The relationship between career adaptability and job content plateau: The mediating roles of fit perceptions

Zhou Jiang *

Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study is the first to test career adaptability as an antecedent of the job content plateau. Based on career construction theory and person-environment fit theory, it examined the mediating effects of person-job fit and person-organization fit on the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau. Results from 270 full time workers showed that employees with higher levels of career adaptability were less likely to experience job content plateaus. Partial mediating effects were found for both person-job fit and person-organization fit. Specifically, career adaptability firstly led to increased person-job fit and person-organization fit, which in turn resulted in decreased job content plateaus. Additional analyses showed that the mediating effect of person-job fit was stronger for female than for male employees. This study identified a new antecedent (i.e., career adaptability) of the job content plateau and revealed the functional mechanism underlying the effect of this antecedent. It offers innovative and useful insights for career management practice.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The career plateau perceived by employees has been a growing source of organizational concern (Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). Considerable evidence indicates that reaching a career plateau may result in negative consequences, such as decreased job and career satisfaction (Chang, 2003; McCleese & Eby, 2006), reduced organizational commitment (McCleese & Eby, 2006), unsatisfactory performance (Stout, Slocum, & Cron, 1988), and increased intention to quit (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). The career plateau was traditionally defined as a point in one's career beyond which promotion becomes highly unlikely (Ference, Stoner, & Warren, 1977), followed by Feldman and Weitz's (1988) extension of the connotation of little likelihood of obtaining assignments of increased responsibility. This traditional view focuses on a hierarchical (or structural) plateau, which concerns employees' vertical movement in the organization (Allen et al., 1999; Bardwick, 1986) and has been dominantly studied in the career plateau literature (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Xie, Lu, & Zhou, 2015). However, advances in research suggest that in addition to experiencing a hierarchical plateau, employees may also experience the job content plateau, which occurs when employees are no longer challenged by work or job responsibilities (Bardwick, 1986).

Recent scholars point out that our currently changing business environments (e.g., the popularity of boundary-less careers and unpredictability of organizational downsizing and restructuring) have made understanding and addressing the job content plateau particularly important (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014; McCleese & Eby, 2006). There is also research suggesting that the job content

---

* Corresponding author at: Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia.

E-mail addresses: dr.zhou.jiang@gmail.com, zhou.jiang@griffith.edu.au.

plateau is related to more negative employee attitudes and, compared to the hierarchical plateau, can be more detrimental to the organization (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998). Emerging efforts thus have been devoted to exploring various antecedents of the job content plateau to identify useful strategies for solving issues caused by this type of plateau. For example, research has identified antecedents such as tenure, education, personality, work centrality, mentoring, supervisory and coworker support, and perceived respect (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). Despite this informed evidence, our knowledge of the factors influencing the job content plateau is limited because the current literature has largely overlooked some important characteristics associated with the resolution of the career plateau (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). For instance, the process of coping with the job content plateau involves self-regulating one's own psychological states to resume positive attitudes toward job or career duties (McCleese, Eby, Scharlau, & Hoffman, 2007; Milliman, 1992). This perspective suggests that personal factors that reflect self-regulatory competences may provide a relatively new lens through which to study the job content plateau.

The present study aims to advance this area by examining career adaptability as an antecedent of the job content plateau. Career adaptability involves self-regulatory capacities in career development (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) and is regarded as a psychosocial construct that resides at people's interactions with the environment and reflects their psychological resources for dealing with work and career challenges (Savickas, 1997). It involves a range of "attitudes, competencies, and behaviors that individuals use in fitting themselves to work that suits them" (Savickas, 2013, p. 45). Such attributes of career adaptability may facilitate individuals in overcoming career plateaus. The current study also examines the mechanisms of the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau by testing the mediating effects of person-environment fit perceptions (i.e., person-job fit and person-organization fit). The person-environment fit perspective is chosen because career development is driven by dynamic adaptation to one's associated environments with an emphasis on person-environment congruence (Guan et al., 2013; Savickas, 2005), and also because the career plateau is argued to be a person-environment interaction process (Hall, 1987). Specifically, drawing on career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005), it is proposed that career adaptability allows employees better to fit into their jobs and organizations, which in turn, based on person-environment fit theory (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998), reduces the likelihood of experiencing the job content plateau.

In summary, the present study examines the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau, with a focus on the mediating roles of person-job fit and person-organization fit. It contributes to the literature in two ways. First, this study examines a new antecedent of the career plateau. Although the importance of career adaptability in the career development process is well acknowledged (e.g., Sibunruang, Garcia, & Tolentino, 2016; Urbanaviciute, Kairys, Pociute, & Liniauskaite, 2014), how it may influence career plateau issues, particularly the job content plateau, is not known. The exploration of career adaptability as a potential antecedent of the job content plateau serves as a basis for identifying new approaches to understand and address employees' plateau status in the career development journey. It also further affirms the broad applicability of career adaptability in solving career-related obstacles and bottlenecks. Second, this study investigates the mediation effects of person-environment fit perceptions. The career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005), along with its associated theoretical and empirical models (e.g., Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015; Tolentino et al., 2014), assert the interrelations between career adaptive, adaptability, and adapting. The present study extends this theory and relevant models by establishing an integrative framework of career adaptability, fit perceptions, and job content plateau to highlight the mechanism through which adaptability strengths can lead to adapting responses. For instance, it offers deeper insights regarding the process by which the role of career adaptability (a reflection of adaptability strength) can be transmitted to cope with the job content plateau (a reflection of adapting response).

1.1. Career adaptability and the job content plateau

Career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005) suggests that individuals continuously adapt themselves to the environment through self-regulation and, in this process, actively build careers and work lives by imposing meaning on vocational behaviors. In career development, individuals develop various psychological resources to effectively cope with career-related tasks, transitions, traumas, and obstacles (e.g., career plateaus). Based on this theory, Savickas (1997) initiated the concept of career adaptability and defined it as the "readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions" (p. 254). Consistent with this definition, Savickas and Porfeli (2012) further explain that career adaptability resources are dynamic and changing self-regulatory capabilities over time and across situations, rather than stable traits. They have verified that career adaptability is a higher-order hierarchical construct that consists of four dimensions (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) at the lower level, with these dimensions adding up to a global indicator that reflects the overall level of the construct (Savickas, 1997; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). *Concern* refers to the degree to which individuals care about the future and prepare for upcoming career and work tasks and challenges. *Control* describes the extent to which individuals hold personal responsibility for shaping themselves and the environment by showing self-discipline, effort, and persistence. *Curiosity* is defined as the extent to which people explore possible selves and future scenarios, and think about the self with regard to influencing various work situations and roles. *Confidence* is about individuals' beliefs that they can achieve career goals and aspirations, solve career problems, and conquer career obstacles. These four adaptability resources jointly function to shape actual problem-solving and coping strategies and direct adaptive behaviors in career and work life (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In light of career construction theory, this paper argues that career adaptability, which involves individuals' self-regulation capacities in facing work roles and environments (Zacher, Ambiel, & Noronha, 2015), will reduce employees' chances of experiencing job content plateaus.

The job content plateau is regarded as an issue employees experience when they feel that their work has been mastered and perceive job tasks to be routine, boring, and unchallenging (Allen et al., 1999). Research shows that those employees who are