

## Career Plateauing: Is It Still A Matter of Concern?

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### Abstract

*Hierarchical plateauing has been an issue and a challenge for most organizations in almost all sectors. The volatile global market conditions and the limited availability of higher positions has made the competition for openings much more intense. Many researchers have associated plateauing with negative consequences such as lower levels of job satisfaction, poor commitment, high absenteeism, greater stress, low motivation and high employee turnover. The literature also indicates that in most organizations, plateauing is often considered as one of the contributing factors to employee's intention to leave in most organizations. However, very few realize that plateaued employees can actually be turned into the most valuable assets and can enhance an organization's competitiveness if the employers are able to manage this group effectively. This paper investigates the relationship between hierarchical plateauing and intention to leave among nurses in public hospitals. Questionnaires were distributed to 700 nurses in 11 public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia to examine the current perception of employees towards hierarchical plateauing in their career . The results showed that hierarchical plateauing was not significantly related to the intention to leave. The results provide some new insight in the sense that they support the recent notion that the plateauing phenomenon has become unavoidable and that many employees have no choices but to experience it sooner or later in their career and sometimes even earlier than they anticipate. The implications of the study and future research suggestions are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** hierarchical plateauing, nurses, intention to leave, Malaysia

### 1. Introduction

Many studies concerning the intention to leave have been conducted to examine the intention to leave and factors relating to the intention to leave in various fields. In fact, many researchers have attempted to answer the questions of what really determines the intention of employees to leave by investigating possible antecedents of employees' intention to leave. However, there is still no standard reason why employees leave an organization or occupation (Ongori, 2007) and there has been little consistency in the findings concerning the question of what really determines employees' intention to leave.

Recent decades have witnessed an increased interest in investigating why employees leave an organization (Van der Heijden, Van Dam & Hasselhorn, 2009). However, knowing the reasons for leaving is too late to stop the actual act of leaving and detecting the presence of the intention to leave feeling is said to be better in supporting the effort to prevent or minimize employees' leaving. In fact, voluntary turnover is said to be best predicted by an employee's intention to leave (Price, 2000). Thus, a further understanding and investigation of the existence of the intention to leave feeling is crucial. In other words it is much more important to scrutinize the factors that make an employee intends to leave the organization.

Previous studies have indicated that plateauing is associated with the negative outcomes among employees including the intention to leave feelings. In addition, studies have revealed that various factors contribute to an employee's intention to leave such as personal factors, job related factors, organizational factors and environmental factors. Among the factors that are often discussed are job satisfaction (Foster, Lonial & Shastri, 2011; Harman, Blum, Stefani & Taho, 2009; Castle et al., 2007; Slattery & Selvarajan, 2005; Sellgren, Ekvall & Tomson, 2007; Tser-Yieth Chen

et al., 2004; Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Bluedorn, 1982; Mobley, 1982; Price, 1977), organizational commitment (Morrison, 2008; Labatmediene, Endriuaiteiene & Gustainiene, 2007; Slattery & Selvarajan, 2005; Yamada, 2002; Nayak, 2002), job stress (Chou-Kang Chiu et al., 2005; ), leadership (Sellgren, Ekvall & Tomson, 2007; Chou-Kang Chiu et al., 2005; Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang & Lawler, 2005; Mohd Sharuddin, 1997), labor market (Hatcher, 1999), work environment (Shwu-Ru, 2007; Stagnitti et al., 2006), role conflict (Murray, 1983), job autonomy (Stagnitti et al., 2006), workplace violence (Sofield & Salmond, 2003) moral obligation (Prestholdt et al., 1987; Sharkey, 1994) as well as other management issues. In addition, plateauing is said to contribute to an employee's decision to leave their current job (Foster, Lonial & Shastri, 2011; Heilmann, Holt, & Rilovick, 2008; Burke, 2006; Zurn, Dolea & Stilwell, 2005; Veiga, 1981).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Career Plateauing

The issue of career plateauing is not new and continues to be a pertinent issue (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Allen, Russell, Poteet & Dobbins, 1999). In fact, the issue remains relevant (Lee, 2003) since most organizations are pyramid-shaped structures in which as one approaches the top, fewer positions are offered and virtually everyone's career at one time or another reaches a point at which there is a stagnation for further hierarchical advancement.

