

The Contribution Trap When Sustained Contribution Fails to Translate into Career Progress

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Received:  2026 Sep 24**Accepted:**  2026 Oct 14**Published:**  2026 Oct 23

Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines prolonged career stagnation as a potentially under-recognized occupational psychosocial risk. It presents an anonymized longitudinal analytic autoethnography of an experienced communication professional in a large industrial organization whose early progression was followed by an extended period without meaningful advancement or substantial role enrichment despite continued contribution and expanding capability.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The retrospective case is organized as a long-term occupational-health narrative and interpreted through career plateau theory, psychological contract theory, organizational justice, the Job Demands-Resources model, self-determination theory, and conservation of resources theory. The evidence base includes available employment records, role descriptions, performance evaluations, career-related correspondence, project documentation, recognition records, personal reflections, and relevant medical documentation. Because the researcher and participant are the same person, reflexivity and separation among documented events, remembered experience, and interpretation are central.

Findings: The case suggests a cumulative pathway in which sustained contribution and organizational reliance were accompanied by limited career mobility, weak perceived sponsorship, underuse of accumulated human capital, and progressive demoralization. The author-subject describes T-shaped capability combining deep communication expertise with broader contribution across organizational domains. The paper argues that such capability may be deployed through strategic, specialist, cross-functional, mentoring, or leadership pathways, yet the author-subject experienced it as underused. A medically documented acute cardiac event later became a major reflective turning point in the narrative. No causal relationship between occupational experience and cardiovascular disease is claimed.

Originality/Value: The paper reframes prolonged career stagnation as a cumulative psychosocial exposure rather than solely a status or compensation issue. Its primary conceptual contribution is the contribution trap, also expressed as the cost-of-being-useful paradox: reliable performance may increase operational dependence while reducing pressure to create mobility or enrichment. T-shaped capability underuse provides an explanatory dimension, and the CARE framework - Career visibility, Advocacy, Recognition, and Enrichment - offers a practical organizational response. The case distinguishes employee retention from employee development.

Keywords: Career Plateau, Occupational Mental Health, Psychological Contract, Organizational Justice, T-Shaped Professional, Managerial Sponsorship, Autoethnography, Middle East

1. Introduction

1.1. The Workplace As A Determinant of Psychological Well-Being

Work occupies a substantial part of adult life and can provide identity, purpose, status, belonging, competence, and social connection. For experienced professionals, work may also become a major arena through which a life narrative is built and validated [1]. This makes organizational recognition more than symbolic praise. Recognition communicates whether accumulated effort, knowledge, and responsibility are visible and whether the organization sees a future

for the person who has produced them. Employment can therefore support psychological well-being, but it can also expose employees to chronic organizational stressors. These stressors are not limited to excessive workload, harassment, or acute conflict. They may include years of blocked mobility, ambiguous promises, repeated non-progression, limited voice, and the gradual narrowing of professional possibility. Unlike a single adverse event, career stagnation can unfold slowly and become normalized by both employee and organization.

1.2. Managing People Versus Developing People

Human-resource management is often experienced administratively through recruitment, payroll, leave, policy, appraisal, and compliance. Yet strategic HR responsibility extends to understanding, developing, deploying, and retaining human capital. Managing people keeps the employment system functioning. Developing people ensures that capability, aspiration, and accumulated organizational knowledge continue to grow and find meaningful application. An organization may administer an employee efficiently while failing to develop that employee responsibly.

1.3. Career Stagnation as an Occupational Stressor

A career plateau is commonly understood as a point at which the likelihood of further hierarchical advancement or meaningful job-content growth becomes limited [2]. Its significance depends not only on objective promotion history but also on how the employee interprets opportunity, fairness, role challenge, and future possibilities. Prolonged plateauing may intersect with perceived organizational injustice, breach of the psychological contract, reduced engagement, weakened professional identity, and loss of meaningful work [3]. These concepts do not prove organizational wrongdoing, but they provide disciplined ways to examine how an employee experiences a long period of stalled development.

