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# Managing the Future: Why Some Ontario Municipalities Are Not Engaging in Succession Planning

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# **Managing the Future: Why Some Ontario Municipalities Are Not Engaging In Succession Planning**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Succession planning is important today for municipalities because Canada faces a slower growing labour force and an aging workforce, particularly in the public sector. As well, municipalities have new and expanded responsibilities. This puts pressure on their need to spend in an environment in which citizens are resentful about paying taxes. Succession planning will therefore help municipalities meet and prepare for these challenges.

This report assesses why some Ontario municipalities choose not to engage in succession planning initiatives. In particular, it analyzes and compares data from municipalities on the degree to which municipalities in Ontario are addressing the challenge of identifying their next top executives/senior management. There is very little empirical research on succession planning in the local government setting. Particularly, there is no research regarding whether Ontario municipalities are currently engaging in succession planning initiatives focused on top executives and senior management.

Leaders, defined in this paper as top executive/senior managers, play a large role in the success of municipalities, as they are responsible for making the decisions that run a municipality. As such, it can be difficult to fill top executive/senior management positions because of the experience and credentials needed. The survey addressed this issue, as well as aspects of current municipal succession planning initiatives. The survey also requested information on the demographics of the individual municipalities.

## **THE RESEARCH**

The research methodology consisted of developing a survey instrument with 18 questions made available on-line by the University of Western Ontario, Social Sciences Network and Data Services.

Surveys were sent to members of the Ontario Municipal Human Resources Association (OMHRA). Members of OMHRA are employed in Ontario municipalities

and local boards and commissions. OMHRA members provide human resources advice and assistance to their respective councils, boards, and commissions as well as to senior administrative management in Ontario's local government. OMHRA members were selected with the intention of gaining access to a cross-section of the municipal management community who may have knowledge of current succession planning initiatives taking place in their municipality.

Of the 160 survey invitations sent, a total of 34 respondents participated in the survey, resulting in a return rate of 21 percent. Out of the 34 participants who responded to the survey, eight had the job title of Director of Human Resources, seven had the title of Manager of Human Resources, five had the title of Chief Administrative Officer, two had the title of Human Resources Coordinator, and two had the title of Human Resources Planner. The rest included Chief Human Resources Officer, Manager of Organizational Planning, Labour Relations Officer, Human Resources Advisor, Human Resources Officer, Manager of Employee Strategies, Manager of Corporate Services, Project Manager, Organizational Development Consultant, and Employee Services Specialist.

The number of full time equivalent (FTE) positions of the municipalities surveyed ranged from 26 to 6,000, with a mean number of 782.65. The budgets ranged from \$71,000 to \$2,000,000,000, with a mean of \$575,620,957.00. Finally, the number of citizens the municipalities served ranged from 6,000 to 1,200,000, with a mean of 210,134.38.

The estimated average number with respect to how long participants expected their current top executive/senior managers to serve in their present municipality had a range of zero to 20 years, with a mean of 7.72 years. Over one-third of the municipalities indicated that they expected their top executive/senior managers to serve for another six years or less.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Municipalities Engaging in Succession Planning Initiatives***

Twenty participants (58.82%) reported that succession planning was identified as a priority in their strategic plan. Thirteen (38.32%) reported that succession planning was not identified as a priority and one participant indicated they were unsure if it had been identified as a priority.

Six (17.64%) participants reported that a succession plan was in place for top executives/senior manager positions. Only four participants (11.76%) reported that a plan was in place for all staff members. Eleven (32.35%) reported that they currently monitored the age demographics of its employees and use this knowledge to project the number of employees that will be retiring in the future. Six (17.64%) reported that their municipality had a formal mentoring program in place. Finally, seven (20.59%) participants reported that one or more internal staff members were currently being groomed to take over as Chief Administrative Officer or another top executive/senior management position.

