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Article

The Relationship Between Career Plateau and Organizational Indifference in Iranian Sports Organizations. Case Study: Ilam Province Sports and Youth Departments

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to investigate the relationship between job plateauing and organizational indifference in Iranian sports organizations (Case Study: Ilam Province Sports and Youth Departments). The research method is descriptive and correlational. The statistical population consisted of all employees of Ilam Province Sports and Youth Departments, 146 people. Due to the limited statistical population, the statistical sample of this study was considered equal to the entire population. To collect information, Milliman's (1992) job plateauing questionnaire and Danai Fard et al.'s (2010) organizational indifference questionnaire were used. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, graphs and tables) and inferential statistics (Kolmogrov-Smirnov test and Pearson correlation and stepwise regression) were used to analyze the data. The results showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between all dimensions of job plateauing and organizational indifference in Ilam Province Sports and Youth Departments. This means that with the increase in job plateau, organizational indifference increases. According to the results, it can be admitted that the lack of attention to the phenomenon of job plateau will increase various dimensions of organizational indifference in sports organizations. Therefore, it is suggested that managers of organizations should take action towards job enrichment, establishing a system for evaluating employee performance, and increasing their support and training.

Keywords: job plateau; organizational indifference; employees; youth and sport offices; Ilam

1. Introduction

Our world is a world of organizations, and people are considered the main drivers of the cycle that give spirit to organizations and achieve goals. These are human resources. Without human resources, organizations have no meaning and management becomes a fictitious subject [1]. Human resources are considered the most important asset of organizations and a competitive advantage, and are considered one of the most valuable resources and assets of an organization [35]. There is a dynamic process in the development of organizations and employees, as well as all regions of the world. Changing organizational structures, employee expectations and pursuing new approaches to management are the main axes of this process [31]. For example, the prevalence of downsizing and organizational restructuring in today's environment has led to a reduction in the levels of the organizational hierarchy and, as a result, fewer opportunities for promotion and career advancement. On the other hand, organizational structures have become more horizontal and this greater uniformity also means that people are likely to remain in their current position for a longer period of

time due to less vertical mobility. Therefore, there is increased competition among employees to achieve higher-level jobs in the organization (cited in [30]). When an individual faces hierarchical (promotion-related), task-oriented (job content) and professional constraints in an organization, they face an obstacle called career plateau, which creates a barrier to moving forward in their career [13]. Career plateau occurs when an individual feels that they are facing difficulties in their career path and cannot advance in the organizational hierarchy or their promotion is slow [26]. Choudhary and Ruiz (2013) defined career plateau as a feeling of frustration and psychological weakness that employees feel as a result of career stagnation (cited in [23]). Bardwick (1986) defined two types of career plateau: structural (hierarchical) plateau and content plateau (job content). Structural plateauing occurs when there is little chance for an individual to move up the organizational hierarchy, while content plateauing occurs when an individual does not feel a major challenge in their job but finds the job unattractive [6]. Plateaued employees evaluate their supervisors negatively and are less supportive. Employees who experience a career plateau believe that their employers have abandoned them [26]. Job plateauing is a critical determinant that affects both the organization and the employees, leading to poor work outcomes such as reduced work engagement [23]. Shafiq and Jamil (2023) conducted a study on job plateauing. The findings of this study showed that job content plateauing has a positive and significant relationship with employee disengagement behavior due to loss of commitment. This suggests that companies can take constructive steps to manage plateauing individuals by modifying their beliefs and, consequently, their unfavorable attitudes toward their jobs [27]. Organizations should reevaluate their reward systems in light of evidence suggesting that promotion desire drives the plateau-outcome link. Bai et al. (2023) found that job plateauing negatively impacts job commitment and positively impacts turnover intention, and job engagement negatively impacts turnover intention. Training negatively moderates job plateauing toward job engagement, and job rotation moderates job plateauing toward turnover intention. Accordingly, organizations should consider the impact on employees' jobs when designing training and job rotation policies in response to the pandemic [5]. Darling and Cunningham (2023), in a study of 67 Canadian employees, found that the causes of career plateauing in the public service were ten main themes, grouped into three areas: lack of experience, skills and education, competitive skills, and perceptions of favoritism and discrimination. In addition to feeling embarrassed by their inability to demonstrate experience, education and knowledge, many employees reported instances of frustration due to lack of interview skills or evidence of bias and discrimination. Those who were at risk due to favoritism or discrimination expressed feelings of disgust and frustration and showed a tendency to be less involved in their work (9). Nazari and Golmohammadi (1402) found in their study that personality traits have a significant negative effect on organizational indifference [22]. Baghban et al. (2018) identified four factors affecting the job burnout of NAJA employees in their research. These factors generally included individual, job, organizational, and external environment [4]. Zardashtian et al. (2017) found in a study that job burnout directly affects the resignation of physical education teachers. Job burnout also indirectly affects the resignation of physical education teachers in Kermanshah province through the variable of job burnout [3].

