Moderating Role of Job Performance on the Relationship between Career Plateauing and Work Outcomes among Administrative and Diplomatic Officers in Malaysia

Mat Sani Hassan, Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority
Maimunah Ismail & Jegak Uli, Universiti Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the moderating role of job performance on the relationship between career plateauing and work outcomes. Data were obtained from 137 Administrative and Diplomatic Officers of which the sample was done based on proportionate stratified random sampling. Analyses showed that job performance moderates almost all outcome variables that consist of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intention to quit both in objective and subjective career plateauing situations. Implications for human resource development practices are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Career plateauing (CP) generally means the situation in which an individual has limited vertical and horizontal movement in terms of job. Ference, Stoner and Warren (1977) define CP as ‘the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is low’. Tremblay and Roger (2004) define CP as being a prolonged halt or the feeling that an individual has of being blocked off from promotion. The above definitions are especially felt by those who advocate the notion of linear concept of career. Some also adopt a still wider view by associating CP with the inability to assume more demanding mandates and greater responsibilities (Feldman and Weitz, 1988).

CP is conceptually divided into two. First, is objective CP, refers to a situation that relates to job tenure as arbitrarily defined cut-off point to explain the limited movement of career. Second, is subjective CP, refers to a phenomenon that the limited career mobility could also be interpreted from the point of view of the career aspirant (Schein, 1978; Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989). From the subjective career dimension, a career aspirant interprets his or her experience in terms of individually defined criteria. Therefore, as argued by Chao (1990), conceptually, it is the individual’s career interpretation of his or her career future that should constitute the focal point in CP research and not merely on assessments made by other people. A study by Tremblay and Roger (2004) convinced that CP could be explained when the analysis is done by adding a moderating variable on its relationship with work outcomes.

Past research have been focused on CP related to effect of changes in structural opportunities on work attitudes and behavior (Rosenbaum, 1979), differences between plateaued and non-plateaued managers in terms of job satisfaction and advancement satisfaction (Hall, 1985; Veiga, 1981), and non significant differences in terms of job satisfaction with need of fulfillment (Evans and Gilbert, 1984). Despite the mixed findings in past research on CP, little is known about the phenomenon particularly among the executives in Malaysian public organizations. Specifically lacking is research on the moderating roles of individual and organizational factors on CP. Hence, this article reports a study the objective of which is to investigate the moderating role of job performance on the relationship between CP and work outcomes (WO).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career Plateauing and Work Outcomes

Literature suggests that some variables, such as job seniority (Chao, 1990), supervisor’s interest and support (Chay et al., 1995; Gerpott and Domsch, 1987; Milliman, 1992), characteristics and aspirations associated with the job (Chay
et al., 1995; Gerpott and Domsch, 1987; Milliman, 1992) or career path (Hall, 1985), may moderate the influence of CP on attitudes and behaviors. However, some of these variables received partial support. For example, Chay et al. (1995) report that job tenure did not moderate the relationship between the CP and outcome variables; instead, job challenge and supervisor support play, to certain extent, its moderating roles. Tremblay and Roger (2004) found that participation in decision making, job scope and role ambiguity moderate the relationship between CP and work outcomes that consist of job satisfaction, satisfaction with supervisor, work intensity and intention to quit. Literature also supports that work performance, individual career management and manager’s roles have a great potential in moderating the relationship between CP and work outcomes.

This paper discusses the moderating effects of Subjective CP (SCP) on Work Outcomes (WO) and the moderating role of work performance on the relationship between the two. The study adopts the definition of WO given by Katz and Kahn (1978) that consists of variables such as job satisfaction (JS), organizational commitment (OC), intention to quit (IQ) and job involvement (JI). Literature shows that work outcome components have been used as an effect of CP phenomenon. Lee (2002) and Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) reported that there were significant negative relationship between CP and JS. Other scholars such as Lim and Teo (1998) and Lee (2002) found that professional group and policemen, who were trapped in CP, indicate significant positive relationships on IQ. JI can be interpreted as the level of psychological understanding of individual on their work (Lodahl and Keirev, 1965) and always being related to the CP. Milliman (1992) reported that CP showed a negative relationship with JI. Gerpott and Domch (1987) supported this argument and found that plateaued employees have low level of JI than do the non-plateaued employees. The hypothesis relating subjective CP to selected work outcomes is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Subjective CP will be negatively related to JS, OC and JI as well as positively related to IQ.