In most organizations, complacency or the state of plateauing usually occurs among employees who have served more than five years or among those that can be categorized as experienced or quite experienced workers (Near, 1984). The problem becomes even worse if employees cannot accept the negative reality and then choose to leave the organization. Just imagine when key people or experienced nurses fall into this group of plateaued employees and decide to walk out. This walk out would mean the loss of knowledge, skills and expertise because experts take their knowledge, skills and expertise with them when they leave.

How can one tell that one is experiencing plateauing? Some previous research used job tenure to determine whether someone has plateaued or vice versa (e.g Gould & Penley, 1984) and some use age as the determinant for plateauing (e.g Evans & Gilbert, 1984). Near (1984) suggested that those who have been in the post for twenty (20) years or more are considered to have plateaued. Gerpott & Domsch (1987) claimed that those who can be considered as plateaued were those whose current job tenure is greater than ten (10) years while other studies considered those who had worked for seven (7) years or more as plateaued employees (Choy, 1998; Gould & Penley, 1984; Veiga, 1981). However, the most usual definition appears to be five years in service without any movement (Near, 1984; Zaremba, 1994; Slocum et al., 1985). To be more specific, those who are really considered as plateaued employees are those who hold the same position and carry out the same job scope and responsibilities for five years or more.

### 2.2 Career Plateauing and Turnover Intention

Some previous researchers suggested that plateauing is associated with negative consequences including absenteeism and turnover (Near, 1990; Chao, 1990; Lee, 2003; Burke, 2006). Burke (2006) claimed that plateaued employees reported greater work alienation, less job satisfaction and greater intention to leave. Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002) also claimed that career immobility affected performance, satisfaction and commitment. There is also evidence suggesting that career development opportunities encourage the retention of nurses to their profession (Zurn, Dolea & Stilwell, 2005) while, to some extent, plateauing could contribute to an employee's decision to leave (Veiga, 1981). A study conducted by Foster et al. (2011) indicated that there was a positive relationship between plateauing and turnover intention, however, mentoring significantly reduced career plateauing and turnover intention.

Knowledge and understanding, especially concerning the effect of plateauing (especially hierarchical plateauing) on job performance or intention to leave, and particularly in the Malaysian context (since culture and geographic factors do contribute to different effects), would be a valuable guide to both employers and employees. Appelbaum and Finestone (1994) believed that plateaued employees have a high potential to be productive again as fast-track non-plateaued if the organization (management) communicates its messages effectively and demonstrates interventions with these individuals. This study can complement the continuous effort made by organizations to ensure their employees have a fresh perspective and spirit of work and, thus, it can minimize the intention to leave among employees, especially those employees who are in the plateaued stage. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to further investigate the relationship between hierarchical plateauing and the intention to leave. It is hoped that the results of this study will develop a better understanding of the issue of turnover intention among Malaysian nurses who are working in public hospitals, and thus, shed further light on the field under study.

### 2.3 Problem Statement

An adequate number of staff will ensure the quality of the nursing care received by patients and the quality of the health care system. However, many articles and journals have discussed the nursing shortage, which has become a global issue. The shortage of nurses in most parts of the world has also been associated with a high turnover in the nursing field. Research has indicated that various factors have contributed to the intention to leave, one of which is career plateauing. Plateaued employees are claimed to have a higher degree of intention to leave due to the decreasing opportunities for them to climb the career ladder. Therefore, this study investigated the relationship between career plateauing and the intention to leave among nurses in Malaysian public hospitals.

### 2.4 Research objective

The objective of the study is to investigate the relationship between hierarchical plateauing and the intention to leave among nurses in Malaysian public hospitals.

### 2.5 Hypothesis

A study conducted by McCleese and Eby (2006) revealed that individuals who feel hopeful about future hierarchical advancement prospects may have less intention to leave even though they are, at the same time, also experiencing job content plateauing. Meanwhile, Burke (2006) claimed that plateaued employees reported greater work alienation, less job satisfaction and greater intention to leave. Thus, this study hypothesized that hierarchical plateauing is positively related to the intention to leave among the nurses in Malaysian public hospitals.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Sample and sample size

The population of the study comprised nurses working in public hospitals with the samples being nurses from 11 major public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia who are deemed to represent nurses in Malaysia. In Malaysia, nurses are categorized into four main groups - matron, sister, staff nurse, and community nurse. Thus, using the proportionate stratified random sampling method was preferred as the sample would be able to represent not only the overall population, but also the subgroups of the population. This kind of sampling was also decided upon in order to reduce potential bias.

