



National Institutes of Health  
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Resources

# Succession Planning: A Step-by-Step Guide

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## Introduction to succession planning

### What is succession planning and why is it important?

Succession planning is the process of identifying very important positions in the organization and creating a talent pipeline, by preparing employees to fill vacancies in their organization as others retire or move on. A successor is an employee with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to fill a vacant position until a permanent replacement can be identified.

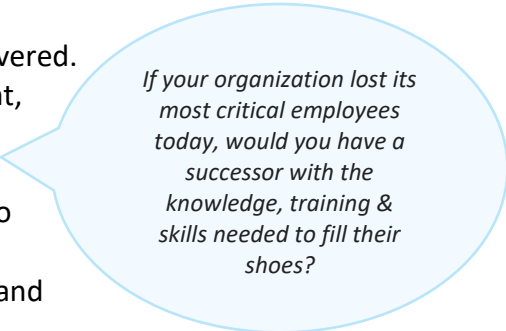
Succession planning helps ensure business continuity and performance, particularly during times of shifting leadership and change. Even when there is no identifiable successor within an organization, succession planning can help identify the knowledge, skills and training needed in a future external candidate.

### The risks of not succession planning

Having no identifiable succession plan for critical roles poses an enormous risk to the organization.

These risks include:

- Loss of mission critical knowledge that may never be recovered.
- Naming a successor who lacks personal drive, commitment, knowledge, training or skills needed to perform the job successfully.
- Significant loss of time spent getting a new successor up to speed.
- Potential disruptions to workplace processes, workflows, and protocols.



*If your organization lost its most critical employees today, would you have a successor with the knowledge, training & skills needed to fill their shoes?*

### Get buy in for succession planning using analytics

Your workforce data has a story to tell! Leveraging workforce data can help you visualize your workforce. For example, how much of your workforce is currently eligible to retire? Using data to provide a visual representation of the workforce is a highly effective strategy for garnering support and interest in succession planning.

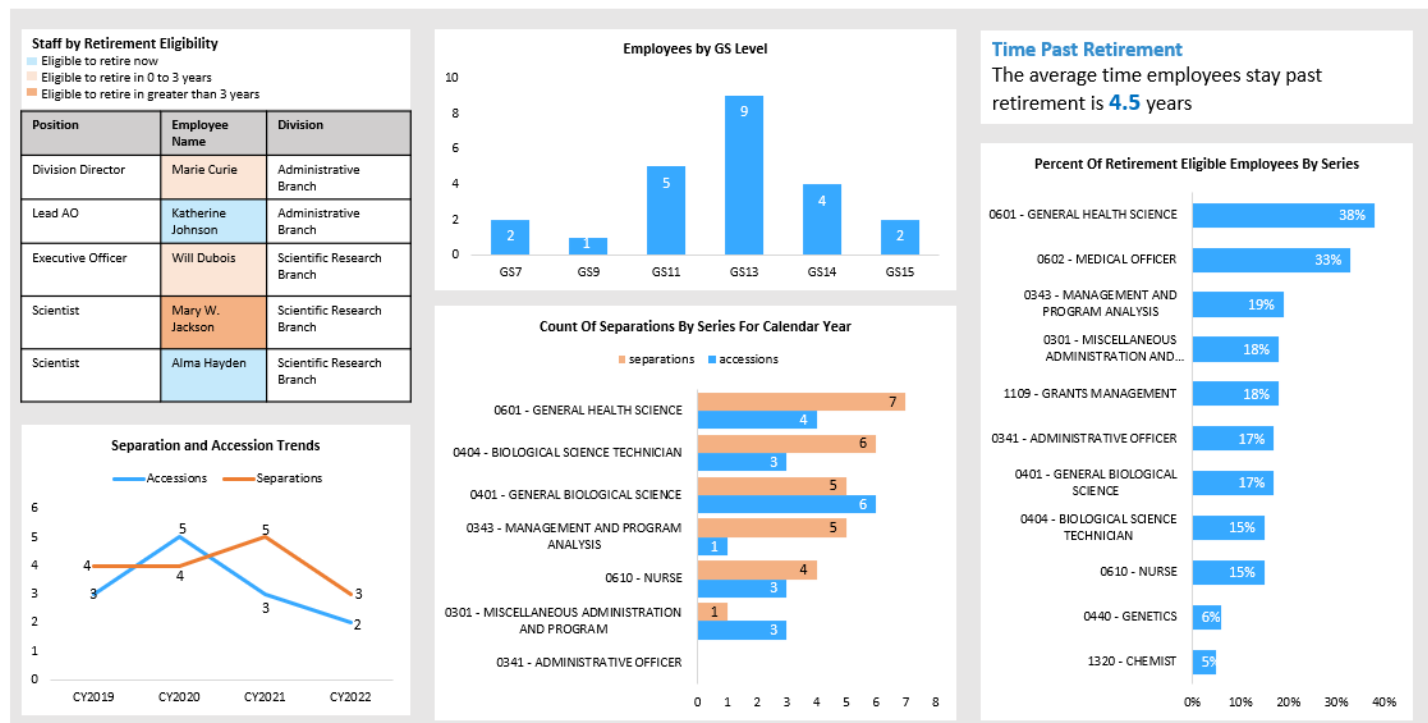
Consider summarizing workforce data into a snapshot for your leadership. Include the snapshot during workforce discussions, strategic planning, and as you discuss your mission, to reinforce the importance of workforce planning. To see a sample snapshot, or for help building your own workforce analytics, [contact the Workforce Planning and Analytics Section \(WPAS\)](#) in the Office of Human Resources using our mailbox: [NIH-WORKFORCE-PLANNING@nih.gov](mailto:NIH-WORKFORCE-PLANNING@nih.gov).

