possess the basic mandatory requirements for a posted position will be screened out of consideration.

Human Capital Career Systems Model is Dominant Over All

The above review indicates the overall HR structure is consistent with the human capital career systems model as outlined by Sonnenfeld (1989) and Rosenbaum (1984). Study proposition 1 suggested that the dominant career systems model is different at different hierarchical levels of the public service. Proposition 1 also proposed that the human capital career systems model is the dominate career model in the public service over all with the political/power career systems model becoming increasingly common as one moves up in the hierarchy until it becomes the dominate model at the executive level but never entirely replaces the human capital model. It was also anticipated that the tournament systems model exists at all levels of the organization but is almost entirely gone by the senior executive level.

The study collected information on participants gender, job tenure and public service career tenure as all these factors have been identified as potentially important in the broader career plateau research. Chi-Square tests were run for gender and dominate career model ($p=.37$) as well as gender and secondary career model ($p=.72$) and were found to be none significant. Chi-Square tests could not be run for tertiary career model as there were too few responses. The study did not uncover any evidence that men and women view the career

systems model differently. This is not to suggest that career systems models do not impact men and women differently or that there may not be any differences in terms of preference for one model over another, only that gender does not appear to impact which career systems model participants identify as dominant.

Chi-Square tests were run for job tenure (time in the current job without a significant change in responsibilities or content) and dominant career model but the category of 20+ years in the same job had to be dropped from the test as no participants in the study had that much time in the current job. Chi-Square tests with the remaining three categories (1-5 years, 5-10 years and 10-20 years in the current job) were found to be non-significant ($p=.97$). Chi-Square tests were run for job tenure and secondary career model, again dropping the category of 20+ years in the same job, resulting in findings of non-significance ($p=.98$). Chi-Square tests could not be run for tertiary career model as there were too few responses. Current job tenure does not appear to be playing a role in the perceptions of career model in the public service. Similarly, public service tenure (the total time the participant has worked in the public service) and dominant career model was not found to be significant ($p=.2$). Chi-Square testing of public service tenure and secondary career model involved dropping the category of 0-5 years as none of the participants who identified a secondary career model had so few years of public service, and again the results were not significant. Chi-Square tests could not be run for tertiary career model as there were too few responses.

As seen in Table 13, the career systems model was found to be perceived differently (Chi Square $p=.0004$) at different hierarchical levels in the public service. Overall, the study participants identified the power/politic model as the dominant career model (25) followed

closely by the human capital model (21) while the tournament model was identified by only 2 subjects.

Table 13: Dominate Career Systems Model by Position Level

| | Administrative | Professional | Management | Executive |
|----------------|----------------|--------------|------------|-----------|
| Power Politics | 2 | 3 | 9 | 11 |
| Human Capital | 10 | 7 | 3 | 1 |
| Tournament | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

It is not surprising that the human capital model is the most dominate career model amongst the administrative participants in the study. Administrative staff are usually subject to rigorous testing processes involving screening, knowledge and competency testing and typing tests. Positions at this level are always subject to open competitions and no other position level faces the same degree of standardized testing. Even at the professional level, the participants identified the human capital model as the dominate career model. Although at this level the perceptions of alternative career systems models become more common. In addition to the power politic model, the tournament model is seen as the dominate career model by some participants for the only time in the study. It is possible that the union members advance within this level by competing with other union members to gain advancement in a fashion like a tournament. N24's may be competing against each other for N27 positions. Those who win the tournament advance to the N27 position and can now compete for N30 positions. The losers are more likely to be stuck trying again to advance to N27 positions or seek other opportunities at the N24 level. The participants at this level are also aware that the power/politic model is present.

At the management level the power/politic model is perceived as the most dominate career model although the human capital model was still identified by 3 of the 12 members of this group as being the dominate career model. It may be that the perceived differences

are related to the levels within this group. For example, those who are in entry level management positions may still be seeing human capital models while the most senior members of this group on the border of the executive level have noticed the decline of the human capital model and are instead perceiving the power/politic model as dominate.

At the executive level the power/politic model is dominate. Only a single participant out of 12 identified the human capital model as the dominate career model. As this is the only level of the hierarchy that is routinely subject to non-competitive promotion processes through OIC appointments, there is a greater likelihood that issues beyond skill sets are entering promotion decisions. This is not to imply that there is no merit at this level.

Every member of the executive will have considerable experience, qualifications and connections. They did not just get these positions by chance. As one of the participants explained when describing their efforts to advance “even though I used my network of champions to secure my position, I still had to work hard to do it and gain the trust of my superiors.”. Being able to gain the trust and support from those above you, is a skill and arguably an important one in a large complex organization. There is arguably merit in possessing the skills that are required to serve the elected officials and senior civil servants. However, merit and competition are not the same thing. This issue involves considering procedural and distributive justice. Procedural justice is supported by competitions which are held and are open and transparent. Distributive justice, the right person getting the position, can occur regardless of the process followed as the outcome is not necessarily dependent on the process. Staff who are effective and cable can find their position via appointment as well as competition.

Proposition 1 predicted that the human capital model would be the most commonly perceived career model in the public service. Although, more participants in the study identified the power/politic model as dominate, the human capital model was identified as the dominate career model by both administrative staff and professional staff in the study. As previously indicated, these unionized positions make up most of the public service (approx. 78 %). Therefore, if the study results hold up when applied to the broader public service, the human capital model would be the dominate model over all.

Conclusion

The results of the study suggest that position level does impact perceptions of career system models in the public service. Human capital is seen as the dominate model lower in the hierarchy while the power/politic model becomes dominate at the executive level. Given the greater number of employees in the base of the organizational pyramid, if the study findings do reflect the wider public service views, the human capital model is the perceived dominate career model in the public service. A review of the legislative, regulatory, policy and program HR framework in the public service supports the perspective that the overall HR structure of the public service is premised on a human capital career systems model as outlined by Sonnenfeld (1989) and Rosenbaum (1984).

The findings in this section of the study may help explain the negative feelings expressed by public servants in Chapter 8. Public servants who join the public service expecting a human capital career systems model but discover they are operating within a power/politic model could be anticipated to experience negative feelings. These public servants are aware of the legislative and policy framework and the public services commitment to merit. Yet the power/political model (Pfeffer 1981) with its focus on the

manager as politician could be viewed by public servants as a violation of the principles of merit and the political administrative divided. With public servants known commitment to values (Perry and Wise 1990) the disconnect between the expected public service career model and the experienced public service career model could be especially jarring. Prior to exploring the affective impacts of career plateau, the next Chapter explores the causes of career plateau.

CHAPTER 7: CAUSES OF CAREER PLATEAU

The previous section presented the results of the career plateau study in relation to career systems model findings. This chapter analysis the perceived causes of career plateau identified by the study participants.

Introduction

This study reveals that public servants career plateau because of organizational and personal reasons consistent with the findings of other plateau studies. Causes of plateau identified in the study are consistent with Ference et al. (1977) who identified the pyramidal structure of organizations as the root cause of career plateau with several participant responses pointing to the fact that there can only be one DM at the top of the organization. As public servants move up the career ladder there are fewer positions at the top for which they can compete. Despite this fact most study participants are still making efforts to continue to advance their career as revealed in Chapter 9.

Despite the study findings being generally consistent with the broader career plateau literature, public servants appear to face a significant challenge with favoritism which was identified as the most common cause of career plateau in the study. Another area of potentially special significance involves the causes of career plateau uncovered in the culture, gender and discrimination category. These findings may not be unique to the public service but are important given the public services focus on eliminating discrimination within its organizations.

The study also reveals that public servants perceive different causes of career plateau depending on their position level. For example, secretaries are more likely to plateau because they lack the educational or skills requirements to move up, while executives lack

the connections and social support of their superiors. This chapter identifies the causes of career plateau in the public sector as revealed by the study participants and organizes these causes into themes. These themes represent a preliminary attempt to build an understanding of the causes of career plateau in the public service.

Approach and Results

As outlined in Chapter 6, an echo sorting and content analysis procedure was followed which initially resulted in 474 Ascription Cards created from participant responses to the interview questions exploring what participants believe to be the cause of career plateau in the public service. The cards were sorted following a second analysis of the 474 ascription cards by the researcher to ensure that they contributed useful data to answer the study research question “What do public servants perceive to be the reasons for their career plateau?” The analysis resulted in 22 cards being removed as they did not provide useful data. This left 452 valid responses for further sorting, resorting and content analysis. The 452 valid responses were sorted into 11 theme categories by the researcher.

Reliability testing of the response card sorting by two separate groups of volunteer sorters was completed, resulting in a 91% category reliability rating. The researcher modified the card assignments in some cases based on feedback from the two volunteer sorts. In addition to the sorting work completed by the volunteers, the names of the theme categories were further refined with input from the volunteer sorters. The cards were finally placed into categories as summarized in Table 14 and Table 15.

The data was then explored within the context of the existing research to see if the responses are consistent with career plateau theory as discussed in detail in Chapter 2 and the findings in Chapter 4. Unique aspects of the public service career plateau experience

were identified. This was followed by an analysis and exploration of the impact of position level on the causes of career plateau. The subject's illustrative examples used in the following sections are paraphrased for clarity and brevity.

Why do Public Servants Career Plateau?

Table 14: Causes of Career Plateau Categories and Glossary

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Favoritism (78)</p> | <p><i>-The people who move up the fastest are people who kiss up.</i></p> <p><i>-People promote their friends.</i></p> <p><i>-Too often the situation comes up where there is a favorite of the hiring panel and that person receives all the benefit of the doubt during the entire hiring process.</i></p> |
| <p>Interview Skills (52)</p> | <p><i>-How many times have we seen someone get a job and you ask yourself, What?...It can't be because they would make a good manager...It must be because they are really good at interviews.</i></p> <p><i>-I think if we really look at the system the way it is set up now, we will see that the system is promoting and hiring based on how people interview, not on how they do the job.</i></p> |
| <p>Skills and Experience (46)</p> | <p><i>-The first consideration for any job is experience.</i></p> <p><i>-Experience in a related setting with a competency approach is a real asset and is one of the strong points in government's approach.</i></p> <p><i>-You need to see your experience in new ways. Don't get stuck thinking only one type of experience counts.</i></p> |
| <p>Culture, Gender and Discrimination (42)</p> | <p><i>-Even when people want to do things differently without bias its hard because we have 150 years of non-FN rules and stuff built up in our hiring.</i></p> <p><i>-Women are more likely to be introverted and communicate differently and it's a disadvantage during interviews.</i></p> <p><i>-We have all these "young" leader awards but no "old" leader awards. Ageism is alive and well in the public service.</i></p> |
| <p>Legitimate Effort and Competencies (40)</p> | <p><i>-The best indicator of success in government up to the Director level is hard work.</i></p> <p><i>-If you are effective you have better chance of moving up.</i></p> <p><i>- If you act professionally and see your self as a professional it builds up your confidence.</i></p> |
| <p>Negative Traits or Actions (36)</p> | <p><i>-If you are going to move up you have to promote yourself as the best things since sliced bread. No one is as good as you and you better let everyone know it. If you can convince your superiors that that's accurate, your self-promotion is paying off.</i></p> <p><i>-All the people who move up are unaware of their faults. Most executives don't think they have any.</i></p> |

Table 15: Causes of Career Plateau Categories and Glossary (continued)

| | |
|--|--|
| Education (34) | <p><i>-You won't get the interviews for a promotion or even lateral movement if you don't have the right education. It to me is very logical. It makes sense.</i></p> <p><i>-Education is the foundation of the public service. Really education is the foundation of a good society.</i></p> |
| Natural Abilities or Traits (34) | <p><i>-In order for people to get others to like them they have to be able to communicate well. They also have to be good talkers to spin their work experience and make it sound good for their bosses and in interviews.</i></p> <p><i>-People stop moving up once they no longer have the temperament to match their goal or they breakdown and give up from the stress of trying to reach a goal they aren't suited for.</i></p> |
| Networks (33) | <p><i>-You have to put yourself out there and build relationships.</i></p> <p><i>-If you're not in the network you lose access to information and your job is a lot harder. Finding a promotion is a lot harder.</i></p> |
| Life Circumstance (27) | <p><i>-The biggest obstacle to getting ahead or getting a new job is what is happening in your life. I had a bout of cancer and there was no way I could deal with anything beyond my disease.</i></p> <p><i>-I don't think government is aware enough of how life stuff impacts your ability to commit to the job or manage your career.</i></p> |
| Organizational Structure and Change (20) | <p><i>-It is an unfortunate truth there just aren't enough senior positions for us all.</i></p> <p><i>-You can have your own job changed and eliminated during re-orgs. and your opportunities for new jobs limited.</i></p> |

Causes identified in the favoritism category indicate that participants see the opportunities for promotion as linked to their standing in the eyes of their superiors. Participants indicate that “people promote their friends. It’s the number one thing that happens in government.” and it is clear to these participants that having friends and supporters above you in the organization is one of the keys to promotion. The people who are viewed as being mobile by these participants are thought to have an ability to “look good in front of the boss and the boss is usually unaware of what they are doing”. There is a perception that others who succeed at getting ahead set out intentionally to manipulate the

environment by serving up in the organization. However, these connections are different from political connections, rather these connections are viewed as “*social nepotism* and the support that comes from these social connections.”. Some participant responses indicate they recognize they have benefitted from favoritism and that favoritism doesn’t just apply to others. At the more senior levels of the organization the importance of favoritism or at least being seen as being capable of handling the next level of organizational responsibility, is crucial as represented in the following response “As my DM friend keeps telling me, you need to have champions who think you can be a deputy, otherwise you will be an ADM forever”. The challenge the organization has is that some participants view the assessment of being ready for the next level as subject to favoritism and not an objective measure of ability.

Participants indicate that a lack of interview skills are the next most common career plateau barrier associated with the process of hiring and promotion in the public service context. The most common refrain in this category is that the participants view the hiring process as being geared towards hiring people who are good at the interview process, not necessarily good at the job. As illustrated in the comment “How many times have we seen someone get a job and you ask yourself, What?...It can’t be because they would make a good manager...It must be because they are really good at interviews.” there is some frustration and incredulity expressed by participants associated with some of the outcomes of the interview process. While some participants recognize the efforts to use a competency approach as helpful, other participants view this approach as being subject to gaming as in any other hiring process when they say “There is definitely a game to competencies and interviews and the better you work the interview panel the better chance you will be

promoted.”. However, not all responses focus on the process or methods used in hiring, some participants raise issues related to their own disposition or characteristics. For example, one participant contributed “People who get all nervous when they interview show really poorly.”. The participant went on to describe how they shake with nerves and can’t think straight during interviews. Several participants lamented that they wished they could be promoted based on their work performance and not be required to compete for positions.

Skills and experience were the next most commonly identified cause of career plateau in the study. The participants point to the legitimacy and need for appropriate skill sets as part of promotional opportunities. As stated by one of the participants “Having the right experience helps land a job which gives hope that with the right experience new opportunities are possible.”. however, several participants point out that gaining the right experience can be difficult as jobs usually go to those who already have the experience. It creates the possibility of being unable to land a job because of a lack of experience and being unable to gain the experience because they can’t land a job. Despite these challenges, experience is viewed by some participants as such a legitimate requirement that even when unfair promotions occur there is an attempt made by the organization to point to the experience of the successful candidate as justification as expressed by the participant who stated “Even with a nepotism hire there is an attempt to play up their experience”. Participants also try to stay focused on gaining experience through temporary appointments and taking on new roles in their existing jobs. One participant indicated that “don’t get stuck thinking only one type of experience counts”.

Culture, gender and discrimination are pointed to by participants as a barrier to career advancement and mobility. The discrimination described includes examples of not

valuing FN culture and having a competency approach to hiring that is inherently biased towards individuals who can talk about their individual importance in projects and positions in the past. This concern was also shared by some non FN participants who also point to their culture of modesty as hindering their advancement opportunities as western culture promotes an individual focus that makes for better examples of competency use when the individual is asked to talk of a time when “they” demonstrated a competency with a focus on what they did directly, not what they did as a team. This was pointed to as a form of subtle discrimination built into the process. As one FN participant put it “Even when people want to do things without bias its hard because we have 150 years of non-FN rules and stuff built up in our hiring”. While an Asian participant added “In China it is rude and thoughtless to promote yourself over the group”. Gender concerns were also raised with one participant contributing “Women are more likely to be introverted and communicate differently and it’s a disadvantage during interviews”. Regardless of the basis of discrimination, overt or subtle, some participants are aware of this as an issue from their perspective and believe it is contributing to their career plateau.

Responses in the legitimate effort and competencies category identified the importance of legitimate competencies for promotion. As one participant indicated “In order to move up you need to have the appropriate competencies...as roles change, responsibilities and accountabilities change and what competencies you require change”. The most common factor raised in this category is hard work and effectiveness. One participant says, “The best indicator of success in government up to the Director level is hard work.” while another added “If you are effective you have better chances of moving up.” The results of hard work, legitimate effort and indicators of competency in the

responses in this category reflect a perception on the part of participants that it is possible to end their own career plateau through their efforts.

The causes identified in the negative traits and actions category contrast with the legitimate effort's responses. Here the participants identify that the negative characteristics or actions of others are leading them to advancement in the organization. Self promotion and blaming others for failure are perceived by some participants as foundational for explaining why some people advance and why they themselves are career plateaued. It is possible for self promoters to be unaware of their own weaknesses as indicated by the participant who said "All the people who move up are unaware of their faults. Most executives don't think they have any.". Although some participant responses in this category indicate that these negative traits may be a necessary requirement for functioning at a senior level, most responses in this category reflect a belief that these traits are not beneficial to the organization. One participant summarized the issue thus "We are creating our own hell as an organization. We don't have legitimate hiring and promotion processes and we live with the bad performers.".

The participants who identify educational requirements as a barrier to advancement reflect a perception that these requirements are simply part of the job market. This is reflected in statements such as "Education is the foundation of the public service. Really education is the foundation of a good society". However, some participants do identify that even with legitimate educational requirements, there are imbalances in the system. Not all education is equally valued. As the participant who said, "My degree from China is not seen the same way as a degree from Canada." demonstrates a concern that education from different parts of the world is not seen as equally valuable. While the participant who

indicated that “The engineers in my department are more likely to hire other engineers than someone with an arts degree” was pointing to the perception that people will be more inclined to hire people with a similar educational background to themselves. Participants see a value in education both for advancement purposes and for the benefits of staying engaged that accompany learning.

The next most frequently identified cause of career plateau is perceived by participants as involving natural abilities and traits. These are perceived as occurring without the focus or effort of the individual. People are either born with these abilities or they are not as indicated by the response “Naturally some people just do better with stress. They can handle the pressure of higher positions and not let it grind them down. They were just born like that and they have an edge.”. These natural abilities include confidence and communication which allows the individual to shine in their environment and get noticed. There were two participants who singled out their introversion disabilities as one of the natural abilities which really hold them back and for which they believe they have an unfair disadvantage versus others which is not recognized in the current system of hiring and promotion. The responses in this category are summarized well by the participant who said, “People stop moving up once they no longer have the temperament to match their goal or they breakdown and give up from the stress of trying to reach a goal they aren’t suited for.”.

