



ELEMENTS AND IMPACTING FACTORS ON LIBRARY SUCCESSION PLANNING IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

This paper aims at identifying the elements of and impacting factors on succession planning at the academic and public libraries in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The research underpinned by transformational leadership theory used data from online survey of 172 participants from all thirteen public libraries and four selected academic libraries in the region. Twenty-three in-depth interviews of library leaders and managers of those libraries are conducted to get further information about emerging themes from the survey. Required elements of succession planning are indicated as an adequate talent pool, staff involvement, job descriptions, work performance assessments, and selection criteria. In the context of a country with only one leading Party such as Vietnam, the key impacting role is the Communist Party Committee. Other impacting factor on determining quality of successors is training programs. Impacting factors on leading and conducting succession planning are library leaders, general staff, and parent organization leaders. Furthermore, research also finds out some interesting correlations among variables of succession planning that contribute to the knowledge of library succession. This research provides potential successors with an awareness of challenges they may encounter to be promoted. This study also specifies evidence that candidates cannot automatically proceed to managerial positions without continuing efforts and self-improvement. Furthermore, the finding of the research contributes an assistance for library leaders in the process of selecting qualified staff for future managerial positions. Library leaders should consider these impacting factors because they affect the quality of successors and succession planning process. In addition, library leaders should pay attention to the correlations among age, qualification, position, and years of experience of employees with awareness of the existence of succession planning, the important role of succession planning, potential candidates, and promotion. These correlations should be considered because they also

affect the quality of successors. The finding that general staff involvement helps to prevent library leaders from bias and demonstrate democracy and openness in succession planning is a new contribution to the literature. In addition, correlations among variables of succession planning are interesting and significant findings of the research. These correlations contribute to an understanding of factors in succession planning which has not been discussed in the literature so far.

Keywords: elements, impacting factors, Mekong Delta, succession planning, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Succession planning plays an essential role in leadership because its nature aims to continue the key managerial positions, retain qualified staff, and maintain the tacit knowledge of the organization ([Rothwell, 2010](#)). In addition, succession planning motivates all employees to improve work performance and develop their careers. In library and information settings, identifying and preparing individuals for future managerial positions is particularly necessary with the impending exodus of library staff, including leaders and managers, as they head towards retirement worldwide. Succession planning is a long journey and needs the involvement of not only the leaders, but also every member of the library. There are many things to be considered in conducting the succession planning. Among them are the required elements of and the factors impacting on this process. However, the researcher has found a few commentaries related to these issues in Western countries, but no attention in Vietnam library sector. This research aims to fill this gap so as to contribute knowledge into literature of Asian library succession planning. Furthermore, this study is expected to help library leaders be more aware of how to increase the quality of their potential successors.

2. Literature Review

In literature, researchers lead their discussions to some main aspects of library succession planning. Most of them pay much attention to its crucial role. They indicate that development opportunities in succession planning are one of the strategies to attract and keep potential talent despite libraries not offering top salaries ([Simpson & West, 2014](#)). Others identify competencies for future success of an organisation ([McMahan & Masias, 2009](#)). Especially, so many authors claim about challenges of succession planning ([Munde, 2010](#); [Weare, 2015](#)). Among them, small talent pool, lack of challenging work assignment, mentoring and feedback ([Leibman, Bruer, & Maki,](#)

1996; [Munde, 2010](#)) and lack of leadership training ([Hicks & Given, 2013](#)) are the major challenges.

In terms of small talent pool, [Whitmell \(2002\)](#) states that identifying the right person to fit the corresponding position or lacking qualified candidates are the real issues. In terms of leadership training programs, the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI), sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Kotuku program developed by the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) have gained much attention from global library leaders. However, Vietnamese library leaders have little change of benefitting from them since access in Vietnam, a developing country, is limited and the library network with local communities is not well connected ([Arabella Advisors, 2015](#)).

