



Developing Succession Planning Capacity within Caltrans

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Project Objective

The purpose of this project is to conduct research on previous and current succession planning strategies undertaken by state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) and other organizations to be used by California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) in developing and updating its own strategies for application in planning and modal programs. Planning and modal programs include focuses on rail, mass transportation and related research. With the transportation workforce steadily aging, state DOT leaders will need to introduce workforce strategies that will prepare candidates to fill new vacancies. Prior work by Caltrans in this area (2015) indicated that about 10,300 of the DOT's full-time employees (which constituted approximately 50% of the full-time workforce) were eligible for retirement.¹ These impending vacancies will present a large gap in transportation knowledge as well as the skills that are required to maintain consistent research, management, and performance standards within the agency.

Problem Statement

Potentially losing half of the workforce would be more than losing loyal and valued employees; it would represent a loss of the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that have accumulated over the 15 plus years each employee has experienced as a part of a state transportation agency. To maintain the integrity and dissemination of these vital perspectives within state DOTs, succession planning and knowledge management strategy implementation has become paramount. The implementation of these strategies will require a new interdisciplinary system for coaching, mentoring, and long-term succession planning within state DOTs. The aging workforce seen in the transportation industry makes the implementation of succession plans of vital importance for organizations such as Caltrans, and this is compounded by difficulties in recruiting and retaining new employees for key positions.

Research Methodology

The project began with an analysis of the existing succession plans implemented by state DOTs and other related organizations. This task focused on how state DOTs and other related organizations articulate their mission, the resources available to achieve that mission and the management of those resources when it comes to workforce and succession planning. In support of this project, the Center for International Trade & Transportation (CITT) research team reviewed the 2012 Knowledge Transfer Guidebook and assessed its use via targeted interviews with select Caltrans employees. The CITT research team also discussed the success of existing succession planning efforts at Caltrans and the difficulties encountered by members of various teams and offices. This information was summarized and discussed in meetings with the Caltrans panel assigned to the project. CITT then hosted a peer exchange with representatives from DOTs in Michigan, Montana, Arizona, and Colorado.

¹ Malcolm Dougherty to Brian Kelly, "Department of Transportation 2015 SLAA REPORT," 2015, https://www.library.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/slaa/SLAA_dot_2015.pdf.

Results

In its engagement with Caltrans, the CITT research team expanded its definition of succession planning to include more holistic approaches: Effective succession planning and knowledge management concerns a Caltrans employee at every phase in their career – from entry-level to C-Suite executive – to not only ensure that more senior leadership relays important institutional knowledge but that the next generation of leadership is developed from day one. As a state DOT peer exchange participant described it, the knowledge that employees possess and develop over the length of a career is as important to a DOT as the physical infrastructure in its inventory. These observations apply universally, beyond the initial focus on planning and modal programs – and apply not just to Caltrans but to all state DOTs across the country. This research concludes with the recommendation of three pilot programs that would promote a more holistic, institutional approach to succession planning.

In-depth interviews with Caltrans and external subject matter experts revealed a general consensus that succession planning programs are critical for state DOT success and the ability of a state DOT to recruit, retain, upskill, and train its workforce, though the implementation of such programs remains a challenge. Accordingly, CITT researchers recommended the development of measurement and tracking methodologies to make it possible to longitudinally track succession planning outcomes over a five- and ten-year period. Using longitudinal analysis, Caltrans could develop a return-on-investment (ROI) model to help leadership gauge the efficacy of investments in succession planning.