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AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAREER PLATEAUS IN ACCOUNTANCY

VICTOR BARTHOLOMEW FICARRA
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Reviewed and approved by the following:

Veronica Godshalk
Professor of Management
Thesis Supervisor

Hans Schmidt
Associate Professor of Communications
Honors Adviser

*Electronic Approvals on File in the Schreyer Honors College

ABSTRACT

Career plateau is a complex, multifaceted experience that can affect one's ability to perform in their role within any profession. Within accountancy, career plateau takes on several different forms depending on an individual's current professional standing and the type of career they pursue in the industry. This study first explores the way career plateau has been defined and where it is most fitting within accountancy. Then, psychological factors that can affect one's professional experience in accounting are examined and applied to fit the scope of this research. From here, the structure of different types of accounting careers are discussed and used as a lens to examine how career plateau applies within them. The minority experience became a significant point of this research as career plateau was found to be greater for them in accountancy. The statistics relating to their positioning within accounting firms were combined with the study on career plateau to conclude that their current representation in accounting positions of leadership is one of the leading factors contributing to their lack of promotion. Researching other psychological, academic, structural, and systemic factors reveals that a multidisciplinary approach may be a better way to combat career plateauing in the accounting profession.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Accounting as a profession has evolved drastically over time. As a white-collar profession that has ties to businesses across many industries, its evolution has been tied with changes in the business world in general. As the accounting profession changes rapidly, the experience of accountants has also changed. This research seeks to examine the career progression, experience, and difficulties for the promotion of accountants. Specifically, the project will explore how accountants may experience a slowdown, or plateau, in their ability to elevate their careers.

After selecting accounting as my major during my sophomore year, I became fascinated by the types of professional opportunities available afterwards. What I found peculiar though was the apparent “leveling off” that accountants seemed to experience early in their career. It seemed as though students became accounting majors to become accountants at Big 4 firms including KPMG, PwC, Deloitte and Ernst and Young. Here, the progression upwards is very stratified and the opportunity for advancement outside of this domain is more limited. This speculation sparked an interest in me to select career plateaus in accountancy as my topic for further research.

In order to best examine the career plateaus of accountants, first this work examines the different types of career plateaus. While the most prevalent way to track the career of an accountant could be through their position or salary at a firm, this work takes a step forward in researching the complexities involved with their personal experience. By examining the actual experience of the accountants as opposed to solely their job title, more information is revealed as to how career plateaus manifest themselves and what types of career plateau are actually present.

Overall, the guiding research questions are:

Why do accountants experience career plateau?

What can be done to combat career plateaus in accounting?

This research also examines the experiences of minorities in accounting. While career plateau as a whole is examined, the statistics regarding the minority career experience (specifically BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) reveal how plateauing is experienced differently and more drastically for them compared to their white coworkers. Additionally, measures for combating career plateau for minorities in accounting can be found by looking at their professional experience specifically.

This research paper will introduce the concept of career plateauing and its various types and then will discuss two motivational theories that will help us understand plateauing more fully. Various exit opportunities to the professional accountancy corporate career path will be reviewed, and the experiences of minorities and women will be offered. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of opportunities to improve the career paths of accountants and future research considerations will be posited.

CHAPTER 2 INTERPRETATIONS OF CAREER PLATEAU

Career plateau is a complex experience whose definition is dependent on a myriad of factors (Smith-Ruig, 2009). Obvious symptoms of career plateau include a lack of progression in title and wage. Others though are more qualitative when job responsibilities, environment, and other more personal experiences of a career are examined. Career plateau is a multifaceted phenomenon, and its definition is strongly influenced by an individual's definition of a career and success.

PAST DEFINITIONS

Ference, Stoner and Warren (1977) defined a career plateau as the point at which employees cease experiencing hierarchical career progression that is, no further opportunities are available for higher levels of promotion within the organizational structure. This definition is clear as one could simply point to remaining in the same position for an unreasonable amount of time as a point at which they have plateaued. What constitutes "unreasonable" is dependent on the position currently being held and the person's own career expectations. This timing is discussed in Table 4 later in this research. For example, in the case of accounting careers at a public accounting firm, one may enter as an associate and eventually progress to roles with titles including senior associate and manager (Anders, 2019). At most firms, the opportunities to reach associate level titles are plentiful, but opportunities for advancement decrease as there are limits to the quantity who can hold titles like partner or managing partner.

An alternative definition posed by Roger, Toulouse and Tremblay (1994), took the previous one a step forward by also including the nature of somebody's work. They defined two dimensions to a career plateau. The first was an objective plateau which is extremely similar to

Ference et al.'s (1977) career plateau definition as it is very observable and measurable by a third party and associated with an excessive length of time at one level. The second dimension is the subjective plateau and this is the primary differentiating factor. This dimension is associated with the perception of limited possibilities for advancement and the individual's response to these scarce opportunities. Taking an employee's own perception of his or her opportunity for advancement into account is extremely important as it can affect one's ability to thrive and move forward. If someone believes they are within this subjective career plateau, they may be less likely to take the necessary steps forward to experience objective, stratified career progression as they may believe those steps are futile.

While the second dimension of career plateau was an important step in advancing the definition, ultimately both of the aforementioned viewpoints are too narrow in focus. First, one can attain new skills while within a position which can lead to an expansion of their role, even if their title remains the same. Secondly, greater forms of personally perceived success can be achieved while remaining within the same role and these can be viewed as a form of career progression. For example, a scientist can view moving through steps in the development process of a new drug as a form of career progression and this can take anywhere from twelve to fifteen years depending on the product (Andersen, 2020). Alternatively, a real estate salesperson can view growth in sales volume as career progression and ultimately their title still remains "realtor". Here, they can be characterized as objectively plateaued due to their title staying the same, but subjectively they may not be based on how their experience is across their career. If this subjectively plateaued person still feels that he/she has the opportunity to learn and grow in the position, then even while objectively plateaued (same title/position), the person does not feel negative effects of plateauing and can continue to thrive in the job.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE MEASURES

Objective measures for evaluating career plateau are capable of being measured consistently. These would include the years worked in a position, the quantity of tasks or level of responsibility allocated to an employee, or the number of subordinates reporting to a person. The subjective measures are significant to career plateau research as well as they are a measurement of what individuals suggest is the reason for their plateau (Godshalk & Fender, 2015). The evaluation of one's personal experience within his or her career offers the ability to distinguish different types of plateau from one another.

Bardwick (1986) discusses this subjective response to work in her three forms of career plateau. The first form of plateau is similar to the aforementioned definitions of objective plateau and is called structural plateau, resulting from a substantial pause in promotions. Content plateau differs as it stems from monotony in the work one completes. Even if one's title changes, if their work remains largely the same, they can be experiencing a content plateau. Her third form, life plateau, discusses a plateau defined by a lack of success one feels in the work they complete (Bardwick, 1986). She argues that one can feel plateau if they are trapped in their role. This definition is similar to the subjective plateau as it is based on one's perception of their current situation yet adds to the literature the concept that work experiences can "spill over" into the non-work or life domain (Lourel, Ford, Gamassou, Guéguen, & Hartmann, 2009).

Feeling trapped in a role is a common factor to accepting an exit opportunity from a job (Garland, 2016). These broader definitions of career plateau are significant for evaluating the plateau of the new, more boundaryless and multi-directional positions that many hold today (Smith-Ruig, 2009). Careers are much more non-linear, leaving opportunity for the subjective measures of career plateau to play a larger role in evaluation. In the field of accounting, the

different types of available careers make each individuals' perception of their career plateau vary. Whether someone opens their own practice or enters the Big 4 directly following graduation, considering that both the objective and subjective measures of career plateau may exist and be experienced, is significant.

MOTIVATION FACTORS

Herzberg's Motivation Hygiene Theory has a unique tie in with the subjective measures of reaching a career plateau. No matter the industry, Herzberg held that there are certain aspects of a job that are consistent with job satisfaction and others that are consistent with dissatisfaction. Career plateau and motivation are related due to the fact that a plateaued employee becomes unmotivated within their role and is therefore less productive and satisfied. The more dissatisfied associates are at a firm, the greater the likelihood for significant employee turnover and continued lackluster productivity (Maclean, 2013).

