



Career Plateaus Reconsidered

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This paper suggests that a variety of individual, job-related, and organizational factors influence whether employees reach career plateaus. The importance of examining causes of career plateaus is discussed in terms of managing career development more effectively and in terms of conducting further research in the area.

Since the publication of Ference, Stoner, and Warren's "Managing the Career Plateau" in 1977, considerable research has been directed at examining the impact of career plateaus on employee attitudes and behavior. However, the results of the research in this area have been inconclusive. Early conceptual writing suggested that plateaued performers were inevitably a problem (Connor & Fielden, 1973; Kay, 1974; Peter & Hull, 1969). More recent articles, though, suggest that plateaued performers can be either solid citizens or ineffective performers (Carnazza, Korman, Ference, & Stoner, 1981; Stoner, Ference, Warren, & Christensen, 1980).

The contradictory nature of these conceptual writings are also reflected in the empirical research on plateaued performers. This research indicates that plateaued managers are absent more frequently from work (Near, 1980), suffer more health problems (Near, 1980), and have lower confidence in their marketability (Veiga, 1981). However, these few differences are overshadowed by the lack of systematic differences in job attitudes (Near, 1985; Veiga, 1981), promotion aspirations (Carnazza, Korman, Ference, & Stoner, 1981), fear of stagnation (Veiga, 1981), and performance (Near, 1980, 1985; Carnazza et al., 1981). Some researchers found that plateaued managers are likely to spend 2 to 3 years longer per job than their non-plateaued counterparts (Rosenbaum, 1979; Veiga, 1981, 1983). but other researchers suggest that age and life stage may account for many of these differences that have been uncovered (Alderfer & Guzzo, 1979; Evans & Gilbert, 1984). Thus, the research on career plateaus has not been able to systematically differentiate plateaued and non-plateaued managers in terms of job atti-

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tudes, job performance, or employee growth patterns. This paper reconsiders traditional definitions of career plateaus, and untangles much of this empirical research.

Definition of Career Plateau

Previous research has defined plateaued managers by focusing on the likelihood of future promotions (Ference et al., 1977), the length of time in the present position (Near, 1985; Veiga, 1981, 1983), or the length of time between promotions (Evans & Gilbert, 1984). The use of promotions to operationally define plateaued managers assumes a direct relationship between level in an organizational hierarchy and job responsibility. However, managers may be given more responsibility without a change in job title (Feldman & Brett, 1983). Similarly, managers can be given new job titles, portrayed as promotions, but their responsibility actually decreases (i.e., "being kicked upstairs").

We suggest that an employee be considered plateaued if his or her likelihood of receiving further assignments of increased responsibility is low. Operationalizations of this concept might include measures of size of budget, number of employees supervised, or level of assets managed.

Based on this definition, career plateauing will not always be detrimental to individual effectiveness. Indeed, some recent work by Levinson (1986) suggests that these levelling off periods may be healthy for individual growth and development. Levinson's work suggests that healthy adult development depends on periods of stability and continuity as much as on periods of change and discontinuity. Refining his earlier work (1978), Levinson (1986) portrays each of the major stages of adult development (early adult, mid-life, late adult) as consisting of three components: a transition period into the stage, a stabilization period, and a transition period into the next stage. The periods of stability allow individuals to master work skills, pursue a predictable family/personal life, and gather psychic energy for the ensuing transition periods. Thus, career plateaus may be functional for individuals, both personally and professionally.

The dysfunctional side of career plateaus occurs when individuals are unable to realize their personal potential performance. In an analogous sense to personality development, individuals become fixated professionally; they are unable to grow and change as their environment changes. Thus, there may be opportunity costs, as well as incurred costs, to both individuals and organizations because of career plateaus.

A Taxonomy of Career Plateaus

Table 1 presents a taxonomy for understanding career plateaus. It suggests that six sets of factors contribute to career plateaus. Depending on the source of career plateauing, plateaued employees will exhibit different changes in their performance and work-related attitudes. Table 1 also suggests that different types of managerial interventions are appropriate for the varying types of career plateaus.