The importance of networks to advancement are pointed out in the responses in the category of the same name. These responses reflect the highly integrated and networked communities that operate in the public sector. The benefits identified in this category extend beyond career mobility and include being more effective at work. As indicated by one respondent “You can expediate policy research with a single call to someone in the right

ministry.”. Responses reflect the sense that networks are essential for a variety of reasons and employees had best stay focused on their networks if they are to avoid career plateau in the public service.

The responses contained in the life circumstances category are diverse and reflect the overwhelming impact that certain events can have on people, both in their private life and their work life. Participants talked of the death of loved ones and how this entirely changed their focus at work, sometimes resulting in a more balanced perspective on the importance of work versus the importance of life and people outside of work, but also reflected the sense from some participants that work became more critical because of the financial uncertainties from illness or dependency in their family. Other participants talked of work as being a means of escaping the life events that they were simply not ready to deal with. However, not all the life events identified involved such extreme examples as death and illness. There were those participants who indicated that as they became career plateaued and they did not see the situation as changing, they began to focus more on family or hobbies. Some of the responses reflected what the participant perceived as a healthier and more wholesome focus on their children which they believe will result in a better life for their children when they grow up. Others reflected on the darker side of being career plateaued with a focus outside of work on alcohol or the example of one participant who indicated his career plateau and boredom at work was one contributing factor to his having an affair and seeing his marriage dissolve.

Finally, there were the responses in the organizational structure and change category. In these responses the participants identified the structure and practices of the organization are causing career plateau. As pointed out by one participant “there is only one DM and we

are not all going to sit in that chair”. The fact that government organizations are pyramid shaped structures leads to a perceived inevitability that there are fewer opportunities the further up one goes in government. While the structure of the organization is viewed in these responses as being an inevitable and unavoidable challenge, the perceived tendency for government to re-organize every few years drew significant and frustrated attention from the participants. Several of the examples given by the participants involved a re-organization occurring just when the participant was about to succeed in getting a new position. There is frustration directed at the organization but also at the people running the competition. Participants express frustration that the competition panel members were unaware of the impending organizational change, or worse that they were aware but proceeded with the competition in case the change did not happen.

Discussion

Building on the work of Ference et al. (1977), Bardwick (1986) and others, the causes of career plateau can be divided into two broad categories, organizational and personal (see Chapter 4 for more detail). Two of the ascription categories from the study “Organizational Structure and Change” and “Networks” contain data that aligns with the organizational causes of career plateau identified in the research. Seven of the ascription categories from the study: “Interview Skills”; “Skills and Experience”; “Legitimate Effort and Competencies”; “Negative Traits or Actions”; “Education”; “Life Circumstances” and “Natural Abilities or Traits” align with the personal causes of career plateau identified in the research.

There are two categories which might be best labelled as findings specific to the public service. “Favoritism” is the single most commonly referenced cause of career plateau

in the study and represents a unique challenge to public sector organizations given the history of the public sectors attempts to grapple with nepotism and political patronage. While the participant responses in the “Culture, Gender and Discrimination” category may not be unique to the public service, the issues raised are also of special significance given the public services commitment to eliminating discrimination within its organizations. The subject’s illustrative examples used in the following sections are paraphrased for clarity and brevity.

Organizational Causes of Career Plateau

The ascriptions identified in the “Organizational Structure and Change” category depict a form of organizationally caused plateau. The most obvious example of this is provided by subject 27 who states, “What is really holding me down now are there are fewer and fewer opportunities to move up.”. This response is consistent with the fundamental cause of career plateau identified by Ferrence et al. 1977 related to the pyramidal structure of organizations. Similarly, subject 31 claims “You must understand that at some point you will reach a peak, I will never be a DM.” and subject 34’s statement “In order to move up there has to be an opening and these become fewer and fewer the higher you go.”. Both subjects identify the structure of the organization as one of the causes of their career plateau. They are not associating the challenge of advancement as related to themselves or their personal characteristics but rather as a part of the make up of the external environment. Other participants comment that the structure of government organizations into specific areas of focus, be it health or environment, impacts their ability to advance. For example, subject 2 expressed regret over leaving their base position in forests for which they were well qualified for, to move to a new ministry resulting in a poorer fit between their career

aspirations and their education and experience. While subject 13 suggested "...to move up I thought I had to leave my professional position in environment...now I think that was a mistake.". These subjects and others are pointing to the organizational preferences for specific educational and professional backgrounds which are part of the organizational culture specific to a Ministry. While the individual may be able to pursue new educational qualifications, the primary cause of plateau identified rests with the organization and not the individual.

Another issue of concern in this category is the propensity for government to reorganize. Following any change in government there is an inevitable restructuring and these changes impact government employees. As subject 2 noted "Organizational changes can leave you in a position that has nothing to do with your abilities, skills or experience, your new role is just chance.". The participants identify the broader organizational changes outside of their control as contributing to their lack of mobility.

Ascriptions in "Networks" reflect the highly integrated and networked communities that operate in the public sector. Subjects indicate that networks are important both as a means of career mobility (e.g. subjects 9, 11, 22, 24, 25, 30, 31, 40, 41, 44, 45) as well as an aid to getting your work done (e. g. subjects 21, 25, 31, 38, 45, 46). The responses highlighting the benefits of networks for organizational advantage focus on: increasing the employees profile as suggested by subject 24 "You have others who talk you up and put your name forward."; identification of opportunities as indicated by subject 31 stating "You need your network to identify opportunities and advocate for you."; and giving you opportunities directly in order to bypass the normal advancement process as subject 11 provides "Networks can tap you on the shoulder for a TA.". The responses focused on the

actual work performance benefits including: being more efficient in the position, such as subject 38 stating “You can expediate policy research with a single call to someone in the right ministry.”; effectiveness in working across agencies and government as indicated by subject 31 “You need this network to gain access to skills and resources outside your area...without it you can’t deliver on cross government initiatives”; to supporting practical daily activities as indicated by the secretary who contributed “It isn’t really about getting ahead as much as securing your position. Knowing what is going on helps me support my director.”. However, there are downsides to these network associations. As subject 17 complained “They will use you to get what they want, which is to get ahead themselves. Only if you can help them do you have value.”. In contrast to the organizational causes of career plateau, which are generally seen as being beyond the individual’s control, the personal causes of career plateau rest with the employee and are discussed next.

Personal Causes of Career Plateau

“Interview Skills” responses demonstrate several concepts that are somewhat different, but all arise during an interview. Some of the skill is related to simple experience and familiarity with the interview process. Responses such as subject 36 saying you must understand the interview process, or subject 44 indicating you require “experience and practice with interviews.” identify the importance of having been through the interview process previously. Other responses in this category point towards the frame of mind of the participant when they go into an interview. As subject 16 indicated “you need to get rolling during the interview to get on.” or subject 3 “I went in to the interview with the wrong attitude.” and subject 36 who suggested “I was over confident.”. For these responses it isn’t about experience, its about the approach they have to the interview in terms of their attitude

or focus during the interview. Another subgroup of responses within this category include those traits that are related directly to innate skills of performance on an interview. For example, subject 41 stated “some people can interview with confidence and a personal presence.” while subject 47 adds “some people know how to read others during an interview.”. Finally, there are responses in this category that suggest there are simply bottom lines of understanding that you either have or don’t that are tested for during the interview.

Responses in the “Skills and Experience” category demonstrate that respondents see this as foundational to being able to do a job. Responses such as subject 34 “The first consideration for any job is always experience.” and subject 21 “You need to have the right skills to do the job.” and subject 10 “There is more merit in having the skills then being good at interviews.”. These responses indicate that skills and experience are generally seen as foundational elements to a promotion. There are also responses that demonstrate frustration with the inability to get the appropriate skills and experience to be successful as indicated by subject 44’s lament “You don’t have the experience, so you can’t land the job and you can’t get the experience until you land the job.” There is also a recognition that not all experience is created equal as suggested by subject 27. Other responses in this category recognize the value of the current government approach and flexibility presented in the hiring process, such as subject 26 stating “Experience in a related setting is recognized in a competency approach, that’s a real strong point in government.” Experience and skills requirements also provide objective criteria which seems to be valued by the participants. For example, subject 18 indicates “It is easier to let people know when they don’t do well in an interview if you keep to objective things like knowledge and experience.”. Finally, the

importance of skills and experience is revealed in this telling comment by subject 34 “Even in situations where someone is being hired because of favoritism there is still some attempt to justify the promotion with a reference back to the individual’s experience.”.

The “Legitimate Effort and Competencies” category responses reveal a high premium is placed on hard work by several participants. Subjects 43, 48, 29, 30 and 28 all suggest that hard work is a key consideration for advancement. While participants recognize that other considerations are also important, there were no responses that suggested hard work would lead to fewer opportunities. At most participants express regret that hard work isn’t valued enough, but don’t suggest it is not valued at all. There is also a recognition that competencies are required to advance. Subject 28 indicates “You have to be a competent strategic thinker to advance to executive.” and subject 31 adds “Your ability to use competencies will grow with the position responsibilities.”. Performance on the job was recognized by several responses, such as subject 35 stating “It doesn’t matter if you are a secretary or a director, you have to be viewed as being able to perform at the next level.”. The ability to perform brings legitimate expectations and recognition that the employee is going to be effective in the future as suggested by subject 42 “If they know you and know you have done a good job, they are confident you will be able to do things right.”. Finally, legitimate effort can involve caring, not just hard work. When people care about what they do it is seen to be linked to the effort they put forward. As suggested by subject 25 “Caring is very important, I worked in an environment with people who cared about what they did, it was less like work and more like a passion.”.

“Negative Traits or Actions” reveal participants have a critical view of those they perceive to be advancing for the wrong reasons. Subject 2 suggests that a gift for gab and a

healthy lack of self awareness are displayed by their superiors. A secretary, subject 25 indicates that “some of the sneaky secretaries don’t share information and they usually get ahead.”. Subject 26 has rather scathing views of their executive in suggesting, “The number one reason people make it to executive is because they serve up, everything else is secondary.”. Subject 32 points out that they perceive their superiors to be delivering on their own careers, while a member of executive suggested the best way to avert attention away from your own failures is to focus on the failures of others. However, there is some recognition that the negativity against senior staff could involve less than a factual understanding of what these leaders are all about. Subject 34 indicated “the more senior you are, the more people will hate you and want to see you brought low because people are naturally jealous of those doing better than they are.”.

“Education” responses generally recognize the legitimacy of education as a requisite for advancement. Education is seen as more important over time and for more senior positions by some participants, such as subject 44 stating “If you are going to move into the higher union positions you need to have more education.”, while subject 43 indicates “nowadays people will sometimes have master’s degrees for even entry level policy positions.”. Not all education is equal as pointed out by subject 38 who criticized his manager of policy for having a zoology degree. With education there is a perceived concern with selection bias, as pointed out by subject 5 “engineers tend to hire engineers.”. As you move up education is viewed by some participants as less valuable as when subject 30 says “I think when you move up education becomes a threat. The director doesn’t want a manager who knows more than them.”

“Natural Abilities or Traits” responses closely align with the personal causes of career plateau. Respondents identified traits that they believe provide advantages such as a sense of confidence (subjects 26, 9, 38, 45 and 46), personal motivation (subject 21), ability to handle stress (subject 47) and communication skills (subjects 7 and 27). These abilities are seen differently than skills which can be learned or developed through experience. As subject 38 succinctly put it “We all have personal traits we are born with. We can’t really change them, and certain traits are more valuable than others.”. These causes are viewed as the natural gifts that guide the success or failure of the individual. Some participants were grateful for these gifts, or envious of others who were born with them. Abilities seem to be viewed as being a form of cap on the maximum potential of the employee as suggested by subject 31 “People stop moving up once they no longer have the temperament to match their goals or they breakdown and give up from the stress of trying to achieve a goal they aren’t suited for.”.

Employee responses in the category of “Life Circumstances” cover off several stresses such as the death of a spouse or parent, a drug addicted child, raising a child with disabilities, dealing with health issues such as cancer, being a single parent or just the challenges of raising a young family. All of these are life events which participants identify as impacting work and the importance of work. As stated by several participants and exemplified by subject 10 “You need stability at work to allow you to deal with life events.”. The dominant theme is that these life events leave the employee with no energy for work. They struggle to complete the basic tasks at work with nothing left to focus on finding a new job. The importance of work generally fades away considering these life challenges, although one participant (subject 36) noted work can become even more

important during a time of family illness as their partner was unable to work and the employees job became even more important to the family's financial well being.

The responses are not all focused on the challenges outside of work, some of the responses reflect the fact that employees find joy outside of work with hobbies (subject 37) family (subjects 34 and 14) or just looking for more balance (subjects 2 and 13). Like the complexities of life, the participants are commenting on, there is no overarching theme of life events beyond their complex interaction with work and the challenges each employee faces in dealing with these entwined but separate worlds.

Favoritism and Discrimination

Favoritism was the primary reason given by participants for their career plateau. Favoritism and nepotism have been a significant concern in the British public service since the time of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1854. Reading this report today one is struck by the similarities of some of the situations described in this study and the challenges in the civil service over 160 years ago. Nepotism in the context of this study does not involve the political nepotism highlighted in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report (1854), rather the participant responses in the favoritism category address the social and friendship connections as a form of favouritism that could be labeled social nepotism. As subject 34 describes it "When I say nepotism, I don't mean political nepotism that we think of with tin pot dictators, I mean social connections and the nepotistic support that comes from these social connections.". This form of nepotism does not seem to be perceived by respondents as dependent on a specific political party.

The data reveals that the participants believe the benefits of favoritism play out in several ways. The friends and supporters of staff can advocate for them, build their

reputations and find them opportunities as suggested by subjects 1, 4, 5 and others. These awareness raising activities centre around both raising the organizational awareness of the traits of the favored employee, as well as making the favored employee aware of the opportunities in the organization. The awareness of organizational opportunities may be followed directly with appointments for non-competed OIC positions or temporary appointments to higher level positions which support the continued growth of the favoured employee in terms of skill acquisition as well as broadening their contacts and networks. Even lateral movement without promotion can result in increased network opportunities, new skill acquisition and further opportunities for growth consistent with the intent of increasing the likelihood the favored employee will be able to move forward. Participants indicate that these actions can not be easily detected.

But where the benefits of perceived favoritism are most painful for the study participants, involve perceptions of competitions with predetermined outcomes. Subjects 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 32, 34 all raise issues related to the ability to run competitions with predetermined outcomes. The impact of these competitions on the employees is expressed in the frustration they experience. The subjects repeatedly express that they go into competitions knowing that the favored employee is gaining the benefits of the panels support. They do not always know this ahead of time, which seems only to make them angrier, but when they believe they did better on the competition than the favoured employee and don't succeed, they lose faith in the organization.

Subjects 1, 19, 32 and 35 indicate that the manipulation which they perceive, in terms of staff seeking to gain favour by serving up or spinning their boss, may not even be recognized by the boss. The manipulation that is observed by the study participants results

in them finding it shocking that the boss can't see it and they feel disdain for both the boss and those doing the manipulation. "Kissing up, brown nosing, sucking up", there are many derogatory terms used by the study participants to describe the actions of those employees they see as seeking to curry favour with their superiors. Participants also comment that the person doing the manipulation may not even be aware that what they are doing is currying favour. Some of this lack of awareness of currying favour that is observed might be related to the ambiguity that is also expressed by the study participants in terms of how they should position themselves for advancement.

Some study participants believe being friends with your boss is both legitimate and smart (e.g. subjects 6, 19, 22, 30, 32). Participants seem to resent others gaining the benefits of favoritism while accepting their own benefits from favoritism as somehow legitimate and right. While some subjects (e.g. 1, 5 and 13) recognize their own participation in and benefit from what they see as an unfair system, others (subjects 8 and 32) seem to think that their being favored is justified. The sense of appropriateness of the favoritism appears related to the employee's perception of themselves as the victim or beneficiary of favouritism. However, there are also perceived risks to playing the favoritism game. As suggested by subject 44 "You can be backed by the wrong people and pay the price following a power struggle.". Subject 1 and 5 both also believe they have gained and lost by backing a specific boss during a power play. It was also noted by subjects 1, 18 and 20 that the perceived ability to play favorites is decreased in union situations.

Elimination of discrimination is a goal Canadian public services are focused on. Participants in the current study express such concerns. Responses in the "Culture, Gender and Discrimination" category uncover issues of systemic concern related to the hiring

practices and culture of the public service. For example, subject 16 indicated “People tend to value youth and the enthusiasm and energy young people are supposed to have.”. Or subject 8 who said, “It is obvious to me that only certain ways of thinking and certain experiences, that is male experiences, are valued.”. And subject 33’s sad claim “I think I don’t have much of a future in the Ministry because I’m First Nations.”. Participants are not pointing to themselves as the cause of their plateau. They do not accept that the challenges they face are related to something they can control or something that should be a legitimate limitation on their advancement. They are recognizing their organizations to some extent reflect the larger society. Their answers pointed to a general resignation to the challenges they face and involved less anger than the responses to favoritism. The participants also seemed remarkably forgiving of the organization. Although they still see the unfairness of their situation, they also appear to be more forgiving as government organizations are not immune to the larger societal context in which discrimination occurs. The feelings associated with all the causes outlined above are covered in Chapter 8.

ADMs and Secretaries Don’t Face the Same Career Plateau

An analysis of the participant data reveals the differences in career plateau faced by employees at different levels of the organization. While there are common elements, such as favoritism and networks, the relative importance of these common themes changes at different levels of the organization.

Administrative and professional staff were most likely to describe facing barriers to upward mobility related to educational, skills and experience requirements. While networks, favoritism etc. were identified as a challenge, the educational, skills and experience requirements were of greater concern than expressed amongst those at higher levels of the

organization. For example, administrative staff identified educational requirements to enter the professional category as a significant barrier. This was not an issue raised by the management or executive level participants. The administrative professional will also be less likely to have the direct experience and competencies required to move into the professional category, such as a lack of direct experience undertaking independent analysis, preparing briefing notes or drafting Cabinet documents.

However, at the more senior levels the importance of skills, education and experience is not emphasised in the participant responses. The importance of these measures in securing further opportunities does not resonate with participants in the way that favoritism and networks do. Perhaps the participants in the senior ranks simply assume they have the skills, knowledge and experience required to advance.

The opportunities to gain the support and build the networks required for advancement were also raised as concerns for the administrative and professional employees. Even though the management and executive employees indicated a much greater importance on support from above for further advancement, study participants in senior positions were less likely to indicate they lacked the opportunities for building support and networks. The opportunity to build networks may exist at the higher levels but the fierce competition and limited number of positions off set the chances that a successful promotion will be pursued. For the senior level participants, the importance of securing favor from above is more important.

