SUCCESSION PLANNING IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

by

Christine Noel Roberts

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

Succession planning is a term that refers to the systematic and methodological efforts an organization uses to plan for organizational stability and proficiency. Organizations must provide employees the training, experiences, and knowledge required to assume positions of increased responsibility when those jobs are vacated. Agencies should strive to create a diversified pool of qualified candidates to avoid a talent gap, workforce shortages, or a loss of agency knowledge. Over the past fifteen years, the Federal Government has continued to highlight the need to take a proactive approach to succession planning by first identifying the skill sets needed for critical positions and then developing their future leaders. With a limited number of new employees entering civil service and projected retirements over the next several years, it is essential that agencies quickly prioritize succession planning strategies to train and prepare employees to assume critical acquisition positions, such as the Contracting Officer (CO) role. COs are the only individuals with authority to procure goods and services on the Government's behalf and therefore occupy positions classified as inherently governmental functions. This research study explored the lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD and the impact of the failure to create a multi-generational pipeline of qualified candidates who can compete for CO positions as they are vacated.

Key words: succession planning, contracting officer, learning and development, knowledge management, recruitment, retention

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my late parents Albert and Judith Gulizia. Mom and Dad always encouraged me to strive for excellence in my academic, personal, and professional goals. Although I miss them every day, their legacy is one of valued lessons, happy memories, and infinite love, which are etched in my heart. They valued higher education and would be extremely proud of this accomplishment, if they were still here on Earth. My love for them is endless and I take solace in knowing that I will see them again with our Lord.

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Table of Contents

r

List of Tables

List of Figures

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The researcher explored the lack of succession planning in Federal Government organizations, specifically Department of the Navy (DoN) agencies located in St. Mary's county in Southern Maryland (MD), and its impact on maintaining organizational effectiveness. Succession planning is a term that refers to the systematic and methodological efforts an organization uses to plan for organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021). Organizations should take a proactive approach to succession planning by first identifying the skill sets needed for critical positions and then developing their future leaders by providing them the training, experiences, and knowledge required to assume executive leadership positions when vacated (Koppolu et al., 2021). Unfortunately, most organizations do not prioritize succession planning, with only about 34% advertising that they have a formal succession plan (HCMG, 2020; Pastores et al., 2019). Therefore, it was not surprising that agencies have no prescribed succession planning process that provided a usable and practical strategy to effectively prepare employees for the acquisition-critical position of Contracting Officer (CO) (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019). This original research study aimed to broaden knowledge of succession planning using the research questions proposed. The researcher used available data from the Government Accounting Office (GAO), the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and interview information gathered through the research process to present potential options to organizational leadership to bridge gaps in current succession planning practices.

Background of the Problem

Succession planning is a topic many companies declare a critical organizational priority but often neglect until the company experiences a wave of departures and then operates in crisis mode, scrambling to fill vacant positions (Talentguard, 2021; Jaynes, 2018). Although up to 86%

of leaders agree that succession planning is an essential component of their organization's talent management process, only 14% are proactive and disciplined about using talent management, leadership development, and other retention strategies as part of their succession planning efforts (Rosenthal et al., 2018). If organizations cannot manage their talent effectively, employees may get frustrated and resign, retire, or transfer to another organization (Ali, 2019). Leadership changes are inevitable, but if an organization fails to create a multi-generational pipeline of candidates that can assume leadership positions, it may experience organizational instability when transitions occur (Ritchie, 2020). COs are the only individuals with authority to procure goods and services on the Government's behalf and therefore occupy positions classified as inherently governmental functions (Weisman & Richards, 2019). The experience level of current COs across the Federal Government ranges from an average of 7.8 to 19.2 years (Weisman & Richards, 2019). Agencies should strive to create a diversified pool of qualified candidates to avoid a talent gap, workforce shortages, or a loss of agency knowledge (Weisman & Richards, 2019). Succession planning may allow the organization to deliver enhanced employee engagement and career development opportunities while increasing organizational stability, strength, and stakeholder confidence (Rosenthal et al., 2018).

The 2022 Federal Workforce Priorities Report (FWPR), published by the OPM, indicated that recruitment, succession planning, and knowledge transfer are high-level priorities with Federal Government agencies (OPM, 2022b). With a limited number of new employees entering civil service and projected retirements over the next several years, it is essential that agencies quickly prioritize succession planning strategies to train and prepare employees to assume CO duties and function as qualified and experienced acquisition professionals (Weisman & Richards, 2018). While organizational leadership recognizes that failing to plan for succession is a problem, they lack strategies to institute succession planning processes and drive organizational change (Goldkuhl, 2012). This research project explored the lack of succession planning for COs in Federal Government organizations, specifically the DoN agencies located in Southern MD, and its impact on maintaining organizational effectiveness.

Problem Statement

The general problem addressed was the lack of succession planning within the Federal Government, resulting in an inability to train and retain employees with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the CO role integral to maintaining organizational effectiveness. Sehatpour et al. (2022) agreed with the literature that succession planning is challenging for many knowledge-intensive organizations because of an inability to identify, develop, and retain talented employees. The critical acquisition role of CO requires extensive experience and training to successfully perform this essential governmental function using the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and other agency-specific guidance (Alanzi, 2021). Senior leaders who fail to establish a pipeline of employees with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform the CO role, negatively impact the culture and operational effectiveness of the organization (Wesemann, 2021, LeCounte et al., 2017). The specific problem addressed was the lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD, resulting in a potential inability to recruit, train, and retain individuals with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the critical acquisition role of CO inherent to maintaining organizational effectiveness.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this flexible design case study was to understand the challenges Federal Government agencies have with including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process (Adewale et al., 2011). Succession planning is a term that refers to the systematic and methodological efforts an organization uses to plan for organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021). Organizations that take a proactive approach to succession planning first identify the skill sets needed for critical positions and then develop their future leaders by providing them the training, experiences, and knowledge required to assume executive leadership positions when vacated (Koppolu et al., 2021). Unfortunately, most organizations do not prioritize succession planning, with only about 34% indicating that they have a formal succession plan (HCMG, 2020; Pastores et al., 2019). Therefore, it was not surprising that while DoN agencies collect data on succession planning, many had no formal succession plan to provide a usable and practical strategy to prepare the organization for senior leadership changes (OPM, 2018). This study fills an existing knowledge gap focused on the critical need for succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant CO positions in the Federal Government (Misch, 2018).

Research Questions

RQ1: How are Federal Government agencies challenged with succession planning?

RQ1 explored the challenges of succession planning in the Federal Government, focusing on DoN activities in Southern MD. The 2022 FWPR indicated that developing and maintaining a multi-generational succession plan is a priority in the Federal Government because determining appropriate staffing levels while preserving institutional knowledge is critical (OPM, 2022b). Although a top priority, federal agencies are not adequately training personnel to ensure they are prepared to assume increasing responsibilities as a future leader in the organization (Devlin, 2019). A recent Human Capital Management in Government (HCMG) survey noted that 47% of respondents indicated their agency's succession planning efforts were unsuccessful (HCMG, 2020). Agencies need to revisit their current processes to determine where their succession planning process fails (Talentguard, 2021).

RQ2: How can agencies increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline?

RQ2 explored the strategies available to help agencies use metrics to identify the talents needed to perform the CO role, assess current talent gaps, and determine a plan to address those gaps to develop a pool of employees with the necessary skills to meet future demands (Devlin, 2019). DoN agencies in Southern MD are knowledge-intensive agencies that use extensive resources to prepare employees for critical acquisition positions, such as a CO (Wesemann, 2021). Leadership fails to regularly assess the work experience, educational background, certifications, interests, skill sets, and career goals of its workforce to determine how they can best contribute to the organization long-term (Baker et al., 2019b). Organizations also fail to develop a pool of multi-generational workers to help ensure the organization's long-term stability (Daykin et al., 2018). COs fulfill specialized, inherently governmental roles, requiring civil servants' performance rather than contracted personnel (Lee et al., 2021). The need to recruit individuals capable of fulfilling critical acquisition roles and retain those employees is a priority at DoN agencies (OPM, 2018).

RQ3: How can DoN agencies tailor their learning and development programs to focus on developing CO skills and abilities to plan for succession effectively?

RQ3 explored the potential lack of specific programs available to develop a talent pool of employees to serve as COs (GAO, 2021a). The Defense Acquisition University (DAU) offers in-person and online training opportunities to teach acquisition professionals the technical skills required to understand the acquisition process (DAU, 2022). Many agencies have formal leadership programs for high-performing mid and senior-level workers who demonstrate leadership capabilities (SHRM, 2022). However, they seem to lack learning opportunities for employees to gain the needed experience for CO duties using temporary rotational assignments or shadowing to fill gaps in an employee's knowledge and skillset (SHRM, 2022). Some leaders are reluctant to allow employees to move within the organization to broaden their careers because they currently fill a critical position that has no backfill (Sehatpour et al., 2022). Agencies should allow employees to cross-train and learn new skills to keep them engaged or risk losing them because they are bored and feel undervalued (Baker et al., 2019b).

RQ4: What strategies are available for leadership to explore to increase retention of employees with critical acquisition skills to maintain organizational effectiveness?

RQ4 explored the strategies available to increase the retention of highly valued employees who possess specialized acquisition skills to maintain organizational effectiveness (GAO, 2019). It takes several years of formal and informal training to become a warranted CO who can negotiate contracts and obligate funds on behalf of the Federal Government (Weisman & Richards, 2019). The need to increase the retention of employees is a serious concern because the resources the agency invests in developing employees into CO are significant (Weisman & Richards, 2019). Retaining a capable multi-generational workforce is crucial because of the substantial number of Federal employees who are currently retirement eligible (Wesemann, 2021). Agencies unable to keep trained employees will experience a shortage of human capital as baby boomers, employees born between 1944 and 1964, continue to retire and risk filling vacant CO positions with employees unable to handle the pressures and responsibilities of the job (Adler & Donohue, 2020).

Nature of the Study

A flexible design using qualitative research methods to complete a case study was appropriate for this project. The case study methodology examined the research questions and trace how agencies collect attrition, talent management, and succession planning metrics (FedScope, 2022). The researcher also discussed the improvements needed to identify talent gaps, increase the leadership pipeline, and improve organizational effectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study methodology explored the DoN agency's talent management and succession planning difficulties and suggest potential solutions based on an interpretation of the data (Ridder, 2017). Succession planning does not focus on a particular individual (Adler & Donohue, 2020). Instead, it relates to whether or not the agency's workforce members demonstrate the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet current and future mission requirements (Devlin, 2019). The research findings from this project will assist federal agencies with identifying talent gaps, determining where learning and development programs can fill those gaps to grow employees, and developing a robust pool of employees with the specialized acquisition skills needed to ensure organizational effectiveness (Deloitte, 2021). This original research study aimed to broaden knowledge of succession planning using the proposed research questions. In addition to interviews, the researcher used publicly available GAO and OPM data and developed potential options to bridge gaps in agency succession planning practices. The researcher presented the findings to organizational leadership for action.

Discussion of Research Paradigms

Research paradigms reflect the researcher's overall perception of conducting research based on their core beliefs and view of reality (Ugwu et al., 2021). A researcher's paradigm defines their worldview, shapes the researcher's perspective of the world, and influences how they act, collect, analyze, and interpret data collected for a study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Paradigms are significant because they control what is studied, how to investigate a problem, and how to interpret the results (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Therefore, researchers who describe their research paradigm will help readers understand how to produce meaningful conclusions from the data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The four primary research paradigms the researcher evaluated were positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism (Yin, 2018). The researcher reviewed each approach and selected pragmatism as the paradigm most closely aligned with the researcher's worldview and strategy to investigate the problem identified for the study.

Positivism. The positivist approach to research relies heavily on direct experience or observation to gain objective knowledge (facts) (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). It asserts that researchers and subjects are independent of one another (Robson & McCarton, 2016). Positivists use the scientific method to formulate and test hypotheses against the facts using an empirical or analytical approach to demonstrate cause and effect (Ugwu et al., 2021). Positivism assumes realism or a single objective and quantifiable view of reality that produces measurable results for interpretation (Robson & McCarton, 2016). The positivist approach suggests that knowledge is not contrived or interpreted, but discovered. (Gannon et al., 2022). Information learned through analysis is used to determine cause and effect relationships to develop trends and predict outcomes (Ugwu et al., 2021). The positivism approach is not an appropriate choice for succession planning research because of the inductive nature of the study.

Post-positivism. The post-positivist approach to research is similar to that of positivism. However, post-positivism recognizes that evidence is always imperfect and probabilistic because of the study's unintended relationship between the researcher and subjects (Gannon et al., 2022). Post-positivists, like positivists, prefer quantitative research methods using experiments to determine a cause and effect relationship with measurable results (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). Post-positivism challenges the concept that absolute truth or objective knowledge is achievable when studying human behaviors, and concedes that the research strategy uses the best information and evidence to determine causality sources (Robson & McCarton, 2016). Post-positivists balance their research findings between theoretical beliefs and statistical analysis to challenge or substantiate the hypothesis (Gannon et al., 2022). Like positivism, the post-positivism approach is not an appropriate choice for succession planning research because of the inductive nature of the study.

Constructionism. The constructionist research approach accepts findings based on an individual's subjective or limited view of reality (Myers, 2020). Constructivists acknowledge the relationship between researchers, participants, and study phenomena (Myers, 2020). They recognize that data gathered during the study reflects participants' diverse perspectives and potentially varying interpretations of events due to their social status, value system, prejudices, or unique experiences (Myers, 2020). Constructivists acknowledge that interpreting reality requires flexibility, inductive reasoning, and working with others to find meaning rather than discovering absolute reality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011). While the constructionist approach is appropriate for succession planning research because it allows inductive reasoning, the method relies on an individual's limited view of reality, making it not the best choice for the proposed study.

Pragmatism. The pragmatic research approach attempts to find solutions to real-world problems by collecting data in the field using objective and subjective evidence guided by practical skills to substantiate the analysis and proposed solution set (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pragmatism uses John Dewey's five-step qualitative framework when exploring prospective answers to research problems (Morgan, 2014). The five steps propose that researchers: select a research problem, determine why it is a problem using the researcher's existing beliefs, suggest solutions that would tackle the problem, reflect on potential solutions to ensure resolution without creating new issues, and finally, analyze the collected data to determine if the results support the conclusion (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism focuses on what a subject does, why they do it, and interpreting observed behavior based on expected consequences rather than singular reliance on the scientific method (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011). A pragmatic worldview approach considers practical, real-world experiences rather than those developed using theoretical or laboratory situations to provide a realistic and defendable approach to understanding and explaining the research problem (Ugwu et al., 2021).

Researcher's Paradigm. The research paradigm for this project was pragmatism, which focuses on the problem and the research outcome rather than on a specific research methodology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011). Using a pragmatic approach, the researcher collected data using objective and subjective evidence to substantiate the analysis and propose a solution set to solve the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The pragmatic worldview lends itself to the human aspect of the research approach and aligns well with the Christian worldview of seeing the world the way God sees it, rather than from a perspective only based on facts (Ryken, 2013).

Pragmatism was an appropriate approach to exploring solutions for the practical, real-world lack of succession planning at DoN agencies. While organizational leadership recognizes the problem exists, there is no framework for realistic actions to intervene and drive organizational change (Goldkuhl, 2012). Pragmatists use inquiry to generate knowledge to help others see what is possible and orient them toward making a positive difference in the organization (Goldkuhl, 2012). The most dangerous phrases in business are "we've always done it this way," followed closely by "if it isn't broke, don't fix it" (Zimmerman, 2021). Companies that remain static, refuse to change, and fail to seek new ideas to solve problems will ultimately become stagnate, irrelevant, and fail to retain talent (Vickery, 2018).

Discussion of Design

A research design reflects the researcher's structural plan to select participants, choose variables, collect data, assimilate results, conduct analysis, and draw conclusions (Hancock et al., 2019). Establishing an effective research design is a function of understanding the methods and procedures used to conduct the study and the consequences of its conclusions (Hancock et al., 2019). Before selecting a research design, researchers must clearly articulate their research problem as some methods are more appropriate than others for particular inquiries (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Research designs are directly related to the research problem because they clarify the type of data collected and influence the methods for collection throughout the study (Hancock et al., 2019). The three research designs considered for this study were a fixed design using quantitative methods, a flexible design using qualitative methods, and a mixed-methods design that uses quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used a flexible design approach and applied qualitative methods for this study.

Fixed Design. A fixed design using quantitative methods is appropriate for studies that use statistical tools to gather and analyze data to verify, dispute, or provide credit to the study's hypothesis (Asio, 2021). Fixed designs are straightforward, direct, quantifiable, and require a fair amount of conceptual understanding of the study phenomenon to ensure the researcher's investment of time and resources is acceptable (Goertzen, 2017). Quantitative research designs strive for objectivity by measuring defined variables and testing their relationship to establish parallels, patterns, or other meaningful connections (Goertzen, 2017). Researchers use mathematical models and statistical analysis to interpret data and explain the results (Williams, 2007). Although researchers may make inferences about the reliability and validity of the data collected, quantitative methods are typically unable to explain errors discovered during data collection or analysis (Bell et al., 2018). Researchers may also experience difficulties concluding a holistic viewpoint because quantitative research recognizes trends across data sets but cannot capture the motivation or inspiration to explain the subject's behavior (Goertzen, 2017). Fixed designs are appropriate for studies that use experimental, nonexperimental, or survey designs to test, explain, evaluate, or verify a hypothesis (Leavy, 2017). A fixed design is inappropriate for this study because understanding the motivation or inspiration behind the subject's behavior is not quantifiable.