Job Performance

Performance as discussed by Ference et al. (1977) refers to the in-roles behavior which is assessed on the basis of the requirements of the job. Theories of Career Management indicate that plateaued employees as ‘dead wood’ and non-plateaued employees as ‘star’. ‘Dead wood’ shows the low level of job performance and ‘star’ as possesses high level of performance. Carnazza et al. (1981) and Near (1983) found plateaued employees show lower job performance than non-plateaued employees. They also reported that CP was negatively related to job performance. Literature in career development recognized that there were significant positive relationships between Job Performance and Work Outcomes (Allen et al., 1998; Orpen, 1986). The relationship between Job Performance and Organizational Commitment has been given more attention in past research. Many researches have also shown that there were positive relationships between Job Performance and organizational Commitment (Mowday et al., 1974; Brett et al., 1995; Leong et al., 1994). Intention to quit was found as one of the consequences of the career plateau traps. A model of intention to quit by Steers and Mowday (1981) stated that Job Performance indicates a relationship with work attitudes, hence the intention to quit. Orpen (1986) and Allen et al. (1998) reported the significant and negative relationship between job performance and intention to quit. Job involvement shows an individual competency to achieve higher job performance in the work place (Elloy & Terpening, 1992). In that sense, Job Involvement is the significant contributor to the change of motivation towards organizational interest. Allen et al. (1998) investigated that there were significant positive relationship between Job Performance and Job Involvement. It shows that the higher is job performance, the more is job involvement among individuals. Based on the literature, hypothesis examining the moderating effect of job performance on outcome variables is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Job performance will moderate the relationship between subjective CP and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to quit and job involvement, as well as between objective CP and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to quit as well as job involvement.
METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The population of this research is Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (ADOs) in three central agencies of Malaysian public services that comprise the Prime Minister’s Department (PMD), Public Services Department (PSD) and Ministry of Finance (MOF). The agencies were selected based on purposive sampling due to a reason that most ADOs in the Klang Valley in Malaysia are stationed in the agencies. It is also due to the need to have respondents with diverse experience since new ADOs as well as senior ADOs are normally posted in these central agencies. Questionnaires were distributed to the ADOs with grades of M41 and M48 in the central agencies. By using ‘G-Power analysis’ (Cohen, 1988), the sample size obtained was 150. Proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used to get a sample breakdown that includes 59 are from PSD (M41-28; M48-31), 67 from PMD (M41-35; M48-32) and 24 are from MOF (M41-11; M48-13). The response rate was 91.3% which comprises, respectively, 84.7% from PSD, 95.5% PMD and 95.2 from MOF. Demographic profiles of the respondents show that 62.8% were male and 42.3% were holding Master’s Degree. The highest age group was in the category of 30 to 39 years old (44.5%) and most of the respondents were married (78.8%). In terms of job tenure, 48.2% (66) worked below five years.

Instrumentation

Career Plateauing. Based on earlier studies (Chao, 1990; Chay et al., 1995; Allen et al., 1999; Tremblay & Roger, 2004), CP is operationalized in two dimension: as an objective event and as a subjective event. The objective dimension was measured by job tenure where six years and above were considered as plateaued employees if they were still holding the same position without any promotion. For this part of analysis, sixty six of the respondents were excluded. The subjective dimension of CP was measured by five questions developed by Milliman (1992). Examples of the questions were: (1) My opportunities for upward movement are limited in my present organization and (2) I expected to be promoted in my organization. The respondents were required to answer questions by using Likert scales from 1-Strongly disagree to 5-Strongly agree. Those who gained mean score below than 2.33, they were considered as in low level of career plateau, 2.34 to 3.66 are moderate and above 3.67, are considered in high level of career plateau. The reliability alpha value of the questionnaire was 0.87.

Job Performance. Job performances of employees were measured by a ‘self-rating performance’ instrument consisted of 11 questions developed by Choo (1986). Five-point Likert scales were used to measure from 1-very dissatisfaction to 5-very satisfactory. The examples of item are (1) maintaining quantity of work; (2) planning and organizing work. The reliability alpha value was 0.91.

