

I AM READY BUT NOT MOVING

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Abstract

The phrase “I am ready but not moving” reflects a critical HR challenge in which employees who possess the required skills, experience, and readiness for career growth remain immobile in their roles. This study examines the HR dimensions of employee immobility, highlighting factors such as weak succession planning, opaque promotion systems, inconsistent performance management, favoritism, godfathers, and underutilization of talent. This paper emphasizes the importance of merit-based systems, transparent processes, and talent development in fostering career mobility and organizational trust by exploring the causes, consequences, and HR-driven solutions.

Introduction

Career growth is the cornerstone of employee motivation, retention, and performance. However, many employees report feeling prepared for advancement but unable to move forward. This paradox, expressed as “I am ready but not moving,” has become increasingly significant in modern organizations. From an HR perspective, stagnation is a structural challenge with implications for productivity, morale, and long-term sustainability. This introduction outlines the problem, highlights its HR relevance, and situates it within broader debates on employee engagement and organizational growth.

Literature Background

The issue of career stagnation has been extensively discussed in the literature on human resources and organizational behavior. Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory (1959) emphasizes that while extrinsic factors, such as pay and working conditions, may prevent employee dissatisfaction, intrinsic motivators, such as recognition and advancement, drive employee satisfaction and performance. Employees who are “ready but not moving” often lack access to these intrinsic motivators. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) also provides insight: career growth is directly related to esteem and self-actualization needs. Employees experience unmet higher-level needs when organizations fail to provide upward mobility, leading to disengagement. The career plateau theory (Ference, Stoner, & Warren, 1977) specifically addresses situations where employees perceive limited opportunities for upward movement, resulting in reduced motivation and increased turnover intent. Additionally, Adams’ equity theory (1963) emphasizes the importance of fairness in promotion systems. Favoritism or bias perceptions in promotion decisions intensify the feeling of being “stuck.”

Empirical studies (e.g., Ghosh et al., 2013; Allen & Katz, 1986) have confirmed that stagnation is correlated with lower organizational commitment, reduced job satisfaction, and higher voluntary turnover rates. Within the HR discipline, solutions to these challenges include succession planning, performance management, and talent development frameworks.

Further contributions in HR literature demonstrate how stagnation impacts not only individual careers but also organizational outcomes. For example, Hall (1976) emphasized the “protean career” concept, where individuals seek continuous growth and self-directed development. In organizations with rigid or opaque promotion systems, employees with protean orientations often become dissatisfied. Similarly, Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1980) illustrates how career development is an evolving process influenced by organizational opportunities; a lack of progression interrupts this trajectory and contributes to the plateau effect. Contemporary HR research emphasizes the role of psychological contracts in employee mobility. Rousseau (1995) argued that when employees perceive broken promises, such as growth expectations that never materialize, they develop mistrust and disengagement. More recent studies (e.g., Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002) have shown that perceived violations of career-related psychological contracts increase turnover intentions. The cross-cultural perspectives provide additional insights. Promotion delays may be tolerated in collectivist contexts due to respect for hierarchy, but in individualistic cultures, employees are more likely to exit when growth is stalled. HR must contextualize promotion and succession frameworks to cultural settings while maintaining fairness.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, evidence-based approach by reviewing theoretical models and empirical studies in human resource management (HRM). This study synthesizes existing literature, HR frameworks, and case examples from both private and public sector organizations. The method is a structured literature review combined with HR practice analysis, focusing on career stagnation causes, effects, and HR interventions. In addition to secondary research, this study draws from comparative case analyses of organizations across industries, including finance, healthcare, and public administration. HR reports, CSR, organizational studies, and practitioner surveys are the sources. A thematic analysis was conducted on recurring human resources practices that contribute to or mitigate career stagnation. This methodological triangulation enhances reliability by integrating theory, practice, and evidence.

