

## Selection criteria for the next generation of library leaders in Vietnam

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### Abstract

This paper aims at identifying the compulsory criteria to select potential candidates for library successors in Vietnam. The research was underpinned by transformational leadership theory. Data was mainly from the twenty-three in-depth interviews which was informed by the emerging themes from the online survey in thirteen public and four academic libraries in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. In the context of a country with only one leading Party such as Vietnam, four compulsory criteria include professional knowledge, leadership skills, moral practice and political ideology. Other required criteria are enthusiasm, years of experience, work commitment, age, and external relationships. Political ideology and moral practices were found to be the most important finding and contribute to an understanding of factors in succession planning which has not been discussed in the literature so far. This research provides potential successors with an awareness of desirable professional criteria to be the library leaders. This study also specifies evidence that candidates cannot automatically proceed to managerial positions without continuing efforts and self-improvement. Furthermore, the finding of the research contributes an assistance for library leaders in selecting qualified staff for future managerial positions. These criteria can be used as a reference point for other similar contexts like Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Human resource management, Library management, Succession planning, Selection criteria, Vietnam

### Introduction

Library leaders play an important role in every organisational success. As leadership is not innate, staff can be trained to be productive leaders (Fallon, Maxwell, McCaffrey, & McMahan, 2011). Identifying and preparing the future leaders are the nature of succession planning and is therefore essential to maintain its functions. Since succession planning is an important strategic approach, incumbent leaders may include it in their management roles (Muna, 2006). Library succession planning leads its leaders to an understanding of their employees' strengths and weaknesses so that these leaders can develop appropriate staff training, coaching and mentoring. Furthermore, library succession planning contributes to strategic retention of highly qualified staff (Warren, 2011). Being crucial for every library, succession planning should cover all levels of the organization, not just the top position (Holcomb, 2006). In order to identify and train potential leaders for libraries, specific selection criteria should be needed.

### Literature Review

In a library and information environment, no existing literature on succession planning with Vietnamese background could be traced and there is limited literature on this topic in Western countries. Most research deals with the importance of succession planning and its challenges (Singer & Griffith, 2010). Some research discusses the general aspects of succession planning such as how libraries respond to preparation for future leadership (Galbraith, Smith, & Walker, 2012), how to develop and evaluate a succession planning program (Brunero, Kerr, & Jastrzab, 2009), the role of flexible job descriptions in

succession planning (Pennell, 2010). Although there is no paper discussing about criteria to select potential candidates, many researches focus on attributes of library leaders. For example, Le (2015) indicate that the top five essential academic library leadership attributes in the digital age are: vision, integrity, management skills, collaboration skills, and communication skills. In a series of research studies into attributes of current university and public library directors and looking towards the next ten years, Hernon, Powell and Young (2003) determine the required attributes and categorise them into twelve groups. Without particular order, these groups are personal qualities, job skills, leadership, people skills, creativity, education/training, knowledge bases, administration skills, communication skills, library knowledge, knowledge of the higher education environment, and knowledge of information technology. Potential candidates for library leaders may not have all groups of attributes as determined. They have to possess certain attributes at the time of enlisting and other attributes can be trained through preparation period. However, the required core attributes have not been known and this research gap will be filled in.

Most importantly, Singer and Griffith (2010) discuss succession planning process and suggest a plan for upcoming vacancy library director's position in their book. They also entail an outline for recruitment of library leaders, an example of a meeting schedule for a search committee, and risk assessment for emergency situations. However, their book does not mention about the specific criteria to choose the candidates for library succession planning. Similar to Singer and Griffith, Stuart and Sullivan (2010) also present the definition of succession planning, strategies, approaches, leaders' role, accessing competencies and key criteria for an

effective program of succession planning in their book. Stueart and Sullivan (2010) have neither specified any criterion to select potential candidates for library succession planning. More recently, Hines and Simons (2015) also focus on succession planning in academic libraries in their book. However, they only provides a wide review of literature on succession planning, no sound explanation about criteria to choose the future leaders for the library thus far, suggesting the need for further research.

### Methodology

This research used a multi-method case study approach including an online survey with 172 responses and twenty-three in-depth interviews. The research was underpinned by transformational leadership theory. Data of this paper was mainly from the twenty-three in-depth interviews which were informed by the emerging themes from the online survey in thirteen public and four academic libraries in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Twenty-three department managers and members of board of directors from these libraries were invited for individual interviews. The selection criteria for the samples related to leadership positions and seniority. The interviewees were selected with the provision that they had experienced at least one year in a managerial position. Narrative data from interviews and the open-ended items in the online survey were imported into NVivo software package for coding and thematic analysis.

### Findings and Discussion

Professional knowledge, leadership skills, moral practice, and political ideology were found as the four compulsory criteria for selecting potential candidates, in both library sectors. In addition to these required criteria, other features such as enthusiasm, years of experience, work commitment, age, and external relationship were also identified.

