SUCCESSION PLANNING M1 Insight

The End of Static Succession Planning

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Succession planning used to answer a relatively contained question: who is ready, or nearly ready, to step into the next important role? That question has not gone away. But in recent M1 CHRO and Talent Community conversations, it sounded increasingly insufficient.

The sharper question now is not who succeeds whom. It is whether the organization understands which roles will matter, which roles will change, and which people can lead into a future the business cannot yet fully define.

Across recent discussions on performance management, talent review, succession planning, and AI-enabled HR transformation, leaders kept circling the same tension: the machinery of talent management still looks familiar, but the business problem has changed.

One CHRO put it plainly during a May succession discussion: "We are using nearly the exact same tools 35 years later." The 9-box, calibration sessions, performance ratings, and succession slates remain the dominant architecture. But AI, workforce transformation, and shifting business models are forcing CHROs to ask whether those tools can still see far enough ahead.

Succession planning is no longer just about continuity. For CEOs, it is becoming a strategic discipline for identifying where the business will need new leadership capacity before the org chart catches up.

AT A GLANCE

- AI is pushing CHROs to rethink critical roles, leadership potential, and workforce planning with a more dynamic, future-facing lens.
- Traditional tools like 9-boxes and calibration meetings are still useful, but only if they produce strategic insight rather than procedural comfort.
- The CHRO-CIO partnership is becoming central to workforce redesign, combining technology foresight with capability, culture, and leadership judgment.
- The most valuable successors may be the leaders best equipped to redesign roles for tomorrow's business, not simply inherit today's jobs.

From Replacement Planning To Role Reimagination

Traditional succession planning was built for a more stable operating model. A role exists. A leader leaves. A successor is identified, developed, and moved into place. That logic still works for many executive roles. But it breaks down when the role itself is changing.

In the May 20 CHRO discussion, one participant described a board asking a more attuned question: which jobs are going to disappear or be replaced over the next five years, and has HR accounted for that in workforce planning? Another participant responded that, so far, "nobody has the answer."

That exchange captures the moment. CHROs are being asked to plan for a workforce that is still taking shape. Succession planning can no longer be limited to named successors for known jobs. It has to become a discipline for understanding how value will be created in the business and where leadership risk is actually accumulating.

Several leaders noted that the most critical roles are often not at the top two layers. They sit deeper in the organization, at the point where strategy turns into execution, risk management, customer experience, or technical expertise. As one facilitator observed, objective efforts to identify critical roles often find them at levels three, four, and five, even though succession planning still tends to focus disproportionate attention on the first two levels.

That is a quiet but important indictment of the current system. Many organizations are over-engineering succession for the roles they can see, while under-investing in the roles that may determine whether the strategy works.

The 9-Box Is Not The Enemy. Stasis Is.

M1 members do not suggest that leaders are ready to throw away existing talent tools. In fact, many are still actively improving them. Talent leaders discussed whether to use a 9-box, 4-box, or 5-point model; whether to label categories; whether to make talent placement transparent; and how to reduce bias in calibration.

One company uses labels such as “accelerate,” “stretch,” “encourage,” and “support” to make talent conversations more actionable. Another is plotting leaders against a continuum of co-authored executive behaviors, with descriptors that make abstract traits more observable. As one participant explained, the continuum helps take the conversation “out of the clouds” and into what leaders are actually seeing.

Those are useful improvements. But the deeper issue is not whether the box has nine squares or four. It is whether the conversation is still anchored in yesterday’s assumptions about performance and potential.

A recurring frustration across the May 1 performance management conversation and the May 19 talent review discussion was that performance systems often become compliance exercises. Leaders want objective differentiation, but the process drifts toward the middle. They want strong development plans, but follow-through fades after the talent review meeting. They want transparency, but culture often makes directness hard.

One participant summarized the broader fatigue well: “Every time I sit in spaces like these… the conversation is still the same.” The group was still grappling with how to differentiate, how to be transparent, and how to drive accountability.

That fatigue is the warning signal. The risk is not that companies still use familiar tools. The risk is that they keep improving the tool while missing the changing job it must perform.

AI Is Turning Succession Into A Business Design Problem

AI entered nearly every recent conversation, but not as a generic technology trend. Leaders were focused on its practical implications: how it changes role design, how it changes performance data, how it changes development, and how it changes the shape of HR itself.

In the May 20 CHRO succession conversation, one leader described partnering with the CIO on a “full workforce transformation approach,” going function by function to discuss what technology will disrupt and what skills will be needed. The CIO brings the latest thinking on what technology may do to revenue operations, finance, or other functions. HR brings the view of capabilities, current skills, and workforce implications.