Herzberg's Hygiene Factors involve the interactions between the employee and his firm. Company policies including dress code, paid-time-off, insurance and supervision are all examples of Hygiene Factors. They describe the job environment and are what one would want and expect from their workplace. Hygiene Factors are essential to the workplace but are distinguished from the motivation factors as they are necessities. Herzberg's Motivation Factors, or Motivators, however, actually improve job satisfaction and are key to improved productivity.

Herzberg's Motivators affect the employee's ability to positively interact within their position and among their workgroup. Feeling as though they are achieving something within their role can push them to perform better while providing the feeling of self-fulfillment and truly producing something of value to the firm. Earning recognition from peers and superiors will give

an employee a similar feeling. Showing that the work itself provides value will also motivate employees to work up to their potential. Furthermore, giving an employee autonomy over the way their work is done will show that the employer trusts him/her and will provide a greater desire to do the work well. Finally showing that there are ample opportunities for advancement and growth within and beyond a role will motivate employees to work harder and make progress at a company. Recognizing the existence of these motivation factors is key to understanding career plateau as without them, employees are significantly more likely to become stagnant or leave a firm for a lateral or even lower position.

Understanding these motivational factors is important because it allows for recognition of the responses to the different types of plateau. Motivation factors can be tied to minimizing plateaus (Godshalk & Fender, 2015; Smith-Ruig, 2009). When significant achievements are had while on the job, recognizing them will promote the continuation of that activity leading to opportunities for advancement. Giving meaningful work to employees will make them feel as though their role is significant to the firm and if this work gains greater depth or value to the firm moving forward, they will feel as though their role has advanced even if their title remains the same. Providing autonomy to employees as well over time can ignite the feeling that one is trusted, making them feel as though they are growing and advancing within their role. These actions, offered by accounting firms, will assist the plateaued employee to be motivated and continue to perform well in the role. Herzberg made it clear, hygiene factors do not motivate employees, but opportunities for recognizing achievements, autonomy over work, and meaningfulness in a job well done do motivate all employees, particularly plateaued employees.

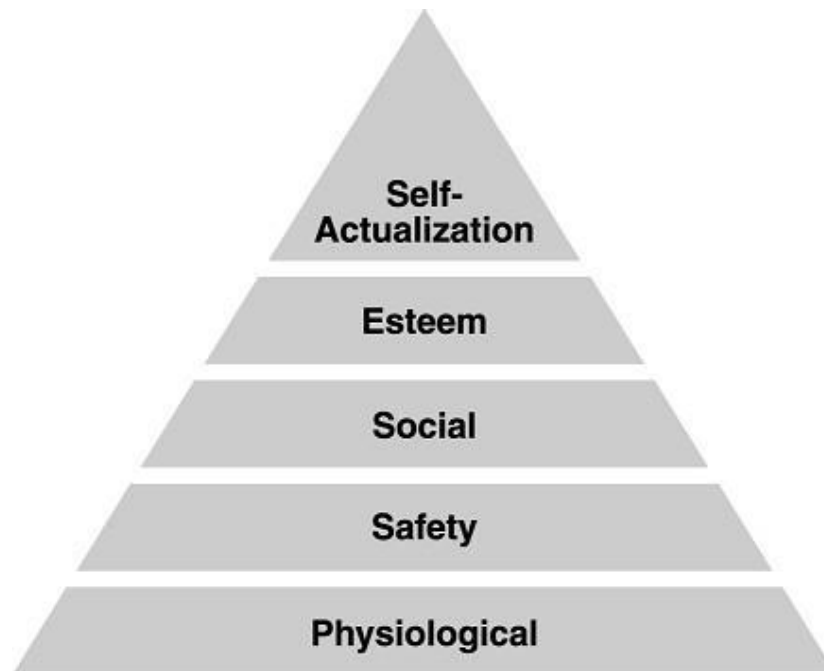
MOTIVATION AND CAREER PLATEAU

Research has primarily cited the link between being plateaued and a consequent lack of motivation in the workplace (Godshalk & Fender, 2015; Milliman, 1992). Whether it is hierarchical stagnation within a current role or monotonous work, career plateau can lead to a lack of workplace motivation. This lack of motivation can further perpetuate the existing career plateau for an employee. A lack of motivation at work can lead to an employee's decreased workplace productivity and as a result can prevent superiors from selecting that employee for promotion moving forward.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Abraham Maslow proposed his hierarchy of needs in 1943 in a paper on human motivation. His theories here parallel those of developmental psychology in that they focus on different stages of human growth. After years of additional research, he fully published this work in a 1954 book titled *Motivation and Personality* and the hierarchy remains a very popular framework for management training and that is where the connection to this research is most significant. As employees are hired to the major public accounting firms, many of their initial needs are met but it is the lack of connection to their higher level needs that initiates the types of career plateau discussed in this research.

Table 1. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



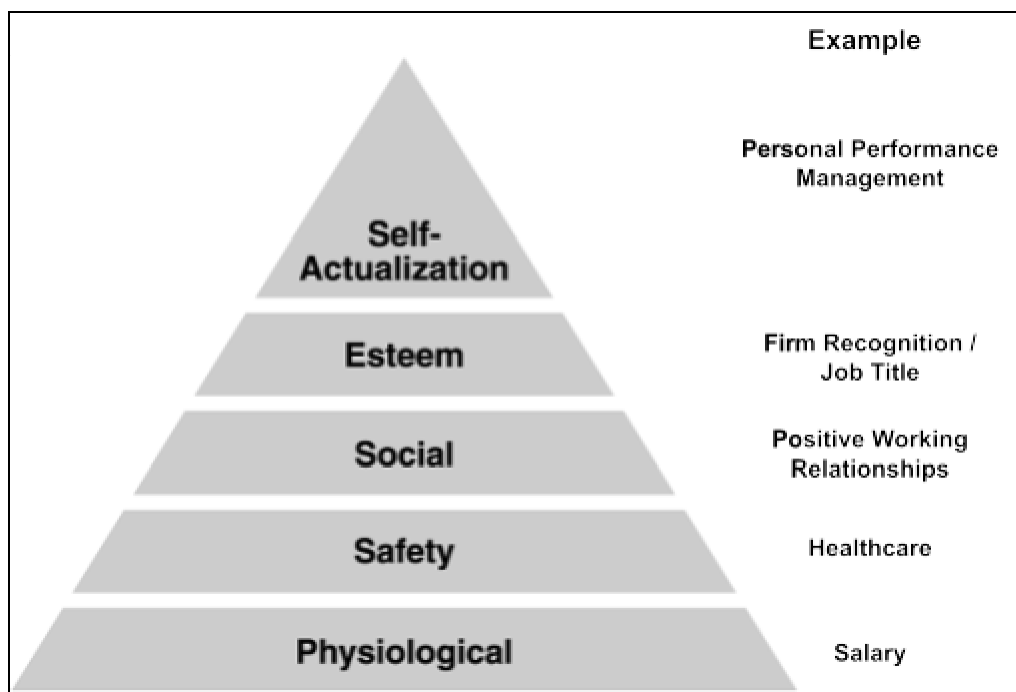
Taken from Cherry (2021)

As depicted in the diagram, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has five levels: Physiological, Safety, Social, Esteem and Self-Actualization (Cherry, 2021). It is said that as each of these needs are met at every level starting at the bottom, one becomes motivated by the aspects of the level above it. Physiological needs include the ability to eat, drink, sleep and sustain oneself. Safety and Security needs can include having a job, basic personal health, and a place to live. Social needs are valuable personal relationships, friendships, and an overall sense of connection. Esteem includes having some degree of status, recognition, respect and even freedom. Finally, the uppermost level, Self-Actualization, can be described as having a desire to be the best one can be in any capacity.

Below I have modified the initial pyramid and applied it to the business and career setting. This application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is relevant because it directly ties

into the reasons why one may become unmotivated in the workplace and potentially leave before having an opportunity to advance their career. Failure to meet these needs can significantly reduce the ability of an employee to best engage with their work and consequently limit or altogether remove any desire to advance their career within that firm. In short, fulfilling employee needs starting at the lower levels will increase their desire to advance their career and a failure to do so could initiate their career plateau.