Our conceptualization of career plateaus is based on the premise that career plateaus can result from individual-level, job-related, and/or organizational-level variables. At the individual level, deficiencies in individual skills and abilities

and particular constellations of needs and values often lead to career plateaus. Jobs that lack enough intrinsic motivation or involve too much stimulation can also result in career plateaus. At the organization level, problems in reward systems or external business conditions contribute as well to lack of job mobility. Thus, career plateaus may be caused by a combination of internally and externally generated factors. Each of the six career plateaus identified in Table 1 is discussed in more detail below.

Individual Skills and Abilities

Employees' mobility within an organization may be effectively stopped because they have the wrong aptitudes or are unable to perform up to the standards necessary to receive additional responsibilities. The selection system can be the initial cause of career plateauing. For instance, selection systems that rely too heavily on typically unreliable selection devices like interviews and personality

Table 1
Career Plateaus Reconsidered

| Source of Career Plateaus | Impact on Performance and Attitudes | Managerial Interventions |
|--|--|---|
| I. Individual Skills and Abilities Selection system deficiencies Lack of training Inaccurate perceptions of feedback | Poor performance Poor job attitudes | Redesign of selection system Improved training Improved performance appraisal and feedback systems |
| II. Individual Needs and Values Low growth need strength Career anchors of security and autonomy Self-imposed constraints | Solid performance Good job attitudes | Continue to reward, contingent on no downturn in performance Career information systems |
| III. Lack of Intrinsic Motivation Lack of skill variety Low task identity Low task significance | Minimally acceptable job performance Declining job attitudes | Combining tasks Forming natural work units Establishing client relationships Vertical loading Opening feedback channels |
| IV. Lack of Extrinsic Rewards Small raises, few promotions Inequities in reward systems Uncontingent rewards | Poor performance Poor job attitudes | Redesign of compensation system Redesign of promotion policies Encourage highly dissatisfied to leave |
| V. Stress and Burnout Interpersonal relationships on job Organizational climate Role conflict | Poor performance Poor job attitudes | Job rotation Preventive stress management Sabbaticals, off-site training |
| VI. Slow Organizational Growth External business conditions "Defender" corporate strategy Inaccurate personnel forecasts | Continued good performance in short-run Declining job attitudes | Provide "stars" with increased resources Provide poorer performers with incentives to leave or retire |

tests might lead to larger numbers of applicants without appropriate skills and abilities being hired (Mills & Bohannon, 1980; Webster, 1964). Incorrect hires are more likely to do poorly and to receive fewer challenging job assignments; in essence, they start off on a negative career cycle (Smith, 1968).

A second source of career plateauing can be lack of training. Feldman and Brett (1983) suggest, for example, that when job changers receive little or no training on their new job assignments, they are less likely to achieve task mastery. Over time, the unavailability of relevant training—or the refusal to undertake such training on the individual's part—closes the door to many potential job opportunities and makes many others less reachable (Balbaky & Sonnenfeld, 1981).

Inaccurate perceptions of one's abilities and past performance are also antecedent conditions to this type of career plateau. Employees may receive very little feedback, inconsistent feedback, or feedback based on unreliable or invalid performance appraisal devices (Latham & Wexley, 1981). Moreover, individuals often misconstrue the feedback they do receive (Gibb, 1961; Ross, 1977), particularly if it is negative. As a result, individuals may stay in their jobs or organizations longer than their performance warrants; they might not pick up whatever subtle social cues do exist that no future movement is likely or that they should exit gracefully.