Job burnout has the potential to cause dissatisfaction because continuous upward progress, learning and job challenge, and ultimately, specialization and access to a potential job market due to professional skills are important sources of motivation. Advancements usually include benefits such as increases in salary, power, and status. Therefore, many employees use advancement as a criterion to measure their success in the organizational environment. They develop a negative attitude when they realize that their career advancement in the organization is no longer achievable. In general, research results have shown that increased absenteeism, psychological stress, desire to leave the service, increased levels of job burnout, decreased levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, role conflict, decreased sense of self-esteem, lack of ability to adapt to changes, low levels of job involvement and lack of initiative will be inevitable consequences of job burnout (cited in [30]). Other research indicates that job burnout in the long term causes employees to become

indifferent to the organization. Among them, we can mention the research of Karimianpour et al. (1402), Kazemi et al. (2018), Asgari (2017), Saleh Ardestan and Seyed Naqvi (2016) [3,18,19,26].

Indifference can perhaps be called a silent crisis, a quiet collapse, and continuous and silent destruction. One of the consequences of indifference to human resources is the creation of a phenomenon called indifference to the organization. A state in which the occurrence or non-occurrence of peripheral phenomena, and specifically the realization or non-realization of organizational goals, does not make a difference to a member or group of members is called "organizational indifference" [3]. Employee indifference to the organization is manifested in five dimensions, which are: 1. Indifference to the manager, in this case, employees refrain from commenting on their abilities in order to accept more responsibility, do not inform the manager about the work process, and sometimes deliberately postpone the manager's demands. 2. Employee indifference to the client, not prioritizing the client's work, lack of responsiveness, postponing services to the client, and aggressive behavior with the client. 3. Employee indifference to the organization, trying to leave the workplace faster, personal use of the organization's facilities. 4. Indifference to work, such as reducing accuracy and speed at work, not caring about the quality of work, pessimism about work. 5. Indifference to colleagues, reducing cooperation and not cooperating in group work, having cold and formal behavior with colleagues, creating pessimism [19]. Theoretically, it can be said that employees who are indifferent to the organization do not have the necessary motivation to do their work and have low job performance, and in these conditions they perform work at a minimal level [2]. Boroumand et al. (2018), in a study, found that organizational indifference is one of the main factors affecting the reduction of employee productivity and efficiency [7]. Zandi and Amani (2018), in their study, found that employees can help reduce organizational indifference by expressing opinions and statements, clarifying rules and regulations, supportive behaviors of managers, collaborative activities, and highlighting the organizational vision [32]. Therefore, it seems that organizational managers should prevent this before the employees of the organization reach the stage of career plateau. Sports organizations, like non-sports organizations, are exposed to these risks and are no exception to this rule. Therefore, given the importance of the issue and the fact that no study has been conducted on the relationship between job burnout and organizational indifference in sports organizations, researchers are trying to answer the question of what relationship exists between job burnout and organizational indifference in sports organizations in the country (case study: Sports and Youth Departments of Ilam Province)?