Table 2. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Applied to Business Setting*



Taken from Cherry (2021)

Physiological needs are those most basic needs one requires for survival. In the working world, one can earn a salary to pay for their physiological needs. Table 3 contains the average salaries per position at the Big 4 accounting firms according to the 2019 Consulting Salaries

Report using salaries from their major offices in New York City, Chicago, Dallas, and Seattle.

Tax consultants were used in this evaluation because tax is a major branch of accounting. These numbers are based solely on those who work in tax, and the change in salary from level to level becomes more significant as one's title changes. An additional consideration here is that this data is based solely on salary and not total compensation. Bonuses and stock compensation can make these differences even greater. Historically, added compensation is greater for those who hold more significant titles than for employees who have spent less time at the firm and hold lower ranking positions.

Table 3. *Big 4 Average Tax Consultant Salaries*

<u>Big 4 Average Tax</u>	<u>Consultant Salaries</u>
<u>Associate</u>	<u>\$61,250</u>
<u>Senior Associate</u>	<u>\$78,250</u>
<u>Manager</u>	<u>\$112,000</u>
<u>Senior Manager</u>	<u>\$152,500</u>
<u>Managing Director</u>	<u>\$275,250</u>

Data from Consulting Salaries Report (2019)

Given a salary exceeding \$60,000, one's physiological needs are more than sufficiently met when accepting an associate role within the Big 4 directly following graduation. As one's standards and costs of living increase though, reaching those higher salaries becomes more and more important and that initial associate level salary can fail to sufficiently meet all of his or her needs if they are not promoted in due time.

The next level, safety, is met largely by salary but also with other benefits of a job. Each of the Big 4 accounting firms offer some form of 401k retirement matching as well as health care benefits so these safety or security needs are met on the surface. Where one can feel a lack of security within a role is if they remain in the same position for longer than their peers. Given the Big 4's propensity for hiring many new associates straight from college, there is constantly young, motivated talent entering the building. If one remains stagnant in their role for longer than the class of peers they entered with, they can attain a level of job insecurity that infringes upon their ability to work well within their current role. Seeing not just your own peers but also those who entered later than you rise above your current position can lead to increased job dissatisfaction. While it may not be an issue in the beginning of someone's time at a Big 4 firm, the competitive fervor that one experiences with one's peers can lead to great job insecurity the longer one stays within the same role. Based on his hierarchy of needs, Maslow would say that the person would regress and stay at the safety level of needs until these are sufficiently met. This could require the person to leave the firm so he or she could progress to the social and esteem need levels.

The third need level, social or positive working relationships, is also met well initially, but can be strained as time progresses within the firms. Since one is typically entering with a large class of peers who are of similar age, it can be fairly easy to make friends at the onset. The Big 4 firms though become famously busy at the height of tax season and this is when the stress levels can potentially damage working relationships. Jealousy of others attaining promotions can also play a role in straining these relationships as fewer and fewer associates can be promoted to each stratified level of leadership. Similar to physiological and security, these social needs are met well at the onset of employment but can become more strained as one stays within the same

role for an above average amount of time.

In a similar vein, firm recognition and title are satisfied by Big 4 firms. They are names that are recognized globally, and the roles definitely carry weight in the eyes of those who apply in part because of the quality of candidate that is typically hired. While being hired by a well-recognized firm is a motivating way to start a career, it can also parlay into extremely appealing opportunities to leave instead of lingering and waiting for a promotion. Having a Big 4 company's name on one's resume suggests that he or she has been working with substantial clients and trained by the most detail-oriented managers in the industry. If one becomes stagnant in their role, this work experience can be used to seek employment elsewhere in the future.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is applicable here because it assists the understanding of how a plateaued employee may respond subjectively to their current situation specifically in accountancy. In this industry, the careers available typically grant to those who work within them the needs of the first four layers of the pyramid. With self-actualization being a primary motivator thereafter, a plateaued employee may experience a lack of motivation significantly worse if they correlate self-actualization with an eventual promotion. If that employee fails to see an opportunity for promotion, they may be more prone to leaving in an attempt to experience self-actualization through an advanced role. As far as evaluating and managing one's own performance is concerned, this is another subjective experience because it is based on one fulfilling their own perceived potential. Self-actualization is linked to performance management because the basis for how one manages their own performance will finally fulfill their own potential, a self-fulfilling prophecy, and possible career path (Eden, 1992).

CHAPTER 3 HIERARCHICAL CAREER PLATEAU

For the purposes of this research, hierarchical career plateau is defined by the stalling of a career and not experiencing a promotion (Smith-Ruig, 2009). If one is experiencing an unusual amount of time within their role at a company, they are experiencing hierarchical career plateau. Characterizing time in a certain position as unusual is dependent on the position they are fulfilling. For example, promotions early in a career are generally more frequent than later promotions. This is due to the quantity of positions at each level within a firm and the abilities necessary of those who fulfill the duties of senior level employees, which are more detailed or broad, and perhaps based on political savvy.

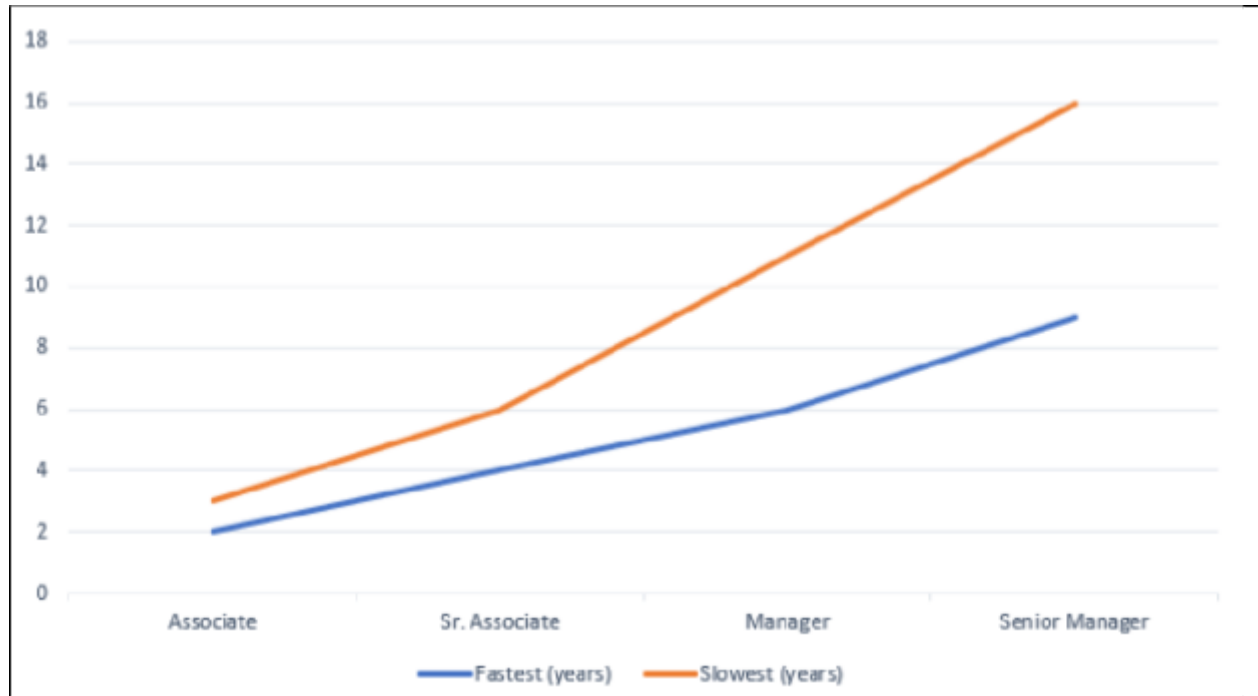
Therefore, career plateau can most visibly be seen within the structure of a firm by the titles of its employees and how long they hold them. Due to their prestige and publicity, when careers at public accounting are discussed many think of and desire to be a part of the Big 4. All four of these firms are among the top ten companies across all industries in hiring after college graduation. They typically begin by recruiting juniors for summer internships prior to their senior years so they can quickly assess their quality and offer them a position to begin in the subsequent summer directly following graduation.