**Professional knowledge:** Professional knowledge is defined as the required knowledge to respond effectively to the demand of the job. In this study, professional knowledge specifically involves required knowledge of library and information science. Twenty-two of the twenty-three participants indicated that professional knowledge was the most important criterion in selecting potential successors. Professional knowledge was deemed essential with several reasons. First, professional knowledge played an important role in human resource management and task performance. Professional knowledge could also help potential successors solve difficulties and better perform daily library services for the users. The finding of professional knowledge as a compulsory criterion for selecting potential successors is supported in previous studies. As confirmed by Herson, Powell and Young (2003) when they conducted a series of research studies into attributes of current university and public library

directors and looking towards the next ten years, professional knowledge was required. About developing library directors, Stueart and Sullivan (2010) further indicate that professional knowledge is one of the necessary leadership attributes and it can be acquired through a series of on-the-job and off-the-job training programs.

**Leadership skills:** According to Sutton and Booth (2012) leadership skills include interpersonal skills and rapport, skills in conflict resolution, assertiveness skills, time management. In this study, leadership skills are criteria to recruit public and academic library successors. Twenty-three participants recognised that leadership skills contribute to positive library development. The findings in this study related to leadership skills as a selection criterion are supported in the literature. In a research into leadership skills for the next generation of academic library leaders, Martin (2009) indicates that library leaders are expected to make and manage changes, advocate and create their libraries with leadership skills. Moreover, Coatney (2010) asserts leadership skills are needed because they help leaders to build up self-confidence, forward vision, prefer challenges, inspire others, to name a few. In particular, Kumaran (2012b) determines that using leadership skills at the right time in the right place and at the right level will help library leaders in their path to success. Leadership skills are also addressed by other authors who discuss personal attributes and leadership qualities of library leaders. In research into developing core leadership competencies for the library profession, Ammons-Stephens, Cole, Jenkins-Gibbs, Riehle, and Jr. (2009) argue that without leadership skills, library leaders are unable to initiate, facilitate, and deliver successful services. Furthermore, in research involving ten institutions, Herson (2011) concludes that leadership is key component in assisting a new director in directing things to strive to secure vision.

**Moral practice:** Moral practice is understood in Vietnamese settings as right and acceptable behaviours such as politeness, gratefulness, honesty, modesty, virtue, and so on. Fourteen of the twenty-three participants in this study viewed morality as a compulsory criterion in selecting successors. Research participants recognised the role of this criterion when they indicated that library leaders are role models for their staff. In the literature, morality is prominently discussed in relation to leadership matters. Sendjaya (2005) indicates that morality is a crucial component of leadership because lack of a sense of morality may have a disastrous outcome such as breaking leader-follower relationship. Barsh and Lisewski (1997) also state that morality helps library leaders to shape the ethical climate in an organisation and to avoid conflict of interest in staff management. Furthermore, moral aspects of leadership are considered as the foundation for organisational and individual growth as well as incremental changes from within the employees

(Kalwies, 1988). Besides these authors, there is no specific paper indicating that moral practice is a required criterion to select potential candidates for succession planning. Therefore, this criterion can be seen as a significant finding.

**Political ideology:** Fourteen of the twenty-three participants indicated that political ideology was one of the prerequisites in succession planning as it reflects the views of the Communist Party which control social and economic practices. Library potential leaders need to be oriented by political ideology towards the Communist Party future policies and directives. The Communist Party Secretary influences Communist Party members and potential candidates in terms of political ideology. The followers and potential candidates must understand the direction of the parent organisation and the leading Party as well as how the library will support this direction in the future. Political ideology is considered as a significant finding of the research because it has not been discussed in literature so far.

**Enthusiasm:** In addition to the above compulsory criteria, fourteen of the twenty-three interview participants indicated that demonstration of enthusiasm for the position is also an important consideration in selecting potential candidates. Enthusiasm is an element which influences success at work. As indicated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American philosopher, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm" (Credo, 2004). Enthusiasm can be a decisive factor in an individual's success. In library leadership, the leaders' enthusiasm tends to inspire the followers' enthusiasm in fulfilling their tasks within the library (Adair, 2009). In research into developing leadership competencies for librarians, Jordan (2012) concludes that enthusiasm is one of the nineteen important attributes required for the future positions. Enthusiasm is an important criterion because it can be infectious by nature (Williamson, 2013). Schmidt (2007) states that in order to become an effective library leader, unbridled enthusiasm is one of the required characteristics. In a study of the job advertisements for public library director position, Henricks and Henricks-Lepp (2014) report that desired characteristics of a new library director were that they should be dynamic, energetic and enthusiastic so that they can respond to challenges in the library.

**Experience:** Fifteen of the twenty-three interviewees reported that length of experience is another criterion that potential successors must possess. In the Vietnamese context, experience is measured by length of working time is compulsory criterion to select successors. This is the same as in Western countries. With regard to recruiting and selecting library directors, the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (2012) indicates that the combination of leadership skills and experience is the requirement of director positions in an academic health sciences library. In this situation, potential candidates with management and

leadership skills cannot succeed without length of working experience. In the meanwhile, Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (2013) indicates that three years of professional library experience after getting Master of Library Science (MLS) or six years of experience prior to MLS is one of the requirements for a library director position. In this situation, experience is a compulsory criterion beside professional qualifications.