2. Research Method

The present study is a correlational study. The statistical population of the study consisted of all employees of the sports and youth departments of Ilam province (including the general department and the departments of the subordinate counties) in the number of 146 people. Due to the limited statistical population, the statistical sample of this study was considered equal to the entire population ($N=n$). Finally, the questionnaires were provided to the statistical sample in various ways such as sending emails, visiting in person, social networks, etc. Out of the 146 distributed questionnaires, 140 questionnaires were used for analysis in their entirety and without errors. To collect information, 3 questionnaires were used as follows:

The demographic characteristics questionnaire was distributed among the research samples to collect data related to age, gender, marital status, service history, employment status, educational degree, and organizational position. Milliman's job burnout questionnaire (1992) consists of 14 questions that measure structural burnout, content burnout, and work life burnout. Danai Fard et al.'s organizational indifference questionnaire (2010) consists of 33 questions that measure the dimensions of indifference to the manager, indifference to the organization, indifference to the client, indifference to the colleague, and indifference to work. In order to determine the reliability of the aforementioned questionnaires, 30 questionnaires were distributed among the statistical community in a preliminary study, and the Cronbach's alpha values for job burnout and organizational indifference were 0.89 and 0.91, respectively. Considering the Cronbach's alpha results, it can be

admitted that the obtained alpha coefficients have an acceptable level and the measurement tools also have good internal consistency. In order to organize and summarize the data, descriptive statistics including: mean, standard deviation, tables and graphs were used, and in the inferential statistics section including: Kolmogorov-Smirnov test; to determine the normality of the data, Pearson correlation coefficient; to detect and determine the presence or absence of a relationship between the variables of job burnout and organizational indifference, and multivariate regression; to determine the contribution of each of the components of the predictor variable (job burnout) in predicting the criterion variable (organizational indifference).

The face and content validity of the research questionnaires were confirmed by 5 management professors and 5 sports management professors. It should be noted that all calculations were performed using SPSS version 26 software at a significance level of 0.05.

3. Research Findings

Table 1 describes the descriptive statistics of the individual characteristics of the research sample.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of individual characteristics of the research sample.

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Gender	Female	28	20
	Male	112	80
Age	Less than 30	16	11/4
	31-40	55	40
	41-50	50	35/71
	More than 50	19	12/89
Marital status	Single	55	40
	Married	85	60
Educational degree	Diploma	12	8/57
	Associate's degree	5	3/57
	Bachelor's degree	90	64/28
	Master's and PhD	33	23/57
Service experience	Under 5 years	21	15
	6-10	28	20
	11-15	21	15
	16-20	35	25
	21-25	14	10
Organizational position	Manager	14	10
	Expert and others	126	90

In addition, before conducting statistical tests and due to a pre-condition for using or not using parametric tests, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used (Table 2). Given the significance level obtained from this test, the normality of the data was determined and we conclude that parametric tests can be used to analyze the research data.

Table 2. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistics for the normality of the data distribution.

Variables	N	Z	Sig	Test result
Job burnout	140	0.185	0.725	normal
Organizational indifference	140	0.352	0.612	normal

Table 3. Results of Pearson correlation coefficient between job burnout and organizational indifference.

Factor	Indicators	Organizational indifference
Job burnout	Correlation rate (r)	0.722
	Significance level (Sig)	0.001
	Number of samples (N)	140

The results showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between job burnout and organizational indifference. This means that as the level of job burnout increases, organizational indifference will also increase.

Next, in order to evaluate the explanatory power of the predictor variables (job plateau components) whose relationships have been previously tested, a stepwise multivariate linear analysis method was used.

Before performing the regression analysis, the assumptions of this analysis are examined. These assumptions include:

1. Normality of the variables, 2. Independence of errors, 3. Absence of multiple collinearity.

The first assumption, which was previously examined and the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. The results of the second and third assumptions are reported in Table 2.

To predict organizational indifference based on job plateauing, the structural plateauing variable was entered into the equation in the first step, the content plateauing variable in the second step, and the work life plateauing variable in the third step, and their significance was maintained throughout these three steps. Table 4 reports the results of the regression analysis.

Table 4. Results of the examination of the independence of errors and multiple collinearity in regression analysis.

