Many times during job, a period comes where an employee is unable to rise further on the corporate ladder. His career becomes stagnant. It is mostly temporarily (Sometimes Permanent). This period is referred to as Career Plateau in HR terminology.

What exactly is this plateau and what causes it?

Most of the people who join a particular job hope that they will be promoted every year or two. It usually happens too. For Example, in typical IT companies, promotions do happen year after year, based on the ratings.

These promotions are given to every individual who performs within acceptable limits. He joins as a trainee software engineer then he becomes permanent after a year then senior software Engg and so on. This is usually coupled with salary hikes too.

But as all good things come to an end, this cycle too halts. There comes a period when due to some reasons, promotions do stop for a period known as the career plateau.

What are the reasons?

Following points are the major reasons:
1) The employee has reached to the maximum level he could have with his current qualifications and skill sets

2) The company is going through a bad phase and can’t promote more people as promotions mean salary hikes too.

3) The company had a bad corporate structure due to unplanned promotions in the past and now the hierarchical pyramid is totally shapeless. So the company needs to hold on certain promotions so that the Pyramid returns to its original shape.

4) The Employee is not interested in getting promoted. He is not performing well and is not acquiring additional skills required to be promoted to the next level

5) Poor Market performance e.g. Recessionary Periods

Many a times the Plateaus are caused by the companies you work for but sometimes the plateau is self induced.

If we see the reason no 4 again, it says when the employee himself/herself is not interested to get promoted. May be due to other priorities or personal issues, he is fine with where he is.

When this period sets in, what can an employee do?

Most of the employees don’t wait for long if the reason is anything expect for 4 (or 5 in some
What is that they do?

Many of them consider a job switch or consider higher studies which might consider them for higher positions or promotions. This basically explains the MBA trend in India. With MBA or Master’s degree, there is a higher probability to reach higher up the ladder without facing many plateaus (Not guaranteed though). Job Switching also helps in some cases but it might not be a permanent solution. It helps in the cases where a particular company is responsible for your plateau (Reasons 2 and 3).

Plateau due to Lack of intrinsic motivation is what needs to worried about. Many a times an employee loses all interest in his job (or field of work) due to personal, professional or unknown reasons. This leads to poor performance or lack of the will to grow.

**When an Employee is on the plateau, he/she has two choices?**

a) Stay in the company and wait for the things to improve.

b) Switch job for some other company which would be offering better salary and Position.

Which choice to take is an extremely tricky question? But the ground rule is that if the company you are in is stable then stick on to it because the situation will improve and you will be promoted in future. Meanwhile you can work on your skills and relationships within the company.

The other choice is again subjective and dependent on an individual.
Career Plateau might always not be a bad thing. In the period you can work on the things you lack. You and gain additional knowledge and skill which might take you much further in your career.

So Career Plateau is part of the game. Plan it well. It is different from Career Stagnation, Don't let the plateau become the cause of permanent stagnation.