



Ambition and subjective career success: A nonlinear relationship

Jingyi Wei^{*}, Sow Hup Joanne Chan, Fangzhou Lin

Faculty of Business Administration, University of Macau, Macau

1. Introduction

In today's boundaryless career world, traditional career trajectories, such as climbing the corporate ladder within a single company, no longer exclusively define success (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Instead, subjective factors like values, personal fulfillment, and professional growth are integral to evaluating a successful career (Guan et al., 2019). In other words, Subjective Career Success (SCS) is emphasized in a contemporary context (Spurk et al., 2019).

Despite scholarly efforts to identify the drivers behind one's SCS, there is no consensus on whether ambition promotes or hinders SCS (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021). This gap is unfortunate because the lack of consensus on the ambition-SCS relationship potentially hampers scholars and practitioners from devising practices that promote individuals' satisfaction in their careers.

Ambition, defined as "the persistent and generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment" (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012, p. 759), has been linked to success in education, politics, sports, and life in general (e.g., Gulzar, 2021; Haider & von Stumm, 2022). Regarding its importance to career success, literature widely acknowledges the positive impact of ambition on Objective Career Success (OCS), referring to externally measurable achievements such as salary and promotions (Arthur et al., 2005).

However, findings remain inconsistent regarding the relationship between ambition and SCS (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021), defined as one's subjective evaluation of personally meaningful career progress, such as competence, recognition from respected individuals, and opportunities for learning (Heslin, 2005). Some existing studies report a negative correlation between ambition and SCS (Judge et al., 1995; Otto et al., 2017), while others find positive associations (El Baroudi et al., 2017; Hirschi & Spurk, 2021; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012), or no significant correlation (Zimmerman et al., 2012).

To help individuals navigate career success that values subjective facets, the present study draws on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to show a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ambition and SCS. The COR theory posits that

individuals are motivated to protect current resources (i.e., resource conservation motive) and acquire new resources (i.e., resource acquisition motive) (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Both competing motives play a role in underlying the ambition-SCS relationship and work together to produce a U-shaped effect of ambition on SCS.

As ambition rises, there may be an initial decline in SCS due to the prevailing influence of the resource conservation motive. However, SCS may subsequently increase as the resource acquisition motive takes precedence. Additionally, hierarchical status (i.e., one's career achievements in managerial levels and responsibilities; Abele & Spurk, 2009) holds the potential to shape the manifestation of personality traits in career outcomes. In other words, hierarchical status may moderate the impact of ambition on SCS. By introducing a novel perspective on the ambition-SCS relationship, the present study offers both theoretical and practical implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ambition and SCS

Ambition stems from underlying personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness) and perceptions of one's environment (e.g., parents' occupational prestige); it manifests as a motivational process such as pursuing education or a career, and is oriented toward achieving specific outcomes such as promotions and pay raises (Jones et al., 2017; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Previous research has yielded conflicting findings on whether ambition facilitates or hinders SCS. Some studies suggest that ambition positively predicts SCS because engagement in the intrinsically motivated process of goal pursuit enhances satisfaction (Barrick et al., 2013; Hirschi & Spurk, 2021). For instance, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) discovered that ambitious individuals achieve more in education and work, fulfilling their desires for competence. Hirschi and Spurk (2021) demonstrated that ambition, as a form of psychological-motivational capital, drives individuals to actively pursue various career goals and derive satisfaction from intrinsic accomplishments.

^{*} Corresponding author at: Faculty of Business Administration, University of Macau, Taipa, Macau
E-mail address: jingyi.wei@connect.umac.mo (J. Wei).

Conversely, some argue that ambition undermines SCS, as reflected in the adage “the more they want, the less they get”. Otto et al. (2017), using a sample of psychologists, illustrated that ambition is negatively associated with SCS, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally, as highly ambitious individuals may easily become dissatisfied with their achievements. Similarly, Judge et al. (1995) found that ambitious executives, despite attaining a certain level of objective success, tend to express dissatisfaction with career progression because their ultimate desires might never be fully realized.

