Career Plateaus in the Salesforce: Understanding and Removing Blockages to Employee Growth

by Daniel C. Feldman and Barton A. Weitz

Recent research suggests that salesforce productivity may be increased through a better understanding of the career development of salesforce employees (Cron 1984; Cron and Slocum 1986; Hafer 1986). A major goal of sales management has been to maintain the growth in responsibility and performance of sales employees over their entire careers, and to help them avoid career plateaus.

The objectives of this paper are four-fold. First, the nature of career plateauing is discussed in some detail. A new definition of a career plateau in terms of responsibility is proposed, and previous research on the impact of plateauing on work attitudes and performance is reexamined in light of the responsibility plateauing concept. Second, a model which identifies the individual, job-related, and organizational factors which affect the propensity of sales employees to reach responsibility plateaus is presented. Based on this model, propositions are developed to explain why employees face blockages to professional growth and development. In the third section, managerial prescriptions for preventing and handling plateaus are identified and discussed. The fourth, and final, part of the paper discusses future directions for research in the area of career plateaus.

The Nature of Plateaus

Definition of Plateau

Some of the contradictory evidence concerning the attitudes and performance of plateaued perform-

ers may be attributed to the definitions of a career plateau. Previous research has defined plateaued employees in terms of 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 and Gilbert 1984). The use of promotions to operationally define plateaued employees assumes a direct relationship between level in an organizational hierarchy and job responsibility. However, employees may be given more responsibility without a change in job title (Feldman and Brett 1983; Schein 1978). For example, salespeople may be "promoted" to a territory with more potential or sales managers may be "promoted" to a more important district or product line. Similarly, employees can be given new job titles, portrayed as promotions, but their responsibility actually decreases (e.g., "being kicked upstairs").

We propose the following definition of plateaued employees: employees are plateaued when their likelihood of receiving increased responsibility is low. This definition captures the concept of plateauing by focusing on the potential growth in the employee's actual contribution to the firm. While individuals and organizations might differ in their opinions on when a sales employee is likely to receive an offer of increased responsibility or makes a contribution to the firm, we focus on the organization's perspective, since that perspective will ultimately determine how the plateaued employee is managed.

This definition has four advantages over definitions dependent upon job titles. First, it uncouples the link between hierarchical promotion and potential contribution to the firm. Sales employees can be assigned greater responsibility (e.g., a larger territory) without a formal promotion, or have no increased responsibility even though their title is changed. Second, this definition of responsibility plateaus also makes salient another important issue: that of incurred costs vs. opportunity costs. When employees plateau, there may be very few incurred costs to the salesperson or to his or her employer. However, when sales employees are unable to realize their personal potential performance, there can

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be substantial opportunity costs to both the individuals and organizations involved. It is as much for this reason, as for any other, that we need to understand better how to prevent or manage career plateauing.

A third advantage of this definition of responsibility plateauing is that it incorporates elements of both "structural" plateauing and "content plateauing" (Bardwick, 1986). It points out that plateauing can be due to lack of upward hierarchical movement as well as due to lack of increases in job duties or job performance. Lastly, the definition presented here lends itself to operationalizations across a wide variety of organizational settings. Operationalizations of level of responsibility in the salesforce context might include potential sales in the salesperson's territory or the number of salespeople supervised directly or indirectly by a sales manager.

Previous Research on Career Plateaus

Most of the previous research on career plateaus has focused on two issues: the impact of career plateaus on work attitudes and job performance and the relationship of career plateauing to career stages. In both cases, the research has been somewhat inconclusive.

The research findings concerning the impact of career plateaus on employee attitudes have been largely inconsistent. Early conceptual research emphasized that plateaued performers were inevitably a problem (Connor and Fielden 1973; Kay 1974). However, more recent research indicates that plateaued performers can be either solid citizens or ineffective performers (Carnazza, Korman, Ference, and Stoner 1981; Stoner, Ference, Warren, and Christensen 1980).

The contradictory nature of this conceptual work is also reflected in the empirical research on plateaued performers. Empirical studies indicate 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, et al. 1981), fear of stagnation (Veiga 1981), and performance (Near 1980, 1985; Carnazza et al. 1981).