Flexible Design. A flexible design using qualitative methods is widely accepted for real-world research and uses an inductive or defined approach to build knowledge or generate meaning from the data collected (Leavy, 2017). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore, investigate, seek purpose, or understand the research problem (Leavy, 2020). Researchers using flexible designs should demonstrate an ability to ask questions, listen well, be flexible, grasp the issues, interpret information, and lack bias (Robson & McCartan, 2016). These characteristics are significant because the researcher often builds a relationship with the participants in the study to obtain a complete appreciation of how and why events transpire (Bell et al., 2018). Qualitative designs frequently fall into one of the following strategies: ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenological research, narrative research, or case studies, although others are available (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher used a flexible design with qualitative methods for this case study.

Mixed-Methods Design. A mixed-methods design methodology is a hybrid approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It uses quantitative and qualitative strategies to collect, analyze, and interpret data to develop an integrated conclusion by leveraging the benefits of both approaches (Paoletti et al., 2021). The researcher can collect data using open-ended questions (qualitative) using observations or interviews and gather responses to closed-ended inquiries (quantitative), which require a fixed response using questionnaires or data gathering instruments (Bell et al., 2018). The mixed-method approach may allow the researcher to validate study results and leverage data collected using multiple techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers frequently use this strategy with a pragmatic viewpoint because of the flexibility the design offers to change the approach to answer the research questions, notwithstanding the philosophical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Common mixed-method strategies include convergent design, explanatory sequential design, and experimental sequential design (Asio, 2021). Although the researcher could use a mixed-methods approach, a sole researcher may experience difficulty managing a multi-strategy design (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher's Chosen Design. The researcher used a flexible design approach and applied qualitative research methods. Using a flexible design allowed the examination of the proposed research questions using how or why to identify government agencies' challenges with planning for succession. The researcher investigated the succession planning problem using a case study approach. Tailored research questions identified workforce gaps, explored leveraging available talent management tools to identify prospective leaders, and facilitated a discussion of improvements needed to increase organizational effectiveness.

Discussion of Qualitative Methods

Common dissertation methodologies for a flexible design approach include using an ethnographical, grounded theory, phenomenological, narrative, or case study design (Durdella, 2017). The researcher conducted a single case study with a flexible design using qualitative methods. This case study design discussion examined a situation or event within a particular setting and timeframe (Groenewald, 2018). Case studies typically ask participants how or why questions related to an event or situation uncontrolled by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research design used real-world occurrences with a comprehensive understanding of the data (Yin, 2018).

Ethnography. The ethnography research approach posits that researchers observe participants to understand what people do and why they do it based on problem-focused and context-specific situations (Winther et al., 2020). Researchers using an ethnographic approach rely on their senses (e.g., sight, hearing) and general observation of subjects in the field when the number of participants is limited (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Winther et al., 2020). The researcher's theory is tested by casually observing the participant's behavior to obtain powerful insights into experiences lived and shared on the research topic (Keränen & Prior, 2020). The researcher must avoid using personal experiences and judgments that could bias data collection and analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). The researcher filters the responses to provide a unique or novel interpretation of the data that offers a new perspective for readers about the group (Winther et al., 2020). Researchers have many ethnography types to consider, but the realist and critical ethnography approaches are the most popular (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers using an ethnographic approach remain flexible because field circumstances can change over months or years due to environmental, human-made, or natural disasters and require researchers to reexamine their theories (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). The researcher did not select the ethnographic approach for this study because it is time-consuming and requires extensive time in the field to collect data using various methods, including interviews, observation, and other data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Grounded Theory. Grounded theory is described as a method to conclude the theoretical data, rather than interpret the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). A researcher may use a grounded theory research design to uncover a theory to justify a particular process or event experienced by many geographically dispersed participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research design attempts to explain the theory so others can understand the conclusions the researcher draws from an analysis of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research design uses data gathered in the field based on how individuals interact and socialize to develop the grounding applied to the research. Researchers use this research design to ground their findings to construct a theoretical interpretation of the gathered observations and data (Urquhart et al., 2010). The grounded theory approach differs from other qualitative research designs because it suggests researchers acknowledge the intertwined relationship between collecting data and conducting analysis (Urquhart et al., 2010). Researchers continue to iterate with participants to fill gaps in the research when generating a grounded theory analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher did not select the grounded theory design approach for this study because the iterative sampling required to validate a theory requires a tremendous amount of time to gather the necessary information to achieve data collection saturation and present the results in a meaningful way (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenology. The phenomenology research design approach emphasizes a single concept or idea (the phenomenon) and seeks to understand a small number of people's lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Phenomenology focuses on a shared experience or phenomenon that all participants experience simultaneously or during their lifetime (Groenewald, 2018). This research design allows participants to provide their thoughts, opinions, and personal understanding of the phenomenological event (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher may bracket or remove themselves from the study to avoid interjecting personal opinions or potential bias and improperly influencing the research and subsequent findings (Groenewald, 2018). A phenomenological design aims to accurately describe the event(s) using facts gathered from the participants who experienced the phenomenon and avoid any pre-conceived perceptions the researcher may have (Groenewald, 2018). When seeking subjects to participate in the study, researchers are required to obtain informed consent from participants and disclose the purpose of the study, the subject's involvement, any risks, confidentiality assurances, and how the researcher will compile and use the results (Groenewald, 2018). Researchers need to develop a trusting relationship and rapport with reluctant participants, so responses to research questions, interviews, or focus groups are related openly and honestly without fear of reprisal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher did not select the phenomenological design for this research study because the study is not dependent on a phenomenon that individuals experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Narrative. Researchers using a narrative design approach collect life experiences and stories from one or more individuals and use information accumulated to construct a chronological story and deliver a lesson to the reader (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative research design approach is appropriate when the researcher is interested in relating one or more subjects' life experiences or detailed stories (Head, 2020). The researcher gathers information through interviews, observations, or other sources and uses diverse strategies to examine and analyze any themes, performance aspects, or perspectives gained from their subject(s) life experiences (Head, 2020). The researcher then frames the data collected from the subject to construct meanings to deliver a powerful message to the audience. Researchers use a biographical, autoethnographic, life history, or oral history narrative to gather and communicate information about their participants (Head, 2020). The researcher did not select the narrative approach for this study because it relies on information as remembered by study participants, who may recall events in varying scope and detail depending on how long ago the event occurred (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Case Study. The case study design consists of well-defined research questions that formulate a blueprint for the study (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). Case studies collect data through non-random sampling techniques, including interviewing employees, reviewing secondary data, observing participants, and triangulation to analyze the information and develop practical conclusions (Ridder, 2017). Case studies examine an individual or organizational event, problem, process, or perspective using intensive analysis to understand the more significant event or phenomenon (Ridder, 2017). Researchers can conduct a single case study or multiple studies depending on available time and resources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Single case studies typically understand how or why things are happening based on the collection of detailed data and robust analysis (Rider, 2017). Researchers who conduct multiple case studies use results to compare or contrast similarities and differences to strengthen the study's conclusions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Researcher's Chosen Method. The researcher conducted a single case study with a flexible design using qualitative methods. The case study methodology identified the DoN agency's talent management and succession planning problems and allowed the researcher to suggest potential solutions to the problem based on an interpretation of the data (Ridder, 2017). The researcher worked with agency leadership and conducted interviews with volunteers from the agency's Procurement Group (PG) personnel to gather the information needed. Publicly available metrics from the OPM provided sufficient data to triangulate the information and helped to answer the research questions for this study (OPM, 2018). The researcher obtained approval from the agency to collect the data needed for this project. The researcher included five common elements in the case study design (1) the research questions; (2) the study focus area; (3) defining and bounding the case; (4) linking the data; and (5) interpreting the findings (Yin, 2018). These five areas allowed the researcher to identify what data was needed to collect, link the findings together, analyze the results, and identify future research opportunities (Yin, 2018). A phenomenological design was inappropriate because the identified problem was not an event based on a specific phenomenon. Instead, the case design was better suited to research a real-world practical organizational problem.

Discussion of Triangulation

Triangulation is frequently used in flexible design approaches using qualitative research methods to substantiate validity, reliability, and quality (Roulston, 2018). While triangulation can limit biases, it could increase difficulties when comparing data (Roulston, 2018). Researchers work to collect data to facilitate the integration of results for comparison regardless of the data collection method used (Stahl & King, 2020). In his book, *The research act*: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods, Norman Denzin offers four types of triangulation: data triangulation, observer triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theory triangulation (Denzin, 1978). This flexible single case study used data triangulation to validate study results.

Using multiple data collection methods, the researcher incorporated the data triangulation element into the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Data triangulation also required several data types to establish trends or other identifiable patterns from the collected information (Stahl & King, 2020). Data collection methods include gathering information using varying time intervals (e.g., quarterly or yearly data), multiple groups across the command (e.g., procurement, engineering, logistics), or participants (e.g., mid-level or senior-level individuals), to name a few collection options (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). When collecting data from individuals, the researcher avoided lengthy or extended data collection in the field (Yin, 2018). Instead, the researcher used data collected from internal surveys, interviews, and other documents coupled with new observations. Using data triangulation, the researcher combined the information gathered into practical and meaningful results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As the researcher was an employee of the DoN, additional scrutiny was provided from the agency's senior leadership to authenticate the study results and verify the researcher's interpretations and recommendations before publication (Stahl & King, 2020).

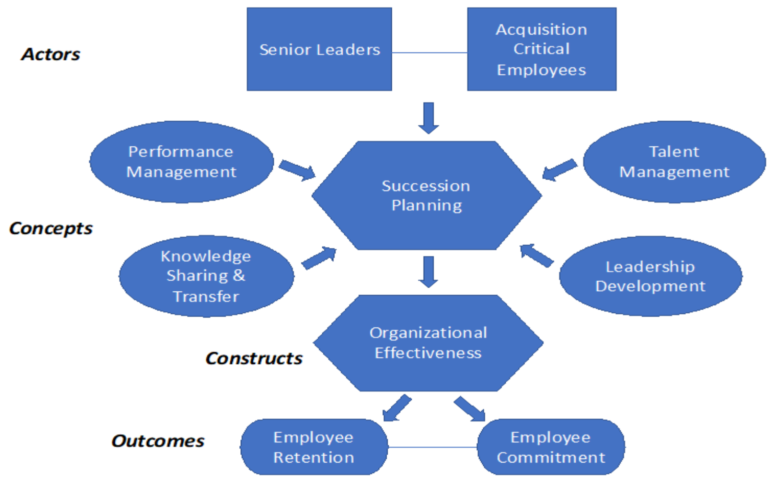
Summary of the Nature of the Study

A flexible design using qualitative research methods to complete a case study was appropriate for the project. The researcher conducted a single case study and performed an in-depth analysis to understand why the agency neglects succession planning efforts and suggested options to overcome organizational deficiencies. The research findings are intended to help the agency identify talent gaps and determine where learning and development programs can fill those gaps and grow employees. The study further provided strategies to retain trained employees with specialized skills who fulfill acquisition roles to maintain organizational effectiveness and provide needed products and services to the warfighter.

Conceptual Framework

The researcher used qualitative methods and a conceptual framework for this single case study. The conceptual framework added value to the study by creating a visual blueprint to link the research concepts to the research questions (Lynch et al., 2020). A formalized framework guided the researcher's analysis by exploring the interrelationship between concepts and providing a consistent approach to analyzing and presenting the research findings discovered as a result of the study (Lynch et al., 2020). Succession planning helps leaders develop talent development procedures and processes to manage the organization's pipeline of future leaders (Jackson & Dunn-Jensen, 2021). The conceptual framework for this study identified senior leaders and acquisition critical employees as the actors who are fundamental to the succession planning construct (Deloitte, 2021). This study explored the concepts of talent management, leadership development, performance management, and knowledge sharing and transfer to explain how they impact the Federal Government's ability to plan for succession (Lynch et al., 2020). Furthermore, this research study provided organizations options to increase employee retention and lower employee turnover rates by maximizing opportunities for organizational effectiveness through succession planning efforts (Jackson & Dunn-Jensen, 2021).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Concepts

Knowledge Sharing and Transfer. Many individuals think of knowledge transfer occurring from senior to junior employees (Knapp et al., 2017). However, all employees have unique skills and abilities valued in the organization and are worth sharing with the workforce (Merrick, 2016). Knowledge-intensive agencies need their more experienced employees to share their institutional knowledge and experiences gained over their business careers with new employees hired for critical acquisition positions (Wesemann, 2021). Younger employees can leverage their digital savvy to demonstrate new ways to solve old problems using technology (Merrick, 2016). Knowledge sharing is particularly critical for succession planning (Siewert & Louderback, 2019). If retiring employees do not share their tacit knowledge about the organization with their colleagues, they could experience difficulties and struggle to fill the information gaps left behind (Siewert & Louderback, 2019). Organizations that encourage a knowledge-sharing culture may experience less disruption when senior employees leave the organization (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2019). Organizations should encourage employees to share their institutional memory informally and transfer their tacit knowledge to others (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2019). Employees can share through one-on-one conversations, mentorships, shadowing assignments, or cross-training activities to help the organization avoid losing institutional knowledge when an employee retires (Siewert & Louderback, 2019).

Leadership Development. Once leaders assess the talent level of their employees and determine what gaps exist, the next step is to invest in personnel. Leadership development programs comprise approximately 14 billion dollars, or up to 35%, of an organization's budget (Ardichvili et al., 2016). Hence, the need to deliver practical yet effective training programs (Ardichvili et al., 2016). Training and development programs can help organizations build a pool of employees with the skills required to fill critical positions (Ali et al., 2019).

However, with training and development budgets shrinking, companies must balance the significant resource investment needed against the benefits of developing an employee's skill set or changing their behaviors to align with organizational goals (Rekalde et al., 2017). Government agencies experience challenges calculating a Return on Investment (ROI) for developmental activities (Muhumuza & Nangoli, 2019). Additionally, some leaders face positional or structural challenges that make it unclear who is responsible for leadership development (Baker et al., 2019b). Agencies cannot calculate an ROI without following up with participants to determine if there was an impact or change in behavior due to the training received (Abner et al., 2021). If agencies cannot demonstrate the value of training programs, they become an easy target for budget cuts (Sellers et al., 2019).

Performance Management. An employee's work performance demonstrates an employee's competency and capability to perform assigned tasks and activities (Ali et al., 2019). Organizations may use various performance appraisal systems to provide formal and informal feedback to employees on their work efforts (Anderson et al., 2016). In addition to a supervisor's formal job performance feedback, some companies also allow employees to use various self-assessment tools (Ligon et al., 2014). These tools include employee surveys and 360-degree feedback assessments to increase employees' self-awareness and identify gaps in their performance (Van Oosten et al., 2019). Robust succession planning could positively enhance employee and organizational performance as employers invest in their personnel to develop future leaders (Ali et al., 2019).

Talent Management. Talent management requires that leaders determine which jobs demand specific and specialized skill sets and identify employees who possess the needed skills to succeed in essential positions (Makarius & Srinivasan, 2017). A talent assessment identifies high-performing employees as potential leaders, evaluates skill gaps and assesses their readiness to assume critical acquisition and leadership positions (Nowak & Scanlan, 2021). Part of talent management is recognizing the mismatch between an organization's essential skills and those skills possessed by employees and resolving the discrepancy (Makarius & Srinivasan, 2017). Additionally, leaders should keep an ethical perspective in place using critical self-reflection and moral judgments to demonstrate equal respect and equitable consideration for all employees regardless of race, class, or gender (Painter-Morland et al., 2019).

Theories

The two predominant theories that provided the foundation for this study were Human Capital Theory and Servant Leadership Theory. Both theories focused on how leaders can develop their people, thus improving their performance and productivity to benefit others and the organization (Moussa et al., 2017). Each theory also required commitment from senior leaders and the organization to provide employees with training opportunities and challenging work assignments (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). Employees who feel they add value and make a difference may increase their loyalty to the agency (Osanloo & Grant, 2016).

Human Capital Theory. Human capital theory explores the advantages organizations experience investing in their human capital and anticipates improved performance and productivity at the individual and organizational levels and the overall societal benefits (Ju, 2019). Companies that invest in human capital seek enhanced organizational commitment and economic value from the workforce, which improves the agency's productivity (Muhumuza & Nangoli, 2019). Organizations often lean more heavily on employees with unique agency-specific knowledge and skills and focus on them for future development and promotion opportunities that contribute to their stability (Ju, 2019). Human capital theory also emphasizes developing talent to create a leadership pipeline ready to assume critical positions when vacated (LeCounte et al., 2017). Organizations that invest in their employees and offer them opportunities to grow with the agency find that employees achieve organizational goals and reciprocate the investment with their loyalty (Ali et al., 2019).

