



Strengthening Iowa Agencies Through Intentional Knowledge Transfer

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The Real Risk

THE CORE THREAT IS LOSS OF
INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE,
NOT JUST VACANCIES

The Risk of Knowledge Loss

It's not just vacancies; agencies rely on institutional knowledge

- Experience & judgement
- Relationships & context
- Tacit knowledge

Knowledge is often concentrated in individuals

- Turnover = disruption beyond the position

Why Traditional Succession Planning Falls Short

Traditional
succession
planning
focuses on

- “Who’s next in line?”

Public sector
constraints

- Require agencies to avoid preselecting individuals

Shift in
approach

- Knowledge continuity
- Workforce transitions readiness

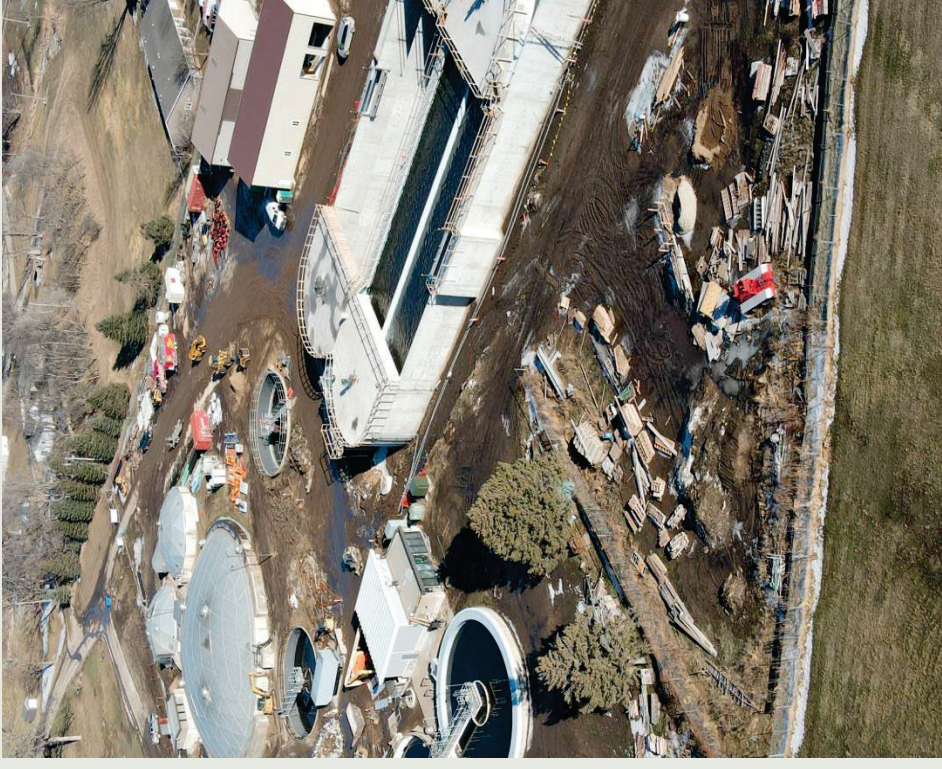


Iowa Water Treatment Plant

SYSTEMIC VULNERABILITY WHEN
KNOWLEDGE IS CONCENTRATED
IN INDIVIDUALS

Consequences of Knowledge Loss

- ◆ 2 out of 3 planned retirements within 10 months
- ◆ Increased call time with employees
- ◆ Safety concerns
- ◆ Lab test shipped out vs completed in-house
- ◆ Pulling supervisors = capacity drain
- ◆ Hired maintenance rather than completing repairs in-house
- ◆ Overall increased costs



What We Heard

INTERVIEWS WITH FOUR IOWA
PUBLIC AGENCIES

Why These Findings Matter

Summary of interviews

- Results from real public agencies vs theory or model policies

Interview-based included

- Metro Waste Authority
- City of Fort Dodge
- City of Webster City
- Iowa Department of Administrative Services (DAS)

Theme 1: Informal Succession Planning Practices

What agencies described

- Succession planning as a process or expectation, not a formal agency-wide system with consistent procedures and required deliverables

Common tools

- Mentoring
- Cross-training
- Leadership development
- “Ad-hoc” transition planning when retirement/departure is imminent

Documentation

- Often scattered across email
- Old folders
- Personal files
- Memory of long-tenured staff rather than appropriately filed information

What This Means for Agencies

- ♦ Agencies recognize the issue, but level structure and follow-through are inconsistent
- ♦ Knowledge transfer relies too heavily on individual initiative, timing, and whether the departing employee gives enough notice for an agency to prepare
- ♦ Even when turnover is expected, agencies may still fail to identify and capture the specific knowledge that is most likely to be lost

