



The Public Sector is on the brink of unprecedented change:

*Succession & Career Planning
can help organisations overcome
the challenges ahead*

Succession planning in the Public Sector

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt the public sector is on the brink of a period of unprecedented change.

Organisations are under intense pressure from government to find more effective and efficient ways of providing public services. The recession has led to a tight squeeze on public sector spending – and public scrutiny of the way the sector spends its money has never been greater.

At the same time, the public sector is finding itself in the midst of an intense war for talent. A huge demographic time bomb is just around the corner. Figures suggest, for example, that 30 per cent of the local government workforce is due to retire over the next 10/15 years. The number of young people entering the workforce is also dwindling – and skill levels are at an all time low.

It's hardly surprising then, that the issue of succession planning is rising rapidly to the top of the public sector agenda.

A new generation of leaders, with the skills and resilience to take on the enormous challenges ahead, need to be in the pipeline – and the task of recruiting, nurturing and developing them has become an urgent priority.

A CRITICAL ISSUE

Of course the concept of succession planning is not new to the public sector. There are pockets of outstanding good practice to be found in local authorities, the health sector and within regulatory bodies.

IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency for local government) research suggests that local authorities only have a sporadic approach to succession planning, although many have identified it as a critical issue they plan to tackle in the near future.

Some of this seeming reluctance to grasp the nettle is that succession planning in the public sector brings with it some particular challenges – which although not insurmountable, can derail programmes or significantly slow the process down.

Traditional public sector culture, for example, can make it difficult to 'single' people out and put them on a fast development track. In many organisations, 'the way you get on round here' is set in stone and there is a tendency for people to hang on in posts for years once they've travelled that tried and tested route.

"The public sector has a reputation for treating staff fairly, in some cases perhaps too fairly," says Gary Miles, Head of Open Programmes at Roffey Park. "This egalitarian approach can sometimes get in the way of doing really good stuff with succession, because no-one wants to rock the boat. But the reality is that there are people who are going to stick at a certain level and do an OK job – and other people who are doing a very good job who you want to accelerate.

"My view is that you have to face up to that. It's a tough, turbulent climate and that means you have to have tough conversations within organisations. The way round it is to be focused, transparent and clear with people about whether they have the potential in the organisation to get to the top or whether they are just going to be seen to be doing an OK job at a certain level."

A TRANSPARENT APPROACH

This need for transparency is endorsed by Gillian Hibberd, Corporate Director, People, Policy and Communications at Buckinghamshire County Council and President of the Public Sector People Managers Association (PPMA). The authority has developed a talent management and succession planning tool-kit, which managers use to identify and succession plan for critical posts within their service or department.

The tool allows managers to attach a level of risk to posts in terms of impact to the organisation if the post was vacant, and the likely difficulty filling it if the incumbent leaves for pastures new. It also enables managers to look at individual employees and assess which people would leave a gaping hole if the departed, either in terms of knowledge lost or impact on service delivery.

This information subsequently feeds into the council's talent management process, and is used to help identify high performers and the 'ones to watch' for the future. Heavy emphasis is placed on engaging managers in the process so that they can see the value of the exercise – and also on being open about the people who have been ear-marked as high potential.

"I think it's really important to have a degree of fairness and transparency in the process so people can see why it's been done – and also to follow through and make sure it doesn't just become a paper-based exercise," says Gillian Hibberd. "We can't guarantee people will get the jobs, but we can let people know that they are in our talent pool and give advice on the kind of career pathway they should consider following."

People in the council's talent pool have access to a range of support and development opportunities including action learning sets and senior management mentoring. They are also given opportunities to develop their skills through appropriate projects and assignments.

Hibberd believes the approach is reaping a number of benefits. Departments have more robust succession plans, recruitment costs have been reduced – and it has helped the organisation look at career pathways in a different light. "An interesting side benefit of our succession planning tool kit has been that it has helped us look across the different services in the organisation and has broadened career paths for our people," she says.

A POLITICAL CHALLENGE

Of course local government organisations have the additional pressure of cultivating their succession planning activity against a complicated and ever-changing political backdrop.

Roffey Park's Gary Miles, himself an ex local councillor, has seen the difficulties this can cause first hand. "There can be frustrations in succession planning in local authorities where you have politicians who are setting the tone at the top of the organisation – but don't necessarily understand the people issues, because they haven't come from that type of background," he says. "It makes long-term planning very difficult when you are having to respond to these different political agendas, because you are often having to respond to short-term emotional desires."

Public sector bodies also have the added challenge of trying to work out a fair and simple process for progressing employees in highly complex organisations, where there are numerous functions and a huge variety of professional skill sets. They also have the propensity to tie themselves in knots trying to make sure that whatever succession planning programmes they do put in place, don't fall foul of equality or pay legislation.

Dean Shoesmith, Vice President of the Public Sector People Managers' Association (PPMA) believes if these problems are to be overcome, more work needs to be done to put in clear career pathways for public sector employees.