1.4. Purpose and Research Questions

This case asks how a long-serving professional made sense of a career that initially progressed and then remained substantially static while responsibilities, experience, and cross-functional capability continued to grow. It addresses four questions:

- RQ1. How does prolonged career stagnation affect the psychological well-being and professional identity of an experienced employee?
- RQ2. How did perceived managerial sponsorship and HR career-development practices shape the experience of career stagnation?
- RQ3. How did sustained contribution without corresponding development shape motivation, fairness perceptions, professional identity, and life outside work?
- RQ4. What organizational mechanisms could prevent prolonged career stagnation from becoming a psychosocial risk?

2. Case Setting

2.1. Industry and Organizational Context

Company S is presented as a major steel manufacturer in the Middle East. Steel organizations typically combine capital-intensive operations, strong technical and safety priorities, formal hierarchies, and reputational relationships with government, industry, employees, communities, customers, and media. Within this setting, marketing communications does not merely promote products. It supports corporate identity, stakeholder confidence, internal alignment, public legitimacy, CSR communication, issue management, and organizational memory. To protect confidentiality, the manuscript does not name the organization, managers, projects, clients, or locations beyond the broad industrial

context. Organizational structures and career processes are described only to the extent necessary for the scholarly analysis and where supported by records the author is permitted to use.

2.2. Organizational and Cultural Context

The case is situated in a hierarchical organization where career movement was perceived to depend on formal structures, managerial recommendation, senior leadership visibility, and HR processes. The analysis avoids attributing the experience to a generalized "Middle Eastern culture." Instead, it treats hierarchy, seniority, managerial discretion, loyalty, employee voice, and expatriate/local workforce dynamics as possible organizational-context variables that require evidence and careful ethical handling.

3. The Protagonist and T-Shaped Capability

The subject, referred to as Participant A, joined Company S in 2007 in a marketing-communications capacity. He entered with professional ambition, prior experience, and an expectation that sustained contribution would lead to progressive responsibility and development. His professional identity was not limited to seeking a title. It was anchored in contribution, strategic relevance, creativity, institutional trust, and the belief that communication could strengthen both corporate performance and social value.

Over time, Participant A developed what this paper describes as T-shaped capability. The vertical stem of the T represents deep expertise and a sustained professional passion for brand management and marketing communications, encompassing brand strategy and stewardship, corporate positioning, media relations, integrated campaigns, reputation management, stakeholder communication, corporate messaging, events, and strategic communication. The horizontal bar represents his ability to extend this expertise across CSR, employee engagement, sustainability communication, organizational psychology, community relations, leadership communication, and cross-functional coordination. This combination is particularly valuable because it brings together specialist depth in brand and communication management with the broader ability to connect diverse organizational functions, stakeholders, and strategic priorities. The central grievance in the case is therefore not simply that promotion did not occur. It is that an increasingly broad and deep capability was, in the author-subject's perception, neither mapped nor intentionally deployed. A T-shaped professional could have been used through a senior specialist track, cross-functional assignments, strategic projects, leadership communication, mentoring, capability building, or succession planning. Participant A instead experienced progressive sidelining, limited sponsorship, and insufficient conversion of capability into influence. In his retrospective account, the accumulated experience substantially disrupted his professional confidence, psychological stability, and sense of organizational belonging.

4. Longitudinal Case Narrative

4.1. Phase I: Entry and Early Contribution

Participant A joined the organization in the late 2000s

in a marketing-communications role during a period of organizational development and brand transition. Early responsibilities exposed Participant A to the intersection of brand management, corporate communication, organizational change, and regional market expansion. This period helped establish the specialist depth later represented as the vertical dimension of T-shaped capability. Participant A's growing credibility was reflected in responsibilities across brand management, communication initiatives, stakeholder-facing assignments, and other organizational projects. Available project records, performance evaluations, correspondence, campaign outputs, recognition, and an early promotion provide a documentary foundation for distinguishing the later experience of stagnation from an account based solely on retrospective perception. An early promotion represented formal recognition and reinforced Participant A's expectation that sustained contribution and increasing responsibility would be accompanied by continued development. In retrospect, that milestone became a reference point: visible early progression was followed by an increasingly prolonged career plateau.