Data points to consider in your workforce snapshot include:

Data Point	Data Insights for Succession Planning
Employee onboard count & retirement eligibility	Provides visual representation of the employees onboard, their distribution across the organization and how much of the workforce is retirement eligible.
Years of service	Identifies employees who may be closer to retirement and have more institutional knowledge to capture.
GS level distribution	Identifies whether there is a junior pipeline of employees for succession planning. May also help identify critical positions.
Separations and Accession (hiring) counts over years	Shows hiring and separation trends for forecasting future staffing needs across different scenarios.
Retirement eligible by demographics (such as series)	Identifies demographics areas that may experience future turnover and may be vulnerable to knowledge loss without a successor.
Time stayed past retirement	Provides insight into how long employees typically stay past their retirement eligibility date.
Separation and accession trends by series	Identifies areas of high turnover to prioritize for succession planning activities.
Time to hire	Helps determine which positions take longest to fill and are therefore more vulnerable when turnover occurs.

Below is a sample snapshot of what some of the above data points might look like visually:

## Sample\* Succession Planning Data Points



\*Snapshot does not contain actual NIH data and is intended for sample purposes only.

## Leverage positions, not people

In the civil service system, no determinations of who will succeed an employee are made until all qualified candidates are provided equal opportunity to apply and be considered for the position. Situations where a candidate is “pre-determined” before the competitive selection process is considered “pre-selecting”, or “pre-positioning”, and should be avoided. **It is more effective and a best practice to determine which *positions* are best qualified to succeed another position rather than the individual *people* filling those positions at any given time.**

Focusing on the qualified positions rather than people offers many benefits, such as:

- ✓ Fostering a culture of trust and fairness.
- ✓ A competitive process that promotes diversity and inclusion.
- ✓ Discovering unexpected and highly qualified candidates that may emerge through the competitive process.
- ✓ Reduced risk that a pre-selected candidate may leave the organization before they’ve assumed the successor position.
- ✓ An increase in employee engagement as a result of the creation of career paths.

## Steps in succession planning

### Identify roles and responsibilities

**Succession planning is not just a one-time administrative task**, it requires continued employee development. The roles and responsibilities you may want to consider include:



## 1. Identify critical and vulnerable positions

The first step in succession planning is to choose positions most in need of successors. Two factors to consider when prioritizing are the positions **vulnerability** and **criticality**.

1. First, determine which positions have no identifiable successor, these positions are most vulnerable to knowledge loss.
2. Next, consider the impact each position has on the organization’s mission; if a vacancy in a position would impact the organization’s ability to accomplish their mission it can be classified as critical. Critical positions at NIH often extend beyond senior leadership roles to include technical and scientific positions.

Determining mission critical positions can be time consuming and difficult to reach agreement on. Identifying vulnerable positions first makes the process easier because it reduces the number of potentially critical positions to assess.

The matrix below will help you visualize how to identify positions in need of succession planning. Use the excel Succession Planning Tracker Template available in [Appendix A](#) to perform this step for your own organization. You may also consider whether there is a lack of candidates available externally for recruitment. Positions that have high vulnerability and high criticality pose the highest risk.

	<b>Vulnerability:</b>			
	No successor position identified for this position			
<b>Criticality:</b>		Low Vulnerability	Moderate Vulnerability	High Vulnerability
Impact of the position on the mission	High Criticality	Moderate Risk	High Risk	High Risk
	Moderate Criticality	Low Risk	Moderate Risk	High Risk
	Low Criticality	Low Risk	Low Risk	Moderate Risk

## 2. Develop eligibility requirements

Once you’ve identified positions in need of a succession plan, the next step is to develop a profile of the position and the performance expectations; this will help your organization determine who has the experience to take on the role. Use the questions below, along with the Succession Planning Profile Template available in [Appendix A](#) to create a profile for the position. You may also choose to use the Transition Planning Interview Guide ([Appendix A](#)) in the toolkit to meet with the position incumbent and gather information.

