

# **Job Satisfaction, Perceived Career Plateau, and the Perception of Promotability: A Correlational Study**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*The current study involved a search to examine what relationship exists between job satisfaction and the perceived career plateau among full-time employees from television media organizations across the United States. The television media industry has a reputation of being an exciting, creative, and evolving industry both internally and externally (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [USBLS], 2007a). Through the technological integration of new media platforms such as Web sites, digital media, video games, advertising, and production, the nature of the television media industry is very innovative but often complex with dedicated employees who are self-aware of their futures within the growing industry (Buchwalter, 2005).*

*With the changing realities of the television media environment, economic shift, mergers and acquisitions, and the goal to remain top industry competitors, some employees feel that with the evolving media culture there should be internal career growth opportunities, most notably for seasoned employees. The USBLS (2007b) projects 12.8 million new jobs will be created by 2016, increasing employment by 8.5%. It is also estimated that employment within the television industry will increase approximately 9% between 2006 and 2016. However, some employees perceive internal growth upward or laterally is not happening fast enough if at all and believe they have reached a career plateau (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977; Heslin, 2005).*

## **BACKGROUND**

Researchers first studied career plateau in the 1970s, much after the inception of mass media outlets that began in the 1920s. These mass media outlets, which consist of radio, print circulation, television, and Internet, were designed to reach a very large audience. With hundreds of television channels, the broad audience appeal could reasonably indicate a growing need for staffing and leadership exists within these media networks. Economic tendency and its resulting media factors (e.g., mergers and layoffs), the number of employees seeking advancement opportunities appears low (Gunnink, 2008). Although little management literature is available to show a direct relationship between job satisfaction and career plateau in the television media environment, experiencing a level of career plateau is likely (Heider, 1958).

Within television media organizations, the practice of internally hiring gifted employees is customary, but some employees do not believe this is happening often or it is not happening to them (Patrick & Laschinger, 2006; Simmering, 2007). Vertical hiring practices or promoting senior employees are not as common as they used to be. A common practice has been to promote based on talent or whom you know. Experienced employees are aware of the practice and can sometimes understand its rationale,

but most do not agree with its practice (Huffman & Torres, 2002). Employees believe they are eligible for promotion if they work hard at their jobs and follow industry rules. As the television media industry grows and new challenges and responsibilities increase, some employees feel so should the reward and recognition of a new title and not just the customary merit increase sometimes used as a tool to quiet promotion talk (Patrick & Laschinger, 2006).

Despite the demanding nature of the work, no one will deny the television media environment is a vibrant industry due to the glamour aspect of celebrity and parties embedded in its core (USBLS, 2007). When one considers the long-term career aspect of working in television media, there are sometimes considerations regarding the nature of the industry where one could argue he or she is at a plateau and do not know how to get out of it. Because the television media industry is a challenging industry in which to gain employment (the basis of gaining entry is often whom you know), most full-time employees will not voluntarily leave their job (Huffman & Torres, 2002). Having employees who want to stay in their job role is an advantage to some organizations for employers retain skilled employees. However, some employees are dissatisfied in the course of their career and may seek opportunities elsewhere. The often unspoken causes of job dissatisfaction are career plateau, heavy workload, and low salary (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

Approximately 73% of workers within the media industry work in television and radio broadcasting, with 39% employed within television (USBLS, 2007), which media organizations depend on for operational continuity. Researchers (i.e., Bardwick, 1986; McCleese & Eby, 2006; Milliman, 1992; Sutton, 2005) have noted the importance of job satisfaction aimed at work attitudes and career plateau, yet career plateau continues to be a source of job dissatisfaction for many employees (Chao, 1990; Heslin, 2005). The general problem and focus of the current research study was that although the allure of the television media industry can appear glamorous, the nature of the work is demanding, and as such, job dissatisfaction and perceived career plateau exist among full-time television media employees. The specific problem was in understanding the television media employees' perception of promotability by examining the relationship between job satisfaction and perceived career plateau.

