

Climbing The Corporate Ladder: What Happens After You Have Reached The Top?

Dr. Theresa Smith

*New England Business School
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
Australia*

Email: tsmith24@une.edu.au

Climbing The Corporate Ladder: What Happens After You Have Reached The Top?

ABSTRACT

Climbing the corporate ladder has long been a focus of many individuals' careers. This paper addresses what happens to those individuals once they reach the most senior positions in their career, or a career plateau. Based on interviews with 59 men and women employed in the accounting profession in Australia, the research shows that these participants report feeling disillusioned, dissatisfied, and unsure of their future career direction. The message for organisations is that just because an individual has reached the maintenance phase of their career, it does not mean that they are no longer interested in further development. In fact, the participants in the research were interested in prolonging their careers and wanted their organisations to provide greater support in the area of career development.

Key words: career plateau; senior workers; accounting profession

Climbing The Corporate Ladder: What Happens After You Have Reached The Top?

INTRODUCTION

Climbing the so called 'corporate ladder' has long been a focus of many employees in the workplace. Traditional definitions of career development focused on achieving greater pay, power, position, and responsibility (Hall, 1996a). The question addressed in this paper is what happens once an individual reaches the most senior position in their career. Has the individual reached ultimate career fulfillment, are they satisfied, and do they want any more out of their career?

The research discussed in this paper is based on a larger research thesis which examined the key personal, inter-personal, and organisational factors that influence the career development of men and women in the accounting profession in Australia (Smith 2006). An emerging theme of the research was the career concerns expressed by some participants. Based on interviews with 30 men and 29 women employed in the accounting profession in Australia, the research showed that participants who had reached senior positions in their organisations reported feeling disillusioned, dissatisfied, and unsure of their future career direction. They were aged in their early 40s and potentially had at least another twenty years in the workforce before the official age of retirement, however they were all questioning their future.

The message of this research is that just because older employees are at the maintenance stage of their careers and focused on stability and job security, it does not mean that they are not also interested in active development of their identity and career. As Super's (1984) theory of the self-concept suggested, an individual's identity development is a lifelong, rather than just an early career phenomenon. Therefore, if organisations wish to retain senior employees, they will need to understand how to enhance the commitment and satisfaction of their senior employees by ensuring on-going development.

Reaching a Career Plateau

Many of the theories on career development have addressed the issues faced by men and women who have reached the so called 'maintenance' phase or 'career plateau' of their careers (Super, 1957; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & Mckee, 1978; Ornstein, Cron & slocum, 1989; White, Cox & Cooper, 1992; Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999). Researchers have argued that the maintenance phase tends to occur during middle adulthood, which is from age 40 to 60 (Super, 1957; Levinson et al., 1978). For example, during the middle adulthood phase, Levinson et al. (1978) believed that the individual reaches a mid-life transition (40-45), where the individual reviews the life structure adopted in their 30s. From 46-50, the researchers believed that the individual develops greater stability as answers to their questions posed in earlier stages are integrated into their lives. In the 50s transition (51-55) the individual again raises more questions about their life structure. At the culmination of middle adulthood (56-60) the individuals seeks to answer the questions raised previously and adjust to their life choices.

Ference, Stoner and Warren (1977) were among the earlier researchers on career plateau and they defined it as the point at which employees cease experiencing hierarchical career progression. Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse (1995) stated it is also associated with employment stability or lack of mobility. A career plateau has the potential to cause discontent because continued upward progression is an important source of motivation for some individuals (Chay, Aryee & Chew, 1995; Lemire, Saba, Gagnon, 1999; Stout, 1988; Trembley et al., 1995). Lemire et al. (1999) for example, believed that a career plateau may cause individuals to develop counter-productive attitudes and behaviours, and their physical and psychological well-being may suffer. They suggested that organisational consequences may include a reduction in organisational commitment, an increase in external mobility, and a decrease in work performance. The researchers also found that the absence or inadequacy of practices linked to career planning, development, and support, as well as the lack of opportunities to play new roles and participate in work groups, accentuated the perception of career plateauing (Lemire et al., 1999).

In addition to career plateau, some researchers have identified a professional plateau. Lee (2003) distinguished between career and professional plateau by explaining the former relates to progression within the organisation, while the latter is concerned with progression in the profession. Lee (2003) believed that the issue of professional plateau is likely to be important in the new paradigm of protean careers. The protean model of careers in the twenty-first century assumes that careers continue to develop throughout life as skills and knowledge are continuously

sought in accordance with individual goals (Hall, 1996b). Therefore, as Adamson, Doherty and Viney (1998) stated, employees will want to ensure that even if they do not progress within their organisation, they will want their jobs to provide them with professional challenge so that they remain engaged, skilful in their profession, and marketable.