4.2. Phase II: Increasing Contribution Without Corresponding Advancement

After the early promotion, experience and institutional knowledge continued to accumulate. Participant A reports that responsibilities expanded and that the organization continued to rely on his communication competence, while formal authority, strategic influence, title progression, and structured development did not expand correspondingly. During this period, frustration remained moderated by the belief that the delay might be temporary or attributable to organizational constraints. During the early-to-mid career period, Participant A was transferred to a broader public-relations and communication assignment reporting close to senior executive leadership. The assignment expanded responsibility and included supporting departmental continuity during the manager's absence. Available records indicate strong formal performance recognition. Participant A interpreted this experience as evidence of readiness for wider strategic contribution, while later non-progression intensified questions about how capability and future potential were being assessed. The gap between contribution and progression became psychologically significant over time. Participant A observed colleagues progressing into higher roles while his own career remained largely static. In his retrospective account, this comparison sharpened questions about how the organization perceived his contribution, capability, and future. The original expectation that contribution would lead to recognition, development, and advancement gradually weakened, contributing to disappointment, self-doubt, perceived exclusion, and strain in professional identity.

4.3. Phase III: Extended Plateau and Perceived Career Ceiling

By the middle of the plateau, Participant A perceived an invisible career ceiling. This term is used cautiously. It does not assert discrimination or intentional exclusion. It describes a structural condition in which a capable employee

continues to perform successfully while organizational mechanisms fail to translate accumulated experience into advancement, enrichment, or a viable specialist pathway. A paradox became visible: the more reliably the employee delivered within the existing role, the easier it may have been for the organization to leave the arrangement unchanged. Organizational dependence increased, while mobility did not. The employee perceived that competence was being consumed operationally rather than cultivated strategically.

Career conversations did not translate into a clear or documented pathway for progression, with defined criteria, managerial sponsorship, development actions, or realistic decision points. Participant A increasingly felt that his concerns were not being meaningfully heard and that repeated attempts to seek clarity about his professional future were met with explanations that he experienced as inadequate, dismissive, or insufficiently grounded in a constructive career-development process. Employee voice research emphasizes that withholding or disregarding concerns can deprive both employees and organizations of useful information [4]. The resulting uncertainty became increasingly difficult to separate from his wider life circumstances. As family responsibilities grew, the absence of career progression also acquired a financial dimension. What had initially been experienced primarily as professional disappointment therefore began to extend into concerns about financial preparedness, family responsibilities, and the ability to plan confidently for the future. The convergence of limited employee voice, prolonged career uncertainty, increasing family obligations, and emerging financial strain progressively intensified the psychological burden. As family responsibilities and future financial commitments increased, the absence of career progression acquired a broader financial and psychosocial significance. These pressures did not remain confined to the workplace; they entered family planning and future decision-making, adding another layer to the psychological strain associated with prolonged career stagnation. In Participant A's experience, this progression can be understood as: career uncertainty → perceived resource limitation → financial concern → family-planning pressure → psychological strain.

4.3.1. Accumulating Psychosocial Strain Beyond the Workplace

The occupational experience increasingly intersected with family uncertainty, financial responsibility, future planning, and reflection on external opportunities not pursued. Participant A continued working because of professional values, commitment, and the practical importance of employment, while confidence in future organizational support weakened. In his account, prolonged career uncertainty therefore extended beyond professional ambition and affected provider identity, perceived financial preparedness, and confidence in family planning. These interacting pressures contributed to demoralization and disruption of professional self-worth; they are presented as lived interpretation rather than evidence that the organization caused outcomes outside work.

4.4. Phase IV: Long-Term Stagnation, Lateral Movement, and Reassessment

In the later period, Participant A no longer experienced the plateau as a temporary delay. In his account, prolonged non-progression weakened confidence in career processes and in the likelihood that additional effort would change the outcome. He experienced himself as useful yet insufficiently included in development and future planning commensurate with accumulated experience. This perceived underuse was especially significant because Participant A understood himself as a T-shaped professional capable of both specialist contribution and cross-functional influence. In his interpretation, the issue extended beyond promotion to reduced agency, narrowing professional identity, and fewer opportunities to contribute at the level he believed his capability permitted.

