CHALLENGES OF LIBRARY SUCCESSION PLANNING

IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Library succession planning has been addressed for more than two decades; however, the concept has only recently been developed in Vietnam. Succession planning provides numerous challenges for library leaders in Vietnam, including a small talent pool of successors; a lack of staff motivation; and an embryonic recruitment culture. This research helps to raise awareness of library leaders and library staff of the role of succession planning. Research was conducted through a multi-method approach at thirteen public and four academic libraries in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Data on succession planning challenges was collected through an online survey and interviews. This study utilized transformational leadership theory to investigate the challenges of library succession planning reported by library members. The findings related to challenges of library succession planning and possible solutions will assist library leaders in conducting the succession planning process.

Keywords: library leadership, succession planning, challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Library succession planning was first addressed in the 1990s, later than in other industries, when research into succession planning practices expanded from business sectors to educational institutions, government, non-profit organizations, health care and small businesses (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2003). However, there is limited literature on succession planning in libraries compared with other industries. Moreover, there is no literature in Vietnam that specifically discusses what factors challenge succession planning and how library leaders deal with them. Research into succession planning challenges will benefit library leaders by assisting them in knowing how to identify, recruit, and nurture the next generation of effective leaders.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Succession planning

Succession planning is “a process of developing talent to meet the needs of the organization now and in the future” (Rothwell, 2010, p. 371). In business, succession planning ensures a supply of successors for current and future key jobs by managing the careers of individuals to optimize the organization’s needs and the individuals’ aspirations (Dessler, 2000). These views of succession planning also apply in the library information sector. According to Rothwell (2010), succession planning aims to continue the key managerial positions, retain qualified staff and maintain the tacit knowledge of the organization. In a library setting, this view, as addressed by Williams (2010) may also influence the retention of existing employees. Whitmell (2002) argues that if an employee is substituted whenever needed, on an individual basis, succession planning fails. Therefore, succession planning is necessary and it is a long-term process.

2.2 Succession planning challenges

Leibman, Bruer, and Maki (1996) indicate that the major challenge of succession planning is the “unavailability of key people at the appropriate time and overlooking development opportunities such as challenging work assignments, mentoring and feedback” (p. 19). These ideas are supported by Whitmell (2002) who states that identifying the right person to fit the corresponding position or lacking qualified candidates are perhaps the real concerns. She also suggests that library leaders should provide opportunities for young staff to learn what they want whenever they want to. She further argues that library leaders should provide opportunities for their employees to enhance their progress up the career ladder. In addition, four other challenges, as indicated by Bridgland (1999), include: lack of support from top-down policies; poor vision of succession planning potential; excessive paperwork; and many meetings. Coupled with these examples of succession planning challenges, Pennell (2010) also addresses the need to have a flexible job description in order to evaluate and select qualified candidates for succession planning. Another challenge is that if retraining, retaining, and recruiting employees are ignored in the organization, with regard to management, then a small talent pool for succession planning is a likely result (Munde, 2010). These pressures or challenges of succession planning are therefore important for library leaders to deal with within the context of their organizations.

This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

a. What factors challenge succession planning in libraries?
b. How do library leaders deal with these challenges?

3. METHODOLOGY

This research draws on transformational leadership theory initiated by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and expanded by Bernard M Bass (1985). This theory includes four components. They are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration which show how leaders influence and consider staff’s ideals (Bernard M. Bass & Avolio, 1994). Idealized influence helps library leaders know how to transfer a library vision in relation to succession planning into their employees so that they can get preparation for future managerial positions. Inspirational motivation guides library
leaders how to inspire their successors to change their perceptions in order to commit themselves to contributing to the benefits of the organization and community. Intellectual stimulation instructs library leaders how to assign employees challenging work in order to develop their intellectual capacities. Doing that leaders can identify what they can do and if their capacities match intended managerial positions. With individualized consideration, library leaders can know how to assess followers’ motives, satisfy their needs and encourage them to perform their tasks effectively. These components also help library leaders to create valuable and positive change in qualified employees with the end goal of developing them into potential leaders.

This research utilized a multi-method approach in two phases. It was conducted at all thirteen public libraries and four selected academic libraries in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. An online survey was first administered with 172 respondents. Data from this phase was analyzed using SPSS software. The themes which emerged from the online surveys informed the construction of the second phase which involved in-depth interviews with twenty-three senior managers and board of director members. Each interview took approximately one hour. Narrative data from interviews and the open-ended items in the online survey were imported into NVivo software for coding and thematic analysis. Narrative and numerical data from the online survey were integrated in analysis to illustrate the emerging themes in answer to the research questions.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Succession planning challenges

Succession planning is a long-term process that affects every library staff member; however, it is a challenging one. Data from the online survey and in-depth interviews revealed difficulties in conducting succession planning. They included small talent pool, imbalance between males and females, leadership expectations, staff departure, lack of job descriptions, insufficient work performance assessment, and low inter-relation between succession planning and promotion. This paper focuses particularly on the first four challenges.

