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Marketing Management Implications of Career Plateauing

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Abstract

The issue of career plateauing is relevant to both consumer marketing and business-to-business marketing. Plateauing has been shown to influence employee satisfaction, expectations, turnover, and initiative. It also affects organizational efficiency, effectiveness, and reputation. Interestingly, career plateauing can have either a positive or negative impact on individual morale and organizational productivity, depending upon individual goals and circumstances.

This paper conceptually defines career plateauing and traces development of the relevant literature. It also identifies research opportunities within marketing. The discussion concludes with a proposal for research methodology and an analysis of the benefits of potential research findings.

Key Words: Plateauism, plateauing, retail, retail manager.

Introduction

People may reach a point in their career when they cannot climb further up the ladder or, alternatively, simply do not wish to move higher. Quite simply they reach a plateau, and cannot, or will not, advance to jobs with additional responsibility. When such a plateau occurs it can be a time of satisfaction or disappointment. A plateau can be a positive influence in the sense that an employee will no longer have additional responsibilities and may be content with his or her position, thus leading to personal plateauism. A plateau can be a negative influence when an employee or a manager has the talent and/or initiative to advance beyond the current position and the company does not have any available positions, or is not willing to move the individual to a position of greater responsibility. This situation is organizational plateauism.

Personal plateauing occurs when employees decide not to pursue further advancement in the organization. Although they may have the ability, they have lost their desire. Organizational plateauing occurs when people want to advance but cannot. Either the company has no openings, or management believes that the person lacks the executive skills to be promoted. This paper focuses on the description, importance, measurement, management implications, and research opportunities in career plateauing.

Definition

Career plateauing is defined in several ways. Ference, Stoner, and Warren (1977) define a career plateau as the time in a career when hierarchal advancement is very unlikely. Evans and Gilbert (1984) consider plateauism in terms of the length of time between promotions. Near (1980) represents plateauism in terms of the length of time in a job position. Veiga (1981) states that managers define a plateau as the point at which further career mobility, including both upward and lateral moves, is in reasonable doubt because the length of time in the present position has been unduly prolonged. Harvey and Schultz (1987) define plateauing as the career point at which an employee is unlikely to receive a promotion, unless he or she changes organizations. Feldman and Weitz (1988) address a career plateau in terms of the likelihood of receiving assignments of increased responsibility.

Plateauing and Its Effects

Plateauism is a problem, only if it is viewed by either the individual or the organization as undesirable. Personal plateauing is not a personal problem since the individual may have chosen it.

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However, it may be an organizational problem when a given position cannot be filled with the most qualified, available candidate, because that candidate has no desire to accept the new responsibility. Content plateauing, which relates to work responsibilities, is job related and is not necessarily a permanent situation. However, it can slow career advancement and lead to personal apathy, negativism, retaliation, stress, and job turnover (Peterson, 1993). Individuals may like or dislike the feeling that they have nothing new to learn from their job. The negative aspects of content plateauism can be decreased by shifting, increasing, or rotating job responsibilities and by involving employees in job trainer roles, training seminars, and decision making groups.

According to Slocum, Cron, and Yows (1985) career plateauing is occurring at an earlier age; much earlier than employees intended. Therefore, organizations and individuals should prepare for it, to avoid what could be very negative consequences. A shortage of career advancement opportunities means that people are not moving along the hierarchical ladder as quickly as they desire or as their abilities and experience merit. Combined social, economic, and demographic pressures are causing career plateaus to occur to greater numbers of employees and, quite frequently, at younger ages (Murray, 1972).

One concern to managers is that plateauism may be linked with negativity in the work place. Job advancement is a social measure of success or failure in corporate America. Plateaued employees have greater stress and health problems, are absent from work more frequently, and have lower satisfaction than their non-plateaued peers (Near, 1980). However, some recent work suggests that these leveling off periods may be healthy for individual growth and development.