Moreover, [Bridgland \(1999\)](#) concerns about lack of support from top-down policies, poor vision of succession planning potential, excessive paperwork, and many meetings in succession planning process. Furthermore, some researches suggest how libraries respond to preparation for future leadership ([Fitsimmons, 2013](#); [McLean, Scale, & Rouse-Jones, 2014](#)). They infer that library employees can train themselves to be future leaders if they want to ([Byke & Lowe-Wincentsen, 2008](#)), and regularly upgrade job descriptions to give standing proof for evaluation ([Pennell, 2010](#)). In particular, coaching, building teams, and mentoring are conducted to help library staff for leadership continuity in their libraries ([Stueart & Sullivan, 2010](#)). Library leaders should therefore provide opportunities for young staff to learn and enhance their progress up the career ladder. To ensure quality, succession planning program should be developed and evaluated ([Romaniuk & Haycock, 2011](#)). These pressures or challenges can be understood as impacting factors on succession planning and therefore important for library leaders to deal with within the context of their organizations, especially in Vietnamese settings.

3. Methodology

This research used a multi-method case study approach including two phases. In the first phase, the online survey with 172 responses was conducted to collect general information about elements of and the impacting factors to succession planning process in libraries. Quantitative and qualitative data collected by the online survey were analysed to form research themes. The themes emerging from the survey informed the construction of in-depth interview questions to collect additional qualitative data in the second phase.

The research was underpinned by transformational leadership theory which was initiated by James McGregor Burns in 1978 and developed by Bernard M. Bass in 1985.

Four components of the theory (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration) help the researcher build the questionnaires of the survey. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items including one open-ended question. Contents of these four theory components were conveyed by the questions related to programs to prepare successors for their new roles; the involvement of general staff in library succession planning process; the recruitment opportunities for managerial positions; and so on.

Samples of the online survey are library employees who have worked in libraries for at least one year, regardless of gender, age or nationality. They are from all of thirteen public libraries and four selected medium-sized and large academic libraries in the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam. They were chosen in the expectation to collect more experience than from short working time staff and small libraries. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to these library leaders by the email invitation letter of collaboration. If the library leaders approved the research conducted in their libraries, they would take the survey and forward the link to their staff. Library employees could involve in the research voluntarily.

In the second phase, twenty-three department managers and members of board of directors from these libraries were invited for individual interviews. The selection criteria for the samples related to leadership positions and seniority. The interviewees were selected with the provision that they had experienced at least one year in a managerial position. Data from these in-depth interviews helped to explain why the finding elements were needed and how to minimize the negative or maximize the positive impacting factors to library succession planning process.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Required elements of library succession planning

This study identifies the required elements of and impacting factors on library succession planning. They are interrelated and influenced the library succession planning processes and successor quality. In terms of the elements of succession planning, an adequate talent pool, staff involvement, job descriptions, work performance assessments, and selection criteria are elicited. These elements are influenced by other components such as staff retention, recruitment sources and recruitment opportunities.

In the library, the talent pool provides qualified staff to be considered for succession planning. Staff qualification and staff retention ensure adequate talent pool. Twenty of the twenty-three interviewees indicated that their libraries have a small talent pool. They have such a lack of qualified staff that they cannot find a candidate for

the position of department head when the current one is not available. In particular, data from the online survey showed that nearly thirty per cent of general staff possess the certificates under-bachelor degrees. In commune and district public libraries, most of their staff hold vocational training degrees and their professional level is low. Therefore, it is hard for them to find qualified staff for managerial positions. Consequently, talent pool is a must for succession planning and a shallow talent pool is a great challenge for succession planning in Mekong Delta libraries in Vietnam. This finding supports well to literature that small talent pool is being globally alarmed and considered for succession planning success ([Leibman et al., 1996](#); [Munde, 2010](#)).