"One size doesn't fit all, so it needs differentiation, but you have to balance that against the complexity and transparency of what you are doing," he says.

"For some areas, like uniformed police officers for example, it's quite clear. In other areas, such as child care social workers, we have developed these paths because it's become a business imperative and we have had to put the architecture in place to be able to recruit and retain successfully. In other areas, however, it's much less clear. I think a certain amount of caution is needed around the idea of having career civil servants, or an equivalent – because how much does that really work when across the organisation you need very particular professional skills, such as IT, HR or finance, for example?"

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

The National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) has taken a very pragmatic approach to the issue, driven by the requirement from government to come up with a 10 year workforce plan for policing.

"That's a massive challenge, but we have tried to do it in a very simple way," explains Angela O'Connor, the NPIA's Chief People Officer. "So we started off with saying what does policing look like now and what does the changing nature of the job mean in terms of the skills we are going to need in the future? What are the hours and patterns people are working to, how many people are going to retire and who is going to fill these positions? It's a very exciting piece of work because it's enabled us to create a picture of the national workforce and it means we can really focus the initiatives we put in place based on evidence.

"We have to be able to develop people with the right skills and attributes for a very fast changing world – we are dealing with different sorts of crimes and working at a different pace – so we have to make sure we are preparing people for that."

NPIA has recently agreed a national people strategy and has reviewed all its learning and development activity in line with this and the national workforce plan.

Among the initiatives that have been put in place is a national graduate scheme and a national senior careers advisory service, which will provide guidance to 300 top police personnel across the country.

There's also a high potential development scheme, which has been put together with Warwick University. The scheme comprises a series of modules covering operational aspects of policing as well as the broader context and leads to a Masters.

O'Connor adds that getting the development spot on is particularly critical in a specialist area like policing. "When you are dealing with a specialist area you are looking at developing talent within a business because your market is not one where you can just dip in and out," she says. "So you are looking at building paths and trajectories of career development and you have to get it absolutely right. There is a lot of pressure on resources and increased scrutiny on public sector spending, and we have, quite rightly, to justify absolutely everything that we do. That means that decisions about talent have to be linked very much to a structured, evidenced view of why we are doing things."

TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

Mark Sweeny of Certus-Solutions specialises in implementing technology in the public sector and believes it has an important role to play in providing this kind of hard evidence about exactly what's required.

"Technology can provide fast access to talent-related information, which supports more effective decision-making," he says. "It allows organisations to better achieve transparency, monitor diversity and have access to analyse critical positions. However, the dependency is as always on the quality of information captured and held".

Julie Windsor, UK Operations Director of Cezanne Software says public sector organisations are definitely beginning to switch on to the potential technology has to streamline their succession planning activities. "We have been finding recently that there is a real thirst from within the public sector for succession planning and how organisations can use technology to accelerate the process and reduce the costs and time associated with the task," she says.

Sally Hulks, Head of HR and Talent Practice at Ashridge Consulting has also seen a noticeable increase in the number of public sector organisations knocking on the door looking for help in how to develop people for senior roles. Part of the problem, she believes, is that managers who have been brought up in the hierarchical school of management themselves can sometimes find it hard define 'leadership' potential, particularly if they are in an organisation where there are no clear role models to look to.

"Sometimes succession planning systems get derailed because people don't know what it is they are actually looking for," she says. "There's often a gap between middle managers and the really senior management jobs and so there is limited capacity to succession plan for that kind of potential because it can sometimes be quite difficult for people to spot that notion of leadership."

THE WAY AHEAD

The NPIA's Angela O'Connor believes one way round this is for there to be increased dialogue between public and private sector organisations. "The one thing I have learnt is that it's really good to involve people in succession planning who are not part of the business, because otherwise you can get a bit of a clone mentality about what good looks like, and who the right people are to fill particular roles. So it's about talking to people about what they do, what are the other influences we should be thinking about, and not feeling defensive about having quite a gritty debate about what's required."

The PPMA's Dean Shoesmith believes the sector also needs clear strategic guidance from on high to help organisations see the bigger picture and understand how they might go about tackling their succession issues.

"We need to tie it back to the enormous challenges we face around skills, demographics and service delivery and to have some leadership on that both at political level and senior management level," he says. "The sector needs clear-sighted leadership to help framework these issues and provide guidance, because if we are going to tackle it successfully we require political, leadership, stakeholder and trade union buy-in as it will completely revolutionise the way we do things in the public sector."

Contact

Cezanne Software provides leading-edge Human Capital Management solutions that help companies better manage, develop, reward and retain their most important asset - their people. With many years' experience of delivering HCM solutions and hundreds of customers worldwide, Cezanne Software is committed to service excellence.

Our focus is to provide flexible, people-centered solutions that improve the day-to-day management of HR activities, drive the processes that are critical to an organization's success and help companies to develop and maintain a competitive talent advantage.

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