Participant A reports emotional exhaustion, demoralization, reduced confidence, impaired motivation, and strain in future planning. He describes a profound disruption of professional identity and psychological stability. These terms represent lived experience rather than retrospective psychiatric diagnosis. During a later organizational restructuring, Participant A was moved laterally to a social-responsibility function without a grade or position change. Although the new assignment carried responsibilities of its own, he interpreted the move as separating him from the communication field in which much of his professional identity and expertise had developed. The significance of the move lay in the meaning Participant A attached to it. After years of waiting for accumulated experience to translate into a broader role within communication, he perceived the lateral movement as reducing an already limited pathway for progression in that domain. Within the longitudinal narrative,

the later transfer became a point of reassessment. Earlier disappointments had accumulated gradually; the move was interpreted as carrying greater finality and prompted Participant A to question whether the professional future previously imagined remained attainable. The available evidence establishes the transfer and career history, while this interpretation remains Participant A's retrospective account.

4.5. Acute Cardiac Event and Reflective Turning Point

During the later period of the case, Participant A experienced chest discomfort during exercise and sought urgent medical assessment. Medical records confirmed a non-ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction associated with multivessel coronary artery disease, followed by specialist cardiac care and percutaneous coronary intervention. The documentation is used only to establish the occurrence and clinical nature of the event; unnecessary procedural detail has been omitted to protect privacy and keep the paper focused on occupational well-being. For Participant A, the event became a major point of reflection on health, mortality, family responsibility, work, and the personal significance assigned to prolonged professional disappointment. He understands survival and recovery through personal faith as occurring "by the grace of God." This statement is retained as meaning-making, not as a clinical explanation. The temporal relationship between occupational distress and the cardiac event does not establish medical causation. Research literature discusses associations between psychosocial work stress and cardiovascular risk at the population level, but such evidence cannot determine the cause of an individual event [5]. The manuscript therefore treats the health event and occupational narrative as related elements of Participant A's lived account without asserting that career stagnation caused the myocardial infarction.

5. Chronology of the Case

Career period	Career stage	Organizational experience	Perceived organizational response	Psychological meaning
Entry period	Entry and learning	New role, brand transition, and expanding responsibilities	Initial opportunity and recognition	Optimism and professional commitment
Early progression	Development	Growing contribution and credibility	Early promotion and broader assignments	Motivation and expectation of further development
Consolidation	Increasing contribution	Accumulating experience and responsibility	Limited subsequent mobility	Emerging frustration and uncertainty
Extended plateau	Sustained contribution	Growing institutional knowledge and reliance	Limited sponsorship and career pathway	Demoralization and perceived injustice
Later career	Lateral movement and reassessment	Capability perceived as underused	Limited enrichment and reduced confidence in progression	Identity strain and reassessment
Health turning point	Medical event and recovery	Documented acute cardiac event and treatment	Specialist care and follow-up	Reflection on health, work, family, and future

Note. Periods and interpretations are based on available records and the author-subject's account. Some dates and organizational details have been generalized to reduce re-identification risk.

6. Methodology

6.1. Design

This study uses a longitudinal single-case analytic autoethnographic approach to examine career experience, occupational well-being, and organizational life [6-8]. The approach supports analysis of accumulated experience across an extended period while locating subjective meaning within organizational context and relevant theory. Its purpose is not to determine causal relationships or infer organizational intent, but to examine how prolonged stagnation was experienced and what the case may reveal about employee development, sponsorship, capability deployment, and psychosocial risk.