Job Satisfaction. A nineteen-item instrument developed by Holland and Gottfredson (1994) was used to measure job satisfaction. Responses were measured on a 5-point scale that ranges from (1) ‘strongly disagree’ to (5) ‘strongly agree’. Sample items include ‘I am bored with my job’ and ‘I like working with the people who work with me’. The alpha value was 0.79.

Organizational Commitment. A fourteen-item instrument developed by Mowday and Steers (1979) was used to measure organizational commitment. Respondents were required to answer on 5-point scales that range from (1) ‘strongly disagree’ to (5) ‘strongly agree’. Sample items include (1) I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful and (2) I really care about the fate of this organization. The scale’s alpha value in the study was 0.86.

Job Involvement. A 10-item scale of Kanungo’s (1982) instrument was used to measure job involvement. Sample items includes (1) I am very much involved personally in my job and (2) the most important things that happen to me involved my present job. The scale’s alpha value was 0.80.

Intention to Quit. The measurement of intention to quit was measured by two scales developed by Camman et al. (1979). A 5-point scale that ranges from (1) ‘strongly disagree’ to (5) ‘strongly agree’ was used. Sample items include (1) I often think about quitting and I will probably look for a new job in the next year. The scale’s alpha value was 0.75.
Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed in a series of steps. The first step of the analysis was to get values of reliabilities, means and standard deviation of the study variables. The second step was zero-order correlation, used to examine pattern of relationships among the study variables and partial test of Hypothesis 1 on the relationship between subjective CP and the work outcome variables. To examine Hypothesis 2, moderated regression analysis was employed to determine the moderating effect of Job performance on Work Outcomes. Following the recommendations of Brett, Cron and Slocum (1995), for testing the moderating effect of a variable, the study then introduced separately the interaction of objective and subjective CP conditions with job performance variable on all of outcome variables, namely, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to quit and job involvement. The significant value of beta would determine the moderating effect of job performance on outcome variables.

Results

Means, standard deviation and zero-order correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1. For Objective dimension, CP was found to indicate negative but not significant relationship to all outcome variables (Job Satisfaction \(-r = -.053, p > .05\); Organizational Commitment \(-.051, p > .05\); Job Involvement \(-.148, p > .05\)) with the exception to intention to quit (\(r = .303, p < .05\)). Subjective dimension of CP showed a significant negative relationship with job satisfaction (\(r = -.553, p < .01\)), organizational commitment (\(r = -.456, p < .01\)) and job involvement (\(r = -.079, p = n.s\)). CP was also found to be significantly and positively related with intention to quit (\(r = .488, p < .01\)). The results fully support Hypothesis 1 and indicate that respondents who perceive their careers to have plateaued reporting lower levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and high level of intention to quit from their organizations.

Results of the moderated regression analysis on the moderating effect of job performance on the relationship between subjective CP and work outcome variables are presented in Table 2 and Table 4. For the objective dimension of CP, job performance moderated all the work outcome variables (Job Satisfaction: \(B = .578, p < .001\); Organizational Commitment: \(B = .593, p < .001\); Intention to Quit: \(B = -.240, p < .05\)) with the exception of job involvement (\(B = .228, p < .05\)). Studies also found in the subjective CP dimensions that job performance moderated all the outcome variables (Job Satisfaction: \(B = .333, p < .001\); Organizational Commitment: \(B = .429, p < .001\); Job Involvement: \(B = .269, p < .01\)) but not the variable of Intention to Quit (\(B = -.121, p = n.s\)). Both the objective and subjective dimensions of CP supported partially Hypothesis 2 in this study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The mixed results pertaining to the effect of CP on work outcomes reported in the literature have been due to problems in the operationalization of the concept of CP (Chao, 1990; Nicholson, 1993; Chay et al., 1995; Tremblay and Rogers, 2004). The results in this study showed that there is a difference in terms of measurement of CP, between perceptual and job tenure measurement. Results of zero order correlation revealed that the dimension of objective CP is less significant than the subjective CP. Only one outcome variable has significant relationship in the objective dimension compared to subjective dimension which in the latter it contributed to three outcome variables. These results are supported by Chao (1990), Milliman (1992) and Tremblay and Roger (2004), suggesting that the two measurements reflect different constructs in describing the phenomenon of CP.

