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The Effects of Perceived Career Plateau on Employees' Attitudes

Moderating Effects of Career Motivation and Perceived Supervisor Support With Korean Employees

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This article examines the relation of perceived career plateau to job satisfaction and organizational commitment and the moderating effects of career motivation and perceived supervisor support on the relationships between perceived career plateau and the two dependent variables. Data are collected from 209 white-collar employees who are more than 30 years old and who come from a wide variety of organizations. The results of this study show that perceived career plateau is negatively correlated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicate that career motivation plays a significant moderating role only on the relationship between perceived career plateau and organizational commitment. Perceived supervisor support moderates the relationships between perceived career plateau and the two dependent variables. Based on the results, the implications and limitations of this study and the directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: *career motivation; perceived career plateau; perceived supervisor support; moderating effects*

Recently career advancement in terms of vertical promotion has become more competitive as organizational structure becomes more horizontal. Career plateau is defined as “the point in one’s career at which the probability

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of a vertical assignment or of a promotion in the near future is not very likely” (Ference, Stoner, & Warren, 1977). More employees tend to perceive that it is getting tougher to go up the hierarchy in their organizations. Within this type of environment, perceived career plateau has become one of the major stressors that can be found in organizations (Rosen & Jerdee, 1990). Also, employees who perceive their career advancement is no longer possible in the future are likely to have low levels of work motivation.

Research on perceived career plateau has focused on types of perceived career plateau, measurement of perceived career plateau (Chao, 1990), antecedents, and consequences (Tremblay, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995). Little empirical research has been reported on the roles of moderators on the relationship between perceived career plateau and outcomes (Ettington, 1998). If it is not easy to completely prevent the negative impact of perceived career plateau on job or organization-related outcomes, attempts should be made at least to reduce the negative impact of perceived career plateau. In this study, an individual and a situational moderating variable were used to see if each of these variables plays a significant role in reducing the negative impact of perceived career plateau on the outcome variables.

Measures of Perceived Career Plateau

Career plateau has been measured objectively and subjectively. Objective measures include age, tenure, or time since last promotion (Ettington, 1998). A subjective measure is concerned with an individual's perception of likelihood of future promotion. Chao (1990) and Tremblay et al. (1995) found that the variance explained by subjective plateau was greater than the variance explained by the traditional objective measures, arguing the importance of the subjective measure of perceived career plateau.

Since the economic crisis in 1997 in Korea, many young employees have come to believe that their companies do not guarantee long-term tenure, and that they can be forced to leave their company anytime. One recent survey on retirement, reported in the Korean magazine *Shindonga* in January 2004, “Starting up One's Own Business for People in Their Thirties,” showed that Korean employees feel that they might be terminated when they are about 36 years old. With this trend, even young employees, as much as older employees, might perceive a career plateau. Thus, in this study, perceived career plateau was measured subjectively regardless of age or tenure.

Consequences of Career Plateau

Perceived career plateau has been negatively related to job satisfaction and career satisfaction (Burke, 1989; Chao, 1990; Ettington, 1998; Lee, 2003; Trembley et al., 1995). Similar results have been reported in the literature of Korean journals (Baik, 2001; Lee, 2004; Lee & Park, 2001). Perceived career plateau also has been significantly related to absenteeism (Near, 1984), intention to leave (Lemire, Saba, & Gagnon, 1999), and job performance (Ettington, 1998; Lemire et al., 1999).

Thus, in this study, the following hypotheses were drawn:

Hypothesis 1a. Perceived career plateau will be negatively related to job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1b. Perceived career plateau will be negatively related to organizational commitment.

Moderating Effects

As Ettington (1998) indicated, only a small number of studies have been conducted to examine moderators on the relationships between perceived career plateau and outcome variables. Ettington (1998) showed that plateaued employees who perceived their work as more challenging were more satisfied with their jobs than those perceiving their work as less challenging. Also plateaued employees who perceived more support from coworkers and supervisors were more satisfied with their jobs.

Park and Yoo (2005) found that emotional intelligence and organizational support acted as moderators on the relationship between perceived career plateau and outcome variables. First, they found that plateaued employees who had higher emotional intelligence had lower levels of intentions to leave than those with lower emotional intelligence. Also, they found that plateaued employees who had the higher levels of perceptions of organizational support were more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave the organization than those with the lower levels of perceptions of organizational support.