6.2. Data Sources and Evidence Protocol

To strengthen the credibility of the case, the narrative draws on available documentary evidence alongside Participant A's recollection and lived experience. Wherever possible, key events in his career are supported by employment and promotion records, job descriptions, performance appraisals, professional correspondence, project materials, organizational recognition, and other relevant records. Personal reflections are used to understand how these events were experienced and interpreted over time, particularly their influence on professional identity and psychological well-being. In this way, the study distinguishes between what can be established through organizational records and what represents Participant A's personal experience and retrospective understanding of those events. Medical records are considered separately where relevant to documented health events. All organizational and personal information is handled with appropriate attention to confidentiality and anonymity. Medical evidence was used to establish the occurrence and clinical nature of the October 2025 cardiac event. Relevant hospital documentation included records of acute assessment, specialist cardiac investigation, coronary angiography, PCI, discharge diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up recommendations. These records were used to corroborate the clinical chronology and treatment of the event, rather than to infer a causal relationship between occupational experience and cardiovascular disease that was not independently established in the medical documentation.

6.3. Analytic Approach

The case was analyzed through temporal bracketing and theory-informed thematic analysis. First, the 19-year chronology was divided into periods of entry and early progression, consolidation, extended plateau, long-term stagnation, and post-health-event reflection. Second, available materials were classified as documented events, contemporaneous reflections, or retrospective interpretations. Third, recurring themes concerning contribution, recognition, managerial support, fairness, professional autonomy, identity, belonging, career opportunity, and psychological well-being were compared across periods and evidence types. The themes were then interpreted through the selected theoretical perspectives. Where documentary evidence and recollection differed, the manuscript privileges the record for factual chronology and

presents subjective meaning explicitly as Participant A's account. Alternative explanations were retained where the evidence did not permit a definitive conclusion.

6.4. Reflexivity and Credibility

The participant and author are the same. This provides depth, longitudinal access, and experiential specificity, but also introduces risks of recall bias, emotional interpretation, confirmation bias, and selective attention. Credibility was strengthened through documentary corroboration, explicit separation of fact from interpretation, chronological comparison across evidence sources, reflexive acknowledgement of the author-subject position, and consideration of plausible alternative explanations [7,8].

7. Theoretical Interpretation

7.1. Psychological Contract

The psychological contract refers to perceived reciprocal obligations between employee and organization [9,10]. In this case, the implicit sequence was contribution, recognition, development, and advancement. This interpretation concerns the perceived exchange relationship; it does not establish a contractual entitlement to promotion. The result was not merely disappointment about title. It was erosion of trust in the exchange relationship.

7.2. Organizational Justice

Organizational justice provides a language for examining perceived fairness [11,12]. Distributive justice concerns outcomes, procedural justice concerns decision processes, interpersonal justice concerns respectful treatment, and informational justice concerns the adequacy of explanations. The case does not prove unfairness, but it indicates how prolonged uncertainty and limited explanation may generate perceived injustice. Prospective review evidence has linked procedural and relational justice with mental-health outcomes, supporting the relevance of justice as a psychosocial-work lens [13].

7.3. Job Demands-Resources Model

The Job Demands-Resources model distinguishes aspects of work that require sustained effort from resources that support motivation and coping [14,15]. In this case, the relevant demand was cumulative occupational strain associated with responsibility, blocked progression, ambiguity, and identity pressure. Missing or insufficient resources included career development, managerial sponsorship, autonomy, recognition, strategic influence, and confidence in future opportunity. The case suggests that career resources deserve greater attention within occupational mental-health practice.

7.4. Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness [16]. Participant A's competence remained central to his identity, yet competence without expanded agency became psychologically painful. Limited influence threatened autonomy, while sidelining weakened relatedness and belonging. The case illustrates that employees may

continue to perform competently while the psychological nourishment ordinarily derived from competence, autonomy, and connection progressively declines.

7.5. Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of resources theory proposes that strain can arise from actual or threatened loss of valued resources [17,18]. Across the plateau, Participant A perceived non-acquisition or erosion of opportunity, status, optimism, voice, professional identity, time, and career capital. Because time is irreversible, each additional year without development could increase the meaning of prior losses. This may help explain why long-term stagnation is experienced cumulatively rather than as a series of isolated disappointments.