An organization can help to make career plateaus an acceptable reality in organizational life, instead of a stigma on the employee's ability, by focusing on showing appreciation for an employee's performance (Elsass and Ralston, 1989). The organization can provide tangible rewards, providing publicly, using that person as a mentor, or offering an opportunity for a lateral transfer.

Measuring Plateauism

Plateauism has been measured by job attitudes, job performance, job satisfaction, motivation toward the job, and job tenure. Models of managerial careers and models of stress have been developed to assess plateaued and non-plateaued managers. However, plateauism should be measured on an individual basis since attitude is important.

Influences on Plateauism

Plateauism is influenced by personal, organizational, and cultural factors. Many managers believe that plateauism is most influenced by competitiveness. People want to be at the top, but nearly all will reach a career plateau before they reach retirement (Bardwick, 1983). Organizational downsizing and the decline of corporate growth are also major reasons for plateauism (Bardwick, 1983). Personal causes of plateauism include the desire to spend more time with families, aversion to additional duties and responsibilities, and unwillingness to relocate to a different location. Management generated plateaus result from a feeling that their subordinates are not skilled enough for job advancement.

Evans and Gilbert (1984) state that many organizations will find themselves staffed at middle and lower management levels by individuals who have been judged by their superiors as unlikely to make high level contributions to the organization, in terms of innovation, administration, and technical decision making. Feldman and Weitz (1988), in their research, say that they rely on observations of individual skills and abilities, individual needs and values, lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of extrinsic rewards, stress and burnout, and slow organizational climate as methods of identifying influences on career plateaus. Ference, Stoner, and Warren (1977) suggest that lack of desire to advance, unwillingness to relocate, negative cost/benefit analysis, lack of openings at the top, or perceived high value in the current position, are all influential in career plateauing. Near (1980) says that plateauism occurs because of affirmative action programs and increases in competition.

Summary

Career plateauing occurs when an individual reaches a career level from which he/she does not desire to advance or cannot advance. A career plateau can be established either personally or organizationally. There is research evidence to show that such a plateau can be either beneficial or harmful. Career plateauing merits study because it happens on a daily basis. Previous research indicates that a plateau can occur at any time in any business. Additionally, research indicates that both organizational and personal plateauing are increasing in the work world. Organizational plateauing occurs when managers, for a variety of reasons, decide that an individual is not ready for a promotion or additional reward. Personal plateauing is an individual decision. It occurs when an individual feels that there is inadequate benefit in going any higher in a career track.

Future Directions

Individuals are bound for plateauism. Organizational plateauism can only be alleviated through either opportunities for individuals to be promoted or new positions created through organizational expansion.

Content plateauism need not to be permanent. When a job becomes routine and does not offer new experiences, it can still be made more challenging. Carnazza, Korman, Ference, and Stoner (1981) found that among the plateaued, those assigned challenging jobs maintained a high performance level. Furthermore, adding new objectives, tasks, technology, or responsibilities to the job can reduce content plateauism.

Additionally, managers may require employees to attend self-development seminars or job skills training sessions to alleviate the negative results of content plateauism.

Managers can stress alternative rewards for plateaued employees and educate them on attaining such alternate rewards. Transfers and relocations can be viewed as an opportunity for advancement, if employees are willing to relocate. Also, counseling can be extremely helpful in reducing the negative effects of plateauism. Counselors can provide advice on coping with possible stress that is associated with plateauism.

Organizations should explore and expand the use of knowledge-based and skill-based rewards systems whereby employees would be rewarded for the depth of skill in their specialty or for the breadth of expertise acquired. Plateauism can lead to a positive exploration of other avenues for an individual's career path. While organizational plateauism is beyond the employee's control, transition to a system where rewards are measured in the form of new challenges, duties, and skills would add an interesting dimension to a job, and can be easily delivered by most organizations.

