

*Managing by the Book . . .*  
**Succession-Planning Strategies for Law Libraries:  
Lessons from the Minor Leagues\*\***

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*While law library managers seldom approach talent identification and nurturing with the single-minded focus of a minor league baseball team executive, the need to understand the process of creating and monitoring a succession-planning strategy plays a similarly critical role in libraries today. The development of “bench strength” in our libraries will ensure the availability of qualified individuals to meet projected vacancies as baby boomers move on to new challenges.*

¶1 On January 1, 2006, the oldest members of the baby boom generation celebrated their sixtieth birthdays. The arrival of this much anticipated milestone focuses attention on how all segments of society, from the health care industry to housing and entertainment providers, have prepared for the changes that will be required to provide service for this aging population.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the industries that provide goods and services to this demographic, the entities whose work force includes a preponderance of the baby boomers in their leadership ranks have focused attention on planning for leadership change.<sup>2</sup>

¶2 During the past decade, business, government, and educational institutions developed a set of strategies under the umbrella term of *succession planning* to prepare for the impact the retiring baby boom generation will have on their ability to meet mission objectives and provide uninterrupted services.<sup>3</sup> Law library managers faced with such leadership drain challenges must not hesitate to adopt succession plans for their libraries.

¶3 The information collected in 2004 by the American Association of Law Libraries’ (AALL) Gen X Gen Y Task Force<sup>4</sup> clearly forecasts the need for

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\* *Editor’s Note:* “Managing by the Book” is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

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1. See Cynthia Hubert, *Aging and the AARP: They’re Inevitable*, WINSTON-SALEM J., Jan. 17, 2006, at D6.
2. See, e.g., U.S. Office of Personnel Mgmt., *Succession Planning*, [http://www.opm.gov/hr/employ/products/succession/succ\\_plan\\_text.htm](http://www.opm.gov/hr/employ/products/succession/succ_plan_text.htm) (last visited Jan. 26, 2006).
3. See Jana Ritter, *Succession Planning: A Tool for Success*, GALT GLOBAL REV., Apr. 15, 2003, <http://www.galtglobalreview.com/business/succession.html>.
4. Beth DiFelice et al., *Generations in Law Librarianship: Results of AALL Survey* (Oct. 7, 2004), available at [http://www.aallnet.org/committee/gen\\_x\\_y\\_Gen\\_Law\\_Lib\\_Survey\\_Res.pdf](http://www.aallnet.org/committee/gen_x_y_Gen_Law_Lib_Survey_Res.pdf). The (CONT.)

law libraries to prepare for an unprecedented exodus of seasoned employees. Nonetheless, for busy librarians already monitoring a variety of comprehensive programs—from strategic plans to technology plans, public relations plans, and disaster plans—the thought of engaging in yet another variety of strategic planning exercise may be almost too much to bear.

¶4 What can be done to demystify the elements of the succession-planning process? If succession planning becomes a new management imperative, where can law librarians turn for guidance? What can law librarians learn about succession planning from the Warthogs and the Lugnuts?<sup>5</sup>

¶5 The world of minor league baseball may seem at first glance to have little to say to library managers about succession planning. The emphasis team management places on player development, however, provides a common-sense road map for librarians preparing to create a succession plan. The reality of how the baseball world assesses, develops, mentors, coaches, promotes, and rewards its work force offers an example of how libraries with a succession plan in place could manage their work force.

¶6 Because the working life span of a major league baseball player is short, talent identification and nurturing play key roles in enterprise success from the onset of the employment relationship. At each step of a player's career, the team management measures progress and provides development support. In an industry with high turnover, this team goal for player development ensures that a pool of highly qualified individuals will be available to fill vacancies as they occur.

¶7 While law library managers seldom approach talent identification and nurturing with the single-minded focus of the minor league executive, the need for a process of creating and monitoring a succession-planning strategy plays a similarly critical role in libraries today. The development of “bench strength” for libraries mirrors steps that will be familiar to any library manager who has participated in a strategic planning exercise.<sup>6</sup> Resources from the efforts undertaken by other segments of the employment market provide helpful models.

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Gen. X Gen Y Task Force surveyed AALL members to determine generational characteristics that might guide the Association in designing attractive programs and services for this segment of the law library work force. Although the focus of the survey centered on determining how Gen X and Gen Y law librarians approached their work life, 66% of the respondents self-identified as baby boomers. *Id.* (All Respondents Multiple-Choice Responses, Question 10). The data presented included one question directed at career longevity: “How long do you see yourself working in the law library profession?” In response to this question, 11.2% of the baby boomers indicated they would remain in their current position for a few years, but then may try something else; 41.8% of the baby boomers indicated they planned to leave the law library profession in the foreseeable future. *Id.* (Baby Boomers Multiple Choice Responses, Question 4).