Employees plateaued due to insufficient skills and abilities ultimately become poor performers and have negative job attitudes. Because these individuals have relatively low levels of the requisite skills and abilities, their performance will inevitably suffer. There is also some modest evidence that absenteeism and turnover may increase as well (Anderson & Milkovich, 1980; Near, 1985; Porter & Steers, 1973). Job attitudes over time will also become more negative, as poor performers receive both fewer extrinsic rewards and intrinsic rewards (Lawler & Porter, 1967). The particular attitudes most likely to decrease are commitment and satisfaction with supervisors (Grusky, 1966; Near, 1985).

Appropriate management interventions might include reanalysis of selection system deficiencies, improved training, and better performance appraisal and feedback systems. These strategies help with the early identification of plateaued performers so that their career mobility will not be permanently stopped (FERENCE et al., 1977).

Individual Needs and Values

Although a person's skills and abilities are sufficient to allow upward job mobility, an employee simply may not highly value the rewards increased responsibility will bring, or greatly desire the type of professional life and personal life a fast-track career would necessitate.

People with high growth need strength have greater desires to push themselves, to develop new capabilities, and to take on increasingly challenging work assignments (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1954). However, individuals with low levels of growth need strength are more willing to trade off that type of work-related striving for satisfying their relatedness needs (Alderfer, Kaplan, & Smith, 1974) or other aims.

Schein (1978) has introduced the concept of "career anchor" to explain another reason why some employees have upwardly mobile careers whereas others

experience little or no movement. Typically upwardly mobile managers have what Schein calls a "managerial competence" career anchor. These managers are good at and enjoy influencing, manipulating, and controlling others; they are stimulated rather than exhausted by crises at work, and are able to exercise power without guilt or shame. Other managers, however, have security and autonomy career anchors. Individuals with security career anchors tend to do what is required of them by their employers in order to maintain job security and a decent income, but are unwilling to risk "rocking the boat" to get ahead. Individuals with autonomy as a career anchor want to pursue their technical or functional competence free of organizational constraints; they are very willing to trade off higher status and income to pursue their own life-style.

There may be other self-imposed constraints on career growth as well. For example, Lansing and Mueller (1967) found that community ties, such as relatives and friends living in the same geographical area, had a significant negative impact on an individual's mobility. Similarly, employees over age 55 who may be thinking of retirement may be less willing to pick up and relocate so close to the end of their organizational careers; corporate fringe benefits and pension programs may induce employees to stay in their current positions longer than is in the best interests of their careers (Veiga, 1983).

Employees who decline jobs of increased responsibility may very likely fall into the quadrant that Ference, Stoner, and Warren (1977) call solid citizens. Although their likelihood of future promotion is low, their current performance may be very high, and many are quite satisfied with their current positions.

Consequently, organizations might do well to retain and adequately reward these employees, contingent upon no downturn in their performance or attitudes. In the writing about career plateaus, the adjective *frustrated* is used a great deal to describe the emotions of plateaued employees. Ironically, with this type of career plateau, the frustration associated with these employees is experienced by their supervisors and managers, who hope to push their employees further and faster than the employees themselves desire. Continued efforts to force all individuals into the same career path can evoke the self-fulfilling prophecy of decreased performance and poorer job attitudes (Ference et al., 1977).

For employees with self-imposed career constraints, the organization might want to consider installing better career information systems (Balbaky & Sonnenfeld, 1981). Some employees may not understand the consequences of early career decisions to pass up promotions, cross-functional moves, and managerial opportunities. As a result, their career paths may plateau because they did not develop the needed technical and social skills early enough in their careers (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977). Better information about staffing policies, job postings, and typical career paths may make salient, especially to younger employees, the consequences a slower career-track may bring in years to come.

Lack of Intrinsic Motivation

Although many managers find their jobs exciting and seek even more challenging job assignments, others find their work boring and unchallenging. As a result, these latter employees feel unmotivated to exert themselves on their jobs or to get ahead (Near, 1985).

