

# **Succession Planning in Public Organizations: A consideration of study perspectives.**

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## **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

### **Succession Planning in Public Organizations: A consideration of study perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Recognition of time-consuming talent development process is of importance to corporations. Case studies rather than surveys appear to be the choice strategy. To determine the right research strategy, data processing from surveys and case study process provide researchers with opportunity to compare strategies in order to decide on the effective strategy for the planning process. Vision conveyance among peers was found to be an embedded succession planning strategy. All those working within an organization are able to absorb the spirit of high performers, and become able to act like them when they resign, or are promoted or fired. A study into this phenomenon is only possible through a time-tested process that incorporates observation, participation and personal interviews. Extensive study situations bring researchers face to face with the need to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches, but succession

planning in public organizations is best-studied using case study strategy. When the focus is on organization types or industry types, a deep understanding of the entity's specifics will still necessitate qualitative research based strategy.

The need to make the right choices drives an organization's efforts in developing effective succession plans. Succession planning is, therefore, of utmost importance to organization so that existing or ongoing projects and transactions are sustained, even when personnel changes occur. To study succession planning in public organizations, a researcher should consider all factors that come to mind instead of pre-determining the most suitable study strategy (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). An organization must make informed decision after a review of essential variables. If those variables necessitate talking to individuals, the organization should be willing to take that approach. On the other hand, if an interpretation of numbers and how they stack on one another can reveal the most important consideration in choosing successors, the company should also not hesitate to use that strategy. Bernthal and Wellins (2006) summarize "key findings from a global benchmarking study for more than 4,500 leaders from over 900 organizations" (p. 31) using quantitative research survey. Findings reveal a need for company-specific case study strategy for succession planning. That work is an indication that contextual study of succession planning is required.

Quantitative data, for instance, includes closed-ended information such as those found on attitude, behavior, or performance instruments (Creswell and Clark, 2007, p. 6). This means a quest for specific solution. Anything outside that scope must be left out. Creswell and Clark continue, "In contrast, qualitative data consists of open-ended information that the researcher gathers through interviews with participants (2007, p. 6). This means that boundaries are removed, and researcher has a capacity to explore and carry out extensive mining till he or she is satisfied. Objectivity is probably the flagship condition for research. Case studies and surveys are characteristically objective, yet one of them is more suited than the other in studying succession planning in public organizations. Careful consideration must be given to them in choosing the best-suited strategy for this type of study. This is in line with Morgan and Smircich's (1980) warning to researchers to choose a strategy based on the subject of study and its requirements instead of insisting on a strategy. The expectation of this investigation, therefore, is to cut through the veil of ease and manipulation expertise to the bone and marrow of an objective choice between case studies and surveys so that a public organization desiring to make long lasting decision from its study of succession planning can rely on the investigation. Without incessant reference, every study considered herein will take cognizance of Creswell's (2003) work, as all comparisons and contrasts will be based on it.

### *Case Studies*

According to Cooper and Schindler (2006), “case study, also referred to as the case history, is a powerful research methodology that combines individual and (sometimes) group interview with record analysis and observation” (p. 217). The use of “powerful” as a description of this strategy points to the intensity and tenacity involved in the work. Case study strategy, therefore, creates the possibility of searching out the crux of the matter under study. In a case study, “the research problem is usually a how and why problem, resulting in a descriptive or explanatory study” (2006, p. 217). Furthermore, the strategy could be frightening as a result of the amount of resources that are required to dig as deep as the study demands. Cooper and Schindler (2006) further state, “case studies place more emphasis on a full contextual analysis of fewer events or conditions and their interrelations” (p. 142), which translates into a tendency to expose a researcher to subjectivity as a result of an effort to relate to the lived experience of the research subjects. This supports Huberman and Miles (2002) echoing, “case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (p.8). The researcher’s feelings, understanding and thoughts are influenced by the phenomenon under review, as an effective way to comprehend it for purposes of accurate reporting. In the course of case studies, researcher may develop new theories or come face to face with existing theories hitherto unknown to researcher. Case studies can become complex, depending on the subject matter under consideration.

