Succession planning: current practices and its influence on turnover intentions in a public service institution in South Africa

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-Abstract-

This study examined succession planning, current practices and the relationship with turnover intentions within a public service organisation in South Africa. The study is located within a post-positive quantitative research paradigm using a structured questionnaire. The study was conducted on a sample of 243 public service employees using a probability sampling method. Data is analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), through which descriptive analysis, exploratory factor analysis, correlations and regression analysis were computed. Two factors of succession planning, namely replacement planning and grooming (employee development) were extracted using exploratory factor analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficient showed a significant negative association between the current replacement planning and grooming practices with turnover intentions. The regression analysis shows that the current replacement planning and employee grooming practices are significant predictors of turnover intention. Findings suggest that if succession planning is implemented appropriately and factors such as replacement planning and grooming (employee development) are taken into consideration, employees' turnover intentions may be reduced. Clear, transparent and objective criteria should be set that will enable the public organisation to improve succession planning practices and counter turnover intentions.

Key Words: Succession planning, internal succession barriers, turnover intentions.

JEL: M12/M53

1. INTRODUCTION

Succession planning has long been an area of study in the private sector; largely accentuated by the vulnerability of not having such systems in place for business continuity (Pila, Schultz and Dachapalli, 2016). What has become apparent is that very few organisations in the private sector survive without proper succession planning (Chima 2013). Whilst South Africa has made concerted efforts to change from a system of apartheid to one of democracy since 1994, there is scarcity of documented evidence of the implementation of succession planning initiatives in the public sector (Koketso, 2011). Moreover, Schall (1997) affirms that the literature on public sector succession planning has been scarce with anecdotal evidence. While succession planning policies may be in place in the public sector, there is very little evidence whether succession planning is practised in the public sector to ensure that employee skills are transferred before employees leave the organisation (Perlman, 2010). Recently, the Africa Agenda 2063 (Africa Union Commission, 2015) called for Africa to be a continent where the institutions are at the service of its people. Citizens will actively participate in the social, economic and political development and management. Competent, professional, rules and merit based public institutions will serve the continent and deliver effective and efficient services. Institutions at all levels of government will be developmental, democratic, and accountable. There will be transformative leadership in all fields (political, economic, religious, cultural, academic, youth and women) and at continental, regional, national and local levels.

Against this call, there is a dire need for public institutions in South Africa to strategically align themselves to these goals and fill critical positions where they need specific skills along with experience. The absence of successful succession planning will hold back public institutions in terms of performance as the demand for quality and quantity of talented employees grows worldwide (Farashah, Nasehifar & Karahrudi, 2011). Reeves (2010) affirms that the brain drain of key employees cannot be replaced easily, unless there is a pool of replacements ready to execute duties upon employee retirement. Most research on succession planning focuses on the relationship with performance and organisational commitment, but a paucity of research has examined the relationship of

succession planning, with turnover intentions as an independent variable, especially in the public service (Garg & Weele 2012; Lee & Jimenez 2011).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The prevalence of high levels of management attrition at different levels of employment and turnover makes succession planning an important area of research (Taylor & McGraw 2004). Froelich, McKee and Rathge (2011) posit that the retirement of a vast number of the baby boomers is fast approaching, creating a huge skills gap that needs to be filled in strategic positions within organisations. Even in the light of the regulatory guidelines for national and provincial government (Republic of South Africa, 2001), as well as the IDP guidelines for municipalities (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2002), the manner in which planning is currently managed in the public sector falls short of the ideal for integrated planning espoused in the regulatory framework for cooperative government (Chapter 3 of the Constitution). Current planning approaches are characterised by a lack of coherence, which leads to the duplication of organisational efforts and the expenditure of resources at different levels, including provincial and local governments. This leads to inconsistencies in policy formulation and action, making it difficult for the government to realise its overall goals of efficiency and effectiveness (Maxegwana, 2012). The entire process of change in the public service has been plagued by a conflict between the need for an efficient, professionally and technically competent and politically neutral public service, on the one hand and the desire for political alignment, cultural change and patronage on the other. In the euphoria for the new South Africa, not many predicted the poor level of service, or the greed and avarice that South Africa has witnessed (Franks, 2014). Many government high officials are appointed on the basis of political inclinations and motives, not on merit, thus hindering the execution of succession planning (Seden, Schimmoeller & Thompson, 2013).