Typically, the design of work has been examined in the context of blue-collar workers (Herzberg, 1966; Hulin & Blood, 1968). However, white collar jobs can be low in motivating potential as well (Brief & Aldag, 1975; Roberts & Glick, 1981). Using the Hackman-Oldham job characteristics model (1980), career plateaus may emerge when workers experience their jobs as meaningless or unchallenging; skill variety, task identity, and/or task significance are low.

For example, in many management jobs, employees do not use a wide variety of skills on a daily basis. Although participating and providing input into decisions, managers may not take a project—or even a chunk of a project—from inception to completion. In many large and complex organizations, some managers' contributions to a project may be small enough that they experience their job as relatively insignificant. For example, Near (1985) reports that mobile managers consider themselves much more important to their jobs than do plateaued employees.

When plateauing is due to low motivating potential on the job, it is hypothesized that employee performance will be minimally acceptable; workers will be working just hard enough to keep their jobs, but not exerting any special effort. The job design research suggests that over time the low motivating potential of the job will lead to lower job satisfaction and lower growth need satisfaction as well (Arnold & House, 1980; Brief & Aldag, 1975).

Job enrichment and job enlargement may be the most appropriate management interventions to deal with these plateaued employees. Hackman and Oldham (1980) suggest five implementing principles, in particular, that might improve the motivating potential of these jobs: combining tasks, forming natural work units, establishing client relationships, vertical loading of the job, and opening feedback channels.

Lack of Extrinsic Rewards

When managers feel that pay raises are too small or promotions are overdue—or that these rewards are not distributed equitably—they are less likely to exert effort on the job. This cycle of “no more work for no more rewards” leads quite frequently to career plateaus.

Pay has consistently been found to be an important contributor to job satisfaction, even with managerial level held constant (Lawler & Porter, 1967; Locke, 1976). Not only is pay instrumental in fulfilling existence needs, but it also serves as a symbol of achievement and a source of recognition. Employees often see pay not only as a reflection of management's present concern for them, but also as a sign of management's future intentions. Especially for managerial workers, the desire to be promoted is strong as well (Porter, 1962). The roots of this desire for promotion include the desire for higher earnings, the desire for social status, the desire for psychological growth (made possible by greater responsibility) and the desire for justice (Locke, 1976). Of all the sources of job dissatisfaction investigated, Veiga (1981) found that the only significant difference between mobile and plateaued employees was on satisfaction with advancement.

Thus, major design problems in extrinsic reward systems—or perceptions of uncontingent, inequitable rewards—can contribute to declining job performance and poor job attitudes. It is important to note here that we are not talking about

each other with problems (Cooper & Marshall, 1977; Feldman & Brett, 1983; McGrath, 1976). Sustained interpersonal relationships that are unsatisfying to employees lead them to invest less ego in their jobs.

A third source of stress leading to career plateaus is role problems (ambiguity, conflict, and overload). Some employees find the scope and responsibilities of their jobs so undefined that they become worn down trying to figure out what to do or how to do their jobs (French & Caplan, 1973). For others, having too much role conflict or too much work to do contributes to career plateaus (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970).

Employees who plateau due to stress and burnout experience poorer performance and job attitudes. Too much stress impedes individuals' perceptual and decision-making skills; these plateaued managers are more likely to procrastinate, forget important pieces of information, and fail to seek out additional information (Janis & Mann, 1977). Physiologically, heightened levels of stress lead to increased symptoms of physical illness (e.g., headaches and stomachaches), increased contributing factors to major illnesses (e.g., higher blood pressure and cholesterol), more physical illnesses and diseases (e.g., heart disease and ulcers), and shortened longevity (Quick & Quick, 1984). Stress and burnout also lead to poorer mental health (e.g. depression, frustration, anxiety) and general dissatisfaction (Brief et al., 1981; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980).