7.6. Career Plateau Theory

Career plateau theory distinguishes hierarchical plateauing from job-content plateauing [2]. Participant A's experience appears to contain elements of both: limited vertical mobility and insufficient role enrichment relative to expanding capability. This distinction matters because organizations may respond to limited vacancies by creating lateral, specialist, project, mentoring, or strategic pathways. Where neither vertical nor content growth occurs, stagnation can become more psychologically consequential.

8. Psychosocial Trajectory

The case suggests a non-linear trajectory from hope and expectation toward repeated disappointment, uncertainty, demoralization, perceived deprivation, and disruption of professional identity. Continued functioning did not necessarily indicate well-being; it was sustained partly through professional commitment, family responsibility, scholarship, faith, and alternative sources of meaning. These stages are analytical reconstructions rather than universal phases. Hope and disappointment may coexist, and adaptive coping may restore purpose while structural conditions remain unchanged. The trajectory should therefore be read as one person's theory-informed interpretation, not as a general model of all plateaued careers.

9. The Cost of Being Useful

The case suggests a paradox: reliable performance can increase operational dependence, while operational dependence can reduce managerial pressure to create mobility or enrichment. Retention in the same role may then contribute to stagnation and demoralization, potentially diminishing both well-being and organizational value. This is the contribution trap, also described here as the cost-of-

being-useful paradox. The paradox does not require malicious intent. It may arise from short-term convenience, risk aversion, weak succession planning, limited sponsorship, or the absence of specialist career architecture. The concept is proposed as an interpretive contribution from this case and requires examination in other settings.

10. T-Shaped Capability Underuse

Participant A's accumulated human capital included institutional knowledge, stakeholder relationships, industry familiarity, communication expertise, crisis experience, professional networks, and mentoring potential. The T-shaped formulation captures specialist depth combined with cross-functional breadth. In Participant A's account, this capability was not consistently converted into expanded authority, specialist progression, cross-functional assignments, mentoring responsibility, or meaningful role enrichment. The organizational issue is therefore broader than whether one employee should have been promoted. It concerns how mature talent systems identify aspiration, assess readiness, distinguish leadership potential from specialist contribution, and create credible alternatives when hierarchical vacancies are limited. Underuse occurs when capability is retained but not enabled to shape wider decisions, develop others, or address broader challenges.

11. Organizational Development Responses

Organizations can respond to prolonged stagnation through scheduled career reviews, capability and aspiration mapping, transparent readiness criteria, documented development plans, job enrichment, internal mobility, senior specialist pathways, cross-functional projects, mentoring responsibilities, and accountable follow-up. These responses do not guarantee promotion; they reduce ambiguity and create evidence-based alternatives when vertical movement is unavailable. Managers have a distinct sponsorship role: communicating achievements upward, creating stretch opportunities, providing candid feedback, and making capable employees visible beyond the current role. HR should not assume that continued performance or silence indicates satisfaction. Research on perceived organizational support emphasizes the importance of employees' beliefs that the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being [19,20]. For long-serving employees, review intensity should increase as non-progression persists. The question should shift from how to retain the employee in the current configuration to what developmental pathway remains credible, whether through leadership, specialist, project, mentoring, or lateral-enrichment routes.

12. The CARE Framework

Element	Organizational question	Required practice
C – Career visibility	Whose career has remained static despite sustained contribution?	Use plateau indicators and scheduled career reviews.
A – Advocacy	Who is actively sponsoring this employee's future?	Assign managerial accountability for upward advocacy and exposure.
R – Recognition	Does recognition create meaningful development?	Connect contribution to transparent opportunity, authority, and reward.
E – Enrichment	How can capability become broader, deeper, or more strategic?	Offer specialist, cross-functional, mentoring, leadership, or project pathways.

The framework treats career stagnation as a preventable organizational condition rather than a private weakness. Its purpose is not to promise promotion to every long-serving employee, but to ensure that prolonged non-progression becomes visible, explainable, and developmentally addressed.

