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Growing Your Own Leaders: Succession Planning in Libraries

Judith M. Nixon

ABSTRACT. Succession planning, a strategy for developing leaders from within the company or organization, is a technique that could be useful to libraries. Libraries will soon be faced with more open positions because of retirements than we can fill. The dilemma is complicated by a shortage of younger, midcareer librarians and a shortage of new recruits into the profession. These openings will be primarily in leadership positions. This problem will affect libraries of all kinds including business libraries. One solution is to “grow your own” leaders by using succession planning techniques to identify staff with the interest and potential for upper-level positions, to determine the gaps in knowledge, and to set up training and mentoring programs so that they are ready to assume leadership positions in the near future.

KEYWORDS. Succession planning, human resources, librarian shortage, staff planning, baby boomers, recruiting, business librarians, leadership

Imagine this: You come to work one day to find out that your library director has accepted another job, decided to retire, or (heaven forbid) become ill or had an accident. In any event, you have a top position open. What will happen? The procedure in academic libraries is very familiar. A search committee will be appointed, and a position description will be

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249

written and advertised. Occasionally it will be decided to limit the search to current staff members, an in-house search. This will speed up the process. However, if a national search is conducted, the hiring process will take months. Contrast this scenario with one at a major corporation such as McDonald's Corp. Jim Cantalupo, chair and CEO suddenly died. Within days the corporation was announcing a new chair. Before the stockholders reading the financial page had time to respond, McDonald's was back to business as usual.

How can they respond so fast? What planning and preparation make this possible? The answer is called succession planning. Organizations such as Dow Chemical, Eli Lilly, Sonoco, and Dell Computer are anticipating changes in leadership, assessing the skills and knowledge of their employees, identifying those that possess the potential to be effective leaders, and providing training, mentoring, and experience so that when the moment happens the plan is in place. Companies are not just doing this for the top executive, they are pushing this planning down the ladder. Succession planning is becoming workplace planning. William J. Rothwell (2005), author of the major book on succession planning, defined it as anticipating changes in management, creating a strategic plan to identify potential staff members, determining the gaps in their knowledge, and providing training and coaching, special assignments, and experiences so that they are ready to step up when the time comes.

REVIEW OF THE LIBRARY LITERATURE

Are some libraries following the lead of these corporations and adopting succession planning? A review of the literature turned up only one article about succession planning in academic or public libraries in the United States, "Your Library's Future," a 2004 article published in *Library Journal* (Singer, Goodrich, & Goldberg). This article discusses how one library, the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon, developed a program to prepare and train younger staff members for the anticipated upper-level positions. This plan included making staff aware of the future needs, encouraging them to make their interest known, and then providing peer reviews, mentors, and a training program. A side bar called "Succession Planning Tool Kit" gives an excellent but brief outline of the steps to take to set up a program. Besides this article, there is one book on succession planning in libraries, *Staff Planning in a Time of Demographic Change*, which is based on a series of conferences held in Ontario, Canada, in 2002

and 2003 (Whitmell, 2005). Libraries in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have more seriously discussed succession planning, and this book provides a thorough discussion of the issues, many which apply to U.S. library situations. With the exception of the *Library Journal* article and a small set of articles centering on special libraries, there is almost nothing in journal literature about libraries in the United States using succession planning. The lack of articles about U.S. libraries is a red flag. Should libraries use succession planning? Why are U.S. libraries not using such plans? Are libraries just behind the times and missing a technique that could be useful? The primary reason that the business world uses succession planning is the shortage of capable people in the management ranks to fill the senior executive positions. In other words, major corporations cannot hire the leaders they need, so they are growing their own. Are libraries facing the same problem? Is there a shortage of leaders in the library field?

IS SUCCESSION PLANNING SOMETHING LIBRARIANS SHOULD CONSIDER?