Organizations with employees who have plateaued because of stress and burnout can use two strategies to deal with the individuals involved. First, organizations can rotate these employees to other job assignments. This might entail an off-site training program, a sabbatical, a short-term special project, or a new permanent job assignment (Greenhaus, 1987). Secondly, organizations can help these plateaued employees cope more effectively with job stress (i.e., preventive stress management). The organization's involvement could range from providing plateaued employees with workshops on stress management, relaxation techniques, and time management to establishing career counselling centers and health maintenance facilities (Quick & Quick, 1984).

Slow Organizational Growth

If there is any rationality at all to the human resource management systems, the more competent and committed employees will be more likely to get offers of additional responsibility. However, external business conditions, internal strategic decisions, and inaccurate personnel forecasting can constrain organizational growth and limit the opportunity to offer increases in responsibilities to qualified employees.

When organizations experience slow growth, there are fewer opportunities for potential candidates to assume more responsibility (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977). Rather than expanding the responsibility for individuals, the slow growth organization is more likely to eliminate positions and slow down pay raises and promotions (Anderson, Milkovich, & Tsui, 1981).

The business strategy the firm pursues can also limit opportunities for jobs of increased responsibility (Stumpf & London, 1981). Using the Miles and Snow (1978) typology, Slocum, Cron, Hansen, and Rawlings (1985) found that there are significantly more plateaued salespeople employed in "defender" companies

employees who perform poorly *and* recognize the validity of receiving small pay raises and no promotions. These employees typically have poor skills or poor training, and fall into our first source of career plateaus. Here we are concerned with employees who have the skills and abilities to perform at much higher levels, but see no point in doing so (Adams & Freedman, 1976; Campbell & Pritchard, 1976).

Employees who reach career plateaus for this reason are potentially the most destructive to the morale and functioning of the organization. They are a constant reproof to the organization, and call into question the legitimacy of management's reward systems. For this reason, every effort should be made to correct whatever injustices in the reward system exist. However, if no accommodation or appeasement of these employees can be made, the organization would be wise to encourage these plateaued performers to leave. Not only is their performance unsatisfactory in and of itself, but their attitudes can be detrimental to other employees as well.

The most appropriate intervention to deal with this career plateau is a thorough examination of compensation and fringe benefit plans. The corporation may be meeting the market for new hires, for example, but may not be providing sufficient incentives for employees with 3 to 7 years seniority. Another source of perceptions of low pay may be random interventions of the firm to "meet the market" of employees who generate outside offers; the net increase in one person's satisfaction may be more than offset by corresponding decreases in that of their co-workers. Perceptions of reward systems as inequitable or uncontingent may also be due to poor job evaluations, lack of clear merit pay and promotion criteria, or pay secrecy (Lawler, 1981).

Stress and Burnout

The ability of employees to perform effectively on their jobs and to feel positively about their jobs can be greatly reduced by high levels of job stress (Greenhaus, 1987). When stress increases up to moderate levels, individuals may be energized and may be more motivated to perform up to their potential. However, if the amount of stress becomes too great or so prolonged over time, work effort declines, work performance suffers, and job attitudes become more negative (McGrath, 1976). The stress that accumulates can be due to acute negative events in the work place, chronic work problems, daily hassles, or personal predispositions or vulnerability to stress (Dohrenwend et al., 1985; Folkman et al., 1985).

One major source of stress leading to career plateaus is the nature of interpersonal relationships on the job. Some jobs require a great deal of interaction with others. Over time, people can become burned out by the friction and hassles of daily interaction episodes (Dohrenwend et al., 1985; Lazarus et al., 1975). This stress is exacerbated when the clients with whom employees come into contact are in distress themselves. For example, this is one reason why employees in the helping professions (e.g., health care, social service, education, and law) experience high levels of stress and burnout (Burke, 1969; Cooper & Marshall, 1977).

Similarly, when the organizational climate is marked by unfriendly, distant, or hostile exchanges, employees are continually tense. They have little trust in each other, do not express their true concerns and desires, and spend little time helping

each other with problems (Cooper & Marshall, 1977; Feldman & Brett, 1983; McGrath, 1976). Sustained interpersonal relationships that are unsatisfying to employees lead them to invest less ego in their jobs.