As our definition suggests, however, the differences between incurred costs and opportunity costs need to be considered separately. In some situations, salespeople may plateau at high levels of performance with positive attitudes, and the opportunity costs may indeed be quite small. In other cases, salespeople may plateau at low levels of performance, and the opportunity costs of not having them develop new customers or manage other salespeople might be quite high, too. Previous research on career plateaus has often assumed that plateauing occurs only due to poor job performance, and that is not always the case.

Building upon the work of career theorists such as Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977), much of the work on career plateaus of sales employees has focused on the nature of career stages and the impact of career stages on plateauing (Jolson, 1974). These models of career stages suggest that in the initial exploration stage, individuals are primarily concerned with finding a suitable occupation and organizational employer. In the second stage, establishment, performance increases as employees concern themselves with developing specialized competences and broadening their business knowledge. In the maintenance stage, the third stage, employees are seen as stabilizing their own positions and performance in their occupations and organizations, and beginning to take on responsibility for managing and training others. Eventually, individuals are seen as entering a final disengagement phase after age fifty-five, when they make the transition from working to retirement. While this stage is typically associated with preparation for retirement, disengagement may occur much earlier in life. During this stage, performance levels as well as responsibility levels may decline.

Implicit in these models of career stages is the notion that performance plateaus most likely occur during the maintenance stage. Mid-career employees, having already worked twenty years in sales, are assumed to lose some of their drive and energy, with an attendant loss of sales and morale resulting. Similarly, performance of late career employees is also seen as likely to plateau because these employees' energies are devoted to planning their retirement and maintaining the status quo rather than on developing new clients and territories.

However, neither the empirical research nor recent theoretical work bear out the assumption that performance plateauing is associated with a mid-life career stage (Feldman 1988). In empirical studies of the performance of job attitudes of salespeople at different career stages, salespeople in the maintenance stage—the stage commonly associated with plateaued performance—did not differ significantly from salespeople in the establishment and disengagement stages (Cron and Slocum 1986; Hafer 1986). Moreover, a recent reconceptualization of ca-
reer stages by Levinson (1986) suggests that career development is a repeating series of oscillations of transition, stability, and growth. This new conceptualization of career development makes salient two points about the career plateaus of salesforce employees that are consistent with our definition. First, periods of stable performance can occur at any stage in a career; plateauing does not occur automatically at middle age. Second, plateaus are not synonymous with ineffective present performance although they are implicitly synonymous with some opportunity costs.

**A Model of Plateaus**

A model describing the factors affecting the growth of salesforce employees is presented in Figure 1. The theoretical framework presented here is based on the notion that responsibility plateau can occur due to three key reasons: 1) an employee's performance is deficient, so that offers of responsibility are not forthcoming; 2) there are few opportunities in the firm for promotions or positions of increased responsibility, so that even a potentially excellent performer could plateau; and 3) due to personal preferences or situational constraints, employees do not accept offers of jobs with additional responsibility even when they are offered. In the discussion below, each of the factors affecting these three key variables is discussed more fully, and propositions relating these factors to employee growth patterns are developed.

**Factors Influencing Job Performance**

The effects of motivation and ability on career plateauing, especially in terms of performance deficiencies, have received considerable attention in the marketing literature (c.f. Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975, 1977; Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1987). Two additional factors directly related to plateauing that have received relatively limited treatment are the
impact of training for individual responsibility and the effects of role perceptions (overload, ambiguity, stress, and burnout) on performance.

Training Opportunities. Responsibility plateauing can arise from inadequate training, particularly training during periods of transition. Organizations often assume promoted sales employees can "hit the floor running." However, when individuals receive little or no training (be it classroom training or on-the-job training) as they assume additional responsibility, they are less likely to master the demands of their new assignments (Feldman and Brett 1983, 1985). This is particularly true when the new job has quite different demands or standards from the old job, e.g., the transition that a salesperson makes into first-line sales management. Over time, the unavailability of relevant training limits improvement in job performance and reduces the likelihood of receiving offers of additional responsibility (Balbaky and Sonnenfeld 1981, Noe 1986). It might also be the case that some individuals would refuse to undertake such training, either because they disagree that they need it or because it would necessitate travel or relocation; the end result would be the same as if training had been made unavailable to them.

Proposition 1: Providing relevant training for sales employees for new positions of increased responsibility improves their abilities and subsequent performance and reduces the likelihood of responsibility plateauing.

