

insight:

Futureproofing the workforce: Why your talent management team should prioritise succession planning

Linda Mason, HR Director

Uplifting, supporting and cultivating the next generation of leaders is a primary focus of any HR professional today. Central to this is succession planning.

When sourcing and welcoming future leaders, it is no longer acceptable to backfill a role or to shoo in candidates based on short-term objectives. With shareholder trust built on a bedrock of evidence that organisations are recruiting talent for longevity, today's recruitment looks beyond the immediate to plan for challenging progression. Futureproofing happens at the very beginning of the employee lifecycle.



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Getting under the skin of succession

Succession planning is a structured, forward-looking process of hiring candidates. It dismisses the outdated idea of 'winging it' and hoping for the best when filling a role, looking only for credentials and skills that meet short-term objectives. Succession planning seeks out candidates with skills that will drive them forward and provides a plan for their next steps towards an integral leadership role.

Organisations don't just 'get lucky' when they find a candidate fit for leadership – they plan thoroughly to make sure it happens, mitigating risk and offering trust and progression to people who deserve success.

As well as being a major focus for HR and talent acquisition departments, succession planning must be an imperative for the CEO and leadership team. Leaders need to be aligned behind driving the sustainability of the business; talent will keep this in motion.



From CV to C-suite

Strong succession planning starts from the very minute we receive a CV. As hiring managers, we're used to asking both ourselves and candidates plenty of questions in relation to role-specific skills. For successful succession planning, we also need to explore a candidate's credentials beyond the day-to-day, discovering if they possess leadership capabilities that the organisation values.

Where has this person been? Where are they going? What are the constraints that would prevent them from progressing? What, then, would the company's role look like in their development? Culturally, can they walk the walk paved by their predecessors? And are they willing to take the path less travelled?

We typically think about succession plans for the C-suite – our board members and senior leadership roles. But the reality is that every role across the organisation is important – it wouldn't exist otherwise. For any key role that is hard to fill, there should be a succession plan built from a good range of internally developed candidates, regardless of whether there is a clear ladder from the role to senior leadership.

Let's look at a real-world example of poor succession planning. I worked with a global organisation that had no choice but to recruit externally for a retiring President following their decade-long tenure. This President was responsible for the largest region from a profit perspective – a really business-critical role, and not an easy one to replace. Despite there being a significant number of promising internal candidates, there was no one who had been developed to replace the outgoing President and no time to implement a fast-track development plan.

In a case like this, not only does the external recruitment and subsequent onboarding take valuable time and impact the organisation's bottom line, internal candidates get a front-row view of how little has been invested in their development, leaving them dejected, with one foot out the door.

The power of talent

As this suggests, as organisations make the move to a model that values home-grown talent and cultivates future leaders within the business, there needs to be a fundamental shift in the way we perceive and treat our workforce as a whole.

Prospective candidates want to work for a company with strong ethics; an organisation that stands for something. They are looking for opportunities to create a career that fits their own personal progression journey. They want to feel they will be supported in their growth.

Once they work for you, people need to know and understand that you think of them as 'talent', not simply employees. They want to be aligned with the workforce across all levels and visible across the organisation.

Today's talent has more power and agency than ever before, and attracting and retaining it is the greatest challenge for many businesses. Just look at The Great Resignation... Effective succession planning can go a long way towards creating an environment of trust, loyalty and engagement that attracts individuals and enables them to thrive.

Successful succession

My key advice for HR and hiring managers when it comes to succession planning?

Involve the whole leadership team in identifying your talent pool. Agree on the type of candidates you want for a role and their future prospects.

Identify the behaviours you are looking for in an individual and be sure to cover these at interview or during recruitment. Do people live and breathe your values?

Sound out people's commitment. It's safe to say someone who aspires to own a beach bar within five years has no aspiration to stick around.

Be aware of constraints that might prevent an individual from progressing. Can you help them overcome them? What development is needed to ensure success and how long will it take?

Ensure leaders are fully trained to interview diverse talent without internal bias and don't simply look for 'the next version of themselves'.

Make sure you have a good insight into the future direction of the business to avoid short-term thinking. Keep referring back to your three-year plan!

Finally, decide if your company is willing to be open about succession planning and how best to communicate this. In my experience, when people know they have been identified as 'talent', it encourages them to give the very best of themselves.



Linda Mason is HR Director at Harmonic, where she enjoys the challenge of succession planning and cultivating the next generation of leaders in an organisation of highly experienced people. In her previous role as Vice President of Human Resources for a global US business, she developed talent acquisition solutions to support business growth.