Robson (2002) defines case study as “a well-established research strategy where the focus is on a case” (p. 181). To make this contextually clearer, organizations intending to successfully put together an effective succession plan should look at all conceivable factors facing their ability to do so. They should relate all considerations to the plan so that when the succession plan is completed, it will relate to the organization, and may not fit any other organization. Based on Robson’s (2002) definition, therefore, the succession plan should be viewed as a case, and every factor under review would be expected to pertain to that case. The organization should focus on the individuals as well as the short, medium and long term needs. Context is a major characteristic of case study, which connects Robson’s (2002) viewpoint to that of Cooper and Schindler (2006) agreeing that the researcher is influenced by the phenomenon under review. Background information about the case being studied includes the organizational context and perspective, revealing the reason for the phenomenon (Robson, 2002, p. 184).

To study succession planning based upon the presentations of Cooper and Schindler (2006) and Robson’s (2002), the researcher should have an interpretivist as well as social constructivist mentality. These constitute the mentality that engenders contextual comprehension of matter as well as extrapolation based on interpretation. The researcher has a capacity to think in diverse directions, use his or her feelings, understand interviewees, view things

from the lens of his or her own realities or worldview, and is entitled to express those feelings in non-numerical ways. This latitude is capable of generating highly subjective work because succession planning requires an understanding of the organization's specific situation vis-à-vis those of the individuals involved. Case study strategy can dig as deep as needed to excavate everything that affects the relevance of the intended succession plan. As a qualitative research strategy, case study delves into the entire situation that is being studied. The researcher is personally involved in order to comprehend the issues that are contextually at stake. Since case studies are effective in understanding behaviors, researchers are likely to want to rely on it for studies that pertain to succession planning. Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that a case is an event that occurs within boundaries, and must be studied as just one case. If there happen to be several of such events, they should be studied as several separate cases, and each one will require targeted effort in order to remain within context (p.25).

### *Surveys*

Robson (2002) draws attention to characteristics of survey strategy as including the use of fixed design that is quantitative in nature. Those characteristics feature quantities of data that are set up from multiple sources and selected samples of individuals or situations from known populations of the subject under consideration (p. 230). Every theory that is involved must be tested for validity. Survey research considers one major issue that may be a theory or paradigm. This narrow focus enables researcher to control the components of the research. Findings are reported numerically in order to determine the extent to which the hypothesis is true or false. Quantitative data includes closed-ended information such as those found on attitude, behavior, or performance instruments (Creswell and Clark, 2007, p. 6). This means that specific question is to be answered. Anything outside the scope of that question is chaff and must be left out. The use of hypothesis testing, the extensive sample sizes and design requirements like description, correlation and experiments determine extents to which phenomena exist rather than reasons for the phenomena. Surveys involve inferences, which often reveal limited amount of phenomena. Data collected may be extensive and comprehensive based on the sample size, but the findings may only address the behavior of the variable that is being considered. Robson (2002) states, "survey is not well suited to carrying out exploratory work" (p. 234). If this is the case, succession-planning study will not benefit from survey strategy. In a study, for example, of Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean and white youths in particular types of employment, there are differences in educational attainment among their groups because of their different ethnic and possibly family backgrounds. Furthermore, their attainments are based on occupational types that have influenced their lives over the period because of parentage or guardian types. Generalization can only reveal discrepancies between the populations but cannot reveal why they exist (Robson, 2002,

p. 235). The same applies to a succession planning study in public organizations.