3. SUCCESSION PLANNING AND INTENTIONS TO LEAVE

Earlier, Rothwell (2001) describes succession planning as a means of identifying critical management positions starting at lower level management and extending up to the highest position in an organisation. Later, Rothwell (2010) expanded the

description by defining succession planning as a thoughtful and orderly effort by an institution to ensure continuity in key positions, to retain and develop knowledgeable capital for the future and inspire employee development. Unlike workforce planning, succession planning focuses more on advancing employees' skills in order to achieve the organisational objectives. Pennell (2010) appropriately encapsulates that succession planning is not about predetermining who will be promoted into a particular position, but a technique of ensuring that organisations have personnel in place when leadership vacancies occur. Jarrell and Pewitt (2007) assert that in succession planning, apart from putting the right people in the correct seats, the wrong ones are put aside. Moreover, Perlman (2010) asserts that in public service organisations, governments do very little to ensure the knowledge that the older and experienced workers have is tapped before they leave, which results in huge gaps in service delivery. Arising from these assertions it seems that the deliberate use of mentoring, coaching and grooming of employees for key positions within an organisation who have the potential to advance when vacancies occur is at the very heart of succession planning. If succession planning is not addressed timeously and appropriately, the opposite may be true; employees may think of leaving an organisation. Turnover intention is defined as the level to which an employee contemplates leaving a current job or organisation, which is often theorised as a manifestation and predictor of real turnover (Arshad & Puteh, 2015; Kim, Price, Muller & Watson, 1996). Drawing from the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), behavioural intention generally is a predictor of an actual action. Turnover intentions refer to the conscious and deliberate wilfulness of the employees to leave the organisation. Turnover intention, therefore, is the final cognitive phase in the decision-making process, in which employees actively consider quitting and searching for alternative jobs or professions.

Turnover intentions are further explained as antecedents of three factors, namely intention to search for a different job elsewhere, thoughts of quitting one's job and to actually quit (Rahman & Nas 2013). There is also a large body of research that concurs with the fact that turnover (intention to leave), generally, is regarded and treated as a problem that threatens organisations, as it is cost related (Biron & Boon 2013; Arshadi & Shahbazi 2013; Cho & Lewis 2012; Joo & Park 2010). 2008). These costs include amongst others recruiting and training costs. Rahman and Nas (2013) affirm that it does not only relate to expenses, but also disruptions

in organisational operations. Most importantly, apart from economic costs, uncontrolled departures disrupt social and communication structures and adversely impact on the cohesion and commitment of those who are left behind (Bergiel, Nguyen, Clenney & Taylor 2009). The majority of studies conclude that turnover intention is regarded as the best predictor of turnover (Aladwan, Bhanugopan & Fish, 2013; Craig, Allen, Reid, Riemenschneider & Armstrong, 2012).

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Against this background, the study examines the current practices to succession planning and the relationship with turnover intentions of employees in a public service organisation.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study is located within a post-positive quantitative research paradigm using a structured questionnaire. This was necessary in order to ensure a degree of confidence because researchers are able to count and predict relationships for large populations and responses from respondents could be measured with a limited amount of questions and comparisons (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013).

5.1 Population, sample and participants

The target population was restricted to public service employees. Employees were selected randomly from a list of staff obtained from the human resource department of the organisation. The inclusion criterion for the study was that employees should hold positions of director, manager or officer. The population comprised N=1075 for employees described above. Probability sampling with simple random sampling was used to select participants in the study. A total of 243 questionnaires were finally used for data analysis after eliminating 30 questionnaires that were not fully completed.

5.2 Instrumentation and data collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, namely a section on demographic information, a section on current practices to succession planning and a section on intentions to leave the organisation. Questions for succession planning current practices were developed from a review of the literature as no previously developed and validated questionnaires could be found. Turnover intention questions were adapted from Sager, Griffeth and Hom (1998) and Lambert and Hogan (2009). For the section on current practices to succession planning and turnover intentions, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each item based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

6. RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

The reliability results are provided in Table 1. The Cronbach alpha coefficient test provided a satisfactory indication of reliability, which reflects acceptable levels of reliability since they are above the benchmark level of 0.70 (Malhotra & Peterson 2006).

Table 1: Overall reliability of the instrument

Sections of the questionnaire (scale)	Cronbach alpha (α)	Number of items	Mean	SD
Succession planning: replacement planning	0.910	6	1.701	.75
Succession planning: grooming	0.803	3	2.160	.72
Turnover intentions	0.899	4	2.511	1.12

Content validity was ascertained through pre-testing of the questionnaire prior to the main survey. It was pre-tested and reviewed by a panel of experts, including experts in human resource management, to check for suitability of questions and whether the questions measure the relevant constructs in the study. In addition, the pilot-testing stage was undertaken with 54 respondents to establish where changes had to be made to the questionnaire concerning the removal of items, addition of items, rewording and rephrasing of questions through the computation of the Cronbach alpha reliability. These participants were not included in the main

survey. Construct validity was ensured by performing a factor analysis procedure to establish a suitable factor structure with no cross-loading of variables among the factors. The factor correlation showed a positive correlation between replacement planning and grooming (r=427; p<0.000), thus providing evidence of convergence between variables. Predictive validity of the measuring instrument was ascertained through linear regression analysis of the constructs. Current replacement planning and grooming practices showed a high negative predictive relationship with turnover intentions, thus providing evidence of predictive validity.