### Questions to consider as you develop eligibility requirements:

- What selection criteria would be used to fill this position if it were vacant?
- What knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies are needed in this position to achieve success?

### 3. Identify a talent pipeline

Using the profile you've created, you can now identify positions that are well-suited to **temporarily** transition into the successor position should a vacancy arise. These positions may also be qualified to apply for the successor position when the announcement is made. Use the questions below to help you assess successor positions.

Questions to consider:

- What are the best aligned duties between the two positions?
- Does the position have similar day to day experiences in the functional areas and tasks performed for the successor role?
- What are the gaps between the two roles?
- Does the position cultivate the core competencies needed to perform the successor role?

Consider sharing the succession requirements openly with employees to encourage transparency, trust and engagement with the process.

### 4. Nominate successors from the qualified positions

The next step is to identify employees in the qualified positions who could temporarily fill the vacancy and potentially apply as candidates for the position should the need arise.

Consider inviting leaders to nominate qualified employees for development in a succession plan, but also invite employees to express their interest as well. Making the opportunity and candidate requirements transparent cultivates equity and trust in the process, and helps employees see potential career trajectories for their role. Work with your leadership to determine a final list of candidates whose performance and job description makes them eligible for development into the successor role.

Consider the following qualifications:

- Sustains high performance.
- Demonstrates a measurable positive impact on the organization's performance.
- Is recognized by colleagues, customers and managers as a future leader.
- Is a good fit with the organizational culture.
- Demonstrates the organization's values.
- Innovates to improve their functional area.

It is important to remind candidates that the position is not guaranteed to any one candidate because it depends on performance, and an employee may be removed from consideration should their performance fall below expectations. The [civil service rules on competitive hiring](#) will still apply for final candidate selection.

If you do not have any eligible candidates in positions well-suited for the successor position, consider incorporating your succession qualifications into your recruitment strategy. You may also want to evaluate whether gaps exist in your learning and development programs preventing people from reaching career opportunities.

## 5. Create an action plan to prepare successor(s)

Creating a developmental plan for potential successors helps to identify meaningful opportunities for growth. The following list of learning and development opportunities may help you create a succession development plan, but it is also important to ask the incumbent to identify opportunities for the successor as well.

Successor development opportunities include:

1. Creating a succession development plan with training and learning opportunities that are aligned with the successor position. Consider opportunities available through [NIH Leadership Development programs](#).
2. Participating in the functional areas of the incumbent's role, especially areas outside of the incumbent's current experience.
3. Mentoring from the incumbent.
4. Providing coaching opportunities.
5. Acting for the incumbent while they are away from work.
6. Working on special projects or opportunities to stretch skills into aligned areas.
7. Dual incumbency opportunities when the incumbent transitions out of their role.

## 6. Evaluate the succession plan

By evaluating your organization's succession planning efforts each year, you can continually improve your succession planning strategy and your organization's effectiveness.

When evaluating your succession planning program, consider the following:

1. Your organization's bench strength prior to succession planning versus after succession planning started.
2. The number of qualified "ready now" candidates compared to before succession planning started.
3. Improvements in the way your organization develops employees, such as new learning and development tools or processes.
4. Organizational performance overall.
5. Whether there is reduced risk associated with employees leaving the organization.



## Appendix A

### Succession planning templates and resources

- **The Succession Planning Tracker Template in Excel**

- Use this template to identify vulnerable and mission critical positions in your organization and track your progress preparing successors.



Succession Planning  
Tracker Template.xlsx



- **Succession Planning Profile Template**

- Use this template to develop a profile of the knowledge, skills, abilities and other talents needed to fill the position you are succession planning for.



Succession Planning  
Profile Template.docx



- **Transition Planning Interview Guide**

- Leverage the transition planning interview guide to meet with your incumbent and learn more about the knowledge, skills, abilities and talents needed to fill the position.



Transition Plan  
Interview Guide.docx



### NIH HR Systems Tools

- The Workforce Planning and Analytics Section creates workforce analytics resources, such as the Workforce Analytics Module, which is available through the [SMARTHR website](#).
  - To view the Workforce Analytics Module in SMARTHR visit: [SMARTHR.od.nih.gov](https://smarthr.od.nih.gov)
  - To request access to SMARTHR, visit: <https://hr.nih.gov/hr-systems/request-hr-systems-access>

### Contact Information

- Additional ad hoc analytics support is available upon request for NIH employees. To request assistance with workforce analytics, contact the Workforce Planning and Analytics Section: [NIH-WORKFORCE-PLANNING@od.nih.gov](mailto:NIH-WORKFORCE-PLANNING@od.nih.gov).