Hard work and effort were also mentioned with greater frequency by the administrative and professional staff. This is in keeping with the perception of the dominate career systems model at this level of the organization being the human capital model.

Within that career systems model the need to invest in your education, skills, and working hard can be anticipated to result in pay offs in terms of promotions and new assignments Rosenbaum (1984). Senior level participants who view a power/politic model as the dominate career model are not likely to see the same returns on investing in skills or working hard as it is the securing of support from more senior positions and building a power base that are key to progress in a power/politic model (Pfeffer 1981). Senior level participants were also more likely to recognize in their answers the basic requirement to work hard, it is more of a given at these levels of the organization. There were few comments made by study participants that suggest a perception that ADM's don't work hard, in fact most comments made about the work life balance of senior positions indicate that the emphasis is on work, not life.

Concern with discrimination does not appear to be vested at any one level of the organization. When the issue is raised it is raised by participants based on their cultural, racial or gender backgrounds. It is not really seen as a part of the system in a hierarchical sense but rather a challenge to the system over all, based on societal norms. Similarly, the challenges of life, such as illness, do not appear to be identified differently between the levels of the participants in the study. Life events impact all employees regardless of level.

Conclusion

The perceived causes of career plateau by study participants are generally in keeping with the existing findings in the career plateau research. Some of the perceived causes of career plateau in the public sector are similar to the organizational causes identified in the broader research. The pyramidal structure of government ministries and their specific areas of focus, such as health or environment, impacts employees career mobility. In response to

specific focus areas, networks are seen by participants as being a means of supporting career mobility via increasing their profile and awareness in the ministry and across government. These organizational causes are generally seen as being part of an environment external to the participant. Other perceived causes of career plateau are more aligned with the personal causes of career plateau identified in the broader plateau research. These causes involve traits, skills, abilities, effort or actions within the individual's control. There were also two categories of perceived causes, favoritism and discrimination, that were identified which may have special meaning and significance in a public sector setting.

The participants provided a detailed explanation of their perceived causes of career plateau and the resulting data was used as a first attempt to name and describe the causes of career plateau in a Canadian public service context that the researcher is aware of. The data also suggests that career plateau is caused by different reasons at different levels of the organization. Administrative and professional staff are more likely to perceive career plateau as related to educational, skills and experience requirements, a view which is not shared to the same extent with those more senior in the organization. For the most senior level participants, the securing of favor from those above was perceived to be the most important cause of career plateau, although the role of perceived favoritism is not absent from any level of the organization.

The perceived dominant career systems model, either human capital or power/political is likely acting as a frame of reference for participants when they identify what they believe to be the primary cause of their career plateau. However, there are also some perceived causes of career plateau that are shared by participants at all levels of the organization. The

categories of discrimination and life circumstances identify causes of career plateau that impact all employees' perceptions of career plateau unrelated to their position level.

CHAPTER 8: AFFECTIVE IMPACTS

The previous section presented the results of the career plateau study in relation to the perceived causes of career plateau as identified by study participants. This chapter analysis the perceived affective impacts of career plateau upon the study participants.

Introduction

As revealed in the systematic review study, career plateau is associated with several adverse or negative feeling outcomes. Prominent amongst these outcomes is decreased satisfaction (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chao 1990; Chay et al. 1995 etc.); Increased intention to turnover (Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Helimen at al. 2008; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lee 2003; Tremblay et al. 1995 etc.); and decreased commitment (e.g. Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002 etc.). While involving fewer studies, career plateau has also been found to be associated with increased stress (Allen et al. 1998; Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; and McCleese et al. 2007) and psychological distress (Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese et al. 2007; and Wang et al. 2014). The present study findings are examined in light of these existing research findings.

Public servants facing career plateau in the current study experience negative feelings such as anger, fear, jealousy, resentment, shame and decreased self-worth. However, not all feelings associated with career plateau are negative as participants also express feelings of ambivalence and acceptance of their situation. When employees have succeeded in finding a new position, they feel hope, pride and happiness.

Using the echo sorting technique and content analysis to examine the affective response data collected in the study revealed that study participants feelings of

disappointment and dejection, sadness and despondency are consistent with findings uncovered in the broader career plateau research. However, other findings may reflect differences in the public service and the private sector and are explored in this chapter. Statistical testing of position level of the participants on affective impacts revealed no significant differences (Chi square $p=.63$).

Approach and Results

Following the echo sorting and content analysis procedures outlined in Chapter 5, 349 affective impacts cards were initially created from participant responses to the interview questions exploring how participants feel about career plateau. After initially creating the cards, a second analysis was completed of each card by the researcher to ensure that they contributed useful data to answer the study question “How does career plateau emotionally impact public servants?”. The second analysis resulted in 79 cards being removed as they did not provide useful data. This left 270 valid responses for further sorting, resorting and content analysis which resulted in the identification of 13 affective response categories as summarily outlined in Table 16 and 17.

Reliability testing of the card sorting by two separate groups of volunteer sorters was completed, resulting in a 94% category reliability rating. The researcher modified the card assignments in some cases based on feedback from the two volunteer sorts. In addition to the sorting work completed by the volunteers, the names of the theme categories were further refined with input from the volunteer sorters.

Feelings Associated with Career Plateau

Table 16: Affective Impacts Categories Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Positive Feelings (40) | <p><i>-When I win a job because of my networks I feel pride and affirmation in my approach to managing my career.</i></p> <p><i>-I feel confident in myself. I feel better with the job I'm doing. I think it's a great sign that the managers trust me enough to promote me. It gives me hope.</i></p> |
| Anger (32) | <p><i>-I feel angry and frustrated. It takes a lot of time and emotional energy to apply, let alone compete, and then it's a rigged competition.</i></p> <p><i>-When I lost in a sham competition, I felt duped and full of anger and despair.</i></p> |
| Injustice Fairness (31) | <p><i>-Its so unfair, such a hypocrisy, but I feel so powerless to do anything about it. How could you?</i></p> <p><i>-the appearance of being fair is more important then being fair. How crazy is that?</i></p> |
| Disappointment Dejection (24) | <p><i>-If I fail to land a position because of my reputation I feel cynical, demoralized and disappointed.</i></p> <p><i>-I feel a bit defeated and apathetic. I despair of ever moving up further and just want to hide and keep my job until I retire.</i></p> |
| Ambivalent Feelings (24) | <p><i>-Sometimes they get a position from favoritism, but they are good people. I'm not sure how to feel because it isn't fair, but it is sort of fair.</i></p> <p><i>-It makes me feel good when someone is promoted because of their experience and education, it's the way it should be. But I'm also sad because I don't have the same opportunity.</i></p> |
| Decreased Self-Worth (21) | <p><i>-My skills aren't valued and that tells me I'm not valued.</i></p> <p><i>-I know I'm not popular at work. I'm not sure what I can do about it, but I don't feel good. If anything, it is a constant sense of being a loser.</i></p> |
| Sad and Despondent (20) | <p><i>-At first there was anger at the favoritism. Than I just came to realize that's the way it is. Now I'm just sad.</i></p> <p><i>-I feel excluded and hurt. You feel like a second-class citizen and you become very sad.</i></p> |
| Accepting (17) | <p><i>-I would have had to really push myself in that the job would have been a stretch. I can rationalize anything. A better candidate won the job.</i></p> <p><i>-The failure would have brought me down even more, so I had to just accept it and pride myself on my professionalism.</i></p> |

Table 17: Affective Impacts Categories Glossary (Continued)

| | |
|--|---|
| Regret (15) | <p><i>-I regret and feel annoyed that in the public sector you aren't rewarded for real performance.</i></p> <p><i>-Sometimes I'm despondent and regret that I ever spent my entire adult life in the service of an organization so unworthy of me and my efforts.</i></p> |
| Jealousy and Resentment (13) | <p><i>-I'm jealous of all the people who have made ADM when I haven't. We were directors together and they benefitted from favoritism, but really, I'm jealous that I backed the wrong people in hoping to get ahead.</i></p> <p><i>-I often feel resentment towards the assholes in charge, some jealousy to.</i></p> |
| Embarrassment (11) | <p><i>-I was embarrassed when I blew the interview. Everyone knew, and it feels very public.</i></p> <p><i>-They can say all they want that they respect you, but you can tell by the way they act and the way they talk that they are looking down on you. Its embarrassing.</i></p> |
| Shame (11) | <p><i>-When I lose an opportunity during the interview, I'm ashamed of myself and my performance.</i></p> <p><i>-I'm ashamed of my career. I haven't done as well as the people I graduated with and when I see them and meet with them socially, I know they are judging me and how I have failed to progress.</i></p> |
| Fear (11) | <p><i>-My families well being is at risk the longer I'm stuck here. I'm afraid this won't end well.</i></p> <p><i>-I can't afford to retire but I can't compete anymore. It is a viscous circle of fear and regret.</i></p> |

The study participants expressed positive feelings associated with finding new positions. Though the study was focused on career plateau, during the focused interviews subjects reflected on the times in the past when they were successful in getting a new position. Success was linked to increased feelings of confidence and self worth. The overall narrative expressed by participants responses in the "Positive Feelings" category was one of joy but there was also a palpable sense of loss that these moments of success are not viewed by the participants as likely to occur again. This category involved the greatest number of responses in the study but does not indicate the feelings associated with career

plateau are positive as there are multiple categories which involve negative feelings as seen in Table 16 and 17.

The category of “Anger” was identified as the second most common affective response to career plateau followed closely by “Feelings of Injustice”. Feelings of anger were most intense when directed at the leadership of the organization as well as the members of hiring committees, especially the chair of the hiring committee. There was also a generalized anger expressed towards the broader organization, especially in terms of how the organization allows hiring processes to occur in the way they do. Several participants expressed feeling a sense of injustice. There was a desire expressed to have the hiring and promotion process run in a fair and open manner and participants in the study did not express a sense that that is currently the case. One trend the researcher noted is that participants expressing anger and injustice would sometimes refer to a past time when they perceived the organization to be fairer. It would be interesting to study the effects of perceptions of justice over the course of a career in terms of hiring and promotion.

The category of “Disappointment and Dejection” involved responses directed mainly at the organization, a disappointment with the way government hires and promotes. However, there were several responses in this category where the disappointment was directed at the individual. There was a recognition that some of the responsibility for being career plateaued rested with the participant as expressed in one respondent as “I feel lazy and disappointed in myself. Both at work and in finding a new job.” Another respondent reflected similar feelings when they noted “I was disappointed in myself. I know I could have done better. I could have prepared a bit better.” Despite the identification by some participants that this disappointment is self directed, most of the responses in this category

are focused on the organization rather than the individual as summarized by the participants who said, “You feel dejected with an unfair process. Not just dejected because you didn’t win and were being used, you feel dejected that this is the government we work for. “.

“Ambivalent” feelings to being career plateaued were also expressed by the participants. These responses were linked to perceptions that in some cases, although the participant failed in a competition, the person who did win was known to them and generally seen in a positive light as captured by the following response, “Sometimes they get a position from favoritism, but they are good people. I’m not sure how to feel because it isn’t fair, but it is sort of fair.”. In these cases, the outcome of the process is seen as fair even though the process itself is not. The reasons behind the failure to win the position were important to participants in terms of their ambivalent feelings. One participant commented that favoritism in interviews for social reasons makes sense as people are likely to hire their friends and it is part of human nature, however they were still annoyed that they had wasted their time in preparing for the interview. Overall the responses in this category tend to involve ambivalent feelings because the participants are seeing the issue of career plateau as complicated which invokes complicated and conflicting emotional responses.

Participants expressed feelings of “Decreased Self-Worth” in response to career plateau. The decreased self-worth develops from the message’s participants perceive that failures to get ahead are reflections of the value of themselves as a person, such as indicated by one participants statement “My skills aren’t valued and that tells me I’m not valued.”. Another participant is more direct stating “My self-worth has declined. I feel worthless and my intelligence is waning.”. What appears to be a common thread within this response category is that the perceived reason for not advancing is personalized to the individual and

extends to other aspects of who they are beyond work. A lack of appropriate skills or ability to advance at work is generalized to a lack of worth as a person.

Participants identify feelings of “Sadness Despondency and Regret” flowing from being career plateaued. The sadness expressed by participants develops as they do not have hope that their situation will change. They indicate that the consistency in the outcomes, that is they will continue to experience career plateau, leads to the sadness rather than why the plateau is happening. A lack of skills, education, friends etc. do not seem to create the sadness, rather it is just the characteristics of the situation, the stability of the cause, that leads to despair. The sadness is expressed as profound and impacting on other areas of the participants life outside of work. Sadness is sometimes paired with regret that takes the form of regret that the participant did not take advantage of past opportunities, such as opportunities to build connections and support for their career. While the regret focused more on actions that occur at work, regret also included statements of regret regarding what education the study participant pursued or failed to pursue.

The “Acceptance” category was expressed by some participants. Cases of acceptance included an acceptance that the outcome of competitions does result in descent employees getting the position and the realisation by the participant that they may not be a good fit for the position. In other cases, participants expressed feelings of acceptance based on turning their focus to outside of work, such as spending more time with family. In other examples participants expressed a feeling that the situation is out of their control so there is nothing that can be done but to accept the situation for what it is. Their acceptance allows them to develop a determination not to get down about their career plateau. A few responses indicated that the participant had simply given up but wasn’t feeling down about it. They

recognize they have some benefits from work, such as the pay that comes from a steady job, and that they can be happy despite the limited opportunities for advancement.

Participants examples in the “Jealousy” and “Resentment” categories are directed towards those who are moving up in government while they are career plateaued. Sometimes the resentment is expressed as a desire or wish to have the skills or good fortune that they perceive others to have. In other cases, the jealousy is focused on the favoritism and friendship that seems to benefit others over themselves. Participant responses in this category demonstrate a sense of awareness, they know that they are jealous, in a manner different from the examples in other categories such as the anger responses.

The categories of “Shame” and “Embarrassment” both express concerns that the participants have regarding the public nature of career plateau. When a participant is unsuccessful at an interview the fact that other members of the work unit are aware that they were not successful can not be hidden. Both the hiring panel members as well as anyone assisting with the competition, such as the administrative support staff who schedule the interview times, become aware of the failed attempt of the participant in trying for the new position. The participant is then required to see the people everyday after the failed interview and continue to experience the failure over again and feel shame. Several responses in this category also indicate that participants have perceptions that other people around the office are talking about their failure and a negative narrative is thereby created about them and their work potential.

Finally, several participants identified feeling “Fear” related to their career plateau. These participants expressed a desire to hide and stay below the radar for fear they would be fired if they are noticed. Their belief that their skills are becoming dated and the fact they

are no longer competitive weighs on them. Should they lose their job they fear they will be unable to win a new position resulting in the loss of their economic well being. The potential loss of employment is seen as a threat to those they love who are dependent on them.

Discussion

The responses of the participants are examined in the context of the findings of career plateau literature, career systems model theory and attributional theory. Subject's illustrative examples used in the following section are paraphrased for clarity and brevity.

Positive Feelings

As outlined in attributional theory discussed in Chapter 2, success in any endeavour is usually accompanied by an immediate positive feeling. Once the causes of the success are reflected on, other feelings may arise, but in general if the outcome is successful than feelings tend to be positive (Weirner 1985). The affective responses identified in the positive feelings' category describe the feelings participants associate with winning a competition or getting a new job. The cause of the success varied, such as success related to having connections or hard work, though the positive feelings were consistent. For example, subject 42 indicated that "My interviewing skills lead to success...I think it's a great sign that managers trust me enough to promote me. I feel more confident in myself." And subject 34 commenting on the importance of their interview skills and the impact of winning on their emotional state and self-confidence "It shows me I understand what the ministry is looking for, great confirmation."

Some successes are based on factors which are important in a human capital career model (Rosenbaum 1984) such as education, experience and hard work. For example,

subject 33 attributed successful competition outcomes to their education and stated “I’m proud of my education.”, while subject 30 said “I work hard in school and it is good to have that pay off with a promotion.”. The hard work in school is viewed as an investment with a hoped-for return in the form of a promotion. The benefits of experience are highlighted by subject 32 “If someone gets a job because of their experience...they really earned it.”; or subject 10 “...always feel good when I land a job because of my experience”; and subject 42 “winning on experience tells you your not just wasting your time and collecting a paycheck.”. The responses reveal that participant experience is seen as an investment that is rewarded by a new opportunity.

Other responses reflect the positive feelings associated with factors that would be important in a power/politic model Pfeffer (1981). For example, subject 40 highlights the positive feelings associated with winning a position because of political connections “Politics are part of governing, if they aren’t something is seriously wrong. I feel good about getting a position because of my political connections.”, while subject 28 contributes “I take pride in my political abilities.”. The importance of favoritism and support from above is also reflected in the comments of subjects 34 “When I get a job because of nepotism I feel gratitude to the people who supported me.”, and subject 24, “I feel really grateful to the person who helped me land the job.”, as well as recognizing the effort it takes to secure support from superiors, as indicated in subject 14’s response “I worked my ass off (to gain favoritism) I earned it!”. Securing promotion by reputation was identified by subjects 9 “when I won a job because of my reputation...I gain a feeling of comradery.” and 42 “it builds confidence to have myself recognized.”. Finally, the reliance on networks to secure a promotion and resulting positive feelings were identified by subject 31 “Winning a

job because of my network gives me pride and confirms building a network is the right approach.”.

The above responses appear to reflect a perspective on the part of the participant that they earned their success because of their actions. It doesn't matter if the actions involved politics or hard work, these causes are all seen as being part of a process of career advancement. Even when success is due to luck or chance, the participant is still likely to experience positive feelings. The causes are not as important as the outcome in terms of the positive feelings engendered.

These findings do not seem to be in keeping with Weiner's (1985) suggestion that initial emotional responses are “outcome dependent-attribution independent” at least initially but will modify to an “outcome dependent-attributional dependent” response after further reflection. Despite adequate time for reflection on the part of participants, they seem to stay in an outcome-dependent-attribution independent response to career success. Positive emotions are expressed regardless of the cause of the success. Perhaps the desire to be successful in career advancement is of such a high priority for participants that they will create narratives that they deserve the success in a manner that reinforces the positive feelings associated with landing a new position. As Weiner (1985) himself suggests, the predictions associated with attributional theory do not constitute absolute laws and achievement success related to promotions may be one area where the outcome is of such importance that individuals do not allow subsequent reflection to entirely take away the positive feelings, they experience with success regardless of later attributions.