7.   RESULTS

7.1 Sample composition

Female employees constituted a larger part of the sample (n= 191; 78.6%) compared to male employees (n=52; 21.4%). Most participants held the officer position (n=157; 64.6%), followed by those who held positions of a manager (n=48; 19.8%). The highest percentage of participants was in the age category 30-39 years (n=87; 35.8%). Those between the ages of 40-49 years made up n=72 (29.6%) of the sample, while n=51 (21%) were between the ages of 20-39 years, followed by those who were over 49 years (n=33; 13.6%). Salary grade in the public service differs from position to position, the lower positions are given the first alphabets for instance, the salary grade for assistant officers is F, for officers is G, for managers is H and I and for directors is K and J depending on the department that the position is held. Most participants in this study were those paid on grade G (n=160; 65.8%). The majority of participants have between 6-10 years of service (n=99; 40.7%).

7.2 Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was run, in which cross loading of variables were examined. This procedure resulted in the extraction of two factors that explained succession planning implementation. The factors were labelled as current replacement planning and employee grooming/development practices. These factors accounted for 71.9 percent of the total variance explained, as depicted in Table 2. Prior to the factor analysis procedure, the data was checked for suitability for factor analysis. The Bartlett's and the Kaiser Meyer-Olkin (KMO) tests were undertaken. The KMO index was 0.840 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at <0.00 indicating that the data was suitable for factor analysis.

Table 2: Rotated component matrix

Component	Replacement planning	Grooming
Replacements are being prepared to fill key vacancies	**0.843**	0.069
Individuals are groomed to assume greater responsibilities for organisational continuity	**0.880**	0.149
Employees are prepared in advance to hold higher positions for organisational survival	**0.901**	0.089
Multiple potential successors are identified and developed for a range of positions	**0.850**	0.219
Lists of high potentials are developed, debated and regularly revised by multiple stakeholders	**0.697**	0.381
There is a trained cadre of replacement leaders standing ready to assume power when the Baby Boomer generation retires.	**0.669**	0.421
Employees are developed in order to be ready for advancement into key roles	0.162	**0.827**
There is a system for employee's competencies gap analysis in place	0.179	**0.826**
Career and personal plans are developed	0.141	**0.819**
Initial eigenvalues	4.846	1.627
Cumulative % of variance	53.84	18.07
Total variance explained from two factors	71.92	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy	0.840	
Bartlett's test of sphericity (chi square =1404.21; d/f=36; sig p<0.000		

7.3 Correlation among constructs

Pearson correlation coefficient was used to measure the degree of linear association between constructs. The strength of the relationship between current practices to succession planning current practices and intention to leave (ITL) was examined. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlations among study constructs and means

Constructs	Replacement planning	Grooming	Intentions to leave
Replacement planning	1		
Grooming	.427**	1	
Turnover intentions	-.364**	-.372**	1

*** Correlations are significant at p<0.01. * Correlations are significant at p<0.05.*

7.4 Regression analysis: current practices to succession planning and intention to leave

Regression analysis was conducted to establish the relationship between the two factors, namely replacement planning and grooming with turnover intentions. The results are reported in Table 4. Stringent examinations were conducted with a view to corroborate the assumptions of linear regression models along with co-linearity diagnostics checks. First, the correlation matrix was examined for existence of multi co-linearity, *inter alia* if the predictor variables correlate too highly ($r>0.9$) with each other (Pallant, 2010). None of the correlations in Table 2 reached a value of $r>0.9$; hence, the data was considered suitable for linear regression analysis. Field (2009) further suggested that if the variance inflation factor (VIF) is greater than 10 then the predictor variables are correlated among themselves; hence, co-linearity is a cause for concern. In this case, the regression model was deemed appropriate for the data as the VIF value was 1.222. Moreover, tolerance levels that fall below 0.1 indicate serious co-linearity problems. The tolerance statistics for the predictor variable was 0.818 indicating that there was no co-linearity within the data set.