13. Organizational Mental-Health Implications

Organizational mental-health programs often focus on counselling, resilience, stress-management workshops, and employee assistance. These services may be valuable, but they are insufficient when structural sources of distress remain unchanged. WHO and ILO guidance emphasizes psychosocial risk management and organizational interventions alongside individual support [21]. Career stagnation may warrant attention when it is prolonged, opaque, accompanied by role expansion, or associated with deterioration in engagement and well-being. The case advances a structural proposition: employee mental-health efforts should consider systems that shape recognition, control, belonging, fairness, and future possibility. Career-development processes are not substituting for clinical care, but they may form part of a broader psychosocial-risk response. Survival of the acute cardiac event adds urgency but does not provide proof of causation. Occupational-health responses should integrate medical care, psychosocial assessment, workload and role review, confidential support, and examination of organizational contributors. They should not reduce the matter either to individual fragility or to an unverified single-cause explanation.

14. Discussion

This case illustrates how a career plateau may become a cumulative psychosocial experience. Participant A continued to contribute, but the meaning of contribution changed as development failed to follow. Early progression supported hope; prolonged non-progression weakened trust; perceived underuse threatened competence and agency; and lateral movement was interpreted as narrowing professional possibility. The analysis links career structure with psychological meaning without claiming that the organization intentionally produced the reported distress. The primary contribution is the contribution trap: operational usefulness may encourage retention in the same configuration while delaying mobility or enrichment. T-shaped capability underuse explains why the plateau may feel especially consequential when specialist depth and cross-functional breadth remain available but insufficiently deployed. The CARE framework translates this interpretation into four practices: Career visibility, Advocacy, Recognition,

and Enrichment. The case does not treat promotion as an entitlement or every plateau as organizational failure. The psychosocial concern arises when non-progression becomes prolonged, opaque, weakly discussed, and disconnected from credible alternatives. Even where promotion is unavailable, transparent explanation, developmental feedback, job enrichment, professional learning, and alternative career pathways can sustain direction and perceived value. The cardiac event adds urgency to the author-subject's reflection but does not validate a causal pathway from career stagnation to disease. Population-level research can inform discussion of psychosocial work and cardiovascular risk, yet individual causation requires independent clinical evidence that is not available in this case [5].

15. Leadership Implications

- Long-term non-progression should trigger a documented career and capability review.
- Managers should be accountable for sponsorship, candid feedback, and employee visibility.
- Retention metrics should be considered alongside development, mobility, and enrichment.
- Career systems should provide credible specialist, project, mentoring, and leadership pathways when promotion is unavailable.

16. Limitations

This is a single-person, retrospective insider case and cannot establish causality or statistical generalizability. Emotional investment may shape recall, selection, and interpretation. The organizational perspective and the accounts of managers or HR are not included. Although dates, clinical details, reporting relationships, and organizational events have been generalized, indirect identification remains possible because of the industry, region, tenure, and career pattern. The case should therefore be handled as confidential scholarly material. The manuscript does not provide a psychiatric diagnosis and does not establish that workplace strain caused the cardiac event. Medical documentation confirms the health event and treatment, while the occupational narrative explains the meaning Participant A attached to it. The case is analytical and illustrative: it identifies possible mechanisms and questions for examination in other settings.

17. Ethical Considerations

This is a self-focused autoethnographic case in which the author is also the participant. No external participant was recruited. Because the narrative concerns a real employment setting, organizational actors, family circumstances, and personal medical information, confidentiality, relational ethics, privacy, and evidentiary separation are central. The organization is anonymized as “Company S,” and managers, colleagues, units, projects, dates, reporting relationships, and potentially identifying events are removed, generalized, or described only where analytically necessary. The purpose is not to attribute blame, but to examine Participant A’s experience of prolonged stagnation and its relevance to employee development and occupational well-being. Organizational motives are not inferred where they cannot be independently established. Employment and career documents are used only to corroborate facts relevant to the case. Confidential corporate information unnecessary to the scholarly argument is excluded, and identifying documents are not reproduced. Only details necessary to understand the psychosocial context of family and colleague-related experiences are retained.