5. The Winston-Salem (N.C.) Warthogs ([www.warthogs.com](http://www.warthogs.com)) of the Carolina League are an affiliate of the Chicago White Sox organization; the Lansing (Mich.) Lugnuts ([www.lansinglugnuts.com](http://www.lansinglugnuts.com)) of the Midwest League are a part of the Toronto Blue Jays organization. Both are Class A minor league teams.
6. See Paula Singer, Jeanne Goodrich & Linda Goldberg, *Your Library's Future: When Leaders Leave, Succession Planning Can Smooth the Transitions*, *LIBR. J.*, Oct. 15, 2004, at 38, 39–40 (providing a succession-planning tool kit).

¶8 For a comprehensive discussion of the elements of succession planning, the world of business literature provides a variety of examples. William J. Rothwell offers a detailed treatment in *Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within*,<sup>7</sup> complete with visual aids, chapter summaries, more than twenty pages of footnotes, a comprehensive index, numerous exhibits and case studies, and a CD that contains worksheets and other resources for creating a succession plan. Another source, *Systematic Succession Planning: Building Leadership from Within* by Rebecca Luhn Wolfe,<sup>8</sup> offers a workbook format, including self-guiding quizzes and worksheets, that is suited for a team charged with developing and implementing the process at the ground level. Ram Charan focuses on the methodology for filling the organization's top position in "Ending the CEO Succession Crisis,"<sup>9</sup> a cover article for the *Harvard Business Review*.

¶9 In *Effective Succession Planning*, Rothwell draws on his experience as a college professor and owner of a consulting firm specializing in succession planning. He organizes the information presented into four broad categories: background information, laying the foundation, assessing the present and future, and operating and evaluating a succession management program.<sup>10</sup> The underlying premise of the book is that "[s]trategic success is, in large measure, a function of having the right leadership. . . . Some effort must be made to ensure that the organization is *systematically* identifying and preparing high-potential candidates for key positions."<sup>11</sup>

¶10 Making the case for developing a program, Rothwell details a series of reasons that justify the effort and expense involved. Key among these is the importance of not conducting succession planning in a vacuum, but rather linking it to all of the other existing planning strategies of the organization.<sup>12</sup> He also points out the usefulness of identifying replacement needs as a way to shape the organization's training and development program. Additionally, succession planning increases the talent pool of employees and provides more opportunities for highly skilled workers. By helping individuals realize their own career plans, a fully implemented succession plan will improve workplace morale. It also will ensure the ability of the organization to cope with the effects of both involuntary separations, such as reductions in the work force, and voluntary separations, such as retirements.<sup>13</sup>

¶11 While the focus of Rothwell's strategies to promote leadership continuity center on nurturing talent within the organization itself, he recognizes that the

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7. WILLIAM J. ROTHWELL, *EFFECTIVE SUCCESSION PLANNING: ENSURING LEADERSHIP CONTINUITY AND BUILDING TALENT FROM WITHIN* (3d ed. 2005).

8. REBECCA LUHN WOLFE, *SYSTEMATIC SUCCESSION PLANNING: BUILDING LEADERSHIP FROM WITHIN* (1996).

9. Ram Charan, *Ending the CEO Succession Crisis*, *HARV. BUS. REV.*, Feb. 2005, at 72.

10. ROTHWELL, *supra* note 7, at xxv.

11. *Id.* at 18.

12. *Id.* at 20.

13. *Id.* at 23.

work force may be too small, the talent pool too limited, or the technical expertise required unavailable internally. In such situations, alternative ways to meet work force needs include short-term solutions such as the use of temporary employees, part-timers, consultants, job-share arrangements, or retirees.<sup>14</sup> More permanent solutions could require process redesign or the use of external hires. Regardless of the strategy used to fill a vacancy, the determining factors must be in line with the organization's strategic vision and future direction.

¶12 This harmony rests on the presence of a considered succession-planning strategy. An important characteristic of a successful succession-planning program is the strong support and involvement of top management. Without the CEO's personal commitment, *Effective Succession Planning* warns, the program will be unlikely to receive such necessary support as accountability goals, financing, and time needed to flourish.<sup>15</sup> The plan must cover all levels within the organization, not just the top position. Organizational leaders should make an effort to determine the retirement plans of key employees to assist with the development of potential successors. Mentoring and coaching practices should be in place to support long-term development goals.<sup>16</sup>

¶13 Recognizing that a one-size plan won't fit all organizations, *Effective Succession Planning* presents a five-stage approach for getting the process started. The first-generation plan details how to replace the CEO only. The next generations of the planning process provide strategies to replace those at the middle management levels. The final generations move beyond replacement plans to focus on the development of internal talent pools and the development of talented individuals outside the organization who may be possible employees in the future.<sup>17</sup>

¶14 As to the common elements of a succession plan, *Effective Succession Planning* identifies seven elements of program design and outlines all of the individual tasks within each element. The seven steps follow the classic strategic planning model: make the commitment, assess present work requirements, appraise individual performance, assess future work requirements, assess future individual potential, close the developmental gap, and evaluate the succession planning program.<sup>18</sup>

¶15 While a reader of *Effective Succession Planning* may feel the need for an occasional pause to synthesize and reflect on the level of detail provided, this tactic won't be needed to digest the information presented by Wolfe's *Systematic Succession Planning*, whose cover promises "a crisp fifty-minute book." Wolfe maintains that succession planning isn't a unique process. Rather, she views succession planning as a strategic plan with a targeted goal that should be integrated as a part of overall planning.<sup>19</sup>

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14. *Id.* at 39.