Role Ambiguity and Overload. Role overload and ambiguity are major factors in blocking employee career growth. With role ambiguity, 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 (Katz and Kahn 1978; Behrman and Perrault 1984). When employees experience constant role overload, their energy also begins to decline. They are too anxious that they will be unable to accomplish their work before a rapidly approaching deadline; as time runs out, the feelings of impending disaster increase (Pruden 1969). Moreover, employees' loss of energy due to role ambiguity and role overload leads to perceptions in the eyes of management that these employees are incapable of taking on any further responsibility (Brief, Schuler, and Van Sell 1981; Ivancevich and Matteson 1980).

Proposition 2: Sales employees with high role ambiguity and role overload are more likely to suffer performance deficiencies, and be more likely to be passed over for jobs of increased responsibility.

Burnout and Stress. Sales employees are particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout because their jobs require a great deal of interpersonal interaction—in interaction with both customers and other employees in the firm (Albrecht 1979; Brief, Schuler, and Van Sell 1981). Over time, the frictions and "hassles" of these interactions can lead to burnout, where employees become unable to cope with even day-to-day frustrations (Lazarus 1977). The stress is exacerbated when the customers that salespeople come in contact with are in distress themselves, e.g. customers who have declining business or profits or dissatisfied customers (French and Caplan 1973). Similarly, when the climate of the sales organization itself is marked by unfriendly, distant, or hostile exchanges, sales employees will be continually tense (Cooper and Payne 1978). They will not be able to express their true concerns and desires, and will spend little time helping each other with problems (McGrath 1976). Such tensions wear down employees' abilities to deal with new and challenging situations (Quick and Quick 1984).

Proposition 3: Dealing with satisfied customers and operating in a trusting organization climate reduces role stress, increases performance, and reduces the likelihood of responsibility plateauing.

Factors Influencing Offers of Additional Responsibility

Sales employees who perform well and have positive job attitudes are more likely to get offers of additional responsibility. However, disadvantageous external business conditions and internal business strategies can constrain organizational growth and limit the opportunity to offer increases in responsibilities to qualified employees.

Job Performance. Effective performance in their present jobs is one indication that employees will perform effectively in jobs with increased responsibility. However, the usefulness of this indicator of performance in a new job is moderated by the similarity between the duties of the present job and the job involving additional responsibilities (Pinder and Schroeder 1987; Brett 1984; Feldman & Brett 1983). The more dissimilar the jobs, the more difficult the transition will be, especially when the job changer receives little training or social support. For example, a salesperson's performance in a small territory may be a better indicator of potential performance in a larger territory than it is an indicator of potential performance as a sales manager. The more similar the territory or the products, the easier the transition will be and the better the performance.

Proposition 4: The degree to which performance results in offers of additional responsibility is moderated by the similarity in duties between the sales employ-
ee's present job and the job with additional responsibility.

Often organizations are not sensitive enough to the differences between the demands of the current job and the demands of future job opportunities. Such lack of attention can result in mismatches between marketing employees' abilities and job demands (Feldman and Brett 1983). For example, high-performing salespeople are often selected for promotions to management positions without sufficient attention to their management skills. Similarly, salespeople who perform well in a rural territory with small accounts are often promoted to higher potential, urban territories without considering the different strategies needed for success in those jobs.

Proposition 5: Organizations which use detailed job analyses (descriptions of job duties) and skill analyses of job applicants are less likely to promote sales employees into jobs in which they will be unable to perform effectively.

Organizational Growth and Business Strategy. When firms experience slow growth, there are fewer opportunities for potential candidates to assume more responsibility (Ference et al. 1977; Schein 1978). Rather than expanding the responsibility of individuals, the slow growth organization is more likely to eliminate positions and slow down pay raises and promotions (Anderson, Milkovich, and Tsui 1991). In general, poor overall economic conditions can contribute to this poor business climate for firms.

The business strategy the firm pursues can also limit opportunities for jobs of increased responsibility. 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 that 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.

Proposition 6: Sales employees in organizations pursuing a "defender" strategy are more likely to plateau than employees in firms pursuing an "analyzer" strategy.