### *Types of Recruitment Planning Initiatives*

Twenty (58.82%) reported that their municipality contracted with retired staff and 10 (29.41%) reported that their municipality provided flexible work arrangements for staff. Furthermore, 20 (58.82%) reported that their municipality provided alternative working arrangements to entice potential employees to work with their organization. Finally, 23 (67.64%) participants provided information that they provided internships or co-op opportunities for students.

### *Why Municipalities Choose Not to Engage in Succession Planning*

One participant reported that succession planning was not a valuable initiative, 12 participants believed that financial constraint played a role in why their municipality did not engage in succession planning, and 15 believed immediate organizational challenges played a role. Thirteen participants believed that time pressure played a role and 12 believed it was the size of the organization that impacted the decision to engage in succession planning. Only four reported that they believed it was a preference to hire staff outside of the municipality and five reported that fairness was a factor.

Twelve reported that other factors were involved. These factors included: currently being in the process of developing a plan (and therefore have yet to engage in succession planning); succession planning was not considered urgent; financial constraint; lack of understanding of the importance of succession planning; lack of leadership; no formal plan but informally identified in service plan; and union environment viewed mentoring staff as unfair to other staff or external potential candidates.

Immediate organization challenges were ranked as the number one reason why municipalities chose not to engage in succession planning. Twelve (35.29%) participants chose this factor as number one. Four participants (11.76%) chose “other” as a reason why their municipality chose not to engage in succession planning and provided further detail of their choice in their comments section.

Financial constraint was reported as number one by only three municipalities (8.82%), as was size of the municipality. Time pressure was reported as number one by two municipalities (5.88%). Preference to hire staff outside of the municipality was never ranked as the priority. However, two municipalities (5.88%) ranked it the third reason (out of eight) as to why their municipality chose not to engage in succession planning. Finally, fairness was never ranked as a number one reason why their municipality chose not to engage in succession planning. However, one municipality ranked it as the number three reason why their municipality did not engage in succession planning.

## **ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

### *Succession Planning in Ontario Municipalities*

Succession planning helps organizations prepare for the future, which is necessary in today’s changing political and economic environment. Succession planning in government is particularly essential, as government employees tend to retire earlier than individuals who work in the private sector or are self-employed. Therefore, one would believe that it is common sense for a government organization to engage in succession planning, as outlined by Grusky (1963)’s One-Way Causality theory. However, this is not the case.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Ontario municipalities are aware that succession planning is important for their municipality, with over half reporting succession planning was identified as a priority in their strategic plan, and only one participant rating succession planning as not an important initiative for their municipality at this time. However, identifying succession planning as a priority does not necessarily indicate that a municipality has followed up with action. Results of this study show that most municipalities have yet to engage in succession planning initiatives.

Less than one-quarter of the participants reported that a succession plan was in place for top executives/senior managers and just over 10 percent reported that a plan was in place for all staff members. Just under one-third reported that they currently monitored the age demographics of their employees and used this knowledge to project the number of employees that will be retiring in the future. Less than one-quarter reported that their municipality had a formal mentoring program in place. Finally, only one-quarter of the participants reported that they were actively preparing for the departure of their leaders by grooming an internal person to take over. These results suggest that many Ontario municipalities do not have a sense of urgency to create formal succession plans.

The time remaining before an top executive/senior manager departs does not appear to be a compelling factor to create a succession plan, as more than one-third of the participants reported that their top executive/senior managers will be gone within six years. The lack of urgency is further demonstrated by the fact that over 80 percent of the participants reported they did not have a plan in place for filling top executive/senior managers positions and 90 percent did not have a plan in place for all staff. Furthermore, 80 percent had taken no action in grooming a successor for top executive/senior managers.