Step	Multiple correlation coefficient	Explained variance	Adjusted explained variance	Standard error of estimate of	R ² Changes
First	0.565	0.08	0.06	8.29	0.02
Second	0.433	0.09	0.08	7.35	0.03
Third	0.579	0.08	0.07	7.71	0.02

According to Table 5, the value of the Durbin-Watson statistic in the present study is 1.94. Values between 1.5 and 2.5 indicate the existence of independence of errors in the data. Therefore, it can be said that in the present study, there is independence of errors for performing multivariate regression. The variance inflation factor (VIF) statistic in the present study was 2.25, which indicates that a number less than 10 indicates the absence of multicollinearity. Therefore, it can be said that there is no multicollinearity between the independent variables in the present study. Considering these cases, multivariate regression analysis can be used.

Table 5. Results of stepwise regression analysis of organizational indifference on the components of job plateau.

Test	Obtained value	Allowed value	Result
Durbin-Watson	1.94	Between 1.5 and 2.5	There is independence of errors
VIF	2.25	Less than 10	There is no multiple collinearity

Table 6. Results of the analysis of variance test to examine the ability of job plateau components to predict organizational indifference.

Model	Total squares	Degree of freedom	Mean of squares	F	Significance level	
Final model	Regression	915.48	3	305.16	5.87	0.001
	Residuals	18707.45	137	51.96		
	Total	19622.93	140			

According to Table 6, the analysis of variance test of the organizational indifference prediction model based on job plateau components ($F=5.87$) is significant at the (0.001) level. This finding indicates that the predictor variables, namely structural, content plateau and work life, are significantly able to predict organizational indifference. Table 8 also reports the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients and a significance test for these coefficients.

Table 7. Regression coefficients and t-statistics of the model for predicting organizational indifference based on the components of job plateau.

Variable	Unstandardized regression coefficient (B)	Standard error (S.E)	Standardized regression coefficient (Beta)	T-statistic	Significance level
Constant number (a)	35.27	2.59	-	12.11	0.001
Structural plateau	0.12	0.05	0.25	3.58	0.001
Work life plateau	0.13	0.05	0.32	3.56	0.001
Content plateau	0.17	0.09	0.28	0.2	0.001

According to Table 7, the effect of structural plateau on organizational indifference (0.25) and at the level 0.001 is significant. The effect of content plateauing on organizational indifference (0.32) is significant at the 0.001 level, and the effect of work life plateauing on organizational indifference (0.28) is significant at the 0.001 level. This finding shows that content plateauing, among the dimensions of job plateauing, has the greatest effect on organizational indifference.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In the current system, improving individual and organizational performance is considered one of the main goals of any living and active organization. The most important resource in any organization is human resources. The job attitude of employees in an organization is very essential for management; because they have information, experience, organizational knowledge, and ideas related to their work [34]. If we consider human resources to be one of the most important pillars of improving the performance of an organization, it is clear that examining the variables affecting their performance can be a guide for managers in improving the performance of the organization. Minimizing physical and psychological stressors in the workplace is one of the most important goals that organizational managers must pay special attention to in order to achieve the organization's goals, because paying attention to these factors and creating a healthy work environment leads to effectiveness, efficiency, job satisfaction, and individual efficiency, and ultimately to the realization of the organization's goals and progress [36].

Almost all decisions that managers make in organizations directly and indirectly affect all people in the organization, especially since this issue is most true among human resource management processes. Indifference in common language is referred to as a state in which a person distances himself from the factor or factors that cause failure or a frustrating situation and, in exchange for an emotional response, apparently becomes indifferent to the obstacle or even his fate. Indifference occurs when a person, after a long period of failure, loses hope of achieving his goal or goals in a particular situation and wants to withdraw from the source of his failure. This phenomenon is often characteristic of people who are engaged in repetitive and boring jobs and who resign themselves to the fact that there is little hope for improvement and progress in their work environment [12]. In a state of indifference, the individual is indifferent to the occurrence or non-occurrence of peripheral phenomena and the achievement of organizational goals. He does not perform the assigned work accurately and quickly. He does not take action in presenting suggestions and ideas for improving working conditions in the organization and is reluctant to confront the manager and avoids accepting responsibility. If such an individual stays in the organization due to job security, he will not feel attached to it or (if possible) will leave the organization [21].