Inaccurate manpower forecasts can result in over-staffing for current business conditions, reducing opportunities for offers of more responsibility as well. When firms are overstaffed, it can take months (or even years) for the number of employees to decrease through attrition or layoffs. The normal pyramid restrictions on promotion are exacerbated. Salespeople who stay in the firm and do not voluntarily leave for better job alternatives are more likely to plateau.

Proposition 7: Firms that have slow growth or do a poor job of manpower planning will have fewer new job opportunities to offer employees, and thus will have more sales personnel with plateaued responsibility.

Attributions Arising From Offers and Non-Offers of Additional Job Responsibility. Figure 1 indicates that offers (or non-offers) of additional responsibility provide feedback to employees which affects their motivation, and thus their subsequent job attitudes and performance. The job performance and job attitudes of employees who accept these offers are generally positive. The recognition, challenging work assignments, and pay raises usually associated with these job changes usually increase motivation and satisfaction.

The impact of non-offers on employees interested in undertaking sales jobs of additional responsibility depends upon the employees' perception of why the offers were not forthcoming. Attribution theory (e.g., Kelley 1973; Weick 1977) suggests that the causes of non-offers will be perceived along two dimensions: internal-external (caused by oneself or outside forces) and stable-unstable (estimated duration of current state of affairs). In uncertain and stressful situations, employees will try to make sense of career events which they had neither expected or predicted (Louis 1980).

The positive effects of offers on motivation will be greatest when the cause of these offers is perceived as internal, e.g., skills, abilities, and motivation. When sales people make this type of attribution of an offer, they will feel that their capabilities and efforts are being properly rewarded, they will be motivated to improve their performance even further, and they will increase their level of effort because their expectancy of future promotions is increased (Feldman 1981, Locke et al 1984, Vroom 1964). Motivation and performance may also improve if employees attribute non-offers to internal-unstable factors, such as temporary lack of ability that will improve through experience and training (Spector 1982, Bandura 1977). Under these circumstances, employees see some ready avenue out of the predicament instead of a dead-end.

Proposition 8: Motivation and subsequent performance will increase when offers of additional responsibility are attributed to internal causes.

The negative effects of non-offers will be minimal when the cause is viewed as external-unstable, such as a temporary downturn in the economy limiting growth opportunities for just a few months. However, external-stable attributions due to perceived long-term inequities in the reward system or poor sales territory can result in reduced motivation. Major design problems in promotion and reward systems—such as uncontingent rewards or inequitable rewards—result in such external-stable attributions (such as luck), and contribute to declining motivation and job performance. Employees who feel their re-
wards are noncontingent or inequitable are more likely to perform poorly and be job dissatisfied (Lawler and Porter 1967). These salespeople have the skills and abilities to perform at much higher levels, but simply see no point in doing so (Adams and Freedman 1976). Internal-stable attributions due to long-term health problems or poor abilities can result in a condition of learned helplessness, which also reduces motivation and performance.

**Proposition 9:** Job performance declines and the likelihood of responsibility plateauing increases when employees make internal-stable or external-stable attributions about non-offers of additional responsibility.

The availability of dual career ladders influences organizations’ abilities to offer jobs of additional responsibility to sales employees, and individuals’ willingness to accept those offers. If the corporation’s career development program allows for dual career ladders, the firm may be able to offer more employees increased challenges and responsibilities within their favored career path (e.g., sales or sales management). In contrast, if sales employees can only advance by switching career paths, they may be less likely to do so.

**Proposition 10:** The availability of dual career ladders allows organizations more opportunities for giving sales employees assignments of additional responsibility.

**Proposition 11:** The availability of dual career ladders increases individuals’ willingness to accept offers of additional responsibility.

## Factors Influencing Individual Acceptance of Offers

As the preceding discussion indicates, even when organizations are able to offer additional responsibility to sales employees, the employees may decline, thus placing a self-imposed constraint on career growth. For example, Lansinging 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 job mobility. Hall and Hall (1978) suggest the emergence of the dual-career couple as a deterrent to career 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 the their organizational careers (Feldman 1988).

**Proposition 12:** Employee age, ties to the local community, and partnership in a dual-career couple decrease the likelihood of employees’ accepting additional responsibilities requiring relocation, and thus increase the likelihood of plateauing.

While sales employees may possess the requisite skills and abilities to allow upward job mobility, they may not be motivated to seek additional responsibility because they do not value the rewards associated with increased responsibility and are unwilling to accept the costs associated with a fast-track career. Two concepts used to describe people who lack predisposition to achieve greater levels of performance and responsibility—growth need strength and career anchors—are particularly important in understanding this source of responsibility plateauing.