According to Rotondo (1999), individuals may cope with the career plateau using several positive and negative strategies. Problem-focused coping strategies address the source of stress associated with the plateau (Rotondo, 1999). Such strategies include: taking lateral transfers, accepting new job assignments or duties, serving as mentors to younger employees, becoming functional or technical experts, and working on special projects or teams (Elsass & Ralston, 1989). Emotion-focused strategies seek to make individuals feel better about the plateau (Rotondo, 1999). For example, an individual may seek social support from friends or mentors to help them resolve their uncertainty. Individuals may also reevaluate their situation and decide to place less emphasis on the desire for future promotions. Both problem and emotion-focused strategies are positive examples of coping measures.

In contrast, Rotondo (1999) also identified a range of negative coping strategies which are all emotion-focused. They include: blaming the supervisor or organisation, reducing the quality or quantity of work, and leaving the organisation to find better promotion opportunities elsewhere.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the men and women in the research felt about the maintenance phase of their career. It discusses their feelings of uncertainty and disillusionment with the organisation, and strategies that they use to overcome such feelings. It provides lessons for both individuals and organisations on measures that can be used to reduce the detrimental repercussions of a career plateau. Whilst the findings are limited to a small sample in the accounting profession in Australia, they point to the need for further research on the issues faced by individuals once they have reached the maintenance phase of their careers.

METHOD

The larger research thesis was conducted using the main elements of the grounded theory approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the career experiences of the 59 participants. There were several key steps in the data analysis phase. First, each interview was audio taped and then transcribed. Second, each interview was content analysed and coded for

emerging themes. In general, the process of data analysis was characterised by a constant comparative method to compare specific codes, concepts, themes and patterns of relationships generated from the interview data. These were then combined to enable an understanding of the current context of career development in the accounting profession in Australia. An emerging theme of the research was the career experiences of the senior and older participants.

The Sample

The sample comprised 30 men and 29 women employed in the accounting profession in Australia. Purposive, convenience and snow ball sampling were used to select these participants. The participants held a range of positions (as indicated in Table I) in a range of organisations, including in: universities; chartered firms; the corporate sector; the not-for-profit sector; and in sole practice.

Insert Table I.

The age range for men was 23–66 and 28–72 for women. The average age of the men was 41, compared to 43 for the women. Only one male and one female were over the age of 65.

RESULTS

Job & Organisational Profile of Participants

The following information provides details on the job and organisational tenure of participants, as well as the positions they held. The majority of the participants in the research had long periods of stable employment with the one organisation. A significant portion of participants (n=12, 20 per cent – nine males and three females) had actually remained with the same organisation during their entire career. There were also a further 29 participants (49 per cent – 13 males and 16 females) who after one or two early job changes, had settled in the one organisation, with intentions of remaining there. Participants indicated that they had been in their current position for an average of 4.6 years and been with their current organisation for an average of 9.5 years. The number of participants who had worked for the one organisation for five years or longer was n=29 or 49 per cent.

Of the 59 participants in the research, 29 held senior positions in their organisations, most of whom had achieved them during their 30s. The following tables summarise the positions held by men and women in the three different organisational contexts featured in the research: accounting firms; universities; and the corporate sector. The total number of participants listed does not equal 59 as those employed in sole practice, or those who switch between teaching and accounting, are not included.

Insert tables II-IV here.

The Maintenance Phase of Career

The larger research thesis (Smith, 2006) identified that both the men and women progressed through three age-related stages in their careers: early adulthood (early 20s); middle adulthood (late 20s to late 40s); and pre-retirement (50s and over). The middle adulthood phase was characterised by a period of establishment and maintenance. In the establishment phase, participants progressed through a series of roles in either one organisation, or in multiple organisations. For example, of the 59 participants, nine males and three females remained employed in the same organisation throughout their career to date, and a further 13 male and 16 female participants stayed with the one organisation after some initial job changes.

By the maintenance phase, participants had reached a plateau in their career development as they had progressed to senior positions within their organisation. At this point, some participants were content to continue coasting along in their career, however many participants (six men & 5 women) had reached what they called a 'cross roads'. The participants admitted feeling, discontented, bored with their jobs, vulnerable and unsure over their future direction. As a result, the participants began to reevaluate their careers.

