



# Bottom Up Succession Planning Works Better

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An HRM researcher or postgraduate student looking up succession planning would be led to believe that it involves identifying and analysing key positions, assessing candidates against job and personal requirements and creating individual development plans for potential successors for more senior responsibilities. Further reading of the literature would encourage creating backup charts, employee profiles and timetables for their promotion.

The problem is that this formula does not bear close scrutiny when considering the nature of organisational life today and the practices required to keep a business viable and staffing resources motivated. It shrieks of outdated top down over-control philosophies with scant attention to the danger that if you do not find out the real, rather than the assumed, career expectations of staff you may not have a reliable succession plan. And how will you know those unless you ask them? And ask them again at regular intervals. Just as organisations change, employees also change as they journey through their lives.

The majority of current succession planning practices reflect the viewpoint of only a linear career direction for ambitious people. They are based on the premise that ambitious people have and want only one career direction—an upwardly mobile one. In fact, every employee has a minimum of ten career direction options at any stage of their working life (Figure 1). Our experiences in conducting 100 career and life planning workshops in the past year indicate that only a minority actually want the career action that requires promotion. But their employers may not have learned this unless a comprehensive career planning support program has been implemented.

See [10 Career Action Options](#).

## Ten Career Action Options

At any time in your career, you have at least ten career action step options from which to choose:

Option	Involves
1 <b>Remain in Current Role</b> No content change	Recognition that your current role provides you with your desired level of challenge and development at the moment.
2 <b>Enrichment</b> Develop current job	Considering what job tasks you wish to do more of and negotiating with others to take over those which no longer motivate you.

<b>3</b>	<b>Vertical</b> Seek promotion	Considering what would be the real gain for you in seeking increased responsibilities.
<b>4</b>	<b>Exploration</b> Test out options	Seeking project work, a secondment or deputising in another job function to test out how you like it.
<b>5</b>	<b>Lateral</b> Sideways move	Moving to a similar level of job task difficulty but with different job content.
<b>6</b>	<b>Realignment</b> Moving down	Downshifting to less responsibility for a short- or long-term period.
<b>7</b>	<b>Relocation</b> Change business unit	Deciding that work of a different nature from your current business unit is more appropriate for your career future.
<b>8</b>	<b>Redirection</b> Change career field	Changing the career stream of field of work with your current employer.
<b>9</b>	<b>Proposal</b> Create new job	Submitting a proposal for creating a new job which would meet the needs of your employer and you.
<b>10</b>	<b>External</b> Change employer	Deciding that work of a nature different from your current employer is more appropriate for your career future.

**Reading Suggestions**

*Stop Postponing the Rest of Your Life* by Paul Stevens (Publisher: Worklife)

*How to Network and Select a Mentor* by Paul Stevens (Publisher: Worklife)

*Planning for Me !* by Paul Stevens (Publisher: Worklife)

**Employee Participation**



Once a career option is actioned and time goes by, an employee will reflect on their work and life experiences and find their primary wants have shifted. Most likely, a different next step option will be chosen than the one previously selected. Knowing the direction in which a good performing employee is inclining is critical to achieving succession planning as a workable human resource practice.

And why should a succession scheme be limited to planning replacements for higher positions? The need for a more career resilient workforce today means that employees must initiate career changes often through lateral job moves within the same employment environment, seek new learning and extended competencies by changing work speciality streams and thereby enhancing their employability.

When employees are stimulated to submit their short- and long-term goals in Career Action Step Proposals (CASP), management has a better idea of who wants what. The top down only system conjectures at the career direction preferences of the individual. These can often be wrong, discovered only when the time comes to act on job succession moves. By assisting employees to decide on and how to communicate their career direction support needs-what they seek and why they believe they merit it-the hazards of succession planning are substantially reduced.

Employees are realistic about the tenuous nature of their continued employment. The recession years taught this lesson. More employees now accept that career protection and increased employability can only be done by themselves. As a consequence, they are eager learners of personal career management practices. They are

responsible for initiating requests and need to be skilled in presenting and negotiating their case.

With skilled facilitation, each employee selects and assembles data about: their preferred skills; their career values; their primary wants at the current stage of their career and life; an appraisal of their career action constraints-their belief system; their motivated interests; and concludes by documenting their desired new learning. This is the minimum database for realistic career action planning and exploration of career development where they work.

Employees learn career management skills by participating in workshops and by accessing structured career planning workbooks, employer-sponsored career self-help libraries or comprehensive computer-based career guidance systems (CBCGS) software, such as DISCOVER for Organisations, Career Builder or SIGI PLUS. Further education comes through career coaching discussions with their manager, mentor or HRM staff designated as their career helper.

Once employees' employability confidence and personal career management expertise have been increased, they are less apprehensive about future organisational change. They feel more secure because they have compiled data about themselves which could be used to identify a set of work tasks in any reasonable amount of change which could be forthcoming.