According to Cooper and Schindler (2006) “a survey is a measurement process used to collect information during a highly structured interview – sometimes with a human interviewer and other times without” (p. 245). As a result, the goal of a survey is to derive comparable data across subsets of the chosen sample so that similarities and differences can be found. The conclusions arising from this exercise are useful in understanding industry or market structure, but cannot be used to understand product behavior in the market. It can also not be used to understand human behavior. Survey strategy uses the telephone, mail computer, e-mail, or the Internet as the medium of communication, and can expand geographic coverage at a fraction of the cost and time required by observation (2006, p. 245).

Gleaning from the above, survey can be said to reveal the existence of phenomena. Researchers are subsequently pointed in a direction that identifies specifics using other strategies. Due to the absence of context in the use of survey strategy, researchers run the risk of crafting inappropriate questions. They can ask such questions in an inappropriate order. They may use inappropriate transitions and instructions to elicit information. When the interviewee is outside the interviewer’s earshot or immediate vicinity, the interviewer is only limited to words received through virtual sources, but the body language that probably carries the main message in those words is lost (Cooper and Schindler, 2006, p. 245).

Survey strategy often features participant error in the sense that a participant may not have the professional, technical, social or educational capacity to discuss the content of study. Participant may be a lover of surveys, and willing to take them anytime and anywhere. Participant may be a student of surveys, searching out all available surveys and taking them in order to understand how surveys work. In all these cases, content arising from responses are potentially misleading. Gender, age, ethnicity, lifestyle, household income, attitudes, expectations knowledge, motivations and intentions are some of the essential ingredients that affect the relevance of survey responses. Fowler (2002) states, “no individual can report feelings, opinions, or knowledge of some other person” (p.26). This is one of the reasons respondents are only able to provide responses such as “don’t know”, “have no opinion” or “decline”. In a survey, these responses count because they are responses that can also be processed statistically (Cooper and Schindler, 2006, p. 252). Survey strategy is attractive due to the researcher’s opportunity to elicit simplistic responses, codify them numerically, process them, find the results and conclude the study. On the other hand possibilities of risky exclusion of critical information exist, thereby providing results that, at best, apply temporarily.

Researcher dissociates self from study. Tests are related to hypotheses. Researcher looks only for information, relies on numbers and captures all available information. Analysis of findings avoids verbiage and develops patterns from numerical values. Furthermore, researcher lacks observation and participation. He or she relies on broad overview of subject of study, compressing information, making codes very important and following only a set procedure.

## **Studying Succession Planning in Public Organizations: Which Strategy?**

Rothwell and Poduch (2004) emphasize that succession planning extends beyond ordinary replacement planning. The activity is presented as proactive, ensuring continuity of leadership by cultivating talent from within the organization using planned development activities (p. 405). This recognition of time-consuming talent development process brings to the fore Morgan and Smircich's (1980) advice to focus on the need instead of just choosing a study strategy. A further analysis of Rothwell and Poduch's (2004) explanation leads to the confirmation that talents are identified, coached, interviewed, put through tests, empowered and deployed to succeed peers that resign and others that are promoted or fired. Rothwell and Poduch (2004) ask nine crucial questions that are best answered through rigorous process of investigation. This again points to case studies rather than surveys as a choice strategy. This research is even more targeted, paying attention to government agency. The presence of government agencies (which are also public organizations) in succession planning and the choice of case studies easily serve as evidence of Morgan and Smircich's (1980) pointers. Rothwell and Poduch's use of assessment checklist (2004, p. 411) creates a sense of quantitative research survey. Incidentally the processing of applicable data only provides researchers with information with which to determine the effectiveness of the agency's planning process. As the government workforce ages, the need exists to discover ways to pinpoint what exists in the institutional memory, distill it, preserve it and transmit it (Rothwell & Poduch, 2004, p. 415). Pinpointing, distilling, preserving and transmitting can only be done through case study, if a successful succession planning must be achieved.