Their desire to aggressively recruit post-graduation is notable for several reasons. Young employees immediately removed from college are more willing to do tedious, “grunt” than seasoned employees due to their lack of experience performing more desirable tasks and because of the allure of earning their first substantial salary while working within a famously large company. They are more likely to see themselves at the bottom of a substantial ladder for growing their career and are more willing to do less desirable tasks.

Younger employees also lack the same quantity of factors contributing towards their aforementioned Hierarchy of Needs as described by Maslow. For example, given that the average age of first-time parenthood is 31 for fathers and 26 for mothers, employees straight from college are much less likely to have familial responsibilities occupying their mind (Bui & Miller, 2018). With fewer needs and above average salaries, they are much more likely to be satisfied within their role. Coupled with the allure of working at a big firm and the potential to earn higher salaries and promotions in the future, hiring young employees allows Big 4 firms to maintain a workforce of motivated and hard-working associates.

STRATIFIED FIRM EMPLOYEE MOVEMENT

The typical progression for an accountant at a Big 4 firm is stratified and hierarchical. Each position that one ascends to leads to greater pay and responsibilities. If one enters a Big 4 firm directly following graduation, he or she will have an entry level role typically labeled as an “associate”. Following this position, they would ascend to roles with titles identical or similar to the following: senior associate, manager, senior manager and partner. Table 4 charts the typical time it would take for one to assume each position.

Table 4. *Time versus Position at Big 4 Firm*

Data from University of Arizona (2012)

The blue and orange lines within Table 4 represent the possible career tracks one could experience while working within the Big 4 structure. The blue line shows the fastest time one could see themselves accelerate in leadership if they enter straight after graduation whereas the orange line indicates the slowest progression. These results show that while on the fastest possible track, one could find themselves in a consistent progression of 2-3 years to reach each role. The orange line however represents the much more likely track where it takes longer for one to reach the more senior positions of leadership compared to the lower ranking roles of associate and senior associate. While the difference in years between the first two roles is just 3 years at most, the potential difference between the third and fourth roles in order can be as many as 6 years. This stagnation in a role where the work can be both monotonous and extremely

stressful leads not just to the clear hierarchical career plateau, but also would likely bring about an emotional one. Based on this data, one would suggest an objective structural or hierarchical plateau in the accounting field may be greater than 6 years. If one is in a job for greater than that length of time, one may be experiencing career plateau.

LATERAL MOVEMENT

Within a firm, a lateral move or transfer can occur when one switches positions to work a job with similar ranking on a different team or line of business. An employee can choose to do this for reasons including finding new knowledge, avoiding content plateau, or hoping that more diverse experience can lead to future promotion. A lateral move can also be defined as accepting a position outside of the firm one is currently working in that is similar to the one that was previously held (Newquist, 2018). An example of this would be an associate at KPMG accepting another associate position at PwC. He or she would be switching companies but have a similar level of seniority and responsibility at their new firm.

Exit opportunities from Big 4 Accounting are oftentimes the product of career plateau. The clientele of the Big 4 are typically firms in the Fortune 500 or 100, so the work experience and accounts they handle are large. Handling this complex work makes Big 4 employees, especially those in positions of leadership, prime candidates for excellent exit opportunities as smaller companies will deem them capable of performing at a high level in-house.

An exit opportunity can manifest itself in several ways. Due to the complexities of the job of a Big 4 accountant, many firms will reach out to them to recruit for new, in-house talent. A very common way for a company to evaluate and later pursue a talent to bring in-house is if they have worked for them before. Firms like Google and Apple hire Big 4 firms to conduct their auditing for the end of the year, and through this process they can become accustomed to

working with particular auditors. If they enjoy working with them enough, they may look to recruit them to work in-house so they have access to their talent on a consistent basis. This can be appealing for a client like Google or Apple because it can be much cheaper to pay them on salary throughout the year as opposed to contracting them during busy seasons.

These exit opportunities can be extremely appealing for a Big 4 accountant due to a couple factors. First, they can provide better work life balance for employees. Those who work within the Big 4 structure travel often and typically work over 40 hours a week especially during busy seasons (Mehta, 2019). One who accepts an exit opportunity to work within a company to conduct consulting and tax work in-house solely will have improved hours. Secondly, working in-house will allow an accountant to work on the same financial reporting repeatedly. This can make their job a lot easier as they will become accustomed to the types of accounts receivable and payable that a firm handles, and they will be focused on the reporting of one industry. Lateral movement allows one to consider taking opportunities of great interest and can be a product of job dissatisfaction or coping with career plateau.

UNSTRUCTURED CAREER PLATEAU

For this research, an unstructured career is defined as one where the employee is not within a strict firm structure where their standing can be clearly indicated by their role (Gagnon, 2018). When discussing career plateau in accountancy, it is important to also consider the less structured careers in accounting. While the Big 4 presents a very structured career environment for accountants, the career paths with less structure, like working for a small accounting firm or owning your own practice, present different variations to the plateaus mentioned in the introduction.

A hierarchical plateau in someone's solo or own practice will be defined very differently

than when one is working within a firm. Since the accountant is essentially acting within the same position at all times, their hierarchical plateau could be measured in two ways. First, revenue could be a proper form of measure. If the solo practice is bringing in more revenue each year, the accountant can be seen as elevating their positioning in a hierarchical sense. Secondly, if their volume requires them to hire more staff, their career growth can be measured by that total. Finally, a method of measurement could be the quantity of clients. Since accounting work is typically done for clients on a yearly and recurring basis, this method of quantifying career growth could be very accurate. Unstructured accounting work is significant to consider when evaluating career plateau because typical indicators of hierarchical and content plateau, as well as career success, may be different in these types of positions as opposed to more structured jobs like working at a Big 4 company.

IMPACT OF CPA

The role of the CPA, Certified Public Accountant, within the Big 4 firm is changing over time. As the review of historical data and compliance becomes faster with developing technology, the jobs of CPAs become quicker and easier to complete. Consequently, the role of the CPA has shifted into more of an advisory function and away from simply being a reporter of historical data. Since the work of a CPA is changing, being a CPA is important now more so because of the knowledge one gains while earning one.

CPA's now have to be capable of being business partners and change agents for their clients. Especially as one seeks to move into positions involving more responsibility, he or she must be capable of taking on multidisciplinary responsibility as well as contributing positively to discussions about the future of their client's or own firm. As technology accelerates the changing business landscape, this ability to be capable of initiating change is even more imperative than

heightened knowledge in one subject area.

While the merits of earning a CPA can be outweighed by the ability to take on responsibilities across many disciplines, the advantage of being a CPA cannot be understated. First, being a CPA directly correlates with added working experience and a general breadth of knowledge in accounting. Attaining a CPA requires over 150 credit hours of education, much of which must be within accounting and finance, as well as work experience (Gagnon, 2018). Additionally, one's knowledge is assessed in the exams prior to applying for the license so becoming a CPA requires hours of education, relevant work experience and critical thinking abilities that can only positively affect one's career and ability to avoid hierarchical career plateau (Johnson, 2018).

The connection to avoiding a hierarchical career plateau is significant as well as it grants one the ability to credibly own and operate their own accounting practice. While it can be difficult to initiate a self-sustaining accountant practice, doing so after already working with a firm can significantly raise the ceiling of one's own ability to be satisfied with their career. While they may require more work during the initial formation of the firm, owning an accounting practice removes the direct restraints on earnings potential that exist when working a salaried position at a firm. It will not grant the safety and security needs that exist on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, however, if one is already in stable positioning in their career and can afford to take risks, it can aid the pursuit for the needs existing higher on the pyramid, that is self-actualization and esteem.

It is this avoidance of career plateau that can make pursuing an unstructured accounting career so alluring. Being a CPA who owns their own practice grants the autonomy to take ownership over their career and work diligently to avoid any type of career plateau. For example,

one who is a CPA working within a Big 4 firm can be working hard to save money to pursue opening their own practice. By opening their own practice, they can avoid the hierarchical and content plateaus they may have faced had he or she stayed within the stratified Big 4 promotional structure. In the end, being a CPA allows significantly more flexibility while finding ways to avoid plateauing in accountancy.