2.2. COR as the underpinning theory

The present study utilizes COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to reconcile inconsistencies in the ambition-SCS relationship. According to COR theory, individuals are motivated by both a resource conservation motive, aimed at conserving existing resources, and a resource acquisition motive, focused on obtaining new resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). In this study, ambition serves as a motivational resource, reflecting the level of effort individuals expect to invest during career goal pursuit and the sustainability of that effort (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Meanwhile, SCS reflects satisfaction with existing resources, such as skills, and the potential to acquire other valuable career resources, such as learning opportunities (Janssen et al., 2021; Spurk et al., 2019).

From a resource conservation perspective, low levels of ambition correlate with high levels of SCS. Achieving SCS inherently requires resources, including time, persistence, and skills (Spurk et al., 2019). Unambitious individuals may find comfort in maintaining their current resources, such as time and attention, and may resist engaging in resource exchange for opportunity or recognition (Babalola et al., 2021; Hobfoll et al., 2018). In other words, unambitious individuals tend to be more satisfied with their current career status.

The resource acquisition perspective, as a competing mechanism, posits that high levels of ambition correlate with higher levels of SCS. First, resources appear in combination (Hobfoll et al., 2018); for example, ambitious individuals also exhibit conscientiousness and exceptional general mental ability (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). The more ambitious individuals are, the more clustered resources they have to achieve successful SCS experiences (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Second, resource gain follows a spiralling nature (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Ambitious individuals, engaged in resource gain (e.g., dedicating extra time for skill development), are likely to extend this engagement into further resource acquisition (e.g., practicing skills for personal growth) (Spurk et al., 2019). Given that SCS reflects one’s evaluation of multiple facets of career progress (Spurk et al., 2019), ambitious individuals may accumulate resources to maximize SCS facets through a resource-gain spiral (Hobfoll et al., 2018), resulting in the most appealing SCS experiences.

2.3. The nonlinear, U-shaped relationship between ambition and SCS

The competing motives work together to create a nonlinear, U-shaped impact of ambition on SCS. At low levels of ambition, individuals lack the motivational resources for accomplishments and anticipate minimal career progress (Ashby & Schoon, 2010), with the resource conservation motive dominating. Those with low ambition tend to demonstrate career self-regulation in a prohibitive manner, such as avoiding undesired losses and making mistakes (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). For instance, they may find satisfaction in holding low-paying positions and express less desire for future leadership roles (Steffens et al., 2018). Low-ambition career strategies demand fewer resources, leading individuals to find contentment in what they have conserved.

At moderate levels of ambition, individuals invest increasing motivational resources in exchange for accomplishments. The resource acquisition motive begins to outweigh the resource reservation motive, creating a turning point where the initially negative relationship between ambition and SCS turns positive. By exerting greater effort and

dedicating more time, individuals deplete their own resources to gain status, power, and control over resources (Jones et al., 2017). This resource-depleting process can raise concerns about goal attainment and lead to dissatisfaction with their current state (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012; Mento et al., 1992).

At high ambition levels, highly ambitious individuals possessing ample resources (e.g., conscientiousness and general mental ability) are better equipped to sustain effort toward their committed goals (Jones et al., 2017), with the resource acquisition motive dominating. The initial success derived from proactive career self-regulation (i.e., striving for higher-level gains, such as superiority) can lead to subsequent career crafting and ultimately greater satisfaction with career progress (Hirschi & Koen, 2021; Janssen et al., 2021).

With reference to recent research highlighting the relevance of these competing motives in understanding one’s career success (Janssen et al., 2021) and previous literature raising questions about the nonlinear effects of ambition on one’s educational prestige and occupational attainment (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012), we propose the *hypothesis 1*.

Hypothesis 1. Ambition and SCS are related in a nonlinear, U-shaped form. The highest levels of SCS will be found at low and high levels of ambition.