A Look at the Leadership Supply in the Library Profession as a Whole

Within the next few years, many librarians, especially those holding the top-level positions, such as directors, deans, associate directors, and heads of libraries, will be retiring. The Bureau of Labor Statistics said that more than three in five librarians are age 45 years or older and will become eligible for retirement in the next 10 years. Mary Jo Lynch, director of American Library Association's Office for Research and Statistics, confirmed that in the near future a surge of retirements will take place peaking between 2015 and 2019. "In total, the decade beginning in 2010 will see 45% of today's librarians reach age 65, representing the early wave of baby-boom librarians reaching the traditional retirement age" (Lynch, Tordella, & Godfrey, 2005, p. 28). Earlier statistics similarly outlined the coming librarian shortage and predicted that 83,366 librarians will be age 65 years by the year 2010 (Hernon, Powell, & Young, 2001). The general conclusion of many articles on the future of the profession is that the cause of the projected shortage is the expected retirements. (For a more detailed look at the retirement data, visit www.ala.org/ala/ors/reports/reports.htm). Not satisfied with this general conclusion Larry Hardesty (2002) took a more analytical look at the recruitment and hiring statistics in his article

in *portal: Libraries and the Academy*. He identified and investigated the possible causes: closing library schools, more attractive positions for MLS graduates in information science fields, or low salaries. He concluded, "The most plausible explanation for the current situation is the increased number of retirements" (p. 94).

The problem is even more pronounced in Canada, which may explain why the Canadian libraries have been paying more attention to this phenomenon than U.S. libraries. The Canadian Library Association conducted a questionnaire survey sent to 386 members that focused on retirement trends from 2002–2010 and looked for strategies and the level of preparedness to deal with the future shortage of librarians. The survey found that between 30%–50% of the Canadian librarians will retire by 2010 and most libraries (74%) feel that they are not prepared or only somewhat prepared (Summerfield, 2002). Further data indicates that there is a decrease in the number of librarians in the 25–34 age range; the figure is 12% in Canadian Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries. These numbers are far from the ideal figures of 20% at the senior level and 20% at the newcomer level. The full report on the Canadian situation has just been released in a publication by the 8Rs Research Team (2007). Despite statistics that indicate a shortage of librarians and lack of middle-level librarians trained in the competencies of leadership, only 9% of the libraries surveyed have a succession plan in place. Although this is a dismal figure, ARL libraries in the United States are probably even less prepared.

In the past the profession has solved similar shortages by promoting mid-career librarians and filling their positions with new graduates. However, there is now a shortage of midcareer librarians and new MLS graduates. The situation is complicated by the fact that the 1990s were lean times in libraries, and the number of new hires during this time was limited. Many of the jobs went to boomers who changed careers and became librarians later in life. The result is that many librarians in middle management positions are the same age as the directors and associate directors, and they will be retiring along a similar time table.

To further complicate the labor situation, over the past 15 to 20 years, there has also been a shortage of new MLS graduates to fill the ranks vacated by promotions of middle-level librarians (Berry, 1988). This shortage is predicted to extend into the peak baby boomer retirement years, 2015–2019. "Estimated retirements outpace graduations in the United States, even accounting for reduced growth in professional-level library staffing in public and academic libraries" (Davis, 2005, p. 16). The library professional associations have made valiant efforts to address this problem by

recruiting more people into the profession, but the prediction is that there is still a shortage of new MLS graduates.

The retirement of the boomers coupled with the shortage of new librarians will complicate the already tight recruiting market, but there is yet another phenomenon occurring that is blackening the outlook even more. That is poor retention of new librarians, or “the five year itch.” Many new librarians are leaving the profession dissatisfied and restless within their first five years as librarians. In survey research reported by Markgren and her research colleagues (Markgren, Dickinson, Leonard, & Vassiliadis, 2007), one half of the 464 new librarians who answered their survey said they are thinking of leaving the profession and list some of the top reasons as “limited or no opportunities,” and “position or role is not challenging enough.” They feel there are no growth opportunities, that they cannot move up the ladder, and that to advance they need to change jobs. Many are leaving librarianship as a career. So while library managers are despairing because they cannot find qualified staff especially for middle and upper-level positions, the new recruits feel there is no job advancement possible. There seems to be a serious communication gap between the generations (i.e., between the boomers and gen Xers). My own personal experience with gen Xers parallels what is written about them. They are described as self-focused and impatient but also very motivated and success oriented; they want to learn and take on responsibility including management and supervision. The time is ripe for formal succession planning programs that open up the discussion of opportunities for leadership and set up educational and training programs to prepare new librarians to step up.

