
Effective succession planning

A framework for thinking about your own approach

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Succession planning is one part of ensuring that an organisation can meet its future needs for people. 'Talent management' is now a common umbrella term for the attraction, retention and development of people with potential. Succession planning certainly comes under that umbrella. In some organisations succession planning and talent management focus only on senior leadership, while others choose to apply the same concepts and processes to broader groups of jobs and people.

Whatever job groups are addressed by succession planning, it is essentially concerned with identifying individuals who can be viewed as short-term and/or longer-term successors for these types of jobs. Its main value lies in planning tailored career and skill development for these individuals to prepare them for the future. The succession planning process typically also checks that agreed development actions are taking place and influences wider workforce planning and resourcing strategies.

Each organisation needs to fit its approach to succession planning to its own particular business needs, culture and workforce situation.

Five key aspects of process design

Purposes - What is succession planning going to achieve? Will the emphasis be on developing talent, faster or wider candidate search, corporate governance or risk management, or on achieving a more corporate approach to people issues?

Populations - For what populations of posts are successors going to be identified? Will individual posts be considered or broader 'pools'? Are you looking for short-term or longer-term successors for the relevant posts or both? What will the 'career journeys' of successors be in terms of when in career you spot them and for how long their development will be actively managed?

Principles - Before more detailed design it can help to agree some general principles, for example concerning transparency, objectivity, equality of opportunity etc.

Processes - Succession planning has several process steps within it. What criteria will be used to identify successors? Who will identify them, and what guidance will managers be given? What kind of career and skill development will be given and how will it be managed? How will succession planning link with other key HR processes?

Players - What role will be played in succession by line managers and top teams? How is the employee involved in the process? Who does what in HR, centrally, locally and in learning and development or leadership development?

... and ten tips:



10 Practical Tips for Effective Succession Planning

1. **Engage with senior managers at the start.** Ask them what they want out of succession planning – it's their process. Agree directly with the top team some purposes, populations and principles (as described overleaf) that address their real concerns.
2. **Focus on easily defined groups** of jobs or groups of people where succession is a problem and could be improved by growing talent from within. Identifying 'critical' or 'key' posts can work, but often leads to disagreement about which posts are critical! If in doubt focus on broad groups eg senior finance managers.
3. **Start with a fairly small population** of posts in scope to the exercise and deliver real results. You can begin with either just one function or division or with a top tier and then widen scope as you embed the process. Small firms can easily cover all their staff in one simple succession exercise.
4. **Design in how information flows** to and from other key HR processes. Succession must link with business and workforce planning. It often uses information from appraisal or assessment and feeds into both job filling and development.
5. **Don't go overboard on assessing potential** or identifying successors, but do give managers clear guidance on how you expect them to identify successors. Think about the people managers will be looking at. If you want them to spot longer-term 'leadership potential' in junior managers, explain what this might look like in simple terms, with some clear criteria.
6. **Collective management agreement** is based on the chance to discuss possible successors and their development needs. Individuals will only get support in development and appointments if leaders agree they are credible successors.
7. **Communicate.** Explain the succession process to all employees and make sure that any individuals identified as successors have conversations about their careers and development at regular intervals. Career conversations may involve the line manager, HR and other relevant managers (eg mentor, functional head, boss's boss).
8. **Tailored career development** is how succession adds most business value. You should be providing good management training anyway. The added value of succession planning is to facilitate job moves and work experiences that give people the track record they will need in order to be credible candidates for future roles.
9. **A serious role for HR leaders.** Succession planning requires active facilitation and championing by senior HR people who have high credibility and are prepared to be 'hands-on'. Designing the process doesn't do anything, you have to work it!
10. **Hang in there.** Evaluate and modify your approach but keep at it for at least 5 years to show real returns in terms of improved resourcing and performance.

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