

Keeping Company Knowledge Where It Belongs

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When employees leave your company, they may take vital knowledge with them. Unless a process is in place to capture that knowledge so that it can be transferred to a successor, it could disappear. This deficit results in lost insights, longer on-boarding time for replacements and an inability for the company to react quickly and effectively to change. Succession planning is the key to ensuring that critical knowledge in the company is not lost.

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Succession planning is about developing employees and supporting them in their careers to ensure that the organization has pools of talent for key areas. It is not about identifying heirs to specific positions. Knowledge in the company must be accessible, communicated and enhanced. Your organization's succession planning approach should ensure that:

- The process is transparent and communicated to all employees
- Candidate assessments are objective and free from personal favouritism
- Employees who have expressed an interest in career advancement have an opportunity to be considered for future roles
- Appointments to roles are based on merit
- Employee expectations around 'guaranteed promotions' are carefully managed

1. Prioritize jobs to focus on.

Jobs that are more critical to the success of the company must be prime targets for knowledge transfer activities. The same holds true for jobs that require sophisticated and complex knowledge. To identify them, ask yourself "Which positions, if left vacant, would cause major difficulties in achieving current and future business goals? Which positions would be difficult to fill because they require particular expertise and/or the incumbents possess a wealth of knowledge?"

2. Identify the required KSAs for key positions.

Knowing the required capabilities for key areas is necessary for guiding learning plans, for setting clear performance expectations, and for selection purposes. Creating a knowledge or competency profile can be helpful for this purpose. A knowledge profile describes the critical operational know-how required to do a particular job, while a competency profile applies a set of competencies to groups of positions. Managers may also interview job incumbents to gain an understanding of relevant skills, knowledge and abilities.

3. Identify interested employees and assess them against required KSAs.

Employees can self-identify, or the organization can use more formal methods of identifying high potential employees. Talent review meetings are one such method used to identify the requirements for leadership and key positions, to assess the capability of people to fill those positions, and to ascertain the developmental needs of potential candidates. Effective talent review discussions:

- Begin by measuring progress against last year's goals
- Include multiple perspectives on employee assessments
- Encourage frank and honest discussion, rather than reporting

- Explore the employees' career intentions
- Include discussions on employees' learning and development needs
- Follow up on action items within a couple of months of the meeting

4. Employ strategies for learning and development.

Experience-based learning is very effective for preparing potential candidates for future roles. Therefore, consider incorporating the following succession strategies to ensure knowledge transfer:

- Stretch assignments
- Job rotations
- Replacement assignments
- Mentoring and/or coaching
- Formal training
- Documentation of critical knowledge/job diaries
- Special Assignment Pay Plan
- Exit interviews
- Communities of practice
- Pre-retirement transition leave
- Casual employment (post retirement)

5. Evaluate effectiveness.

It is important to systematically evaluate and monitor your succession planning activities and make adjustments as needed. The following can be used to measure progress:

- The number of vacant positions
- Average number of days elapsed for each vacancy
- Your bench strength
- Average performance ratings of new employees in key positions

Since a succession planning initiative is a large and complex project, it would be a good idea to start with a small pilot group. Even if you can't expand beyond your area, you can feel good knowing that you are ready to meet talent challenges head on.