2.4. The moderating role of hierarchical status

We further propose that the ambition-SCS relationship is contingent upon one’s hierarchical status. Hierarchical status is defined as an individual’s career achievements in terms of managerial levels and responsibilities (Abele & Spurk, 2009). It serves as a situational moderator with the potential to shape the manifestation of personality traits in career outcomes (Heslin et al., 2019). Drawing from trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), individuals are intrinsically motivated to express traits (i.e., ambition) when presented with trait-relevant situational cues (i.e., high hierarchical status).

Individuals at higher hierarchical status often have greater access to organizational resources and broader professional networks (Singh et al., 2009), enhancing their ability to navigate challenges and positioning them better for sustained achievements in anticipated facets of career success (Janssen et al., 2021). For these individuals, pursuing ambitious goals may be associated with greater resource accumulation. In contrast, individuals at lower hierarchical status may face constraints in translating their ambitious goals into the fulfillment of career objectives (Heslin et al., 2019). Thus, we propose the *hypothesis 2*.

Hypothesis 2. Hierarchical status moderates the U-shaped relationship between ambition and SCS, such that at moderate to high levels of ambition, hierarchical status will strengthen this relationship.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedures

In February 2022, we collected data through the Chinese professional online survey platform Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn>), similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and widely used in many published studies (e.g., Miao et al., 2021). This platform offers a paid data collection service designed to help researchers invite a target audience that meets specific criteria (e.g., age, employment status) to participate in surveys. With a membership base exceeding 6.2 million individuals from diverse regions and occupations across China, this service facilitated our access to a diverse sample of working adults (i.e., full-time employees over 18 years old). We chose to use the data collection service instead of recruiting through our social network to avoid community bias.

Our final sample comprises 224 full-time working adults in mainland China. Participants provided ratings for their ambition and demographic

information at Time 1. After one week, participants were invited to participate in Time 2 of the survey, where they rated their SCS and hierarchical status. While 361 participants completed the survey at Time 1, only 224 participants provided responses at both Time 1 and Time 2, allowing for matching using their unique IDs. The two-wave approach with a 1-week interval helps mitigate common method bias (CMV; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The cover page of the survey explained the survey’s purpose, confidentiality and security of personal information, voluntary nature of participation, and rewards for participation. All participants in the final sample were informed and agreed to attend the study. The participants were predominantly aged 20–30 (62 %) and held bachelor’s degrees (80 %). Regarding their hierarchical status, 30 % were frontline employees, 40 % were junior managers, 28 % were middle-level managers, and 2 % were senior managers.

3.2. Measures

Ambition was measured using five items that measure traits related to the pursuit of success and the establishment of challenging goals (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021). Participants provided their evaluations on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale demonstrated high reliability in this study ($\alpha = 0.79$).

SCS was measured employing the widely utilized five-item Career Satisfaction Scale (Greenhaus et al., 1990). Participants rated their career satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale exhibited strong reliability in this study ($\alpha = 0.83$) and has been validated in the Chinese context (Chan et al., 2016).

4. Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables examined. As expected, ambition exhibited a positive association with SCS ($r = 0.39, p < .01$). Bivariate correlations for demographics, including age, gender, and education, did not reveal any significant associations with the focal variables (ambition and SCS). Proposed hypotheses were tested both with and without demographic controls; as the significance remained unaltered, the results were reported without controlling for demographics.

To examine Hypothesis 1, we followed the three steps proposed by Lind and Mehlum (2010) to test the nonlinear, U-shaped relationship between ambition and SCS. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis of ambition, squared ambition, hierarchical status, and the ambition–hierarchical status interaction on SCS are shown in Table 2. In Model 1 (linear model), ambition was positively and significantly related to SCS ($\beta = 0.39, p < .01$). In Model 2 (quadratic model), the quadratic term of ambition (x^2) regressed positively and significantly on SCS ($\beta = 0.15, p < .05$), indicating a curvilinear relationship between ambition and SCS. Further analysis showed that the turning point ($X = 2.44$) fell within the data range. The slope of the relationship between ambition and SCS at the higher end (+2 SD, $B = 1.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.533, 1.703]$) was significant and in the expected positive direction, while the slope at the lower end (-2SD, $B = -0.04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.514, 0.433]$) was