CHAPTER 4 MINORITIES IN ACCOUNTING AND CAREER PLATEAU

For the purposes of this research, the following terms are defined. The titles, “staff professionals in accounting and finance functions” or “professional staff” are those who work in accounting and finance functions at any accounting firm under the jurisdiction of the AICPA. Those who work at these same firms and are CPAs fall under the category of CPA used in Tables 7 and 11. Finally, Partners are those who hold the title of Partner or Managing Partner at all of these same firms.

The accounting profession historically has been dominated by white males in almost every metric. In 1969, just 0.15% of all CPAs were African American which equates to fewer than 150 individuals. To combat the racial inequality in the industry, the AICPA launched the Committee on Recruitment from Minority Groups and this vastly supported bringing diversity into the profession. Between 1976 and 1989, the number of African Americans in major CPA firms grew by 43% (AICPA, 2019).

Minority representation as professional staff has improved significantly at CPA firms. In 1995, minorities represented just 8% of all professional staff at accounting firms whereas in 2018, this number jumped to 29% as indicated in Table 5 (AICPA, 2019).

Table 5. *Ethnicities of Staff Professionals in Accounting and Finance Functions*

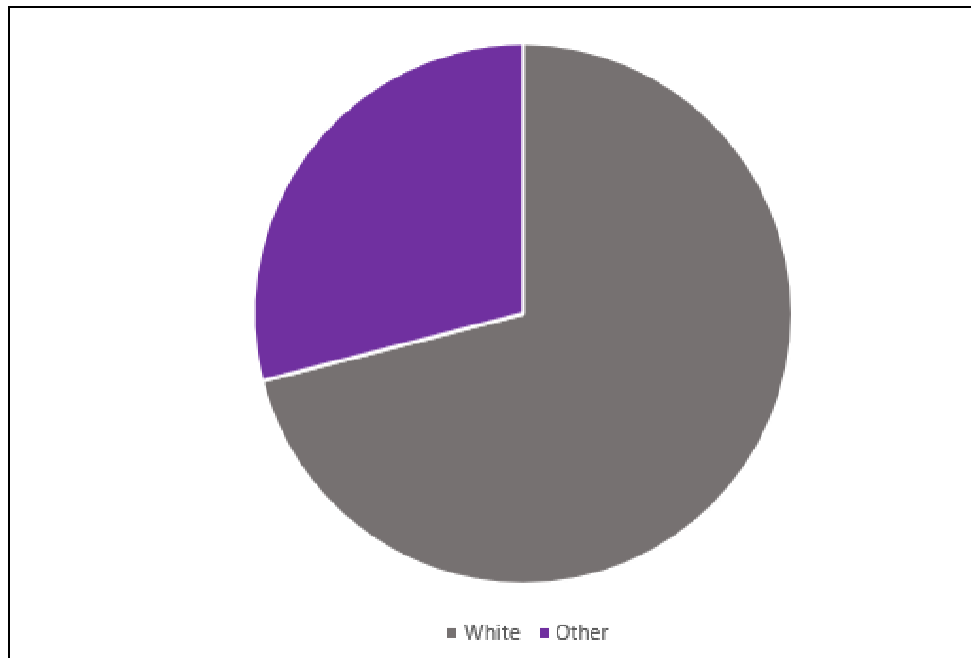


Table from AICPA (2019)

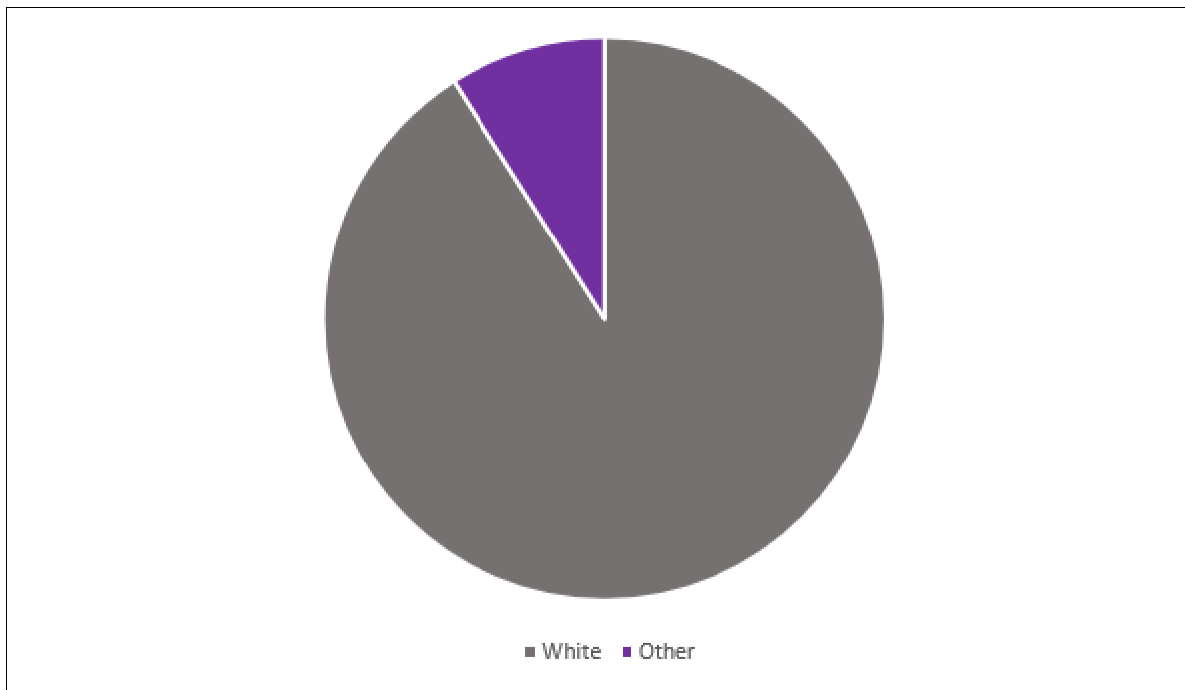
While minorities are still underrepresented within CPA firms, the increase suggests further improvement is possible when the AICPA takes action as they did in the late 20th century. More opportunities like having diverse BIPOC alumni of universities who work at CPA firms return to their alma mater to recruit more similar candidates is needed.

Furthermore, in the 21st century, the racial parity in accounting is improving through high education. In the 2006 to 2007 school year, just 5% of bachelor's and master's graduates in accounting were Latino, but now this figure stands at 16% much closer to the percentage of Latinos in the United States as a whole at 18% (AICPA, 2019).

While the figures for professional staff in general have drastically improved, minorities have not maintained a similar percentage in the role of partner. As indicated in Table 6 below, in 2018 underrepresented minorities accounted for just 9% of the partners at CPA firms. Setting a

precedent as members of professional staff will certainly bode well for future diverse candidates, but this lack of representation in the more significant positions of leadership has and will continue to perpetuate the existing career plateau for minorities in accounting. Not seeing diverse individuals in positions of power will only enforce the belief that it may not be possible for minorities to reach partner status and as a result, will make them stagnant in their roles or encourage the acceptance of exit opportunities.