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than in "analyzer" companies. Analyzer companies are still adding new products to their portfolios and can provide greater upward mobility; in contrast, defender firms engage in little new product development and are less willing and able to provide growth opportunities for their employees.

Inaccurate personnel forecasts can result in overstaffing for current business conditions, and can reduce opportunities for offers of more responsibility as well. When organizations are overstaffed, it can take months (or even years) for the census of employees to decrease through natural attrition or layoffs. The normal pyramid restrictions on promotion are exacerbated.

When slow organization growth limits opportunities for career growth, the plateaued employees will continue, at least in the short run, to be solid performers. They have not fallen off a fast career track so much as the whole pace of the race has become slower. Moreover, these individuals will want to sustain their performance to maintain their market potential should they choose to leave the firm. However, over time their job attitudes will become more negative. The constant frustration with promotional blockages can lead to lower satisfaction with the occupation chosen and ultimately with the employer firm.

To deal with this career plateau problem, the organization can take a two-pronged attack. First, it can try to reward highly what Ference and his colleagues call the "stars" (high current performers with high likelihood of promotion). Organizations can try to provide these individuals with as many resources as possible (e.g., increased job responsibilities, job titles, praise and reassurance, pay raises) to keep them in the firm until business conditions change. Second, the organization can try to ease what Ference and his colleagues call the "deadwood" (poor current performers with little likelihood of promotion) out of the organization. The organization can try to provide these employees with financial incentives for early retirement, professional outplacement services, or substantial reimbursement for retooling and education (Connor & Fielden, 1973). The loss of these employees frees up scarce resources and opens up opportunities for rising stars.

Summary

Writing several years ago about the state of research on plateaued employees, Veiga (1981) noted that "without the ability to go behind the scene of ineffective plateaus' career assignments and choices, one can only speculate on the forces that shaped such careers." In this paper, we try to identify the sources of career plateaus, and their differential impact on job performance and job attitudes. In addition, the paper illustrates why different managerial actions are needed to deal with each type of career plateau.

Several research tasks lie ahead. First, although the six types of career plateau suggested here make sense conceptually, there may be additional patterns of career plateauing. For example, with the increased frequency of mergers, hostile takeovers, and leveraged buyouts, employees may plateau independent of their own performance or even that of their firm. Corporate politics can also lead to some employees experiencing career plateaus, independent of their individual or organization-level performance. Thus, though the typology presented here is a

useful starting point for understanding blockages to employee growth, it is not exhaustive.

Second, the empirical research on career plateaus can be expanded as well. In general, research on career plateaus has used *t*-tests and *F*-tests to look at the differences in attitudes and behaviors between mobile and nonmobile managers. As reviewed earlier in this article, the results of this research have been equivocal at best. One suggested avenue of future research would be some sort of discriminant analysis to corroborate or modify the various types of career plateaus presented here. Another would be canonical correlation analysis to look at systematic patterns of outcomes associated with each type of career plateau. In addition, longitudinal data on individual needs and abilities, job assignments and task characteristics, and organizational profitability and strategy can be used to model the causal links among antecedent conditions, plateaued performance, and career attitudes.

Third, the prescriptive writing on career plateaus can become more specific in the recommendations it provides top management and the rationale for those recommendations. Rather than simply identifying a broad set of management interventions that could be used for this problem, researchers should examine more closely which types of managerial actions are most effective with which types of plateaued employees. Rigorous action research projects might be the ideal first step toward that end.