Theme 2: Strengths and Limits of Development Efforts

What agencies described

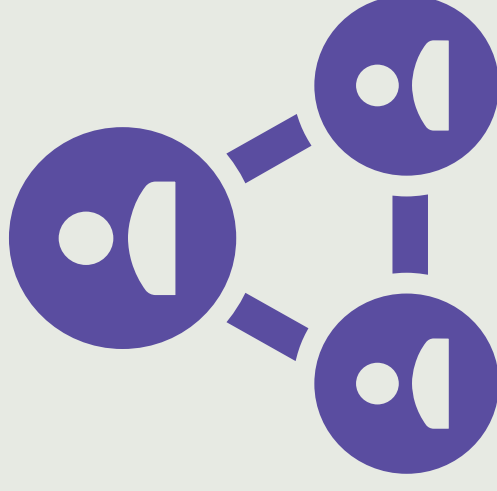
- Leadership programs help, but don't replace role-specific knowledge
- Cross-training is generally viewed as helpful, especially in lean organizations where one person often holds a large amount of practical knowledge
- Specialized roles, certification-heavy positions, and single-incumbent jobs are much harder to prepare for through normal training alone

Implications for Workforce Readiness

Leadership development alone does not create a role-ready replacement with the needed context and judgement

Tacit knowledge - unwritten routines, exceptions, and decision reasoning- is still difficult to transfer through training programs

Trust issues, uncertain retirement timing, and limited staffing capacity can reduce the effectiveness of otherwise strong development efforts



Theme 3: Overlap in Findings

- ♦ Interviewees generally described overlap and shadowing as helpful
- ♦ They give successors a chance to observe tasks, ask questions, and absorb context in real time
- ♦ The larger problem is that overlap is not routine, and agencies do not always have the notice, staffing flexibility, or budget support to use it in a structured way

DAS

Perspective on Overlap and Hiring Constraints

Overlap appointments

- Often underused (30 days or less) due to staffing limits and misconceptions about eligibility

Competitive hiring expectations limit the ability to “pre-select” a successor

- Places constraints on traditional succession planning
- Shifts focus away from a ‘next-in-line employee’, and limits internal opportunities in cross-training, manager development, skill building, and documentation

Key Takeaways From Interviews

- Succession planning is more informal
- Agencies generally rely on culture, supervision, and local practice rather than standardized systems
- Knowledge transfer is a weak point
- Lean staffing makes documentation, cross-training, and other practices difficult to prioritize
- In Iowa, building readiness across several employees is more practical than identifying a single successor

Applied Examples

A SHIFT TOWARD MORE FORMAL,
STRUCTURED APPROACHES

Why Succession Planning is Critical

Ensures continuity for critical functions and reduces operational disruption

Builds organizational capacity before vacancies occur

Protects long-term stability, compliance, and public trust

Works best when proactive rather than reactive

Embeds knowledge transfer into daily work, not last-minute efforts

Strengthen internal talent pipelines well before transitions happen

Example: Carroll County Waste Management Commission

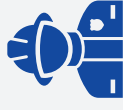
- Multi-month transition preparation
- Structured cross-training
- Documented competencies for each role
- Limits operational disruption
- Supports compliance, service continuity, and public trust



Why Competency-Based Models Matter

- ♦ Clarify expectations for employee growth
- ♦ Align development with agency needs
- ♦ Reinforce readiness for complex responsibilities
- ♦ Promote transparency in leadership preparation

PFA Competency Framework Example



Core competencies include communication, program management, cultural awareness, and emergency preparedness



Provides consistent guidance across roles



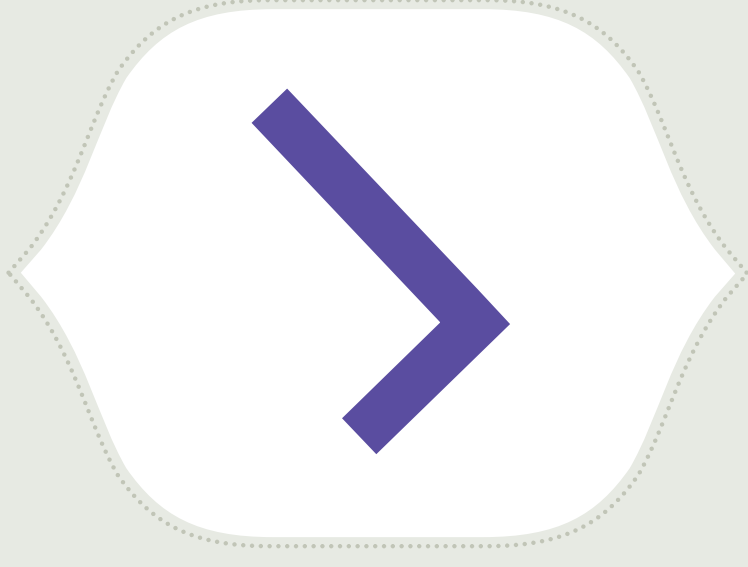
Career Development Framework adds progressive leadership preparation