**Work commitment:** Eleven of the twenty-three in-depth interviewees said that commitment to work is a necessary criterion of successors. The finding of work commitment as a criterion for selecting potential candidates is supported in prior studies. As indicated by Markgren, Dickinson, Leonard, and Vassiliadis (2007), it is likely that librarians purposefully switch jobs or roles at least once within his/her first five years as a professional and half of 464 surveyed librarians were currently thinking of leaving the profession. Iyer (2012) reports that there are two main reasons why employees leave their jobs. One is low income and the other is lack of job promotion. In particular, librarian salaries for job postings in the United States are sixteen per cent in average lower than salaries for all job postings of the country (Indeed, 2015). If the salary staff earn cannot support them, the less possibility there is that commitment to their work in the long run will occur.

**Age:** Twelve of the twenty-three participants mentioned age as a required criterion for selecting successors. Vietnamese government guidelines require that potential candidates must fit proportionally into three age groups: under forty (20-25%), from forty to fifty (50-60%) and over fifty (20-25%). The aim of this government policy is to retain knowledge and pass it on. The percentage of forty to fifty in the age group is higher so that older employees with more leadership experience can coach and mentor younger ones. However, participants in this research preferred younger candidates, possibly because they may have new ideas and be more innovative. Age as a criterion is much discussed in the literature with differing viewpoints. For instance, Kumaran (2012a) states, "Age does not factor in the US, the UK, Germany, France, and Poland when leadership is considered, but it is very important in Japan, Vietnam, and China. In Asia, it is generally believed that the older one is the wiser" (p. 46). Kumaran's viewpoint about age in Asian leadership is somewhat different with the current finding which indicates the young candidates are more preferable. Different from Kumaran point of view, Kind (2012) discusses that age should never be a barrier when it comes to following dreams. She also explains that getting to a position of seniority in any organisation should not be based on age; it should be based on ability. Kind's viewpoint is completely different to the current finding because age criterion is a 'must' in Vietnamese context. Vietnamese government rules that successors must be able to meet two leadership terms

before retirement. In other words, female successors must be younger than forty-five and fifty for males. This is because retirement age in Vietnam is fifty-five for females and sixty for males. This rule is applied to any new candidate for the required positions. Incumbent leaders must be able to complete full or two-thirds of the leadership term (Central Personnel Committee, 2012). This implies that young candidates are preferable to appoint to managerial positions.

**External relationships:** Eleven of the twenty-three participants indicated external relationships – relationships outside the library such as social relations (with friends), community relations (with governors) and professional networking (with other librarians) are important for a potential leader to have external relationships convey the same meaning as political savvy and skills which are prominently discussed in literature. In the research into leaders' attributes, Goulding, Walton, and Stephens (2012) argue that political acumen and skills are needed by today's library leaders. In their study, political skills are understood as a range of attributes which include communication, advocacy, influencing, political sensitivity and knowledge of the wider organisation. These skills can help library leaders to build alliance relationships across the organisation, local authority and partners so as to secure funding or defend their current positions.

The finding with regard to external relationships is supported in literature, suggesting that these benefit leadership. For instance, Davis and Macauley (2011) suggest that leadership literacies commonly understood to connect shared understandings and initiate changes. Schreiber and Shannon (2001) state that library leaders should have major external relationships to build community relations and coalitions. This characteristic is important because it benefits libraries in receiving support from the library budget decision makers. McCarten (2011) and Farrell (2013) both indicate that relationship building also helps potential leaders embrace challenges and develop opportunities for their libraries. Likewise, such ties are in line with Calcagno (2013) who suggests various ways to build relationships.

### Conclusion

Several criteria are required to select potential candidates for succession planning in Vietnamese libraries. Professional knowledge, leadership skills, enthusiasm, years of experience, work commitment, age, and external relationships are supportive of literature. Furthermore, in Vietnamese settings, all of these criteria are significant because Department of Library in Vietnam does not have any documents of specified selection criteria for library leaders and managers (Nguyen, 2012). Moral practice and political ideology are two new criteria adding to succession planning knowledge. These criteria are required in

Vietnamese libraries because they originate from Vietnamese culture and politics. Library leaders must be moral and self-controlled so as to conform to community standards. This concept is from Vietnamese culture which is shaped and influenced by Confucian thought. Confucian thought influences the roles of personal morality, correctness of social relationships, and interactions. Library leaders must be moral and become role models for their employees. Political ideology responds to the ideal of the Communist Party, the only political in Vietnam. This criterion may not be needed in other countries where there is more than one political party and more freedom of political choice. The research allows for selection of the right person for future managerial positions, increase leadership transparency, and avoid bias in conducting succession planning.

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