Contrary to my hypothesis, size and financial constraint cannot be used to predict whether a municipality is engaging in succession planning initiatives for this study. Stemming from the literature examined in this research, larger municipalities should be more likely to have succession plans than smaller municipalities considering that larger municipalities generally have more resources and more at stake than smaller departments (McConnell, 2006; Holinsworth, 2004; Schmalzried & Fallon, 2007). Instead, it appears the major reason why succession planning is not a priority relates to immediate organizational challenges. As discussed, leaders play a major role in directing organizational commitments. It is difficult for government executives to engage in succession planning because executives are often tied to their particular administration and make the assumption that succession issues are beyond the scope of their work (Schall, 1997). Therefore, it could be that Ontario municipal leaders are choosing to require staff take on initiatives other than succession planning.

Nevertheless, it does appear that financial constraint and size of municipality may play a role in whether they choose to engage in succession planning, as both were

ranked by a few participants as major reasons why their municipalities chose not to engage in succession planning and were significant variables in predicting that a municipality would choose to make succession planning a priority in their strategic plan. This suggests that municipalities may need to be large in order for succession planning to be identified as a valuable initiative in the municipality's long term vision for the future. It also seems possible that if a municipality has limited financial resources, executives will choose to spend funds on a current 'crisis' to assist their situation today, as opposed to spending on initiatives that may help them in the future.

Finally, time pressure was also identified by a limited number of municipalities as a reason behind why a municipality chooses not to engage in succession planning. This supports Schall's (1997) understanding that leaders choose not to make succession planning a priority as they believe other initiatives are more important.

### *Factors Relating to Succession Planning*

As only one participant answered that succession planning is not a valuable initiative to their municipality at this time, it appears that many Ontario municipalities believe succession planning is important. However, the basis for deciding that a succession plan is important is unclear.

It does not appear that the size of the municipality (measured in terms of the number of staff that the municipality employs and the number of citizens the municipality serves) or budget of the municipality is a predictor for why a municipality engages in succession planning initiatives. These variables do appear to be factors, however, in predicting whether a municipality chooses to make succession planning a priority in their strategic plan.

The findings suggest that there may be a range of external and internal factors involved in predicting why a municipality chooses not to engage in succession planning. For example, it is possible that executive attitude plays a role in whether a municipality engages in succession planning, as executives are responsible for choosing which initiatives to make priorities. Furthermore, there must be a high level of executive support to convince council that succession planning is important and that budgetary means should be set aside for succession planning. Council is the body that approves municipal budgets, therefore dictating the various initiatives that a municipality will engage in over the following year. Thus, municipal executives need to

support the importance of succession planning, to convince council that succession planning needs to be a priority.

Other factors that may also be involved include technology advances, particularly succession planning for positions that may become outdated because of new technology. Therefore, a municipality that has many positions that are no longer needed because of technology advances may choose not to engage in succession planning. Again, this area needs further research.

Furthermore, employee attitude and past experience may play a role. For example, a municipality may engage in succession planning that is not supported by staff. That is, employees did not wish to take part in any succession planning because of a negative attitude towards the initiative or because of lack of available time to commit to a succession planning project. Therefore, the municipality may not engage in further initiatives. This is an area in need of further research.

Surprisingly, it does appear that size and budget of the municipality are predictors for why a municipality chooses to make succession a priority in their strategic planning. This suggests that municipalities may need to be a large size and have a large amount of resources in order for succession planning to be identified as a valuable initiative. Unfortunately, no data were captured to determine how many municipalities created a strategic plan. It is possible that size and budget may predict whether a municipality creates a formal strategic plan. Therefore, it is possible that these results show municipalities that are large create formal strategic plans. Nevertheless, these results support that size and budget plays a role in whether succession planning occurs in Ontario municipalities.

### *Municipalities with Recruitment Mechanisms*

It appears from the data that ensuring current level of staffing and engaging in recruitment mechanisms are a high priority for most municipalities, with over half reporting that their municipality contracted with retired staff and almost one third reporting that their municipality provided flexible work arrangements for staff. Furthermore, over half reported that their municipality provided alternative working arrangements to entice potential employees to work for their organization. Finally, well over half indicated that their municipality provided internships or co-op opportunities for students.

