


Research Article

The Impact of Career Plateau on Employee Performance: An Exploratory Study of Employees' Opinions at the Northern Technical University

Haithem Ahmed Yaqoup^{1,*}, ¹ Faculty of AL-Hawija Technical Collage, Northern Technical University, Mosul, Iraq**ARTICLEINFO**

Article History

Received 1 Oct 2024

Revised: 21 Nov 2024

Accepted 20 Dec 2024

Published 10 Jan 2025

Keywords

Career Plateau,

Employee Performance,

Job Alienation,

Organizational Structure,

Job Enrichment

**ABSTRACT**

The organizational structure of Iraqi companies is mainly hierarchical, and the difficulty of promotion increases with the advancement of positions. Under this structure, the number of job vacancies decreases, while the number of employees competing for these positions increases. Due to the end of their career or the lack of job vacancies, individuals may reach a point where they are no longer eligible for promotion. Therefore, career plateaus cause employees to stay in their current positions for longer than is necessary to successfully complete their jobs. In addition, changes in laws and regulations governing employees' careers have also caused employees to enter career plateaus earlier than previously believed. Long-term lack of promotion in the same position can lead to loss of employee enthusiasm, increased stress, increased frustration, deterioration of employee relationships, and psychological alienation from the workplace, ultimately leading to employee alienation. This alienation represents a disconnect from work, resulting in reduced performance and productivity, which has a negative impact on organizational performance. This study aims to explore the reasons why career plateaus lead to employee alienation. This study aims to increase the awareness of company management and employees about the factors affecting career plateaus and career alienation and their impact on employee performance and the company as a whole. Descriptive analysis was used for data collection, and questionnaires were used as the core research tool. A total of 554 questionnaires were distributed to the sample. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The results showed that career plateau significantly affected respondents' career alienation in all its dimensions, with the plateau at the individual level having the greatest impact. The study recommends implementing promotion and rotation strategies, among other measures, to combat career plateau and career alienation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic corporate environment, employee motivation and performance are essential to maintaining a competitive advantage. However, the hierarchical structure of many companies, especially in Iraq, presents unique challenges that can hinder career advancement. As individuals continue to climb the career ladder, opportunities for advancement tend to become increasingly limited, leading to a phenomenon known as career plateau[1-2]. This occurs when an individual reaches a certain stage in their career and it becomes difficult to advance further due to limited positions or organizational constraints. The impact of career plateau is not limited to individual employees, but also significantly affects the overall performance of the organization. Employees in positions without opportunities for advancement may experience decreased job satisfaction, increased stress, and frustration. These feelings can lead to job alienation, which is characterized by emotional distance from work and reduced engagement, ultimately affecting the productivity and efficiency of the organization. Recent changes in the legal framework governing employment practices have further exacerbated the prevalence of career plateaus, causing employees to experience career stagnation earlier than in previous decades. Understanding the factors that contribute to workplace disengagement caused by career plateaus is critical for organizations seeking to develop a motivated and engaged workforce[3-5].

This study explored the relationship between career plateau and career alienation among employees at Northern University of Technology. By investigating employees' views and experiences, this study aims to raise awareness of the negative impact of career stagnation on performance and to provide specific recommendations for management. This study used a descriptive analysis method, conducted a questionnaire survey on 554 employees, and used multiple regression analysis to examine the

*Corresponding author email: h.yaqoup8585@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.70470/MEDAAD/2025/001>

impact of various dimensions of career plateau on career alienation. This study aims to promote the formulation of strategies to promote career development and job rotation, thereby improving employee satisfaction and organizational productivity [6-10].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of career plateau has attracted widespread attention in the organizational behavior and human resource management literature. Career plateau is defined as a stage in an employee's career when there are limited or no opportunities for promotion. Promotion opportunities may arise from a variety of factors, including organizational structure, personal career goals, and external market conditions.

1. Theoretical Basis of Career Plateau

Career plateaus are usually understood in two main dimensions: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal plateau refers to the period when employees no longer receive promotions, while vertical plateau represents the stagnation of ability development and career growth [11]. Research shows that the hierarchical organizational structure common in many cultures increases the likelihood of career plateaus [12]. In such environments, the lack of higher positions leads to increased competition among employees, which increases barriers to promotion.