One way to enhance the knowledge and skills of the workforce is to encourage lateral movements within the organization (Jin & Waldman, 2020). This investment in human capital allows participants to experience new and different tasks to broaden and deepen their skill set, making them more productive when promoted (Jin & Waldman, 2020). Agencies that encourage experiential learning keep their workforce engaged, enhancing the organization's health (Jin & Waldman, 2020). Using lateral job assignments can help bridge interim staffing needs, develop employees to fill critical roles in the organization, and avoid the time and expense of searching for external hires (Campion et al., 2022). Lateral assignments also offer developmental opportunities through increased responsibilities or novel experiences (Campion et al., 2022). While human capital theory posits that investment in human capital is necessary, it is essential that agencies understand the short-term costs (e.g., lower productivity) associated when workers move to a new position (Jin & Waldman, 2020).

Servant Leadership Theory. Servant leaders serve others by encouraging employees and teammates to work with purpose and supporting their efforts with increased autonomy and ownership of their work product (Cable, 2018). Servant leadership philosophy discusses that in addition to serving others, leaders help their followers grow and develop into independent thinkers who can positively contribute to society (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). Servant leaders have a social responsibility to find and eliminate inequalities in the workforce and extend opportunities to those individuals who are socially disadvantaged (Northouse, 2019). Servant leaders lead by example and encourage their team to use their creativity to propose new ideas to improve the organization and develop employees to fill critical positions (Cable, 2018). Leaders who demonstrate listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people's growth, and community-building exhibit a servant leadership style (Reilly & Spears, 2018). Each letter in the word SELFLESS reminds leaders to use servant leadership characteristics such as strength, enthusiasm, love, flexibility, long-term orientation, emotions, systems, and spiritual intelligence (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018).

However, leadership is more than a natural or learned ability; it is about humbly serving others (Merida et al., 2015). The Bible calls for individuals to "humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:6, NIV). The Bible also states, "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others." (Phil 2:3-4, NIV). These Bible passages emphasize that leaders (and all individuals, for that matter) have a moral obligation to put others before themselves by demonstrating strong moral and ethical responsibilities to others. (Greenleaf, 1970).

Unfortunately, not all leaders understand how to serve others and can struggle with practicing servant leadership principles. In particular, many leaders are reluctant to relinquish their decision-making authority and encourage subordinates to make significant decisions (Quain, 2018). Another concern is when leaders think they are empowering employees with decision-making authority, but employees feel pressured or abandoned by the leader (Kalhorn, 2020). A problem with the servant leadership model is that it could decrease managerial authority when employees underperform or move to another position (Quain, 2018). Leaders who try to use an inclusive approach to create consensus and incorporate workers' contributions may experience difficulties when a more dominant temperament is necessary to drive decisions (Kalhorn, 2020). Leaders using the servant leadership model should understand how to balance the workforce's needs with the organization's (Kalhorn, 2020).

Theories Summary

Human Capital Theory and Servant Leadership Theory focused on the organization's investment in their people and supporting employees' development (Ballaro & Polk, 2017). Leaders using both theories equip future leaders with the intrapersonal skills needed to succeed as leaders (Day et al., 2014). Critical reflection, ethical leadership, and self-efficacy are required for future leaders to build networked relationships among their coworkers, peers, and superiors (Day et al., 2014). Organizations that utilize the tenants of Human Capital Theory and Servant Leadership Theory as foundational guidance may increase employee retention and commitment because employees find value in their efforts (Osanloo & Grant, 2016).

Actors

Acquisition Critical Employees. Personnel who fulfill the critical role of CO in the Federal Government are valuable commodities because they are the only individuals with authority to procure goods and services on behalf of the Government (Weisman & Richards, 2019). Agencies invest significant time and monetary resources in training personnel to perform acquisition roles, so retaining those employees is critical (Weisman & Richards, 2019). Agencies need to keep their workforce engaged by promoting an environment that values accountability, transparency, and effective communication (Weisman & Richards, 2019). Additionally, a culture of knowledge sharing is needed to encourage collaboration between employees at all seniority levels to ensure the transfer of their tacit knowledge (Carter et al., 2019). Senior leaders closely monitor attrition trends to minimize the loss of employees with specialized knowledge and critical expertise because of its detrimental impact on Federal agencies (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Senior Leaders. Senior leaders actively evaluate their workforce to determine their talents, skills, gaps, and potential (Nowak & Scanlan, 2021). Senior leaders are those supervisory employees who use their experience, exposure, and education to guide and develop capable employees so they are ready to assume leadership roles when needed (Rosenthal et al., 2018). Senior leaders should practice servant leadership by striving to serve others and demonstrating a deep desire to help others succeed in the workplace (Hunt & Weintraub, 2017). To help others succeed, senior leaders develop their employees through employee engagement and leadership training (Ballaro & Polk, 2017). Future leaders typically demonstrate exceptional intrapersonal skills, critical reflection, ethical leadership, and self-efficacy to build networked relationships with coworkers, peers, and superiors (Day et al., 2014). Leaders who provide focused feedback to employees with honest assessments of their current capabilities, developmental needs, and leadership potential will help employees prepare for senior roles in the organization (Heam, 2020).

Constructs

Organizational Effectiveness. Many factors contribute to how succession planning impacts organizational effectiveness, business continuity, and the retention of high-performing employees in a competitive marketplace (Al Suwaidi et al., 2020). While difficult to measure and somewhat subjective, the accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives typically relates to its effectiveness (Shet et al., 2019). Organizations that manage their talent and develop future leaders might demonstrate effectiveness (Al Suwaidi et al., 2020). Agencies that also build a culture of knowledge sharing to increase the expertise of others are considered effective (Younas & Bari, 2020). Organizational effectiveness diminishes when companies fail to identify and encourage employees who are the perfect fit for a particular job based on their demonstrated talent and capabilities (Kareem, 2019). Agencies need to effectively conduct succession planning to manage their talent, ensure their employees develop the needed skills to perform successfully, are fully empowered to make a difference, and share knowledge with their teammates (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019). When agencies mismanage their people, they miss opportunities to recognize employees who can help the organization achieve its goals, increase efficiencies, and effectively use its resources (Kareem, 2019). Succession planning is critical to ensuring organizational effectiveness by providing continuity of operations and ensuring that capable individuals fill key positions and have the institutional and intellectual knowledge to succeed in their new roles (Siewert & Louderback, 2019).

Succession Planning. Succession Planning is a long-term strategy to improve and sustain organizational stability (Gordon & Overbey, 2018). When developing a succession plan, agencies will first identify which positions are critical and will negatively impact the organization if vacant (Whysall et al., 2019). Essential job functions are those at the senior leadership levels, middle managers, or other pivotal decision-making roles that impact succession planning priorities (Davis & Dolson, 2018). Succession planning relies on robust talent management and leadership development to avoid a shortage of leaders that could impact the agency if positions are gapped (Monarth, 2015). Other steps include identifying potential candidates, analyzing successor readiness, assessing skill gaps and capabilities, and organizational commitment (Carter et al., 2019).

To use a sports analogy, organizations consider their bench strength by assessing their workforce members' breadth, depth, critical skills, and exceptional talent (Nowak & Scanlan, 2021). Identifying capable employees engaged, committed, and qualified to assume leadership roles will help the organization succeed and lessen the chance of disruption when making leadership changes (Monarth, 2015). Although 86% of leaders recognize the need and importance of succession planning, only 14% stated their organization does succession planning well because of poor human capital management (Rosenthal et al., 2018). Succession planning relies on talent management, developmental opportunities, and employee retention activities to achieve organizational effectiveness (Carter et al., 2019).

Outcomes of Effective Succession Planning

Employee Commitment. Studies have found that job satisfaction is a significant factor in an employee's decision to remain with their organization (Barkhuizen & Gumede, 2021). Employees want to positively impact their organizations and work for an employer who is attentive to their professional and personal development needs (Weirich, 2017). Individuals wish to add value to their company and not just perform work the way it's always been done (Vickery, 2018). Organizations that reward employees with higher pay, better benefits, increased responsibility, or added autonomy may find workers who demonstrate increased loyalty to the agency because they feel valued (Fadairo et al., 2020). Agencies that engage in talent management practices such as motivating performance, providing job enrichment opportunities, or other engagement activities may also increase the employee's commitment to the organization (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Employee Retention. Organizations should recognize that employees who demonstrate exceptional leadership skills and technical capabilities are rare and difficult to replace (Painter-Morland et al., 2019). Although Government agencies have various talent retention strategies available, they are often poorly applied or neglected (Barkhuizen & Gumede, 2021). Strategies to increase talent retention include offering tangible rewards such as cash or time off or intangible rewards such as choice of work assignments, flexible schedules, or desired developmental opportunities (Thibault-Landry et al., 2017). Employees who recognize the rewards of a career in civil service and understand how their efforts make a positive difference for military service members are more likely to stay with the organization (Fadairo et al., 2020).

Relationship Between Concepts, Theories, Actors, Constructs, and Outcomes

As graphically described in Figure 1, the interrelationship between the concepts, theories, actors, constructs, and outcomes identified for this study are evident within the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework identified the actors for this study as acquisition critical employees and senior leaders. Human capital and servant leadership theories guided the actors to develop a succession planning construct, stressing the concepts outlined for this study. Servant leadership theory was pertinent for this study because leaders have a moral responsibility to put others before themselves, which drives the succession planning construct. Leaders who serve first and lead second demonstrate strong moral and ethical obligations to others (Greenleaf, 1970). Succession planning requires that leaders identify the characteristics needed for leadership positions and recognize that leadership is more than a natural or learned ability; it is about humbly serving others (Merida et al., 2015).

The Bible calls for individuals to "humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6, NIV). The Bible also states, "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others" (Phil 2:3-4, NIV). Greenleaf's (1970) servant leadership philosophy discusses that in addition to serving others, leaders help their followers grow and develop into independent thinkers (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). This study posited that organizations can successfully plan for succession and ensure organizational effectiveness through leadership development, talent management, performance management, and knowledge sharing and transfer. Organizations can measure the effectiveness of their succession planning efforts based on turnover rates and employee retention metrics (Ju, 2019). Lower turnover and higher retention result from positive succession planning efforts (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019).

Summary of the Research Framework

The research framework provided the concepts, theories, and constructs that allowed the delivery an in-depth qualitative analysis and discussion of the problem based on the research questions. The various ideas were notable factors that organizations must examine to develop and implement an effective succession plan. Based on a review of the available literature, data, and independent qualitative analysis, the researcher discussed the benefits and detriments succession planning and its concepts had on organizational effectiveness. Further, the researcher provided potential options for the command to consider to maximize the benefits of succession planning while minimizing any disadvantages.

Definition of Terms

Contracting Officer (CO).

A Contracting Officer is an individual who has the authority to enter, administer, or terminate contracts for supplies or services and bind the Government within the scope of their appointment as provided in the Federal Acquisition Regulation Part 1.602 (FAR, 2022).

Department of the Navy (DoN).

DoN agencies in Southern MD primarily include the Naval Air Systems Command Headquarters (NAVAIR HQ) and its subordinate commands, the Naval Air Warfare Center, Aircraft Division (NAWCAD), and the Fleet Readiness Center (FRC). Together, these agencies serve as the primary provider of air warfare capabilities for the Naval Aviation Enterprise (NAE) (NAVAIR, 2022).

Knowledge Sharing and Transfer.

Knowledge sharing and transfer relate to agency experts sharing lessons learned and experiences with junior employees to help impart their tacit knowledge and organizational expertise to others for future use (Mazorodze & Buckley, 2020).

Leadership Development.

Leadership development refers to formal and informal learning opportunities to expand or enhance an employee's critical thinking, problem-solving, and other skills to lead others in the organization using a strategic lens (Abner et al., 2021).

Performance Management.

Performance management is a term that describes the communication process between the employee and supervisor to relate real-time and ongoing positive or negative feedback about the employee's performance (HCMG, 2019).

Succession Planning.

Succession planning is a long-term strategy that uses a defined process to identify the systematic and methodological efforts to plan for organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021).

Talent Management.

Talent management is a process used by organizations to identify the critical abilities needed to perform specific roles or responsibilities and then match employees with positions that maximize using their inherent strengths (Shahi et al., 2020).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The researcher reviewed the scholarly literature and government-specific resources relative to succession planning constructs to determine assumptions, limitations, and delimitations (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). Assumptions were those underlying details, findings, or apparent facts that formulated the foundational basis of the study but were out of the researcher's control (Simon, 2010). Limitations were those prospective weaknesses or flaws the researcher cannot control and could affect the study's outcome if not mitigated (Simon, 2010). Delimitations were those aspects of the study that the researcher controlled by clearly describing the study's constraints and boundaries (Simon, 2010).

Assumptions

The underlying assumption for this qualitative study was that succession planning remained a top priority for Federal Government organizations (HCMG, 2020). The researcher assumed the reference materials collected by GAO, FedScope, OPM, and others were authentic and free from bias. The researcher used triangulation to corroborate the validity, reliability, and quality of data collected for this study (Roulston, 2018). Triangulation helped minimize the risk of drawing inaccurate conclusions. It relied on the ability to confidently compare data across multiple sources to reach meaningful conclusions (Stahl & King, 2020). Using a case study with qualitative methods also assumed coding accuracy and the correct categorization of responses (Simoni et al., 2019). Additional assumptions included that attrition metrics collected by GAO and OPM reflected an honest and accurate assessment of why COs left their position (OPM, 2022a).

Limitations

A limitation of this research study was that the succession planning concepts suggested from the in-depth analysis of DoN agency CO attrition metrics were not comparable to similar employee populations across the Federal Government because they are too narrow (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Another limitation was that this research was based on a qualitative, single case study and did not represent conclusions the researcher could generalize to other Government agencies or the private sector without further study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Finally, a third potential limitation was that respondents did not answer truthfully during surveys or interviews; however, this limitation was not experienced (Simoni et al., 2019). To minimize the risk of relating study findings limited to only the DoN enterprise, the researcher leveraged similar data from publicly available Federal Government sources. However, the researcher was unable to leverage the publicly available data for comparison because it was not from a similar group of participants (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). To mitigate the potential of deceptive answers to survey or interview questions, the researcher emphasized that all responses would be kept confidential, and the accumulation of data ensured anonymity (Simoni et al., 2019).

Delimitations

The constraints and boundaries for this study were DoN acquisition employees currently or formerly employed under OPM Contracting job series in the Southern MD area. The eligible participants for this research study. The researcher primarily used personal interview data and some existing data from GAO, FedScope, and OPM to establish connections. The researcher provided participants with informed consent about the purpose of the study, their involvement, the research risks, confidentiality, and how the results would be used (Groenewald, 2018). The researcher implemented a fixed thirty-minute time constraint when she interviewed participants to avoid a lengthy data collection period (Yin, 2018). The researcher avoided bias by bracketing or removing assumptions about the individuals or their responses to avoid skewing the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although the need for succession planning is systemic throughout the Federal Government, for positions such as engineering or logistics personnel and at the senior executive service (SES) level, this single case study was constrained to the need to plan for the succession of COs (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019).

Significance of the Study

This qualitative single case study research project benefits the DoN because it provides practical options for improving succession planning processes and ensuring the continuity of operations as CO attrition occurs (OPM, 2018). This study focused on the need for agencies to conduct succession planning to create an adequate talent pool of capable individuals poised to compete for CO positions when vacancies occur (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019). Due to the critical nature of the CO position, a lack of qualified individuals with the knowledge, experience, and abilities to award and administer contracts on behalf of the Federal Government is potentially disastrous for the Federal Government and its servicemembers (Lohier & Johnson, 2019). COs are held personally accountable for unauthorized commitments, negligence, or errors in their contractual documentation and could face discharge, fines, or imprisonment due to their actions, so ensuring that COs are qualified is imperative (Boyd, 2020).

The data collected and analyzed provided agency leaders with the information needed to manage talent and performance, develop leaders, and share and transfer knowledge to facilitate employee retention and commitment to the agency (Mazorodze & Buckley, 2020). This study filled an existing gap in the literature by focusing on the critical nature of the CO position in the Federal Government and the need for robust succession planning for that position (Misch, 2018). Examples of leadership succession are evident throughout the Bible, with leaders such as Moses preparing his successor Joshua by transferring knowledge, providing counsel, delegating tasks, and assisting with the change in leadership (Yoder, 2020). Succession planning benefits every organization because identifying and developing talented employees prepared to accept critical leadership positions helps reduce organizational disruption (Deloitte, 2021).

Reduction of Gaps in the Literature

This study reduced the literature gap surrounding the considerable need for agencies to conduct succession planning to analyze skill deficiencies, identify talent pools, and develop successors capable of performing CO duties in the Federal Government when needed (Jaynes, 2021). A review of the scholarly literature provided many instances that substantiated the need for agencies to practice succession planning to maintain their knowledge base and ensure talent availability (Jaynes, 2021). The need for succession planning is not new, with Kerlin et al. (2008) highlighting the need for agencies to proactively implement succession planning processes because the average age of the Federal workforce is older and closer to retirement. However, ten years later, the 2018 FWPR indicated that succession planning and knowledge transfer are still the highest priority in the Federal Government (Jaynes, 2021). The newly published 2022 FWPR emphasized succession planning and knowledge transfer as the number two priority in the Federal Government (OPM, 2022b). The 2022 FWPR added recruitment as part of the number two priority and indicated the need for agencies to leverage workforce diversity with the next generation of Federal Government employees (OPM, 2022b). Although some agencies mention succession planning strategies like talent management, knowledge transfer, coaching, and mentoring, few agencies hold leaders accountable for using performance management to prepare employees for future CO roles (Mazorodze & Buckley, 2020).