Anger

Hurst et al. (2017) found that negative feelings associated with career plateau may arise because of a lack of fairness both in the process designed to assign work (i.e. procedural justice) and in the outcomes resulting from that process (i.e. distributive justice). It is perhaps this sense of injustice (both procedural and distributive) that leads to the passionate expressions of anger expressed by participants when discussing the emotional impacts of career plateau caused by favoritism. Although some of the feelings associated with favoritism caused career plateau were stated mildly, such as subject 30 who claimed to “feel cheated and angry.” and subject 35 who flatly stated, “You start to feel run down, bored and annoyed all at the same time.”. Other responses reflect a higher level of frustration and hostility invoked by perceived favoritism. Subject 1 indicated in a strident tone “We promote the wrong kind of people, shit who hire shit to work with them and replace them.” with a similar theme and tone adopted by subject 13 “I’m angry and resentful that executive is too stupid to see who they are promoting and why.”. Other participants not only adopted a tone of anger and indignation but also appeared visibly agitated when discussing favoritism. Examples in this group included subject 19 who contributed “I’m so angry this occurs and is allowed to occur in the public sector.”; subject 25 stating “It is annoying when someone gets an opportunity because they are friends with the boss.” or subject 12 who lamented “It takes a lot of effort to prepare for a competition and than favoritism makes me feel angry and frustrated”. One participant was visibly shaking and yelling when they contributed “bullshit favoritism and bias frustrate and outrage me. I hate the system and the injustice and hypocrisy of it all!”.

Such a clear physical reaction to the frustration the participant is experiencing at work is suggestive of a highly stressful experience. Empirical research has consistently

found stress associated with being career plateaued (Allen et al. 1998; Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; and McCleese et al. 2007). The current study did not attempt to measure stress on a separate scale but responses in multiple categories across the study findings are indicative that some level of stress appears to be experienced by some participants.

While the feelings of anger were strongest in relation to career plateau attributed to perceived favoritism, anger was expressed in relation to other causes as well. Examples include: perceived career plateau attributed to the use of the competency approach in the interview process as expressed by subject 11 “It is frustrating not to win because of the competency framework...it doesn’t gauge your real performance.” and subject 24 “Smooth talkers have the edge with competencies, we are hiring for the wrong reasons.”; career plateau attributed to a lack of understanding of the participants experience as suggested by subject 34 “It makes me annoyed because executive has never spent any time understanding what I have done.”; and career plateau attributed to discrimination as expressed by subject 33 “It gets me angry and worried about the future for my kids (who are aboriginal).”. The anger can also be accompanied by other emotions such as the sense of sadness that permeated subject 14’s discussion of how life events impacted their career when they stated “My experience with my drug addict son ruined my marriage and my life went to shit. Otherwise I would have been an ADM years earlier.” and subject 23 “Work doesn’t really support people with families, they say they do but they don’t.”.

Anger also arose in conjunction with feelings of “Injustice and a Lack of Fairness” identified in the category of the same name, again consistent with Hurst’s (2017) findings. Examples include subject 39 who stated “I don’t think it is fair that we are hired just because

we can do well on interviews.”; or subject 31 who contributed “If I think it was a cooked competition I’m more likely to feel a sense of injustice.”; and subject 24 who claimed “Hiring bias isn’t fair and it shouldn’t be happening as much as it does.”. As anticipated, based on principals of procedural justice, participants were less likely to feel angry when they had faith in the system or the panel doing the hiring. If there is a sense that a legitimate approach was followed, participants were more accepting of the outcome.

Decreased Satisfaction

The sense of decreased satisfaction that has been uncovered in the broader career plateau research (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chao 1990; Chay et al. 1995) is supported by data in the study categories of disappointment and dejection; sadness and despondency; and decreased self worth. Disappointment and dejection were expressed both before the failure to win a competition, in anticipation of a future failure, as expressed by subject 12 stating “when I see there is an incumbent in a position I want, I feel dejected.” or after the failure had occurred, as when subject 16 stated “of course I was disappointed with the outcome, but even more I was disappointed in myself.”. The feelings of disappointment can go beyond the individual and be projected onto the organization itself. For example, subject 18 claimed “I’m so disappointed that the public service I joined is gone forever.” and subject 30 who indicated “it’s so disappointing that my education is not recognized and valued in the public service in Canada.”.

The sense of sadness and despondency when faced with failure can be directed at the individual; such as subject 31 indicating that their failure leads them into a prolonged funk where they become down on themselves; directed at the organization, as expressed by

subject 13 who claims “It is pretty sad that we work in an organization like this, I feel despondent when I think about it.”; or society, as when subject 30 said “I feel sad about discrimination in Canada because in so many other ways Canada is great”; or just the world in general, like subject 20 indicating “I feel despondent about the world, why do we always have people who play favorites like this in power?”. These expressions of sadness are consistent with existing research findings on the negative effects of career plateau, specifically the work of Lemire et al. (1999), McCleese et al. (2007) and Wang et al. (2014).

The feelings of sadness are not linked to specific causes of the failure. For example, Subject 27 attributes their career plateau to the structure of the organization when they say “...they are not going to suddenly create a bunch of new senior positions, so I’m stuck, how depressing is that?”. Or subject 38 who views part of their career plateau as related to their characteristics “I feel most depressed of all that my characteristics can’t change, and they will always hold me back.”. These responses are also suggestive of responses are “outcome dependent-attribution independent” as identified by Weiner (1985).

Shame and Embarrassment

Subjects feelings of shame and embarrassment predominately had to do with the public nature of success and failure in the job competition. Public sector competitions for positions are usually well known within the organization. People who compete are aware that others in their work unit will know they have thrown their hat into the ring, and any failure to win a position will be known by their peers. The intense need to succeed combined with the public nature of the failure leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment. The embarrassment does not only exist in relation to the work unit and peers, it is also expressed as a concern, if not an even more significant concern, for the

awareness of failure that the employee's superiors will have. When an employee blows an interview, the interview panel members will witness the failure. When the employee is forced to work with these same people in the future, their failure can colour their perceptions and the perceptions of their superiors. This could manifest in project opportunities being foregone and a labelling of the employee which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and result in inappropriate labelling by superiors (Near 1985, Ettington 1997, and Ettington 1998).

Fear

Several of the participants expressed fear associated with their career plateau. Most of them expressed concern regarding the potential economic loss associated with the failure to move up changing into being viewed as a failure in the current position with a threatened loss of employment. The financial needs of their dependents add to the sense of distress and need for the employee to hold onto the current position. This can lead to behaviors such as hiding and making attempts to avoid drawing attention to themselves at work. These employees can also start to buy into the narrative and see themselves as less able workers which makes them feel more vulnerable. This was expressed by several employees as a sense that they could not get work outside of government, they do not have the skills to win a job elsewhere and the loss of the government job would lead to a downward spiral in terms of employment opportunities and compensation. These participants were the most likely to appear tentative and more worried than those expressing anger. The participants who expressed anger still seemed to have fight in them, they may be scared but they direct the anger often outside themselves, though some participants do express anger towards themselves.

Ambivalence

Ambivalent feelings are also expressed by participants. The nature of these comments indicates that participants are not necessarily happy with their plateau situation, but that they have reason to suspect that they may not have been a good fit, or that another employee who won the position did so for legitimate reasons. It is also possible that employees who feel they win for favoritism reasons, have a complex emotional response. For example, subject 8 indicated that they were happy they won a position, but because they won through connections, they felt both pleased and guilty at the same time. These answers demonstrate that individuals do not simply look at the outcome, or the cause of the outcome, but look at the various factors that go into securing a new position. Each of these factors has associated with it different feelings. Some of the legitimate reasons for plateauing, such as hard work, will engender positive feelings of pride etc. however, the same individual may also express regret that another candidate who could have benefited from the new position was unable to do so, as expressed by subject 8 when talking about the other candidates who failed to win the position. Each participant seems to have different feelings associated with their situation and the impacts it is having on the broader organization as well as those who work with them.

As subject 18 indicated, they were happy with their success in winning a new position because of what it would mean to their family and their families financial well being, but also was concerned with others who didn't win the position but could have benefitted from it. More than one subject expressed concern about their ability to perform in a new position. While they may have been happy with the securing of a new position, they have a fear of being able to perform in the new role. As expressed by subject 33, even when you take a

new position, you will be placed under scrutiny as you attempt to figure out how to best respond and deliver in the new position. There is a sense that nothing is won without a corresponding risk.

Acceptance

Finally, some participants indicate that they are accepting of their situation. While the feedback contained in this category does not indicate that the participants are happy to be career plateaued, they are not as upset as they may have once been. As pointed out by Bardwick (1986) career plateau is experienced in two distinct stages. The second stage, resignation is characterized by a gradual withdrawal from work and increasing passivity in the work place. As they become more alive to the truth of their situation the feelings associated with being plateaued appear to decrease. The focus evolves away from work to include the family, home activities or hobbies. The employee starts to find meaning and purpose in things beyond work and begins to describe a narrative of not being as upset or caring about the work situation as is the case for subjects 1 and 8.

While it is possible some employees really do focus on other aspects of life and truly see these experiences as more valuable, it is also possible that they are simply still in the first stage of career plateau, resistance, identified by Bardwick (1986). In this stage the individual still believes they have an opportunity for promotion and continues to focus on work and remains committed to the organization in the hopes of achieving a new position as suggested by the responses of subjects 26 and 18. Other participants appear to be accepting of the situation and be able to stay engaged at work expressing ideas of professionalism and public service values like subject 7. It is possible these participants have successfully plateaued consistent with the solid citizens described by Ferrence et al. (1974).

Conclusion

The study results indicate that public servants generally respond to career plateau consistent with other research. Specifically, they respond with feelings of decreased satisfaction with the work environment and organization which is consistent with the findings of Allen et al. 1998; Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Chao 1990; Chay et al. 1995 etc. The study findings related to stress are also consistent with the findings of Allen et al. 1998; Beheshtifar and Modaber 2013; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; and McCleese et al. 2007. Other findings related to stress etc. are also consistent with research findings explored in Chapter 4. However, Participants do not appear to demonstrate a decreased commitment to work despite findings in the broader career plateau literature (e.g. Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002 etc.). This finding may be related to the differences between public servants and their private sector counterparts in terms of Public Service Motivation (Perry and Wise 1990).

Public servants facing career plateau in the current study experience predominately negative feelings including anger, fear, jealousy, resentment, shame and decreased self-worth. However, not all feelings associated with career plateau are negative as participants also express feelings of ambivalence and acceptance of their situation. When employees have succeeded in finding a new position, they feel hope, pride and happiness. The next chapter reviews the study findings in terms of how public servants behave when faced with a career plateau.

CHAPTER 9: BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSE

The previous chapter presented the results of the career plateau in the public service study in terms of the affective impacts on public servants from being career plateaued. This chapter presents the findings of the study in regard to the behavioural responses made by public servants when they are career plateaued.

Introduction

Public servants faced with career plateau respond by giving up, building networks, improving personal traits, focusing on life outside of work, being more selective in the application process, training and educating themselves, improving their jobs skills and competencies, gaining new work experiences, looking for jobs, improving interview skills and working hard. But they also identify bias and discrimination as an issue they face and struggle to find any actions to address.

Using the echo sorting technique and content analysis to examine the behavioural response data collected in the current study, reveals that the study participants actions are generally consistent with the Internal Actions and Doing Things Differently findings in the existing research. However, the study also suggests two new thematic areas, Public Service Value Responses and Responses based on Public Sector Organizational Characteristics. Some of these unique responses are likely related to differences between public servants and private sector employees in terms of Public Service Motivation (PSM) as first articulated by Perry and Wise (1990). Other unique reactions are likely related to the structures of government and the policies which govern public sector organizations. Statistical testing of position level (Chi Square $p=.47$). This chapter presents the findings of the study that

explore how public servants respond to career plateau and examines these findings in the context of the existing research.

This is the only study to the authors knowledge that has focused on the identification of behavioural responses to career plateau in a public service setting. The results are a first attempt to explore and categorize the actions of public servants in Canada and therefore only represent a starting point for further research and theory development.

Approach and Results

Following the echo sorting and content analysis procedures outlined in Chapter 5, 302 Behavioural Response Cards were initially created from participant responses to the interview questions exploring how public servants behave when faced with career plateau. The cards were sorted following a second analysis of the 302 cards by the researcher who determined that 18 cards did not provide useful data as they did not describe participant behaviour but usually involved tangential issues not related to career plateau. This left 284 valid responses for further sorting, resorting and content analysis.

The 284 responses were pilot test sorted and categorised by the researcher into 12 categories. Reliability testing of the response cards by two separate groups of volunteer sorters was completed, resulting in a 93% category reliability rating. The researcher modified the card assignments in some cases based on feedback from the two volunteer sorts. In addition to the sorting work completed by the volunteers, the names of the theme categories were further refined with input from the volunteer sorters. The cards were finally placed into categories as outlined in Table 18 and Table 19. Individual responses were also considered in terms of the existing research to see if the responses fit within the Internal Actions and Doing Things Differently themes identified in Chapter 4.

How do Public Servants Respond?

Table 18: Behavioural Response Categories Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Given Up (53) | <p><i>-Basically, I've just given up, I don't give a fuck anymore beyond keeping my position to pay for the mistakes I've made in life.</i></p> <p><i>-I've always been pretty happy with life. I'm still really happy today, why would I push myself to move up?</i></p> |
| Building Networks, Friends and Favoritism (41) | <p><i>-I try and actively expand my network every time I travel to Victoria.</i></p> <p><i>-Even in my office I stay connected, electronically and walking around and saying hi to people.</i></p> <p><i>-I'm focused and dialed in on spending time with coffee, lunch, drinks you name it. You're a fool not to and its time well spent.</i></p> |
| Improving Personal Traits (33) | <p><i>-I went to a counsellor offered through the employee assistance program to help me feel better and more self confident in work situations.</i></p> <p><i>-I try not to get angry with my manager. I know if she only really knew me she would like me and see that I'm a nice person.</i></p> <p><i>-I take opportunities to get more exposure to help with my introvert personality. Talks in the elevator and presentations at team meetings, that sort of thing.</i></p> |
| Focusing on Life (24) | <p><i>-I make my family my priority. I'm not going to sacrifice them or time with them to get ahead. Make your family your priority and you won't regret it.</i></p> <p><i>-I focus on my life outside of work for most of my meaning and fun.</i></p> <p><i>-I pray and ask for strength to deal with the challenges in my life.</i></p> |
| More Selective Applications (23) | <p><i>-I will screen myself out of competitions when I don't think there is a good fit between me and the organizational culture.</i></p> <p><i>-I won't apply for any position if there is an incumbent, unless the boss calls me and tells me to apply because the incumbent is a screw up.</i></p> |
| Education, Training and Knowledge (21) | <p><i>-I'm never going back to school now, not like college or anything, but I still like to take training and get a lot out of it. I like the people in the courses and learning stuff, it sure beats sitting in the office.</i></p> <p><i>-You have to take education for its own value, even if it doesn't help you get ahead.</i></p> |
| Job Skills and Competencies (18) | <p><i>-I will take TA's to try and gain new skills and do the work required to move up.</i></p> <p><i>-I focus on continuous learning and opportunities to learn new competencies to help me in interviews.</i></p> |

Table 19: Behavioural Response Categories Glossary (Continued)

| | |
|--|--|
| Gaining new Work Experience (17) | <p><i>-When I'm at work I try and get on team-based projects. You can demonstrate new skills to new people and maybe open some doors because of the exposure.</i></p> <p><i>-I take on any stretch opportunities I can or take on new assignments in my current job that will either sharpen my abilities or gain new ones.</i></p> |
| Job Search (16) | <p><i>-I didn't throw in the towel. I didn't give up. I honestly kept searching for new positions with my DM coffee meetings and my networking and chasing down jobs by socializing.</i></p> <p><i>-I apply for management jobs just accepting that when I leave the union, I will lose my flex time, but I'm not going to let it stop me.</i></p> |
| Larger Issues Such as Bias Impact Opportunities (14) | <p><i>-Political parties impact the public service when they form government. You can't do much about it and the non-partisan public service isn't as non-partisan as people say so you just accept that when a downsizing government comes in you will be downsized.</i></p> <p><i>-When management plays favorites in hiring you can't really do anything. Going to the union won't help as you are labelled and you don't get the job anyway.</i></p> <p><i>-I am angry about the expectation of free overtime that comes with management but if you want to move up you have to accept it.</i></p> |
| Improving Interview Skills (12) | <p><i>-I keep trying to get better at interviews, the only way forward for me is to win a position.</i></p> <p><i>-If I think I have a shot at a job I will put time and effort into preparing for the interview. I will practice ahead of time with my wife and friends.</i></p> |
| Working Hard (12) | <p><i>-It isn't about getting a promotion, its about respecting myself and respecting my family. Working hard is what you should do.</i></p> <p><i>-I will always work hard. It is my culture and upbringing. I can't just put in enough to get by.</i></p> |

The “Given-Up” participant responses reveal that the study participants are no longer trying to do anything about their situation and show various levels of remorse and regret, or sometimes simply accepting the situation. The common theme within this category is the lack of any specific action directed at changing their career plateau status or the feelings they experience in response to being career plateaued. The participants responses indicate apathy.

For the “Networks, Friends and Favoritism” category the actions are focused on building connections to help the participant end their career plateau. In some situations, the participants may not see the action as being primarily driven by the need to get ahead but are viewed as having value in other ways such as staying energized. Some of the responses the participants provide demonstrate high levels of cynicism especially as it applies to attempts to garner favoritism. In the case of building effective work networks, the responses demonstrate greater perceived legitimacy as the participants link their actions to improved outcomes at work.

Responses in the “Improving Personal Traits” category reveal that participants see a need to change an aspect internal to themselves to improve their situation or simply adjust better to the situation. These actions imply that the individual still perceives that they may be able to change these characteristics which they do not view as stable conditions within the framework of attributional theory (Weirner 1985). The locus of control expressed in these responses is internal as opposed to environmental within the attributional theory lens.

The “Focusing on Life” category responses reveal participants act to focus on life outside of work. Sometimes the intention is to create an alternative focus to work but, in many situations, it is simply pointing out that dealing with life impacts work. For the former the focus is often directed towards greater engagement with children or a partner. The importance of family and the joy to be derived from family interactions are highlighted, usually accompanied by value statements that a focus on the family is its own reward. For the latter, the actions express an overall concern that the participants can not keep what is happening outside of work from impacting the way they feel and act within the work

environment. These observations can be accompanied by expressions of concern that the organization does not recognize the impacts of life on work to an adequate extent.

In the examples contained in the category of “Being More Selective” in job applications indicates participants have changed their behaviour when applying for positions. They are more likely to avoid applying for positions in which there is an incumbent or if they feel there is a poor fit with the job. The participants are not as interested in advancement for the sake of a title or an increase in pay but consider what will be lost as well as gained in any new job.

Some participants act to change their career plateau status by focusing on “Education, Training and Improving their Knowledge Base”. These actions are aimed at improving the participants qualifications to work as well as pursuing learning for its own sake. Most of the responses in this category demonstrate a focus on direct skills related to the work environment. Some of the examples involve extensive educational pursuits such as attaining a degree. Others are still substantial such as pursuit of a professional designation such as a registered forester or biologist. Other participants indicate they pursue learning opportunities in a less formal way by shadowing employees who they view as having special knowledge.