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). 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, and Smith 1974) or other aims such as leisure. Thus, it appears that growth need strength should be inversely correlated with likelihood of career plateauing.

**Proposition 13:** Sales employees with high growth need strength are more likely to be motivated to seek out and accept new opportunities on the job, and less likely to plateau.

The concept of “career anchors”, developed by Schein (1978), also explains why some employees experience career plateaus while other do not. Schein suggests that employees gain greater insight into the real talents, motives, needs, and values based on actual work experience on their first few jobs. As a result, individuals develop a stable career concept early in adulthood that serves to guide, constrain, and/or stabilize their later career paths.

People who have a “managerial competence” career anchor are stimulated, rather than exhausted, by crises at work, and seek out frequent promotions to positions of increasing responsibility. On the other hand, individuals with “security” career anchors tend to do what is required by them by their employers in order to maintain job security and a decent income. Employees with “autonomy” as a career anchor want to pursue their technical specialty free of organizational constraints, and are very willing to trade off higher status and income to pursue their own lifestyle. Therefore, employees with security and autonomy career anchors are more likely to become plateaued in the organization’s perspective, even though they do not perceive themselves as having failed somehow is getting ahead.

**Proposition 14:** Sales employees with a “managerial competence” career anchor are more likely to be motivated to seek out and accept additional responsibilities, and are less likely to career plateau, than sales employees with “security” and “autonomy” career anchors.
Managerial Prescriptions Addressing Responsibility Plateauing

In this section, we outline a set of managerial prescriptions for removing blockages to career growth that can reduce organizational effectiveness. These prescriptions, based on the conceptual model presented in the preceding section, addresses the three key factors related to responsibility plateauing: 1) performance deficiencies, 2) limited growth opportunities, and 3) acceptance of opportunities. While these prescriptions are based on research cited in this section and the previous section, the research on career plateauing is limited and additional research is needed to support these prescriptions. Even though these suggestions reflect the current state of knowledge, the reader should recognize the limited base of empirical support and exercise care in applying these prescriptions.

Prescriptions Related to Performance Deficiencies

Developing Appropriate Skills for Promotion through Selection and Training. A management intervention to address sales employees who are plateaued because of insufficient skills is a reanalysis of selection system deficiencies. Among the actions sales managers might consider here are the increased use of more valid selection devices, or the increased use of systematic evaluations rather than intuitive judgment.

A second intervention which can be used is a thorough review of job analyses and the criteria used to make advancement decisions. It is often the case that employees are promoted on the basis of their performance on the current job rather than on their suitability for the next job (Feldman and Brett 1983). Thirdly, organizations may need to increase the amount of training they provide sales employees to whom they are giving more responsibility. Particularly when there is a discontinuity in the skills needed between the old job and the new one, this training is critical. Otherwise, performance in the new job is deficient, and employees needlessly plateau. This is especially true for the career transition from direct sales to sales management.

Redesign Jobs to Increase Intrinsic Motivation. Several job redesign interventions are potentially useful for reducing plateauing due to low intrinsic motivation. Hackman and Oldham (1980) suggest five implementing principles that might improve the motivating potential of sales jobs: (1) combining tasks, such as increasing the number of sales activities performed by each salesperson; (2) forming natural work units, such as selling teams; (3) establishing client relationships, such as emphasizing the development of long-term customer relationships and the account management concept; (4) vertical loading of the job, such as giving the salesperson more autonomy over scheduling and budgeting; and (5) opening feedback channels, such as giving the sales employee more frequent feedback. These interventions can change the nature of the job without changing the level of responsibility.

Provide Feedback. Since sales employees make attributions about why they were not given offers of additional responsibility, it is also important for sales managers to influence the explanations plateaued employees make about blockages to career growth. Research suggests that this type of “attributional training” can help turn around sales employees’ performance (Hastie 1984; Manz and Sims 1980). In the context of plateaued employees, sales managers can give more cognitive feedback (i.e., explaining how and why performance was deficient) and explicitly discuss strategies for improving sales as well as strategies for career management. Sales managers can also influence their subordinates to see many blockages they face as unstable forces that can be corrected through greater effort or different work procedures. These feedback efforts should help increase sales employees’ “intrinsic reward orientation,” i.e., their orientation to derive feelings of success from accomplishment on the job (Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986).