Implications for Biblical Integration

In particular, servant leaders such as Moses answered a calling to serve and implemented God's vision with love and caring (Crowther, 2018). Servant leaders want to develop and train personnel to eventually become their successors and build upon or improve organizational leadership (Crowther, 2018). Moses recognized that he needed to plan for succession to ensure that God's message to His people was sustainable and continued without interruption (Parapat et al., 2020). Moses followed succession planning steps of identifying potential candidates, providing leadership development opportunities, evaluating leader effectiveness, choosing a successor, mentoring the selected individual, providing the newly appointed leader with authority over meaningful assignments, and providing ongoing support (Parapat et al., 2020).

Moses identified potential candidates who demonstrated leadership talent, were wise, respected, and understanding (Numbers 13: 1-3, NIV, Deuteronomy 1:13, NIV). Moses developed a talent pool of twelve candidates, including Joshua, and provided each leader with opportunities to practice and apply their leadership abilities and demonstrate their problem-solving skills (Parapat et al., 2020). Moses evaluated the candidate's performance and ultimately commissioned Joshua as his successor in the presence of others. The Bible states, "So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him." (Numbers 27:18-20, NIV). Moses is an excellent example of a servant leader who challenged Joshua to embrace leadership roles, provided needed encouragement, and offered supporting guidance to help Joshua adapt to changes (Parapat et al., 2020).

In his essay, *The servant as leader* (1970), Robert K. Greenleaf focused on how leaders should focus on serving first and leading second (Greenleaf, 1970). Greenleaf suggested that great leaders put the needs of others first and provide the tools and support needed to cultivate future leaders of the organization (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). A leadership philosophy that is teamwork-centric and based on serving the community is critical in helping others succeed, as demonstrated in Ecclesiastes, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NIV). Leadership development and succession planning are necessary for organizational success and significantly impact God's purpose to teach, support, and help others (Lumpkin & Achen, 2019). Great organizations strive to develop individuals who incorporate strong moral and ethical values as part of their leadership principles to emerge as positive and respected future leaders (Sharma et al., 2019).

The Benefit to Business Practice and Relationship to Cognate

This study benefited succession planning business practices at Federal agencies by providing practical guidance to develop and implement processes to facilitate CO succession planning. This study explored talent management, leadership development, performance management, and knowledge sharing to analyze skill gaps, identify talent pools, and develop successors (Fadairo et al., 2020). This research relates to the leadership cognate because of the significant leadership and technical skills required to serve in the CO role (Weisman & Richards, 2019). It emphasizes the need for leaders at Government agencies to immediately implement succession planning processes for CO positions because of the time and resources required to develop personnel for a CO position (Weisman & Richards, 2019). While the GAO reported in 2021 that the Department of Defense (DoD) made progress with increasing the size of the acquisition workforce, a continued need to recruit and train individuals for the CO role is evident from this study (GAO, 2021a). Agencies that prioritize succession strategies will enjoy a pool of competent and experienced personnel to fulfill vacancies as senior CO workforce members retire over the next five years (GAO, 2021a).

Summary of the Significance of the Study

This qualitative single case study research project aimed to provide practical options for improving succession planning processes and ensuring the continuity of operations as CO attrition occurs (OPM, 2018). The study highlighted the need for leaders to manage their talent, develop leaders using internal resources, manage employee performance, and relate the tacit knowledge of senior employees to junior staff members (Mazorodze & Buckley, 2020). This study focused on the criticality of training and preparing employees to fill CO positions because of the high turnover due to retirement or transfer (Misch, 2018). This study also drew upon biblical lessons to emphasize that succession planning was not new, but has deep roots in the Bible. This study demonstrated that succession planning was needed to provide measurable benefits and reduced organizational disruption when leadership changes occur (Deloitte, 2021).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

A comprehensive review of the professional and academic literature on succession planning provided notable business practices, related studies, and anticipated and discovered themes. Companies must develop and implement a succession plan to ensure organizational sustainability when employees voluntarily or involuntarily leave the company (Gordon & Overbey, 2018). Some organizations neglect succession planning because they perceive it as a giant, time-consuming, and overwhelming task and fail to get started (Adler & Donohue, 2020). Other companies do not recognize the value of developing a leadership pipeline or succession practices and put it off until it is too late (Fernández-Aráoz et al., 2021). Establishing a pipeline of qualified candidates to rise to leadership positions helps demonstrate to the workforce that the agency is forward-thinking and understands the need for a pipeline of capable individuals who can fill critical positions when vacated (Adler & Donohue, 2020). While most companies never neglect their organization’s financial or business aspects, they often fail to consider succession planning to manage their human capital (Adler & Donohue, 2020).

Business Practices

The leading business practices involved with succession planning include identifying the agency’s current and future needs, analyzing skill gaps, identifying talent pools, managing the talent pipeline, communicating feedback, developing successors, and evaluating the succession plan (Abdullahi et al., 2022; Adler & Donohue, 2020). Each step in the succession planning process provides senior leaders with valuable information about the organization and its personnel (Coleman, 2020). As the organizational environment changes, leaders should review each succession planning step and adjust or correct the skills needed, the talent pool candidates, or the successor development process (Lauby, 2019). Succession planning is not pre-selecting successors but instead is a strategic process to identify the skill sets needed to achieve current and future organizational goals (Abdullahi et al., 2022). Organizations that strive to have several employees ready to assume critical roles, such as the CO position are well positioned for continued success (Adler & Donohue, 2020).

Identifying Skills Needed. The first step in succession planning is identifying the skills needed to perform the CO work successfully, not just now but in the future (Adler & Donohue, 2020). Agencies need to imagine a workforce capable of meeting future agency demands and determine the required skills and experiences workers require to ensure mission success (Devlin, 2019). Senior leaders have to think beyond the individual worker and focus on the broader workforce when identifying the skills required to perform the CO's work (Devlin, 2019). While agencies typically conduct a job analysis to collect the relevant information needed to accomplish the CO job, analyzing the content of job advertisements for similar positions may further highlight desired skills for future demands (Rios et al., 2020). COs are required to demonstrate technical and subject matter expertise in Federal Government procurement practices (FAR, 2022). Looking ahead to the 21st century, it is apparent that workers have to exhibit a broad skill set that caters to the technological demands of a globalized workforce (Rios et al., 2020). 21st-century skills are cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills that demonstrate a worker's strength, stability, and competence, but allow for flexibility when unforeseen events occur (Rios et al., 2020).

Agencies should also consider internal or external factors to determine the skill sets needed to ensure future organizational readiness (Adler & Donohue, 2020). Decision models can assist senior leaders with visualizing, streamlining, categorizing, and summarizing the information collected in a logical way for analysis (Krogerus et al., 2018). The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis provides a systematic process to identify and evaluate the internal and external factors related to the organization's future success (Tsangas et al., 2019). Strengths and weaknesses identify internal agency factors such as the ability to collaborate across departments, critical thinking, talent management, and employee engagement (Gamble et al., 2019). Opportunities and threats are external factors such as demographics, regulatory changes, environmental concerns, or technological changes that could be advantageous or adverse, but the organization has little or no control over them (Tsangas et al., 2019).

The National Contract Management Association (NCMA) developed the Contract Management Standard™ (CMS™) Publication to define guiding principles for contract management (NCMA, 2019b). This standard delineates the pre-award, award, and post-award contract phases, and seven primary contracting competencies needed by contracting professionals (NCMA, 2019b). The CMS™ underwent a rigorous drafting process that included surveys, consensus activities, peer reviews, and public comments (NCMA, 2019b). The result was the production of an authoritative document published by the American National Standard Institute (ANSI) as an American National Standard (ANS) known as ANSI/NCMA ASD 1-2019 (NCMA, 2019b). The CMS™ provides the foundational information for the Contract management body of knowledge (CMBOK)®, which further explains and expands the concepts introduced in the CMS™ (NCMA, 2019b). The CMBOK® identified leadership, management, guiding principles, pre-award, award, post-award, and learning as the seven primary contracting competencies needed by contracting professionals (NCMA, 2019a). The CMBOK® provides guidance and breaks down each of the seven competencies into subject matter components (NCMA, 2019a). Most agencies could easily identify the need for COs to demonstrate the ability to interpret guiding principles and the work associated with the pre-award, award, and post-award contracting phases (NCMA, 2019a). CMBOK® further suggests that continuous and lifelong learning, leadership, management, and professional development are also required (NCMA, 2019a). It is essential that COs demonstrate the breadth and depth of contract knowledge to think critically, use problem-solving skills, and propose potential solutions when challenges arise (Rendon, 2018).

Analyze Skill Gaps. Once senior leaders identify and document the required skills needed to perform the CO position in the future, they should openly discuss skills and gaps in the workforce (Desarno et al., 2021; Burke & Erickson, 2020). Talent management is one way to help leaders proactively determine which skills are lacking and to what extent (Whysall et al., 2019). Leaders carefully consider hard and soft skills and the proper balance of each when assessing skill gaps (Kapoutsis et al., 2019). Hard skills are related to job-related knowledge, technical ability, life experiences, or education (Kapoutsis et al., 2019). Soft skills are related to leadership, problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal, or teamwork (Kapoutsis et al., 2019).

To help accurately assess an employee, leaders collect and review feedback using various assessment tools, including job performance review data, employee surveys, interviewing, and 360-degree instruments (Van Oosten et al., 2019). A comprehensive assessment will assist leaders with identifying potential talent gaps and provide an in-depth understanding of an individual's strengths and weaknesses (Clarke, 2018). The assessment tools help to identify changes in the employee's behavior, effectiveness, work attitudes, or other areas are needed (Van Oosten et al., 2019). Employees who seek opportunities to fill their talent gaps, strengthen their leadership abilities, and improve their interpersonal skills make themselves competitive for future work possibilities (Gan et al., 2021).

Once leaders identify the needed skills, the organization can determine how to provide the workforce access to the training and development opportunities necessary to acquire the missing competencies (Olatunji et al., 2017). Collaborating with other acquisition professionals could help prospective COs effectively work with internal and external stakeholders and form partnerships to fill knowledge deficiencies (Wilkinson, 2019). To successfully collaborate with others, workers develop and demonstrate performance built on an individual's integrity and character, strengthening leadership competence (Wilkinson, 2019). Many agencies offer leadership development programs where employees can learn, explore, and refine their leadership style and develop a network of trusted advisors (Cavanaugh, 2017). Due to limited spaces available in these programs, candidate selection is often competitive and requires leaders to select applicants based on their performance record and not popularity (Armstrong & Taylor, 2017). Agencies that choose to fill talent gaps by investing in their current workforce make a deliberate decision to develop those employees into the organization's future leaders (Armstrong & Taylor, 2017). Employees could pursue a higher-level or terminal degree program to bring a refreshed perspective from academia to the workplace (Jantzen, 2019).

Identify Talent Pools. Agencies should identify internal and external candidates to develop a pool of individuals who demonstrate commitment to the organization and a willingness to learn the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the CO role (Schepker et al., 2018). External candidates may require additional time to learn the organizational culture, but can offer an unbiased perspective on potential issues not apparent to internal candidates (Schepker et al., 2018). Leaders may also identify high-performing employees who demonstrate organizational commitment, technical competence, and leadership potential as promising candidates in the talent pool (Desarno et al., 2021). Succession planning is rooted in the philosophy that agencies want to recruit the best talent possible and provide employees ongoing professional leadership development opportunities to develop an internal talent pool (Cavanaugh, 2017). Agencies that perform succession planning well fill their talent pool with many qualified candidates ready to compete for vacancies (Cavanaugh, 2017). Identifying a robust collection of talented employees will allow the organization to fill vacancies quickly when a voluntary or involuntary departure occurs (Desarno et al., 2021).

Organizations that promote a culture of respect for all individuals tend to attract the best talent because they consider their employees as internal customers (Bitterle, 2020). The Federal Government consistently struggles to develop a talent pool because many employees leave the organization within the first three to five years (FedScope, 2022). Full-time employees under 30 years old are less than 7% of the federal workforce compared to 20% of private-sector employers (PPS & BCG, 2022). With the next generation of public servants in jeopardy, it is critical that agencies quickly rethink how to attract and retain workers for a career in public service (PPS & BCG, 2022). To attract a workforce of diverse and inclusive employees, the Federal Government needs to develop an employer brand or reputation that demonstrates itself as a strong, positive, and rewarding employer (PPS & BCG, 2022). Federal agencies that encourage innovation and new ways of thinking provide employees the opportunity to work on the country’s most unique and pressing challenges in the workplace (PPS & BCG, 2022). Engagement begins with recruitment, and if recruiters are not excited, animated, and enthusiastic about sharing the opportunities available with their agency, the recruitment process will become a dismal failure (PPS & BCG, 2022).

Managing the Talent Pipeline. Effectively managing talent is a challenging task. Once leaders identify a pool of qualified employees, they must create a work environment culture that encourages and rewards employees who stay with the organization (Sylvis et al., 2020). Managing the attrition of acquisition critical employees is a problem that plagues DoD, with approximately 30% of DoD workers leaving their agency after eight years of employment or less (Ahn & Menichini, 2021). The 2021 Training industry report shows that Government and military organizations spend about $1,482 per employee per year, the most per learner based on the 2021 report (Freifeld, 2021). However, turnover costs also include advertising, recruiting, travel, relocation, and training which can quickly approach 50-60% of an employee's annual salary, with experienced employees being more difficult to replace (Li et al., 2022; Barker, 2017). In the case of the contract specialist position, OPM job series 1102, it takes an average of three to five years for an employee to become proficient in the DoD contracting process, with many acquisition professionals believing it takes ten years or more (Fischetti, 2019)

Employees may look for other job prospects to increase their salary, find more challenging work opportunities, job advancement, or if their value system no longer aligns with the agency's values (Sokolowsky, 2022). A recent study found that 73% of employees change jobs to advance their careers, while only 27% remain with their current employer for new opportunities (Sokolowsky, 2022). When people change careers, it should be because they are following God's calling and not because of poor leadership at the company (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016). Many teachings describe ethical principles and boundaries throughout the Bible o remind leaders to follow their moral compass and “don’t say anything you don’t mean” (Matthew 5:33, MSG).

Leaders find that while retained employees are qualified and demonstrate the competencies needed to ascend to leadership positions, some are reluctant to apply or uninterested in the CO job (Baker et al., 2019b). A lack of interest in leadership positions is not unique to the Federal Government. A recent study conducted in higher education of mid-career faculty members demonstrated that up to 40% of survey respondents felt unprepared for prospective leadership roles (Baker et al., 2019b). An October 2021 study found that only 33% of employees searched internally for new opportunities because of the perception that favoritism occurs with a specific employee pre-selected for the position (Smith et al., 2022).

Other suggested reasons for the lack of enthusiasm to ascend to the CO position could result from personnel shortages, the inability to hire replacements, heightened responsibilities, lack of management support, and an overabundance of work without a commensurate increase in salary (McMullin, 2012). The shortage of experienced COs is a problem that results in the selection of inappropriate contract types, the inability to effectively conduct acquisition planning, ineffective contract management, increased protests, and a lack of accountability for errors (McMullin, 2012). Avoiding a leak in the talent pipeline requires that senior leadership recognize the implications of a disengaged or apathetic workforce and the significant damage it can cause (Baker et al., 2019b). Workers who are discouraged, disheartened, or feel undervalued by their organization are more likely to seek other employment (Baker et al., 2019b).

Communicate Feedback. As part of the succession process, leaders communicate their honest assessment using constructive feedback on workers’ strengths, weaknesses, and capability gaps and provide opportunities to overcome their limitations (Greszler, 2020). Leaders and supervisors are responsible for assisting Contract Specialists who aspire to become a CO by providing them with challenging work assignments and shadowing opportunities to learn the position's duties (McMullin, 2012). The feedback loop between leaders and staff requires open communication and the ability for employees to feel empowered to speak up about issues that impact them without fear of retribution (PPS & BCG, 2022). In turn, leaders must honestly and openly communicate performance feedback to employees and provide a genuine assessment of their potential for future advancement (PPS & BCG, 2022). Agencies that assume everyone has a valuable perspective offer multiple options to communicate feedback to ensure that great ideas flow faster to senior leadership (PPS & BCG, 2022). However, if an individual is not absorbing the information or demonstrating the capabilities needed to advance to the CO position, leadership is obligated to inform the individual of their limitations (McMullin, 2012).