It is clear from these results that recruiting and ensuring current staff levels of staffing are important priorities for Ontario municipalities. These initiatives are important not only to help phase out potential retirees (HRDC, 2002), but also to attract potential new staff. For example, Human Resources and Social Development Canada suggests that a person is more likely to work longer in an organization if they can work part time. Therefore, having a flexible schedule or an alternative work arrangement may encourage employees to stay longer at the municipality and lesson the urgency created by potential staff turnover.

Furthermore, over half of the municipalities engaging in succession planning provided an internship or co-op program. Students or recent graduates will benefit from having a program that provides work experience and the municipality will benefit from the potential to hire staff they have groomed. Thus, again, it appears municipalities believe having a plan in place to recruit staff is an important planning initiative.

However, there are issues with focusing solely on recruitment and maintaining current staffing levels. The major financial costs involved in these initiatives may be higher in the long run, in comparison to spending money in preparing a municipality for the future. For example, a retired municipal employee receives a government pension. If a municipality contracts with a retired employee who receives a pension, then the government is, in a sense, paying the employee twice. At some point the retired employee will stop working because of health care concerns. Therefore, contracting with retired staff is simply holding off filling the inevitable vacancy. It is possible, that in the long run, it may be more cost beneficial for a municipality to engage in a formal mentoring program to allow current staff to learn from soon to be retirees, rather than paying retirees twice who will eventually stop working. This is an area for further research.

### *Lewin's Force Field Analysis Applied to Results*

It is clear from the results that the issue of whether or not a municipality should engage in succession planning is being pushed more strongly by the restraining forces than the driving forces. Few participants reported that succession planning was a priority for their municipality. Also, very few participants reported that their municipality had

succession plans in place, currently monitored the age demographics of their employees or provided a formal mentoring program for employees.

It appears the variable that is creating the strongest restraining force is immediate organizational challenges taking priority over succession planning initiatives. As discussed by Schall (1997), the underlining reason for this factor could be because of top executive/senior management and elected council members' attitude regarding succession planning. These groups are choosing to make other initiatives a priority.

Weaker yet still important factors that create restraining forces include financial constraint and size of municipality, as well as time pressure. As discussed, Ontario municipalities face an era of fiscal constraint with additional responsibilities, which may make it impossible to take on initiatives outside of directly providing programs and services. Stemming from this, staff may not have time to dedicate to succession planning. Finally, it appears that if a municipality does not have enough employees with the credentials that enable them to move into a technical or top/executive senior management role, then a municipality may be less likely to engage in succession planning.

As noted above, this research report did not address the factors that may be creating driving forces for a municipality to engage in succession planning. This, therefore, has potential for further research. Nevertheless, stemming from the literature and theories above, I can offer some suggestions as to what factors may cause a municipality to engage in succession planning.

The public sector faces an aging, slow-growing labour force (HRDC, 2002). In fact, according to Tindal and Tindal (2007), Ontario municipalities already face a shortage of senior staff. Therefore, the potential of having a small pool of applicants to fill a growing number of vacancies may drive a municipality to engage in succession planning.

Requiring special local knowledge may also be a driving force for engaging in succession planning. As noted, Tindal and Tindal (2004) believe municipal government requires local people who have resided in the municipality for a period of time to make local decisions. Thus, having experienced and continuous staff with local knowledge is important for municipalities. As noted above, succession planning can assist municipalities in retaining local knowledge through knowledge transfer between staff.

Meeting the challenge of globalization may also be another driving force. As discussed, ensuring an adequate supply of staff with the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to support the organization in the future may assist organizations to meet the challenge the world's changing political, economic and social environment (Tindal & Tindal, 2004; McConnell, 2006).

Retaining staff may also be a driving force for engaging in succession planning. Organizations that demonstrate mobility and career enhancement within the organization are more likely to retain their employees (McConnell, 2006). This, as noted, will be essential in the future if there is a small labour force, as employees will be able to easily move from one job to another.

