

CHAPTER 9

MY CAREER HAS PLATEAU, NOW WHAT?

A career plateau is reached when an engineer no longer continues to advance professionally or technically. Career plateau occurs when you are passed over for promotions, your job responsibilities do not grow, no salary increases, or your technical work is transferred to others deemed more capable. There are multiple causes of career plateau with some causes linked to the individual and others linked to the company or the economy [1,2]. The common causes of career plateau include lack of individual motivation, burnout, lack of update training, company business decline, poor economy, technical failures, and personal problems.

The impact of a career plateau can be devastating to the engineer as it can lead to feelings of being trapped, low value, low self-esteem, and no future to look forward to. If these feelings go unchecked they will certainly lead to poor performance and ultimately could result in job loss.

A simple example of career plateau is shown graphically in Figure 9-1 where an engineer's professional level is plotted versus age. For the example shown, the engineer has steadily moved up the engineering ranks and is now at level 5. The engineer moved a level every 3–4 years; however after achieving a level 5, the engineer has remained at this level without a promotion for 9 years. This data would indicate that the career has plateau. The normal reaction for anyone whose career has plateau is naturally to be concerned and wonder what to do next. The questions the engineer may be asking are:

Is my career over?
Is this as far as I am going?
What's next?

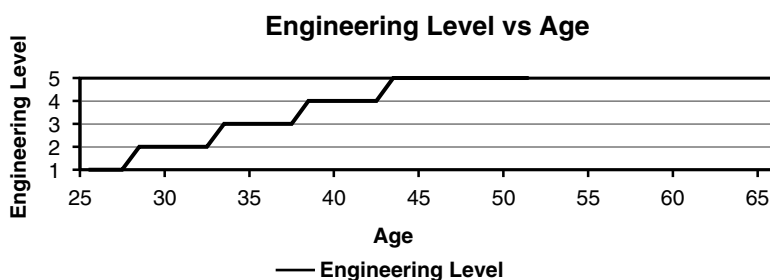


FIGURE 9-1 Plot of engineer's level versus age showing plateau.

These are all normal questions and if you find yourself in this position it is time to take some positive career actions. Here are some recommended career actions you can take if you wish to remain in your present job.

Look for Alternate Means of Job Satisfaction and Recognition. You can look for job satisfaction and recognition by volunteering for special assignments like training junior or new engineers, teaching a class at work, or leading a volunteer effort in the community on behalf of your company. You can mentor grade school and high school students in mathematics. Or you could organize and lead your local high school robotics team or Lego League team. Join an engineering society and volunteer to help others in their careers.

Take on the Challenge to Enhance Your Job. All jobs can be improved and taking on the challenge to improve things significantly is an excellent means to overcome career plateau. Can you identify cost savings or performance improvement projects you would be willing to participate? You can make a competition out of it and get others in the department or company involved.

Put Your Writing Skills to Work. Write a paper and submit it to a conference. Or if you have the energy and feel you have the knowledge, write a book on your experiences or technical knowledge. You could even file a patent on the idea you have.

Start a New Hobby. One way to get your mind off the problems at work and your career is to start a new hobby. A new hobby will give you something to look forward to and fill the void left by a career that has plateau.

Attend an Engineering Conference. Attending an engineering conference can be very uplifting with the exposure to the latest technologies and new products. Attend a training class at the conference in a new technical area.

Here are some actions you can take if you want to get your career growing again by leaving or changing from your present job.

Start Searching the Company Job Postings for Other Opportunities. Start searching the company job postings for new opportunities and network with others in the company to find out if there is anything new opening up. Even a lateral career move can provide new opportunities.

Have a Career Discussion with Your Supervisor. Find out what is planned for the department, the job, and your future in the department. Discuss how you want to advance and see if you both can identify an action plan to realize your goals.

Explore Returning to School for More Education. By supplementing your technical or leadership skills with more education you are increasing your net worth to the company. With more education you open new doors of opportunity.

Volunteer to Take on New Responsibilities and Tasks. Volunteering to take on new responsibilities and work can lead to career growth.

SUMMARY

A career plateau is reached when an engineer no longer advances professionally or technically. Career plateaus can lead to a feeling of being trapped, low value, low self-esteem, and no future to look forward to. If these feelings go unchecked and not turned around, they will certainly lead to poor performance and could ultimately result in job loss. You can overcome career plateau by taking positive career actions such as looking for alternate means of job satisfaction and recognition, taking on the challenge to enhance your job, putting your writing skills to work, starting a new hobby, joining an engineering society, or attending engineering conferences. The key to successfully deal with a career plateau is to take positive actions and implement changes in your job, surroundings, and lifestyle.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 When is career plateau most likely to occur, at a young age or older age?
- 2 How do you determine if your career has plateau?
- 3 Name three actions you can take for career plateaus.

REFERENCES

1. Lee, Patrick C.B., *Career Plateau and Professional Plateau: Impact on Work Outcomes of Information Technology Professionals*, Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, E-mail: acblee@ntu.edu.sg.
2. Sharma, Surajit Sen, "Stuck on a Career Plateau," <http://www.hrcrossing.com/article/270059/Stuck-on-a-Career-Plateau/>.