Job dissatisfaction can have an impact on television media employees' enthusiasm to maintain effective performance levels because they no longer feel challenged by their job responsibilities and perceive they are experiencing a career plateau (Bardwick, 1986; Ference et al., 1977; Sutton, 2005). Sutton (2005) noted the concept of a career plateau frequently evokes negative connotations for both individuals and organizations; however, these might be unreasonable assumptions. Patterson et al., (1987) proposed that the majority of organizational workers are *solid citizens* who perform satisfactorily though they have reached their career pinnacle. Other researchers have similarly reported that plateaus are not synonymous with poor performance (Bardwick, 1986; Feldman & Weitz, 1988).

A gap observed in the management literature related directly to the television media industry reveals a lack of research about the relationship that the job satisfaction and perceived career plateau constructs have on full-time employees' perception of promotability. The research contributes to the current body of media and management literature as it involves an examination into which factors of a relationship exist between job satisfaction and perceived career plateau of full-time television employees. In the current study, employees in an industry with a thriving and evolving organizational culture across the United States who feel stalled in their career (Broadly-Preston & Steel, 2002) identified and discussed

the role certain demographic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, geographic region, tenure, and education level) play in a relationship between job satisfaction and perceived career plateau.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of the study was to examine what factors of a relationship exists between job satisfaction and perceived career plateau of full-time employees from television media organizations across the United States. Some objectives of the study were (a) to understand the relationship between job satisfaction and career plateau and (b) later in the study identify and discuss certain demographic characteristics that might relate to the job satisfaction and career plateau relationship.

In addition to these objectives, the study involved an exploration into the job satisfaction factors of (a) performance (attitude and behavior), (b) motivation and needs, and (c) organizational success. The study also involved exploring career plateau factors of (a) hierarchy, (b) perception, (c) promotion, (d) job content, (e) job enrichment, and (f) outcomes. In examining the relationship between job satisfaction and perceived career plateau, the secondary purpose of the study was to gather quantitative data to render new information in the correlation analysis of demographic factors such as age, gender, geographic region, tenure, and education level and their relationship to job satisfaction and perceived career plateau. Finally, the study involved an attempt to enhance the existing management literature of job satisfaction and career plateau of television media employees and to find what respondents attribute to the perceived career plateau.

### **Research Design**

The linear regression analysis of the quantitative study involved the use of a Likert-type survey approach to obtain job satisfaction and career plateau scores of full-time television media employees. The Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS; Spector, 1997) and the Career Plateau Survey (CPS; Milliman, 1992) instruments were administered to capture data electronically through the Survey Methods tool. Full-time employees from television media organizations across the United States participated in the study. The employees consisted of assistants, coordinators, supervisors, managers, and directors.

The quantitative study employed linear regression analysis to examine what relationship exists between any of the subcategories of the JSS (Spector, 1997) and the CPS (Milliman, 1992). The two surveys provided respondents the ability to answer questions regarding their level of job satisfaction and perceived career plateau as well as answer questions of demographics such as age, gender, geographic region, tenure, and education level.

### **Research Questions**

A general assumption is that job satisfaction describes how content an individual is with his or her job (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2007; Mayo et al., 1924). Employees need leadership and guidance in developing effective models and approaches to achieving career growth. The information derived enhances current management literature on the subject and might assist individuals and organizations in implementing new strategies to enrich current job roles. The study involved an examination into the relationship between job satisfaction and the perceived career plateau of full-time employees from television media organizations across the United States. It is hypothesized that individual job satisfaction and perceived career plateau ideals form the basis of the perception of promotability of full-time broadcast television employees. The JSS (Spector, 1997) and the CPS (Milliman, 1992) instruments aided in the study as it involved a search to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the respondents' job satisfaction score and their perceived internal (job content) plateau score?
2. What is the relationship between the respondents' job satisfaction score and their perceived external (hierarchy) plateau score?
3. What is the relationship between the respondents' job satisfaction and subscale scores and demographic characteristics?
4. What is the relationship between the respondents' perceived internal (job content) and external (hierarchy) plateau scores and demographic characteristics?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Historical Overview**

Research about employee perception has progressed for over 50 years. Researchers believe employee perceptions relative to promotability are predicated on certain demographic variables and outcome comparisons relative to job satisfaction. Attempts by philosophers and scholars to understand perception theory and its characteristics date back to the late 1800s with the Gestalt School and Heider. The introduction of perception theory into modern relevance began with Heider's (1958) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, which speaks to making causal attributions to behavior in others or oneself and how it is explained.