Small talent pool

The biggest challenge for library succession planning is lack of talent. Twenty of the twenty-three interviewees indicated that their libraries had only a small talent pool. A small talent pool can lead to difficulties in selecting qualified candidates for succession planning. It is hard to look for potential replacements from within the library if there is a limited number of staff to select from. This finding is supported by literature (Hanoi Moi, 2010; Ministry of Culture and Information, 2007; Ministry of Culture Sports and Tourism, 2010; Nguyen, 2009; Vu, Pham, & Le, 2013). According to the Vietnam’s master plan 2010 on library development, it was expected that all provincial and urban libraries would have internet access to the National Library, 20% of rare materials would be digitized; and 40% of the district libraries were encouraged to apply information technology to their own activities (Ministry of Culture and Information, 2007). However, this strategy has not been achieved. One of the causes, particularly in the public libraries, is that there were insufficient staff and poor training (Hanoi Moi, 2010). On average, the number of staff in provincial and urban libraries was twenty-five employees. However, many libraries were below this average (including Bac Kan provincial library with only nine employees). This average rate dramatically fell to 1.6 staff in a district library (Ministry of Culture Sports and Tourism, 2010). These figures indicate
that public library staff numbers were insufficient, even for the needs of library services. Low staffing numbers can be a great challenge for succession planning. In terms of qualifications, Ms Thanh Mai, the Head of the Department of Library who directs all library systems in Vietnam reported that the provincial library staff had masters’ degrees (6%), bachelor degrees (72%) and vocational training certificates (22%). In a lower level of library structure, district libraries, 40% of staff had bachelor degrees and the remainder held vocational training certificates. Although these library staff were primarily trained in traditional library skills, they were not fully able to meet the requirements of the modern services that their libraries were developing (Nguyen, 2009). In academic libraries, both the quantity and quality of library staff were also low and poor. Also, some of these libraries were under pressure to recruit teaching staff without library knowledge and some academic library leaders were educated in disciplines other than librarianship. These circumstances impede the delivery of library services and the application of library standards (Vu et al., 2013). A small talent pool of library-educated staff and leaders is considered to be a great concern in both public and academic libraries, not only in the Mekong Delta but also in the whole country.

Imbalance between males and females

Imbalance between males and females is considered to be a challenging factor of library talent pools. Data from the online survey showed that there were more women than men in librarianship and in leadership roles in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. In particular, more women (64%) than men (36%) were working in librarianship in the region. This imbalance occurred in both public and academic libraries. This finding therefore reflected the long-standing notion of female dominance in librarianship globally (Anwar, 1973; Phillips, Carson, & Carson, 1994; Romaniuk & Haycock, 2011). An additional finding of the present study is that there were only twice as many female librarians as males in Vietnam, while the ratio of women to men was three to one in Western countries (Bello & Thompson, 2003) and in Kuwait (Alqudsi-ghabra & Al-Muomen, 2012), and four females to one male in librarianship in Jamaica (Lambert & Newman, 2012). In the United States, 83% of librarians are women (Beveridge, Weber, & Beveridge, 2011).

With respect to leadership or managerial positions, the number of women who were members of boards of directors (n = 11) was about the same as that of men (n = 10). However, the number of female managers (n = 31) was nearly triple male managers (n = 11). This finding is contrary to the notion that leadership is generally a male occupation (Bello & Thompson, 2003; Connerley, Mecham, & Strauss, 2008; Rohmann & Rowold, 2010) and supports the concept of female employees and female leader domination in librarianship (Franks, 2012; Jones, 2013). In Australia, there are currently more female leaders than male in Australian academic libraries. Among thirty-nine Australian university library leaders, twenty-seven are females (information received by personal email from Diane Costello, the Executive Officer of the Council of Australian University Librarians). In Vietnamese library sectors, academic library leadership in Vietnam is also female dominated (see Table 1). At present, there are 150 state-owned universities in Vietnam and 145 academic libraries. Table 1 shows that there are more female directors (54.5%, n = 79) than males (45.5%, n = 66) in academic libraries in general and also in the Mekong Delta, with 6 women (66.7%) and 3 men (33.3%). However, there is a different case in Vietnamese public libraries. Thirty-seven male directors (57%) and 27 women (42.2%) pre-dominate in these libraries overall but there are more female directors (61.5%, n = 8) than males (38.5%, n = 5) in the Mekong Delta public libraries. It could be that the imbalance between women and men in the library workforce may in turn cause imbalance in library succession planning.
Table 1  Library directors by gender (as of Oct. 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Library directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>University libraries</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>27 (69.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>State-owned university libraries</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>79 (54.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public libraries</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>27 (42.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>State-owned university libraries</td>
<td>Mekong Delta</td>
<td>6 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Public libraries</td>
<td>Mekong Delta</td>
<td>8 (61.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Library websites and personal email