Table 6. *Ethnicities of Partners at CPA Firms*

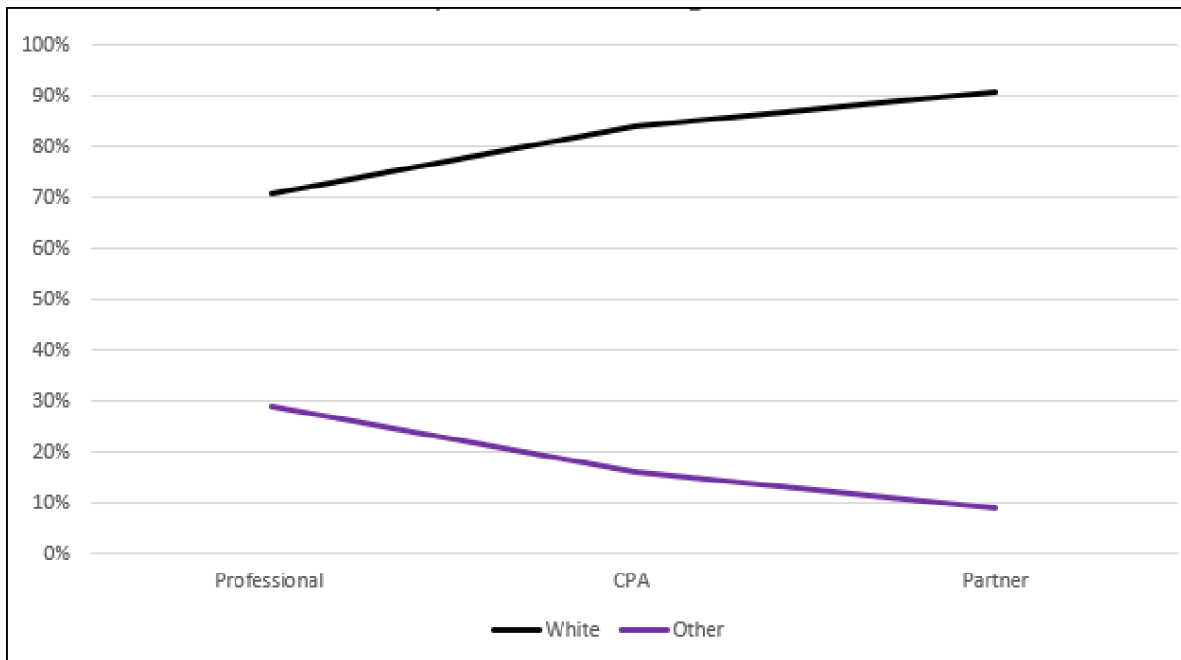


Taken from AICPA (2019)

The stark contrast in leadership role versus diverse status is emphasized even further below in Table 7. This data draws from the same 2018 data used in Table 6 but instead plots position compared to percentage of representation (AICPA, 2019). General professional staff in a finance or accounting function is where the disparity between white and minority status is closest.

As CPA ownership and partner status is attained, the disparity grows as the line graphs drift further from one another. Recognizing this difference is significant because of the impact it has on career plateau for minorities in accountancy. These figures show that fewer minorities attain CPAs and partner status and this is largely a product of the career plateau or potential racism on part of partners making promotional decisions that clearly hinders them. The AICPA should find a way to actively promote the earning of CPAs to minority individuals and determine why minorities are less likely to pursue CPAs and the higher ranks within accountancy. If the issue is financing education, Big 4 firms should actively promote the tuition reimbursement benefit so that minorities are aware they exist. If the issue is experience, Big 4 firms should actively mentor minorities so that they have client or project experiences that allow them to thrive and grow developmentally in their careers. This 70% discrepancy between white and minority CPA earners is an embarrassment to the profession.

Table 7. *Ethnicity versus Position at CPA Firms*

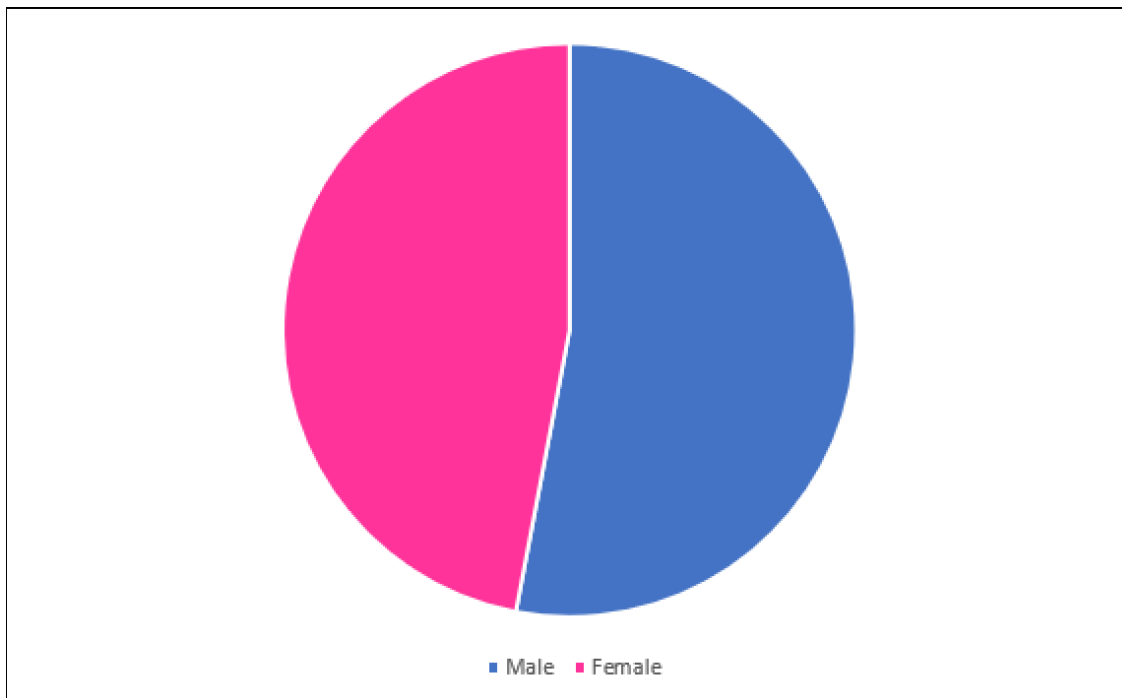


Data from AICPA (2019)

IMPACT ON WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING

Women have experienced dynamic shifts in their positioning at CPA firms. In 1970 women were awarded just 10% of bachelor's degrees in accounting compared to 56% in the year 2000. In 2018, women comprised 47% of all professional staff in accounting and finance functions as represented in the Table 8. Their ability to attain higher levels of education has led to their ability to become professional staff members working in accounting and finance functions at CPA firms (Chivers, 2012).

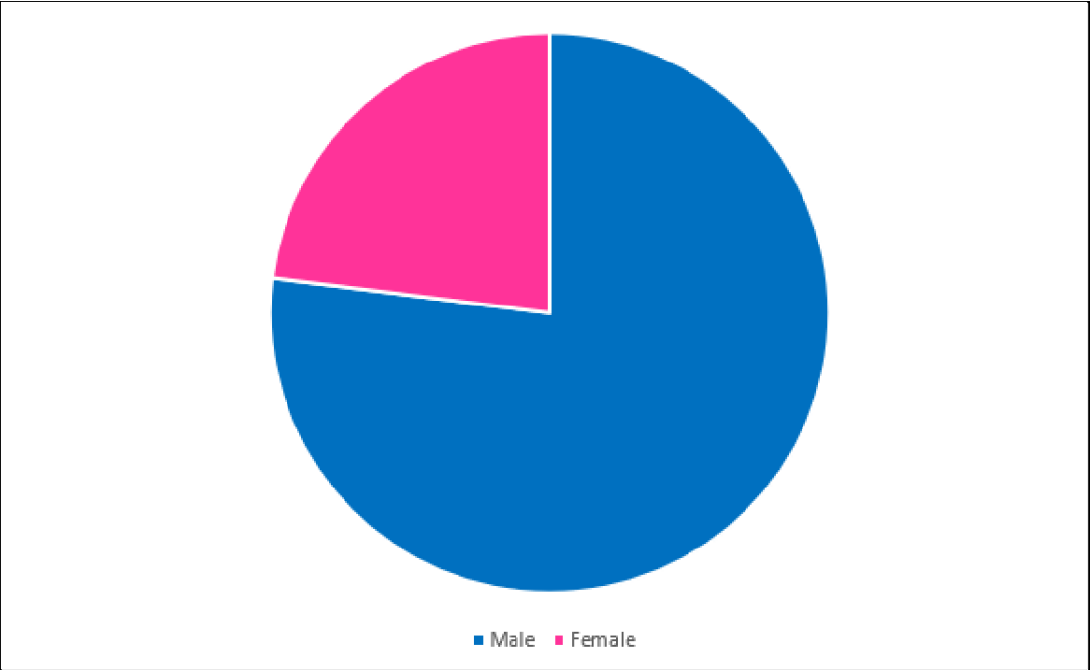
Table 8. *Genders of Professional Staff at CPA Firms*