The female participants for example, redirected their career paths to either establish their own business (n=3), moved to contract based work and business related teaching (n=1), and became a primary school teacher. The reasons for such redirection included: to pursue a more flexible career; achieve a better work-life balance; and to pursue a more fulfilling career. Whilst for the men, two participants chose to establish their own business, and four pursued an academic career at a university. The motivations for the men to pursue such career changes were to seek greater flexibility, more control over the job, and to perform more fulfilling and stimulating work.

In the latter phase of middle adulthood, four of the participants indicated that they were just treading water in their careers. They had achieved all they wanted and were now prepared to coast along until retirement.

*At my age now career is just being able to continue on what I am doing now. **I have got no career aspirations** what so ever in the sense that I don't want to go any higher now than I am at ***.* (participant 44m)

The major issue raised by participants who had reached a career plateau centred on the conflict between work and family. Three of the male participants admitted being unhappy with their work-family balance, but were unsure or unwilling to take any proactive steps to resolve the conflict. Participant 21's comment encapsulates the dilemma faced by these men:

*Most of my peers don't think about another career until they reach the end of their **career path**... For me I'm only 35 and I've reached that point. What do I do, **should I be poor but seek happiness**. Or should I make us comfortable before I break off. **What's the responsible thing to do?** I don't know the answer... Where I am now is 75 per cent there, but in order to get the other 25 per cent I might have to go back to zero. Am I able to wriggle in my current position and get a **better work life balance**, or will I have to **reassess and take on something else?*** (participant 21m)

Similarly, a female participant gave up a highly successful career as a finance director to establish her own accounting practice. She felt that the sacrifices she had made to achieve such success were not worth it.

You expect when you get there that there will be this great rush of feeling or expectation and there wasn't. It wasn't what I wanted. I always thought that this is what I wanted. I wanted recognition, I wanted to be somebody that people would look up to and say look what she did against all odds, and that's the reality. When I actually sat there in that job and realised what I was giving away. If I had stayed in that job my health would have deteriorated and I reckon I would have been dead if I stayed there. Then I look at my family and I think what I gave away. During all this time the daughter that my husband

and I had together had grown up virtually on her own because I was off chasing a career.
(participant 23f)

The second concern raised by participants was that they feared becoming bored in a job that would not offer any future career development. For example, participant 32 felt that the problem with her career going forward was that she may become bored with the job.

*If you look at my career I have not stayed in one place... I can sense that if I don't do something, I will get bored. Fortunately in my area there is a lot of business development. How long I will stay I don't know. So that's why I am at a **crossroads**... I can't see that for the rest of my life I will want to do what I am doing now.* (participant 32f).

The third major problem highlighted by the participants who had reached the top of the career ladder was their feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability about the lack of future career growth. Given the participants had reached the most senior levels of their organisation during their 30s; many did not know what to do with the rest of their careers. This represented such a change from being focused on climbing the ladder. For example, one male participant who was a senior manager in a large multi-national corporation, revealed that he was 'struggling to see where to go next' in his career.

I can't easily see the next step in the path**, but I've never really worried about the next step in the past as I have gone through my career. It's been quite fast paced. I've successfully done a job and the next stage has taken care of itself. Whereas now I am **quite concerned** that I can't see where the opportunities are and **I can't see the organisation is doing too much about that. (participant 13m)

*Becoming a partner is the ultimate as what you might set as a goal. But once you get there **you realise it starts all over again**. You haven't necessarily made it and **you can feel quite vulnerable** in terms of where you go with your career. It's interesting watching all of the partners that aren't necessarily in power positions; see the youth coming in behind them as a threat.* (participant 34f)

For example, three of the participants (one male and two females) employed as partner in a major professional services firm, felt vulnerable despite their obvious seniority, tenure and depth of experience. As participant 34 explained:

*You have a lot of partners that don't have an official mentor and that got there and are left to work it out for themselves. We are only starting to do formal succession planning in the partnership. Whether that is planning for internal roles, such as CEO, or owners of major client accounts. We have just recently started a program for partners in their first three years called 'the foundation program'. They are given some more counselling and coaching, formal mentoring, more business development training, checking in how they are going. **Some are sailing and some have fear in their eyes because they feel vulnerable** and nobody has been saying how they are going. (participant 34f)*

Participant 38 similarly believed that whilst the organisation did a lot for younger partners and other employees, little attention was focused on partners once they reach their 40s and 50s. He felt that the latter were just left to 'stumble' or 'lope' along. 'We seem to ignore them when they are at the most influential stage of their life' (participant 38m).

