

Effective talent and succession management

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, identification and development of people with potential. Succession planning and talent management should be integrated, not two separate sets of processes. In some organisations succession planning and talent management focus only on the senior leadership 'pipeline'. Others choose to apply the same concepts and processes to other groups of jobs and people and/or to particular 'critical posts'.

Whatever job groups and kinds of employees are addressed by talent and succession management, we are usually concerned here with identifying individuals who may be able to develop their potential into different roles (often, but not always, at higher level) on varied timeframes, usually both short term and longer term. A key aspect is planning and then facilitating tailored career and skill development for identified individuals to prepare them for the future. Talent management should also check that agreed development actions are taking place, link appropriately with the way jobs are actually filled, and influence wider workforce planning and resourcing strategies.

Each organisation needs to fit its approach to talent and succession management to its own particular business needs, culture and workforce situation, and the capability of its line managers.

Five key aspects of designing your approach to talent and succession management

Purposes - What is talent and succession management going to achieve? Will the emphasis be on attraction, development or retention; better internal deployment of people; or stronger early career pipelines of employees with potential? How will the organisation measure its success in this aspect of HRM?

Populations - For what populations or posts does the business need to identify pipelines of 'talent' and/or successors? Will individual posts be considered or broader 'pools'? Are you looking for short-term or longer-term successors or both? If you talk about individuals having 'talent', 'potential' or 'high potential' how will you define these groups of people, when will you spot them and what will they need to learn?

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

Processes - Talent and succession management encompasses several processes. What criteria will be used to identify potential/successors? Who will identify them, and how will managers work on this together? What career and skill development will be given, over what timeframes and how will it be facilitated? How will talent and succession management link with other HR processes? How will you build in evaluation?

Players - What do line managers and top teams need to do? Which managers are responsible for different levels or groups of jobs and people? How is the employee involved in the process? Who does what in HR, centrally, locally and in learning and development or leadership development?

10 Practical Tips for Talent & Succession Management

1. Talk to senior managers at the start and involve them in co-designing the approach. Ask them what they want out of talent and succession management – it's their process. Agree directly with the top team purposes, populations and principles that address their real concerns.
2. Focus on easily defined groups of jobs or groups of people where succession or resourcing is a problem and could be improved by growing talent from within. Identifying 'critical' or 'key' posts can work, as long as the debate does not go on forever. If in doubt, focus on broad groups defined by level and function, eg senior finance managers, specialist engineers, division heads.
3. Pilot your approach by starting with just one or two functions, divisions, regions or levels in the business and then widen scope as you embed the process. Small firms can easily cover all their staff in one exercise.
4. Design in how information flows to and from other key HR processes. Talent management must link with business and workforce planning. It often uses information from appraisal or assessment and feeds into both job filling and development.
5. Clarify what you mean by 'potential' in relation to the areas of focus identified. Don't make it too complicated for managers to assess potential or identify successors – give them clear and practical guidance. Especially when looking more than a few months ahead, explain what to look for in how people are working in their current job, which may signal potential for a bigger or different role. When advising managers on this, take into account changes in skill needs that you can already identify in the business.
6. Collective management agreement is based on the chance to discuss possible successors, 'talent' groups and their development needs. Individuals will only get support in development and appointments if leaders agree they are credible future candidates for real positions.
7. Communicate. Explain talent and succession processes to all managers and employees and make sure that any individuals identified have conversations about their careers and development at regular intervals. They may need to talk to several people in the line and HR.
8. Tailored career development is usually how talent and succession management gives additional business value. You should be providing training and development anyway. The added value comes from facilitating job moves and work experiences that give people the experience and 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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