Another required element of an adequate library talent pool is staff retention. In Vietnam, about 73 per cent of 13,000 surveyed employees in business are willing to quit to find a better work environment ([JobStreet, 2016](#)). In library and information settings, together with aging workforce and few training programs, high staff departures are contributing to the shallow talent pool for leadership succession ([Huynh, 2016](#)). It will cost time and money to train new candidates if suitable candidates depart from the library. Staff retention brings stability into the library talent pool which is pivotal for succession planning. A sufficient talent pool will provide enough qualified candidates and save time and money for training others in professional and leadership skills. In the study, participants reported that library leaders should select candidates who appear to have the intention to remain at the library. Research participants also noted that an indication that suggests employees will stay with the organisation for a long time is their willingness to raise ideas or provide input into library development. This finding fits into the worldwide concern of brain-drain that happens in library and information settings. Qualified staff are willing to depart from their jobs because of salaries and other benefits.

Another element for successful library succession planning is staff involvement. In the study, nearly seventy per cent of general staff (69.7%) are often not personally involved in the library succession planning process. They also expressed their desire and perceived right to participate in the process of suggesting, selecting, commenting on, evaluating, and observing the potential candidates until they are promoted. In addition, online respondents also wished to know the final list of potential candidates, so that they can observe and evaluate candidates who may then keep on improving themselves to receive positive comments from general staff, and therefore continue to qualify to be on the list. Also, knowledge of the list of potential candidates may motivate general staff to perform their tasks well so as to be included on the next list.

Furthermore, interviewees indicated that staff involvement would help library leaders to avoid potential and perceived bias in conducting succession planning. Staff involvement and a bottom-up model are considered innovations in library succession

planning in Vietnam by research participants. In 2012, the Communist Party released a new policy that general staff have to participate and vote for their favoured candidates for leadership roles in all industries of the nation. Therefore, staff involvement is mandated by government policy so as to practice democracy and transparency in leadership, as well as enhance the quality of the candidates and staff motivation. However, data from the online survey and interviews showed that some of the libraries are not following policy, with more general staff not involved in the succession planning process in their organisations. Nearly twenty-one per cent (20.7%) of library leaders and managers believed that general staff should not be involved in succession planning. In the meanwhile, nearly eighty per cent (78.9%) of general staff stated that they have to be involved in the process.

A job description is a required element of succession planning because it helps to evaluate and select qualified staff for the list of candidates for particular positions. Together with other criteria for selection, a job description can be used to consider, compare and assess appropriate candidates. Job descriptions also help library leaders and staff to avoid bias in selection. Through job descriptions, they can assess employees' capacities, knowledge, and skills objectively. However, data from the survey indicated that nearly forty per cent (39%) of libraries in the Mekong Delta do not have job descriptions for their employees. Moreover, among sixty per cent libraries which possess job descriptions, thirty per cent of their general staff do not personally participate in constructing these professional documents. In reality, flexible and up-to-date job descriptions can encourage staff to grow within their positions and make more significant contributions to the organisation. Unfortunately, about one-fourth of these documents (25.3%) were not timely upgraded. Therefore, lack of job descriptions and their poor upgrading are identified as the challenges of library succession planning. This fits well with previous research since a flexible and up-to-date job description cannot be absent in the process of succession planning ([Pennell, 2010](#)). Moreover, online respondents stated that staff participation in upgrading of job descriptions is necessary. It is likely that employees will try to fulfil their tasks if they themselves design and upgrade the requirements of the job descriptions.

Work performance assessment is another required element of library succession planning because the results of assessment are used for candidate selection. Through annual work performance assessment, employees are categorised into four groups: 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Average', and 'Weak'. Employees who achieve 'Excellent' and 'Good' are generally included on the list of potential candidates for succession planning. However, the online data showed that general staff are not satisfied with the results (32.1%) and the way in which work performance assessment (35.8%) is conducted. To clarify why approximately one-third of general staff are not pleased with

the results and the way to evaluate employees, the interviewees claimed that the criteria to evaluate employees' innovative ideas – one of the requirements to achieve a rating of 'Excellent' – are not clear. Work performance assessment is also reluctantly performed by general staff and consequently its quality is poor. Work performance assessment needs to be improved.