Utilizing the theories outlined by Grusky (1963), it appears the Common Sense One-Way Causality theory may not be at work in Ontario Municipalities. That is, even though it appears to be "common sense" those municipalities should engage in succession planning because they are facing a potential staffing shortage, they are not engaging in succession planning.

It is possible, however, that the "vicious cycle" may eventually cause Ontario municipalities to engage in succession planning. That is, as decisions made by inexperienced workers could cause negative financial repercussions. This, in turn, may cause staff turnover, which disrupts routine and lower morale. This then may cause more staff to leave the organization. Therefore, the municipality is forced to begin succession planning in hopes of encouraging knowledge transfer between the staff that are left and preventing the cycle from continuing.

Furthermore, Gamson & Scotch's (1964)'s theory of the Ritual Scapegoating may also play a part in why a municipality chooses to engage in succession planning. If, for example, a highly publicized mistake occurs that causes a lot of public scrutiny, it seems possible that top executives/senior staff will be dismissed to show the public that the municipality is taking action to correct the mistake. If this is the case, then having a successor who is able to step in the top executive/senior staff role is essential, thereby forcing succession planning.

The results also suggest that there are variables at work that drive the municipality to engage in other types of human resources initiatives. For instance, many participants indicated that their municipality contracted with retired staff, granted alternative working arrangements to entice potential employees to work for their

organization and provided internships or co-op opportunities for students. It seems likely that top executive/senior staff and council believe that allocating budget dollars for recruiting staff is better than allocating money on succession planning. Although in the short term this could be seen as positive, as bringing in staff now allows for new blood to bring in new ideas for innovation, it ignores the need for knowledge transfer (McConnell, 2006).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Succession planning may help Ontario municipalities that face small budgets and large mandates ensure that the right people are in the right jobs. Succession planning may also assist municipalities in reducing financial waste stemming from past mistakes being replicated because of an inexperienced workforce.

The results of this study indicate that most Ontario municipalities are not engaging in succession planning because other immediate organizational challenges are taking priority. However, Ontario municipalities are engaging in recruiting initiatives. This suggests that Ontario municipal staff (such as senior executives and/or elected council members) may value recruitment initiatives over succession planning initiatives. Nevertheless, it is clear that the participants of this study believe succession planning is important, which leaves a potential pathway for Ontario municipalities to change their current attitude regarding succession planning.

### ***Further Study Recommendations***

It does not appear that the size or budget of the municipality plays the largest role or is a predictor for why a municipality engages in succession planning initiatives. Instead, other immediate organizational challenges play the largest role. Therefore, further study may want to determine the exact organizational challenges that are being viewed as higher priorities and use this information to create a stronger argument for the importance of succession planning.

Further research is needed to determine what other factors are playing a part in why an organization is not engaging in succession planning. For example, it seems possible that individual attitudes to succession planning play a large role. Therefore, future research may provide insight regarding why some leaders are choosing to

embrace succession planning and the arguments used to encourage the adoption of succession planning initiatives specific to local government.

Exploring some of the factors outlined by the participants may also be beneficial for understanding why some municipalities are not engaging in succession planning, such as lack of understanding regarding the importance of succession planning. By learning what arguments and information have been used to influence leaders who believe succession planning is important, a stronger argument may be created for the importance of succession planning.

One participant commented that the union environment made it difficult to engage in succession planning, which links into the fairness issue. According to this participant, the union felt that identifying certain participants as “special enough” to take part in succession planning caused issues of unfairness. It may be important, therefore for municipalities to ensure that all staff are taking part in succession planning. This is similar to the suggestion made by Holinsworth (2004): the development of all middle and upper managers helps the organization by allowing for whole, continual organizational development. Further research may want to examine how unions are responding to succession planning and what information or arguments could be presented to gain union support.

Finally, future research may want to examine municipalities outside of Ontario. This would provide insight regarding what initiatives are being engaged in and why and help to determine benchmarks for the identification of the most effective succession planning initiatives for municipalities.

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