Taken from AICPA (2019)

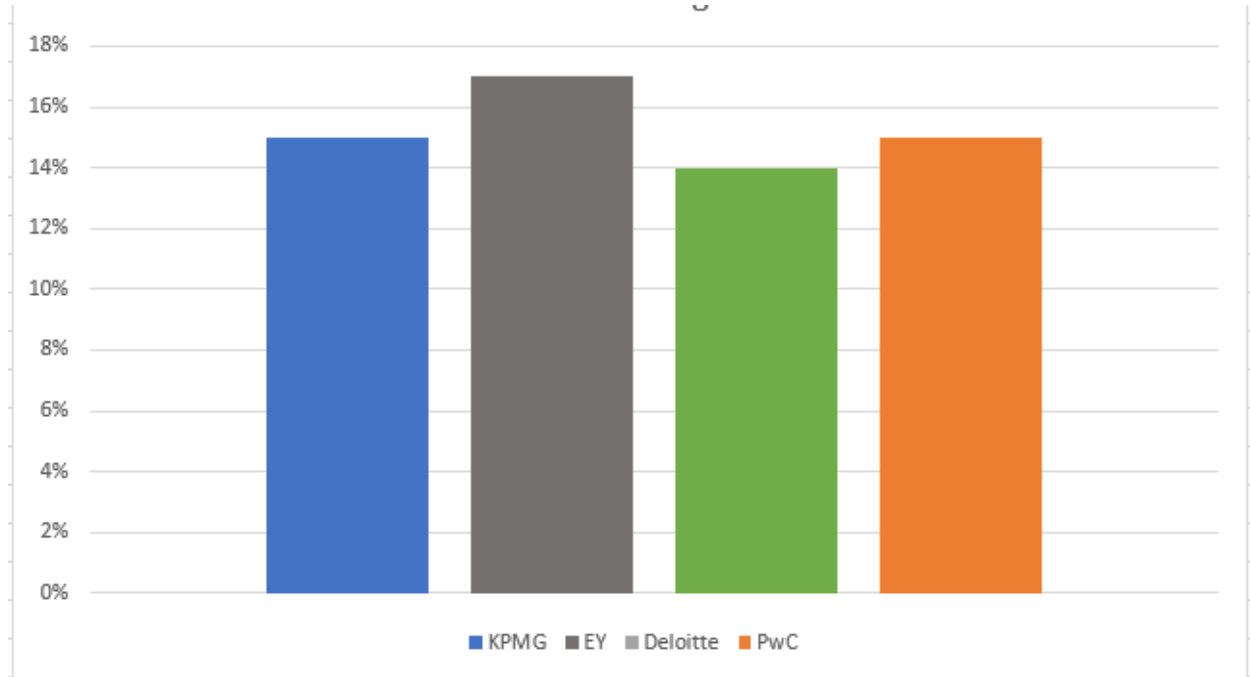
The progress for women tails off drastically when examining those who actually hold positions of significant leadership at CPA firms. The disparity between men and women as partners at CPA firms is displayed in Table 9.

Table 9. Gender of Partners at CPA Firms



Taken from AICPA (2019)

Just 23% of all partners at CPA firms are women and the averages are worse within the Big 4. Table 10 represents data collected on the percentage of partners at Big 4 firms who are women. The total quantity of partners is as low as 549 at Ernst and Young and as large as 990 at Deloitte (Chivers, 2012).

Table 10. *Percentage of Female Big 4 Partners*

Data taken from Chivers (2012)

As displayed in Table 10, the percentage of partners who are women is below 20% at each of the Big 4 firms. In fact, the average is 15% or less at all four firms except for EY where 17% of the Big 4 firms (Newquist, 2018). As mentioned in prior sections, the Big 4 often sets the standards for excellence in many aspects of accounting. With few women in positions of influence over the direction of the firms, decision making will continue to have few diverse perspectives taken into consideration. Additionally, with few women as partners, other women within the firms have less role models to look to when looking for mentorship and as a result, their career plateaus will only grow worse. While men and women differ by just a few percentage points early in their accounting careers, by the time they make partner, this disparity becomes greater than 25%. Are women becoming more plateaued than men, or are they leaving as they do not see opportunities for becoming partners in the future? The AICPA needs to

investigate this matter and determine whether women, much like minorities, are being railroaded out of the profession, or are there other structural or personal issues that may account for these differences.

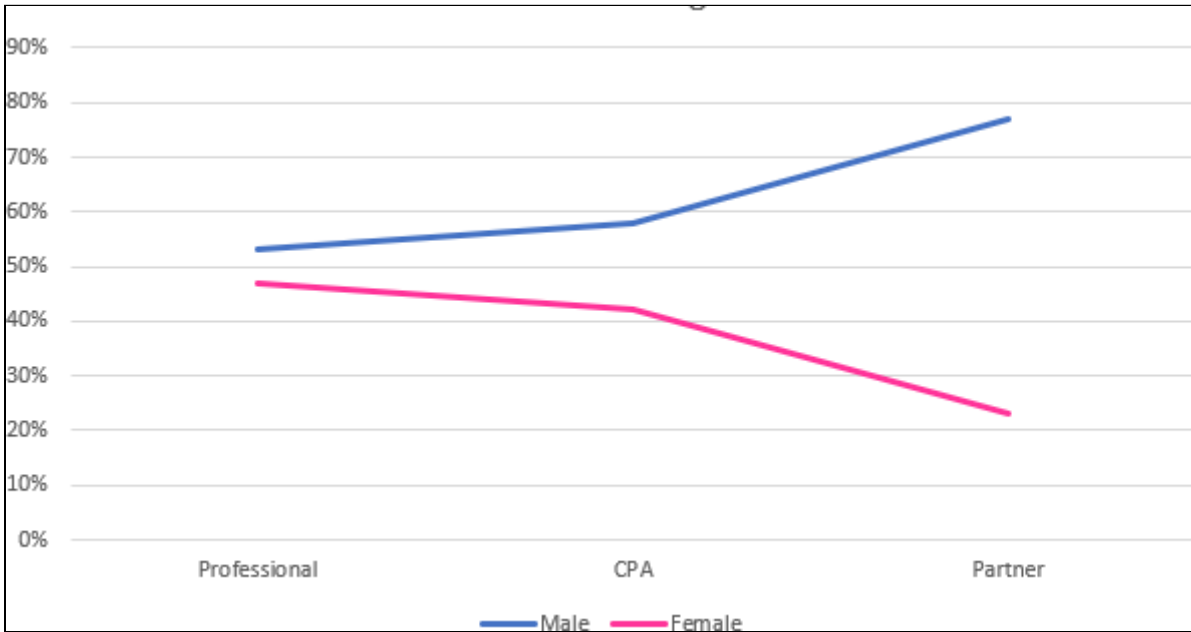
All of these figures regarding minority positioning at CPA firms factor heavily into the discussion of career plateau because of their tie into the subjective and life plateaus. The inability for minorities to see few if any other minorities in positions of power at CPA firms can make it difficult for them to ever envision themselves attaining a similar opportunity. This can prevent them from taking the necessary steps to pursue reaching partner status for any number of reasons. They may experience difficulty or even fear when trying to connect genuinely with people in positions of leadership at their firm because of the lack of shared life experience. Not being able to even see many like themselves in elevated roles can make one feel as though those opportunities are not available to them. It then becomes significantly more attractive to take an exit opportunity into a lateral role rather than to wait for a promotion that appears unlikely. While the AICPA has created some programs to promote opportunities for minorities in accounting, firms can also step forward to create their own programs before minorities are hired like career days or after they are hired like mentorship and networking lunches (AICPA, 2021).

For women specifically, their plateau is affected by additional factors. The majority of Big 4 firms hire college graduates to start into their stratified leadership programs. If they are to complete their CPA coursework before starting within the Big 4, most women would be entering around the ages of 23-25 years old. Women with graduate or professional degrees have the highest birth rate in the United States, and seeing that this approximates the educational attainment of those who enter the Big 4, it can make maintaining stratified progression to partner difficult (Birth Rate by Educational Attainment of Mother, 2021). The ideal child-bearing ages are 20-35 years old, so if a woman were to

attempt to work within the Big 4 structure for the 10-13 years it would take to reach partner status, they would then be outside of this age group if they wanted to have children afterwards (Tirun-Tudor, 2018).

