Attitudes of Managers Who Are More or Less Career Plateaued

Tammy D. Allen
Mark L. Poteet
Joyce E. A. Russell

This study investigated demographic and attitudinal differences across managers classified as nonplateaued, content plateaued, hierarchically plateaued, or both content and hierarchically plateaued. The results revealed significant demographic differences across the 4 groups on a variety of variables. Managers who were classified as both hierarchically and job content plateaued tended to report less favorable job attitudes than managers who were plateaued for one reason only or managers who were nonplateaued. Managers who were only job content plateaued tended to report less favorable job attitudes than managers who were only hierarchically plateaued.

A unique combination of demographic and economic factors has resulted in an increase in the potential number of individuals encountering a plateau in their career. For example, structural changes in organizations such as flatter hierarchies, the continuing proliferation of organizational restructuring and downsizings, and the number of baby-boomers in midcareer have resulted in more employees vying for fewer advancement opportunities. In addition to being an issue of critical concern to individuals, plateauing has also been recognized as an important subject to organizations that must find ways to manage the detrimental effects that a career plateau may have on employees (Rosen & Jerdee, 1990). Given these events, the issue of career plateauing has begun to receive considerable attention by researchers and practitioners.

The definition and operationalization of career plateauing has evolved over the years. Initially, plateauing was defined as the point in a manager's career beyond which further promotion is un-
likely (Ference, Stoner, & Warren, 1977). More recently, Bardwick (1986) suggested that individuals may experience two forms of career related plateuing: structural (i.e., hierarchical) and job content. Hierarchical plateuing results when an individual has little chance of further vertical movement within an organization. On the other hand, job content plateuing occurs when the individual is no longer challenged by his or her work or job responsibilities. Similarly, Feldman and Weitz (1988) defined career plateuing as the likelihood of not receiving further assignments of increased responsibility. Thus, career plateaus are no longer simply defined as an inability to “move up” hierarchically in the organization but include other factors as well.

Chao (1990) further expanded the definition of plateuing by positing that research should center on an employee’s subjective evaluation of his or her career future, rather than the objective number of years he or she has been in a particular position. Moreover, Chao advocated the use of a continuum to measure career plateuing rather than dichotomizing employees into plateued or nonplateued categories. Milliman (1992a) advanced these concepts and developed continuous subjective measures to assess individual perceptions of both hierarchical and job content plateuing. This type of measurement acknowledges that employee perceptions of plateuing can range from not all plateued to very plateued.

These important developments in the plateuing literature raise several important issues for investigation. Specifically, there has been little research examining job content plateuing. Today’s midcareer workforce is composed of baby boomers who are less concerned with advancement and more concerned with balance and diversity (Hall & Richter, 1990). These individuals may not emphasize hierarchical promotions to the same extent as did the previous generation. Thus, the main concern for organizations in the future may be the effects of individual perceptions of job boredom or stagnation (job content). Consequently, research examining job content plateuing seems vital. Furthermore, research that has examined perceptions of hierarchical plateuing or perceptions of job content plateuing does not recognize the possibility that an individual may be both hierarchically and job content plateued. That is, variables related to being both job content and hierarchically plateued have yet to be investigated. It seems likely that individuals who are “double” plateued differ significantly from those who are either job content or hierarchically plateued.

The purpose of this study was to examine differences among individuals who were nonplateued, job content plateued, hierarchically plateued, or both job content and hierarchically plateued. To better understand potential causes and consequences related to the different types of plateuing, two sets of variables that have been the focus of previous plateuing research were studied. The first set of variables was demographic and included age, job tenure, sex, and race. Second, five dependent variables that represented a range of work-related attitudes were selected for investigation. Specifically, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intent to turnover, job involvement, and job induced stress were examined. In addition, a self-report measure of job

160 THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT QUARTERLY / DECEMBER 1998/ VOL. 47
performance was included. A brief review of the research examining the variables of interest is provided in the next section.

**DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES RELATED TO CAREER PLATEAUNING**

Numerous demographic variables thought to be related to plateauing have been investigated. For example, research indicates that plateaued employees tend to be older compared with their nonplateaued counterparts (Near, 1983, 1985; Savery, 1989; Tremblay & Roger, 1993; Tremblay, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995). Several studies that have operationalized plateauing as job tenure have also demonstrated that individuals who reach a plateau have significantly more seniority than those who are nonplateaued (Gould & Penley, 1984; Tremblay & Roger, 1993). In addition, several researchers have found that Blacks are more likely to report having reached a career plateau than are Whites (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Milliman, 1992a). Few studies have examined gender differences in plateauing. One exception is Milliman (1992a), who failed to find any differences in incidences of plateauing between men and women.

**ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS RELATED TO CAREER PLATEAUNING**

A number of studies have examined the consequences associated with becoming plateaued. Although not all studies have found negative outcomes associated with plateauing (e.g., Nicholson, 1993), there is considerable evidence indicating that plateauing is related to unfavorable job attitudes and behaviors. Studies have demonstrated that hierarchically plateaued employees have higher absenteeism (Near, 1980), report less satisfaction with their supervisors (Near, 1985), more health problems (Near, 1985), more stress (Elsass & Ralston, 1989), greater intentions to leave the organization (Burke, 1989; Tremblay et al., 1995), and greater psychological burnout (Burke, 1989). In addition, numerous studies have indicated that plateaued employees report lower levels of satisfaction and organizational commitment (Chao, 1990; Davenport, 1993; Ettington, 1992; Gerpott & Domsch, 1987; Milliman, 1992a, 1992b; Orpen, 1986; Patterson, Sutton, & Schuttenberg, 1987; Tremblay et al., 1995) and lower job performance (Ettington, 1992; Patterson et al., 1987; Stout, Slocum, & Cron, 1988). The limited research examining job content plateauing has yielded results similar to those found for hierarchical plateauing. Specifically, research has indicated that perceptions of job content plateauing are related to lower levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and higher levels of intent to turnover (Davenport & Russell, 1994; Milliman, 1992a).

In summary, this study was an exploratory attempt to investigate how distinct forms of plateauing may be differentially related to several demographic and job attitude variables. The following general hypotheses were proposed:
• Hypothesis 1: Individuals varying in plateauing (double, hierarchical, job content, or nonplateaued) will report differences in demographic variables and job attitudes/performance.

• Hypothesis 2: Individuals who are both hierarchically and job content plateaued will report less favorable job attitudes/performance than individuals who are plateaued for one reason (hierarchical or job content) or individuals who report not being plateaued.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 607 managers employed by a large southeastern state government. The participants were first level managers who directly supervised the activities of nonmanagerial employees. Fifty-nine percent (N = 353) of the managers were male, and the average age was 46.82 years (SD = 8.79). The participants held management positions in 32 departments in the state government (e.g., transportation, human services, finance, and administration). Their average organizational tenure was 16.87 years (SD = 8.87) and average job tenure was 6.4 years (SD = 5.50). The median level of education achieved was the completion of a 4-year college degree. Ninety-one percent (n = 544) were White, 8.7% (n = 52) were Black, and .4% (n = 2) were from other minority groups.

Procedure

Surveys were mailed directly to the home address of a random sample of 1500 managers who were instructed to return the completed surveys directly to the researchers with the provided return envelope. Of the 1500 surveys, 8 were returned as undeliverable by the post office. A total of 622 of the remaining 1,492 surveys were returned for a response rate of 41.7%. Due to missing data, responses from 607 surveys were used in the analyses. In an effort to assess the generalizability of the study sample to the total population of first-line managers in the state government system, demographic characteristics were compared. Within the total population, 55.87% were male, 85.83% were White, and the average age was 46.84 years (SD = 9.61). These findings suggest the current sample was similar to the population of managers from which it was drawn in terms of demographic characteristics.