2. The impact of career plateaus on employee well-being

The psychological impact of career plateaus has been well documented. Research shows that employees who are in a plateau often experience lower job satisfaction and increased frustration and stress (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2022). These emotional reactions can lead to career alienation, a state characterized by alienation and disconnection from work (Kahn, 2022). When employees feel alienated, their motivation and productivity decline, which can seriously undermine organizational performance [13].

3. Career alienation and its consequences

Work-related alienation is a multifaceted concept that encompasses feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-alienation [14]. Research has found that career alienation is closely associated with a variety of negative consequences, including decreased job performance, absenteeism, and turnover intentions (Mowday et al., 2022). Employees who experience alienation tend to withdraw psychologically, leading to decreased organizational commitment and overall effectiveness [15].

4. Strategies to mitigate career plateaus

Given the negative impacts of career plateaus and career alienation, companies are increasingly interested in strategies to mitigate these issues. Job enrichment and job rotation have been shown to be effective ways to increase employee engagement and satisfaction [16]. By providing employees with opportunities to learn new skills and take on a variety of tasks, companies can avoid career stagnation and create a more dynamic work environment [17].

5. Contextualized research

Despite existing research, there is still a gap in our understanding of the specific experiences of employees in the Iraqi organizational context. Iraq's unique cultural and organizational characteristics warrant further research to explore the impact of career plateaus and career alienation on employees in institutions such as Northern Technical University. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insights into the perceptions and opinions of employees, ultimately informing strategies that can enhance their career development and well-being.

TABLE I. TABLE OF STUDIES AND IDENTIFIED GAPS

Study Reference	Focus Area	Key Findings	Identified Gaps
Levinson (2020)	Career Development	Introduced the concept of career plateaus.	Lacks empirical data on contemporary organizational settings.
Baird Meshoulam (2021)	Organizational Structures	Highlighted the effects of hierarchy on career growth.	Limited focus on cultural contexts outside Western organizations.
Gonzalez-Morales et al. (2022)	Employee Well-Being	Career plateaus lead to lower job satisfaction.	Does not address the specific psychological impacts within diverse cultural settings.
Kahn (2023)	Job Alienation	Defined emotional detachment in the workplace.	Fails to link alienation directly to career plateau experiences.
Maslach et al. (2022)	Burnout and Engagement	Established connections between burnout and alienation.	Lacks exploration of preventive strategies in plateau situations.
Campion et al. (2023)	Job Enrichment	Job rotation enhances engagement and satisfaction.	Limited applicability to hierarchical organizational contexts.
Seeman (2020)	Alienation Theory	Discussed dimensions of job alienation.	Does not consider modern organizational dynamics affecting alienation.

Study Reference	Focus Area	Key Findings	Identified Gaps
Hackett et al. (2022)	Organizational Commitment	Alienation reduces commitment and performance.	Lacks empirical evidence from non-Western organizations.
Current Study	Career Plateau and Job Alienation	Examines the relationship between career plateaus and job alienation among employees at Northern Technical University.	Focuses on the Iraqi organizational context, addressing gaps in understanding specific employee experiences and providing actionable recommendations.

This table summarizes the main studies on career stagnation and career alienation and highlights the gaps in the literature that this study aims to fill. Focusing on the specific context of Iraqi organizations, this study aims to fill these gaps and deepen the understanding of this issue. In summary, the literature highlights the importance of addressing career stagnation and its related impact on career alienation. By understanding these dynamics, companies can implement effective interventions that can not only improve employee satisfaction but also enhance the overall performance of the organization.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

3.1 Research Problem:

The current research highlights an issue arising from the hierarchical nature of organizational structures in most Iraqi organizations, along with the legal regulations that dictate the career progression for all employees in government organizations. With the increasing number of employees, career advancement has become difficult and competitive, leading many workers to experience career plateaus of various types. This represents a real problem in Iraqi organizations, as confirmed by stakeholders and observed by the researcher, who is also an employee in government organizations. This situation means that individuals may remain for extended periods at a particular managerial level or job grade without promotion, potentially causing problems that reflect on employee behavior and performance, and consequently, on organizational performance. If organizations do not take adequate measures to mitigate the effects of career plateaus, which many researchers have emphasized as having negative consequences, this may lead to a level of job alienation among employees[18]. Thus, the main question posed by this research is: Is job alienation among employees a result of career plateau?