Participants seek out ways to increase the “Skills” they have or to “Learn New Competencies” to assist with interviews. They express an awareness of how the competency approach to competitions impacts their ability to succeed as examples and demonstrations of specific competencies are required. Without the experiences needed for examples, either in the work place or taken from outside of work, the participants will be at a disadvantage.

Examples of these actions include joining toast masters or taking on temporary opportunities in new areas with the specific intent of gaining a new competency.

Similar are the examples given by participants who seek to “Gain New Work Experiences”. This category is different from the training and skills categories in that participants focused on the experience arising from actual work. The responses also differ from the responses in the competency category in that the motivation is not to gain a competency but rather work based practice. Participants also pursue work experience for the positive energy that comes from a change of scenery and the challenge of learning.

Despite being career plateaued, participants continue to actively look for new opportunities through “Active Job Search”. From the responses in this category, it appears that the participants have not given up on their hope to advance or change jobs. This is similar to the findings in the “Hard Work” category where participants indicate they continue to put in effort. While the responses in the hard work category are not linked to expectations of promotion, they still demonstrate that the participants are engaged and not giving up on being a good employee.

The responses contained in the “Larger Issue’s” category deal with bias that is racially, gender based or related to bias against people with specific health conditions such as obesity. The issues go far beyond the individual and individuals appear to struggle with actions to respond to bias. The participant responses recognize that issues in this category are much more difficult to address as the challenges are part of society, history or human nature over which participants indicate they have little control.

Discussion

The categorical themes reveal the diversity of actions that are undertaken by public servants. These actions are examined within the context of the broader career plateau research. The subject's illustrative examples used in the following sections are paraphrased for clarity and brevity.

There is consistency in the way public servants respond to career plateau and the broader findings of the plateau research. Four of the behavioural response categories from the study: "Given Up"; "Improving Personal Traits"; "Focusing on Life"; and "Working Hard" demonstrate elements consistent with the *Internal Actions* theme identified in career plateau research. Seven of the behavioural response categories from the study: "Gaining New Work Experience"; "Building Networks"; "Friends and Favoritism"; "Trait Improvement"; "Job Skills and Competencies"; "Job Search" and "Improving Interview Skills" demonstrate elements consistent with the *Doing Things Differently* theme identified in career plateau research.

There are also several potentially unique responses to career plateau demonstrated by public servants that have not been emphasized in career plateau research. The *Public Service Value Responses* theme is suggested by individual response data taken from the studies "Given Up" category. The *Public Sector Organizational Characteristics* theme is also suggested by response data taken from the studies "Given Up" category but mostly from the responses in the "Selective Applications" category.

Internal Actions

Some responses in the "Given Up" category reveal participants are lowering their expectations of themselves as well as their organization which is consistent with the findings

in the broader career plateau research. This lowering of expectations is composed of more responses related to the lowering of the participants expectations of themselves than the lowering of expectations related to the organization. For example, subject 9 indicated “I became less professional and couldn’t get myself to care enough to do anything about it.”. Subject 19 identified “I have given up investing in my skills.” and subject 29 states “I don’t have any ambition and I’m not going to change that.”. Subject 10 offers “I’m ok with not getting any further if I need new skills, experience or education.”. Participants are simply no longer willing or perhaps able to invest into a work situation they no longer believe can be changed. Some of the subjects appear to be excepting or resigned to this fact while others seem wistful or disappointed.

Responses in the “Focusing on Life” category are consistent with career plateau research in the *Internal Actions* theme that suggests people who are career plateaued change their focus from work to activities outside of work as a means of coping with the disappointment that accompanies career plateau. The focusing outside of work can involve a focus on loved ones such as family. For example, subject 23 stated “I make my family my priority. I’m not going to sacrifice them or time with them to get ahead.”. While subject 20 says “My kids and my family have become a bigger focus for me. Work isn’t as important as family.”. These statements were often stated in a way that suggest it is self evident that family matters more than work. It is also possible that these comments provide comfort for the participant who is not getting ahead at work but can still see their parental role as being successful.

Other participants make suggestions that they focus on life outside of work as a means of taking care of themselves and their well being. For example, subject 10 says

“When my parents died, I focused on taking care of myself, not work.”. Subject 45 indicated “I knew if I didn’t get better work wasn’t going to matter.”. These participants seemed to the researcher to be attempting to solicit an empathic response to recognize their suffering. The self-focus and effort to care for themselves may be in response to stress they are feeling with their life issues as well as the challenges of being plateaued or may reflect their depleted energy levels do not allow them to be as effective at work.

Finally, there are those participants who focus on other aspects of life outside of work separate from family or health. For example, subject 27 indicates “I focus on my life more and more outside of work to stay positive.”. While subject 3 said “I focus on sports and activities outside of work.” and subject 1 contributed “I focus more on stuff outside of work since work is never going to change and I need to do something.”. These participants responses are focused more on the positives to be gained outside of work. Their demeanour was generally more positive and hopeful than participants discussing health and family as a focus.

Responses in the “Improving Personal Traits” category align with *Internal Actions* in that the participants are taking actions to change the way they feel and respond to being career plateaued. The participants focus on several behaviours that they hope will make them more at peace with their lack of mobility. For example, subject 26 states “I need to impress myself and convince myself I’m still doing a good job.” While subject 20 indicates “I try and do positive self talk and remember all the things I’m good at.” as well subject 20 indicates that they seek counselling to feel better about their work situation. Other participants use less formal techniques than counselling such as subject 32 who states, “I read a lot of self-help books.”. Many participants with these responses are vague in terms of

their goals, such as subject 48 claiming “I’m lazy and a procrastinator and I’m trying to get better.” without any real sense that concrete actions were being undertaken or would be undertaken in the future. These general statements may indicate a lack of focus or real plan to make things different or may reflect that participants are unsure of what they can do differently. Participants appeared to have a range of responses from a naïve optimism to a despondent resignation that their effort is doomed to fail, as when subject 48 indicated they need to eat right and do more exercise to lose weight (which they believe will help them get a new job) but also expressed that they had no belief that this was ever going to be accomplished.

Lastly, the “Hard Work” category responses are consistent with the *Internal Action* findings in the research which suggest people will find their own internal reasons to be professional or stay engaged. They are acting on their own personal sense of what is right in terms of their action as opposed to hoping for advancement related to their action. For example, subject 29 stated “I was raised to work hard, I’m not going to change now.”. While subject 30 indicated “hard work is in my culture.”. The participants identify a personal need to work the way they do as a means of staying true to themselves. The respondents almost seem to be stubbornly proclaiming they refuse to change something that is important to them just because they see no opportunities for advancement.

Doing Things Differently

The behavioural responses in the category “Trait Improvement” reveal that the study participants focus on changing aspects of themselves in the hope that it might lead to a new opportunity or simply improve their performance at work. For example: subject 28 indicates that “successful people build on successful habits.” and is committed to improving their

work habits to perform better; subject 27 strives to avoid failing at work stating that “the best way to avoid being labelled a failure is to avoid failing.”; and subject 8 used a personal coach to gain confidence and behave differently at work. These findings appear consistent with the inconsistent findings of the research which has failed to find clear impacts on performance with career plateaued employees (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Chay et al. 1995; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; and Near 1985). It is possible some employees just do less at work and don’t care as described by subjects 8 and 23, while the subjects in the examples above are clearly still trying to improve their performance.

Some of the behavioural responses in the category “Gaining New Work Experience”, demonstrate the participants focus on doing things differently within their existing job roles. Participants are looking to stay engaged and to find greater enjoyment in their work and not necessarily looking to advance or change jobs. For example, subject 44 states that “new experiences keep me turned on at work.”. For these subjects the benefits of being more engaged are positive and reward enough to continue to find new ways of doing things. As subject 26 says “Boredom is a terrible thing.” and subject 8 comments “I’m sad that this is who I have become, I never thought I would be like this.”. Their personal self image of being a productive worker is undermined when the work becomes dull and routine and they don’t see opportunities for advancement or lateral movement.

Other participants in this category are looking at gaining new experience through what is essentially changing their job while not leaving their current role. Although the participants may not move into a new position, they seek to change the nature of what they do. For example, subject 43 “I’m always putting my hand up to take on new assignments and gain new experience.”. While subject 42 adds “I ask to do new things, new files or

helping different managers.” and subject 34 says “I volunteer to take on new roles in my branch.”. These participants are looking to find new experiences to keep things fresh while often accepting that they do not have the ability to change positions. They try to overcome their inability to compete or to benefit from favoritism or other mobility enhancing factors by building on the strengths they have in the current situation.

A smaller number of the responses in this category demonstrate behaviours of looking for lateral movement, which if successful could address being content plateaued even though they would not address their hierarchical plateau. For example, subject 31 says “I seek new experience in different programs across government or across my ministry at my level.”. Similarly, subject 32 offered “I ask to be placed on new teams to gain new experiences.”. These placements do not involve promotions but do represent a chance to have new challenges.

The category of “Building Networks” had several responses and demonstrated the most active response to career plateau within the theme of *Doing Things Differently*. People engage in both informal network building like subject 41 who claimed, “I do a lot of informal networking.” and subject 40 saying “I always maintain a network of friends at work.” as well as networking through formal channels as suggested by subject 11 “I engage with the wider organization through the community of practice.”. Regardless of how the subjects develop their networks, they express mixed feelings about why they network. Some see networking as a very positive activity that has merit on its own as demonstrated by subject 33 “When you meet new people and you get a new way of doing things or seeing things, it’s pretty special.”. Others are more ambivalent about networking such as subject 7

“I go to coffee and work the social stuff though it doesn’t feel right.” and Subject 3 “I have a network of co workers to complain to and dump on.”.

The negativity associated with behavioural responses to career plateau is more strongly expressed in the “Friends and Favoritism” category. Examples include subject 2 stating “I need to become more of a slut and sell myself ruthlessly to the upper levels.” while subject 32 contributes “I don’t like it, but I try and suck up to people above me.”. Although even in the “Friends and Favoritism” category there are those who see positives associated with maintaining friendships or garnering favoritism without the self deprecation. For example, subject 10 “I maintain a positive face in the office to build friendships.” while subject 25 suggests that keeping up with friends is both helpful in terms of getting the job done as well as receiving positive emotional support. The “Friends and Favoritism” category also demonstrates some of the most emotionally negative and profanity laced responses in the study. There is a great deal of anger and pain that accompanies the discussions of favoritism and the actions taken by public servants in response to favoritism.

The study participants continue to invest in their skills to improve both their performance and increase the chances for future job opportunities as demonstrated in the responses in the “Job Skills and Competencies” category. Sometimes that effort to increase participant skills involves less formal processes, such as subject 29 stating “I’m open to learning new skills.” without having specific examples of how they intend to accomplish their goal. Others build their efforts into more formal processes such as subject 31 saying “I continue to grow and develop my competencies overtime. I include them in my EPDP.”. Most respondents focus on gaining skills to improve their chances for further promotion such as subject 27 stating “having more skills in terms of variety gives you the chance to

connect with a director or ED in a new way.” and subject 11 “I focus on learning and opportunities to learn new competencies to allow me a better chance to compete.”.

However, not all subjects gain skills simply to advance, some find it enjoyable to learn skills as it is engaging, as is demonstrated by subject 28 saying “Watching others is a great way to learn and see new skills in action. I do find it cool to learn new skills.”.

The behavioural responses in the category “Job Search” reveal subjects are responding consistently with research findings that plateaued people have higher intentions to leave their job (e.g. Allen et al. 1998; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Helimen at al. 2008; Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; Lee 2003). Public servants look for opportunities outside of their existing work areas, such as subject 24 who stated “I don’t have great skills to transfer between ministries but you have to put yourself out there and try.”, as well as seeking temporary opportunities such as subject 22 “No sense feeling sorry for yourself and not trying to do something about it, you need to consider TA’s to.”. Job search strategies vary from: exploring alternative work arrangements as demonstrated by subject 11 “I ask managers to allow me to work virtually outside of Victoria.”; using social networks as indicated by subjects 6 “I decided to look for other opportunities using my social networks.” and subject 3 “I didn’t give up but kept searching for new positions chasing jobs down by socializing.”; and simply applying more to posted jobs like subject 44 “I keep reviewing the postings and applying even though I’m not likely to win anything.”. The participants appear to continue to hope for success despite their lack of success and being plateaued in the current role, sometimes dating back years. Perhaps they have not yet given up hope even though they are clearly career plateaued on Milliman’s (1991) scale. They may perceive themselves to be career plateaued but have not yet

accepted the reality of the situation, or they accept the reality but can't stop applying in the hope that the next time the outcome will be different.

The behavioural responses in the category "Improve Interview Skills" reveal subjects are clearly trying to avoid becoming career plateaued. These participants have recognized poor interview performance as a key factor contributing to their career plateau and are actively trying to change this. For example, subject 38 states, "I keep trying to get better at interviews, the only way forward is for me to compete." and subject 8 adds "I keep trying to improve my interview skills because it is the main reason I fail to get promotions.". Participants seek help to improve their interview skills from co-workers, like subject 47, from friends and family, like subject 23, or by getting formal training to improve their interview skills, as indicated by subject 20. All the responses in this category contain clear examples of attempts made by public servants to do something about their plateau.

Unique Public Service Responses

While much of the data collected is consistent with existing findings of career plateau research and provides more empirical evidence which expands on that research, some of the study data suggests that there may be unique behavioural responses occurring with public servants who are career plateaued. It is important to note that these findings are only early and exploratory suggestions. The findings arose from the content analysis of the data and the comparisons to the existing research findings in the career plateau literature. Further exploration and development will be necessary to determine if these responses are unique to the public service.

Public Service Value Responses

The first potentially new behavioural response to career plateau that might be occurring is labeled Public Service Value Responses. There has been a significant amount of research suggesting public servants have different value systems and are motivated differently than their private sector counter parts (for a fulsome discussion see Perry, Hondeghem and Wise 2010). In reviewing the research findings on Public Service Motivation (PSM), Perry, Hondeghem and Wise (2010) suggest that at its heart, PSM involves the idea that individuals are oriented to act in the public domain for the purposes of doing good for others and society with human behaviour driven by other-regarding motives, not only by self-concern and self-interest. The data collected through out this study and discussed in this dissertation, demonstrates examples of underlying behaviour, feelings and thoughts that appear aligned with PSM. As indicated by Perry and Wise (1990), PSM is not the only factor, and may not even be the primary factor driving public servant actions, but it is an important consideration and it is not shared by private sector employees.

If public servants do possess a different value system as suggested in the preceding paragraph, it seems logical that public servants may respond differently to career plateau consistent with their unique value system. The responses collected in this phase of the study demonstrate statements suggestive of PSM while other responses are more aligned directly to the construct of PSM. Suggestive statements include those such as subject 12 who said “I was determined to win and do the right thing for my staff and the organization. What the Ministry does is important.”. Subject 25 adds “I do it because its my job as a public servant and I need to feel good about what I do.”. Subject 17 stated “I get I won’t move up without seriously compromising my values and these values are very important to me as a public

servant.”. While they do not directly state that public servants have a role in serving others and doing good for society, their statements are suggestive of these considerations.

The clearest statements reflective of a Public Service Value Response are provided by subjects 25, 1 and 17. Subject 25 said “I make sure my boss gets what he needs as long as it is consistent with my ethics and serving society. I will except I can’t move up if I can remain ethical.”. The participant names citizens directly as a consideration in the actions they take. Subject 1 also indicated “You have to do the right thing, we are public servants and that means serving the public and being part of something important and larger then us. I know it sounds ridiculous but it’s true, we need to do things differently than others.” While subject 17 adds “It seems outrageous that this is the public service. With all our values and emphasis on service and trying to make a better society, and this is what we get for leadership and action?” The responses demonstrate these public servants react to career plateau through a lens that extends beyond their own self interest and involve a desire to benefit citizens. These responses to career plateau are grounded in a public service perspective that is other-regarding and may not be shared with the private sector. While public servants may have given up on further career advancement, some of them view continued action in the public interest and helping others as a key component of who they are and indicate they will not pursue further career advancement if it will impact what they see as core to the public service.

Responses Based on Public Sector Organizational Characteristics

The theme of Responses Based on Public Sector Organizational Characteristics was suggested by the observation that respondents are acting in ways that are likely influenced, if not determined by, the specific organizational structures and norms present in the public

service. As this research is a form of early exploration of career plateau in the Canadian public service, it may be that these behavioural responses could be shown to occur in other large bureaucratic structures such as exist in large corporations that may organizationally function like bureaucracies even if they do not serve public purposes. Regardless, behavioural responses to career plateau in the study reflect the structures of government and the organizational practices of government.

The first example of this involves the repeated concerns expressed by participants regarding re-organization and the disruptions this causes. While re-organization may occur frequently in other sectors of the economy, in the public sector new governments or new executives inevitably re-organize their Ministry, division or branch. Ministries must be restructured after an election to provide each member of the Cabinet with a post to command. A large Cabinet will require the creation of more organizations while a small Cabinet may require amalgamation of small ministries into fewer larger Ministries. Although large scale re-organizations and downsizing initiatives are often very public, the numerous smaller re-organizations that occur across government almost routinely, are not tracked and reported on.

Public servants can be subjected to what feels like endless rounds of downsizing, right sizing, realignment and refocusing. This creates a sense of uncertainty and a desire to avoid areas that might be prone to frequent restructuring. Participant responses such as subject 5 stating “after an election or a big re-organization, there are tons of new opportunities...competent people can sometimes take advantage of this.” and subject 36 “You can have your own job changed and eliminated and your opportunities for other jobs

limited during re-organizations...Man I was chocked.” demonstrate the awareness of the impacts of restructuring and the frustration associated with it.

Public servants may seek out areas they believe are less likely to be subject to the whims of change. For example, they might seek to work in ministries with clear public mandates whose core services are less likely to be privatized or outsourced as is suggested by subject 26 who indicated they avoid areas where a clear government role and purpose is not served for fear of outsourcing. Alternatively, public servants may be prone to keep their head down and hide when they anticipate organizational change as suggested by subject 12 stating “I’m hiding to hang onto my job, lying low to make it to retirement.” and subject 14 “I hide now, if I have a high profile I put a target on my back.”.

Another area of potentially unique behaviour relates to the frequent use of temporary appointments in government. Numerous respondents mention TA’s as a vehicle to move up or acquire new skills which they actively seek. As suggested by subject 10 saying “For a TA it is like a test run. The person is given the chance to do the job and to see if they are liked by the people in the branch and see if they can deliver.”. These “test runs” present opportunities to try on a new position with decreased risks as a failure usually involves a return to the base position as opposed to a firing. Current government policies allow staff to be appointed into TAs without competition and without necessarily having the skills and abilities required to do the job if presented as a “stretch” opportunity. Government has made it part of its culture to allow employees to pursue TA’s without their boss’s approval, so it is clearly something the public service sees as a key strategy to fight career immobility.