***IS THE SHORTAGE OF LIBRARIANS TRUE
FOR BUSINESS LIBRARIANS AND BUSINESS
LIBRARY MANAGERS?***

***Statistics on Business Librarians and the Job Market
for Business Librarians***

The focus of this journal is business librarianship, and there is data on this niche of the library world. Two articles published since 2000 shed some light. Ruth Pagell and Edward Lusk (2000) did a thorough statistical study of business librarians and found that in the United States the average business library manager was a 51-year-old white and as likely to be female as male. As a group business librarians were well educated with 68% of the 25 managers in the survey holding multiple postundergraduate degrees

and about one third of them having a MBA. They averaged 22 years of experience as a librarian and nearly 17 years as business librarians. A major finding of this research was that 50% of the managers indicated that they did not anticipate being an academic business librarian longer than five years. So Pagell and Lusk's research indicates that we should be in the midst of a major shift in the managers/directors/heads in business libraries right now. However, a quick review of the Academic Business Library Directors (ABLD), the same group Pagell and Lusk surveyed, indicates little change in the demographics of this group in the last seven years. The average age now is 55 years; their education level is approximately the same with 67% holding multiple higher education degrees; 37% hold a second master's degree other than an MBA, and 30% hold an MBA; and 55% are female. So in seven years the group has aged respectively, but the education level has not altered. New directors were more likely female as the ratio of male to female has altered. However, many business library directors are not retiring yet, as Pagell and Lusk's survey expected. To ascertain when the retirement exodus will begin, I asked when each ABLD member plans to retire. Sixteen of the 27 in the group (or 60%) plan to retire by 2014; but only three of these 16 plan to retire within the next two years. So just as the Census Bureau predicts, the retirement blitz will occur between 2010 and 2015.

Are the upcoming business librarians (the midcareer, nonmanagement business librarians) being prepared for these positions? Some of Pagell and Lusk's (2000) survey results shed some light. They asked how the current managers found out about and were hired for these positions. The major way (36%) was by personal contact, followed by internal postings (28%). It is the internal posting statistic that is of interest to this article. If in the 2000 survey over one fourth of the business library directors came to their jobs by internal promotions, then some rudimentary "succession planning" techniques were happening in their library, even if it was not called that. I found this so surprising that I asked a few related follow-up questions of the ABLD group in August 2007. Sixty percent stated that they were internal candidates. Twenty-two percent were internal promotions without any search, in-house or external. Another 11% were promotions after an in-house search, and 26% were internal candidates in an external search. These statistics clearly show that libraries are "growing their own" business library directors. Business librarians in the ranks are being prepared to manage the library and being promoted from within the same library.

Do midcareer, nonmanaging business librarians feel they are ready and willing to be promoted to leadership positions when the business managers retire? Again some of Pagell and Lusk's (2000) survey results give us some

clues as they asked skill related questions. Interestingly, nonmanaging business librarians' self ratings for information skills did not deviate from managers' skills; however, there was a significant gap in management skills in two areas: human resource responsibilities and conflict resolution. There was a wide variation especially in conflict resolution; about 60% of the managers rated themselves high in this area, whereas only 30% of the nonmanagers felt they were able to handle this. So business librarians in the ranks know their subject but feel they lack management skills, and they feel they particularly lack human resources skills such as conflict resolution skills.