Leadership expectation

Data from the in-depth interviews showed that the staff who worked for the longest time in both public and academic libraries would most probably become library leaders. Participants in this study expressed their concern that library staff might choose the oldest staff as the potential candidates because of their expectations about leadership. However, library leaders reflected their responsibility to select capable and moral staff for succession planning rather than the longest-serving staff. Therefore, it is not the case that staff who have worked for the longest time would necessarily be promoted to be leaders. Seniority should not be considered as a major criterion in succession planning although there is a long-established Vietnamese proverb that “Seniority is always preferred in the group”. The finding related to seniority is a controversial topic that is discussed in literature (Boyea, 2011; Davis, 2009; Kumaran, 2012). There are some particular circumstances where seniority results in leadership positions. For example, in the Congress of the United States, Davis (2009), “The longer you serve in the House or Senate, the more likely you are to be running a committee” (p.1). In this statement, Davis confirms that length of service is considered in selecting candidates for committees in the Congress. Similarly, Boyea (2011) claims, “The role of seniority varies where the rule structures of state courts allocate authority based on seniority and where judges are appointed rather than elected” (p.46). This current research found otherwise to Kumaran’s idea that leadership in Asian countries is for the wise and the elderly. It is not for those who climb the organizational ladder quickly (Kumaran, 2012).

Staff departure

Data from the in-depth interviews also indicated that staff departure was considered a challenge in succession planning. Twelve of the twenty-three interviewees reported it was common for employees to quit their jobs in the library environment. Library staff resigned from their jobs because salary was too low for them to make end meets. In particular, most of information technology staff in their libraries left their jobs because other organizations agreed to pay them a higher salary. Qualified staff departures might cause a shortage of talent for succession planning because libraries were not permitted to recruit new staff. Some literature addressing retention has discussed the challenges of staff departure to succession planning (McMahan & Masias, 2009; Nixon, 2008; Strothmann & Ohler, 2011). Nixon (2008) describes how many librarians are leaving their career in the United States resulting in a lack of qualified staff, especially for middle and upper-level positions. While Nixon indicated that staff departure is a challenge to succession planning, McMahan and Masias (2009) determined that succession planning is good protection against staff departure to ensure leadership continuity. Strothmann and Ohler (2011) affirmed, “Libraries may cause themselves additional staffing shortages unnecessarily by neglecting retention of the remaining employees” (p. 192).
Potential successors had their own challenges with remaining in library positions and being promoted to leadership positions. These challenges included family and economic issues for public and academic library participants. These participants thought that as library leaders, they should focus on their leadership tasks and they could therefore not do part-time jobs for extra-money. Therefore, many library staff did not want to be leaders. In addition, they might not manage to participate in training programs because of family commitments. Sometimes, the staff left the library even though they were on the succession planning list because they recognized that salaries in the other organizations were much more than their library salaries. The finding that potential successors may leave libraries because of their low salaries is supported in literature (Iyer, 2012; Strothmann & Ohler, 2011; Usherwood, 2001; Whitmell, 2002; Woo, 2007). In a study of how to retain academic librarians, Strothmann and Ohler (2011) indicated that inadequate salary is the number one of the four categories (including salary, working conditions, job enrichment and education) that make employees quit their jobs. Meanwhile, Iyer (2012) claims that income is one of the two reasons (the other is career progression) that employees change their workplace. Better salaries from other companies entice qualified staff resulting in a smaller talent pool for library succession planning.

4.2 Possible solutions

Recruitment policies, training programs, work performance assessment, mentoring, and challenging work assignments were reported to be possible solutions for the challenges. This section examines the first two of these solutions.