Therefore, a small number of previous studies showed that an individual variable such as emotional intelligence and situational variables such as perceived supervisor support and organizational support moderated the relationships between perceived career plateau and job attitudes.

This study attempted to examine an individual variable and a situational variable as moderators. In this study we selected career motivation as a moderator, representing the individual variable.

Career motivation implies a multidimensional construct and consists of three individual components: career identity, career insight, and career resilience (London, 1983). Career identity is concerned with the extent to which individuals' careers are important to their personal identities. Career insight is concerned with the extent to which people perceive themselves and the organization realistically and relate their perceptions to career goals. Finally, career resilience is concerned with the extent to which people are resistant to career disruption in negative work environments.

London (1983) argued that career motivation influences career decision and behaviors. Career motivation was significantly related to career-related decision making and career success (Noe, Noe, & Buchhaber, 1990). Thus, career motivation is expected to be related to perceived career plateau and outcome variables. Also, career insight was significantly related to participation in a variety of career-related learning development activities provided by the company (Maurer & Tarulli, 1994).

Thus, employees with high levels of career motivation are likely to perceive their career goals realistically and pursue them with more confidence under a negative environment, which may lead them to perceive higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment than those with lower levels of career motivation.

Hypothesis 2. Career motivation will moderate the relationships between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 2a. The negative relationship between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction will be weaker among employees with the higher levels of career motivation.

Hypothesis 2b. The negative relationship between perceived career plateau and organizational commitment will be weaker among employees with the higher levels of career motivation.

We selected perceived supervisor support as a moderator, representing a situational variable. Perceived supervisor support implies the extent to which a supervisor provides employees with concern and help (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Perceived supervisor support is likely to play a moderating role in the relationships between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Ettington (1998) found that perceived supervisor support contributed significantly to explain job performance but not job satisfaction for plateaued employees. However, it is not clear whether perceived supervisor support was more concerned with either psychological support or career support in Ettington's study.

In some studies (Baik, 2001; Lee, 2004) that were conducted with a sample of Korean employees, perceived supervisor support did not play a significant moderating role in the relationship between perceived career plateau and employees' job attitudes. One reason perceived supervisor support did not play a moderating role might be associated with a measurement issue. Baik (2001) and Lee (2004) measured perceived supervisor support, focusing on emotional support, instrumental support, information, and evaluation.

Kram (1983) classified mentors' roles into two major components: psychosocial and career functions. Psychosocial functions focus on enhancing the protégé's sense of competence, self-efficacy, and professional and personal development. Career functions are mainly concerned with providing the protégé with learning the ropes and facilitating the protégé's advancement in the organization. Both of the psychosocial and career functions have been positively related to various job attitude variables such as career commitment, job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment (Jung & Tak, 2005), and career advancement (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Because career functions are focusing more on the organization and the protégé's career (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), plateaued employees would be more satisfied with a supervisor who focuses more on career functions rather than psychosocial functions. This type of perceived supervisor support would be more helpful to plateaued employees in finding solutions to deal with their career-related problems. Thus, in this study, perceived supervisor support was measured using the competence development and assistance subscale, which was one of the career functions of the Mentor Role scale developed for Korean employees (Jung & Tak, 2005).

Hypothesis 3. Perceived supervisor support will moderate the relationships between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 3a. The negative relationship between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction will be weaker among employees who receive more supervisor support.

Hypothesis 3b. The negative relationship between perceived career plateau and organizational commitment will be weaker among employees who receive more supervisor support.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 209 white-collar workers in 20 different companies in Korea. Employees more than 30 years old who were likely to perceive

a career plateau were included in this study. The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and collected during business hours. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained, and respondents were asked not to write their names on the questionnaire to guarantee anonymity. Overall, male workers numbered 167 (79.9%). Their mean age was 35.6 years ($SD = 6.1$) and ranged from 30 to 56. The mean of organization tenure was 7 years and 3 months. Concerning job position, 47.8% of the total employees were either managers (39.2%) or executives (8.6%).

