MAKING A SUCCESSION AUDIT
Strategies for Any Organization

A succession audit evaluates an organization's readiness to fill critical roles and maintain operational continuity when key personnel depart. Succession planning is important to organizations for several reasons. It is often less expensive to develop in-house talent, the learning curve of the internal candidate should be shorter, and identifying internal candidates is a step in preparing for unanticipated change.

Completing Key Steps

- **Identify critical roles** by mapping positions essential for daily operations, specialized technical expertise, or senior leadership.
- **Profile key positions** in terms of the core competencies, behavioral traits, and technical skills required.
- **Take stock of the workforce** broadly to identify pockets of retention risk, including retirement likelihood, throughout the organization (see below).
- **Inventory current "bench strength"** by reviewing the performance appraisals and competency metrics of potential internal candidates (individuals who could succeed others leaving critical roles).
- **Evaluate skills gaps** by comparing the current capabilities of succession candidates against future requirements of target roles.
- **Assess knowledge transfer systems** to verify whether critical processes, institutional knowledge, and related documentation are preserved and accessible.
- **Review individual development plans** to check if succession candidates have active and relevant training roadmaps.
- **Probe candidate readiness** through stretch assignments, project leadership, job shadowing, or other short-term initiatives.
- **Engage key stakeholders** to validate talent pipelines and reduce evaluator bias.
- **Establish and monitor benchmarks** of organizational progress, such as internal promotion rates, time-to-fill ratios, and talent retention data.

Identifying Retention Risks

Retention risk refers to the possibility that key employees, succession candidates, or critical knowledge holders will leave the organization in the near term. Certain situations can increase retention risk:

- **Compensation Misalignment:** Gaps between internal pay structures and market rates, lack of incentives tied to milestones, or perceived inequities.
- **Role Ambiguity and Career Stagnation:** Uncertainty about reporting lines, delayed timelines for stepping into a target role, or frustration when anticipated opportunities fail to materialize.
- **Cultural and Leadership Friction:** Disconnect between a successor's leadership style and the organization's values, organizational fatigue from prolonged periods of transition, or resistance to strategic shifts.
- **Burnout and Overburdening:** Succession candidates being overloaded with dual responsibilities (performing current duties while preparing for a potential role) without adequate support.
- **Knowledge Loss and Disengagement:** Loss of organizational memory or psychological safety during leadership handoffs, leading to a decline in organizational commitment and an increase in voluntary turnover.

Enhancing Retention After the Audit

Limiting retention risk requires deliberate engagement and transparent communication so that succession candidates do not feel overlooked or undervalued. Strategies for strengthening engagement and retention include the following:

- **Transparent Career Pathways:** Communicate possible growth opportunities and development plans clearly so succession candidates appreciate their value and can envision their future within the organization.
- **Targeted Retention Incentives:** Implement milestone-based retention incentives for succession candidates identified during the audit to anchor them through periods of organizational transition.
- **Targeted Leadership Development:** Enroll succession candidates in coaching, mentoring, and shadowing initiatives to signal the organization's recognition of their potential.
- **Regular Feedback and Stay Interviews:** Have "stay interviews" with all employees to gauge sentiment, address workplace friction, and realign expectations as needed.
- **Stretch Assignments:** Assign project management or leadership roles to give succession candidates personal ownership and organizational buy-in before transition decisions occur.

OKLAHOMA CareerTech