The Pagell and Lusk (2000) article did not attempt to determine if there will be enough business librarians to fill the upcoming management positions. However, another article by Lisa O'Connor and Stacey Marien (2002) did address this question. Their research, based on a survey to libraries that had advertised for a business librarian between March 1, 2000 and March 31, 2001, emphasized that at that time there was a lack of available business librarians. The major conclusion was that 70% of the employers were not satisfied with the applicant pool, with the quantity of candidates being the major problem. "Low supply of business information professionals" and "too much competition" for librarians were the major reasons listed by libraries that experienced difficulties in hiring. A huge 40% of the searches were reopened at least once. O'Connor and Marien concluded that "a good business librarian is hard to find" and "recruiting internally and providing extensive professional development and training may also be a cost-effective alternative" to searching for an outside business librarian. Their recommendations have the sound of succession planning. Like major corporations, perhaps libraries need to grow their own.

All the statistics indicate that there will be a major shortage of librarians, starting in 2010 and peaking at 2015, caused by retirements and shortages of young people choosing librarianship as a career. This shortage will affect business libraries. Succession planning seems like a logical approach. So why are U.S. libraries not readily using it? One reason is that in most libraries "the bench is too narrow." In other words, libraries do not have enough staff members to mentor and train new leaders. Major corporations have thousands of employees and hundreds of top-level managers. Identifying a handful of them that have the potential and interest to lead is possible. In a library with a few dozen librarians, this may not work. Another reason is that higher education institutions are actively working on increasing diversity; every opening is an opportunity. And the institutions have stated goals to increase the diversity of the faculty and staff;

internal promotions do not meet this goal. The whole diversity problem is a topic for another article, but American Library Association's Office for Research and Statistics is following these statistics closely. They concluded that the "persistent lag in diversity in our LIS schools, the number of librarians and library assistants leaving the profession prematurely, the aging of racial and ethnic minority library workers, and the continued under representation of workers with disabilities, suggest a proportionally less diverse library workforce on the horizon" (*Diversity Counts*, 2006). Furthermore, they suggested strategically planning around human resource development and succession planning (for the full *Diversity Counts* report, see www.ala.org/diversitycounts). A third reason is the "grass is greener" perception. Libraries always want to hire the best candidate, and somehow librarians are not inclined to believe the best is on the staff right now. The last reason is the "new broom theory"; libraries have a strong desire for a change in management. Unlike the business world that is dependent on stockholders' desire for consistency, libraries use upper-level staff openings as an opportunity to bring in new ideas and people that can implement creative strategic changes. Verbalizing and then discussing these reasons can help a library assess whether succession planning or some strategies of succession planning might be useful. Even if a fully developed succession planning program is not the choice, there is much to be learned and borrowed from succession planning.

HOW TO START A SUCCESSION PLANNING PROGRAM

The business literature on the topic is clear on two essentials: succession planning only works if the top-level administrators are 100% behind it; and the program needs to be an open process. It cannot be done by the human resource department alone or by middle managers mentoring and grooming staff members reporting to them. The administration has to be deeply involved; likewise staff members need to be involved, with feedback going to the employees that have been identified as possessing the potential for leadership.

The basic steps of succession planning are:

1. analyze the demographics of your key positions
2. identify potential employees for lead positions
3. assess candidates strengths and weaknesses
4. develop a training program to build competencies.

Analyze Your Demographics

In a large academic or public library this would mean figuring out the age of your current directors, assistant or associate directors, department heads, and any other key positions, such as the main computer technician or business manager. In a smaller library system or a business library within a larger library system this might be a short list including only the managing librarian and possibly the assistant or associate managers. This step is easy to do; the main obstacle, because birth dates may not be readily available, is ascertaining ages. However a fairly close estimate can be obtained by assuming each librarian was age 22 years when the undergraduate degree was earned. This analysis does give some insights. Using the *Purdue Faculty Directory* I did this exercise for Purdue libraries just to see what our demographics are. The average age of librarians in management positions has dropped over the past five years as younger people have been hired. One surprise was the number of internal promotions and in-house hires; over one half of the changes were internal promotions. We are not officially using succession planning, but these internal promotions indicate that we are preparing our midcareer librarians for upper-level positions.