Selection criteria are vital to select qualified candidates for succession planning. Desirable selection criteria include professional knowledge, leadership skills including good moral practices, approved political ideology, enthusiasm, experience, work commitment, age, and external relationships ([Huynh, 2016](#)). Selection criteria help to build the initial list of candidates in the first step, provide the measurements to evaluate candidates in the second step, inform suggestions of further training programs for the candidates in the fourth step, and assist the deliberations to promote a candidate in the last step. Furthermore, selection criteria help library leaders and staff avoid bias in conducting succession planning. Without selection criteria, it is hard for library leaders and staff to be objective in the process of selection.

5.2 Impacting factors on the library succession planning

Research data showed that impacting factors on the library succession planning process are acknowledged as the Communist Party, library leaders, and general staff. Among these factors, the Communist Party of Vietnam plays the most decisive role in the process. This role was the major emergent theme from the online survey data and was therefore intensively focused on during the in-depth interviews. In Vietnam the Communist Party, as the only political party and government, directs leadership in all industries of the nation, including in the library and information sector. In general, the Communist Party influences planning of library activities, library and work management, screening or finalising the succession planning list, and maintaining fair and equitable succession planning. This fits with the Vietnamese national mechanism of "Party is the leader – State is the manager – the people are the owners" ([Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013](#)). In particular, the Communist Party issues leadership policies and guidelines in National Congresses every five years. The Communist Party plays the decisive role in succession planning process because it aims to ensure that the next generation of library leaders will follow the socialist direction of the party.

Library leaders are found to be an impacting factor on succession planning. Library leaders challenge potential successors in their performance by assigning work for the candidates and assessing their performance regularly. Assigning challenging tasks for employees is considered as a way to help them gain experience in library management and leadership. Twenty of the twenty-three interviewees indicated that it is library leaders who create opportunities for employees to prove their capacities for

organizing and managing. This may enable employees to take up new challenges. By doing this, leaders are able to know what their employees can do and identify capacities matched against intended managerial positions. The research finding about library leaders challenging potential candidates fits well with previous research. [Singer, Goodrich, and Goldberg \(2004\)](#) claim that library leaders can provide challenging assignments for their candidates' learning. Challenging tasks are an opportunity to help employees think independently and increase their job satisfaction ([Omar & Hussin, 2013](#)).

Another impacting factor on library succession planning is general staff. Twenty-two of the twenty-three participants reported that library staff could contribute to evaluating and commenting on the succession planning candidates. Their contributions are positive because they could observe, comment, evaluate candidates and select the qualified ones for managerial positions. General staff participation in succession planning allowed for the process being democratic and open, but also helped library leaders to avoid bias in the succession planning process and prevent to conduct succession planning based on relationships rather than ability to perform the job. Moreover, general staff involvement could negate the perception that staff working for a long time at the library would automatically become leaders. In literature, *"Getting everyone involved will ensure that a variety of concerns and issues are addressed and will engender organization wide commitment to its success"* ([Whitmell, 2002, p. 149](#)). The finding that general staff involvement helps to prevent library leaders from bias and demonstrate democracy and openness in succession planning is a new contribution to the literature. Staff participation to ensure that there is no bias was aligned with the role of the Communist Party.

Research data also showed that the impacting factor to the quality of successors is training programs. However, more than sixty per cent of the survey respondents (62.2%) indicated that training programs were not available for successors. In the in-depth interview, eighteen of the twenty-three interview participants recommended various training programs for potential candidates: higher education, professional librarianship, leadership and managerial skills, foreign languages, information technology, political ideology, state-run management, financial management, and soft skills. Interviewees also indicate compulsory reasons why potential candidates have to join these programs. The emerging reason is to response to managing people, psychology, and other necessary skills for managers to deal with future managerial problems. Beside training programs, the library director must mentor the potential candidates about financial management in the library so that they can avoid certain mistakes in financial decisions. The finding about essential training programs fits well into previous studies in literature ([American Library Association, 2014](#); [Hicks & Given,](#)

2013). Training programs help to fill the current gaps by providing skills and confidence in the pool of emergent library leaders (Romaniuk & Haycock, 2011). Similarly, McMurray and other co-authors (2012) believe that training programs address leadership skills, the need for a career path, and decision-making processes for future managerial positions.