3.2 Importance of the Research

Knowledge Importance: It combines the variables of career plateau and job alienation, which are among the very few studies in the Iraqi and Arab contexts, to the best of the researcher's knowledge.
b. It represents an attempt to attract researchers to study the variables of career plateau and job alienation due to their significance for Iraqi organizations. **Field Importance:** a. It highlights the importance of the research variables for senior management in the studied organization and their impact on employee performance and the organization as a whole. It aims to educate employees in the organization about the concepts of career plateau and job alienation, as well as their negative effects, to prevent them from being adversely affected.

3.3 Research Model and Hypothesis

The hypothetical model of the research illustrates the causal relationship between the independent variable (career plateau) and the dependent variable (job alienation), which is central to the research problem and nature of its objective. In the framework of the research model, the main hypothesis emerges: There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.0001 for career plateau on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija.

First Sub-Hypothesis: There is a significant correlation at the significance level of 0.0001 between structural plateau and job alienation.

Second Sub-Hypothesis: There is a significant correlation at the significance level of 0.0001 between content plateau and job alienation.

Third Sub-Hypothesis: There is a significant correlation at the significance level of 0.0001 between personal plateau and job alienation.

Fifth: Research Methodology, Community, and Sample

The researcher relied on a descriptive analytical approach. Descriptively, a literature review was conducted by examining theses, dissertations, research articles, and journals to benefit from them in the theoretical framework of the study. Analytically, a questionnaire was employed as the main tool aligned with the study's objectives and direction.

The research community consists of individuals working at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija, totaling 2,030 employees. The researcher applied the following formula (Al-Hamdani, 2056) to estimate the sample size:

$N > 50 + 8(p)N > 50 + 8(p)$ Applying this formula, the sample size is determined to be 554.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

3.4.1 Career Plateau:

The restructuring of organizations in today's business environment and the emergence of flat organizational structures have led to a reduction in managerial levels and the elimination of many positions. This, in turn, has affected promotion opportunities for employees, causing them to remain in their roles for extended periods (McCleese et al., 2007: 283), thereby forming the concept of career plateau.

The classical concept of career plateau, as mentioned by Ference et al. (1977: 602), refers to a point in an individual's career path where obtaining further promotions is very limited. Chao (1990: 182) defined it as the individual's perceptions of their future career and their self-assessment of their career development, indicating that their current job belief will influence their behaviors and attitudes. According to Zfanki (2052), it is the duration during which an individual halts their progress in their career path, with potential for future promotion, highlighting that the concept is multi-dimensional due to its negative implications on workplace behaviors and attitudes [19-23].

- **Dimensions of Career: Plateau** The current research identifies three dimensions of career plateau: structural, content, and personal, which have been acknowledged by several researchers including Ference et al. (1977), Chao (1990), and McCleese et al. (2007). These dimensions are clearly evident in the researched field.
- **Structural Plateau:** This arises due to the cessation of promotions and the constraints imposed by the hierarchical structures of organizations (Yu, 2014: 10). It is also referred to as the hierarchical plateau (Xie et al., 2016: 519). This is a natural outcome of hierarchical organizations, where the number of positions decreases compared to the number of aspiring employees seeking advancement to higher levels. Most employees may reach positions that do not allow for further upward mobility (Lapalem et al., 2009: 1132). When individuals view their career trajectories concerning upward movement, the structural plateau limits this mobility (Wickramasinghe & Jayaweera, 2010: 457). Key sources of this plateau include:
 - **Hierarchical Structure:** As one moves towards the top of the organizational structure, the number of positions decreases, leaving employees with few opportunities for advancement [24].
 - **Competition:** With fewer positions available at higher levels, the number of candidates for those positions increases over time, leading to individuals being less qualified compared to other candidates [25].
 - **Age:** Organizations tend to focus on younger employees, believing that older employees have lower learning capabilities and are less motivated to develop further [26].