Identify Potential Employees

This step is much more involved. Following the philosophy that top-level administrators need to be involved in the process does not mean that other people in the library system are not included. Even in business setting, identifying potential employees involves many people; in some instances it is done by committee. For each position the qualifications and competencies need to be agreed upon. These might include such additional skills as ability to speak influentially to a large group, or ability to handle multiple projects at the same time, or ability to influence staff. These skills and competencies need to grow from the libraries' strategic plan and emphasize future needs. One way of developing this list of skills is to interview the staff currently in these positions. This is also a good opportunity to ask for their nominations for a successor, recommendations for a training program, and their willingness to mentor candidates for succession. This step is similar to writing job descriptions. Next potential employees are nominated and staff are asked to self identify listing their personal goals. The openness of the process is critical. Doing this step behind closed doors is generally not successful as it leads to staff distrust and accusations of unfair opportunities.

Assess Candidates' Strengths and Weaknesses

Once a list of potential candidates is developed, interview each of these employees to identify his or her interest, experience, and potential skills in librarianship and management. For example, does the candidate have extensive reference skills but lacks supervisory skills? Pay particular attention to management and leadership skills and gaps, and then prioritize the gaps. This needs to be a frank discussion, and help from mentors and supervisors will be critical for the success. At this point it is important to have an agreement with the incumbents about their skill gaps and willingness to address these gaps and build the competencies needed. Is he or she willing to be mentored and willing to outline a self-development program? Is the candidate willing to travel to attend association preconferences and workshops, to take courses at the university that provide needed skills such as financial management or personnel management skills? Likewise the library administration needs to make a commitment to the incumbents. This would include funds for training and travel, release time from current responsibilities, and such things as supporting mentors.

One of the major challenges of succession planning in libraries is "bench strength." In a small library there might not be anyone in the ranks who has the potential or interest in managing or leading the library. If this is the conclusion then the library needs to look closely at new hires in the future and to search for beginning librarians with career objectives of leadership and management.

Develop a Training Program to Build Competencies

There are many choices for meeting skill gaps. Many libraries already have extensive training programs in place, and libraries connected with universities have university employee training programs as well as formal courses available. The major library associations offer many opportunities to learn leadership and management skills. In addition there are leadership institutes available at the University of California–Los Angeles, Harvard and Emory. The Association of Research Libraries also has programs on leadership. Besides these formal training programs, other options are job rotation, job shadowing, or interim positions. Managing a library while the head is on an extended vacation or sabbatical can help fill the management experience gap. Budget planning; staff selection, training, and evaluation; crisis management; and donor relations are all areas that midcareer librarians need training to be ready to step up to director-level positions.

For detailed information on developing a succession plan, I recommend three books. The major one is William J. Rothwell's (2005) *Effective Succession Planning*. A second useful title is *Growing Your Company's Leaders* (Fulmer & Conger, 2004). And as mentioned in the introduction to this article, the third recent book is the Whitmell's (2005) *Staff Planning in a Time of Demographic Change*. It is the only book available specifically on succession planning in libraries. It is a collection papers from a conferences held in Ontario, Canada, and covers mentoring, training, and demographic statistics and information from the business literature. Like many of the articles on succession planning, this book focuses on Canadian, Australian, and U.K. libraries. Whitmell is executive director of the Legislative Library for the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

CONCLUSION

Although the literature indicates that few U.S. libraries are utilizing succession planning techniques, statistics on the demographics of librarians, and business librarians in particular, indicate that there is and will continue to be shortage of qualified middle-level librarians available for the projected management positions. This shortage will peak between 2010 and 2015. The business world has successfully used succession planning to identify, train, and prepare employees to be ready to step up the executive positions. This idea of "grow your own" leaders could help to accomplish the following goals for libraries: increasing career advancement opportunities for interested staff that will lead to the retention of young librarians looking for a more challenges and career development, encouragement of targeted diversity candidates who have leadership potential, as well as being ensured of leadership at a critical moment when the boomers retire.

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