

# Career Plateauing: A Survey of Technical College Employees

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## Synopsis

A questionnaire that measures attitudes towards plateauing was administered to employees at a public technical college. Significant differences were found among staff groups with support workers experiencing significantly greater levels of both content and structural plateauing, and professional/technical employees having greater structural plateauing than teachers and administrators. Suggestions for further research and implications for vocational education are discussed.

The inability to climb the career ladder is an emerging concern for employees in the 1990's. With aging of the baby boom generation and shrinking of middle management positions brought about by recession, improvements in office technology, and mergers and acquisitions, there are fewer opportunities for advancement (Weiner, Remer, & Remer, 1992). One significant vocational effect is plateauing, "a unique form of career stall" (Milstein, 1990b, p. 325) which can result in a feeling of malaise on the part of upwardly mobile individuals. This phenomenon is labeled plateauing because it resembles a long flat uninterrupted expanse with minimal contours and a sameness that stretches endlessly.

If people's jobs are filled with routine and boring tasks or if desired promotions are blocked, then they are likely to feel an intrinsic sense of loss and become skeptical about finding fulfillment in their careers. (Milstein, 1990a, p. 48).

Bardwick (1986) developed three categories of plateauing. **Structural plateaus** represent occupational situations where advancement is unavailable due primarily to the pyramidal nature of organizational hierarchies. People experience a **content plateau** when no challenge remains in their job. Tasks have been mastered and little new or exciting remains to be learned. Boredom may follow. **Life plateauing** occurs when individuals believe they are trapped in their ongoing everyday routines, cycles, obligations, and relationships. This may lead them to have "the sense that there's little fulfillment left in any area of life" (p. 100).

Bardwick suggests that three to five years of tenure in the same position is a precursor to plateauing. However, the effects of extended time in a job are varied and not all veteran employees experience plateauing. Of those who do, many show a decrease in organizational commitment and a diminishing concern with their own career issues such as promotability and marketability. A decline in job performance may or may not follow (Stout, Slocum & Cron, 1988). In others, plateauing leads to intense feelings of personal dissatisfaction (Viega, 1981).

Plateauing research has been relatively limited in scope and breadth. Studies of plateaued corporate managers appear in the professional literature (Viega, 1981; Near, 1984; Stout, Slocum & Cron, 1988; Weiner, Remer, & Remer, 1992). University faculty career plateaus

have been addressed (Patterson, Sutton & Schuttengberg, 1987; Simpson, 1991). Public school teacher and administrator plateauing was the object of work done in New Mexico (Milstein, 1990b, Milstein & Bader, 1992). While a small number of community college teachers and administrators were a part of the 1992 Milstern & Bader educator study, support staff were not included.

The focus of this project was to expand the knowledge about plateauing by having employees at all levels of a public technical college take the Plateauing Survey (Milstein 1991). Of specific interest were the relationships between position, years in the job, and plateauing. The following questions were explored: a) Are there differences in plateauing among the various levels of technical college staff? b) Are there differences in plateauing based upon the number of years spent in the position? c) Do the employee groups demonstrate different levels of content, structural and life plateaus? d) Do the variables of employee age, gender, and marital status affect plateauing? e) Can this survey provide useful suggestions for college staff development and training?

### Study Design & Methodology

Employees at a publicly-funded suburban area technical college voluntarily completed the Plateauing Survey in 1993 in response to the researcher's request for participation. Eighty-three of the 100 surveys distributed were returned. The instrument, containing 50 items, was developed in a study of 216 educators (Milstein, 1990b) and validated on 120 educational respondents in 1991 (Milstein & Bader, 1992). Thirty of the questions are designed to assess plateauing with 10 items each in the categories of content, structural, and life. Each query is ranked by the respondents according to a five point Likert scale. The remaining 20 questions tally vocational and personal information. Reliability analysis for the content, structure, and life plateauing scales using this data set found normal distributions and alpha levels of .83, .74, and .70, respectively, using SPSS Release 4.1. Table 1 summarizes the demographic make up of the respondents by their position, years in job, age, gender, and marital status.