Measurement of Plateauing

Content plateauing. The Content Plateauing Scale was a 6-item measure adapted from Milliman (1992a; e.g., “My job requires me to continually extend my abilities and knowledge”). The mean of the scale items was used, with a low score indicating a greater degree of plateauing (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Hierarchical plateauing. The Hierarchical Plateauing scale was a 4-item measure adapted from Milliman (1992a; e.g., “I expect to
advance to a higher level . . . in the near future"). The mean of the scale items was used, with a low score indicating a greater degree of plateauing (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Classification of plateau groups. The participants were classified into one of four subgroups based on their responses to the two perceptual plateauing scales described previously. The following procedure was used. First, a median score for each of the two scales was obtained. Next, respondents who scored at the median were removed from further analyses (n = 55). The purpose of excluding employees who were in the middle (and hence could be grouped into either category) was to ensure that there were relevant differences between the classifications.

Respondents who scored below both scale medians were classified as double plateaued (D; hierarchically and job content, N = 148). Respondents who scored above the median on both scales were classified as nonplateaued (N; N = 171). Respondents who scored above the median on the hierarchical scale and below the median on the content scale were classified as content plateaued (C; N = 108). Likewise, respondents who scored above the median on the content scale and below the median on the hierarchical scale were classified as hierarchically plateaued (H; N = 125). Admittedly, the generation of subgroups versus the use of continuous variables results in some loss of information. However, the purpose of this study was not to assess how the degree of plateauing was related to the variables examined (within-group differences), but rather to assess how the type of plateauing was related to the variables of interest (between-group differences). Furthermore, to the extent that double plateauing represents a greater degree of plateauing than nonplateauing, content-alone, or hierarchical-alone, the degree of plateauing is also captured.

Dependent Variables

With the exception of job performance (described in the next sections), each of the following scales was measured with items based on a 5-point Likert-type rating format (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). For each scale, the mean of the scale items was used in the analyses with higher scores indicating a greater degree of the construct assessed (e.g., more job satisfaction, greater intentions to turnover). Due to survey length constraints, several of the variables were measured with abbreviated scales. In each case, to help ensure the validity of the shortened instruments, items were chosen that were general representations of the domain of the construct measured.

Job Involvement. Four items from Lodahl and Kejner's (1965) scale of Job Involvement were used to assess job involvement (e.g., "The most important things that happen to me involve my work").

Organizational Commitment. This four-item measure was adopted from Mowday, et al.'s (1979) Organizational Commitment scale (e.g., "I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization succeed").

Intent To Turnover. Intent to turnover was measured by four items from the Organizational Climate scale developed by Cammann,
Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979; e.g., "I often think about quitting my job").

**Job Induced Stress.** Three items adapted from House and Rizzo (1972) were used to assess job-induced health problems, stress, or anxiety (e.g., "I have felt anxious or nervous as a result of my job").

**Job Satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was assessed by modifying 11 items from Hackman and Oldham's (1975) Job Diagnostic Survey. These items tapped various dimensions of job satisfaction such as satisfaction with pay, growth, and security (e.g., "I am satisfied with the amount of challenge in my job").

**Job Performance.** Job performance was a one-item self-report measure that read, "How would you rate your current overall job performance?" A higher score indicated a higher level of perceived job performance (1 = extremely ineffective to 5 = extremely effective).

**Demographic data.** Managers responded to demographic questions regarding their gender, age, race, and job tenure.

## Analysis

The analyses proceeded through several stages. First, chi-square tests were conducted to determine if there were differences in the percentage of men and women and Whites and Blacks in the different plateauing categories. Next, the remaining study variables were clustered into two subgroups: demographic and job attitudes/performance. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on each subgroup of variables with the four categories of plateauing as the independent variable (double plateaued, hierarchically plateaued only, content plateaued only, nonplateaued).

## RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas for all study variables are presented in Table 1.

The chi-square test revealed that there was a significant difference in the frequency with which Whites and Blacks were classified into the plateauing categories ($\chi^2 = 20.41, p < .001$). A greater percentage of Whites were classified as double plateaued, hierarchical plateaued, and nonplateaued than were Blacks (D: Whites, 28%; Blacks, 13%; H: Whites, 23%; Blacks 17%; N: Whites, 32%, Blacks, 27%). On the other hand, Blacks were more likely to be classified as job content plateaued (44%) than were Whites (17%).

A significant difference was also found in the frequency with which men and women were classified into the plateauing categories ($\chi^2 = 10.02, p < .05$). Specifically, men were more likely to be classified as double plateaued (29%) or nonplateaued (34%) than were women (23% and 27%, respectively). In contrast, women were more likely to be classified as hierarchical (28%) or job content plateaued (22%) than were men (19% and 18%, respectively).

Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations by plateauing type and the MANOVA results. Significant multivariate effects were found for each of the two groups of variables. Significant univariate main effects were also found for all of the study variables. To fur-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</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>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hierarchical</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Content</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Age</td>
<td>46.82</td>
<td>8.79</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Race*</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sex*</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Job Tenure</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Job Involvement</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Organizational</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Job Performance</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Stress</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Inten To Turnover</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>-.47**</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NA = not applicable. Numbers on the diagonal represent alpha coefficients.
*Race coded: 0 = Caucasian/White; 1 = African American/Black. *Sex coded: 0 = male; 1 = female.
*p < .05. **p < .01.
### TABLE 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Results of Significance Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Type of Plateau</th>
<th>Significance Tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Double</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>47.93</td>
<td>8.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Tenure</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>6.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Attitudes/Performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Involvement</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Commitment</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Performance</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Induced Stress</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent To Turnover</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = nonplateaued; C = content plateaued; H = hierarchical plateaued; D = double plateaued (e.g., [C; D, H] [N; H] indicates content plateaued significantly different from double and hierarchical plateaued, and nonplateaued significantly different from hierarchical plateaued).

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
ther examine the nature of the differences between the plateau types, post hoc analysis of the means using the Scheffe test was conducted. The Scheffe test was chosen because it is a conservative estimate of mean differences, and it does not require equal sample sizes. An alpha level of .05 was used.

As shown in Table 2, the results indicate that content plateaued managers were significantly younger in age ($M = 44.53$) than double plateaued ($M = 47.93$) and hierarchically plateaued managers ($M = 48.94$). In addition, nonplateaued managers were significantly younger in age ($M = 45.87$) than hierarchically plateaued managers. Regarding job tenure, both double plateaued ($M = 8.64$) and hierarchically plateaued ($M = 7.52$) managers had significantly longer job tenure than did content plateaued ($M = 5.29$) and nonplateaued managers ($M = 4.67$).

The results indicated that double plateaued managers ($M = 3.12$) were significantly less involved in their jobs than were hierarchically plateaued ($M = 3.38$) and nonplateaued managers ($M = 3.39$). When observing mean differences regarding organizational commitment, it was found that double plateaued ($M = 3.16$) individuals had a significantly lower level of commitment than the other groups ($M = 3.52$ for hierarchical, $M = 3.52$ for job content, and $M = 3.73$ for nonplateaued). The job performance results indicated that job content plateaued managers ($M = 4.22$) reported performing at a significantly lower level than did nonplateaued managers ($M = 4.56$). In addition, nonplateaued managers ($M = 3.32$) reported significantly lower levels of job stress than did hierarchically plateaued managers ($M = 3.49$). Numerous differences were found for job satisfaction. Double plateaued managers ($M = 3.17$) reported significantly lower job satisfaction than did hierarchically plateaued ($M = 3.68$), job content plateaued ($M = 3.38$) and nonplateaued managers ($M = 3.81$). In addition, job satisfaction was significantly lower for job content plateaued managers than for managers who were hierarchically or nonplateaued. The final attitudinal variable assessed was intent to turnover. The results indicated that both nonplateaued ($M = 1.67$) and hierarchically plateaued managers ($M = 1.73$) were significantly less likely to report intentions to turnover than were double ($M = 2.09$) or job content plateaued managers ($M = 2.11$).