Measures

Perceived career plateau. Perceived career plateau was measured using the five items of the Korean translated version (Baik, 2001) of the scale originally developed by Milliman (1992). A 5-point rating scale was used (1=*completely disagree*; 5=*completely agree*). In Baik's study with Korean employees, the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .73. In our study, the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .86. A sample item included, "I have now come to an end where promotion to higher level position is not possible in this company."

Career Motivation. Career motivation was measured using a slightly modified version of the career insight subscale of the Career Motivation Scale developed by Noe et al. (1990). In the process of translating the Career Motivation Scale into Korean, we found that it was difficult to translate the two subscales of career identity and career resilience into Korean. After translating the subscales, we could not understand what many items of the subscales exactly meant, so we decided to omit them in this study. Thus, we used only the career insight subscale. Among the eight items of the career insight scale, four items were chosen because those items were expected to be more easily understood. Those items were slightly modified so that the respondents could more easily understand them. For example, one original item "To what extent do you have a specific career goal?" was modified into "I have a clear career goal." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .82 in this study.

Perceived supervisor support. Perceived supervisor support was measured using the 8-item subscale from the Mentor Role Scale developed by Jung and Tak (2005) for Korean employees. The subscale measured the degree to which supervisors recognize employees' abilities and motivate them to improve their skills. Based on the first-order factor analysis of the scale, Jung

and Tak (2005) found nine mentor-role functions, one of which was supervisor support. Then they conducted the second-order factor analysis with the nine factors and found two higher-order factors such as career and psychosocial factors. The perceived supervisor-support factor was found to belong to the career factor. In their study, perceived supervisor support was significantly correlated with career commitment, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and career success. Also, Jung and Tak showed that the Cronbach alpha for this subscale was .88. In this study, the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .96. Example items included "My supervisor recognizes my weakness and strengths and helps me to develop my talents," and "My supervisor provides me with advice and opportunities to continuously develop myself."

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using the 3-item scale developed by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). This scale was translated into Korean for this study. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .86 in this study. An example item included, "I am generally satisfied with my job."

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured using the attitude commitment component, consisting of eight items, developed by Allen and Meyer (1996). Zhou and Tak (2005) used this scale for Korean employees and reported .87 of the Cronbach alpha. In this study, the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .88. An example item included, "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own."

Analysis

Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the intercorrelations among all the variables included in this study. Four separate hierarchical regression analyses were also conducted to test the moderating effects of career motivation and perceived supervisor support on the relationships between perceived career plateau and the two dependent variables. To control the effects of demographical variables on the dependent variables, age, gender, tenure, and job position were put into the regression equation at the first step. We used a dummy code for gender. At the second step, perceived career plateau and either career motivation or perceived supervisor support were included in the regression equation. Finally, at the third step, the cross-product term of perceived career plateau and the moderator were put into the regression equation. A statistically significant increment in R^2 at Step 3 indicates a significant moderator effect.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.20	.40									
2. Age	35.63	6.06	-.27**								
3. Position	2.58	1.19	-.22**	.61**							
4. Tenure	9.29	6.26	-.13	.91**	.61**						
5. Career plateau	2.55	.90	.10	.28**	.16*	.33**					
6. Career motivation	3.64	.59	-.05	.26**	.20**	.24**	-.19**				
7. Supervisor support	3.10	.94	-.25**	.24**	.25**	.23**	-.32**	.48**			
8. Job satisfaction	3.42	.90	-.17*	.30**	.30**	.30**	-.33**	.47**	.72**		
9. Organizational commitment	3.27	.73	-.22**	.36**	.35**	.37**	-.29**	.48**	.73**	.88**	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Gender (1 = male; 2 = female). Position (1 = pure employee; 2 = assistant manager; 3 = manager; 4 = senior manager; and 5 = executive). Tenure (years served in organization).

Results

Table 1 shows the intercorrelations among the variables used in this study. Perceived career plateau was significantly related to age ($r = .28, p < .01$), position level ($r = .16, p < .05$), and tenure ($r = .33, p < .01$). Perceived career plateau was also significantly related to job satisfaction ($r = -.33, p < .01$) and organizational commitment ($r = -.29, p < .01$), supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Career motivation and perceived supervisor support were also significantly related to job satisfaction ($r = .47, p < .01$; $r = .72, p < .01$, respectively) and organizational commitment ($r = .48, p < .01$; $r = .73, p < .01$, respectively).