That dyad may become one of the defining operating models of the AI-era CHRO. HR cannot redesign future roles alone, because the disruption is technological. Technology cannot redesign the workforce alone, because the work is human, organizational, and cultural.

Another participant framed the issue as a mindset problem. Functional leaders tend to declare their own roles critical. HR says HR roles are critical; finance says finance roles are critical. The harder work is getting leaders to think about the business first and ask which roles are critical to business continuity, value creation, and strategic risk.

That distinction matters. AI will make it easier to generate job descriptions, build development plans, summarize talent data, and identify internal candidates. But the strategic work is deciding what the organization is trying to become and which human capabilities will make that possible.

The New Succession Question: Who Can Redesign Work?

One of the strongest themes across the transcripts was that future leaders will need different capabilities. Adaptability came up repeatedly, as did systems thinking, technology fluency, and the ability to lead people through uncertainty.

In the May 20 discussion, M1's "future leader" framing included adaptive range, systemic foresight, future followership, and tech-human fusion. The language resonated because it named what many leaders are already feeling: potential can no longer mean "looks like the people who succeeded here before."

One participant from a company undergoing business model transformation described the challenge of applying a future lens when the business of 2030 will not look like the business of today. Traditional performance, aspiration, and potential criteria become too narrow if they are based on the current model.

The collective intelligence suggests this is the heart of the issue. Succession planning has historically rewarded clarity. It favors people who perform well in known systems, build sponsorship in familiar ways, and resemble proven archetypes. But the next phase of succession planning has to identify people who can operate when the system itself is being redesigned.

The most valuable successor may not be the person best prepared to inherit today's role, but the leader best equipped to redesign it for tomorrow's business.

Performance Management Is Being Pulled Into The Same Shift

The May 1 performance management discussion reinforced the same pattern from another angle. Companies are trying to create sharper differentiation between top, middle, and low performance, but the mechanics are hard. Several participants described ratings inflation, middle clustering, unclear behavioral standards, or systems where compensation outcomes muddy the performance conversation.

One leader described a company moving away from financial results as a major input into individual performance reviews, because it made the review less useful. Another described separating the "what" and the "how," with the possibility that leadership behaviors could materially affect bonus outcomes. Others debated whether a 5-point scale is really just a 3-point scale in practice.

The details varied, but the direction was consistent: performance management is being asked to produce better signal. Not just fairer ratings, but better intelligence about who creates value, how they create it, and whether they can scale into future needs.

AI may help. Participants described using AI to improve goal quality, support managers, generate development plans, mine Workday data, and identify hidden talent. One leader described thousands of employees using an AI tool to improve goals within a month. Another imagined a future where AI could search for employees with sustained performance, promotion velocity, and learning agility signals.

That is where performance management and succession planning begin to converge. Performance data becomes less useful as a backward-looking judgment and more useful as an input into workforce intelligence.

The Best Companies Will Treat Talent Systems As Living Systems

The most compelling idea across the conversations is that talent systems need to become more dynamic. That does not mean constantly changing frameworks or chasing every new AI tool. It means building a living view of the relationship between strategy, roles, skills, performance, and potential.

In practice, that points to several shifts:

1. Succession planning should start with strategic roles, not hierarchy. Companies need a disciplined way to identify where value creation and risk actually sit, including roles

below the executive layer.

2. Potential should be defined against the future business, not only current performance. Adaptability, systems thinking, and tech-human judgment must become explicit criteria, not vague preferences.
3. Performance management should generate usable signal. Ratings, goals, and behavioral feedback should help leaders make better talent decisions, not simply complete the annual cycle.
4. AI should be treated as an intelligence layer, not a shortcut. The strongest use cases were not about replacing judgment, but about improving the evidence base, scaling manager support, and making patterns visible.
5. CHROs and CIOs should jointly own workforce redesign. The future of work is too technological for HR to manage alone and too human for technology leaders to manage alone.

A More Demanding Mandate

The next generation of succession planning will be more demanding because it will no longer be enough to know who is ready now. CHROs will need to know which roles are becoming more critical, which capabilities are becoming more scarce, which leaders can adapt, and where the business is still relying on old assumptions.

That is uncomfortable work. It requires challenging functional politics, redesigning familiar processes, and admitting that some long-standing talent practices have produced more ceremony than insight.

But it is also a major opportunity. If AI makes technical advantage easier to copy, then the way companies identify, develop, and deploy human capability becomes more important, not less. The organizations that win will not be the ones with the prettiest succession charts. They will be the ones that can continuously answer a harder question:

Do we have the leadership capacity, critical roles, and workforce intelligence required for the business we are trying to become?