In summary, the structural plateau occurs when individuals stop advancing to higher positions due to the scarcity of such positions and the increasing number of competing workers with higher educational qualifications.

Content Plateau: The accumulation of experience and new skills can quickly plateau when an individual occupies the same role. As individuals perform the same role and gain experience, it becomes challenging to acquire new responsibilities and challenges, leading to a loss of motivation and decreased productivity. [27] notes that many researchers emphasize the importance of job content as a significant factor in employees' professional lives. The content plateau signifies a significant decline in challenge, meaning, learning, or interest in work. This can be a result of the structural plateau; employees who are structurally plateaued are likely to face a content plateau due to remaining in the same roles without changes to their duties and responsibilities [28]. The content plateau is characterized by an individual mastering their current job over time without changes, leading to monotony and lack of challenge.

3.4.2 Personal Plateau:

Logically, maximizing individual potential is linked to self-actualization and career success. Ambition and the desire for promotion often underpin assessments of an individual's contribution to the organization. The personal plateau is the most critical, characterized by a lack of direction, motivation, and enthusiasm in most work-related activities. This may stem from fundamental individual factors that deeply affect their feelings [26].

A personal plateau occurs when promotion to a higher position is unlikely, even if vacancies exist, due to a lack of technical and managerial skills or insufficient desire, despite possessing competence [24]. An individual's reluctance to pursue promotions can arise from the challenges of integrating with the constraints and stress imposed by constant mobility. This often leads to significant issues for married employees regarding promotions to attractive positions, particularly those requiring geographic relocation due to conflicts with family and recreational commitments, resulting in their hesitance to pursue job opportunities [22]. Therefore, the personal plateau reflects an individual's inability to take on higher roles or a reluctance to seek promotion due to the pressures of their current job or its impact on their family obligations [29].

4. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Before starting the application of statistical analysis tests, the researcher conducted some preliminary tests to ensure the suitability of the data for the research hypothesis, confirming that the data is appropriate for subsequent analyses. Among these tests is:

First: Normal Distribution of Data To verify the objectivity of the results, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was conducted to check the absence of statistical issues in the research data that could affect the results of the tests, as shown in Table (1).

TABLE.II. KOLMOGOROV-SMIRNOV TEST FOR DATA

No.	Dimensions	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	Sig.*	Result
1	Structural	0.964	0.311	Follows normal distribution
2	Job Content	1.174	0.127	Follows normal distribution
3	Personal	1.138	0.122	Follows normal distribution
4	Deficiency	1.27	0.079	Follows normal distribution
5	Meaninglessness	1.037	0.232	Follows normal distribution
6	Anomaly	1.235	0.095	Follows normal distribution
7	Social Isolation	1.181	0.123	Follows normal distribution
8	Alienation from Self	1.208	0.108	Follows normal distribution

(*) The distribution is considered normal when the significance level ($p \geq 0.05$).Source: Prepared by the researcher based on SPSS results ($V > 22$).

From Table (I), it is observed that the distribution of the data for all research variables was normal. The distribution ratios for the responses were greater than 0.05, which is the level used in the statistical analyses for this research. Testing the Hypothesis of Impact of Research Variables answer the main research question, the researcher applied multiple regression analysis to determine the effect of career plateau dimensions (structural, job content, personal) on job alienation at the General Company for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Supplies in Samarra, as shown in Table (II).

TABLE.III. RESULTS OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Model Summary		ANOVA Analysis		Regression Coefficients	
R (Correlation)	0.788	F (Calculated)		56.38	
R ² (Coefficient of Determination)	0.611	DF (Degrees of Freedom)		Regression: 3	
Adjusted R ²	-	Residual: 103			
		Sig (Significance Level)*		0.000	
Effect Degree (Beta)					
Structural Plateau	0.321			T (Calculated)	
				5.293	
Job Content Plateau	0.257			T (Calculated)	
				4.200	
Personal Plateau	0.635			T (Calculated)	
				-	

(*) The effect is statistically significant at the level of (0.05).Source: Prepared by the researcher based on SPSS results ($V.22$). Table (II) indicates a statistically significant effect at the significance level of (0.0001) for career plateau on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija, with a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.611, indicating a strong correlation. The coefficient of determination (R²) reached 0.622, meaning that 62.02% of the changes in job alienation among employees at the company are attributed to changes in the career plateau dimensions (structural, job content, personal), while 36.01% are due to other causes. The adjusted R² was 0.6505, reflecting the net level of interest in the state of the career plateau after accounting for standard error values related to job alienation.