Table 2 presents the results of the two separate hierarchical regression analyses to test the moderating effects of career motivation for each of the two dependent variables. It shows that the control variables were significantly related to the dependent variables. Once the effect of the individual characteristics had been taken into account in Step 1, the inclusion of perceived career plateau and career motivation into the regression equation in Step 2 significantly increased the explained variance of the dependent variables (33% for job satisfaction and 28% for organizational commitment). Finally, the inclusion of the cross-product term between perceived career plateau and career motivation in Step 3 significantly increased only the

Table 2
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Testing Moderating Effects of Career Motivation for Each of the Two Dependent Variables

Step	Variable	Job satisfaction			Organizational commitment		
		β	R ²	ΔR^2	β	R ²	ΔR^2
1	Control variables		.13**			.19**	
2	Career plateau	-.39**	.41**	.28**	-.36**	.44**	.25**
	Career motivation	.30**			.30**		
3	Two-way interaction		.41**	.00		.46**	.02*
	Career plateau \times career motivation	.35			.78*		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

explained variance of organizational commitment (2%). Thus Hypothesis 2 was partly supported.

To determine the nature of the moderated relationships, regression lines between perceived career plateau as the predictor and organizational commitment as the criterion were drawn at the high and low levels of career motivation. Using the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991), the high and low subgroups were formed by using scores that fell one standard deviation above or below the mean of career motivation, respectively. The negative relationship between perceived career plateau and organizational commitment was considerably weaker for the high career motivation group, supporting Hypothesis 2b.

Table 3 presents the results of the two separate hierarchical regression analyses to test moderating effects of perceived supervisor support for each of the two dependent variables. It shows that the control variables were significantly related to the dependent variables. Once the effect of the individual characteristics had been taken into account in Step 1, the inclusion of perceived career plateau and perceived supervisor support into the regression equations in Step 2 significantly increased the explained variance of the dependent variables (45% for job satisfaction and 42% for organizational commitment). Finally, the inclusion of the interaction terms between perceived career plateau and perceived supervisor support in Step 3 significantly increased the explained variance of the two dependent variables (2% for job

Table 3
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Testing Moderating Effects of Supervisor Support for Each of the Two Dependent Variables

Steps	Variables	Job satisfaction			Organizational commitment		
		β	R ²	ΔR^2	β	R ²	ΔR^2
1	Control variables		.13**			.19**	
2	Career plateau	-.23**	.58**	.45**	-.20**	.61**	.42**
	Supervisor support	.59**			.58**		
3	Two-way interaction		.60*	.02**		.65**	.04**
	Career plateau \times supervisor support	.50**			.72**		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

satisfaction and 4% for organizational commitment). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was fully supported.

To further determine the nature of these moderating effects, regression lines between perceived career plateau and each of the dependent variables were drawn at the high and low levels of the perceived supervisor support variable. The negative relationships between perceived career plateau and each of the two dependent variables were significantly weaker for the high level of subgroup, supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3b.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of perceived career plateau on job satisfaction and organizational commitment and the moderating effects of career motivation and perceived supervisor support on the relationships between perceived career plateau and the two dependent variables. The results show that perceived career plateau is negatively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment and that career motivation and perceived supervisor support has moderating effects on the relationships between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction and between perceived career plateau and organizational commitment.

Negative relations of perceived career plateau to job satisfaction (Allen, Ressel, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999; Baik, 2001; Lee, 1999, 2003, 2004; Lee &

Park, 2001; Milliman, 1992; Trembly, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995) and organizational commitment (Lee, 2004) are consistent with the results of previous research. In some research reported in American journals, no significant differences were seen in job satisfaction between plateaued and non-plateaued employees (Near, 1980, 1984; Nicholson, 1993). However, in most of the research conducted with Korean employees, perceived career plateau was found to be negatively related to job satisfaction (Baik, 2001; Lee, 2004; Lee & Park, 2001). It is not clear what caused the more consistent negative relationships between perceived career plateau and job satisfaction in the Korean sample. The reason could be that few studies have been conducted in Korea on perceived career plateau. Or it could be because of circumstances in Korea. Korean employees may not be used to tolerate perceived career plateau because of the recent rapid changes (i.e., downsizing) in the labor market. Thus, when Korean employees perceive a career plateau, they might think that they are being forced to leave their organization and get frustrated easily.

