

THE MISSING LINK IN SUCCESSION

Readiness, Not Planning





Succession planning has long been positioned as a safeguard for organizational continuity, ensuring that leadership transitions do not disrupt performance, strategic direction, or institutional stability. In today’s environment of accelerated leadership turnover and increasing business complexity, its role has become even more critical.

Yet despite the strategic importance of succession planning, its effectiveness is frequently undermined by the absence of structured, role-based assessment. While organizations invest time in identifying successors, far fewer invest in rigorously evaluating whether those individuals are equipped to succeed in future roles. Many organizations continue to rely on **subjective judgment and internal perspectives rather than data-driven evaluation**, limiting their ability to accurately assess leadership readiness.

Recognizing these limitations, organizations are increasingly shifting toward assessment-led succession models that prioritize data, objectivity, and forward-looking evaluation.

Leadership assessment usage has increased by **85%** globally between 2019 and 2022, signaling a rapid move toward structured evaluation of leadership capability and readiness. In 2024, **33%** of assessment activity focused on development rather than selection alone¹.

I. The Structural Flaw in Traditional Succession Planning

At its core, traditional succession planning suffers from a fundamental design flaw: it separates **identification from validation**. In practice, this structural gap becomes evident in how successors are selected. Organizations frequently rely on observable indicators such as strong performance in current roles, tenure within the organization, or visibility to senior leadership.

However, these indicators are inherently backward-looking and do not capture the complexity of future leadership demands as **high performance in a current role does not necessarily translate into high potential for more complex roles**, highlighting the limitations of performance-based succession decisions.

This issue is further compounded when leadership roles are defined broadly, without being translated into **clear competency frameworks or measurable capability requirements**, which means successors are evaluated against inconsistent or implicit criteria.

Together, these dynamics give rise to what can be described as **assumed readiness**—a condition in which individuals are perceived as ready for advancement without objective evidence to support that conclusion and succession decisions are more susceptible to personal perceptions and informal influence, as **subjective evaluation processes are prone to bias and distortion**.

¹ Leadership in transition: Insights from 750,000 Aon assessments – Top Talent Solutions



As a result, traditional succession planning often fails to function as a forward-looking system for identifying the most capable future leaders. Instead, it tends to reinforce existing dynamics and historical patterns and introducing significant organizational risks:



Only around

12% of organizations report confidence in the strength of their leadership bench², reflecting a clear gap between perceived and actual readiness.



80% of organizations lack confidence in their leadership pipelines³, highlighting how fragile leadership pipelines have become, needing more structured approaches to talent development.



Only about

20% of HR leaders report having ready successors for critical roles⁴, meaning that organizations continue to face significant gaps in leadership readiness.



Only

49% of leadership roles can be filled internally⁴, indicating that many organizations are forced to rely on external hiring due to insufficient internal readiness.

Rather than accurately predicting leadership success, it reflects internal perceptions of talent—limiting its effectiveness in building truly ready leadership pipelines.

II. Assessment as the Foundation of Succession Readiness

Assessment fundamentally restructures succession planning by shifting it from a nomination-based process to a **capability-based system grounded in evidence**. Rather than relying on assumptions about readiness, assessment introduces structured methods to define, measure, and validate leadership capability. It enables organizations to move from reactive identification to **continuous, data-driven pipeline development**. Organizations integrating assessment into succession planning are better able to:

Evaluate leadership pipelines

Build sustainable leadership capacity

Measure capability development

Fill critical roles internally in lower time-to-fill

Identify readiness gaps early

Align talent with future business needs

²New Research Suggests An Alarming Decline In High-Quality Leaders - Forbes

³The Leadership pipeline crisis: When your best people don't want to lead – FA News

⁴HR pros are turning their focus toward internal talent capabilities, DDI says – HR Dive



A. Role Clarity: Defining What Success Actually Looks Like with Success Profiles

Effective assessment begins not with the individual but with the role itself. One of the most critical weaknesses in succession planning is the absence of clearly defined role expectations. Without an understanding of what success requires, organizations cannot accurately evaluate readiness.

This has become particularly important as leadership roles evolve: modern leadership increasingly requires **capabilities such as emotional intelligence, collaboration, and digital fluency**—reflecting the growing complexity of operating environments and the need to lead across uncertainty and change.