Managers can alleviate the negative aspects of career plateauism. First, employees should be given the facts about plateauism. Second, content plateauing should be identified and eliminated. Feldman and Weitz (1988) agree that increased responsibilities on the current job can forestall the stagnation of upward mobility. Thus, an individual who may not receive additional promotions, but is constantly challenged by new tasks and responsibilities in his or her current job may not be career plateaued. Third, nonmonetary rewards need to be provided. Fourth, employees need to receive positive and honest feedback. Employees are motivated when they know that their efforts, abilities, and achievements are recognized and respected. Lastly, managers should pay special attention to the organizational environment when they attempt to hire new workers.

Opportunities for Research in Marketing Management

Chao (1990) states that future research on career plateauing should move away from job tenure toward a focus on work content. The development of such a career plateau measurement scale can focus on the content of an individual's work, mental outlook toward career advancement, and career mobility opportunities both inside and outside the individual's current organization. The development of future measures of a career plateau should also differentiate a career plateau from a career pinnacle. A career pinnacle is defined as the highest organizational level or job an individual aspires to (Chao, 1990).

Qualitative research and conceptual articles recognize plateau differences between those who choose to be plateaued and those who are forced into plateaus. Organizational interventions, such as challenging work experiences, project management, employee involvement, mentoring, and restructured personnel policies, as well as non-work interests in family and leisure activities need to be examined, on the basis of a more inclusive definition of a career plateau.

A career plateau stress model should provide a useful framework for future research into career plateaus, because it shows that organizations as well as employees can influence the level of stress that plateauing brings to individuals (Elsass and Ralston, 1989). Stress is experienced only when an individual reaches a subjective awareness of personal dysfunction. The stress cycle does not begin until an individual perceives a difference between his/her ideal career development and his/her perception of current career reality.

Rather than simply identifying a broad set of management interventions that could be used for this problem, researchers should examine more closely which types of managerial actions are most effective with which types of plateaued employees. Appropriate management interventions might include reanalysis of selection system deficiencies, improved training, better performance appraisal, and enhanced feedback systems. These strategies can help with the early identification of plateaued performers so that their career mobility will not be permanently stopped. The research on career plateaus should move progressively from broad definitions of the phenomenon to identification of more specific sub-patterns, from generic identification of symptoms to discovery of specific problem outcomes, and from general to more specific recommendations for managerial action (Feldman and Weitz, 1988).

Additional attitudinal factors that might serve to differentiate effective and ineffective employees need to be investigated. Some of those might include career impatience, stagnation, and mobility patterns. A longitudinal study designed to track people over time would provide insights into when and how they choose certain career alternatives. Individuals and organizations should devise strategies for managing the different career issues that occur in each plateau state.

There are four principal career states in the Veida (1981) model of managerial career states: learners, stars, solid citizens, and deadwood. "Learners" or "comers" are individuals who have a high potential for advancement but presently perform below standard. "Stars" are people who presently do outstanding work and are viewed as having high potential for continued advancement. They have "high potential," and are on the "fast track" career paths. "Solid citizens" are rated satisfactory to outstanding in their present performance, but they are seen as having little chance for future advancement. "Deadwood" are individuals that have little potential for advancement. Their performance has fallen to an unsatisfactory level.

For the solid citizen, useful strategies might include a job change, providing professional counseling, or perhaps becoming a mentor to someone in the exploration or establishment career stages. For deadwood, management strategies might include termination, demotion, early retirement, or retraining (Slocum, Cron, Hansen, and Rawlins, 1985).

Another area worth examining is the type of positions most likely to result in plateauing. Staff positions may produce plateaued persons for different reasons than line positions (Slocum, Cron, and Yows, 1987). Plateauing employees may differ significantly by the type of position held, personal characteristics, personal priorities, and career paths. No studies have specifically addressed this line of thinking. Line positions offer greater competition and a more glorified reward system than staff positions do, thus the causes, results, and treatment of plateauing may well differ.

Additional research is needed to understand more fully the circumstances surrounding the plateaued person's career decisions. In particular, longitudinal research designs are necessary to explain further how career attitudes develop as a plateaued person's career unfolds. In-depth analysis of career assignments, personal aspirations, and management perspectives in combination can greatly advance the research, understanding, and management of career plateauing.

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