5.3 Correlations of research variables

Another noteworthy finding is the correlations among variables in the quantitative data (see Table 1). Age, qualification, position, and years of experience of employees have mutual relations with job descriptions, training programs, work performance assessment, and training program evaluation respectively. Age, qualification, position, and years of experience of employees each also have relationships with other matters related to succession planning, such as awareness of the existence of succession planning, awareness of the important role of succession planning in libraries, selection of potential candidates, and promotion. Although these correlations are modest and moderate in magnitude, they provide a basis for library leaders to find ways to maximise the role of general staff in library succession planning.

Table 1: Correlations of variables (Spearman's rho)

Correlations	Age	Position	Qualification	Years of experience
Awareness of succession planning	.203**	.339**	.260**	.325**
Important role of succession planning	-.099	-.246**	-.094	-.175*
Knowledge of the list	.026	.212**	.200**	.033
Job description upgraded	.303**	.075	.098	.023
Personally upgrading job description	.237*	.129	.110	-.017
Work performance assessment	.004	.219*	.121	.033
Process of work performance assessment	.031	-.205**	.030	.028
Evaluation of training program	-.236	-.194	-.304*	-.258*
Leader promotion	.149	-.217**	.103	.141

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to Muijs (2011), effect size is weak with $r < +/-0.1$; modest with $r < +/-0.3$; moderate with $r < +/-0.5$; strong with $r < +/-0.8$; and very strong with $r \geq +/-0.8$. In general, the correlations (Spearman's rho) between variables of this study shown in Table 1 were mostly modest and moderate effective sizes. For example, the Spearman rank order correlation coefficient is .339 illustrates a moderate positive relationship between position and the awareness of succession planning. In other words, staff who held the higher positions were likely to be more aware of the existence of succession

planning in their libraries than general staff. Similarly, there is a moderate relationship between years of working experience and awareness of succession planning. This can be understood that the longer staff had worked at the library, the more awareness of succession planning they were likely to have ($r = .325$). The age of general staff had a moderate positive relationship with an awareness of position descriptions being updated. With a Spearman's rho of .303, it can be inferred that the older the general staff were, the more awareness of updating job descriptions they were likely to have. Supporting this pattern, the correlations between qualification and the evaluation of the training program for potential successors is also displayed. This is a moderate negative relationship ($r = -.304$). In particular, the general staff who were more qualified commented that there was no evaluation of the training program.

The other variables such as important role of succession planning, knowledge of the list, personally upgrading job description, work performance assessment, process of work performance assessment, and leader promotion all have modest relationships with age, position, qualification, and years of experience with $r < +/-0.3$. Although they illustrate modest relationships, they are statistically significant at p value 0.01 (2-tailed). They can be deduced that the higher the position general staff held, the more knowledge of the succession planning list they were likely to have ($r = .212$) and more satisfied they were likely to be with the process of assessing work performance ($r = -.205$). Library staff in higher positions were more likely to be aware that library leaders' promotions were as a result of succession planning (Spearman's rho .217). These correlations can be inferred that general staff from public and academic libraries in Vietnam seem less involved, knowledgeable and aware of the matters related to succession planning and potential successors. Library leaders should therefore inform and attract their participation since general staff involvement affects the quality of succession planning.

6. Conclusion

There are many required elements of and impacting factors on succession planning in Vietnamese library settings. Library leaders should consider these elements and factors because they affect the quality of successors and succession planning process. General staff involvement helps to prevent library leaders from bias and demonstrate democracy and openness in succession planning is a new contribution to the literature. In addition, the summary of correlations of variables in succession planning can inform library leaders about the relationships among employee's age, qualification, and position as well as years of experience and succession planning related matters. Knowledge of these relationships can help library leaders know how to involve their

employees in making and upgrading job descriptions, upgrading and evaluating training programs, and conducting work performance assessment effectively and what should be done to maximise employees' participation in the succession planning process so as to prevent bias. These correlations should be considered because they also affect the quality of successors.

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