in the expected negative direction but not significantly different from zero. Although the results failed to support a significantly negative relationship between ambition and SCS at low levels of ambition, the significant R-square change in Model 2 (compared to Model 1) indicated that the quadratic model fitted the data better than the linear one, suggesting the existence of a nonlinear relationship between ambition and SCS. Additionally, the shape of the curve, as depicted in Fig. 1, aligns with the idea that the highest levels of SCS were found at low and high levels of ambition, while the lowest level of SCS was found at moderate levels of ambition. Therefore, these findings partially support Hypothesis 1. To further test the robustness of our finding, we included a cubic term of ambition (x^3) in the regression. The cubic term showed insignificant results ($\beta = -0.01, n.s.$), indicating that an S-shaped relationship did not fit our data well.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that one’s hierarchical status moderates the curvilinear relationship between ambition and SCS. Using junior managers as a referent, three dummy variables were created for frontline employees, middle-level managers, and senior managers, respectively. As shown in Table 2, Model 4, the interaction term composed of the linear term of ambition and middle-level managers on SCS was marginally significant ($\beta = 0.71, p = .08$). Importantly, the interaction term composed of the linear term of ambition and senior managers on SCS was significant ($\beta = 1.19, p < .01$). The results indicated that the relationship between ambition and SCS was strengthened at moderate to high levels of ambition. In other words, compared to junior managers and frontline employees (who stand on a lower hierarchy and have less managerial responsibilities within an organization), middle-level and senior managers reported a stronger effect of ambition on their SCS. The findings confirmed that one’s hierarchical status has a moderating effect on the U-shaped relationship between ambition and SCS. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

We conducted additional analysis to examine the moderating effect of hierarchical status. Participants are categorized into the matched (high ambition-high hierarchy or low ambition-low hierarchy) and the mismatched group (high ambition-low hierarchy or low ambition-high hierarchy). As shown in Model 6, the moderating effect of the mismatched group was significant and negative ($\beta = -0.22, p < .05$), indicating that the U-shaped relationship between ambition and SCS was weakened when one’s ambition was high but hierarchical status was low. The additional findings revealed that low hierarchical status constrains the motivational effect of ambition on SCS, whereas high hierarchical status amplifies the effect. Such findings provided more evidence for Hypothesis 2.

5. Discussion

Trait ambition, proposed to be “most closely linked with career success” (Jones et al., 2017, p. 26), has shown conflicting effects on SCS across different studies (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021). Addressing the call for a deeper understanding of SCS in this boundaryless career world, this study examined the role of ambition in predicting SCS. We positioned ambition as a contextualized middle-level trait (i.e., what individuals actually do with this personality), and SCS as career satisfaction. The

Table 1
Means, standard deviation and bivariate correlations of study variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Age	2.46	0.68	–					
2.Gender	[43%M]	–	0.05	–				
3.Education	3.11	0.44	0.04	0.13	–			
4.Ambition	3.69	0.67	–0.04	–0.02	–0.01	(0.79)		
5.Hierarchy	2.01	0.80	0.11	–0.04	–0.09	0.24**	–	
6.SCS	3.44	0.80	0.10	0.03	–0.07	0.39**	0.41**	(0.83)

Note: N = 224. M = Male. Age: 1 = 20 years old or below; 2 = 21–30 years old; 3 = 31–40 years old; 4 = 41–50 years old; 5 = 50 years old or above.