Another organizational practice in the public service, flex time, appears to act as a barrier to movement. Responses across the study point to the importance of flex time as an

organizational practice that is valued by some employees and acts as an anchor constraining movement. For examples, subject 39 indicated “I wouldn’t accept a TA or job with a loss of flex time.” while subject 10 contributed “A loss of flex time would be really hard to make up for with cash from a promotion.” And subject 23 stated “The older I get the more important my flex time is to me.”. Government practice is to allow public servants to have flex time unless there are clear operational needs preventing its use. This reverse onus to granting flex time may be unique to the public sector or not, but it clearly is one aspect of the public sector culture that impacts career mobility.

The challenge of knocking an incumbent out of a position also may not be entirely unique to the public service, but it is clearly an issue of concern for many of the studies participants. As seen in the following examples: subject 36 “I don’t apply where there is an incumbent.”, subject 4 “You need to know if there is someone in the job, if there is don’t apply.”, subject 12 “I won’t bother applying if there is an incumbent, it’s a waste of my time.”, and subject 16 “If there is someone in the job don’t apply unless you check with the area and can find out if they are screwing up.”. Public servants appear to be aware that beating out an incumbent will be tough. In a system where the perception is such that favoritism plays a role in outcomes for promotion, any incumbent is more likely to have already built the relationships required to have an edge in any competition.

Overall, the structures practices and culture of the public service present a constraint on career mobility that is likely to be different from the private sector. Although elements of the culture, structure and policy may be shared with other sectors of the economy, the public sector is likely to have a unique combination of elements that could be explored in more detail to examine how these organizational and policy structures could influence behavioural

reactions to career plateau. These findings suggest there may be value in exploring this possibility in greater detail in future research.

Discrimination, a Societal Issue

One issue that came up as troubling for the study participants but did not elicit set behavioural responses involves bias. While this is not uniquely a public service issue it may manifest differently in public sector organizations (Jones et al. 2018). Respondents complained about biases based on race, gender, cultural background, mental and physical disabilities, age and other subtler forms of discrimination such as fit with the culture of the work area. For the least extreme examples of bias, such as work unit culture, there seems to be a willingness to accept that this bias may be legitimate as was suggested by subjects 8 and 19. Participants accept that organizations have a right, if not an obligation, to promote and develop their work culture for performance and morale. But there are still concerns expressed with how this culture is established and how one is judged to fit within the culture.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those biases that are clearly not acceptable to participants, such as: racial bias as raised by subject 33 who indicated they have faced bias as a first nations person; ageism as indicated by subject 16 who stated directly “I know that sometimes I don’t get an opportunity because I’m older than other candidates.”; or gender discrimination as suggested by subject 8’s claim “...discrimination against women does occur in the public service.”. The participants appear aware that these issues are of much greater complexity than other types of organizational bias and favoritism and impact all of society. As subject 33 stated “How do you undo 150 years of discrimination against FN people and how that is reflected and played out in the hiring process?” The issue is

simply seen as being beyond any organization, although there is a recognition that this should not be occurring in the public service. The existing mechanism such as appeals to the ombudsman are not seen as being a realistic option for employees.

Between these extremes are the issues of culture as they play out in the competency and hiring process. Government itself has recognized the need to modify the competency process by including FN competencies within the wider competency framework. However, the issue raised by some participants is that the real challenge with the competency framework is that it is subtle form of bias. Asking people to talk of a time when they did something and focus directly on their actions is to limit the chances of success for those people whose cultures do not encourage individual thinking over team thinking. As subject 30 said “I can’t promote myself well as my culture and upbringing discourage this whole me attitude. Canadians have a culture edge in interviews” and “I come from a humble culture which makes it hard to be successful in competency interviews that focus on arrogant individual actions.”. The competency framework was also singled out for its hierarchical bias as the grading of demonstrated levels of competency create a systemic barrier to lower level employees. Subject 8 indicated “...bias includes hierarchical bias with peoples experience being considered less valuable when they are not managers and scored so on the competency framework.”. Some participants believe their inborn characteristics, such as being an introvert (subject 8) or suffering from social anxiety (subject 20) cause them to face challenges with the competency-based approach to hiring which they feel is unfair. They believe that alternatives to this form of hiring should be explored to allow them to compete fairly on those characteristics over which they have control.

Bias presents a special challenge as it requires change beyond the organization. As, subject 18 says “The truth is none of us can fight a system. There is just no point in trying and everyone can see the system for the way it is.” while subject 5 suggest “It becomes hopeless in that you can’t vote anyone in who will do anything different, changes in government have not resulted in changes in hiring really”. Finally, subject 33 summed it up this way “I don’t know what to do about this. There are things to be done but getting rid of discrimination is a pretty big order.”

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter demonstrate the broad range of behavioral responses the study participants identified to career plateau. While these results demonstrate consistencies with the existing research, they also suggest differences in public servants’ responses. Further research could refine the public service response categories and test the differences between public service responses and private sector responses.

An interesting question arises when looking at the results of the study in terms of the behaviour of the participants. Are these participants successfully plateaued? Most of the studies participants appear to fall within the “solid citizens” category of Ference et al.’s (1977) typology. They do not appear to act as though they have given up and become the “deadwood” that Ference et al. (1977) identified as being problematic for organizations. Although a small number of the participants do seem to be “mailing it in” and hiding in the organization, most appear to still be engaged and actively attempting to change their plateau status. Have they truly given up?

Are they in the early stages of the plateauing process of resistance as suggested by Bardwick’s (1986) work? Or do the participants simply refuse to give in and lose hope.

Some of their responses and actions would suggest they don't expect anything to change and they do seem despondent. However, the same participants still provide answers that indicate they have not given up. To this researcher there appears to be a surprising amount of action aimed at changing the status quo even amongst those who seem hopeless. Could this be another unique reaction of public servants related to PSM? Are the workers in the public service driven to continue to try to improve their situation in the same way that PSM suggests they try to serve others and make a difference in society?

Leaving these questions to future researchers, this study does consider what actions public sector organizations can take to address career plateau. These suggested actions arise directly from the participants responses as well as interpreting those responses within the framework of the existing career plateau research. The organizational implications are discussed in Chapter 10.

CHAPTER 10: ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The previous chapters presented the results of the career plateau in the public service study in terms of the affective impacts on public servants and the behavioural responses public servants make when career plateaued. This chapter presents the findings of the study regarding the organizational implications for action participants.

Introduction

This chapter reviews the findings of the study related to the organizational implications and action's participants recommend be taken in response to career plateau. As indicated in Chapter 4, organizational responses to career plateau can be categorized into three distinct types of action: those actions that address plateau directly by trying to change the plateau state; actions which mitigate the negative impacts of career plateau; and actions that manage employee expectations related to careers and career plateau. The findings from the study can also be categorized into these three themed areas. There are similarities between the study's findings and the broader research, but there are also differences. Participant responses demonstrate a significant focus on improving the hiring and promotion process. These recommendations don't entirely align with the existing recommendations in the literature in that they are not necessarily about career plateau, they are about the culture of the public service and reflect the value that public servants place on a culture of fairness and transparency.

Approach and Results

Following the echo sorting and content analysis procedures outlined in Chapter 5, 237 Organizational Implication Cards were initially created from participant responses to the interview questions exploring recommendations for organizational action. The researcher

sorted the cards a second time to ensure that they contributed useful data to answer study research question 4 “What can public organizations do to support employees experiencing career plateau?”. The second analysis resulted in retention of all 237 cards which were divided into 10 categories.

Reliability testing of the organizational recommendation card sorting by two separate groups of volunteer sorters was completed, resulting in a 91% category reliability rating. The researcher modified the card assignments in some cases based on feedback from the two volunteer sorts. In addition to the sorting work completed by the volunteers, the names of the theme categories were further refined with input from the volunteer sorters. The cards were finally placed into categories as outlined in Table 20 and Table 21.

Table 20: Organizational Implications Categories Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Increase Hiring Legitimacy (45) | <p><i>-Interviews focus on certain skills that are key to interviewing but not key to the job. Competencies don't help, they are just more interview skills stuff.</i></p> <p><i>-Allow a 3rd party to review the results of competitions and overturn panel decisions when the panel is gaming a favorite. Film the panel deliberations and hiring so the panel can't lie. FOI issues could be dealt with.</i></p> |
| Executive Hiring Changes (34) | <p><i>-Executive must recuse themselves from competitions where they have a social connection of any sort to the candidates. Not just family, and the current stuff, but anyone they have worked with or promoted before. How will we ever get ride of this hiring of friends if we don't stop this?</i></p> <p><i>-No ADM or DM should ever be hired by a government panel. Hiring should be done by an independent third party.</i></p> |
| Eliminating Bias (26) | <p><i>-Realize discrimination plays out in all parts of hiring, from the screening to the interview to what knowledge is valued and how every aspect of the process reflects the dominate culture.</i></p> <p><i>-Its hard to work with an invisible disability (mental illness) because no one accommodates you in the hiring process.</i></p> <p><i>-Competency interviews ask you to brag about a time when you did something, it doesn't reflect the reality of humble cultures.</i></p> |
| Temporary Appointments (17) | <p><i>-Everyone should be offered a TA opportunity once per year. Don't rely on staff to find their own TA's, make it part of the Ministries responsibility.</i></p> <p><i>-They promote TA's now by saying you don't need your boss's approval to apply. But to go you need your boss's approval and if you are trying to hide from your boss that you're not happy with your job, how can you do that and go on a TA?</i></p> |
| Training (15) | <p><i>-government offers more meaningful courses for managers. Non managers get stuff like "how to manage your time"...duh...</i></p> <p><i>-The whole approach to training in government needs to change. Leadership courses are offered but for some of these you already must be a supervisor. How does that make sense? I thought they could supervise when they won the job, not need to take up our limited training budget so they could get what they should have had in the first place.</i></p> |

Table 21: Organizational Implications Categories Glossary (Continued)

| | |
|--|---|
| Hire Based on Performance (15) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stop hiring people because they are good at interviews but can't do the job. How many managers do we have who can't manage? -We need to focus more on results and less on interviews. Some objective way of measuring results and not some game of who executive likes the most. |
| Mentoring (14) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We need mentors who don't join a mentoring program as a way of looking like they support a corporate goal but because they really want to be mentors. -Mentoring programs should focus on people who would benefit most from mentoring, not the same golden children that get all the recognition and are going to move up anyway. |
| Offer Incentives (10) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We need some sort of financial carrot for staff to deliver. I know in a union environment that's tricky, but we need to find something financial to link to performance like they do in the private sector. - A financial reward is critical to increasing performance. All the other pat on the back stuff will never work. |
| Realistic Career Expectations (10) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stop the narrative that everyone can move up. We can't! -We need to be totally honest with people about why they don't advance. Be respectful but honest, you don't drink with the boys, you can't write, you don't look the part, whatever. Will never be done though, human rights and all that so we pretend it's a fair society and fair government and anyone can make the top...just a lie. |
| Miscellaneous (51) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We need better support for day care both at work and off site with more recognition for the needs of young families. -Management needs to be more respectful and value administrative services and experience more than they do. -Better HR support, less passive and web based. -We need more promotional opportunities in the regions such as more senior union positions. -Don't make everyone focus on advancement as part of their EPDPs) -Provide flex time for excluded managers. -The union is too powerful, management needs more control. -The union doesn't have enough influence on hiring and promotion. |

Public Organizations Can Assist Employees in Dealing with Career Plateau

Two of the recommended action categories from the study: "Training" and "Temporary Appointments" demonstrate actions consistent with the *Change Plateau Status*

theme identified in career plateau research. Two other recommended action categories from the study “Mentoring” and “Offering Incentives” demonstrate actions consistent with the *Mitigating Negative Impacts* theme identified in career plateau research. And one of the recommended action categories from the study “Realistic Career Expectations” demonstrate elements consistent with the *Managing Career Expectations* theme identified in career plateau research. The four categories of “Hiring Based on Performance”, “Eliminating Bias”, “Executive Hiring Changes” and “Increasing Hiring Legitimacy” demonstrate elements of *Changing Public Organization Culture*. The subject’s illustrative examples used in the following sections are paraphrased for clarity and brevity.

Change Plateau Status

As indicated previously, the most common recommended action for organizations to take to change plateau status is to increase job mobility (e.g. Drucker-Godard et. al. 2015; Ettington 1997; Gerpott and Domsch 1987). Participant recommendations in the “Temporary Appointments” category are consistent with increasing job mobility.

TAs are one means of unblocking opportunities for further advancement or lateral movement. TAs offer the opportunity to try out a new position in which the employee can gain new skills and make new connections while maintaining the employees’ base position. There is little risk and significant upside to taking on a TA as identified by comments such as subject 23 “The best way to get a job is to have an opportunity as a TA.”, subject 42 “The TA is the best way to get to know the managers and for them to get to know you. It works in everyone’s favour.”, and subject 20 “I think these TA’s where you can learn new skills and grow are so important.”. Public servants understand the opportunities presented by a TA. When public sector organizations make job mobility a priority by allowing employees

to apply for a TA without their supervisor's permission, that is seen as a positive step by the participants in the study.

Further refinements to the TA process are recommended. Subject 34 indicates that the benefits of TA opportunities should be extended to more senior levels of the organization. There are fewer opportunities at the top so increasing temporary appointments will increase over all job variability and mobility by opening positions for shorter lengths of time without increasing the overall number of positions at the senior level. Subject 43 suggests that the approach to allowing TA's would be enhanced when management takes a more open look at the background of participants and is more flexible in under implementing people.

Subject 47s suggestion expands on the promotion of mobility through TAs by recommending opportunities be provided by requiring all position first be posted as a TA before being posted as a permanent position. Subject 20 said one way to make TA's happen more is to require all staff have one TA opportunity offered to them every year as part of the annual performance plan. TA opportunities could involve an increase in the number of job swapping opportunities between staff as suggested by subject 25. Subject 8 points out that the permission of the supervisor, a current requirement for a TA, should be waived in order to deal with situations were the supervisor is holding the person back. Increasing mobility across divisions within and between Ministries using TA's was suggested by subjects 42 and 14.

Offering training and learning opportunities to plateaued employees has been recommended by several researchers (Allen et al. 1999; Allen and Poteet 1998; Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Ettington 1997; Jung and Tak 2008; Hofstetter and Cohen 2014; Lemire et

al. 1999; McCleese et al. 2007; Wen and Liu 2015). The premise behind these recommendations is that the learning of new skills will engage the employee and provide intellectual stimulation. While government has an extensive range of learning and development programs, one area of opportunity would be to open the existing supervisory skills training offerings to non-supervisors. Although some of these courses are open to those who are not yet supervisors, many are restricted to those in a supervisory role. Subjects 11, 22 and 29 all indicate that they believe limiting the training to those who are already in a supervisory role is preventing them from advancing further in their careers. Another potential area for improved training would be to have a more robust form of onboarding for new employees. Subject 21 points out that, while there is a high level of quality related to training offerings, the training employees receive as part of their orientation to a new area is very limited. A focused approach to this initial training will help employees come up to speed quickly and enable them to gain increasing competence in their new position in a timely manner.

Training can extend to increasing the mandatory background requirements for some positions. While engineers in government are required to possess engineering degrees and be part of professional associations, some study participants believe that anyone who is a manager in government should be required to have a management degree and training. Subject 30 points out that managers could have completely unrelated educational background, such as an art degree, and yet be placed into a management position without the fundamental understanding of what is required to effectively manage people. Without a shared basis of knowledge, management in the public service will always be hit and miss dependent on the skills that managers bring to the job from their own experience. Given the

concerns around the hiring and promotion process expressed by study participants there is not a high level of confidence that effective managers will be hired without having some basic management training as a mandatory job requirement.

Expanding training beyond the management level was recommended by several participants in the study. As subjects 29 and 44 point out, increasing training opportunities beyond the management level to include more professional and administrative staff will lead to an overall improvement in organizational effectiveness. As well as courses of broad application to the public service, subject 42 indicates training shouldn't also be offered that is tailored to the specific skill requirements of individual jobs. Facilitating training with more paid educational leaves was identified as a need by subject 20. However, as indicated by subject 26, overall the government system is very robust and a lot of effort and significant resources have been invested into the existing training regime.

Mitigating Negative Impacts

A commonly recommended organizational response to mitigating the negative impacts on employees who are plateaued involves mentoring (Corzine et al. 1994; Evans and Gilbert 1984; Hurst et al. 2017; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Lentze and Allen 2009; Wang 2014; Xie, Lu and Zhou 2015). Subjects in the study indicate that mentoring programs can be very effective, but the motivation of the mentor is key. According to subject 8, the organization must ensure that mentors are selected because they want to support a mentee. There is a perception among some study participants that some mentors join existing mentorship programs for the main purpose of advancing their own careers. There is not necessarily a genuine interest in supporting the mentee.

There are other responses in the study which reveal individual participants have a profound interest in being a mentor. For example, subjects 27 and 20 indicate that they sincerely wish to pass along their knowledge before their time with government is done. Mentorships are also one way of supporting the regular staff in government who are not stars or the target of succession planning programs. The solid citizens that are overlooked by most programs can benefit from a low-cost mentorship program which will demonstrate to them that they are still valued and supported by the organization. Subject 20 points out that too much time and energy are focused on the stars of the organization. This lack of focus on the regular employees was highlighted by numerous participants in the study and is an area requiring increased focus across government according to the study participants. It is especially important, according to subject 9 to offer mentoring to administrative staff. From this subject's perspective the administrative staff are the most over looked group in government when it comes to mentorship.

Mentoring could also help address specific individual issues of concern raised by participants such as social awkwardness highlighted by subject 38. The mentor can develop an understanding of the employee's situation and can advocate for them and support the organizations awareness of the employee and their potential. Mentors are required for specific groups of employees such as indigenous people and women as indicated by subject 27. Subject 27 indicates that male mentors may not understand the different issues that women face in the public service and how their lives outside of work are impacting what is happening in their careers. Having successful women to advise them may assist in their own career growth.

Any mentoring program will require flexibility in terms of time allocation to allow the mentor to ensure there is time in the day to engage and support staff who are being developed as pointed out by subject 8. Without the allocation of actual work time as part of the mentor's daily routine, the role is likely to receive little attention and be much less effective. It might also occur that a mentor's own work performance may suffer unless adequate time to perform the mentor role is allowed for.

Participants also indicate that offering incentives for work performance should be seriously considered to mitigate the impacts of being stuck in a position. Subject 22 believes incentives such as performance pay could help motivate staff and achieve better results for the employee and the organization. They feel this could work even within a union environment and need not be limited to DM's who sometimes have hold back pay systems. Subject 7 indicates that there is too much focus on what they term as the whip and not enough of a carrot to motivate staff. Incentives need to include a focus on performing work that is not aimed at serving those above you in the organization. As subject 8 indicates, the real rewards such as promotion are reserved for those who serve up, instead of performing their job. A performance management system that was somehow removed from favoritism would address the need to incent the right types of behaviours according to the recommendations of the study participants. Subject 9 suggests that a financial incentive is required to enable staff to go above and beyond on the job instead of relying on what they perceive as token forms of reward such as employee recognition. Without access to financial compensation programs the organization deprives itself of the most effective form of motivating behaviour according to some study participants.