To effectively communicate feedback to employees, supervisors should demonstrate the ability to deliver comments to employees constructively and objectively (GAO, 2019). Providing feedback to high-performing employees who demonstrate an excellent work ethic is easier than tactfully explaining poor performance and shortcomings to an underperforming employee. (Levine et al., 2020). Leaders must honestly, but compassionately, hold difficult conversations with poor performers knowing that their inputs may motivate or discourage them (Levine et al., 2020). Agencies are responsible for ensuring that supervisors have the requisite training, skills, and experience to relate excellent and inadequate performance concerns to employees (Greszler, 2020). Rewarding employees with monetary compensation, time-off, office-level awards, selection for a coveted assignment, or other meaningful ways will help retain top performers (GAO, 2019). Supervisors should also demonstrate the ability to counsel employees who are poor performers and document areas for improvement in a performance improvement plan (PIPs)

(Greszler, 2020). However, fewer than 15% of supervisors rated low-performing employees as less than fully successful, even though almost 80% of supervisors stated managing an underperforming employee (Greszler, 2020). If supervisors cannot effectively relate performance issues, they are likely unfit to fulfill supervisory duties and are not helping their employees succeed (GAO, 2019). Federal agencies that fail to reward high performers or discipline poor performers may find that their best employees leave the agency because they are frustrated with the feedback loop (Greszler, 2020).

Develop Successors. The last step is to provide development opportunities to those employees to nurture a group capable of competing for open positions (Day et al., 2014). Some scholars characterize successor development as expanding the organization's bench strength by growing the leadership pipeline with several capable employees instead of a single individual (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Developing the skills and abilities of employees in the talent pool allows the organization to strengthen its talent base and ensure workers are ready to assume increased responsibilities when needed (Chaturvedi, 2016). An organizational culture that expects and encourages professional development opportunities is critical for talent management (Cavanaugh, 2017). Some agencies overlook a vital factor in engaging and retaining valuable employees by challenging them with new, different, or stimulating experiences at work (Claus, 2019). Agencies that encourage employees to participate in diverse programs that offer experiential learning and mentorship opportunities and recognize that the investment is worth the reward is needed (Cavanaugh, 2017). Employees who temporarily rotate to other parts of the organization or other agencies will return with fresh ideas, new perspectives, or a deeper understanding of the complexity of leadership roles (Cavanaugh, 2017).

Performance management is another relevant component of succession planning because it helps to clarify organizational goals, differentiates between employee performance, identifies weaknesses and strengths of the workforce, and is the foundation for positive or negative administrative actions (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). A robust performance management process allows supervisors to hold employees accountable and make unbiased personnel decisions to motivate, engage, and retain their top talent (Claus, 2019). Holding supervisors responsible for their employee's professional development and continuous learning as a performance management objective could help prioritize its importance (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). To retain top talent, agencies could implement a stay interview as part of the performance management process (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021).

The stay interview is an individualized conversation with employees intended to learn why they stay with the organization and what could cause them to disengage and leave the agency (Driscoll, 2022). This approach allows leaders to develop strategies to prevent or mitigate turnover, discovering fixable problems during an exit interview (Driscoll, 2022). The stay interview creates a positive and trusting relationship between the employee and supervisor and demonstrates the organization's attention to learning and growth opportunities (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). This interview is only effective if a positive and trusting relationship between the employee and supervisor allows for open and honest communication without concern for reprisal for negative feedback (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). It also requires leaders to investigate the problems and make changes to meet employees' needs, such as recognition for their contributions or clarity of organizational goals (Driscoll, 2022).

Evaluate the Succession Plan. Companies should regularly evaluate the succession plan to ensure continued success with succession planning (Adler & Donohue, 2020). Organizations may implement monthly or quarterly reviews to determine how the company performs against the plan and adjust as needed (Adler & Donohue, 2020). While it is tempting to close the book on succession planning once the agency implements the initial plan, reviewing talent pools and rating employees frequently will help the talent pipeline fresh and alert leadership when candidates become ready for more challenging assignments (Adler & Donohue, 2020).

To help contract specialist employees gain the experience they need to become great COs, the PG should rotate employees to other departments or parts of the organization by embracing diversified professional development (Coleman, 2020). Employees who diversify and generalize their learning and professional experience beyond their specialty can view problems differently instead of based on narrowly-focused experiences (Coleman, 2020). Employees who apply knowledge gained from various competencies are more adept at solving complex problems using their critical thinking skills because they have more experience to use when developing recommendations (Coleman, 2020). Obtaining expertise across multiple disciplines is exceptionally effective in molding and leveraging the talents of the professional workforce to fill critical acquisition roles when needed (Abdullahi et al., 2022).

Related Studies

There are many studies related to the need for organizations to plan for succession, its benefits, and the consequences of inadequately preparing for personnel changes who occupy mission-critical positions. The researcher did not find any literature that contradicted the need for organizations to use succession planning as an integral part of their talent management practice. When searching the scholarly literature specific to succession planning in the Federal Government, the researcher discovered several studies that discuss the need for succession planning and talent management in Federal Government agencies. Reports from the General

Accounting Office (GAO), the OPM, Human Capital Management in Government (HCMG), Deloitte, and the Partnership for Public Service were reviewed and utilized as a part of this study.

For more than one hundred years, the GAO has conducted studies at the request of Congress and provided non-partisan and fact-based findings with recommendations to improve government operations (GAO, 2022). The GAO has published several recent studies that discuss the need for succession planning. In particular, their 2019 study on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) called for the Secretary of VA to design a department-wide succession planning strategy for mission-critical leadership positions (GAO, 2019). The report cited that a third of the VA workforce is retirement eligible in 2022, highlighting the urgency to develop a pipeline of high-potential employees capable of filling key leadership positions when vacated (GAO, 2019). GAO's Centennial webinar: Oversight issues for the next 100 years featured succession planning as one of the topics (GAO, 2022). In this report, leaders discussed the need for a strategy to develop a multi-generational and diverse talent pool for Government agencies to implement a successful approach to talent management and plans for succession (GAO, 2022). GAO reported that the DoD acknowledged inconsistency with succession planning across the department and its difficulty retaining millennials but has not implemented a strategy to resolve its talent management challenges (GAO, 2021a). GAO's report noted similar issues at non-DoD agencies like the Department of Transportation and the Department of Treasury with a lack of succession planning and talent management issues (GAO, 2021b).

The OPM is focused on Human Capital Management priorities and established the FWPR in response to a recommendation from a 2014 GAO report entitled, Human capital: Strategies to help agencies meet their missions in an era of highly constrained resources (GAO, 2014). The 2018 and 2022 FWPRs established government-wide human capital priorities based on current and emerging workforce challenges and incorporated data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) to identify priorities that spur productivity and organizational success (OPM, 2021). The FWPRs indicated that federal government agencies are keenly aware of the need for succession planning, knowledge transfer, and talent management (OPM, 2022b; OPM, 2018,). GAO supported the requirement to create a diverse talent pipeline to allow agencies to respond to current and future staffing demands (GAO, 2019). The HCMG reports published over the past three years emphasize that succession planning is among the top priorities in Governmental agencies (HCMG, 2020).

Deloitte is a consulting company that publishes reports, survey results, and articles that leverage research, analytics, and industry insights that clients can use to advance their business programs and improve employee performance (Deloitte, 2022). Deloitte's annual Global human capital trends special report provides statistical and trends analyses about succession, talent supply, and government impact (Deloitte, 2021). Deloitte emphasized the need for leaders to follow through with actions on areas identified for changes and demonstrate transparency in communicating organizational priorities (Deloitte, 2021). The survey also found that 80% of respondents indicated that leadership readiness is a significant internal barrier to future talent management and succession planning strategies (Deloitte, 2021).

The Partnership for Public Service (PPS) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated exclusively to building a better government and more robust democracy (PPS & BCG, 2022). The partnership provides reports, articles, blogs, videos, and podcasts on leadership, workforce, innovation, and collaboration that impact the federal agencies and workers (PPS & BCG 2022). The partnership annually publishes the Best places to work in the Federal Government®, together with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), which assesses employee engagement throughout Federal Government agencies (PPS & BCG 2022). The partnership also provides a robust catalog of leadership training for Federal Government employees at various career levels (PPS & BCG 2022).

Each resource provided extensive insights and suggestions for implementing succession planning processes specific to Federal Government agencies. These studies revealed that the Federal Government values succession planning and expects agencies to comply with the recommendations. However, as evidenced by the 2018 and 2022 FWPRs, succession planning is still a top priority in the Federal Government, with agencies demonstrating little progress in implementing succession planning since 2018. Therefore, agencies that do not prioritize succession planning strategies may find themselves without a qualified workforce as experienced employees leave the organization.

Anticipated and Discovered Themes

Organizations desperately need to develop succession planning strategies, as evidenced by a recent study reporting that formal succession plans exist in only about 35% of companies (Robinson, 2020). The same study also noted that two-thirds of retirement-eligible Federal workers did not transfer their knowledge to junior employees before leaving the organization because there was no formalized process to guide them to impart their knowledge to others (Robinson, 2020). These statistics are troubling, but several themes emerged from the literature review to help implement succession planning strategies in an organization without a formal plan. To successfully develop a succession plan and implement it, organizations need senior leaders who demonstrate transparency, trust, and emotional intelligence to engage employees and manage organizational knowledge; otherwise, implementing succession plans is nearly impossible (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017).

Building Transparency and Trust. Leaders build an organizational culture of trust and transparency when they proactively share pertinent corporate information with employees, peers, or other stakeholders and ask for honest and constructive feedback on the related information (Yi et al., 2017). Openly communicating with staff builds trust and engages employees to invest their time and creative talents to ask questions, challenge authority, and suggest new ideas to solve challenging problems (Yi et al., 2017). When communicating, transparent leaders also display genuine personal feelings (e.g., emotions, strengths, and weaknesses) (Yi et al., 2017). Leaders who model transparency solidify an authentic and trusting environment where two-way communication is welcomed and encouraged to improve employee engagement (Jiang & Luo, 2018).

Employees who work for transparent leaders are often more creative because of the information exchange, feedback, and open communication to facilitate employee engagement (Yi et al., 2017). In transparent organizations, employees are rewarded and encouraged to disclose new ideas, discuss procedures, question authority, challenge stereotypes, and suggest alternative solutions to problems (Yi et al., 2017). Employees who believe their senior leadership is honest and transparent when sharing information about organizational goals improve job performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Jiang & Luo, 2018). Leaders who model transparency and cultivate an environment of trust and authenticity find that increased communication flow improves employee engagement and commitment to the organization (Jiang & Luo, 2018). Unfortunately, a recent study by Deloitte found that only about 18% of respondents reportedly consider their leaders transparent and trustworthy with relating to or receiving information (Deloitte, 2019). To successfully implement succession planning, many organizations will first have to develop a culture of trust and transparency to demonstrate that the proposed succession planning strategy benefits employees as much or more than the organization (He et al., 2019).

Emotional Intelligence (EI). Servant leaders who are naturally self-aware, exhibit empathy, and are open to feedback demonstrate high EI (Hunt & Weintraub, 2017). Emotionally intelligent leaders can understand how direct reports feel and demonstrate the ability to view the problem through the employees' lens (Irving & Strauss, 2019). Leaders with EI consistently display exceptional integrity and the ability to behave appropriately in interpersonally challenging situations (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021). Additionally, employees who demonstrate high EI can better adapt to changes or disruptions in the workplace and maintain excellent work performance levels, positive professional activities, and few counterproductive work behaviors (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021).

Leaders can measure their emotional intelligence by collecting data and metrics using self-assessment and 360-degree feedback tools (Van Oosten et al., 2019). Leaders obtain candid feedback from the instruments and suggest improvement areas to strengthen their EI to refine leadership behaviors (Longenecker & McCartney, 2020). Emotionally intelligent leaders are those employees who communicate well, are optimistic, demonstrate flexibility in their thoughts, and are emotionally balanced (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021). As public servants, EI requires self-awareness, control, social cognizance, and relationship management (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021). Leaders who follow Jesus' example use ethical and moral principles to engage employees with challenging and meaningful tasks (Buhler & Evans, 2018). Servant leaders follow their heart and moral compass to make ethical decisions on their employees' behalf (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016). Proverbs states, "Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul" (Proverbs 2:9-10, NIV). The entire organization realizes a tremendous benefit when leaders use wisdom from their loving hearts instead of a balance sheet when making decisions (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016).

Some organizations are exploring artificial intelligence (AI) to imitate human thinking tasks and intellectual capabilities, including the ability to reason, problem-solve, learn, recall information, and apply knowledge (Eriksson et al., 2020). Human-inspired AI can reportedly combine cognitive and emotional intelligence with critical thinking techniques to understand consequences and provide suggested solutions (Bossen, 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Some AI systems are capable of deep learning that closely resembles the human thought process by demonstrating the ability to detect, interpret, learn, and understand human emotions (Bossen, 2020). Although AI cannot replicate all aspects of EI, it can personalize the user's experience by demonstrating adaptability, flexibility, and dynamic perception (Prentice et al., 2020).

Followership. Followership is part of any leadership approach. A follower or subordinate is needed in the leadership process to help accomplish the leader's goals and objectives (Northouse, 2019). The Kellerman typology defines followers by their level of engagement (Northouse, 2019). The follower engagement levels include isolates, bystanders, participants, activists, and diehards (Northouse, 2019). Followers that are diehards are those individuals who are entirely devoted to their cause and will act alongside (or against) leaders based on their extreme engagement and commitment to an ideal, belief, or organization (Gobble, 2017). A recent example of diehard followers is the group of individuals who stormed the Capitol and staged an insurrection because of their devotion to President Trump (Goethals, 2021).

Interestingly, people follow their leader with a passion for the cause regardless of whether they promote a self-serving or selfless agenda. Individuals who are faithful followers of

Jesus find beauty in all God does by genuinely and lovingly serving Him (Merida et al., 2015). Christian followers are selfless and charged with helping leaders serve and tend the flock (DeLashmutt, n.d.). “And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” (1 Thessalonians 5:14-15, NIV). Christian followers listen to God’s word and further communicate God’s teachings to others using the truth, guidance, and direction given to them by church leaders (DeLashmutt, n.d.). In this context, they are followers, first to understand and embrace the message, then lead others by furthering the message (DeLashmutt, n.d.).

Employee Engagement. An organization’s success or failure is often a direct result of its leaders and corporate culture (Mello, 2019). Leaders who are employee-focused and concentrate on developing, engaging, and empowering their employees see an employee’s emotional commitment to the organization and its goals (Raley & Buller, 2019). Their level of trust primarily drives employees to engage in the organization’s workplace and support its leadership (Jiang & Luo, 2018). Engaged employees work because they believe in the organization’s mission and goals and care about their work on behalf of the company (Kruse, 2015). Workers engaged in their work demonstrate commitment, passion, enthusiasm, and energy when performing their jobs (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017).

When employees care about their work and feel valued, they demonstrate commitment by putting in discretionary or voluntary work effort because of the benefit it offers fellow workers and the company (GAO, 2019). Engaged employees exhibit superior performance, increased job satisfaction, and commitment to remain with the organization (Yanchus et al., 2020). Facilitating employee engagement as part of succession planning efforts results in an employee exhibiting superior performance, increased job satisfaction, and commitment to remain with the organization (Yanchus et al., 2020). High-performing employees will push each other to maintain excellence, achieve more, and provide increased value to the company (Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2018). Leaders who manage their talent intelligently and effectively by communicating openly and honestly encourage employee engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Leaders who use a people-focused perspective and prioritize their human capital investment develop employees capable of assuming future leadership roles, ensuring continuity of operations when a strategic or unexpected transition in leadership occurs (Ritchie, 2020).

Effective Listening. An often overlooked but critical leadership skill is actively listening to others and providing full attention to the speaker (Baker et al., 2019a). Active listening skills are essential for establishing and sustaining interpersonal relationships (Bjornestad et al., 2021). Critical listeners listen for content (Minehart et al., 2022). Listening for content involves focusing on what is actually said and not allowing any premature judgments or biases to cloud what was said (Baker et al., 2019a). Critical listeners also judge the speaker's reliability when hearing what they say (Minehart et al., 2022). A relational listener is listening to build connections and understand any emotions in the underlying message (Minehart et al., 2022). When listening for feelings and values, the speaker's tone, body language, and word choice become part of the listening experience and allow the speaker to influence others (Baker et al., 2019a). A task-focused listener shapes the conversation to focus on the meaning and transfer of information (Minehart et al., 2022). Listening for meaning describes an aspect of deep listening that requires careful attention and practice to become proficient at discerning the underlying purpose of the conversation while still listening for content (Baker et al., 2019a). The Bible discusses active listening in the book of James, stating, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19-20, NIV). Dr. Steven Covey also discusses active listening as habit five to seek first to understand, then to be understood (Covey, 2013). Covey reminds people to truly and actively listen to the speaker and not listen with the intent to reply (Covey, 2013).

Respectful Inquiry. Respectful inquiry involves asking questions openly while actively and attentively listening to the speaker (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Many leaders use respectful inquiry to motivate followers, increase team effectiveness, and encourage work relationships (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Some studies estimate that only 6% of all speech acts are questions, while 60% are in response to a previous question (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Questions are open-ended when they invite individuals to share their thoughts with an elaborate and undetermined response through two-way interaction (Tan et al., 2020). Listeners often express verbal and nonverbal signs to the speaker to indicate their interest in the response (Tan et al., 2020). Attentive listeners maintain eye contact, demonstrate appropriate facial expressions, display head movements to express understanding, and provide audible verbal assurances (Tan et al., 2020; Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018).