### **Succession Grids, Not Charts**



Succession planning should resemble more a grid-like patterning than a traditional organisation chart. Here, possible successors can be plotted for job content moves that are upwards, sideways or downwards (often a good direction for entry to a new career stream, a new area of expertise growth).

Focusing on replacing incumbents in positions as they exist today is based on the premise that the organisation will clone what is currently wanted for next month, next year, even the next decade. This approach fails to recognise the rate of change-and its turbulent nature-occurring in the economic and social environment in which organisations are operating. Restructuring has become a way of organisational life as the ebb and flow of business needs and altered strategies recur.

The assessment of a person's match with their employer should look beyond the position occupied today. The organisation's requirements need to be clarified in terms of competencies, roles, culture and technology. Then, in turn, facilities are required for employees to self-assess whether they are motivated and compatible with these requirements. Knowledge and skill to do a job well are not sufficient. Motivation and compatible values and purposes are also required. We now have multi-task roles rather than jobs when we go to work.

### **The Learning Journey**



Every designated successor would benefit from a learning journey. This means arranging for the candidate to participate in information gathering discussions with the current occupant of the targeted role. This learning journey is a propitious strategy helping both parties by sharing the realities of the role rather than career plans being based solely on the publicised descriptions of jobs. A period of intermittent job shadowing could also be scheduled. If the role reality is no longer attractive to the candidate, time is saved by redirecting the succession planning to a more likely candidate. For this to function, succession planning is an open system, not one where the contents are locked in a cupboard by a senior executive.

Secrecy features in too many succession planning systems. A judgement is made by a senior person and a name entered on a succession chart. Rarely is the individual consulted or informed. Or asked whether it is what they want. Consider the chart in Figure 2 below.

### Career Action Step Proposal

What ? Where ? When ?

- *Performance Improvement:*  
List your support needs and proposed actions
- *Professional Development Plan:*  
What you believe you should undertake in priority sequence
- *Self-Development Plan:*  
Your personal actions relating to supporting your career action step
- *Current Position Enrichment Plan:*  
How your current job may be enhanced to increase your satisfaction
- *Measures of Success:*  
How will you know when you have achieved your short-term goal

## Workforce Responsiveness

What succession planning is really about is ensuring teams of people are in readiness for contingencies, organisational expansion or contraction, for entering new markets, for handling changes in the nature of technology with which the business operates.



A career resilient workforce will adapt readily to changes in structure, command relationships and objectives. To achieve this resiliency, employees need to be educated in the revised definitions of career management and skilled in self-reliant practices in their own career development. This requires commitment to establishing what is the vision of the organisation and communicating it to staff. It requires courage to invite employees to learning events which assist them to review their worklife and plan, on time horizons no further ahead than two years, the type of roles they as individuals want and can show evidence that they merit such appointments.

## The New Reality

Succession planning in action is offering a new role to an employee who you know can do two-thirds of the task requirements, as it is naive to expect sustainable high performance if the person knows how to do it all. With no room for new learning, there is self-limiting motivation. Succession planning as a process is holistic in nature. It embraces career development skills building and life management planning for individuals while at the same time linking into the employer's overall business planning practices.

Managers need to learn about the talent and career action proposals of employees outside their area of accountabilities before a total company-wide succession scheme can be effective. There should be more than one party inputting the data on which effective succession planning functions. Limiting succession judgement to a top down secretive process reduces rather than enhances the insurance for the ongoing life of the organisation.

### *Further Useful Reading*

- Career Development Support in Organisations. Stevens, Paul. The Centre for Worklife Counselling, Sydney, 1993.
- The Career Is Dead-Long Live the Career: A Relational Approach to Careers. Hall, Douglas T. and Associates. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1996.
- Employees, Careers, and Job Creation: Developing Growth-Oriented Human Resource Strategies and Programs. London, Manuel, Editor. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1995.
- Promoting a Development Culture in Your Organization. Simonsen, Peggy. Davies-Black Publishing, a division of Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., Palo Alto, 1997.
- A Passion for Work: Our Lifelong Affair. Stevens, Paul. The Centre for Worklife Counselling, Sydney, 1993.
- Succession Planning: An Annotated Bibliography and Summary of Commonly Reported Organizational Practices. Eastman, Lorrina. The Center for Creative Leadership, North Carolina, 1995

Worklife has been providing in-company career and life planning training since 1983. In the past year nearly 100 workshops have been facilitated. Career development support strategies have been designed in partnership with more than 22 organisations since 1995 for their employees and executive management objectives. For more information, email [solutions@9to5.com.sg](mailto:solutions@9to5.com.sg) or visit [www.worklife.com.au](http://www.worklife.com.au).

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