Finally, one of the key themes to arise from the research was that some of the more senior or older participants wanted access to mentors so they approached external coaching programs. It should be noted that when referring to these programs, the participants interchanged the terms mentors and coaches. Technically the word coach or coaching should be used, as the programs used by participants involved a fee for service. In contrast, typically mentors, whether formal or informal, do not get paid for this service. This is an important distinction to make since five of the participants (two men and three women) reported using external coaching, as opposed to the remainder of participants who simply used the mentoring relationships developed in their organisations. The fact that coaches are paid for their service and mentors are not, may create a different type of relationship, however this was not explored in the research.

The five participants explained that their organisations had encouraged them as senior members of staff to participate in external coaching programs. The coaching helped participants learn more about themselves, their career goals and concerns, helped to identify their 'strengths and weaknesses' and their 'passions'. It was an important means by which participants sought career

and business guidance. Whilst the males used external mentors to crystallise career goals, the women sought external mentors to act as role models in their career.

Crystallise what I feel I am capable of, getting some assistance in that. I'm not getting that at work. Believing more about what I want to be and how I will get there.
(participant 50m)

The above quote emphasises the need for career support, while the following focuses on the need for psychosocial support.

*I'm talking to someone outside the firm who can help me focus and work through that. Part of that is really **working out what you are, what your strengths are, what your passions are.** So I'm working through that with someone. That's been a process for about 3–4 months. We meet every 4–6 weeks. **It provides the discipline and the focus.***
(participant 38m)

Participant 38 believed that employees should not have to consult with external coaches, but that the organisation should provide such a service.

*Part of doing this is once I'm through the process, **one of the legacies I'd like to leave with the firm is to institute such a process.** It needs to be done by people like me who have been there and done it, rather than consultants. To have the conversations we are talking about **you need absolute trust.** People don't want to advertise that they are not happy or they want to change in case it impacts negatively on their careers. You need a way that allows the process to happen so that people **don't feel threatened by it or don't feel they can't be completely honest.*** (participant 38m)

In addition to receiving coaching, some participants also felt that it would be useful to utilise the skills and experience of partners by making them mentors for others in the firm. Participant 38 for example, believed that the partners should be encouraged to 're-energise' and 're-direct their passion' into the organisation by mentoring younger employees.

Where we are missing out is that the best people who can look after morale and the well-being of our people is our partners. If these partners aren't receiving the mentoring and the probing and the questioning about what they are doing, then they are not going to be energised to deliver that down to their people. (participant 38m)

Whilst these suggestions were made by only a minority of participants, it highlights an important issue that needs to be addressed. If organisations wish to retain these valued and experienced senior employees, then they need to recognise that such groups may also need some form of mentoring that provides both career ('business development training') and psychosocial support ('morale and well being'; 'vulnerable').

Given that many of the participants in this research reached partner by their early thirties, and some even by 28, the comments of the three participants show that such senior employees are still interested in receiving career support, such as that provided by mentoring. These senior people have many years left in their careers, and are still interested in pursuing rewarding and challenging roles. Mentors may help such participants to crystallise their career options and may encourage them to act as mentors for others.

CONCLUSIONS

The key issue highlighted by the research was that whilst many of the participants had reached the most senior levels in their organisation, they still highly valued job variety, pursuing challenging work, and on-going personal and professional development. When these were not present in their careers, they soon became disillusioned, dissatisfied or bored with the job. This is an important finding for organisations to consider. They need to be aware that such employees may need help and support at this critical stage if they wish to retain such highly skilled employees.

The senior participants also believed that they still had something to contribute to their organisation. Organisations may consider harnessing the skills and experience of this segment and use them to help educate younger employees. In turn, the participants also identified their own need for coaching or mentoring to help provide career and psycho-social support. The participants used coaches to help crystallise their career goals, and to provide support and encouragement to cope with their career plateau.

As the Australian population ages, more people may be interested in prolonging their careers beyond their 50s and 60s, thus organisations may need to consider this in designing workplace policies on career development. In particular, if organisations are interested in retaining senior employees, then they will need to address their need for on-going development to enhance their commitment and job satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are a number of avenues for further research highlighted in this paper. First, the research revealed that some of the more senior or older employees in the organisation are feeling vulnerable and unsure about their future career development. More detailed research is needed to further explore the feelings and concerns of this cohort. For example, what are their fears and concerns?; what support, if any, do they need from the organisation; and is this age-related, or is it occurring among younger participants as well?

Second, more in-depth research could examine what individuals perceive the role of organisations to be in their career development. If organisations are to play a greater role in career management, then what specifically are individuals expecting from their employer? What role can organisations play in providing on-going development for senior employees who have reached a plateau in their careers?