Training and Development. Organizations that prioritize human capital investment with training and development programs typically enjoy higher employee satisfaction and reduced employee turnover (Mello, 2019). Programs offered by employers should incorporate both training and development aspects to equip future leaders for any challenge they may face (5 reasons to invest, 2019). Teaching professionals facilitate most training programs and focus on best practices from learned experiences (5 reasons to invest, 2019). On the other hand, development programs are more future-focused and geared to provide employees with experiential learning opportunities using job rotations or stretch assignments (5 reasons to invest, 2019). Recent studies show that many organizations are shifting their focus from formal education and training to experiential experiences in the workplace and other professional settings to engage in professional learning (Wallin, 2020). Organizations that want to create a learning-intensive work environment have to provide new opportunities for employees to learn by performing challenging tasks, which develop the employee's confidence, proficiency, and commitment (Wallin, 2020). Upon completing the tasks, leaders should provide employees feedback about their performance and support as they attempt new or more complex jobs (Wallin, 2020).

Executive coaches provide senior leaders with opportunities to further develop their leadership skills to make them more effective in the workplace. A good executive coach is skilled at asking open-ended questions, listening intently, and providing constructive feedback to senior leaders to improve their performance (Hunt & Weintraub, 2017). An executive coach assists learners in interpreting and effectively applying training concepts in the workplace while remaining by their side to help if they struggle (Underhill et al., 2007). An external coach's role often differs from a mentor-mentee relationship or a supervisor-employee arrangement (Stoltzfus, 2018). Executive coaches help leaders clarify their organizational vision, enhance their critical thinking skills, improve problem-solving abilities, assess missing leadership competencies, and suggest resources to allow coachees to acquire lacking skills (Stoltzfus, 2018). Leaders who can face and overcome daily challenges by involving their team to develop solutions are successful in the workplace (Stoltzfus, 2018).

Career pathing and talent management boards are potential options to create internal growth potential for employees (Sokolowsky, 2022). Leaders should assist employees with setting long-term goals to develop a clear view of possible career paths available to achieve those goals (Sokolowsky, 2022). Some scholars argue that talent management disproportionately invests resources in the 20% of employees who contribute 80% of the value based on Pareto's law (Kwon & Jang, 2022). Employees characterized as talents demonstrate more positive work attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors compared to other employees (De Boeck et al., 2018). However, those employees with high potential may experience burnout due to the excessive responsibilities and availability requirements expected because they are considered high performers (De Boeck et al., 2018). Those employees with low potential for upward mobility in the organization may become disengaged and less invested in developing their skills (Kwon & Jang, 2022). Organizations that create an environment that facilitates teamwork and learning successfully avoid a culture of destructive internal competition (Kwon & Jang, 2022). However, all employees should consider the value and impact of their contributions to the organization before comparing whether training resources are distributed fairly (Kwon & Jang, 2022).

Leadership Styles. Based on the research conducted for this literature review, it is clear that no single leadership style works for every leader or situation (Northouse, 2019). It helps leaders to become familiar with various leadership styles and aware of how their personal characteristics may help or hinder their effective use (Bertsch, 2017). Effective leaders recognize that the situation often defines what leadership attributes are needed to succeed (Northouse, 2019). Most scholars agree that leadership involves influence, motivation, and the ability to empower others to achieve organizational goals (Bertsch, 2017). The best leadership style is the one that allows leaders and subordinates to accomplish organizational goals based on the specific situation (Northouse, 2019). The researcher explored servant leadership, transformational leadership, and situational leadership, and all styles seem to promote succession planning concepts (Burke & Erickson, 2020).

Servant Leadership. Greenleaf (1970) first described servant leadership in his essay, *The servant leader*, as leaders who put the needs of others as their priority. Leaders serve others by fostering a growth culture in their organization and using their moral compass to guide their decisions (Qiu & Dooley, 2019). Servant leaders are trustworthy and demonstrate a sense of social responsibility deeply rooted in their character to promote a culture of cooperation and collaboration in their organization (Qiu & Dooley, 2019). Leaders serve their subordinates by helping them appreciate and understand their full potential, empowering them as decision-makers, and inspiring them to work toward a common goal of solving organizational problems (Qiu & Dooley, 2019). Leaders with a service-oriented mindset are successful because they involve subordinates in decision-making, encourage teamwork and community, display ethical and caring behavior, and ultimately enhance employees' personal growth (Spears, 2020). A leadership philosophy that is teamwork centric and based on serving the community is critical to the individual and the organization (Reilly & Spears, 2018). Servant leaders desire to help others succeed, as demonstrated in Ecclesiastes, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NIV). Servant leaders follow God's purpose to teach, support, and help employees when they stumble. Servant leaders make decisions based on gathering information from knowledgeable individuals and because they occupy a specific hierarchal position in the organization (Spears, 2020). Servant leaders want to develop and train their personnel to eventually become their successors and build upon or improve organizational leadership (Crowther, 2018).

Jesus exemplified servant leadership with countless examples throughout the Bible. Jesus taught his disciples that mutual trust is the foundation needed to develop every relationship (Kim et al., 2018). In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples were frightened that they would drown during a storm that overtook their boat while Jesus slept. The disciples woke Jesus in a panic, but Jesus responded, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” (Matthew 8:26, NIV). Jesus was a leader who taught his subordinates to trust that he would protect them in turbulent or difficult circumstances (Kim et al., 2018). Mutual trust allows teams to create a shared vision, work collaboratively, improve flexibility, and spur innovation (Kim et al., 2018). Servant leaders may challenge subordinates to think independently or develop creative solutions, but do not leave them unprotected or alone (Qiu & Dooley, 2019). Servant leaders practice succession planning by training and preparing subordinates to step up or step into leadership roles in the future (Ali & Mehreen, 2019).

Transformational Leadership. Transformational leadership is a methodology where the leader is fundamental in sparking change and transforming others to exceed performance expectations using influence and engagement (Northouse, 2019). Leaders create connections and build relationships with their followers by attending to their needs, motivating them to set stretch goals, and inspiring them to reach beyond what they believe is possible (Northouse, 2019). These leaders are skilled at empowering and nurturing their employees to uncover their hidden talents and abilities that bring value. Transformational leadership techniques focus on integrative methods to produce novel solutions using a group-oriented approach that emphasizes striving to attain higher-level goals (Jiang & Chen, 2018).

Leaders following the transformational leadership model encourage their followers to develop creative solutions and provide positive recognition for their efforts to build trust further and focus on the collective good (Jiang & Chen, 2018). These leaders are often charismatic, well-liked, and demonstrate a genuine ability to touch their follower's hearts (Ahmad & Saad, 2020). Transformational leaders model the behavior they want others to emulate, inspire others with a shared vision, challenge the status quo, build trust with empowerment, and reward employees' positive efforts (Northouse, 2019). Transformational leaders create a plan for succession by focusing on strategic planning, mentoring, and understanding the changing landscape of skills needed for future work efforts (Burke & Erickson, 2020).

Situational Leadership. Situational Leadership II® (SLII®) is a well-known leadership style used frequently because of its straightforward approach, allowing leaders to grasp the main concepts and use them immediately (Blanchard & Hersey, 1996). SLII® is a familiar model that divides styles and behaviors into four quadrants representing how a leader's behavior corresponds to an employee's developmental level (Wright, 2017). SLII® focuses the leader's attention on only two things: personnel and the task, and therefore is less complex than other leadership styles (Kaushik, 2020). SLII® divides behaviors into four quadrants of directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating to correspond with the developmental levels of employees based on their willingness and ability to perform the task (Blanchard & Hersey, 1996). Although most leaders tend to exhibit a dominant leadership style, leaders who can quickly adjust their behavior and style to match workplace challenges may more effectively mitigate disruptions in the workplace (Walls, 2019).

The directing leadership style occurs when the leader uses a top-down communication approach to tell the employee how to achieve the goal (Walls, 2019). Leaders use a directing style when quick decisions are needed or to teach inexperienced personnel (Walls, 2019). The coaching leadership style finds the leader demonstrating supportive behavior to encourage employees to share ideas and describe their approach to solving a problem or meeting a goal (Northouse, 2019). Leaders using a coaching style may brainstorm with employees to help collect ideas and discuss which ideas to pursue, explaining the rationale for choosing one idea over the others (Northouse, 2019). This leadership style allows employees to build confidence, refine their skills, and feel appreciated for their inputs and ideas. (Tortorella et al., 2021). The supporting leadership style occurs when leaders support employees by listening, complimenting, asking for suggestions, and providing constructive feedback. (Walls, 2019). Leaders using this style have employees who can function autonomously and independently because of their competence (Blanchard et al., 2013). Leaders support employees by helping refine their problem-solving skills and demonstrating confidence in their abilities (Blanchard et al., 2013). Leaders use a delegating leadership style when they have capable, committed, confident employees who require minimal direction to decide how to accomplish the goal and are responsible for the outcome (Northouse, 2019). Leaders who delegate tasks and responsibilities are still available to help, but their involvement with detailed planning or specific goal clarification is minimal (Blanchard et al., 2013).

To effectively decide which SLII® style to employ, leaders must correctly assess the employee's development level (Tortorella et al., 2021). Employees may become frustrated and discouraged when leaders misjudge an employee's skill or developmental level and do not provide the appropriate direction or support (Chapman, 2018). As employees develop and mature, what they need from the leader changes, so leaders should be flexible with their approach (Tortorella et al., 2021). The enthusiastic beginner relates to those employees who are new to the job or task and are highly committed, but not competent to perform the work alone (Plenert, 2012). This employee demonstrates excellent learning potential and is anxious to learn quickly but needs direction from the leader (Blanchard et al., 2013). The disillusioned learner is an employee who feels undervalued because they think their good performance goes unrecognized and therefore demonstrates low commitment and average competence (Plenert, 2012). These employees are discouraged because they believe that leaders highlight their mistakes immediately but are slow to recognize their accomplishments (Plenert, 2012).

The reluctant contributor is a capable and competent performer but is not enthusiastic or excited about their work efforts (Plenert, 2012). This employee is not enthusiastic about their assigned work effort and does not demonstrate the desire to complete their (Blanchard & Johnson, 2018). Peak performers are those employees who demonstrate high competence and commitment to their work efforts and the organization (Plenert, 2012). These employees are experienced and thrive when challenged without much direction or support from their leader. Employees at this level can identify problems and articulate the difference between the current situation and what they want to happen (Blanchard & Johnson, 2018). Peak performers can openly discuss potential options with leadership, but leaders are responsible for teaching employees to ask the right questions with their teams first, so they approach leadership with solutions rather than problems (Blanchard & Johnson, 2018)

Many leaders use the SLII® approach to model behaviors of professional judgment and flexibility to overcome challenging situations (Ridlwan et al., 2021). Leaders who use a combination of directive and supportive behaviors can help employees feel valued. Directive behaviors provide employees with structure, control, and supervision (Mustofa & Muafi, 2021). Supportive behaviors include appreciating and listening to employees and facilitating further communications (Mustofa & Muafi, 2021). Without the correct balance of direction and support, employees may become frustrated and seek employment elsewhere (Ridlwan et al., 2021). Jesus practiced situational leadership with his disciples. He selected twelve men with high enthusiasm but little competence and developed them into leaders who would carry his message to the masses (Boa, 2005). The disciples were ordinary individuals who did not demonstrate remarkable skills. Still, their authentic character and potential abilities allowed him to mold them into exceptional leaders because he understood and provided what his followers needed (Merida et al., 2015). Jesus adjusted his leadership behavior to match his disciples' needs based on the situations they encountered (Boa, 2005). Proverbs states, "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm" (Proverbs 13:20, NIV). Once the disciples were capable and competent, Jesus delegated tasks to them to lead others to Christ. Leaders should follow this example of planning for succession using the SLII® style by developing capable and competent employees ready to assume roles of increasing responsibility when those jobs are vacated (Ridlwan et al., 2021).

Organizational Culture. A recent survey indicated that 80% of respondents stated that the organization's culture was the greatest obstacle to achieving their human capital goals, other than budget (Devlin, 2019). An organization's culture is the underlying set of attitudes, beliefs, values, and shared principles of the company's personnel (Bendak et al., 2020). Some observable aspects of an organization's culture are demonstrated through symbols, behaviors, ceremonies, dress codes, or other ways agencies visibly express their identity (Daft, 2016). However, most characteristics relating to a company's cultural environment are only evident to employees because attributes such as ethical behavior, trust, transparency, customer exchanges, or employee engagement are not observable characteristics (Spicer, 2020).

Many leaders work to develop a culture where employees and leaders express genuine interest, compassion, and empathy with all staff members (Ridlwan et al., 2021). Leaders who are trustworthy, respected, and committed to organizational goals can positively influence job satisfaction (Li & Yuan, 2017). The Bible says to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4, NIV). Boastful, self-centered, or self-serving leaders dramatically damage and undermine the cultural environment and job satisfaction (Li & Yuan, 2017). Companies succeed when they focus on attracting and hiring individuals whose beliefs and behaviors align with the agency's culture (Jones, 2018). Before making a job offer, companies should consider what an employee brings to the organization (e.g., technical knowledge, skills, capabilities, commitment, motivation, and collaboration) and determine if the prospective employee is a natural fit with the agency (Mello, 2019). Candidates not aligned with the company's mission or values are unlikely to stay very long because personal values do not change based on employment (Jones, 2018; Lillemoe, 2018).

Targeted Recruitment. When most individuals think about the recruitment function, they immediately think that responsibility squarely rests on the shoulders of the Human Resources (HR) or Human Capital Management (Devlin, 2019). However, a happy and engaged workforce can become an extension of the organization's recruitment efforts by advertising and sharing job openings using word of mouth or social media (PPS & BCG, 2022). The workforce's newest members, Generation Z (Gen Z) (those born between 1996 and 2015), are a diverse group of civil-minded, digitally connected, and highly educated individuals who are not attracted to civil service work (Buhler & Evans, 2018). The agency has to know its target audience to effectively reach qualified individuals using social media (Verlinden, 2019). A recent study found that up to 86% of Gen Z job seekers use social media channels to search for employment opportunities, so advertising federal jobs on www.usajobs.gov alone is ineffective in reaching qualified Gen Z candidates. (Verlinden, 2019). Social media recruitment methods go beyond targeting recent college graduates and easily extend to passive mid-level candidates who are not actively seeking a career change but may click on a social media post to learn more (Verlinden, 2019).

Gen Z workers account for less than 7% of the Federal workforce and often focus on short-term benefits rather than long-term career goals (PPS & BCG, 2022). Some agencies find that targeted and intentional recruitment allows the organization to proactively seek prospective employees interested in the agency’s mission and goals (PPS & BCG, 2022). Other agencies are developing long-term relationships with universities and professional organizations to attract diverse talent through internship programs that create a pipeline for young professionals (PPS & BCG, 2022). Many agencies have a rigorous direct-hire program available for recent graduates that allow the organization to hire graduates directly without going through the typical competitive process, creating a win-win for the employee and the agency (PPS & BCG, 2022).

Agencies should select recruiters who accurately represent the organization’s culture. When speaking to potential candidates, recruiters who demonstrate the characteristics and model behaviors indicative of the organization subtly provide sincerity and authenticity with the information they provide. (Lillemoe, 2018). To assist with targeted recruitment, the Federal Government may consider aptitude testing similar to the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test (Greszler, 2020). The ASVAB instrument uses a multiple-aptitude battery testing sequence to measure developed abilities to predict future academic and occupational success within nine areas of knowledge and capability (Greszler, 2020; ASVAB, 2022). The computerized ASVAB (CAT-ASVAB) is an adaptive test driven by AI, which changes the questions based on the respondent’s answers to previous questions providing a more targeted assessment to the individual (ASVAB, 2022). Taking the ASVAB does not require a military commitment and is administered annually to more than one million individuals interested in knowing their natural aptitudes (ASVAB, 2022). The ASVAB is offered in high school, post-secondary school, or by military recruiters (ASVAB, 2022). Results of the ASVAB or a Civil-Service assessment could assist applicants and recruiters with matching jobs to a demonstrated natural ability (Greszler, 2020). This method is beneficial when applicants are not familiar with the job opportunities available in the Federal Government (Greszler, 2020).

Interviews. Conducting interviews to select the best candidate for the organization is standard practice (Schudlik et al., 2021). Before inviting a candidate to participate in an interview, many companies use AI to screen resumes for the technical skills and educational background required for a position using algorithms to attain consistency and reduce human bias (Arora & Kumari, 2021). However, resumes are only a tiny piece of the assessment. Conducting interviews is a critical component of the recruitment process. Recent data suggests that 89% of applicants prefer an in-person or face-to-face interview rather than a video interview (Proost et al., 2021). Although some agencies have embraced video technology innovations to reduce costs and increase the global reach for qualified candidates, many applicants do not believe they can create a favorable impression with a video interview (Proost et al., 2021).

A face-to-face interview provides an opportunity to better observe a candidate's non-verbal communication through expressive mannerisms, gestures, body language, and verbal responses to questions (Tu et al., 2022). Individuals typically exhibit confidence and humility through non-verbal cues such as proper posture, an authentic smile, and consistent eye contact with the interviewer (Lavoie, 2016). Individuals who feel anxious or less confident may exhibit non-verbal behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, restless body movements, or self-touches (Tu et al., 2022). Studies conducted over the past several decades suggest that interviewees that display nonverbal cues such as making eye contact, using hand gestures, and adopting an open posture are perceived as more genuine, powerful, confident, and competent (Tu et al., 2022).