Figures in brackets are Cronbach’s alpha.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Hierarchical regression analysis results for SCS.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	1.70**	4.30**	4.37**	4.51**	4.13**	4.56**
Ambition	0.39**	-0.88	-1.01	-0.77	-0.80	-1.14*
Ambition squared		1.28**	1.33*	0.99	1.25*	1.71**
Frontline employee			-0.24**	-0.38		
Middle-level manager			0.19**	-0.49		
Senior manager			-0.04	-1.20**		
Ambition X Frontline				0.14		
Ambition X Middle-level				0.71†		
Ambition X Senior				1.19**		
Mismatch					-0.13*	-0.09
Ambition X Mismatch						-0.22**
R ²	0.15	0.17	0.30	0.33	0.19	0.21
ΔR ²		0.02*	0.13**	0.03*	0.01*	0.03**

Note: N = 224. Standardized coefficients were presented.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

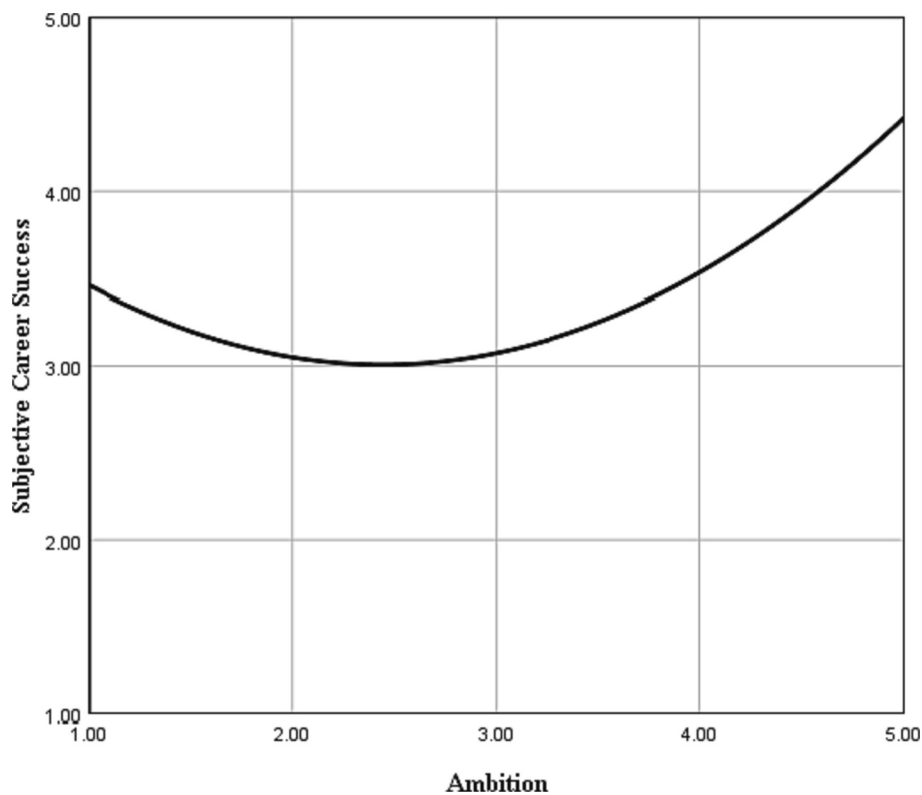


Fig. 1. Plot of the relationship between ambition and SCS.

findings revealed the anticipated U-shaped relationship between ambition and SCS. Additionally, hierarchical status amplified the relationship between ambition and SCS at moderate to high ambition levels.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study advances our understanding of the ambition-SCS relationship. Firstly, we reveal a nonlinear effect of ambition on SCS grounded in COR theory. Prior literature notes the persistent ambiguity surrounding the predictive value of ambition on SCS within the realms of personality and career research (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021). For example, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) suggested a negative link between ambition and SCS, yet they found a weakly positive link and tested a quadratic relationship without conclusive results. Our study contributes to the literature by highlighting that ambition can demonstrate a

nonlinear effect on SCS. Our findings align with COR theory’s core tenets, emphasizing how resource conservation shields individuals from adversity, while resource acquisition maximizes well-being (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Secondly, our study introduces a novel perspective on moderately ambitious individuals. Previous studies often overlooked their unique characteristics, behaviors, and experiences, focusing on high or low ambition extremes (e.g., Babalola et al., 2021). Drawing from COR theory, we illuminate how moderately ambitious individuals navigate their careers. As their resource acquisition motive surpasses the conservation motive, these individuals shift from protecting existing resources to acquiring additional ones. This dynamic may place them in a “champagne taste on a beer budget” scenario, where their ambitious efforts may not be sustainable enough to overcome potential career obstacles, resulting in career dissatisfaction.