Develop Compensation and Promotional Programs to Maintain Extrinsic Motivation. A thorough examination of compensation and promotion procedures is critical to prevent plateauing due to lack of extrinsic motivation. The corporation may be meeting the market for new hires, for example, but may not be providing sufficient incentives for employees with three to seven years’ seniority. Another source of perceptions of unfair promotions may be random interventions of the firm to “meet the market” of employees who generate outside offers.

Reduce Stress and Burnout. Organizations can use three strategies to minimize plateauing due to stress and burnout. First, organizations can rotate these sales employees to other job assignments, such as moving a field salesperson to a staff position. Other possibilities include a short-term special project or a new permanent job assignment. Secondly, organizations can help these plateaued employees cope more effectively with job stress. The organization’s involvement could range from providing these
employees with workshops on stress management, relaxation techniques, and time management to establishing career counseling centers and health maintenance facilities. Third, organizations can use organizational development techniques, such as team building, to improve the quality of interpersonal relationships on the job.

**Prescriptions Related to Limited Growth Opportunities**

**Reward Stars. Ease out Unproductive Workers When Growth Slows.** When slow organization growth limits opportunities for career growth for plateaued performers, the firm can take a two-pronged attack. First, it can try to highly reward what Ference et al. (1977) 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 et al. (1977) 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 and Fielden 1973; Lorsch and Takagi 1986). The loss of these employees frees up scarce resources and opens up opportunities for rising stars.

**Integrate Human Resource Planning and Strategic Planning.** Organizations can address periods of limited growth opportunities by better integrating their human resource planning with their overall strategic planning. For example, Corning Glass divides its products into four categories depending upon their market share and growth potential. It then tries to match the career paths of its executives to the different types of product groups. Managers with entrepreneurial interests are assigned to bringing along new products, while “undertaker” managers are assigned to mature, stable business units.

**Prescription Related to Acceptance of Career Growth Opportunities**

**Provide Better Career Planning Information.** Some employees are reluctant to accept offers of additional responsibility because of their own personal values or family constraints. Organizations might do well to retain and adequately reward these employees contingent upon no downturn in their performance or attitudes.

For employees with self-imposed constraints, the organization might want to consider installing better information systems about career opportunities (Balk and Sonnenfeld. 1981). Some employees may not understand the consequences of early decisions to pass up promotions, cross-functional moves, and managerial opportunities. 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.

**Offer Dual Career Ladders.** Organizations might also consider here the use of dual career ladders (Dalton et al 1977). By using these dual career ladders, organizations more satisfactorily match employees with different career anchors to different organizational career paths; the decrease in mismatches should result in fewer plateaued performers.

**Directions for Future Research**

In this paper, we have tried to define and identify the sources of responsibility plateaus, and some appropriate managerial actions for dealing with plateaued employees. At least three avenues for future research remain open.

First, this paper has concentrated mainly on the situational context of career plateauing. More work is needed on the role of individual differences as contributory, or moderating, variables in the plateauing process.

Second, this article has focused on plateauing as a dependent variable, i.e., which factors and forces lead to plateaus in responsibility. More empirical research is needed on the role of plateaus as an independent variable (e.g., the impact of plateauing on perceptions of reward equity) or moderating variable (e.g., how plateauing moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and withdrawal behavior). In general, the relationship between plateauing and work attitudes—whether one causes the other, whether they are reciprocally related, and so on—needs much more investigation.

Third, the research on career plateaus would benefit from the integration of a variety of theoretical perspectives. Thus far, the research on career plateaus has been largely driven by an adult development/career development. However, the stress literature, the attribution theory literature, and the resource dependence/population ecology literature all have insights relevant to career plateaus. For
instance, the population ecology literature suggests internal manpower distributions might be useful in predicting likelihood of plateauing by cohort.

All in all, the research on career plateaus needs to move from a molar level of analysis to one of greater specificity. In the future, the research on plateaus should move progressively from broad definitions of the phenomenon to identification of symptoms of plateaued employees to discovery of specific problem outcomes, and from all-encompassing panaceas to more specific recommendations for managerial action.

References