15. *Id.* at 56.

16. *Id.* at 58.

17. *Id.* at 68.

18. *Id.* at 79.

19. WOLFE, *supra* note 8, at 14.

¶16 Wolfe's resource has been designed specifically to be used by a team charged with drafting a succession plan. Page layout provides fill-in-the-blank opportunities and checklists with spaces for responses. While echoing Rothwell's view of the critical role of CEO support for the planning effort, Wolfe also acknowledges the difficulties inherent with change and suggests methods to secure commitment for the plan from all levels of the organization.<sup>20</sup> Effective communication and an open process pave the way for implementation.<sup>21</sup>

¶17 Practical tools included in *Systematic Succession Planning* provide methods to complete the steps of the plan development: identify key positions within the organization, evaluate individual and team performance, predict future needs for the organization, and analyze the effectiveness of the completed plan.

¶18 Although a fully developed succession plan will provide strategies to fill vacancies wherever they occur within the organization, Charan points to the unique elements of the process of filling the top position in "Ending the CEO Succession Crisis."<sup>22</sup> Filling a vacancy at the top presents special challenges because so much rides on getting the best fit for securing optimal organizational effectiveness. While responsibility for filling vacancies below the CEO level fall on the staff of an organization, decisions about who will succeed in the top leadership position quite often will be made by an individual or group outside the daily operations of the library.

¶19 Specifically, Charan details the problems inherent when a board or other overseeing body must select a successor for an outgoing CEO.<sup>23</sup> Boards spend little time interacting with the organization's employees other than the CEO. Their fiduciary and governance duties leave little time for becoming familiar with the internal dynamics of the entity, with the skill set needed by the individual at the top of the organization, or with the potential pool of available inside or outside talent. The members of the group will have little or no experience working together as a team to make a hiring decision. The time that boards or other overseeing bodies will have to devote to the process may be inadequate, leading to decisions based on charisma rather than competency. Finally, Charan details the relationship between the outgoing leader and those charged with selecting the successor:

[T]he role of the outgoing CEO is chiefly consultative. He or she must be active in spotting and grooming talent, help define the job's requirements, provide accurate information about both the internal and external candidates, and facilitate discussions between candidates and directors. But when the choice of successor is imminent, make no mistake: That decision belongs to the Board.<sup>24</sup>

¶20 Against this framework for the development of a process for succession planning, where can a law library manager turn to get started? How can the process

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20. *Id.* at 35.

21. *Id.* at 51.

22. Charan, *supra* note 9, at 72.

23. *Id.* at 74.

24. *Id.* at 77.

be tailored to fit an individual library's needs? What specifically can be done in an environment with only one librarian?

¶21 Here's where the framework of the minor league analogy comes into play. Remember that developing bench strength will be the whole focus of the exercise. Elements for the plan will likely already be in place. Review existing job descriptions, performance review plans, and opportunities for providing staff development as a part of a new integrated succession-planning framework rather than as separate documents or functions. Conduct an internal scan for other existing practices and procedures that match the elements of a succession plan such as hiring procedures and employee exit practices. Talk with peers in a benchmarking exercise to identify best practices that are transferable to your environment. Don't wait until a vacancy occurs to plan. Provide ongoing education for staff and those outside the library who will make hiring decisions about the competencies needed to enable the library to meet current and future mission goals.

¶22 If the library director has been in place for a long time, regardless of the size of the library, a unique set of challenges may exist for both the incumbent and those charged with finding a successor. No leader wants to stay beyond his or her corporate shelf life. Separating self identity from work identity may make laying the groundwork for an orderly transition difficult. Leaders with proven track records often receive less oversight from those who will be selecting their successor, leading to a steep learning curve for the selection team. Filling "big shoes" at any level of an organization brings its own set of challenges. But remember, vacancies do provide an opportunity to reassess positions and establish appropriate responsibilities and compensation levels.

¶23 In a final nod to the minor league analogy, remember the rallying cry of every journeyman player and engaged fan—wait 'til next year! Many opportunities will exist to create and fine-tune a succession plan. Each team—and each library—has a place for role players who add unique value. The challenge and the fun is to engage in a process that smooths the path to a winning season.