According to subject 22, the incentive to be innovative is held back by having managers and a system that is about avoiding failure. The subject indicates that it needs to be recognized that innovation will never work if there is not a real embracing by the organization of the willingness to allow mistakes to occur. One non-monetary means of incenting innovation according to subject 11 would be to offer increased flexible work arrangements for those who perform. Flexible work arrangements are offered on a piecemeal bases currently and are not linked to performance targets. In a system of fiscal constraint, could staff be incented to perform by the promise of greater work flexibility and freedom?

Managing Career Expectations

Consistent with research recommends that organizations establish realistic expectations for promotion among their employees (Burke and Mikkelsen 2006; Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Orpen 1983; Slocum et al. 1987) the study participants responses in the “Realistic Career Expectations” category highlight the importance of managing career expectations. Recognizing the reality of limited career potential may assist employees in dealing with their own career plateau when it inevitable arrives. Subject 40 suggests we need to be totally honest with people about why they don’t advance. They continue adding that we need to be respectful, but we can’t keep sugar coating peoples lack of ability which leads to their failure to advance. When we do not provide employees with truthful feedback about their potential because we think it keeps them motivated to try harder and give more, we set up a situation which is destined to fail in the long term. According to subject 14, as the employee continues to fail to advance, they will become bitter and twisted at the organization which they believe is artificially holding

them back. Subject 14 says we need to limit people's expectations from the time they enter government. Too much is done to market the opportunities and advancement in government. This creates entitled employees who will never achieve the position level they believe they should.

Limiting employees' expectations need not be negative. Subject 31 suggests that directing people into positions that are a good match for their temperament and abilities will result in increased happiness even if the position is not at the senior level the employee hopes for. This can focus the employee on other considerations beyond hierarchy and potentially demonstrate to them what they would need to change in terms of their outlook to really move to the next level. Subject 31 also feels that employees must be told about the impacts on health and wellbeing when they strive for or achieve a position above their capabilities.

Another issue to be clear about is that you don't get ahead from hard work according to subject 26. This would be very hard to do because senior staff would have to acknowledge that hard work is not enough and risk employees making less of an effort. The recognition that hard work will not compensate for skills, abilities and temperament required for senior positions is not necessarily a negative thing. Subject 26 recommends that it is important to become comfortable at the right level for yourself in the organization. A level that allows you to hold true to your values, ethics and commitment to contribute, not to get to the highest position possible. Subject 26 feels that there is a process of socialization about advancement that needs to begin as soon as an employee joins government.

Changing Public Organization Culture

The responses in the categories “Increasing Hiring Legitimacy”, “Eliminating Bias”, “Executive Hiring Changes” and “Hiring Based on Performance”, all point to recommended changes to the organizational culture of the public service.

The most commonly perceived cause of career plateau which causes the greatest sense of anger amongst participants is perceived favoritism in hiring. Numerous participants indicate that some form of independent 3rd party review of the outcomes of hiring, not the process, is required to ensure favoritism is eliminated. The current system in involving a merit commissioner and appeals to the DM are not seen by some participants as being adequate. The merit commissioner can only review process and can not over turn the decisions of the hiring panel. Some participants feel that the ability to over turn the decision of a panel and appoint a different candidate will be required to ensure a fair process.

However, this is not a practical solution. The potential of having a second competition process run for each job competition is wasteful of resources and would involve appointing people to positions in departments where they are unlikely to be welcomed by the members of the hiring panel who they would have to work with and whose decision had been over turned. Depending on the nature of the second competitive process there might still be perceptions of favoritism.

Other suggestion from participants to eliminate favoritism by having external 3rd parties run competitions on behalf of government might be more feasible. There would only be one competition and the hiring department could have representation on the hiring panel, so long as they don't control the final decision. Steps could be taken to ensure the panel members do not know any of the candidates. Again, this solution would likely entail additional costs as any external hiring agency would require compensation for the service

provided and if agencies are paying for the service then they would anticipate having some say over how the service is provided and what the results of the service provision are. In controlling the purse strings, influence could still be exerted over the independent 3rd party.

Opening the existing hiring process to include recording of the actual process. The very process of recording interviews would likely decrease perceived favoritism as a review of the recording could reveal much more than a current review of the paper documents that are created during an interview process. Time and money would be required beyond what is currently involved in hiring but would be less extreme than some of the other recommendations. Challenges with privacy etc. would likely exist but there may be some merit in looking at these suggestions.

Even expanding the current role of the merit commissioner to review excluded competitions as well as consider the outcome to ensure the best candidate won the position, would likely go some way at increasing perceptions of legitimacy. Or just changing the composition of hiring panels so that most members of the panel are from outside the hiring area and increasing the transparency of the process in terms of how decisions are made might improve the perceptions of legitimacy.

Eliminating bias against employees based on various grounds such as gender, race or less apparent considerations such as anxiety disorders will not be easy. Moving away from competency hiring to traditional forms of hiring may not be enough. The issue of racism and bias goes beyond any organization and the government has an existing legislative and policy framework which specifically prohibits bias. As Canadian public services currently report on diversity and other targets, the framework is reasonably robust.

Changing the way executive is hired by eliminating the use of OIC appointments for ADM's and DM's and requiring these positions to be competed would be an easily accomplished first step in responding to some of the recommendations of the study participants. Improving employees understanding of what is required to be an effective executive might also curb some of the suspicion that exists in the study participants minds regarding how staff reach the executive level. It is likely there is significant misinformation and misunderstanding of the role of the executive and efforts by government to improve staff understanding by having executive engagement discussions is likely to be helpful.

Conclusion

The perception of participants that changes are required to the hiring and promotion process are filled with contradictions. Participants seem ready to point to an unfair system when they fail to advance due to perceived favoritism, however some participants recognize they benefit from favoritism by times and that it is not possible to entirely move away from perceptions of favoritism anytime judgment calls are made regarding who is promoted. The system is not perfect and can never be perfect as each employee has a different definition of what will help and what should be done.

There are likely always going to be employees who are disappointed with any outcome which does not see them being promoted within the organization. It is unrealistic to assume that career plateau can be eliminated or that employees will be comfortable with career plateau because hiring and promotion are seen in a more positive light. The rule of 1% identified by Bardwick (1986) can not be changed. We will never have a ministry composed of only DM's. However, implementing changes recommended by study participants and discussed above, such as increasing TA opportunities, improving training,

offering more mentoring opportunities and improving the organizational culture will all likely contribute to employee's ability to adopt successfully to career plateau.

CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION

The previous chapter outlined the last of the career plateau in the public service study findings, covering recommendations made by study participants regarding actions that public organizations can take in response to career plateau. This final chapter presents the overall dissertation conclusions, summary of study contributions and suggestions for future research.

Conclusions

1. Public servants respond to career plateau in ways that are generally consistent with existing research. However, two unique categories, *Public Service Value Responses* and *Responses based on Public Sector Organizational Characteristics* are identified. These unique responses are likely related to value differences between the public and private sectors and the unique organizational structures and policies of the public service.
2. Public servants perceive the causes of career plateau consistent with existing research findings, however, two categories, favoritism and discrimination, may have special meaning and significance.
3. Public servants' plateau for different reasons depending on their position in the hierarchy. For example, administrative and professional staff were most likely to describe facing barriers to upward mobility related to educational, skills and experience requirements, while social connections, senior support and favoritism are greater barriers at the executive level.
4. The dominate career systems model is different at different levels of the public service hierarchy. The human capital model is dominate lower in the hierarchy while the power/politic model dominates at the executive level.

5. Public servants experience feelings of decreased satisfaction with work as well as increased stress when career plateaued, consistent with the other research findings. Participants also do not appear to demonstrate a decreased commitment to work, again in keeping with existing research findings. Intense feelings of anger are associated with perceptions of favoritism. The negative impacts of career plateau on public servants also include sadness, shame and despondency.
6. Secondary analysis of the existing empirical research indicates career plateau is consistently linked to: decreased commitment; decreased satisfaction; increased intention to turnover; decreased perceived support; and increased stress. Empirical evidence does not support the contention that career plateau impacts the performance of the individual employee.
7. Public servants recommend organizations respond to career plateau in ways consistent with existing research findings based on three categories of action: those actions that change plateau status; actions which mitigate the impacts of career plateau; and actions that manage employee career expectations. However, public servants' recommendations reflect the value that public servants place on a culture of fairness and transparency.
8. Given the greater number of public servants in the base of the organizational pyramid and the dominance of the human capital career systems model at lower levels, the perceived dominate career systems model overall in the public service is the human capital model.

9. Secondary analysis of existing research reveals individuals respond to career plateau by changing their thinking about career plateau, working differently, and avoiding career plateau.
10. An analysis of the existing research on career plateau reveals over 70% of the research has been focused on the private sector and at the management level.
11. An analysis of the existing research on career plateau indicates that the effectiveness of recommendations for individual and organizational action has not been empirically measured which impacts confidence related to these recommendations.

Summary of Contributions

This research contributes new knowledge to further the understanding of career plateau as follows:

1. This is the only study that exists which examines career plateau in the core Canadian public service to the authors knowledge.
2. This is the only study that exists which explores how public servants respond to career plateau and uncovers potentially unique public service response categories (Public Service Value Responses and Responses based on Public Sector Organizational Characteristics). It is also the only study to categorise these behavioural responses.
3. This is the first study which has explored the causes of career plateau at different hierarchical levels of the public service and the first study to uncover differences in the causes of career plateau based on position level.
4. This is the first study which identifies different career systems models are dominate at different levels of the public service hierarchy.

5. This is the first study to explore and categorise the affective impacts of career plateau on public servants.
6. The negative impacts of career plateau are confirmed through a secondary analysis of the empirical research.
7. The study contains recommendations for ways in which public service organizations can help career plateaued employees based on actual recommendations from public servants experiencing career plateau.
8. Outlines a suggested approach for future studies of career plateau based on a synthesis of data as part of a systematic review study.
9. Uncovers and highlights gaps in the existing career plateau research identified through a systematic review study.

Future Research

1. Given that this is the first study to be completed on career plateau in the Canadian public service, all the findings must be considered tentative and require further testing and replication.
2. The categories developed throughout the study which describe how public servants feel and respond to career plateau all require further refinement and more empirical testing. The categories represent a first attempt to build an understanding of what career plateau means to the individual public servant who is experiencing it. The emotions, time and willingness of participants in the study to share and discuss what is for some of them a painful experience, needs to be respected and honoured by having further research continue to build upon this preliminary attempt to address a complex and common phenomenon. It is likely that further research will identify different categories or

explore these categories in greater depth with more detailed testing. The intent of this research was always exploratory in nature and as such it can only be a starting point.

3. With further qualitative research continuing to explore and establish the concepts revealed in this study, it is hoped that more quantitative research can be completed to examine how the information gained from this study and others like it could apply to the broader public service.
4. As the theoretical understanding of career plateau in the public service deepens, it would be helpful to undertake longitudinal studies to explore causal relationships and further increase our understanding of how career plateau occurs over time.
5. A study using the same approach and variables that has two separate sample groups, one in the public sector and one in the private sector, could be undertaken to rigorously explore if there are differences in the experience of career plateau amongst the sectors.
6. As the existing research on career plateau is heavily focused on the private sector and management, other studies of the public sector including levels other than management staff are required to further our understanding of career plateau.
7. As an analysis of the existing research on career plateau indicates that the effectiveness of recommendations for individual and organizational action has not been empirically measured, there is a need to undertake studies which measure the impact of actions taken to address career plateau. Without this information the trade offs that are required within organizations in terms of the cost and energy in addressing career plateau can not be effectively determined.
8. There has been no study that looked at the impacts of career plateau on organizational performance. All impacts are assumed to occur based on theoretical grounds. A study

directly attempting to compare the performance of organizations with high levels of career plateaued employees versus organizations with few career plateaued employees would go some way to establishing the real impacts of career plateau on organizations. Of course, controlling for other variables which may contribute to performance would be a challenge.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Systematic Review Appraisal Example

Source Screened into Study

Author: Allen, Poteet and Russell

Year: 1998

Source: Career Development Quarterly

Record Number: 1

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | x | | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | x | | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | x | | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | x | | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | x | | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | x | | | |

Country: USA

Overview and Research Methods:

607 plateaued (hierarchical, content and double) and non-plateaued managers in state government (nurses, accountants, law enforcement etc.) were surveyed to explore the impact of plateau status (the independent variable) on attitudinal variables (dependent variables) of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intent to turnover, job involvement, and job induced stress as well as demographic variables (age, job tenure, sex and race).

Content plateauing and hierarchical plateauing were measured using scales adapted from (Milliman 1992). Attitudinal measures used as dependent variables included: job involvement (Lodahl and Kejner 1965); organizational commitment (Mowday, et al. 1979);

Intent to turnover (Cammann, et al., 1979); job induced stress (House and Rizzo 1972); job satisfaction (Hackman and Oldham 1975) and job performance (Allen and Poteet 1998). Chi squares were calculated to test for differences between race and gender and plateauing followed by MANOVA to test differences between the four plateauing groups and other variables.

Results:

The following are the results that are relevant to the research questions guiding the systematic review:

In terms of race, white participants were more likely to be hierarchically and double plateaued as well as non-plateaued than blacks, who were more likely to be content plateaued. In terms of gender, men were more likely to be double plateaued or non-plateaued than women, while women were more likely to be hierarchical or content plateaued. In terms of age differences, content plateaued were found to be significantly younger than hierarchically plateaued employees. Those who were double plateaued and hierarchically plateaued had longer tenures than the content plateaued and non-plateaued. The researchers suggest that hierarchical plateauing may be more associated with becoming older and reaching a point where there are simply fewer promotions available while content plateauing is less age dependent with individuals feeling stagnant in their jobs during any point in their careers.

In terms of the dependent variables, double plateaued participants had lower job commitment. The content plateaued participant's job performance was significantly lower than non-plateaued. Non-plateaued participants reported less job stress than hierarchical plateau participants and double plateaued participants had the lowest level of job satisfaction, while job satisfaction was lower for content plateaued versus hierarchically plateaued

managers. The non-plateaued and hierarchically plateaued participants were less likely to report intentions to job turnover than double or content plateaued participants.

Overall, the double plateaued participants had worse job attitudes than any other group in the study. Job content plateauing is viewed more negatively than hierarchical plateauing which may be seen as just part of organizational life.

In terms of recommendation for action, the study suggests that organizations should exert more effort to address content plateauing and double plateauing. Supervisors need training to recognize content and double plateauing and should provide support and feedback to those employees who are experiencing a content or double plateau.

Appendix B: Sample of Sources Screened In for Analysis

These are some samples of the 52 summary forms for those sources screened in for synthesis analysis. More detail was recorded for each source similar to the example in Appendix B but summaries are used here for brevity.

Author: Allen, Poteet and Russell

Year: 1998

Source: Career Development Quarterly

Record Number: 1

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | x | | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | x | | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | x | | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | x | | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | x | | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | x | | | |

Author: Allen, Russell, Poteet and Dobbins.

Year: 1999

Source: Journal of Organizational Behavior

Record Number: 2

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | x | | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | x | | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | x | | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | x | | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | x | | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | x | | | |

Author: Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel 2009

Year: 2009

Source: Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology **Record Number:** 3

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | x | | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | | x | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | x | | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | x | | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | x | | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | x | | | |

Author: Beheshtifar and Modaber

Year: 2013

Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business **Record Number:** 4

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | x | | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | | | x | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | x | | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | x | | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | x | | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | x | | | |

Appendix C: Examples of Sources Screened Out

There was a total of 66 sources screened out of the Systematic Review at this stage but only three are covered here as examples for brevity.

Author: Adams, Cox, Adamson and Schofield

Year: 2011

Source: Australian Health Review

Record Number: 1

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | | x | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | x | | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | x | | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | x | | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | x | | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | | x | | |

This study provides useful information related to the retention of professional staff (nuclear medicine technologists) in their chosen field. It is a longitudinal study for which there are very few examples in the career plateauing literature. The study is empirical with a good descriptor of the methodology and findings. The primary finding that an employee's ability to exercise job control aids in retention does contribute to the understanding of what organizations can do to limit the impact of career plateauing as it relates to retention. However, the scope of the article is specifically focused on retention and is not broad enough to add significant value towards answering the research questions guiding the systematic review. Accordingly, the study is not included in the synthesis of the research component of the systematic review.

Author: Allen, J**Year:** 1995**Source:** Book**Record Number:** 2

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | | x | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | | x | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | | x | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | | x | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | | x | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | | x | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | | x | | |

The search engine screened this source into the appraisal section of the systematic review using the terms outlined in Chapter 3. The source does not contribute to answering the research questions guiding the systematic review. This source is a self-help book to assist individuals looking for a job. Accordingly, the source is not included in the synthesis of the research component of the systematic review.

Author: Appelbaum and Santiago**Year:** 1997**Source:** Career Development International**Record Number:** 3

| Question | Yes | No | Unclear | Not Applicable |
|--|-----|----|---------|----------------|
| Is career plateau clearly conceptualized and operationalized? | x | | | |
| Does the study consider impacts of career plateau on individual or organization? | x | | | |
| Are individual or organizational responses to career plateauing covered? | x | | | |
| Is this an empirical paper? (i.e., existence of evidence to support arguments and conclusions) | | x | | |
| Are the data collection strategies and/or tools clearly described? | | x | | |
| Is the data analysis clearly described? | | x | | |
| Does the paper make a useful contribution? | | x | | |

This article puts forward the case that changing organizational structures in American businesses in the 1990s was resulting in the loss of middle management positions and the traditional hierarchical structure. The authors argue that career plateau will be an increasingly common phenomenon due to these organizational changes combined with the demographic impact of the baby boom. The baby boom cohort created a glut in the organizational structure which was not as problematic for the career aspirations of managers while organizations were growing, but once this growth slowed down and reversed, the increased number of managers with the decreasing number of positions makes it inevitable that more employees will plateau.

The article provides a helpful perspective on these issues as well as career plateauing as a concept and the individual and organizational responses that can be taken respond to career plateauing. However, the article is not empirically based and does not contribute to answering the research questions guiding the systematic analysis. Accordingly, the study is not included in the synthesis of the research component of the systematic review.