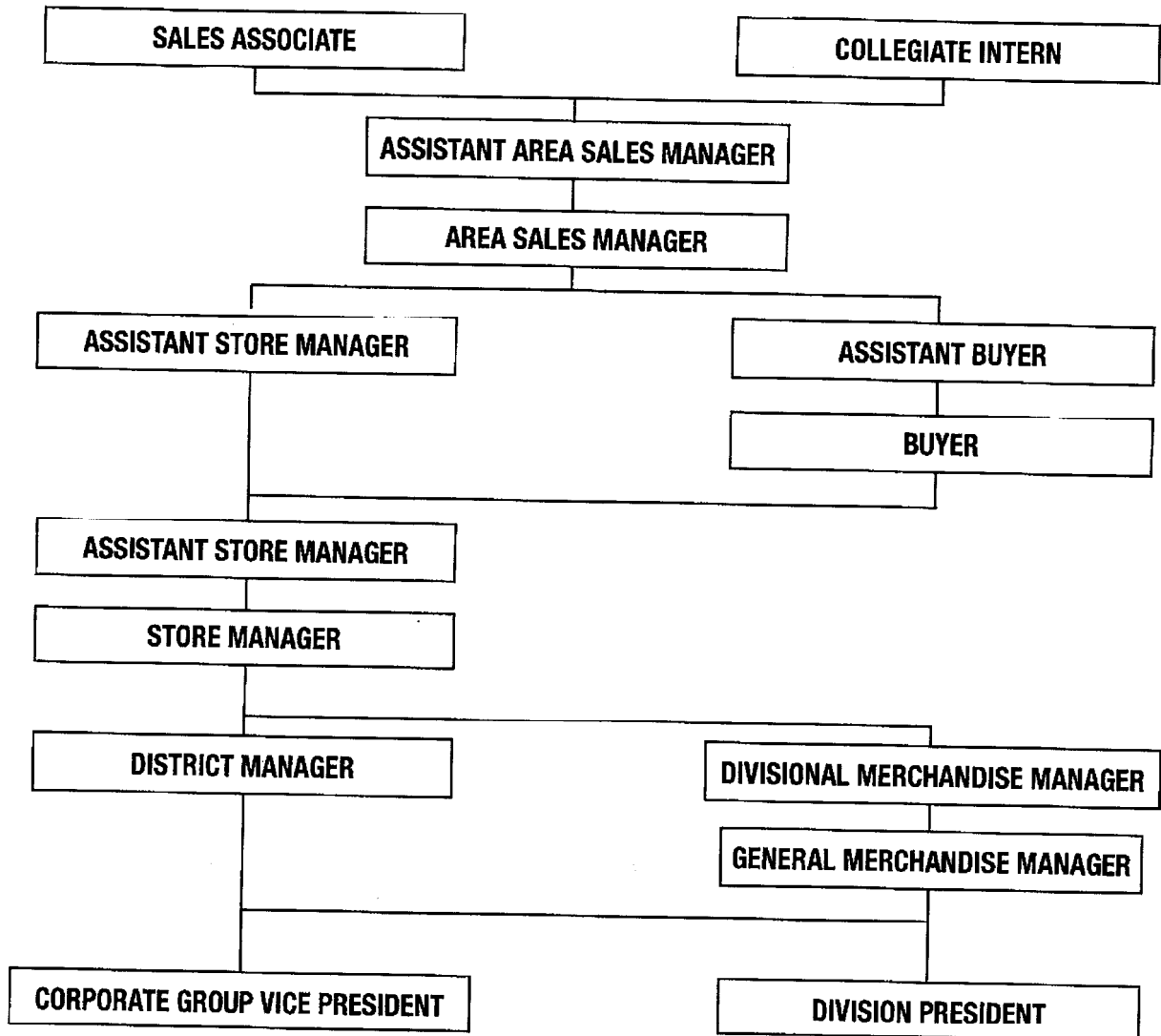
In short, the research on career plateaus has to move progressively from broad definitions of the phenomenon to identification of more specific subpatterns, from generic identification of symptoms of plateaued employees to discovery of specific problem outcomes, and from all-encompassing panaceas to more specific recommendations for managerial action.

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