The stress and time it takes to work at a Big 4 CPA firm also makes it difficult to balance the responsibilities of being a mother or father to a young child. The competitive environment of working in these positions, particularly during the quarter of tax season in accounting, makes the idea of taking maternity leave and then attempting to eventually return unattractive. This factor, coupled with the opportunity to take a position elsewhere with a Big 4 name on one's resume, can make it more appealing to make a lateral move to a firm with a less stressful and competitive environment.

The impact these factors have as careers are progressed is displayed in Table 11. This graph compares men and women as their careers are moved forward at CPA firms. As professional staff members, the percentages are close. To attain a CPA, one needs work experience and more education and while the disparity is small, it is still greater than simply being a professional staff member in an accounting and finance function. (Ng et al., 2017). Finally, the dramatic shift occurs at the level of partner largely due to the aforementioned factors.

Table 11. *Gender versus Positioning at Big 4 Accounting Firms*

Data from AICPA (2019)

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

This research suggests that hierarchical, structural, content and life plateau are present in accountancy. Within the structure of the Big 4, the experiences of hierarchical career plateau are perpetuated by the stratified progression that individuals experience upon being hired.

Particularly since one is hired with a class of individuals they have known since they were interns at 20-22 years old, it is inevitable that hires are looking over their shoulders at how their peers are progressing throughout their careers entering roles with similar workloads and titles.

This competitive environment also perpetuates the life career plateaus that employees experience. Because the hiring schedule brings in large quantities of recruits directly following graduation, it is evident within a few years who is preferred and performing best in their roles and who else is struggling. This, coupled with stressful work itself, can lead to prolonged stagnation within a position and a potential lateral move to leave the firm or move in-house

within another business.

The psychological factors to experiencing plateau were significant to this research because of their tie-in with hierarchical career plateau and consequent effect on consequent effects on emotions associated with career plateaus. The lucrative aspects of attaining a Big 4 job can fulfill some of the existing needs that a college graduate would have but as needs evolve later in one's career, their job satisfaction inevitably decreases. Particularly if this growing change in needs is compounded with a hierarchical plateau, one's career plateau becomes further emphasized.

The minority experience was particularly important to note as a part of this study because of the connection it has to the career plateaus. While they are already underrepresented, the ones who are able to join major public accounting firms may also experience significant career plateau. As evidenced in this research, several factors have led to an exacerbated career plateau experience for minorities. Due in part to limits on their opportunity for education in years past, there are significantly less minorities currently holding positions of leadership within the major public accounting firms. This lack of representation can lead to limited motivation for attaining the higher positions of leadership as not seeing minorities in positions of power can lead to a lack of feeling that it can be achieved. The stratified nature of achieving partner status and its tie-in with ideal child-bearing ages can prevent women who desire families from ever having the opportunity to reach partner status prior to having children. Overall, this minority experience was a very significant finding of the research as understanding the factors that perpetuate career plateaus for minorities and women can aid major public accounting firms in understanding the problems associated with their progression and combating these problems in order for women and minorities to move forward.

CONCLUSIONS

To combat career plateau, schools can emphasize a multidisciplinary approach to their education in accountancy. This multidisciplinary approach can be carried out in many ways including pairing accounting classes with additional technological, writing, management or other disciplines that can complement accounting. Content plateau affects those who are burdened by monotonous tasks at work. If an accountant can show the ability to complete a wider variety of work, their manager may grant them the opportunity to work on projects a typical accountant may not be offered. For example, if an accountant who typically handles auditing also shows the ability to connect genuinely with clients, then an employer may give them opportunities within consulting as well. This will give the employee a wider variety of duties throughout the year and aid them in avoiding a content plateau.

Big 4 firms can also work to silo their employees less in one area or line of their business. Firms like JP Morgan offer rotational programs to entry level employees granting them an opportunity to learn more about the firm as a whole (JPMorgan Chase & Co, 2021). This could benefit firms and employees in a handful of ways. First, it allows a firm to see what environment their hiree thrives in best. Getting to see an employee work different lines of business with different sets of team members can only benefit an employer with a more robust employee, allowing them to be moved forward in the hierarchy.

For the employee, they successfully avoid a content plateau while getting more time to find out what their passion is within the firm. After rotating, they could have the opportunity to work in their preferred line of business. This could allow them a better opportunity to fulfill a goal of self-actualization, avoid a content plateau, and be in an environment where they experience improved career growth and thus combat hierarchical career plateau. A current

initiative of the AICPA that should be furthered is their Accounting Scholars Leadership Workshop (ASLW). This is an annual invitational program for minority accounting students seeking the CPA designation where they can strengthen their professional skills and gain a better understanding of what possibilities they will have after earning their CPA (AICPA, 2021). Moving forward, the AICPA could make this a semiannual or quarterly program and create a similar event for women.

Smaller firms can create benchmarks for employees to measure their growth. Without the stratified career growth of a Big 4 firm, accountants at smaller firms could be more prone to experiencing hierarchical career plateau due to the lack of positions to which to elevate. Finding a way to measure an employee's growth can grant them set ways to take ownership of their ability to elevate their positioning at a small firm allowing them to better avoid both hierarchical and content career plateau.

FURTHER RESEARCH

One area where further research on career plateau in accountancy can be productive is researching the impact that other graduate degrees have on individuals who work in this field. As the need for multidisciplinary base knowledge becomes more prevalent, those who hold degrees in other areas of business can have an advantage. Whether it be an MBA, MS or even a PHD, having certifiable experience and knowledge in other areas of business can make an individual a much more valuable asset to a firm and thus more likely to be promoted and compensated as such. With a CPA, these other degrees can help an accountant if they are working with clients from specific fields as they may hold an additional degree in their client's area of business.

Where having a wider breadth of knowledge can prove to be most valuable to career advancement is in the area of technology. As firms become increasingly multinational, the

accountants who perform their audits and business consulting have to be capable of harnessing larger sums of complex data and reading them into their software for computations. Research may suggest that those who currently hold technology backgrounds in addition to their accountancy experience are much less prone to experiencing career plateau as they are more prepared to perform the complex work that the field now has and will continue to have moving forward (Pepe, 2011).

Another set of statistics that would be relevant here could be the turnover rate for minority employees within the Big 4. While this paper discusses statistics relating to the percent of Staff Professionals, CPA's and Partners who are of minority status, there is no discussion as to how many leave CPA firms. If the turnover rate is more significant for minorities than their white coworkers, this could be another reason for their career plateau in accountancy.

Further research could investigate the minority and female experience in other white-collar careers where stratified progression is common. The Big 4 company structure and job titles are also common to the legal profession and it would be extremely interesting to see if the minority and female experience is similar here. If so, this finding would suggest that minorities could be at a current disadvantage in professions where graduate work is required and job growth moves in a very linear fashion.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Victor B. Ficarra

vbficarra@gmail.com

Education

Pennsylvania State University

Spring 2021

Bachelor's of Science in Business

Minors in Global and International Studies and Civic and Community

Engagement Schreyer Honors Scholar

Research Experience

“Utilizing Machine Learning to Predict Fantasy Football Player Performance”

- Under Dr. Joseph Mahoney (Summer 2019)
- Research sponsored by Erickson, MC REU, and NSF funds
- Wrote a neural network in Python to solve a stochastic knapsack problem based around Daily Fantasy Sports

“Irish Study Abroad: Prospects for Multinational Firms Investing in Ireland”

- Under Dr. Veronica Godshalk (Spring 2019)
- Analyzed the impact of international tax policies on the practices of multinational technology firms
- Completed interviews with Irish businessmen and the Limerick Chamber of Commerce
- Awarded 1st place in Enterprise category at the EURECA research competition

Honors and Awards

- USCAA All Academic Team (2019 - Current)
- PSUAC All Academic Team (2018 - Current)
- Dean's List (2017 - Current)
- President's Freshman Award (2018)