Another intriguing aspect of this research is a reference to Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) work on the knowledge-creating company. Both works feature one of the many ways to ensure succession within corporations. The reference to Nonaka and Takeuchi's work means that vision conveyance among peers is an embedded succession planning strategy. The organization under review builds operational concepts, which enables them to drive the process of fundamental change or revolution within the organization (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p. 132). This means that all those working within the organization are able to absorb the spirit of high performers, and become able to act like them

when they resign, or are promoted or fired. A study into this phenomenon is only possible through a time-tested process that incorporates observation, participation and personal interviews. Rothwell and Poduch (2004) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) respectively consider government agencies and publicly traded corporations (both of which are public organizations).

Several extensive study situations bring researchers face to face with the need to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. Pragmatists find themselves in such situations while trying to draw from diverse sources (Creswell, 2003). This combination is evident in Rothwell and Poduch's (2004) qualitative research work with an internal quantitative assessment survey tool. Beyond Rothwell and Poduch (2004) and Creswell (2003), further corroboration probably becomes unnecessary. However, certified public accountants that work on the financial statements of public organizations, using their accounting practice as an example, make contributions through Dennis (2005) stating, "when owners agree in advance on a corporate structure that one managing partner will implement, then staff and partners have a model to follow, making the transition to new leadership easier" (p. 49). If this mirroring is anything to go by, then public organizations studying succession must take rigorous steps to cultivate and nurture such future successors. Such nurturing involves coaching, mentoring, modeling and observing. Survey strategy cannot accomplish this feat, but case study can.

According to Creswell and Clark (2007), "A review of qualitative and quantitative research starts with the knowledge that they both address the same elements in the process of research..." (2007, p. 28), but the difference will be in the implementation of each step. In studying succession planning, a demonstration of those similarities is in the sampling procedures, permission issues, collection of data, entering or recording as well as the administering of data. These will be carried out whether the researcher chooses quantitative or qualitative method in studying succession planning in public organizations.

Henrico County study uses developmental approach. It addresses two concerns related to the loss of intellectual capital in key positions and the decreasing number of younger adults in their workforce that are expected to grow into top positions (Holinsworth, 2004, p. 475). The key positions span across all echelons of the operation, and step-wise classification streamlines expected progress. Deeper analysis reveals the Henrico County research as a proof of the suitability of case studies (which is a strategy in qualitative research) in studying succession planning in public organizations. This context-driven research involves teaching upper management five steps of succession management program. Those exercises involve a close look at the history of succession over a decade, enabling the researcher to observe changes in the workforce over the period of the study. Consequently, it appears that surveys, which is a strategy in quantitative research, will not be appropriate for this study because it will not allow for the close monitoring and participation that this study engenders. Conceptually similar to Henrico County research, Pollitt's (2005) "one-on-one coaching or mentoring for high-potential individuals; allocation of resources for leadership development; and making the development of talent a strategic priority for the organization" (p. 36) uses quantitative data to support the use of steps that are only achievable through case studies. This also reveals the need for context, especially as it uses a

quantitative data, yet supporting further extension of the study through context-based activities.

According to Holinsworth (2004), “other observed changes in the workplace also indicated a need to develop an initiative that would effectively plan for the succession of retiring managers and provide for the development of non-management employees” (p. 476). The meaning, therefore, is that a researcher has to interpret observations, develop targeted programs instead of assigning numbers that will not provide researcher with the desired solutions.

Holinsworth’s (2004) two-phased program has three time-consuming activities and five extensive steps respectively. The resultant case study strategy points to the fact that if a public organization desires an effective succession management, the qualitative research approach of case studies will be best suited for the study. A major lesson from the research is that success factors that benefit public organizations include visible support from top executive, a research that is simple and tailored to the organization, flexibility and linkage to the organization’s strategic plans. Others are development of competencies to be kept in view, involvement of employees through their input, creation of long-term employee development plans and emphasis on accountability and follow-up (Holinsworth, 2004, p. 485). Those tasks definitely lead to the achievement of effective succession plan. They are rigorous. Human and intangible resources such as time and mental energy should be deployed in abundance so as to achieve the goal so pursued. On the contrary, Wright and Snell (2002) make several assumptions at the beginning of the study that do not address specific organizational need (p. 45), thereby exposing to readers that the investigation seeks an answer to a broad question. The study is controlled to move in a specific direction. The result is a generic human resource planning activity. In effect, the study is context-free, and loses the capacity to reveal all necessary attributes of both the problem studied and the potential solutions. Such an approach is less suited for the study of succession planning in public organizations.