Results

The review identified five key HR-driven causes of the “I am ready but not moving” phenomenon:

1. Ineffective succession planning, where organizations fail to establish leadership pipelines.
2. Opaque and inconsistent promotion processes foster mistrust and favoritism perceptions.
3. Weak performance management systems that are overly reliant on tenure rather than competencies.
4. Gaps in talent management, including failure to identify and develop high-potential employees.
5. Cultural and behavioral challenges, such as leadership bias and nonchalant supervision.

Employee frustration, nonchalant behavior, increased turnover intentions, and erosion of trust in HR systems are the consequences. At the organizational level, stagnation leads to weaker succession pipelines, reduced innovation, and difficulties in sustaining competitiveness. Additional findings highlight that stagnation disproportionately affects mid-level managers caught between operational delivery and strategic leadership. Allen and Katz (1986) found that technical experts often experience plateauing when leadership development opportunities do not complement their specialized skills. Furthermore, organizations that lack mobility frameworks struggle to laterally reallocate talent, causing career progression bottlenecks.

Transparent internal job postings and structured talent reviews in multinational corporations significantly reduce perceptions of stagnation (Cappelli, 2008). In contrast, organizations with highly politicized human resources (HR) systems demonstrate higher rates of voluntary turnover and talent drain.

Discussion

From an HR standpoint, addressing career stagnation requires systemic reforms. Succession planning must be institutionalized to ensure that employees with potential are prepared for advancement. Transparent promotion frameworks are vital to restore trust, and competency-based systems that align career growth with organizational strategy are required. Performance management should be evidence-driven, incorporating 360-degree feedback and measurable outputs rather than tenure or personal biases. Employee empowerment through mentoring, strategic training, coaching, and internal mobility platforms plays a critical role in reducing stagnation. Furthermore, HR must act as the custodian of fairness by ensuring accountability in talent decisions. These approaches align with the best human capital management practices globally and support sustainable employee engagement. Comparative analysis with international organizations demonstrates that firms with strong succession systems and clear career pathways report higher engagement, lower turnover, and improved organizational outcomes (Cappelli, 2008). Thus, implementing evidence-based HR interventions can transform the employee experience from stagnation to progression. The balance between internal promotions and external recruitment is a key dimension of this discussion. While external hiring may introduce new perspectives, over-reliance undermines internal employee morale. Therefore, HR must strike a balance by integrating internal succession with selective external hiring. Equity theory further suggests that visible fairness in these decisions is crucial for sustaining trust. Another critical HR implication concerns diversity and inclusion. Women and minority employees often report higher levels of stagnation because of systemic barriers in promotion pipelines (Catalyst, 2020). Thus, management and HR must incorporate inclusive talent practices to ensure equitable mobility. This includes bias training for managers, transparent promotion panels, and sponsorship programs.

Conclusion

The expression “I am ready but not moving” captures the silent frustration of employees facing career stagnation. In this sense, it refers to a situation where employees who have reached professional readiness for higher responsibilities are denied advancement due to external influence rather than merit. Instead of recognizing expertise, experience, or performance, connections and godfathers dictate who reaches the career ladder’s peak. Experts remain frozen at mid-level or technical roles, whereas less competent but politically connected employees are elevated. By design, this creates a career plateau in which employees are *ready but not moving* because influence replaces meritocracy in succession and promotion decisions. This study demonstrates that the issue is not employee readinesses but rather a systemic barrier where organizational politics, favoritism, and godfathers restrict advancement. The issue lies in the system, not the individual, where influence replaces expertise, and career progression becomes dependent on patronage rather than performance.

The challenge for HR is to design transparent, fair, and competency-driven systems that align organizational needs with employee aspirations. Organizations create environments where readiness is matched with opportunity, driving both individual fulfillment and organizational performance. The expanded analysis underscores that career stagnation is both a cultural and HR system challenge. Sustainable solutions require the integration of succession planning, CBP management, diversity initiatives, and digital tools. By addressing these issues holistically, HR can transform the narrative from stagnation to career agility, ensuring that employees who are ready indeed have opportunities to move.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in the development of this manuscript.

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