Heider's theory is applicable to organizational methods in which an individual experiences inner fulfillment and pride from his or her duties (job satisfaction) but after some time the individual is not structurally advancing at a rate desired, if at all (perceived career plateau). Yet, the individual continues to hope that a chance exists for upward mobility at a future date (promotability). There are many reasons to which to attribute this behavior, and the current research includes an examination into the underlying causes and theories to discover what constitutes a career plateau in organizations (Warren, Ference, & Stoner, 1975).

### **Career Plateau and Job Satisfaction Relationship to Promotability**

The issues and relevance of career plateau and its relationship to job satisfaction is a growing subject in management research. Empirical research suggests a career plateau averages 5 years tenure and progress forward (Nachbagauer&Riedl, 2002; Slocum et al., 1985; Stout et al., 1988). Other studies declare a plateau can take anywhere from 3 to 5 years to reach once work is mastered and there is nothing new to learn (Bardwick, 1986; Evans & Gilbert, 1984).

According to Elsdon (2007), additional factors that can lead to plateauing in the early years of one's career include lack of clarity about personal aspirations since work and life experiences are still developing. Lack of flexibility in considering options can also be a significant internal factor. External factors include constrained life circumstances that result because of growing inequality in society, growing competition (e.g., in popular jobs or from emerging global regions), or being part of a declining work sector.

McCleese et al. (2006, p. 72) explained that plateauing research often reveals a negative relationship between job content plateauing (i.e., lacking challenge in one's job) and work attitudes. McCleese et al. explored situations where job content plateauing is associated with fewer negative work attitudes, revealing role ambiguity (i.e., being unclear about job duties and responsibilities) and hierarchical plateauing (i.e., low likelihood of promotions) as moderators of the job content plateau-work

attitude relationship. Specifically, job content plateaued employees reported greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment if they were not also experiencing a hierarchical plateau. Job content plateaued employees also reported greater job satisfaction when role ambiguity was low.

According to Heslin (2005, p. 377), the organizational trends over the past decades such as downsizing and outsourcing have also lessened the potential for hierarchical progression through promotion. This applies even to master's of business administration graduates who have earned a degree widely promoted as the credential for access to a successful managerial career, characterized by upward corporate mobility. For many years, people pursued a continuous linear career within one occupation, perhaps working for one or two organizations, without major disruptions or redirections. Over the last few decades, people have changed jobs at an increasing rate. Managers and professionals, who had previously been more shielded from layoffs, have also experienced greatly diminished job security. Besides the trauma of unemployment, the underemployment and career plateauing that these changes have brought can also deflate a person's sense of career success.

Underemployed people perform jobs requiring significantly less education and work experience than they possess, involuntarily work in a field unrelated to their education, or are unable to find permanent, full-time employment in their field of interest. Career plateauing can involve hierarchical plateauing, where future promotions are unlikely, or job content plateauing, where increases in responsibility in the current job are unlikely. The flattening of organizational structures has decreased opportunities for promotions. Realizing this fact of modern organizational life can make hierarchical plateauing less troubling than job content plateauing for an individual sense of career success. While some people do not mind being plateaued, it can undermine the sense of success felt by those who desire career progression, either through the ranks of the organization or in the kind of work they do (Heslin, 2005).