Table 4: Regression analysis: current succession planning practices with intention to leave

Independent variables: succession practices. Dependent variable: turnover intentions	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t-value	Sig	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Tol	VIF
Replacement planning	-.378	.097	-.257	-.3.90	.000**	.818	1.22
Grooming	-.413	.100	-.265	-4.11	.000**	.818	1.22

*R= .436. R^2=.190. Adjusted R^2 =.183. ** Significant at p<0.05. Tol=tolerance value. VIF = Variance inflation factor.*

8. DISCUSSION

The objective of the study was to examine the current practices to succession planning and the relationship with turnover intentions of employees. The strength of the relationship between current practices to succession planning current practices and turnover intention was examined. Table 3 reflects that the marked correlations are significant at p<0.01. Positive correlations were found between replacement planning and grooming of employees (r= 0.427; p<0.01). This indicates that if replacement planning takes place in the public service, grooming becomes a natural programme in the implementation of succession planning. Suresh (2014) posits that grooming future leaders to replace old ones is crucial today because leaders drive productivity, thus if there are gaps in their ability, the organisational performance suffers. Replacement planning correlates negatively with turnover intentions (r=-.364; p<0.01) indicating that if replacements are not undertaken, there is a greater propensity for employees to leave the organisation. This is concurrent with the findings in Dahiya, Samalkha, Mann, Gupta and Israna's (2014) study where they revealed that the lack training and development opportunities in organisations increases employees' turnover intentions, thus making it very difficult to replace high performers. Grooming is associated negatively with turnover intentions (r=-.372; p<0.01) meaning that employees who are groomed in the public service are more likely not to leave the public sector. An organisation that provides grooming opportunities values its employees, which motivates them to remain in the organisation (Veloso, Cunha da Silva, Dutra, Fischer & Trevison 2014). An organisation that fails to provide career development for its employees is at risk of losing its employees as a result of discontentment (Kibui, Gachunga & Namusonge 2014).

Regression analysis was performed to test whether the independent variables, namely succession planning current practice (i.e. replacement planning and grooming) predict the dependent variable (turnover intentions). It was found that two factors (current replacement planning and grooming practices) explained approximately 19 percent (R^2 =0.190) of the variance in employees overall turnover intentions. In terms of the beta weights (β= -0.265) lack of grooming is a stronger predictor of turnover intentions, followed by replacement planning (β= -0.257). The negative beta coefficient thus indicates that as employees' perceptions of low levels of succession planning (or lack thereof) increases in the organisation, their turnover intentions increase. In other words, if the opposite happens (i.e. the presence of high levels of succession planning), employees' propensity to leave the organisation will decrease. Harun and Mom (2014) affirm that institutions that place emphasis on proper succession planning initiatives stand a greater chance to retain best employees. Additionally Omisore (2013) concluded that if the organisational talent is not identified and prepared in advance, it would lead to the public service being incompetent. Therefore, succession planning prepares, develops, improves and retains the human capital of every organisation (Gulza & Durrani 2014).

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE

In order to win the war against the brain drain it is of paramount importance for the public service to engage both policy makers and top management in succession planning to assist with strategies to preserve talent and retain highly competent key employees. Prior to undertaking succession planning a mission, vision and values that accommodate the contributions of employees should be developed. The major succession planning factors, which were identified through factor analysis, namely replacement planning and grooming, returned mean scores of 1.70 and 2.16 respectively, which indicate that the right process of succession planning is not followed in the public service for selecting successors. It is recommended that clear, transparent and objective criteria should be set that will enable the public organisations to improve succession planning practices and counter turnover intentions. Electing or appointing top public service employees for short-term contractual employment should be avoided as it hinders the implementation of long-term programmes, which include succession planning. Therefore, it is recommended that longer terms of appointment be provided for top public service employees. Finally, it is essential that decision makers identify,

through succession planning, the type of manpower that the organisation has in order to develop mechanisms to transfer critical organisational knowledge and mentoring programmes to shepherd the right talent, into the right positions at the right time.

10. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study advances and contributes to the literature on succession planning, especially to the current understanding of what succession planning practices are being used by the public service of a developing country. The study was subject to certain limitations that may pave the way for further research opportunities. The sample was drawn from officers, managers and directors stationed in one district (in the capital city). A broader national sample would have offered additional insights not only limited to the capital city. Responses from junior employees would have potentially offered an additional perspective, but in this study, they were not included in the sample and, therefore, they could be included in future studies. The study was based on a small sample due to financial constraints; therefore, the findings must be treated with caution when drawing conclusions. In this study, only a quantitative approach was followed, which limits the information collected. However, a broader scope of information could have been acquired if this approach was mixed with a qualitative approach. The respondents, of their own accord, completed the questionnaire and the researcher had no control over the responses; therefore, the researcher had to rely on information supplied by the respondents.

11. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Akin to other human resource management changes and initiatives, succession planning requires long-term and significant commitment from top management and other stakeholders. Organisations that do not have succession plans or do not appropriately implement such plans will fail to retain their valued employees. The findings of this study revealed that employees view such organisations as lacking recognition and may show greater propensity to leave the organisation.

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