The results further suggest that job performance is one of the strategies for improving plateaued employee’s attitudes and behaviors at workplace. The study concludes that job performance moderates the relationships between CP and most work outcome variables in both objective and subjective CP dimensions. The results also support the Model of Career Management by Ference et al. (1977) and work of Carnazza et al. (1981) which placed job performance as the most significant determinant of the career development of plateaued employees in organization.

The implication of the study is that there is optimism in dealing with plateaued employees in the public sector such as the ADOs. The knowledge generated from this study is useful in HRD interventions towards improving job performance of plateaued employees especially in the service sector that made up of professionals such as ADOs which regard vertical movement within the organizations as important milestone in their career. The relevant interventions are
probably strategic training and retraining, job restructuring, job rotation and other job enrichment initiatives. Also important is supervisors and immediate bosses should show patience and wait for the ADOs’ varying abilities and energy levels to resume the process of growth in accordance with their own feelings and internal motivations as well as readiness to learn at workplace. On the optimistic side, a plateau can be a positive experience if combined with reassurance about individual accomplishment (Kreuter, 1993). An organization should also be able to differentiate between plateaued and permanently stalled employees because the former is able to resume in terms of performance while the latter is subjected to other options such as relinquish the job or retirement. According to Kreuter (1993) again, depending on the situations, career plateaus can be healthy for professionals, particularly those who have accomplished a breakthrough in their careers. A plateau can be a highly valuable and stable period of rest and security that provides an opportunity to regain perspective and digest new ideas. The author further noted that individuals who have comfortably leveled off during this plateau are more likely to refresh and plan better for the next stage of their career development, and are less likely to experience frustration and dissatisfaction than those who have not.

It is also suggested that there should be a system of providing employees with regular, participative performance evaluations along with personal consultative discussion to motivate the plateaued employees. It is also suggested that management has to stay in touch with the concerned staff by periodically asking them how they feel their work progressing. Open channel of two-way communication is vital. By doing so weaknesses will be self-identified that should lead to self-renewal.

This study concludes that job performance has proven as a significant variable to be considered in the career development and it must be given more attention and priority for the well being of the employees especially those in the service sector who are experiencing the situation of career plateauing.

Table 1: Means, standards deviation and zero-order correlations of study variables for objective career plateau dimension (n=71)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Tenure (JT)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective Career Plateauing</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>.530**</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction (JS)</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>-.249*</td>
<td>-.053</td>
<td>-.526**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Commitment (OC)</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>-.179</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>-.317**</td>
<td>.743**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to Quit IQ)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>.400**</td>
<td>.303*</td>
<td>.488**</td>
<td>-.473**</td>
<td>-.425**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Involvement (JI)</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>-.037</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>-.038</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Performance (JP)</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>-.073</td>
<td>-.148</td>
<td>-.293*</td>
<td>.573**</td>
<td>.588**</td>
<td>-.280*</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance: ***Significant at .01; * Significant .001

Table 2: Moderating effect of job performance between objective career plateau and outcome variable (n=71)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Work Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Plateauing</td>
<td>-.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Plateauing + Job Performance</td>
<td>.578***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance: ***Significant at .001; **Significant at .01; * Significant .001
Table 3: Means, standards deviation and zero-order correlations of study variables for subjective career plateau dimension (n=137)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Tenure</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>.509**</td>
<td>-.509**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Career Plateau (SCP)</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>.484**</td>
<td>.484**</td>
<td>-.289**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction (JS)</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>-.318**</td>
<td>-.318**</td>
<td>-.151</td>
<td>-.553**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Commitment (OC)</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>-.339**</td>
<td>-.339**</td>
<td>-.267**</td>
<td>-.456**</td>
<td>-.756**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to Quit (IQ)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>.429**</td>
<td>.429**</td>
<td>.324**</td>
<td>.488**</td>
<td>-.463**</td>
<td>-.461**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Involvement (JI)</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>-.079</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.266**</td>
<td>-.120</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Performance (JP)</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>-.119</td>
<td>-.284**</td>
<td>.463**</td>
<td>.524**</td>
<td>-.386**</td>
<td>-.269**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significant at .01; * Significant .05

Table 4: Moderating effect of job performance between subjective career plateau and outcome variable (n=137)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Work Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Plateauing</td>
<td>-.553**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Plateauing + Job Performance</td>
<td>.333***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Significant at .001; **Significant at .01; * Significant .05

REFERENCES