Third, several participants in the research discussed the issue of external coaching. This is an area that has received little attention in the field of human resource management, and would therefore represent a key area for future research into career development. Research could explore: does coaching work; how well does it work; who does it work best with; what methods and approaches work best; who are the people using coaching; why and how are organisations showing an interest in coaching; what are the qualifications and background of the coaches; what requirements are there for licensing of coaches; and are there any professional associations overseeing practitioners in the field?

Finally, whilst the results of this research have implications for both individuals and organisations, the study was limited to a small professional context of accounting professionals. In order to maintain their professional certification, accounting professionals are required to

complete on-going training and education. Perhaps this is a reason why they feel the absence of development because it is such a critical feature of their careers. Further research could explore the attitudes of individuals from a wide range of occupational backgrounds who have reached a career plateau.

REFERENCES

- Adamson, S., Doherty, N., Viney, C. 1998, The meaning of career revisited: Implications for theory and practice, *British Journal of Management* 9 (4): 251-259.
- Arthur, M.B., Inkson, K. & Pringle, J.K. 1999, *The New Careers: Individual Action and Economic Change*, Sage Publications: London.
- Chay, Y., Aryee, S., Chew, I. 1995, Career plateauing: Reactions and moderators among managerial and professional employees, *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 6 (1): 61-78.
- Elsass, P. & Ralston, D. 1989, Individual responses to the stress of career plateauing, *Journal of Management* 15: 35-47.
- Ference, T., Stoner, J., Warren, E. 1977, Managing the career plateau, *Academy of Management Review* 2: 602-612.
- Gordon, J.R. & Whelan, K.S. 1998, Successful professional women in midlife: How organisations can more effectively understand and respond to the challenges, *The Academy of Management Executive* 12 (1): 8-29. Retrieved from Proquest database.
- Hall, D.T. 1996a, *Career Development*, Boston University Press: Ma.
- Hall, D.T. 1996b, Protean careers of the twenty-first century, *The Academy of Management Executive* 10 (4): 8-16.
- Hall, D.T. & Moss, J.E., 1998, The new protean career contract: Helping organisations and employees adapt, *Organisational Dynamics* 26 (3): 22-37.
- Lee, P.C. 2003, Going beyond career plateau: Using professional plateau to account for work outcomes, *Journal of Management Development* 22 (6): 538-551.
- Lemire, L., Saba, T., Gagnon, Y. 1999, Managing career plateauing in the Quebec public service, *Public Personnel Management* 28 (3): 375-391.
- Levinson, D., Darrow, C.N., Klein, E.B., Levinson, M.H. & Mckee, B. 1978, *The seasons in a man's life*, Alfred Knopf: New York.
- Ornstein, S., Cron, W.L. & Slocum, J.W. 1989. Life stage versus career stage: A comparative test of the theories of Levinson and Super, *Journal of Organisational Behaviour* 10: 117-33.
- Rotondo, D. 1999, Individual-difference variables and career-related coping, *Journal of Social Psychology* 139 (4): 458-471.

Stout, S.K., Slocum, J.W., Cron, W.L. 1988, Dynamics of the career plateauing process, *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 32: 74-79.

Super, D.E. 1957, *The Psychology of Careers*, Harper & Row: New York.

Super, D. 1984), A life-span, life-space approach to career development, in D. Brown, L. Brooks, & Associates (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (2nd ed), pp. 197-261. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Tremblay, M., roger, A. & Toulouse, J. 1995, Career plateau and work attitudes: An empirical study of man, *Human Relations* 48 (3): 221-236.

White, B., Cox, C. & Cooper, C.L. 1992, *Women's Career Development: A Study of High Flyers*, Blackwell Business: Oxford.

Table I: Participants by organisational type

Organisation Type	Males	Females	Total
accounting firm	11	13	24
corporate sector	11	5	16
education	5	5	10
self employed	2	7	9
not-for-profit sector	1	0	1
total	30	30	

Note: the total for women is 30 as one participant was employed as both an accountant and teacher.

Table II Position by Gender in Accounting Firms

Position	Males	Females	Total
Partner	7	4	11
Director	0	1	1
Senior Manager/Accountant	2	4	6
Manager	1	2	3
Accountant	1	2	3

Table III Position by Gender in Universities

Position	Males	Females	Total
Associate Professor	0	1	1
Senior Lecturer	1	1	2
Lecturer	3	0	3
Associate Lecturer	1	1	2

Table IV Position by Gender in the Corporate Sector

Position	Males	Females	Total
CFO	1	1	2
Senior manager/consultant	4	2	6
Manager	4	2	6
Graduate accountant	1	0	1
Assistant accountant	1	0	1