To determine the sample size, Sekaran (2003) suggested that the sample size for a population size of 41,000 is 381. However, for data collection, this study distributed 700 sets of questionnaires. The survey questions applied a multi-item approach whereby a few questions were asked under one particular variable. The survey questions were divided into three major sections. Section A required respondents to provide their personal information details, Section B contained questions about the respondents' perceived hierarchical plateauing and Section C contained questions about the respondents' perceived intention to leave.

### 3.2 Instrument

To measure hierarchical plateauing, Milliman's (1992) six-item survey questions with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.9 were used, and to measure the respondents' intention to leave, the instrument developed by Hinshaw and Atwood (1984), called the Anticipated Turnover Scale (ATS) was used. This Anticipated Turnover Scales (ATS) instrument contained twelve items relating to the respondents' anticipated length of time to leave and their certainty of leaving their job. The Anticipated Turnover Scales (ATS) was chosen because extensive testing on its reliability and validity was conducted before it was finally published. The internal consistency reliability was 0.84 for the scale. Furthermore, this ATS instrument has been used repeatedly and successfully (Miller, 2007) in studies concerning the intention to leave.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Respondents' profiles

A total of 436 responses were returned out of the 700 questionnaires distributed to 11 major public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia, which gave a 62.3% overall response rate. This was considered as quite a good response rate. However, only 398 responses were keyed into the system as 39 responses were rejected due to incomplete information.

The 398 respondents comprised 90.5% Malay, 4.5% Chinese, 4.5% Indians and 0.5% others. The respondents' organizational tenure ranged from less than one year to more than fifteen years. From the total of usable respondents, 78 (19.6%) have been with their present organization for less than one year, 86 (21.6%) have been working with their present organization for one to three years, 70 (17.6%) have been working with their organization for four to six years, 37 (9.3%) claimed that they have seven to nine years' experience with their current organization, 40 (10.10%) have ten to twelve years' experience with their present organization, 42 (10.60%) have thirteen to fifteen years of experience with their present employer and 45 (11.3%) have been with their current employer for more than fifteen years.

In term of being promoted, 27.4% respondents had been promoted or offered a higher post in the last five years while 72.6% had not been promoted or offered a higher post in the last five years. This indicates that the majority of the respondents had not been promoted in the past five years.

**Table 1.** Respondents' Profiles

| Demographic Characteristics |                              | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender                      | Male                         | 3         | 0.80           |
|                             | Female                       | 395       | 99.20          |
| Age                         | Below 25 years               | 32        | 8.00           |
|                             | 26 – 30 years                | 87        | 21.90          |
|                             | 31 – 35 years                | 68        | 17.10          |
|                             | 36 – 40 years                | 66        | 16.60          |
|                             | 41 – 45 years                | 29        | 7.30           |
|                             | 46 – 50 years                | 39        | 9.80           |
|                             | More than 50 years           | 77        | 19.30          |
| Race                        | Malay                        | 360       | 90.50          |
|                             | Chinese                      | 18        | 4.50           |
|                             | Indian                       | 18        | 4.50           |
|                             | Others                       | 2         | 0.50           |
| Marital Status              | Married                      | 349       | 87.70          |
|                             | Unmarried                    | 38        | 9.50           |
|                             | Divorced, Separated, Widowed | 11        | 2.80           |
| Level of Education          | MCE/HSC                      | 89        | 22.40          |
|                             | Certificate                  | 38        | 9.50           |
|                             | Diploma                      | 258       | 63.60          |
|                             | Degree                       | 16        | 4.00           |
|                             | Master                       | 2         | 0.50           |
| Level of Income             | Less than RM 1500            | 18        | 4.50           |
|                             | RM1501 – RM 2500             | 167       | 42.00          |
|                             | RM2501 – RM 3500             | 161       | 40.50          |
|                             | RM3501 – RM 4500             | 43        | 10.80          |
|                             | Above RM 4500                | 9         | 2.30           |
| Organizational Tenure       | Less than 1 years            | 78        | 19.60          |
|                             | 1 – 3 years                  | 86        | 21.60          |
|                             | 4 – 6 years                  | 70        | 17.60          |
|                             | 7 – 9 years                  | 37        | 9.30           |
|                             | 10 – 12 years                | 40        | 10.10          |
|                             | 13 – 15 years                | 42        | 10.60          |
|                             | More than 15 years           | 45        | 11.30          |

n=398

#### 4.2 Hierarchical plateauing and intention to leave

Table 2 below illustrates the results of the estimated direct effect of hierarchical plateauing on the intention to leave.

