



## Time Waits for No Succession Plan

By Robert Half

Succession planning doesn't just apply to the Jamie Dimons and Warren Buffetts of the world. Every company, large and small, needs to groom potential successors for key positions — and not just those at the highest levels. Nurturing a talent pool and promoting from within are valuable strategies for retaining top performers and ensuring smoother management transitions at all tiers of an organization.

But many companies still view succession planning as a task they'll undertake when a clear need presents itself. A Robert Half [survey](#) bore this out: 83 percent of financial executives interviewed said they had not identified a successor for their position. Of those, 81 percent said their primary reason for not doing so was that they had no plans to leave their present companies in the near future.

Succession planning is not an ad hoc activity, however. It means being prepared for any possibility. Consider these suggestions to ensure you're ready to replace essential employees, whether their departure is anticipated or unexpected:

**Pinpoint key roles.** Start by identifying critical positions that should never go unfilled. This should include a variety of roles at different levels. It may be a given that you don't want the chief financial officer job to be left unexpectedly vacant, but also plan for continuity in other positions. For instance, an accounting firm might need to plan just as diligently for replacing a tax specialist with in-demand expertise as it would someone in a management position.

**Identify high-potential candidates.** Next, consider who in your organization, with focused professional development, could be qualified to move into the roles you've identified as pivotal to the business' success. This does not necessarily mean anointing a single "heir apparent" for each senior position, but rather trying to define a pipeline of future talent for critical roles.

One approach is to apply the lifeboat drill: If an individual in a vital position fell overboard and drowned, who would be left to steer the ship? It's often suggested that companies have two or three capable people who could step up. If you find you lack these in-house, you may need to look externally.

**Have discussions.** Implementing a succession plan requires more than just having a sense of who might be chosen were circumstances to change. It also involves holding discussions with protégées to explain that they're being singled out for positions of increasing importance, gauging their interest and getting their buy-in.

Companies sometimes discover that high-potential employees aren't eager to assume management roles. According to another Robert Half [survey](#), more than three-quarters (76 percent) of employees polled said they have no interest in having their manager's position. If you

find similar attitudes in your organization, examine underlying reasons staff members might feel this way. Many aspects of management involve making difficult, sometimes unpopular decisions, and not everyone is comfortable in this role. Even top performers may not see themselves as potential leaders.

Sometimes generational differences are to blame. Members of Generation X and Generation Y often see baby boomer managers clocking long hours at the office, and then putting in even more time from home on weekends. Therefore, they may equate managerial roles with being tethered to your desk and having a lack of work/life balance. These professionals may want greater flexibility to manage how they work. Also, some staff members may fear they'll lose the sense of camaraderie they have with colleagues if they opt for the management track.

Although attitudes about advancement may be more perception than reality, they could inhibit some workers' desire to consider a supervisory role. By being willing to address possible barriers, you may be able to encourage reluctant candidates to step forward.

**Groom future leaders.** Identify and prioritize the personal and professional qualities that are essential for success in a particular role. You can then focus on closing knowledge and skill gaps in succession candidates. Individuals may need additional career development in the form of mentoring, job rotations (where they move through a number of positions in the organization to gain an overall understanding of the business) and continuing professional education programs. In addition, provide future leaders with ongoing feedback to help them fine-tune their abilities.

Keep in mind that succession planning is not just good for ensuring the continued success of your business; it's good for your people too. By identifying tomorrow's leaders you let top performers know you value their contributions and that there is a path for advancement within your company. This creates powerful motivation for them to stay on the job.

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