Public Sector Guidance from Office of Personnel Management

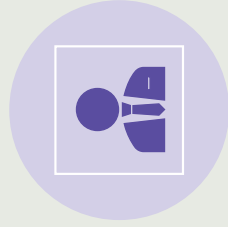
- ♦ Structured approaches for talent pipeline building
- ♦ Emphasis on workforce analysis
- ♦ Agency-wide readiness for key transitions
- ♦ Reinforces intentional, ongoing development efforts

Private Sector Insights Adaptable for Government

- SAP SuccessFactors models highlight:
 - Talent visibility
 - Competency mapping
 - Tracking readiness levels
 - Identifying successors for mission-critical roles
- Practices can be applied with internal tools,
not just software



Recommendation: Expand Experiential Learning Opportunities



Job rotations, shadowing, and interim leadership



Fellowship opportunities to broaden skills



DOT rotation programs have shown meaningful success



Builds understanding of operations across contexts

Recommendations: Strengthen Use of the 60-Day Overlap Policy

- Currently underused by agencies
- Standardized tools would improve consistency:
 - Checklists
 - Knowledge-handoff templates
 - Decision logs
- Even when overlap isn't possible, alternative structures can still replicate many of the benefits

Recommendation: Make Succession Planning Continuous



Maintain updated documentation



Identify critical roles annually



Train backups for essential functions



Integrate leadership development into day-to-day operations

Overall Impact on Agency Readiness



Protects institutional knowledge



Strengthens workforce resilience



Ensures smoother leadership transitions



Builds a sustainable talent pipeline for Iowa agencies



Knowledge Continuity Framework

A GUIDE THAT WORKS FOR ANY
AGENCY

Treat Knowledge Loss as Operational Risk

- Institutional knowledge loss affects continuity, compliance, service delivery, and public trust
- Succession planning should preserve both people pipelines and knowledge pipelines
- Focus first on roles where knowledge loss would disrupt operations



Knowledge Continuity Framework: Core Steps

Identify	the critical role or function
Recognize	the knowledge at risk
Match	knowledge to transfer methods
Assign	responsibility, timeline, and outputs
Build	knowledge sharing into daily operations

What Agencies Should Capture

- ♦ Technical and process knowledge
- ♦ Historical and institutional context
- ♦ Stakeholder relationships
- ♦ Judgement, expectations, and workarounds
- ♦ Lessons learned from recurring problems or major events

How to Implement the Framework

Start with a 90-day pilot

Select 2-3 high risk roles

Complete the Knowledge Continuity Template

Create practical transfer products

Review results before scaling

Example: Lead Equipment Operator

- ♦ Critical knowledge may sit in operational roles
- ♦ Example risks include route knowledge, equipment quirks, seasonal readiness, emergency response, and informal training
- ♦ Transfer methods: ride-alongs, annotated maps, checklists, mentoring, debriefs
- ♦ Output: Usable tools that remain with the agency

How Agencies Measure Success

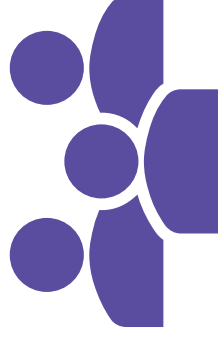
Another employee can perform the task independently

Documentation is updated and stored accessibly

Key contacts and stakeholder context are transferred

Cross-training or mentoring is scheduled

Knowledge sharing becomes routine, not last-minute



The Bottom Line

WHAT THE WATER TREATMENT
EXAMPLE SHOWS US

Practical Impacts of Knowledge Loss

- ♦ The issue was not only that three employees left
- ♦ The bigger risk was that critical knowledge was left with them
- ♦ Operational knowledge was concentrated in too few people
- ♦ When that happens, a vacancy becomes a service continuity risk

What Could Have Mitigated Knowledge Loss Water Treatment Example



Identify the water treatment function as high risk



Map the knowledge most likely to be lost



Capture permits, testing, vendors, equipment, and emergency-response knowledge



Create practical transfer tools before the crisis occurs

Knowledge Continuity = Public Service Readiness

- ♦ This is not about pre-selecting successors
- ♦ It is about preserving the knowledge the public depends on
- ♦ Agencies can start small with one or two high-risk roles
- ♦ When people leave, the agency should not have to start over

Questions?