Succession planning must move beyond generic role descriptions toward role-specific definitions of success. Leading organizations are increasingly doing this through **data-informed success profiles**, which go beyond generic competencies to define what success looks like in a specific role within a specific context. These profiles integrate strategic priorities, business challenges and operating realities to outline not only what leaders need to do, but how they need to operate to deliver impact, combining:



Assessment operationalizes these success profiles by translating them into **clear, measurable leadership criteria**. It ensures that succession decisions are grounded in a consistent, role-specific standard, aligned with both current requirements and future organizational needs.

B. Readiness Validation: Moving Beyond Performance

Beyond defining the role, assessment plays a critical role in validating whether individuals are truly ready to step into it. **Effective succession planning requires combining quantitative and qualitative assessment methods to evaluate leadership capability.**

Assessment enables organizations to distinguish between:



Success profiles act as the **benchmark for this evaluation**. They provide a structured reference point against which readiness can be measured, ensuring that individuals are assessed based on their alignment with the actual demands of the role.

Structured assessment frameworks evaluate dimensions such as **adaptability, decision-making under uncertainty, and leadership behaviors in unfamiliar contexts**, providing a more accurate view of future capability. Integrating multiple assessment tools—ranging from behavioral evaluations to data-driven metrics—allows organizations to **better understand readiness, track development, and align talent decisions with long-term performance outcomes.**





III. Assessment as a Tool for Equity and Objectivity

Traditional succession approaches often favor individuals who are more visible within the organization, those with:

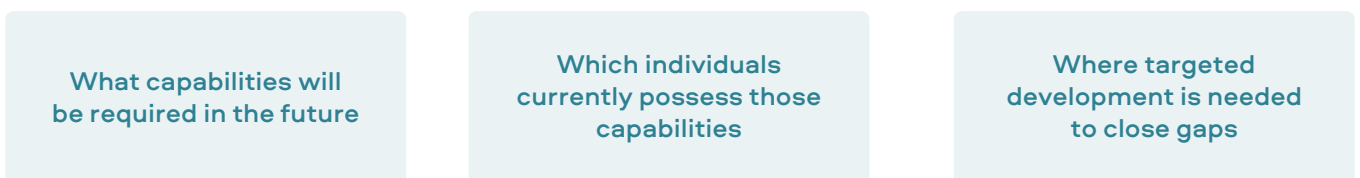


This is not necessarily a reflection of capability, but rather of opportunity and proximity. In the absence of structured evaluation mechanisms, leadership decisions are more likely to rely on human judgment—an area consistently shown to be vulnerable to **cognitive bias**, including favoritism, reinforcing existing leadership patterns rather than identifying the most capable talent.

Assessment directly addresses this limitation by introducing **standardized interviews, competency-based evaluation criteria** and standardized assessment simulations that are specifically designed to reduce subjectivity and improve consistency and fairness in selection decisions by ensuring that outcomes are based on measurable inputs rather than personal judgment.

- ▶ In this context, assessment becomes more than a technical tool—it becomes a **mechanism for enabling equity in leadership progression**. Organizations that embed assessment into succession planning are not only improving decision quality, they are also building **more inclusive, merit-based leadership pipelines**, where advancement is determined by demonstrated capability rather than visibility or proximity to power.
- ▶ Moreover, continuous assessment enables organizations to **align leadership pipelines** with shifting strategic priorities so that leadership capability remains aligned with future needs.
- ▶ In this model, succession planning transitions from a static planning exercise into a **dynamic organizational capability**—it becomes an ongoing process of measuring, validating, and developing leadership readiness, supported by continuous data rather than periodic judgment.

Organizations that adopt this approach are better positioned to **maintain leadership continuity, respond to change,** and **build resilient leadership pipelines** that evolve in line with the business itself, by determining:



Without assessment, succession pipelines risk being anchored in outdated definitions of leadership, limiting their ability to support future performance.



Conclusion

Readiness Must Be Proven, Not Assumed

Succession planning without assessment creates a false sense of security, one in which organizations believe they are prepared for leadership transitions yet lack objective evidence to support that belief—as relying on performance, visibility, or managerial judgment as proxies for readiness often leads to overestimation.

Assessment fundamentally changes this equation by introducing objectivity, measurability, and transparency into succession decisions.

Instead of relying on perception, organizations can evaluate leadership capability against defined criteria and generate a clear, data-backed view of readiness. They increasingly use assessment to understand bench strength, identify gaps, and ensure leaders are prepared for future roles, reinforcing its role as a foundational element of effective succession systems and elevating succession planning into a strategic lever for long-term value creation and organizational sustainability.



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