Appendix D: Concepts and Measurement Scales Plateau Research

| Concept | Measurement/operationalization by researcher |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Anxiety | Zigmond and Snaith (1983) |
| Authority/autonomy | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Assignment challenge | De Pater, Van Vianen, Becholdt and khehe (2009) |
| Burnout | Schaufeli et al. (1996) |
| Career attitudes | Veiga (1981) |
| Career adaptability | Hou, Leung, Li, Li, and Xu, (2012) |
| Career anchor in challenge | Schein (1990) |
| Career concerns inventory | Super, Zerkowitz, and Thompson (1981) |
| Career disillusionment | Orpen (1983) |
| Career exploration | Stumpf, Colarelli, and Hartman's (1983) |
| Career history | Orpen (1983) |
| Career intentions | Veiga (1981); Slocum et al. (1985); Slocum and Cron (1985) |
| Career motivation | Noe et al. (1990) |
| Career orientation | Jansen and Chandler (1989) |
| Career planning | Gould (1979) |
| Career-related strain | Fernandez (1995) |
| Career satisfaction | Greenhaus et al. (1990) used in 4 separate studies |
| Career stage | Super, Zerkowitz, and Thompson (1981) |
| Company identification | Smith (1976) |
| Co-worker support | Ducharme and Martin (2000); Allen et al. (1999) |
| Depression | Zigmond and Snaith (1983); Radloff (1977) |
| Distributive justice | Price and Mueller (1986) |
| Desired job moves | Nicholson and West 1988 |
| Emotional exhaustion | Schaufeli et al., (1996) |
| Employee Appraisal | Folkman and Lazarus (1985); Lazarus and Folkman (1984) |
| Expected job moves | Nicholson and West 1988 |
| Extrinsic career satisfaction | Nicholson 1993 |
| Family situation | Tremblay and Roger 1993 |
| Future prospects satisfaction | Nicholson 1993 |
| Growth needs strength | Hackman and Oldham (1980) |
| Health complaints | Eriksen et al. (1999) |
| Job characteristics | Keller et al. (1977) |
| Job challenge | Near (1985) |

| Concept | Measurement/operationalization by researcher |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Job involvement | Lodahl and Kejner's (1965); Lodahl and Kejner (1965) used in two separate studies; Kanugo (1982) used in three separate studies; Hall, Goodale, Rabinowitz, and Morgan (1978); Milliman (1992) |
| Job induced stress | House and Rizzo (1972); Cohen et al. (1983) |
| Job performance | Wells and Muchinsky (1985); Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Near 1985; Nathan, Mohrman, and Milliman (1991); Stout, Slocum and Cron (1988); Tremblay and Roger 1993; Williams and Anderson (1991); Pelz and Andrews (1976); Denison, Hoojberg and Quinn (1995); Allen and Poteet (1998). |
| Job satisfaction | Hackman and Oldham (1975); Weiss, Dawis, England and Lofquist. (1967–1977) used in two studies; Cobb (1970); Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979) used in six studies; Spector (1985); Quinn and Shepard (1974); Neville and Henry (2017); Nathan et al. (1991); Halpern (1966); Smith, Kendall and Hulin (1969); Lodahl and Kejner (1965); Hppock (1935) |
| Job search | Kopelman, Rovenpor, and Millsap (1992) |
| Job scope/job complexity | Tremblay and Roger (2004) |
| Intentions to retire early | Gaillard and Desmette (2010) |
| Intention to stay | Godshalk and Fender (2015) |
| Intent to turnover | Cammann, et al., (1979) used in two separate studies; Kim, Price, Mueller, and Watson, (1996); Ashford et al. (1989); Lentze and Allen (2009); Mobley, Homer, and Hollingsworth (1978); Jones (1986); Chung (1989); Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse 1995; Keller (1984); Mobley (1977); Farh, Tsui, Xin, and Cheng (1998) used in two separate studies; Drucker-Godard et al. (2015) |
| Intrinsic work elements | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Intrinsic career satisfaction | Nicholson (1993) |
| Life satisfaction | Quinn and Shepard (1974) |
| Locus of control | Lesage and Rice (1977) |
| Marketability | Stout, Slocum and Cron (1988) |
| Mentoring functions questionnaire | Hu, Pellegrini, and Scandura, (2011) |
| Military I/O intentions | Chien (2003) |
| Motivation to learn | Baldwin et al. (1987); Fatian et al. (1995); Hicks (1984); Noe and Schmitt (1986). |
| Need for advancement | Orpen (1983); Tremblay and Roger (1993) |

| Concept | Measurement/operationalization by researcher |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Need satisfaction | Porter (1961) |
| Opportunity for community service | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Opportunity for self-development | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Organizational commitment | Mowday, et al. (1979) used in three separate studies; Allen and Meyer (1990 and 1993) used in three separate studies; Porter and Smith (1970); Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974); Caldwell, Chatman and O'Reilly (1990) |
| Participation in decision-making | Tremblay and Roger (2004) |
| Pay satisfaction | Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Weiss, Davis, England and Lofquist (1967) |
| Plateauing reasons | Godshalk and Fender (2015) |
| Perceived organisational support | Eisenberger et al. (1986) used in three separate studies |
| Person-job fit | Cable and Judge (1996); Saks and Ashforth (1997); Singh and Greenhaus (2004); Nicholson (1993) |
| Personal marketability | Orpen (1983) |
| Pride in membership | Nicholson (1993) |
| Proactive personality scale | Parker (1998) |
| Procedural justice | Moorman (1991) |
| Promotional aspiration | Stout, Slocum and Cron (1988) |
| Propensity to leave | Stout, Slocum and Cron (1988) |
| Psychological distress | Lapalme et al. (2009) |
| Psychological success | Hall, Goodale, Rabinowitz, and Morgan (1978) |
| Recognition/esteem | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Regulatory focus | Neubert et al. (2008) |
| Rewards/benefits | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Role ambiguity | Rizzo et al. (1970); House et al. (1983) |
| Sales performance | Stanton and Buskirk (1983) |
| Social factors | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Supervisor behaviour | Hackman and Oldham (1980) |
| Supervisor satisfaction | Nathan et al. (1991) |
| Supervisor support | Ettington (1998); Jung and Tak (2005); Sylvia and Sylvia (1986); Greenhaus et al. (1990) |

| Concept | Measurement/operationalization by researcher |
|-------------------------|--|
| Spouse/partner concerns | Torgen et al. (2001) |
| Suicidal ideation | Paykel et al. (1974) |
| Task satisfaction | Neuberger and Allerbeck (1978) |
| Task stagnation | Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) |
| Top management support | Facteau et al. (1995) |
| Willingness to leave | Veiga (1981); Orpen (1983) |
| Work demands | Kristensen and Borg (2001) |
| Work/job commitment | Meyer and Allen (1984); Balfour and Wechsler (1996); Tremblay and Roger (1993) |
| Work challenge | Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969); Hall and Lawler (1970) |
| Work environment | Newman (1977); Slocum et al. (1985) |
| Work expectations | Sylvia and Sylvia (1986) |
| Work family conflict | Torgen et al. (2001) |
| Work frustration | Neville and Henry (2017) |
| Work hours | Evans and Gilbert (1984); Kopelman (1976) |
| Work intensity | Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse (1995) |
| Work motivation | Ettington (1992) who adapted Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979); Near (1985); Neville and Henry (2017); Herzberg (1966) |
| Work outcomes | Kristensen and Borg (2001) |
| Work responsibilities | Tremblay and Roger (1993) |

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Introduction and Consent

Prior to starting the interview potential participants receive an explanation of the study as well as providing consent consistent with UVIC Ethics Protocol 17-174.

Determining career plateau status

Milliman's (1992) 12 item questionnaire is used to assess career plateau status.

1. My opportunities for upward movement are limited in my present organization: 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree
2. I expect to be promoted frequently in the future: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree
3. I have reached a point where I do not expect to move much higher: 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree
4. The likelihood that I will get ahead in my organization is limited: 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree
5. I am unlikely to obtain a much higher job title in my organization: 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree
6. I expect to advance to a higher level in my company: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree
7. I expect to be constantly challenged in my job in the future: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree
8. I will learn and grow a lot in my job: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree
9. My job tasks and activities will become routine for me in the future: 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree

10. My job responsibilities will increase significantly in the future: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree
11. My job will continually require me to extend my abilities and knowledge: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree
12. I will be challenged in my job: 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree

Only participants who are experiencing career plateau will proceed further.

Basic career and tenure information

1. What is your current position level?
2. How long have you been in your current position without a significant change in responsibilities?
3. How long have you been in the public service?
4. What is your current age?

Career systems model

Career systems are dynamic, focusing on the creation and maintenance of organizational membership via three functions: entry into the organization; development and advancement within the organization and exit from the organization (Sonnenfeld 1989). Think about the career system model that exists in the Public Service. Please rank order the following career systems model descriptions in terms of how closely they match the public service model:

A: Individuals are selected and promoted according to rational matching of their qualities with position requirements. Employees advance based on their hard work, ability, education and training.

B: Individuals are selected and promoted on the basis of sponsorship from their superiors, leverage in the organization, coalition-building, and power-broking. Employees advance based on how they respond to the needs of their superiors and effectively playing the game.

C: Individuals are selected and promoted on the basis of competition for advancement.

Winners continue to enjoy opportunities for further advancement while losers can no longer compete for higher level positions but can still participate for positions at a lower level.

D: Other: Please describe.

Causes of career plateau (Ascriptions)

Think of a time when you had an opportunity to win a job competition or take on a new role when you have been successful as well as another time when you were not successful.

Briefly describe the event to help you recall the details.

Please identify the reasons you can think of for why you were not successful.

Causes of career plateau (Ascription Domains)

We will now consider each of the causes for immobility you identified in the previous question on the causes of career plateau. There are generally three ways of thinking about immobility causes that provide us insight and understanding.

1. The first is the location of the plateau cause. For example, if you feel you personally lack the interest to look for a new position that could be seen as an internal causal location. If you feel the position requirements for the jobs you're interested in are not a good match for you, the position requirements would represent an external causal location (it's in your environment and not you).

We will consider each reason you identified in the previous question on the causes of career plateau and ask you to please identify the causal location. There are no right or wrong ways to identify the causal location. What matters is how you see it.

2. The second consideration is the stability of the plateau cause. For example, if you feel you do not have mobility opportunities because you are seen as too old, there is little chance you will become younger in the future and may feel this cause is stable in character. If you feel you haven't put forward your best effort and you feel you can change your effort, this cause would likely be seen as unstable.

We will consider each reason you identified for the causes of career plateau and ask you to please identify the stability of the reasons. There are no right or wrong ways to identify the stability. What matters is how you see it.

3. The third consideration involves the controllability of the cause. Controllability is similar to stability but different. Can you control the cause of your immobility; is it subject to your effort? For example, if you feel you lack the training requirements for a promotion and this is seen as a stable cause (that is the job requirements are not going to change) but you feel you can exercise control over the cause by getting the training you lack, you may feel you have control over a stable cause. If on the other hand you feel there is age discrimination in the work place and you feel you cannot control your age, but you believe that age discrimination can be eliminated with a new program the organization is introducing, you may feel this is uncontrollable (age) but unstable (new program eliminating age discrimination).

We will consider each reason you identified for the causes of career plateau and ask you to please identify the controllability of the cause. There are no right or wrong ways to identify controllability. What matters is how you see it.

Exploring the affective impact of career plateau on the individual

You have described a time when you were unsuccessful in a job competition as well as explored the job mobility of yourself and others in your organization.

When you think of job immobility for yourself, please briefly describe your feelings.

Behavioural responses to career plateau

Question:

Recalling times when you have experienced job immobility, please describe what you do in response to immobility.

Organizational recommendations

Question:

Considering job immobility for yourself and others, what actions do you think the organization can undertake to assist people facing job immobility?

Closing

Do you have any final questions or are there any items you would like to revisit?

Thank you for participating in this study.

Appendix F: Subject Coding for Data Sort

Gender: Male 1 Female 2

TJ (Tenure Job) and TG (Tenure Government):

Position:

Category 1: 0-5 years
 Category 2: 6-10 years
 Category 3: 10-20 years
 Category 4: 20+ years

Category 1: Administrative
 Category 2: Professional
 Category 3: Management
 Category 4: Executive

| Subject | Gender | T J | T G | Position | Code |
|---------|--------|-----|-----|----------|------------|
| 01 | M | 2 | 4 | 4 | 01-1-2-4-4 |
| 02 | M | 1 | 2 | 3 | 02-1-1-2-3 |
| 3 | M | 1 | 3 | 4 | 03-1-1-3-4 |
| 4 | F | 1 | 3 | 3 | 04-2-1-3-3 |
| 5 | M | 1 | 4 | 3 | 05-1-1-4-3 |
| 6 | F | 1 | 4 | 3 | 06-2-1-4-3 |
| 7 | F | 2 | 4 | 2 | 07-2-2-4-2 |
| 8 | M | 1 | 2 | 2 | 08-1-1-2-2 |
| 9 | F | 1 | 2 | 2 | 09-2-1-2-2 |
| 10 | M | 2 | 4 | 1 | 10-1-2-4-1 |
| 11 | M | 1 | 4 | 2 | 11-1-1-4-2 |
| 12 | M | 2 | 4 | 4 | 12-1-2-4-4 |
| 13 | M | 2 | 3 | 3 | 13-1-2-3-3 |
| 14 | F | 1 | 4 | 4 | 14-2-1-4-4 |
| 15 | F | 1 | 2 | 4 | 15-2-1-2-4 |
| 16 | F | 1 | 3 | 3 | 16-2-1-3-3 |
| 17 | M | 1 | 4 | 3 | 17-1-1-4-3 |
| 18 | F | 1 | 4 | 3 | 18-2-1-4-3 |
| 19 | F | 1 | 4 | 2 | 19-2-1-4-2 |
| 20 | M | 1 | 3 | 2 | 20-1-1-3-2 |
| 21 | F | 1 | 2 | 1 | 21-2-1-2-1 |

| Subject | Gender | T J | T G | Position | Code |
|----------------|---------------|------------|------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 22 | F | 1 | 2 | 2 | 22-2-1-2-2 |
| 23 | M | 2 | 4 | 1 | 23-1-2-4-1 |
| 24 | F | 1 | 3 | 2 | 24-2-1-3-2 |
| 25 | F | 2 | 3 | 1 | 25-2-2-3-1 |
| 26 | M | 1 | 4 | 3 | 26-1-1-4-3 |
| 27 | M | 2 | 3 | 3 | 27-1-2-3-3 |
| 28 | F | 2 | 4 | 4 | 28-2-2-4-4 |
| 29 | F | 1 | 1 | 1 | 29-2-1-1-1 |
| 30 | F | 1 | 3 | 2 | 30-2-1-3-2 |
| 31 | M | 1 | 4 | 4 | 31-1-1-4-4 |
| 32 | M | 2 | 3 | 2 | 32-1-2-3-2 |
| 33 | F | 1 | 3 | 2 | 33-2-1-3-2 |
| 34 | M | 2 | 4 | 4 | 34-1-2-4-4 |
| 35 | F | 3 | 4 | 4 | 35-2-3-4-4 |
| 36 | M | 1 | 3 | 4 | 36-1-1-3-4 |
| 37 | F | 1 | 3 | 4 | 37-2-1-3-4 |
| 38 | M | 1 | 3 | 2 | 38-1-1-3-2 |
| 39 | F | 2 | 4 | 1 | 39-2-2-4-1 |
| 40 | F | 2 | 4 | 4 | 40-2-2-4-4 |
| 41 | F | 2 | 4 | 3 | 41-2-2-4-3 |
| 42 | F | 2 | 4 | 1 | 42-2-2-4-1 |
| 43 | F | 2 | 3 | 1 | 43-2-2-3-1 |
| 44 | F | 1 | 4 | 1 | 44-2-1-4-1 |
| 45 | M | 2 | 4 | 3 | 45-1-2-4-3 |
| 46 | F | 1 | 3 | 1 | 46-1-1-3-1 |
| 47 | F | 1 | 3 | 1 | 47-1-1-3-1 |
| 48 | F | 2 | 3 | 1 | 48-1-2-3-1 |

Appendix G: Example of Ascription Data Coded

1. I was going for an ADM position in a ministry I had never worked for and was meeting an ADM in that ministry. It was to be a screening interview and it was fairly informal. The ADM and I had never met before, and knowing that we had no connection I felt at a bit of a disadvantage. The fact that it was an ‘informal’ interview also raised my suspicion that the competition would be cooked. Without the presence of an interview panel I knew the ADM could make up anything she wanted and I would never be able to do more than ask how I could have improved and she would spout off whatever banal response she wanted to justify the result of the process.

01-1-2-4-4

2. So I met with the ADM and we started the interview and she rarely met my eyes. She kept looking out the window behind me, as if she wasn’t even listening to my responses to her questions. I got the impression she didn’t really care what I was saying as if it would have no impact on the outcome of the interview. Eventually it became really annoying that she wasn’t meeting my eye or giving any indication that she wanted to hear anything I said. I had trouble keeping my responses on target and couldn’t give the usual polished pitch I can make. Eventually the interview ended and we went through the formality of shaking hands and her indicating she would get back to me. Of course, she never did and I found out later that a friend of hers was hired to be the new ADM. Typical.

01-1-2-4-4

Appendix H: Example of Affective Data Coded

1. I feel angry and frustrated. I think the Ministry is promoting the wrong kind of people, to work with them and replace them.

01-1-2-4-4

2. I feel the whole system is broken and the public service is worse for it. The public have no idea how bad it is and how much of it is going on.

01-1-2-4-4

3. I guess I feel regret that I didn't suck up to former DMs when I had the chance. I could have been a DM today and have a lot better pension. I knew sometimes I wasn't playing the game and I should have. I played the game sometimes and won. Other times I didn't play and lost by default.

01-1-2-4-4

4. I feel angry for needing to play the game but also sad that I didn't.

01-1-2-4-4

5. I guess I feel a bit defeated and apathetic. I despair to ever move up further and just want to hide and keep my job till retirement. I don't trust the system, I don't trust the leaders, I don't trust politicians and I don't trust the public. When Rob Ford and Donald Trump can be elected, I no longer trust humanity.

01-1-2-4-4

Appendix I: Example of Behavioural Data Coded

1. I played a lot of baseball over the years. Baseball teaches you to fail. The best baseball players in the world fail a lot. Look at the best hitters in the world, they fail to get on base more often than they succeed. And these are the best in the world. So when you fail more than you succeed and you are considered a success, you get used to failing. My mentor once told me that he applied for so many jobs he failed and didn't get. But you have to keep going, you have to persevere and keep trying, to be successful you have to have grit.

08-1-1-2-2

2. But sometimes you also have to realize a good fit might not be there.

08-1-1-2-2

3. Critical to the work group is that you should create a culture and environment. You need to create this and so it is fine to consider fit. I try and screen myself out of positions that aren't a good fit. You need to think of ethical environment and your fit with the ethics.

08-1-1-2-2

Appendix J: Examples of Implications Coded

1. Put in place new systems to create open and transparent hiring and promotion processes where the process is recoded, results are reviewed and no friends can be hired.

01-1-2-4-4

2. Put checks and balances on the power of executive and take the results of engagement scores seriously. Fire executives who can't promote a respectful and engaged work place. Don't promote people who serve up but promote leaders who make better work environments as measured through engagement scores.

01-1-2-4-4

3. Make employee engagement results a part of promotion and job security. Focus on organizational health outcomes not pandering to executive and politicians. Better yet, involve the public somehow in determining the value of the public service.

01-1-2-4-4