Medical information is treated separately and with sensitivity. The author-subject chose to disclose the acute cardiac event because of its significance as a reflective turning point. The manuscript reports only the clinical information required to establish the nature and treatment of the event, does not reproduce medical records, and does not use those records to claim occupational causation. Participant A’s statement that survival occurred “by the grace of God” is retained as an expression of personal faith and post-event meaning-making. It is not presented as a clinical explanation, causal mechanism, or scientific finding. Because the author is simultaneously a researcher and participant, reflexivity is central to the ethical treatment of the case. The manuscript

acknowledges the possibility of retrospective reconstruction, emotional involvement, selective memory, and interpretive bias. These limitations are addressed through documentary corroboration where available, careful differentiation between fact and perception, consideration of alternative interpretations, and avoidance of claims about organizational intent that cannot be independently established. The author reports that the institutional ethics committee determined that formal approval was not required for this self-focused autoethnographic study. Written documentation of this determination is available for editorial review. No external funding supported the study, and no separate consent was required for the author’s own account. Information concerning other individuals has been generalized to reduce re-identification risk.

18. Conclusion

This longitudinal case argues that prolonged career stagnation may become a cumulative psychosocial exposure when sustained contribution is not accompanied by consequential recognition, meaningful development, or a credible future. For a T-shaped professional, underuse may be especially significant because both specialist depth and broader influence remain insufficiently realized. The paper’s primary conceptual contribution is the contribution trap, or cost-of-being-useful paradox: dependable performance may increase operational reliance while reducing pressure to create mobility or enrichment. The CARE framework responds by making prolonged stagnation visible and linking career review to Advocacy, Recognition, and Enrichment. The acute cardiac event is reported as a documented health event and reflective turning point, not as proof of workplace causation. The broader organizational message is that resilience initiatives cannot substitute for transparent career systems, active sponsorship, credible developmental alternatives, and humane use of accumulated capability.

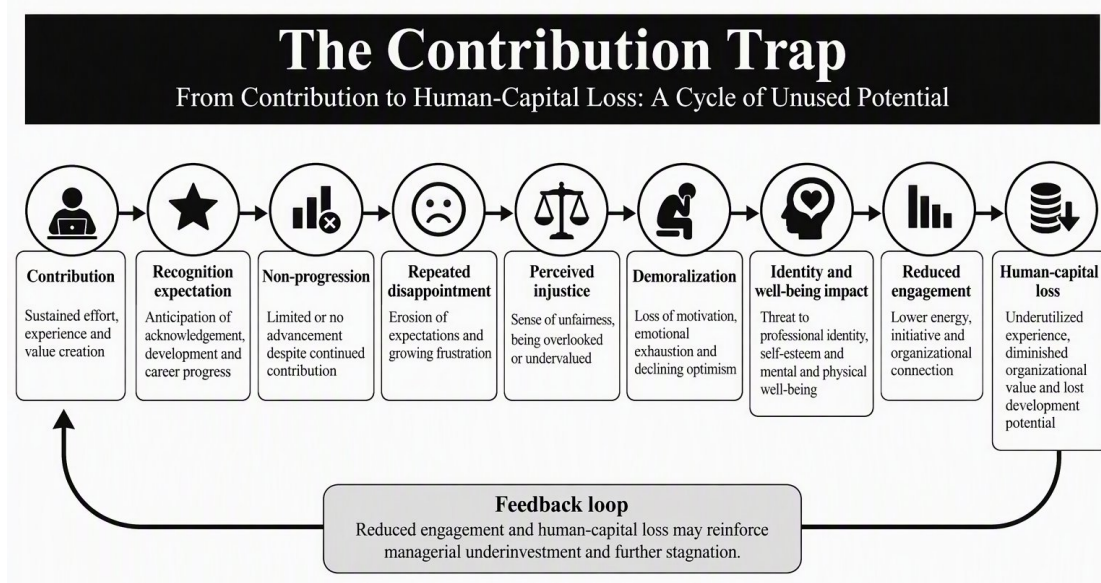


Figure 1. Conceptual pathways associated with the contribution trap

Note. Arrows represent proposed relationships and possible feedback processes derived from this single case. They do not indicate validated temporal or causal effects.

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