In summary, support was found for both hypotheses. Specifically, there were significant differences in the variables studied as function of plateauing classification (Hypothesis 1). In addition, the results provided moderate support for Hypothesis 2. That is, managers who were classified as both hierarchically and job content plateaued (double plateaued) tended to report less favorable job attitudes and performance than managers who were hierarchically plateaued, job content plateaued, or nonplateaued.

**DISCUSSION**

Several conclusions can be drawn from the results. It is not surprising that the results indicate that job attitudes are most negatively related to double plateauing. That is, individuals who were identified as double plateaued had less favorable attitudes regarding job
involvement, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction than those who were nonplateaued, job content plateaued or who were hierarchically plateaued. There is some evidence to suggest that, following individuals who are double plateaued, individuals who are job content plateaued have the most negative job attitudes and performance. Specifically, managers who were only job content plateaued reported the lowest level of job performance and the highest intentions to turnover of the plateauing categories as well as the second lowest levels of job involvement, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. It may be that individuals recognize that hierarchical plateauing is an inevitable part of organizational life and hence more forgivable; however, job content plateauing may be perceived as avoidable and correctable and, hence, has a greater negative impact on job attitudes toward the organization.

Regarding the demographic data, the results indicated that of the four classifications, job content plateaued individuals were the youngest, whereas hierarchically plateaued managers were oldest. Moreover, job tenure differences were in an expected direction. Specifically, managers with the least job tenure were the nonplateaued, followed by job content, hierarchically, and double plateaued respectively. The findings indicate that hierarchical plateauing may be more associated with becoming older and reaching a point where there are fewer promotions available. In contrast, perceptions of job content plateauing are less dependent on age and tenure because individuals may feel stagnant in their jobs during any time in their career.

Although the results should be viewed cautiously because only a small number of minority members were included in our sample, the present study indicated that there were significant differences regarding the frequency in which Blacks and Whites were classified into the various plateauing categories. The biggest difference was regarding job content plateauing, which consisted of a considerably greater percentage of Blacks than Whites. These results should be considered along with those of Milliman (1992a), who found that minorities reported plateauing more often than Whites, and Greenhaus et al. (1990) who found that Blacks were more likely to have reached career plateaus than were their White counterparts. In concert, these findings may suggest that although many Blacks have moved into positions of responsibility within organizations, there may still be differences regarding the level of challenge and growth they are provided in their jobs (Fernandez, 1988). Additional research seems warranted to further examine these issues and better delineate appropriate counseling approaches for Blacks, because few studies have examined race and plateauing.

In contrast to the results found by Milliman (1992a), significant gender differences were found in the present study. The biggest difference between the sexes occurred regarding perceptions of hierarchical plateauing, which indicated that a greater percentage of women perceived that there were fewer advancement opportunities available to them than did men. The results are consistent with previous research suggesting that although women have been fairly successful reaching lower-level management positions, they may become plateaued sooner than men (Gallos, 1989; Russell, 1994).
The results have important implications for organizations. Most of the research regarding career plateauing has focused on the potential negative impact that hierarchical plateauing can have on job attitudes and behaviors. The present results underscore the importance of examining job content plateauing in concert with hierarchical plateauing. In general, managers who were classified as both job content and hierarchically plateaued reported the least favorable job attitudes. Furthermore, this study provides evidence indicating that individuals may react more negatively to job content plateauing than to hierarchical plateauing. Consequently, it seems important for organizations to exert greater efforts toward identifying and developing career interventions for individuals who are not only blocked regarding hierarchical promotion, but who also perceive themselves as plateaued in terms of job content. These efforts are further warranted given the widespread prevalence of plateauing as demonstrated by the significant portion of the respondents classified as both job content and hierarchically plateaued.