Thirdly, our study introduces a critical boundary condition: hierarchical status. Overlooked in prior studies across different cultural contexts (e.g., Hirschi & Spurk, 2021), hierarchical status gains prominence. In Asian/Chinese cultures, emphasizing power distance and hierarchical authority structures, employees expect and accept an uneven distribution of power (Hofstede, 1980). Managers at higher levels may effectively translate motivational resources into tangible career achievements, while frontline employees may hold weaker beliefs in the impact of increased effort (Barrick et al., 2013). By situating this study in the specific Chinese context, we contribute not only to academic discourse but also offer insights for developing effective practices to foster SCS in high power distance cultural settings.

5.2. Practical implications

The first practical implication focuses on empowering and rewarding moderately ambitious employees, a group often experiencing lower career satisfaction compared to their peers with lower or higher ambition. Due in part to a skill gap, some employees who set ambitious goals for themselves experience slow career progress (Guan et al., 2019). Through Learning and Development (L&D) programs, for example, older sales and marketing team members unfamiliar with social media might receive training to maximize its potential. Similarly, logistic team members could be updated with the latest industry software. This strategic upskilling allows them to be assigned roles matching their skillsets with challenging tasks, increasing the likelihood of their inputs being recognized and rewarded.

Our second focus is to facilitate employees with lower hierarchical status to translate their ambitious efforts into tangible career achievements. This is especially relevant in cultural contexts where power distance is high (Hofstede, 1980), including Eastern countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. Those with lower hierarchical status often face limited opportunities to directly engage with higher-level decision makers and have less autonomy to craft their jobs (Berg et al., 2010). HR development can foster a supportive work environment by potentially flattening organizational structures. If this is not feasible, providing all frontline employees with opportunities to present ideas and take ownership of their ideas, or giving talks and training sessions on technical expertise to others. In doing so, high-potential employees may be identified and able to translate ambitious goals into SCS within this inclusive framework.

Finally, in collectivist cultures, where conformity and harmony are emphasized with the proverb “shoot the bird which takes the lead” (Kim & Markus, 1999), employees often hesitate to openly critique HR policies. To evaluate the impact of HR policies on career progress, incorporating feedback mechanisms becomes valuable. Establishing structured processes for collecting input from employees about their experiences with implemented HR strategies provides a platform for anonymous expression, fostering a culture of open communication. This feedback, when received, serves as a guide to refine HR strategies, ensuring better alignment with employee needs and organizational goals.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

Several limitations in this study could be addressed in future research. Firstly, a potential limitation arises from the use of self-reported scale items, introducing the possibility of CMV (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To mitigate this, we implemented a time lag between the measurement of the independent variable (ambition) and the dependent variable (SCS). Additionally, Harman’s single-factor test indicated that the extracted factor explained only 20.3 % of the variance, falling below the threshold of 50 % (Podsakoff et al., 2003). While these measures suggest that our findings are less likely biased by CMV, future research could employ experiments or longitudinal study designs to establish stronger causal inferences and replicate our findings.

Secondly, the data collected in an Eastern culture (China) may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Although our findings provide valuable insights for Chinese HR practitioners, future research should explore cross-cultural comparisons, particularly in Western cultures characterized by higher individualism and lower power distance (Hofstede, 1980). Employees in Western cultures may hold different views on SCS and find less constraints when they invest ambitious efforts toward “making a difference” (Holtschlag et al., 2013).

Finally, ambitious employees who have mastered their job content or feel they are unlikely to gain any future promotions may demonstrate negative attitudes and withdrawal behaviors (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). Future research may generate further insights into how those ambitious employees facing job content plateau or hierarchical plateau (e.g., Hu et al., 2023) navigate their future careers.

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Ethical statement

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the final sample.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jingyi Wei: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Sow Hup Joanne Chan:** Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Fangzhou Lin:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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