The present study was conducted with the ultimate goal of investigating the relationship between job burnout and organizational apathy in the sports and youth departments of Ilam province. As expected, the overall result of the study indicated that there is a positive and significant relationship between job burnout and organizational apathy in these organizations. This means that the higher the job plateau, the higher the level of organizational indifference of employees. This result of the research is consistent with the results of the research of Karimianpour et al. (1402), Kazemi et al. (1397), Asgari (1396), Pourghasem and Agha-Ahmadi (1396), Saleh Ardestan and Mirnaqvi (1395), Sheibani et al. (1395), Jian and Chabra (2023), Onuri and Angela (2009), Yang and Tuck (2008) [3,15,17–19,24–26].

The research results are also inconsistent with the findings of the research of Hillman, Holt, and Rilovick (2015) [14]. In a study titled *The Effect of Career Plateau on Exit*, these researchers found that employees who are no longer progressing in the organization are more likely to leave their jobs and tend to develop their skills elsewhere. Therefore, disengaged employees will give up on their jobs and leave the organization after a while and will rarely experience a career plateau.

A career plateau is a negative phenomenon that leads to reduced confidence and perceptions of career progression and work monotony. Jian and Chhabra (2023) found in their study that career plateaus cause adverse work behavior in employees. This study has important implications for supervisors who should consider if their behavior is perceived by employees as career-degrading. They should guide employees, especially those with higher career aspirations, and provide them with different career paths [15]. Sijabat (2023), in an extensive study, found that job plateauing can reduce employees' job satisfaction and work commitment and increase their intention to quit. The results of this study also showed that job satisfaction and work commitment can reduce the desire to quit. Employees who face job plateauing face emotional exhaustion and intention to quit, which is not desirable for the organization and the employees themselves [29]. Individual, job, and organizational factors affect employees' access to job plateauing. On the other hand, apathy is a characteristic of people who are engaged in boring and repetitive jobs and who surrender to the fact that there is little hope for improvement and progress in their workplace. Basically, this specific psycho-behavioral state is called individual apathy and is considered a result of individual deprivation and a sign of a problem in the workplace [3]. Employees who plateau have little chance of promotion in their career path and are more exposed to organizational apathy. Employees often begin their careers with high hopes and expectations of reaching the highest levels in the organization, and most of them value advancement, power, and the highest responsibilities and rewards. However, few opportunities for promotion, including rigid rules and regulations, exacerbate this feeling in individuals and cause them to have a negative view of their jobs [28]. Other results indicated that among the dimensions of job plateauing, content plateauing was most strongly correlated with organizational indifference. Content plateauing occurs when an individual has completely mastered the job and is no longer able to learn more. Although professionals are more susceptible to this phenomenon, Bardwick warns that anyone can experience such a phenomenon if their responsibilities and issues are repetitive. This could be a warning sign for managers of sports organizations. Because unfortunately, in most government organizations in the country, responsibilities become routine and repetitive after a while, which reduces the employee's desire for change, learning, knowledge acquisition, etc. Bardwick also believes that employees who experience content plateaus are still competent and satisfied.

Some remain stagnant, while others cope with this situation. In this way, they resist change in order to maintain a sense of security because they believe that change will lead to failure. Therefore, given the high correlation between content plateauing and dimensions of organizational indifference, it is suggested that senior managers and policymakers in these departments organize knowledge-enhancing courses in the organization and consider job rotation, organizational learning, and knowledge management in the organization. Lee (2003) believes that career plateauing in organizations can be managed by seeking career guidance from consultants and experienced individuals from within or outside the organization. This can create job opportunities by learning the skills and knowledge needed for career change. In addition, it creates networking within and outside