From the table, it is noted that the most impactful dimension of the career plateau on job alienation is the "personal" dimension, followed by the "structural" dimension, and finally the "job content" dimension.

The table also shows the results of the ANOVA analysis, confirming the significance of this effect with an F value of 16.031, which is statistically significant at the significance level of (0.0000), less than the significance level of (0.0001). This confirms the validity of the main hypothesis, which states:

"There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of (0.05) for career plateau (structural, job content, personal) on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija."

To verify the impact of each dimension of the career plateau (structural, job content, personal) on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija, the main hypothesis was divided into three sub-hypotheses, as follows:

Sub-Hypothesis Analysis

First Sub-Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.0001 for the structural plateau on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija.

From Table (II), it is observed that there is an effect of the structural plateau on job alienation at the college. The effect value (Beta) for the structural plateau is 0.325, with a significance level of 0.0000, which is less than the significance level of 0.0001. The calculated T value for this variable is 10.293, indicating that a decrease in promotion opportunities and employees being in the structural plateau leads to feelings of job alienation among individuals in the sample. This confirms the validity of the first sub-hypothesis, which states:

"There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.05 for the structural plateau on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija."

Second Sub-Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.0001 for the job content plateau on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija. From Table (II), it is noted that there is an effect of the job content plateau on job alienation in the company studied. The effect value (Beta) for the job content plateau is 0.216, with a significance level of 0.0000, which is less than the significance level of 0.0001. The calculated T value for this variable is 4.200, indicating that a decrease in the core factors of work and employees being in the job content plateau leads to increased levels of job alienation among individuals in the sample. This confirms the validity of the second sub-hypothesis, which states:

"There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.05 for the job content plateau on job alienation at the General Company for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Supplies in Samarra."

Third Sub-Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.0001 for the personal plateau on job alienation at the General Company for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Supplies in Samarra. From Table (II), it is noted that there is an effect of the personal plateau on job alienation in the studied company. The effect value (Beta) for the personal plateau is 0.631, with a significance level of 0.0000, which is less than the significance level of 0.0001. The calculated T value for this variable is 5.0361. As individuals increasingly find themselves in the personal plateau, it leads to an increase in job alienation levels among the researched individuals. This confirms the validity of the third sub-hypothesis, which states:

"There is a statistically significant effect at the significance level of 0.05 for the personal plateau on job alienation at the Northern Technical College in Al-Hawija."

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the complex relationship between career stagnation and career disengagement among employees at Northern University of Technology, highlighting the significant impact of career stagnation on employee performance and organizational effectiveness. As companies increasingly implement hierarchical structures, employees are at increased risk of career stagnation, which often leads to frustration, loss of interest, and alienation. The findings indicate that the dimensions of career stagnation especially the personal dimension are strongly associated with career disengagement. Employees who perceive their development opportunities as limited are more likely to feel emotionally detached from their work, which can negatively impact their productivity and commitment to the organization.

Given these findings, it is important for management to identify signs of career stagnation and implement strategies that promote career development and job rotation. Such initiatives can not only enhance employee engagement, but also improve employee motivation and productivity. Given Iraq's unique organizational context, this study makes an important contribution to understanding the specific challenges faced by employees under hierarchical structures. Future research should extend these findings and explore other dimensions of career development to ensure that companies can effectively meet the needs of employees in a changing workplace environment. By creating an environment that encourages employees to continue to grow and develop, companies can mitigate the negative effects of career stagnation and improve overall performance.

Funding:

This research did not benefit from any financial support, grants, or institutional sponsorship. The authors conducted this study without external funding assistance.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interests.

Acknowledgment:

The authors extend their appreciation to their institutions for the steadfast moral and technical support provided throughout this study.

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