Recruitment policy

Data from both the online survey and in-depth interviews show that increasing employment of qualified staff for leadership positions was a possible solution for a shallow pool of talent. Qualified staff can be recruited from inside and/or outside libraries. In the survey, fifty per cent of academic libraries and forty-one per cent of public libraries preferred to use advertisements for their recruitment, both inside and outside the organization, to attract qualified staff. However, the more in-depth interviews suggest that potential successors are generally suggested from within. Fifteen of the twenty-three participants stated that libraries should promote candidates from inside the library for managerial positions. Inside library candidates already understand personalities and the working capacity of each library staff member. In addition, inside library candidates can readily understand library activities and have in-depth knowledge of the library. Therefore, they can manage the library easily and face fewer challenges. Research participants preferred internal candidates because of their knowledge of how their library works and understanding of the people in the libraries.

Seven participants reported that their libraries had never recruited from outside for managerial positions because they believe that outside candidates are not suitable and could not fulfil their duties without understanding the library. The finding that potential successors are mainly from within is supported by literature (Ernest & Barr, 2003; González, 2013; Jantti & Greenhalgh, 2012; Rothwell, 2010; Rust, 2007; Scott, 2008). Rust (2007) claims that developing existing employees is less risky and less expensive than recruiting new ones. Ernest and Barr (2003) said that promoting from within the organisation aims to encourage and value growth and develop excellence from employees. Similarly, in research into leadership competencies, Jantti and Greenhalgh (2012) indicate that growing library leaders from within is a way to develop an individual’s progress. The finding of this current research is also prevalent in the business world (González, 2013; Scott, 2008). DHL Express company hires 83%
of senior managers internally and considers promoting from inside the organisation as the number one strategic priority to keep people and keep client relationships strong (Scott, 2008). Similar to this, a library can primarily consider its inside talent pool so as to encourage its employees to perform better. This is also indicated in research conducted by González (2013), “The best companies groomed employees with leadership potential so that they can aspire to higher level positions” (p. 113).

Training programs

Training programs should be employed for potential candidates. More than half of the survey population (51.5%) responded that training programs are offered for successors, and in the in-depth interviews, fourteen of the twenty-three participants indicated that successors should be trained properly. Potential candidates should be trained in various skills and knowledge based on the requirements of their future positions. These training programs should include both library management and leadership. The finding of this study, that training programs are necessary for successors, is supported by literature (American Library Association, 2014; Romaniuk & Haycock, 2011; Simmons College, 2014). For example, in the United States, there are many institutes and universities facilitating leadership programs such as the “American Library Association Emerging Leaders” (EL) program, “American Research Libraries' Leadership Development”, “Discover the Leader Within”, the “Illinois Library Leadership Initiative”, the “Michigan Library Association’s Leadership Academy”, the New York Library Association's Library Leadership and Management Academy”, etc. (American Library Association, 2014) and the doctoral program in “Managerial Leadership in the Information Professions” (MLIP) for leadership competency development (Simmons College, 2014). These programs help to fill the current leadership gaps by providing skills and confidence in the pool of emergent library leaders (Romaniuk & Haycock, 2011).

While leadership training programs are operated and developed in most Western countries, library leadership programs are non-existent in Vietnam. At present, there are eight universities providing bachelor library programs, three universities are in charge of educating masters’ degree librarians and one university offers a doctoral library program in Vietnam. However, there is no university or institution leading a formal training program for library leadership positions (Le, 2013). Fortunately, beside academic and short training programs for library leaders conducted by Australian universities and state libraries, the Australian government has annually provided Australian Awards Scholarships for 200 recipients globally since 2007 (Australian Government, 2014). As a result of this, the Australian program has educated many cohorts of experts, academics and leaders in various industries including library and information science for Vietnam.

In addition to leadership training for successors, knowledge of financial matters should be paid attention. In Vietnam, only a director has a right to make decisions on library budgets but it is likely that their own training did not focus on library budgeting. Becoming a library director without good budget knowledge means a leader might face difficulties in tackling financial issues. In many Western countries, financial knowledge is included in librarianship education (Boock, 2008; Singer, Goodrich, & Goldberg, 2004). Singer et al. (2004) indicate that budgeting is something successors must learn to prepare for their own future positions but Boock (2008) indicates that education on budgeting may not be adequate. Experience of library financial issues can be shared through mentoring (Hernon, 2010; Mavrinac, 2005).
5. CONCLUSION

This paper presented some major challenges and possible solutions in conducting library succession planning in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Identifying challenges and possible solutions can be useful in supporting library leaders in preparing the next generation of leaders for libraries. By taking into account the challenges and possible solutions indicated, library leaders can apply these to their individual contexts so as to optimize their management and leadership in the future.

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