Weick (1979) states, “Nevertheless, there is a kind of inevitability once some of these small beginnings of expansion are set in motion” (p. 9). This points to the fact that succession involves a long line of officers, and each person’s actions cause other reactions easily regarded as effects. It also refers to the connection between top and bottom management, which creates activity that can last a long time. Administrators that are overconscientious of the future produce plans that artificially simplify the complexity involved, and unnecessarily admonish people to work towards goal consensus and consensus on values (1979, p. 103). Complexities are part of public organizations. Succession planning deals with the station of each concerned party. These two suggest a strategy that corporately and individually permeates the organizational fabric. Case study appears to be the only one that can look into such complex phenomena.

Arnone (2006) approaches succession-planning study from the quantitative research survey angle and produces work that reveals broad sweeping phenomena. As much as the work addresses the exit of baby boomers from workforce, it does not zoom in on an organization's specific dilemma. Numbers are informative only to the extent of keeping readers abreast of general market or industry situations. For any organization to use the information, it will probably need to conduct an incisive company-specific study to determine how Arnone's findings may affect its operations. This is one proof of survey strategy's contribution to succession planning study. Furthermore, Arnone's (2006) quantitative work provides market-level information that can be used by any public organization. This also points to the appropriateness of case study strategy as better suited than surveys for studying succession planning in public organizations.

Gaffney (2005) states "succession planning synergy creates happier and more productive employees in a growth-oriented company. The organization experiences positive bottom-line results while preparing for future business needs based on mutual corporate and individual growth" (p. 7). Similar to Henrico County succession management research, which was done through case studies, Gaffney (2005) further points to the acceptability of case study strategy as better suited for studying succession planning in public organizations. This conclusion is based on Gaffney's (2005) use of developmental items that take time and resources to achieve. She includes synergies that can easily be studied quantitatively, but not enough to circumscribe a specific public organization's succession planning situation. She also includes role criticality process that defies numbers and emphasize context.

Other considerations are individual career plan side-by-side corporate plan and corporate self-assessment. Based on her findings, a good starting point will be a corporate business plan with a workable methodology that uses that business plan. When the business plan is followed, the individual's career plan will be made to synchronize with corporate goals and objectives. Under such circumstances, top-level management and department heads make substantial input in both the employee and corporate plans. The use of these plans will be expanded to address the ever-growing need for talent in the organization (Gaffney, 2005, p. 8). Gaffney's outlined considerations imply that a case study strategy is more appropriate than surveys strategy in studying succession planning in public organizations. This is because the factors necessary for understanding the organization's succession needs cannot be based on numerical codification and processing.

Endres and Alexander (2006) use a base quantitative survey data comparatively to study two organizations, first lesson being, "the new succession planning processes at both agencies reinforced the importance of having senior management from across the agency actively involved in the development and implementation of the project" (p. 31).

The second lesson being, “the succession planning process needs to reflect the current reality of the agency, so it has to continuously evolve” (2006, p. 31). The recommended evolution took place between the publishing of the case studies and this evaluation. Therefore, a deeper, rather personal investigation reveals the existence of internal politics, poor rating on Gallup’s assessment instrument, some friction arising from the non-inclusion of a top-brass protégée in succession as a favor, and the re-establishment of competency based rating (G. Endres, personal communication, November 5, 2007). Consequently, through discoveries made in case studies, researcher is able to explain findings that duly cover the subject, as witnessed in Endres and Alexander (2006) and the above-mentioned post-research update.