To accurately assess whether or not an applicant is a good fit for the company, interviewers often ask questions about an applicant’s values to measure how they align with its core values (Lavoie, 2016). Interviewers who carefully consider what the applicant has to offer the organization will ensure the applicant will fit the company’s culture and mission (Lillemoe, 2018). Asking ambiguous or vague questions allows an interviewee to break the question down into logical points or ask additional clarifying questions (Lavoie, 2016). Candidates who pause before responding to a question or restate or reframe questions demonstrate the ability to think before answering (Lavoie, 2016). Applicants appear honest and sincere when answering interview questions using self-promotion to explain how their qualifications fit the position, describing how their values and goals align with the agency’s and indicating lessons learned from a negative experience (Schudlik et al., 2021).

Knowledge Management. Knowledge management is the formalized process that uses an integrated approach to identify, collect, evaluate, recall, share, and manage the knowledge and expertise of the agency’s employees (Desarno et al., 2021). Managing the organization’s knowledge is accomplished using a variety of assets including databases, written policies, procedures, or other documents, and by asking experienced employees to relate their tacit knowledge so the organization can capture that expertise (Desarno et al., 2021). Proverbs states, “Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (Proverbs 8:10-11, NIV). Managing the organization’s explicit and implicit knowledge requires increased attention, especially with many agencies embracing telework and managing a dispersed workforce (Marion & Fixson, 2021).

Knowledge-intensive organizations rely on their people as a strategic resource that provides competency, expertise, and stability to the organization (Ncoyini & Cilliers, 2020). Organizations should appropriately prioritize knowledge management by offering options for creating, storing, transferring, and employing knowledge within the organization (Ncoyini & Cilliers, 2020). Robust knowledge management tools allow users to search for solutions, evaluate any suggestions, select a path forward that was previously used, or apply lessons learned from similar experiences to avoid repeating mistakes (Marion & Fixson, 2021). Clustering and classification are two popular data mining techniques to collect, analyze, and document data that can help suggest information optimization improvements (Khanbabaei et al., 2019). The goal of receiving feedback on processes is to help better manage resources, continuously improve, and encourage long-term organizational and personnel stability (Medne & Lapina, 2019).

Knowledge management is especially challenging when companies oversee a distributed workforce due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ammirato et al., 2021). With agency-wide telework, the transfer of tacit knowledge has somewhat slowed, impacting organizational innovation and sustainable development (Xu et al., 2022). Tacit knowledge transfer among employees relies on experienced workers sharing their implicit knowledge with others using formal or informal methods (Xu et al., 2022). Although sharing knowledge leads to greater creativity, better performance, and more innovation, many employees are reluctant to share what they know (Gagné et al., 2019). When employees intentionally withhold information by being evasive or playing dumb, their behavior destroys trust, credibility, and transparency, which so many organizations strive to achieve (Gagné et al., 2019).

Employee Retention. Employee retention is a term that reflects an employee's decision to stay at their current job rather than seek something new (Ahn & Menichini, 2022). To retain highly qualified employees, employers must ensure employees are engaged and receive adequate compensation for their efforts (Mello, 2019). Recruiting, hiring, and training new employees is costly to the organization in terms of both time and money (Mello, 2019). When employees are engaged, they feel valued, contribute, and are satisfied with their work; they remain with their current employer, which helps the employer's return on its human asset investments (Buhler & Evans, 2018).

One effective method to retain employees is to recruit individuals who are well-aligned with the organization's culture and appropriately matched to their job (Cattermole, 2019). Dr. Steven Covey discussed the concept of beginning with the end in mind as the second habit in his book, *The 7 habits of highly effective people* (Covey, 2013). The philosophy of beginning with the end in mind involves a mental concept (idea) and execution of that idea (creation) (Covey, 2013). Recruiters who understand that the career progression pattern for contract specialists is typically to become a CO can recruit the best candidates for the job (Covey, 2013; McMullin, 2012). In addition to recruiting suitable candidates, organizations have other options to retain employees once employed. Retention strategies include increasing salary, bonuses, or time off incentives (Thibault-Landry et al., 2017). Intangible rewards such as choice of work assignments, flexible schedules, or desired developmental opportunities are also excellent options to encourage employee retention (Thibault-Landry et al., 2017).

While some turnover in personnel can provide organizational benefits by bringing in fresh ideas and lessons learned, agencies typically want to retain their talented employees and appoint them to positions of increasing responsibilities (Ali & Mehreen, 2019). Well-defined succession planning strategies can facilitate worker engagement, create new knowledge paradigms, encourage worker loyalty, dampen turnover intentions, and increase employee morale (Ali & Mehreen, 2019). Organizations that communicate their succession plans to current employees highlight future job opportunities and guide those workers toward strategic organizational change compared to external hiring alternatives (Ali & Mehreen, 2019). Turnover intention is a term that serves as a strong predictor that employees are considering leaving the organization (Lee et al., 2021). The cost associated with turnover intention is significant with individuals dedicating time to searching for employment opportunities elsewhere and becoming distracted at work resulting in a decline in productivity (Lee et al., 2021).

Remote Work. With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, another retention strategy many DoD agencies are offering is remote work or a hybrid work environment (Ahn & Menichini, 2022). Many organizations abruptly required employees to work remotely to ensure the continuity of operations while addressing health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 virus (Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021). After more than two years of remote work, the great experiment of allowing the majority of employees to work from home is becoming a permanent work solution for many DoN employees (Manes, 2020). Agencies recognize benefits such as reducing office space, condensing the facilities' footprint, and recruiting employees from outside the local commuting due to large-scale telework (Kim et al.,2021). Successfully teleworkers are independent and self-motivated employees who demonstrate superior communication and technical aptitude (Buisine & Guegan, 2019). Data extracted from OPM reports and personnel data reported that agencies with more teleworkers saw less voluntary turnover (Choi, 2020).

The option of working remotely is appealing to many applicants because retaining young professionals in the St. Mary's County area is difficult because of its remote location. St. Mary's county was established in 1634 and is surrounded by the Patuxent River, Potomac River, and the Chesapeake Bay on Maryland's western shore (St. Mary's, 2022). This rural area boasts approximately 500 miles of coastal shoreline, with abundant outdoor recreational resources, historical sites, maritime history, and a low crime rate (St. Mary's, 2022). The area's largest employers are the DoN and various Defense contractors situated nearby to support the Government's needs (St. Mary's, 2022).

Although this location sounds ideal, retaining young professionals is difficult because of a lack of entertainment, retail, recreational, and cultural resources to meet and interact with people outside of the workplace (Wood et al., 2018). Nearby Washington DC offers endless possibilities for cultural and social events (Washington DC, 2022). However, being approximately 60 miles from Washington DC makes it an option for weekend activities and not a regular choice for after-work events (St. Mary's, 2022). However, if employees prefer the urban environment with telework or hybrid work, that desire can become a reality, increasing employee retention (Washington DC, 2022).

An organization that leverages alternatives to the traditional work site may also increase employee retention with improved work-life balance (Mello, 2019). The ideal balance of work and life varies with every individual, and "each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load" (Galatians 6:1-5, NIV). Although many did not anticipate agency-wide and long-term telework, employees report increased productivity with the ability to collaborate with anyone, anytime, using technology without traveling or commuting to see colleagues, clients, or vendors (Szumilo & Wiegelmann, 2021). Teleworking employees have the freedom and flexibility regarding how and when they work instead of a typical nine-to-five schedule (Daft, 2016). An additional benefit of large-scale telework is the cost savings companies may realize for commercial space, utilities, cleaning, office furniture, office supplies, and more. (Kim et al., 2021).

Employee Commitment. Studies have found that job satisfaction is a significant factor in an employee's decision to remain with their organization (Barkhuizen & Gumede, 2021). For DoN agencies, emphasizing the rewards of a career in civil service, including how employees' efforts make a positive difference for military service members, helps instill a sense of commitment to the organization (Fadairo et al., 2020). Employees need stretch goals to remain engaged and challenged in their workplace and not become complacent or bored (Cattermole, 2019). If employees depart the organization in search of other opportunities, always keep the door open for top talent to return (Cattermole, 2019). Employees who return to the organization are eager to share fresh ideas, and best practices learned from other agencies (Cattermole, 2019).

Another factor integral to an employee's commitment to the organization is how their commute affects a healthy work-life balance (Emre & De Spiegeleare, 2021). Long or traffic-filled commutes could prompt some employees to seek employment closer to their homes (Emre & De Spiegeleare, 2021). Some commutes are complex, with congested roadways or overcrowded public transportation, which may cause workers to pursue jobs that allow remote work (Emre & De Spiegeleare, 2021). Employers who offer remote work options may experience an increase in entry and mid-level applicants looking to reduce their commuting expenses and stress levels (Emre & De Spiegeleare, 2021).

Employee satisfaction is another area to discuss relative to employee commitment. Employees satisfied with their job translates to a longer tenure with that employer, which results in a return on the organization's investment in people (Buhler & Evans, 2018). Many employees want jobs with a sense of purpose and growth opportunities (Fratričová & Kirchmayer, 2018). The Bible reminds individuals that "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism" (Colossians 3:23-25, NIV). Employees find satisfaction working the way Christ intended when their work is valuable and serves others (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016). Job satisfaction is significantly affected by the role of a leader who demonstrates care, gives advice, offers praise, and aids employees who experience problems at work (Ridlwan et al., 2021). Employees who feel satisfied with their work efforts desire to work more optimally and find fulfillment in their duties and responsibilities (Ridlwan et al., 2021).

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature review provided an excellent look at succession planning practices and the need for agencies to prioritize succession planning in their organization. The researcher specifically examined GAO, OPM, and other relevant studies focused on Federal Government agencies to determine if the lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD is typical of other DoD organizations. Based on that review, most Federal agencies were poor at planning for succession and implementing a plan if one exists (OPM, 2018). The lack of succession planning in the Federal Government was not a surprise, as the private industry also struggled with planning for succession (Chaturvedi, 2016). The researcher based the foundation of this study on peer-reviewed and expert analysis from public and private data sources. The researcher provided options to organizational leadership to formalize a succession planning program and led an effort to bridge gaps at DoN agencies with the themes identified in this research. Specifically, agency leadership must work to demonstrate transparency, trust, and emotional intelligence to engage employees and manage their organizational knowledge. Looking ahead to the significant number of employees likely to retire over the next five years, agencies cannot afford to postpone their succession planning efforts any longer (Lewis & Pitts, 2018).

Summary of Section 1, The Foundation of the Study

This section investigated the potential lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD and its impact on the organization. In knowledge-intensive organizations, the loss of acquisition professionals because the agency failed to embrace strategies to identify, develop, and retain those employees with specialized knowledge to perform the CO role was problematic. Further, agencies lacked robust training programs to provide prospective COs with classroom training, on-the-job training, job shadowing, or temporary job rotation opportunities to gain additional knowledge and insight into the contracting process from experienced COs.

The researcher proposed using a flexible design using qualitative research methods to complete a single case study for this project. A single case study allowed the researcher to analyze why agencies neglect succession planning efforts and documented the impacts of such neglect on organizational effectiveness. The conceptual framework for this study explored the concepts of talent management, leadership development, performance management, and knowledge sharing and transfer to explain how they impact the Federal Government's ability to plan for succession. Senior leaders and acquisition critical employees were the actors participating in this study. Human Capital and Servant Leadership Theories guided this research as they focused on investing resources to develop employees. This research aimed to discover if succession planning strategies could increase employee retention and lower employee turnover rates by creating a pipeline of qualified and trained employees who could compete for future CO roles.

Transition to Section 2, The Project

This qualitative single case study research project benefitted the DoN by providing practical options for improving succession planning processes and ensuring the continuity of operations as CO attrition occurs (OPM, 2018). This study focused on the need for agencies to conduct succession planning to provide an adequate talent pool of capable individuals poised to compete for CO positions when vacancies occur (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019). This study reduced the literature gap surrounding the considerable need for agencies to conduct succession planning to analyze skill deficiencies, identify talent pools, and develop successors capable of performing CO duties in the Federal Government when needed (Jaynes, 2021). Within the next section, the researcher included a comprehensive evaluation of discussion on the collection methods, analysis, reliability, and validity of the data used to formulate the project's assumptions and conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

The researcher explored the lack of succession planning in Federal Government organizations, specifically DoN agencies located in St. Mary's county in Southern MD, and its impact on maintaining organizational effectiveness. Succession planning is a term that refers to the systematic and methodological efforts an organization uses to plan for organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021). Organizations need to take a proactive approach to succession planning by first identifying the skill sets needed for critical positions and then developing their future leaders by providing them the training, experiences, and knowledge required to assume executive leadership positions when vacated (Koppolu et al., 2021). Unfortunately, most organizations do not prioritize succession planning, with only about 34% indicating that they have a formal succession plan (HCMG, 2020; Pastores et al., 2019). Therefore, it was not surprising that agencies have no prescribed succession planning process that provided a usable and practical strategy to effectively prepare employees for the acquisition-critical position of CO (Anzelone & McCulloch, 2019). This original research study broadened succession planning knowledge using the proposed research questions. The researcher used available GAO and the OPM data and information gathered through the research process to present potential options to organizational leadership to bridge gaps in current succession planning practice.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this flexible design case study was to understand the challenges Federal Government agencies have with including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process (Adewale et al., 2011). Succession planning is a term that refers to the systematic and methodological efforts an organization uses to plan for organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021). Organizations need to take a proactive approach to succession planning by first identifying the skill sets needed for critical positions and then developing their future leaders by providing them the training, experiences, and knowledge required to assume executive leadership positions when vacated (Koppolu et al., 2021). Unfortunately, most organizations do not prioritize succession planning, with only about 34%

indicating that they have a formal succession plan (HCMG, 2020; Pastores et al., 2019). Therefore, it was not surprising that while DoN agencies collect data relative to succession planning, it has no formal succession plan that provided a usable and practical strategy to prepare the organization for senior leadership changes (OPM, 2018). This study fills an existing knowledge gap by focusing on the critical need for succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant CO positions in the Federal Government (Misch, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this qualitative research study was to serve as a facilitator who collected information from the participants as accurately as possible (Groenewald, 2016). The researcher was considered an instrument of the study who correctly recorded and transcribed the verbal and non-verbal information collected from participants during the interview (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The quality of the study was somewhat dependent on the researcher's skills and ability to collect, interpret, and present the data obtained during the interview process (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Consistency, reliability, and rigor were required when documenting results to support the study's credibility and avoid fragmented or overly simplified outcomes (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). The researcher concentrated on generating meaningful conversations with participants and obtaining detailed answers to the interview questions without being an active participant in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As the interviewer, the researcher remained mindful that some participants may demonstrate apprehension or discomfort with the artificial barriers associated with an interview, such as consent forms and recording devices (Collins & Stockton, 2022). Interviewers who asked open-ended questions allowed participants to relate deeply held beliefs, values, or experiences on the research topic (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The researcher emphasized that recording the interview ensured that the information provided was recorded accurately and captured in the correct context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, since the researcher was a member of the research population and shared a cultural identity, experiential base, and lived experiences with the study participants, the insider position granted the researcher a greater level of trust, acceptance, and honesty with participants (Mohler & Rudman, 2022). The researcher collected information on succession planning constructs from a sample pool sufficient to ensure the depth and breadth of data obtained were adequate for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fink, 2000). The researcher analyzed, sorted, and coded the information gathered during the interviews and identified common themes and trends to develop meaningful conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Although the insider position provided many benefits when conducting interviews, the researcher worked to avoid bias when selecting, organizing, coding, and connecting the information gathered when summarizing the outcome of the discussions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Bracketing was one method the researcher used to mitigate any adverse effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the study (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). Bracketing also helped the researcher reach more profound levels of in-depth reflection and understanding across all stages of the qualitative research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The researcher explicitly informed participants of the purpose of bracketing by including the method and contribution to the research study (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Researchers who avoid personal bias when collecting data and interpreting the findings increased the rigor of the research study and developed more robust results (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021).

To ensure the integrity of the research study, the researcher minimized personal bias and used bracketing to disclose any preconceptions to participants. The researcher developed rapport with participants to cultivate a trusting relationship, but did not influence or direct the conversation to a predetermined conclusion. The researcher presented the results of this research study to agency leadership for awareness and potential action. Therefore, the study was conducted with integrity, reliability, and rigor to provide meaningful results about the agency's succession planning and implementation process.

Research Methodology and Design

Qualitative research is a methodology that allowed the researcher to use various techniques to gather data to explore meanings and gain insight into a particular research topic (Mohajan, 2018). Researchers using a systematic and disciplined approach to collect information from participants will ensure accurate results (Mohajan, 2018). The researcher conducted interviews in a comfortable and natural setting that allowed participants to speak freely and openly about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the research study topic (Mohajan, 2018). The eligible participants for this research study were current or former DoN acquisition employees employed under OPM Contracting job series 1102. Individuals who occupy 1102 coded positions were the best candidates for this research study because they were the only group qualified to satisfy the specialized knowledge, experience, and education attributes required for the CO position (Fischetti, 2019). The researcher exercised great care to ensure the validity and credibility of the study and its findings.