**Table 2 . Estimated Direct Effect of Hierarchical Plateauing on the Intention to Leave**

| Independent Variable    | Coefficient | p    |
|-------------------------|-------------|------|
| Hierarchical Plateauing | 0.028       | 0.57 |

\* Significant at 0.05 significance level

Referring to the values shown in Table 2, it was determined that the direct effect coefficient for hierarchical plateauing on intention to leave is about 0.028 (positive) and the p value is 0.569. Because the p value > 0.05, hierarchical plateauing failed to demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with the intention to leave. Thus, the hypothesis that Hierarchical Plateauing has a positive relationship with the Intention to Leave among Malaysian public hospital nurses is not supported since even though the coefficient is positive, the p value is greater than 0.05. This is a little surprising since plateauing relates to promotion, which falls within the motivation factors in Herzberg's classification and should produce a significant result.

In contrast to the results of this study, previous findings by several researchers showed a positive relationship between hierarchical plateauing and intention to leave. For example, the results obtained by Choy et al. (1998) indicated that plateaued employees are more likely to believe that they are not skilled enough for higher positions and that they would have to leave the organization if they wanted to obtain a higher position. To some extent, plateauing could also contribute to the employee's decision to leave the current job (Chan & Morrison, 2000; Veiga, 1981) even for lower pay. Anonymous (2002) supported what had been stated by Burke (2006) and Veiga (1981) in that they stated that pay is not the major factor underlying employee dissatisfaction and leaving. Instead, employees are most likely to be discontented and leave when they find that their skills or talents are not properly developed or when they perceive a lack of clear direction in their career development.

As for the nurses who work in the Malaysian public hospitals in this study, it was found that the majority of them have been in their present posts for more than 5 years. According to Near (1986), those who are stuck in the same position in their career for five years or more could be considered as plateaued workers. As such, it was a surprise when the results showed an insignificant positive relationship between plateauing and intention to leave as the results had been predicted to be consistent with the previous findings (Heilmann et al., 2008; Chan & Morrison, 2000; Veiga, 1981). However, although the results failed to support the findings revealed by Heilmann et al., Chan & Morrison and Veiga, they supported the findings by Mohd Fikri (1997) who found that advancement opportunity was not significantly correlated to the intention to leave.

The results seem to suggest that in today's world, hierarchical plateauing is an unavoidable phenomenon in most organizations including hospitals and can no longer be a matter of concern to employees in certain professions. Thus, it is not a surprise if hierarchical plateauing is not significantly related to the intention to leave since, nowadays, workers do not bother too much about being plateaued, as long as they can remain in their job happily. Besides, finding other jobs in today's job market is also quite difficult. The results seem to also support that employees today do not really bother about being plateaued, as long as they are paid fairly and receive benefits that are of a satisfactory level. In summary, it can be said that the influence of plateauing on the intention to leave in today's job market job is not that significant; there are other factors that influence the intention to leave more than career plateauing.

#### 5. Conclusion

The result showed an insignificant relationship between hierarchical plateauing and the intention to leave. This gives signal that nowadays, plateauing is no longer a major factor contributes to intention to leave. However, it does not mean that employers can just ignore the issue of plateauing. In fact, employers in the health care industry can take a few proactive and positive steps to remove the negative effects of plateauing among employees if they notice the existence of such a situation in their organization. After all, the literature revealed that plateauing does contribute to a negative attitude and work behavior. Thus, advancement policies in the organization must be continuously revised to suit the current employees' work needs and demands.

In the Malaysian context, and especially when focusing on nursing, career movement, career support and career

planning, to name a few, could be revised and restructured since on various occasions nurses voiced their complaints regarding such matters in the Malaysian papers. If steps are taken to refresh the feelings among Malaysian nurses who have plateaued, it would reduce the brain drain and leavers, which in turn, would ensure the sustainability of the Malaysian health care industry.

In general, the results of the study appear to provide a richer understanding of turnover intention beyond just focusing on satisfaction and organizational aspects. This knowledge and understanding towards hierarchical plateauing also seems to be a viable way to better understand how it relates to turnover decisions among employees. In fact, with greater knowledge and understanding of plateauing, employers could anticipate the feelings of stagnation in an employee's career and proactively intervene with retention strategies before the employee considers leaving the organization.

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