**Table 1**

#### *Characteristics of Survey Respondents*

Position	n	Years in Job	n	Age	n	Gender	n	Marital Status	n
Teacher	40	1-3	41	21-30	10	F	55	Mar	56
Admin.	12	4-6	20	31-40	18	M	25	Sgl	26
ProfTec	10	7+	18	41-50	27				
Support	21			51+	26				
Total N	83*	**		Total N	81*	Total N	80*	Total N	82*

\*some respondents chose not to supply all data

\*\*Total N not applicable in this category

### Statistical Procedures

As indicated in Table 1, staff positions consisted of four types; years in job had three levels; four groupings were set up for age; and gender and marital status had two. The plateauing scores were grouped according to the three categories. Differences were tested

using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The MANOVA technique involved two steps. To explore staff position, years in job, and age, gender, and marital status as they affect plateauing, the first assessment looked at a combination of the categories (multivariate). The differences were then analyzed on each category separately (univariate). If significant differences were found, post hoc comparisons between selected levels of each variable were conducted. Differences with  $p < .05$  were considered significant.

## Results

Table 2 reports the means on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) and standard deviations obtained for age, sex, marital status, years in job, and staff position on content, structural, and life plateauing.

**Table 2**

### *Plateauing – Group Means*

Variable	n*	Content Plateauing		Structural Plateauing		Life Plateauing	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Gender							
Male	24	2.071	.479	2.708	.586	2.383	.613
Female	52	2.375	.698	2.979	.632	2.444	.501
Marital Status							
Married	52	2.260	.702	2.838	.670	2.344	.546
Single	25	2.332	.501	3.004	.510	2.592	.499
Age							
21-30	10	2.580	.748	3.120	.553	2.730	.611
31-40	17	2.200	.662	2.747	.686	2.371	.492
41-50	27	2.267	.614	2.959	.553	2.485	.578
51+	23	2.200	.635	2.826	.677	2.222	.447
Years in Job							
1-3	40	2.310	.657	2.930	.573	2.495	.549
4-6	18	2.406	.761	2.917	.769	2.294	.513
7+	17	2.271	.654	2.892	.629	2.405	.541
Position							
Teacher	35	2.174	.520	2.709	.580	2.343	.498
Administrator	12	1.833	.507	2.533	.545	2.383	.778
Prof/Tech	10	2.130	.633	3.056	.615	2.330	.406
Support Staff	21	2.273	.644	2.886	.622	2.418	.541

\*Some respondents chose not to supply all data

Table 3 demonstrates the results of the multivariate statistical investigation.

**Table 3****Plateauing – Multivariate Analysis**

Variable	MANOVA**		ANOVA:	
	F	Content F	Structural F	Life F
Sex	.241	.057	.080	.648
Marital Status	.219	.646	.279	.059
Age	.431	.438	.425	.073
Years in Job	.425	.213	.694	.311
Position	.001*	.000*	.000*	.326

\*  $p < .05$   
 \*\* Pillais formula

Multivariate analysis (MANOVA), as shown on Table 3, demonstrated no significant relationships between age, gender, and marital status and the degree of plateauing experienced by the respondents. Similarly, the number of years served in the job did not impact the degree of plateauing in this sample. There was a significant multivariate difference ( $p < .05$ ) among levels of positions across the plateauing variable.

Table 4 shows group means and standard deviations for total plateauing and post hoc comparisons between the specific staff groups on content and structural plateauing.