Thomas, Kidd and Fernandez-Araoz’s (2007) nearly 100 third-party reviews, with 50% use of questionnaire targets the mining of similar data. The advice of Morgan and Smircich (1980) applies to that study as the study deploys a survey, which successfully provides basis for further research that can only be executed through a case study in succession planning. An organization can rely on the findings of above survey to chart the course of its own internal research into succession. Under conditions such as this, research questions are geared towards learning about the organization’s exact succession needs. Information gathered is expected to be broad, deep and extensive to allow for researcher’s navigation and meaningful understanding and reporting because case studies are not experiments. A brief study of crew rostering problem in a public transport company, for instance, using survey strategy searches for the best way to roster employees so that daily, hourly, and shift-related successions are smooth (Lezaun, Perez and Sainz de la Maza, 2006, p. 1173). This shows that surveys convey a message of objectivity, and consequently capable of emerging as a default recourse in any research. Furthermore, the rostering succession management demonstrates a short form of the perfect scheme for succession planning in other public organizations. Howbeit, the friendliness of surveys should not motivate researchers to choose it. Researchers should pay more attention to what is being investigated rather than pre-choosing a strategy for the study (Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

Bellin and Pham (2007) reports, “top managers are increasingly concerned with the problem of maintaining a common corporate culture and identity” (p. 44). This very familiar ‘tune’ draws attention to a big picture. It plays out in a survey strategy that reveals the circumstances of large public organizations everywhere, with particular attention to the global presence of Marriott hotels whose different brand names are in diverse geographies. The summation, therefore, is that survey may not be completely ruled out in studying succession planning. However, an organization should pay attention mainly to characteristics that make for its own stability and continuity. For this reason, the organization may need more than what codified numbers can offer. From a rare angle, Ho, Chang and Tseng (2006) study scheduling operations that involve successive provision of non-human factors of production. This survey-based

study shares concepts with the crew rostering study by Lezaun, Perez and Sainz de la Maza (2006). The former can be manipulated, changing the non-human factors to personnel and stretching the intervals to as long as personnel should serve the organization. This simulation will produce a human succession plan for the organization. Unfortunately, because their lived experiences are not incorporated, unforeseen contingencies will nullify the study. It can, therefore, be concluded that surveys cannot provide a researcher with the reason a situation changes from its original nature. It may provide to what extent the change takes place.

### *Conclusion*

Succession planning in public organizations is best-studied using case study strategy. When the focus is on organization types or industry types, a deep understanding of the entity's specifics will still necessitate qualitative research based strategy. This is hinged on a need to consider the organization's circumstances without which a study of succession planning will be generic.

Arnone's (2006), targeting organization-specific study of succession planning uses trends and patterns to show that case study is a better choice for studying succession planning. This is especially important because the successors are employees. They are human beings. They effectively contribute their quota in specific ways that warrant the use of case study. The future successor must, therefore, be an effective employee. His or her effectiveness, according to Nwosu (2007), "manifests in the individual performance of official tasks, which reveals such an employee's positivity, responsibility, honesty, productivity, self-consciousness, stability and creativity" (p. 16). Case study, therefore, allows the study to probe into those nooks and corners of both the employee and the organization in order to successfully discover the essential ingredients for making a decision on the organization's future. According to Duska and Graves (2006), "questions about succession planning naturally arise, particularly with regard to who will take over the jobs and do the work" (p. 19). They argue in favor of taking succession planning seriously again in order to continue organization's legacy. Since valuable skills and experience are essential tools for that task, coming generations of decision makers should benefit from the wisdom of their incumbent leaders for successful succession (Duska & Graves, 2006, p. 20). Researchers must, therefore, choose the best-suited strategy to study succession planning in public organization. The overall comprehension of evidence so far gathered shows that case study is better suited to study succession planning in public organizations.

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