According to McCleese and Eby (2006), because of the rapidly increasing number of downsizings and layoffs that characterize the world of work, it is important to ensure that those employees who are able to remain with their companies can make the best of their career situations, but the remaining employees will likely face the reality of fewer promotions. As a result, some find themselves experiencing a hierarchical plateau. The longer an employee remains in the same position, the more likely it is that he or she will experience a job content plateau, which can occur when employees become bored with their jobs. Bardwick (1986) asserted that "virtually everyone who works in an organization will plateau" (p. 62) at some time in his or her career.

For employees perceived to have plateaued, the likelihood of promotion is an adjustment equal to the promoted employee. Learning new tasks and creating and maintaining relationships are key for negotiating and changing job roles (Kramer & Noland, 1999). If a supervisor perceives an employee as promotable, the employee might receive support for upward mobility and career success. The identification of high-potential employees is a crucial step for building and developing a large talent pool that enables organizations to effectively adapt and respond to changes in the environment (De Pater et al., 2009).

The job satisfaction and career plateau relationship is connected to the television media environment just as with any organization in that positive and negative factors of job dissatisfaction can affect its overall organizational structure as well. In the current economic environment, media organizations are paying more attention to employee performance because of its inextricable connection to the organizations bottom line. In a ratings-based business, employee well-being can play a key role in establishing a competitive advantage. Employers should give more attention to the well-being and job satisfaction of their employees, for happiness is critical to organizational success (Kansas State University, 2009).

## **Literature Gap**

Research supports the notion that organizations benefit from happy employees (Jensen & Luthans, 2006; Kansas State University, 2009) and that understanding the causes of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction among staff can be an important step to ensuring the continued success of business organizations (Heslin, 2005; Roberts & Fusfield, 1988). However, no studies address the relationship that job satisfaction and perceived career plateau constructs have on full-time television media employees' perception of promotability. Research has indicated that perceived promotability by employees experiencing a career plateau might lead to positive organizational outcomes and that well-known approaches implemented in organizations every day influence the perception of promotability related to job satisfaction practices (Elsdon, 2007). Yet again, no studies address these issues among full-time employees from television media organizations across the United States. One goal of the current research study was to fill the aforementioned gaps in the media and management literature using a quantitative correlation research method that ensures employee anonymity to foster honest responses to the survey items.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A quantitative research approach was appropriate because quantitative tools such as surveys are appropriate for studies with well-known research variables and can be used to describe correlations (Creswell, 2009). The variables allow for statistical consideration and accuracy when identifying research objectives to testable hypotheses and answering the research questions. According to Neuman (2003), using a quantitative research methodology fosters the measurement of objective facts, while focusing on variables and reliability, and promotes researcher detachment. Quantitative research allows the researcher to use a survey instrument designed to collect numeric data from respondents that can be statistically analyzed in an unbiased and objective manner (Creswell, 2009) and is conducive to objectively collecting, quantifying, and summarizing information to explain phenomena (Golafshani, 2003).

The current quantitative study involved electronically surveying full-time employees from television media organizations across the United States who have worked at their respective organizations for 3 years or more. The study included the JSS (Spector, 1997) and an adaptation of the CPS (Milliman, 1992). The goal of the research study was to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between job satisfaction and the employees' perceived career plateau. Additionally, the study assessed the relationship between certain demographic characteristics (age, gender, tenure, geographic region, and education level), the variables of job satisfaction, and perceived career plateau.

The current quantitative study involved the use of a Likert-type survey instrument to test the study hypotheses and answer the research questions at a  $\pm .05$  level of significance. Researchers use the quantitative method to gain formal and objective numeric information about the population (Creswell, 2009). The independent variable and dependent variable of the current research study (job satisfaction and career plateau, respectively) are measurable and were evaluated to determine if a statistically significant relationship exists by collecting data using the JSS (Spector, 1997) and the CPS (Milliman, 1992) instruments.

## RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 indicated that a significant positive relationship exists between job satisfaction and internal (job content) career plateau, yet less than 30% of the variability in the internal (job content) career plateau score was explained by the job satisfaction score. Also, for Hypothesis 2, a significant positive relationship exists between the variables with approximately 48% of the variability in the internal (job content) career plateau score explained by the two job satisfaction subscale scores (nature of work and promotion). In addition, for Hypothesis 3, a significant positive relationship exists between the job satisfaction scores and external (hierarchy) career plateau scores, but overall job satisfaction explained only 14.7% of the variability in the external (hierarchy) career plateau score. For Hypothesis 4, there was a significant positive relationship with approximately 17.5% of the variability in the external (hierarchy) career plateau score explained by the contingent rewards job satisfaction subscale scores. For Hypothesis 5, there was a significant positive relationship with only 8.7% of the variability in the job satisfaction score explained by the gender of the participants. For Hypothesis 6, two significant positive relationships exist with only 7.6% of the variability in the internal (job content) career plateau score and 6.2% of the variability in the external (hierarchy) career plateau score explained by the gender of the participants. In addition, all of the assumptions associated with linear regression were assessed for all the hypotheses tested, and none of the assumptions were violated. Lastly, power analyses were conducted for each hypothesis to determine if the power was adequate to detect a significant effect and to protect against a Type II error. The power was adequate for Hypotheses 1 through 4, but not for Hypotheses 5 and 6.

## DISCUSSION

In a job satisfaction survey released in January 2009, 48% of human resource professionals and 32% of employees reported that career advancement opportunity within their particular organization was very important. Career advancement was more important for employees from medium and large organizations than for employees from small organizations, and was a higher priority for employees aged 35 and younger than for employees aged 56 and older. Similarly, employees with 2 years or less of job tenure indicated that career advancement was more important to their job satisfaction than did employees who had been with their organizations for 16 or more years. It is not surprising that employees who are relatively new to their organizations placed greater value on career advancement opportunities than did more tenured employees (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009).

Job satisfaction is critical to businesses of all types. Television media organizations and their personnel occupy a unique position in global media culture and society. Television symbolizes an essential source of information and knowledge content that shapes the immediate environment. To achieve this, employees must maintain a level of engagement and productivity to their television network and peers with the full support of management and leadership officials cognizant to the potential existence of job dissatisfaction and perceived career plateau expressed.

The information gained in the current study supports the proposition that factors of a relationship do exist between job satisfaction and career plateau. The literature review further supported the supposition that factors of a relationship do exist between employee perceptions of promotability and job satisfaction. Employee perceptions of promotability relative to career plateau are influenced by job enrichment and motivation such as motivating employees by giving them increased responsibility and variety in their jobs and thus balancing personal satisfaction. Job enrichment, the focus of current research concerning job

satisfaction and career plateau, is believed to prompt drive and influence employees to improve the quality of their individual work performance and behaviors by setting and accomplishing new work tasks and maintaining open communication with leadership and peers, which are all essential elements to career growth and success.

Past research reinforces the belief that job dissatisfaction and career plateau yields a host of negative outcomes influenced by absence, attitude, and performance due to the lack of communication and challenge in the work environment and individual career progression. Job satisfaction can have many positive outcomes (e.g., work attitude, loyalty and commitment, and increased productivity) for the overall health of an organization if nurtured. Nurturing job satisfaction might lead to improved perceptions of promotability within organizations.

The present study utilized the JSS (Spector, 1997) as well as the CPS (Milliman, 1992) tools. Although the study found ambivalence in the JSS subscale scores of pay, promotion, contingent rewards, and operating conditions, it did provide an opportunity for additional research to increase overall job satisfaction efforts. Additionally, the identification of job dissatisfaction experienced by some employees might result in an expanded base of research across multiple business lines.

Although not entirely preventable, a career plateau is likely as the economy and organizational structures dictate. It is important that organizational leaders immediately address and initiate programs to enable the career development of the employee talent pool and reduce the negative impact of plateauing. Greater knowledge and reaction to the plateauing construct is critical to the success of organizations and their stakeholders.

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