**Table 4****Group Means & Contrasts**

Total Plateauing		
Position	M	SD
Teacher	7.226	1.59
Administrator	6.749	1.83
ProfTec	7.516	1.65
Support Staff	7.577	1.80

Content Plateauing			
Group Contrasts	<i>t</i> value	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i> probability
Teacher x Administrator	-1.583	77	.117
Teacher x ProfTec	-0.008	77	.994
Teacher x Support Staff	4.044	77	.000*
Administrator x ProfTec	1.218	77	.227
Administrator x Support Staff	4.487	77	.000*
ProfTec x Support Staff	2.869	77	.005*

\* $p < .05$

Structural Plateauing			
Group Contrasts	<i>t</i> value	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i> probability
Teacher x Administrator	-1.086	76	.281
Teacher x ProfTec	1.580	76	.118
Teacher x Support Staff	3.728	76	.000*
Administrator x ProfTec	2.158	76	.034*
Administrator x Support Staff	3.812	76	.000*
ProfTec x Support Staff	1.186	76	.239

\* $p < .05$

Univariate analysis (ANOVA), on Table 3, demonstrated significant differences among positions for content and structural plateaus ( $p < .05$ ). The post hoc comparisons (Group Contrasts), shown on Table 4, found support workers had significantly higher scores for content and structural plateauing than did professional/technical staff, teachers, or administrators ( $p < .05$ ). Professional/technical staff also showed significantly higher structural plateauing than administrators ( $p < .05$ ). Unlike the results reported in the New Mexico study with community college educators, (Milstein & Bader, 1992), no significant plateauing differences were found between college teachers and administrators.

### Conclusions

Results of the survey found that teachers and administrators at this technical college were not significantly different in their self-perceived levels of plateauing. Support staff felt more content and structural plateauing, while the people occupying professional/technical positions experienced more structural plateauing. Age, gender, and marital status did not have measurable effects, nor did the number of years in the same job.

This study adds to the literature about career plateauing. It demonstrates that the Plateauing Survey instrument can be successfully used to assess plateauing among all types of employees of postsecondary educational organizations. Additional surveys in other two year colleges will expand the sample size and possibly highlight other effects. Qualitative research may reveal new insights and further the understanding of this phenomenon.

### Discussion

The positions that employees at this technical college occupy are the best predictors of whether or not plateauing will be present. Age, gender, and years in job were irrelevant for these respondents. The higher levels of both structural and content plateauing found among support staff may be related to the nature of the positions such individuals occupy. Support workers perform important assignments across the campus in instructional assistance, building maintenance, clerical/secretarial, and food services. They are not highly paid, their job status is low, and the entry level skills required for many of the positions are minimal. Support staff duties tend to be routine and performance closely monitored. Little opportunity for advancement exists and only limited staff development and training is offered.

Support staff are not alone in their perceptions of plateauing. A less well-known type of position exists in this technical college. Called "proftecs" or professional/technical employees, these people are involved in contract training projects outside the school and in specialized industry-consulting. They bring higher education backgrounds and years of prior employment experiences with them to their positions. Their significantly increased levels of structural plateauing may occur because they have less direct contact with teachers and campus administrators due to the unique focus of their jobs and the necessity for frequent offsite travel. Lacking ongoing involvement in the day to day activities of the college, and possessing specialized skills, their opportunities for vertical career advancement may be limited.

Milstein (1993) suggests that further research take a close look at the individual characteristics of plateaued and non-plateaued educators. He is particularly interested in the characteristics of those respondents whose highly unusual responses classify them as outliers. The author of this article is currently conducting employee focus groups in an effort to learn more about plateauing. In the groups, participant information is obtained through loosely structured questions and probes initiated by a moderator (Morgan, 1988). Analysis of the data obtained from these sessions will lead to a richer understanding of the meanings technical college workers attach to their jobs and provide keys to how they can be helped to avoid/cope with plateauing.

### Implications for Vocational Education

Static organizational growth, as well as, labor market constraints and changes may indeed limit career advancements and lead to structural plateaus. Concomitant content plateaus need not occur. Capable employees who are provided opportunities to choose new activities that are appropriate to their skill levels can continue in the same positions indefinitely, enjoying work for its own sake, rather than only for its remuneration or status (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Vocational educators are ideally-suited to assist both institutions and staff groups with programs to avoid content plateauing. Expertise in occupational analysis, curriculum development, hands-on instruction, and customized delivery of technical coursework can facilitate the ongoing skills acquisition which will allow lateral movement of employees and functions across entire occupational classifications within organizations. Seemingly endless worklife plateaus can give way to jobs with contours, creativity, and challenge.

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