One suggestion is for organizations to educate supervisors on the signs of job content plateauing and how to provide the support and feedback needed to avert the negative consequences associated with the plateau. Several studies have found that support from supervisors may play an important part in the plateauing process. For example, Gerpott and Domsch (1987) found that negative reactions to plateauing were partially due to lower levels of feedback and support from supervisors. Similarly, Allen, Russell, Poteet, and Dobbins (in press) found that individuals who perceived greater support for training and development from their supervisors were less likely to perceive themselves as job content plateaued.

The present study contains several limitations that should be addressed. First, the data in the study were collected from one source. Hence, the extent to which the results may be affected by common method variance cannot be fully determined. However, an examination of the intercorrelation matrix reveals a number of unrelated variables, indicating that common method variance may not be a source of major concern. In addition, response bias was potentially lessened because the measures included for this study were located in various parts of a larger survey that covered an array of topics. The cross-sectional nature of the study precludes our ability to make causal inferences (e.g., one might argue that those with low job commitment are more likely to plateau) regarding the relationships observed. Although our hypotheses were guided by both the theoretical and empirical literature, the present study does not provide an adequate test of causality and hence rival causal flows cannot be ruled out.

Another limitation was the use of a one-item, self-report measure of job performance. Single item measures are not inherently defective; however, they create cause for concern due to their unknown reliability (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983). Although this measure is a weak indicator of actual level of job performance, it does serve as a barometer of individual self-perceptions of job performance. Additional research is needed where information is collected from a variety of sources (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, subordinates). Several
factors limit the generalizability of the results of the present study. First, given that the participants in this study were all low-level managers working in a state government, it is uncertain to what extent the results are applicable to nongovernment employees at other job levels. However, the participants did hold positions in diverse fields such as nursing, accounting, and law enforcement, thus reducing the likelihood that the findings are a product of circumstances related to a specific profession. In addition, the response rate of 42% was lower than desired. Although response rates lower than that of the current study are not atypical of voluntary self-completion survey research of this nature (e.g., Gotlieb, Grewal, & Brown, 1994; Tyler, Degoe, & Smith, 1996), we cannot rule-out the possibility that certain groups of employees may have been more predisposed to respond to the questionnaire than others (e.g., severely plateaued employees may have chosen not to participate). Finally, our data analysis method of forming subgroups based on sample specific median scores may also limit the generalizability of results. Future research may address these concerns and attempt to replicate these findings in other settings and by using other analytic methods.

The practical significance of the results is also an issue for attention. The differences in means was generally small. However, when considering the effect sizes associated with the statistically significant results, the findings suggest that type of plateauing has a small-to-moderate (job involvement) to a large effect (job satisfaction) on job attitudes (Cohen, 1988). Despite the generally robust effect sizes associated with the results, it is difficult to confidently determine the practical meaningfulness of the findings. We suggest that even small mean level differences across a host of job attitudes, aggregated across time and persons, have the potential for substantial impact on organizational functioning.

There are issues to be addressed in future research. First, research is needed that identifies the coping mechanisms that plateaued employees use. Attribution research may also be helpful in examining coping mechanisms. For example, it may be easier for a hierarchically plateaued individual to attribute a lack of promotions to organizational factors (external causes) such as downsizing or economic conditions rather than to individual shortcomings (internal causes). Subsequently, an individual’s response made to plateauing and to the coping method they used may differ according to the attribution made. In addition, although several researchers (e.g., Greenhaus & Callanan, 1994; Hall, 1986; Hall & Richter, 1990) have offered several suggestions and alternatives for plateaued employees and their employing organizations, research is required to assess the effectiveness of such alternatives. Different interventions may be more effective in dealing with hierarchical versus content plateauing. Research assessing pre- and post intervention plateauing perceptions is needed.

In summary, the present research addresses a salient issue of concern for organizations. The study advances our knowledge regarding the multidimensional nature of plateauing and potential causes and consequences associated with different types of plateauing.
Little research has comparatively examined the different forms of perceptual plateauing. Research designed to further delineate the occurrence of and resulting consequences of both hierarchical and job content plateauing seems warranted.

REFERENCES


172 THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT QUARTERLY / DECEMBER 1998 / VOL. 47