the organization and provides useful information about career paths. Finally, an employee who develops job strategies appropriate to his or her job and organizational position is likely to increase his or her ability to provide positive evaluation from superiors and receive a larger share of the organization's salary [24]. Other results showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between structural plateauing and dimensions of organizational indifference. Structural plateauing is caused by the limitations in the organizational structure hierarchy; because the higher the individual moves in the organization, the more limited the positions are, or the individual does not have all the skills and abilities necessary to move to the next level; in some cases, there is no higher position at all. In the organizations studied, the results indicated that the average of this dimension of plateauing was high. Given the inflexibility of organizational structures in Iranian government organizations, as well as recent social trends and the increase in the level of education of individuals, more people are experiencing plateauing at a younger age. While most people reach this stage in mid-life, at an age when the main issues of life are ongoing and acute. The results of the demographic characteristics of the research samples showed that more than 80 percent of the education of the employees of the aforementioned departments is bachelor's degree or higher, which indicates the sensitivity of the issue. Because elitism can have both a positive and a negative effect. Extreme elitism in the organization also causes the organization's attention to be focused on a number of individuals, and the rest of the employees will also follow indifference due to the organization's lack of attention to them. Conditions must be created in the organization so that all employees are involved in organizational issues, not a specific group of individuals. In this way, individuals consider themselves important and cannot be indifferent to the problems and goals of the organization. By understanding and recognizing the phenomenon of career plateauing, which is affected by the flattening of organizations, individuals will be able to consider career path strategies to improve their career opportunities inside and outside the organization. Other results showed that the third dimension of job burnout (work-life burnout) has a strong and significant correlation with organizational indifference dimensions. Life burnout involves the feeling that satisfaction will not be achieved in any area of life. Work-life burnout involves the feeling of being forced to do things that an individual has committed to in the past and now no longer feels a sense of belonging to. In other words, life burnout describes an individual feeling, such that individuals are stuck in a role outside of their work. These factors refer to the life and vitality of an individual, when an individual becomes routine and does not feel any interest or pleasure in their personal life (20). El-Sayed et al. (2023) suggested maintaining a supportive work environment for employees by providing all the necessary resources for their work and using job enrichment to increase their work engagement as ways to deal with job burnout [10].

The perception of job plateauing causes many harms to human resources, which are the most important pillars of today's organizations. One of the reasons for this harm is the feeling of monotony for the workforce. Many employees complain about the monotony of work and lack of participation in decision-making processes. It seems that redesigning jobs and involving more employees of sports and youth departments in job responsibilities can provide better conditions for them. Another harm of job plateauing is the lack or difficulty of vertical movement of employees in the organizational structure. Therefore, if vertical movement is not possible, horizontal movement can prevent content plateauing. Most importantly, managers must understand the situation of their employees. Employees who are organizationally plateaued due to a lack of job positions will want to enrich their jobs. As a result, involving them in projects that are appropriate to their experiences can keep them productive and satisfied in their current position. As with all research on career plateaus, it is recommended that employees' perceptions of plateauing be periodically assessed, that counseling sessions be held with expert psychologists for those who are plateaued, and that job placement services be provided for employees who decide to leave the company. It also seems that providing appropriate rewards to employees can prevent the occurrence of plateauing and ultimately reduce their indifference to the organization. Clark (2005) believes that rewards paid to motivate employees do not increase costs; rather, a balanced distribution based on fair indicators can prevent or control

the occurrence of plateauing in employees [8]. We should also know that the continuous occurrence of plateauing in employees

It can affect the lifespan of human resources and their effectiveness and retention in the organization. Some organizations reduce the negative effects of plateauing by using rewards, work policies, opportunities, and specific functions.

The above-mentioned cases are important because, according to the results of the present study, people who experience plateauing are prone to indifference to the organization, the individual, the manager, the client, etc. in the long term. This can cause irreparable damage to sports organizations, and managers and policymakers of these departments should pay close attention to this issue.

Finally, according to the findings of the study, other suggestions are also presented:

1. Job enrichment in sports organizations, especially the sports and youth departments studied.
2. Increasing awareness, skills, and understanding of the current situation in sports organizations, especially sports and youth departments, by employees.
3. Creating a useful system and design for fair payments and rewards in the organization to motivate employees.
4. Increasing support and training for employees from sports and youth department managers on a continuous basis and following up and paying attention to its results. Because people who receive more support in the field of training and development from their supervisors are less likely to experience content plateauing.
5. In sports organizations, the employee performance evaluation system should be strengthened and the strengths and weaknesses of the employees' performance should be discussed and discussed, and measures should be taken for their weaknesses.
6. Creating necessary measures for the poor performance of plateaued employees and preventing them from leaving the organization.
7. Providing training programs to employees on job descriptions and a roadmap for career advancement.

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