

Don't Let Plateaus Stagnate Your Firm

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There is a trend in workplaces today for middle managers to experience slower career growth than they expected. This is in part due to older workers ahead of them staying longer in the organization. However they interpret it, more and more employees between 35 and 54 are experiencing frustrations associated with not having the opportunities to climb quickly in their organizations. They have temporarily "plateaued".

"Successful organizations are full of people who are excited about what they do"

The effects of plateauing

Although employees in this situation work hard to overcome the barriers they see before them, they may feel they are going nowhere. Employees of this age group will move mountains if they feel their work is fulfilling. So their joy in life is affected, energy diminishes, and confidence is eroded if they feel they are stagnating. Unfortunately, in many cases employers are unaware of the effects of plateauing on productivity and profitability. Successful organizations are full of people who are excited about what they do and who devote their hearts, minds and souls to every task they face. Employees whose careers offer no further challenge and who are thwarted in their attempts to experience success may be present physically but lack energy and enthusiasm for their jobs.

A lack of predictable paths

Employees' careers are peaking earlier, largely because of demographic factors and changes in the make-up of the workforce. A study conducted by Concours Group, a Texas-based consulting company, indicated that 71% of employees in this age group have disengaged

and become unproductive* due to changes in the workplace that affect their belief in the mission. In addition, with older employees retiring later, these middle-management employees face delayed prospects of upward movement that may leave them feeling stagnant. That's detrimental to an organization that relies on the experience they bring to the table. And there is a real risk that these employees will feel the need to go outside of the organization to fulfill their need for career opportunities.

Redefining successful careers

Unfortunately, the traditional reward systems of recognition, respect, and remuneration based on position are still in place in many organizations. As a result, these employees are dissatisfied and have feelings of failure when they interpret their inability to get promoted as an indication that their own skills are lacking. Plateaus are inevitable sooner or later in every career, but the effects do not have to be negative. Employers need to begin by redefining what makes up a successful career. Organizations and individuals alike have to openly acknowledge that upward growth may no longer be possible and that it has nothing to do with an employee's abilities.

*Rethink How You Manage People, Harvard Management Update, Boston, MA, February 2006.