In this study, career motivation is found to play a significant moderating role only on the relationship between perceived career plateau and organizational commitment. Perceived career plateau negatively influences organizational commitment, but the negative impact of perceived career plateau on organizational commitment becomes weaker if employees have high levels of career motivation. Because the high career motivation group is more likely to participate in various career-related learning development activities provided by the organization (Maurer & Tarulli, 1994), they could feel more appreciation of the organization and then more commitment toward its success.

Perceived supervisor support is found to be effective in reducing the negative effects of perceived career plateau on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. For the high perceived supervisor support group, perceived career plateau is not significantly related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, but for the low perceived supervisor support group, perceived career plateau is negatively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This result is not consistent with the results of previous research (Baik, 2001; Park, 2001; Lee, 2004), which did not find the moderating role of perceived career plateau.

Previous studies (Baik, 2001; Lee, 2004) that did not find a significant moderating effect of perceived supervisor support measured supervisor support using the scale focusing on supervisor's emotional support. In this study, however, perceived supervisor support is measured using one of the subscales of the career roles of the Mentor Role scale developed for Korean

workers. This subscale, called the “competence development and assistance,” focuses on recognizing and developing subordinates’ competence, providing opportunities for self-development, helping them to develop their own talents, and providing advice for their mistakes. Providing emotional support may be helpful for career-plateaued employees to stabilize their emotions but not good enough to solve the career-related problems. It would be more helpful to provide them with more opportunities and advice for competence development to overcome their perceived career plateau.

However, because the measure of emotional support is not used in this study, this conclusion might be tentative. Future research should include two types of perceived supervisor support at the same study and examine which type of perceived supervisor support is more helpful for career-plateaued employees.

This research has theoretical implications in terms of showing the moderating roles of career motivation as an individual variable as well as perceived supervisor support as a situational variable on the relationships between perceived career plateau and the outcome variables. More research on moderating variables should be conducted to reduce the negative impact of perceived career plateau on the outcome variables. Situational variables such as job autonomy or task variety might serve as moderating variables. Career-plateaued employees might be more satisfied intrinsically with their jobs when they perceive more autonomy or more variety in their jobs.

This research also has practical implications for motivating career-plateaued employees in the organization. Because perceived career plateau is negatively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, organizations should focus more on reducing the level of perceived career plateaus. Among 12 recommendations that Appelbaum and Finestone (1994) suggested for plateaued employees, we believe that facilitating lateral or cross-functional moves and providing honest feedback would be more plausible alternatives for Korean organizations.

Career motivation plays a moderating role on reducing the negative effect of perceived career plateau on organizational commitment. Thus, organizations should develop programs to increase individuals’ career motivation. A program that could be easily implemented would be a career workshop program focusing on exploring self-evaluations, setting career goals, and implementing action plans.

Also, perceived supervisor support focusing on career roles is found to be a significant moderator of the relationships between perceived career plateau and the two criteria. Organizations should focus more on managers’ career

roles for their subordinates. Mentoring programs will be helpful to initiate these roles. Organizations must emphasize career functions among various mentor roles to deal with problems of career-plateaued subordinates. Managers should be trained in ways that emphasize providing subordinates with feedback to improve their competences and help them to set career goals and implement action plans.

Several limitations in this study should be noted. Data in this study are collected only from white-collar employees, so the results have a limit in generalizability to other types of employees. Perceived career plateau is measured using the subjectively perceived scale in this study. Because there is controversy on the measurement of perceived career plateau (Ettington, 1998), future research must include an objective measure of perceived career plateau as well. Only 47.8% of the total participants in this study were managers or above in their positions. Although the correlation between job position and perceived career plateau is not that high ($r = .16$) in this study, different results might be obtained when only managers are used as a sample.

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