Flexible Design

A flexible design was appropriate for this case study research because it afforded the researcher flexibility during data collection and an ability to change or adapt the research process as needed to obtain meaningful results (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The success or failure of research efforts using a flexible design depended on the researcher's skills, abilities, adaptability, preparedness, and in-depth knowledge about the interview topic (Roberts, 2020). A flexible or qualitative interview allowed participants to relate their stories to the interviewer, who listened to understand those experiences and their meanings (Roberts, 2020). The researcher actively listened and approached each interview with an attitude of discovery to gain deeper insight from interviewees and their thoughts on succession planning since they are experts on their experiences (Roberts, 2020).

This study was limited to current or former employees under OPM Contracting job series 1102 at DoN agencies in Southern MD. The researcher sent surveys using email to approximately 420 employees who fell into the eligible population for this study. Although the researcher sent the survey to all employees in the eligible population, the survey indicated that participation was voluntary. The survey also asked for volunteers interested in participating in an interview where the participant could follow up their survey responses with an in-depth conversation with the researcher (Braun et al., 2021). The interview allowed participants to provide a thorough and complete answers to the open-ended questions leveraging their experiences, business practices, or observations at the agency (Braun et al., 2021). The interview format allowed participants to ask clarifying questions and fully explain their thoughts on succession planning at the agency (Bouncken et al., 2021). Collecting qualitative data validated the findings and explained unexpected outcomes (Bouncken et al., 2021). The researcher did not obtain additional data by observing non-verbal cues during the interview. Participant numbers were randomly assigned and the researcher aggregated the information collected to ensure the anonymity of the participants (Simoni et al., 2019).

Case Study

The case study design was appropriate for this research study because it was suitable for collecting research on a real-world organizational problem. The researcher used a case study design to interpret the agency's data on succession planning processes to illustrate particular focus areas together with conclusions and recommendations for future consideration (Yin, 2018). The case study methodology examined the research questions and traced how DoN agencies in Southern MD collect attrition, talent management, and succession planning metrics (FedScope, 2022). The data collected from surveys, interviews, and direct observation will allow the researcher to understand the challenges with succession planning at the agency, identify potential talent gaps, recognize leadership pipeline shortfalls, and explore strategies to retain 1102 employees to improve organizational effectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher defined the scope, depth, and context of the single case study to perform an in-depth and detailed analysis to appreciate why or how things occur (Ridder, 2017). The single case study research method aimed to identify patterns or connections within the data to help create, extend, or test a particular theory or concept (Ridder, 2017).

To further validate the appropriateness of the case study design, the researcher devoted the time needed to obtain a complete understanding and broad appreciation of the subject matter by questioning and listening to participants responses to the interview questions (Turnbull et al., 2021). Since this study required insight into a subject's life experiences, the researcher developed a rapport with participants to ensure honest and open feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Demonstrating a sound and supported case study framework to include how the design was valid and reliable helped establish credibility for a case study approach (Yin, 2018). The researcher analyzed data collected from interviews, documents, and observations using triangulation to combine the information gleaned into practical results without spending too much time gathering extensive data (Yin, 2018).

Triangulation

Triangulation is an appropriate method to increase the credibility and validity of case study research findings (Farquhar et al., 2020). The researcher used several data collection methods, sources, and types to establish trends or other noticeable patterns from the information and avoided the fundamental bias that could arise from a particular collection method, source, or type (Stahl & King, 2020). There are four types of triangulation: (1) data source; (2) investigator; (3) theory; and (4) method (Noble & Heale, 2019). The researcher used methodological triangulation to collect data with individual interviews, surveys, and observations of several groups of OPM job series 1102 participants (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation using multiple data sources is a best practice used to link results of the case study research to develop practical and meaningful results about succession planning efforts (Farquhar et al., 2020).

Summary of Research Method and Design

A flexible design using qualitative research methods to complete a case study was appropriate for the project. The researcher conducted a single case study and an in-depth analysis to understand why agencies neglect succession planning efforts and used triangulation to increase the credibility and validity of the findings. The researcher presented the results of this research study to agency leadership for awareness and potential action with the agency's succession planning and implementation process. The study further highlighted the impact of retaining those acquisition workforce employees with specialized skills to maintain organizational effectiveness and provide needed products and services to the warfighter.

Participants

The participants eligible for inclusion in this study were current or former DoN acquisition employees in Southern MD employed under the OPM Contracting series, 1102 at the General Schedule (GS)-11 (or equivalent) through GS-15 (or equivalent). DoN agencies in Southern MD use a variety of pay or performance systems in addition to the GS scale, including the Federal Wage System (WS), Scientific & Technology Reinvention Laboratory (STRL), and the DoD Civilian Acquisition Workforce Personnel Demonstration Project (AcqDemo) (NAVAIR, 2019). However, the researcher equated all employees to the corresponding GS pay level for this study. The researcher accepted participation from employees with at least two years of experience in their position. The total number of eligible participants was approximately 420 based on analytical data from agency employment data pulled from the Defense Civilian Personnel Data System (DCPDS) (DCPDS, 2022). All participation was strictly voluntary, and subjects could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants eligible for this study were a diversified group of individuals concerning age, gender, natural origin, race, ethnic and social background, grade level, length of service, and other differentiating characteristics.

Population and Sampling

The research study focused on understanding why DoN agencies in Southern MD face challenges with planning for the succession of COs. Therefore, the best candidates to participate in this project were current or former COs or those on a career path that would lead to a CO role in the future. Using a different population, geographical location, or sampling criteria could yield different results. However, the sample size of individuals employed under the same job series and located in the same geographic region provided meaningful results for the agency to consider. Individuals who occupy 1102 coded positions were the best candidates for this research study because they were the only group qualified to satisfy the specialized knowledge, experience, and education attributes required for the CO position (Fischetti, 2019).

Discussion of Population

The eligible population for this study included current or former DoN employees who occupy positions coded as OPM Contracting series, 1102. This study was limited to only those individuals in OPM Contracting series, 1102 because to hold a CO position with a warrant above the simplified acquisition threshold, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) requires individuals in OPM Contracting series, 1102 to (1) complete all contracting courses required for COs; (2) demonstrate at least two years of contracting experience; (3) received a baccalaureate degree from an accredited educational institution; and (4) meet any supplementary requirements as established by the OSD (10 USC 1724). In addition, each agency may require added training or agency-specific procedural requirements before obtaining a CO warrant (Fischetti, 2019). This study excluded individuals in other job series categories who would not qualify to compete for the CO position based on the OSD requirements. The total population of current 1102s at all grade levels at DoN agencies in Southern MD is approximately 420 employees (DCPDS, 2022).

Discussion of Sampling

Sampling Method. Sampling selects a subset of the eligible population to include in the research study (Turner, 2020). The researcher used purposeful sampling to select individuals to participate in this study who decisively disclosed relevant information about the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling was appropriate because of the specific and specialized knowledge criterion needed to participate in the study (Kalu, 2019). Since participation was voluntary among the eligible participants, the researcher eliminated personal bias because selection for inclusion in the study was at the participant's discretion.

The researcher sent out a survey to the entire eligible population (approximately 420 individuals) with a request to voluntarily participate in the interview process as part of the researcher's dissertation project. The researcher kept all information confidential so participants could answer questions honestly and openly without fear of reprisal. The survey collected basic information such as educational background, gender, age, grade, length of service, and other relevant facts about each volunteer, along with some short qualitative open-ended questions. The survey asked for volunteers interested in participating in a personal interview with the researcher so the participant could follow up their survey responses with an in-depth conversation (Braun et al., 2021). The researcher used a semi-structured interview format with some key open-ended questions on succession planning (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). This flexible interview approach allowed participants to provide a thorough and complete answer to the open-ended questions or digress to explore a newly highlighted issue within the topic domain to increase the depth of understanding (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Campbell et al., 2020).

The semi-structured interview format allowed participants to ask clarifying questions and fully explain their thoughts on succession planning at the agency creating two-way communication between the researcher and participant (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The researcher did not obtain additional data by observing and taking notes on non-verbal cues detected during the interview. The researcher conducted thirty-minute face-to-face interviews using Microsoft Teams® and provided the interview questions to participants several days before their scheduled interview. Providing participants with the interview questions on the research topic in advance allowed them to reflect deeply on each question and they provided a more detailed and thoughtful response during the interview. Additionally, this approach offered participants time to deliberate, explore, and follow up with unstructured questions where the interviewee can freely share additional comments to enrich the data collection experience (Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, this approach made participants feel more like trusted partners in the research process rather than just a studied subject (Guillemin et al., 2018). The researcher aggregated all information collected to ensure the anonymity of the participants (Simoni et al., 2019).

Sample Frame. The sample frame is a list of the representative units or elements of the population representation of the population of interest (Turner, 2020). Researchers use a sample frame because collecting data or asking for participation from an entire population of interest is not practical (Turner, 2020). The sample frame for this research study clearly defined the group of individuals qualified to participate (Turner, 2020). This study included approximately 420 potential participants employed by the DoN in Southern MD who are graded at GS-11 and above, which is 93% of the available sample (DCPDS, 2022). This study will not include employees who occupy 1102 positions below the GS-11 grade and have less than two years of experience in the 1102 position. Employees with less than two years of experience actively attend formal and informal training classes to amass the knowledge and education required to become proficient at their job.

Desired Sample Size. The desired sample size for this qualitative study was to conduct enough interviews to reach data saturation. Data saturation occurred after fifteen interviews with those individuals providing consistent feedback. Although not required, the researcher conducted interviews with eighteen additional volunteers because they agreed to participate before the deadline set by the researcher. The added contributions further strengthened the study findings and did not provide anything not previously identified by the first fifteen participants. The study volunteers demonstrated a significant level of experience, with twenty-seven participants demonstrating over six years of experience with the organization and thirty participants at grade levels of GS-12 and above. There were forty-three surveys returned which relates to about 10% of the eligible participants. As this research study is an information-rich project, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the problem rather than empirical generalizations to explain, describe, and interpret the study findings (Staller, 2021). Purposive sampling relied on the researcher to exercise sound judgment to bound the case study with participants who could provide the most relevant, plentiful, and insightful perspectives on the study topic of succession planning (Staller, 2021). The sample sizes were based on the case study methodology, eligible population, research topic, available resources, and the researcher obtained data saturation with the actual sample size (Gill, 2020). Data saturation occurred when the information collected became redundant, and no new information related to the codes, themes, or theories on the research topic was collected (Johnson et al., 2020). However, since this case study used a flexible design, the researcher slightly adjusted the research process and obtained meaningful and quality results (Staller, 2021; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Access to the Sample. The researcher was an employee with the DoN in Southern MD and has extensively discussed this research project with senior leadership at the agency. The researcher obtained written permission from the Director of Strategic Support, to conduct the study and solicit participation from acquisition employees under OPM job series 1102. Several senior leaders reviewed the researcher's proposed survey and interview questions and agreed they were applicable and appropriate for the study. The researcher sent the survey in Appendix B to all eligible participants using a work distribution email list as suggested by senior leaders at the agency.

Summary of Population and Sampling

The selected participants for this qualitative research single case study were limited to current or former DoN acquisition employees in Southern MD employed under OPM Contracting series 1102 at the GS-11 level or above. The participant pool is 93% of the total available population. Participation in this project was voluntary, but the researcher obtained ample participation to reach data saturation. The researcher reached data saturation after interviewing about 3.4% of the participant pool, but interviewed about 7.9% of the eligible population because they volunteered to participate. This study reached data saturation and the researcher coded, analyzed, and presented meaningful results to senior leadership for consideration in future succession planning processes.

Data Collection and Organization

Data Collection Plan

The data collection plan for this qualitative case study follows the data collection activities offered by Creswell & Poth (2018). These activities included identifying the site and individuals, gaining access and developing rapport, using purposeful sampling, collecting data, recording information, exploring field issues, storing data securely, and ethically performing all activities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research represented a bounded case study. The eligible population was defined as those employees who occupy positions coded under the OPM Contracting series, 1102, at grade level GS-11 or above, working for the DoN in the Southern MD area (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher secured access to the eligible population for this study from the Director of Strategic Support (DSS) and used interviews, surveys, and observation as the three fundamental methods of gathering data for this research project (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The researcher shared a cultural identity, experiential base, and lived experiences with the study participants as a DoN employee in the Southern MD area (Mohler & Rudman, 2022). The insider position granted the researcher greater trust, acceptance, and honesty with participants and limited the time needed to develop rapport (Mohler & Rudman, 2022). The researcher was also well aware of the potential risks of conducting a study at the same organization where she was employed (Mohler & Rudman, 2022). As a result, the researcher used multiple strategies to validate that the findings were objectively analyzed, accurately related, and provided a deep understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher purposefully sampled the eligible population based on the specific and specialized knowledge criterion used to determine participation in the study (Kalu, 2019).

The researcher used interviews, surveys, and observations from the eligible population to collect the data for this study (Yin, 2018). The researcher worked to collect data that limit biased content and used other secondary data available from the OPM and the GAO to validate the findings (Ridder, 2017). The researcher assumed that the reference materials collected by outside sources were authentic and free from bias. The researcher used triangulation to corroborate the validity, reliability, and quality of data collected for this study (Roulston, 2018). The ability to triangulate the data collected allowed the researcher to confidently compare the data collected at the DoN agencies in the Southern MD area with the broader Federal Government OPM Contracting job series 1102 workforce to develop meaningful conclusions (Stahl & King, 2020).

Instruments

Instruments for this research study included the researcher, surveys, interviews, observations, and secondary data. The researcher was considered an essential instrument of the research and was responsible for developing rapport with participants and correctly recording, transcribing, and interpreting the verbal and non-verbal information collected during the interview (Collins & Stockton, 2022). A semi-structured interview helped the researcher create a safe conversational space where the participants could openly and honestly relate their thoughts and experiences (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Using multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, surveys, observation, and secondary data) supported the consistency, reliability, and rigor required to validate the study's credibility with data triangulation (Farquhar et al., 2020).

The researcher documented all interviews and observations with written notes and Microsoft Teams® to create a video recording of the interview (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher used her field notes and the video recording of the interview session to characterize all information in the correct context for analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher provided participants an opportunity to review the written transcript of their interview for accuracy before aggregating the data for analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). If needed, the researcher could follow up with participants to clarify a response or ask additional questions; however, follow-up was not needed.

The interviewer developed an interview guide for use with participants, which outlines the general themes related to the agency's CO succession planning efforts and the participant's perception of the effectiveness of those efforts (Marion & Fixson, 2021). The researcher recorded the interviews using Microsoft Teams® since that tool was readily available and familiar to the researcher and the participants. The researcher took field notes during the 30-minute video chat interview session to assist with the memoing, context identification, and coding of dominant themes (Marion & Fixson, 2021). The researcher provided each interview participant an opportunity to review their written transcript for accuracy and make minor edits if needed (Fink, 2000). The researcher used the Otter.ai transcription software tool and written field notes to develop each transcript.

The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews is attached as Appendix A and will serve as the foundational document for the interviews. The researcher used a semi-structured interview format with some key open-ended questions on succession planning (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). This flexible interview approach allowed participants to provide a thorough and complete answer to the open-ended questions or digress to explore a newly highlighted issue within the topic domain to increase the depth of understanding (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Campbell et al., 2020). The researcher asked all participants the same twelve questions to assist with consistency. The first three questions related to the participant's experience and time of service with the agency. Question four asked about the participant's career goals to assess their desire to become a CO. Questions five through nine related to the use and availability of training and professional development programs to cultivate the talent pool. Questions ten through twelve specifically asked participants to share their thoughts on the challenges with succession planning, how to increase the qualified candidates in the pipeline, and how to retain talented employees. The interview concluded with the researcher asking if the participant had anything additional to share or had any questions about their participation. The researcher expected around 10% of the eligible population to volunteer for the interview. The researcher reached data saturation after fifteen interviews which equated to about 3.4% of the eligible population (Alam, 2021).

Surveys. The researcher used email and a focused email distribution list to distribute the Appendix B survey to the eligible population. The personnel at DoN agencies in the Southern MD area are avid users of the Microsoft® Suite of products. Senior leadership at the agencies suggested using the Microsoft Forms® Survey tool to send all eligible participants an email with a link to the survey through their work email; however, the researcher elected to email the survey using Microsoft Outlook® to avoid potential issues with the Microsoft Forms® Survey tool.

Microsoft Outlook® complies with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) and cybersecurity protocols to ensure the safeguarding and privacy of data (Microsoft, 2022). This researcher manually converted the survey results to Microsoft Excel® for analysis (Jotform, 2022).

The researcher sent out the email with the Appendix B survey and allowed participants forty-five days to respond. The researcher sent participants a reminder after fifteen and thirty days to request participation. The researcher included an invitation to respond to the survey with details that, although the research is for academic purposes, the results have the potential to impact operations at the command. The average survey response rate is reportedly between 20% and 30%, with senior leadership at the agency sharing that the typical response to agency surveys is around 25% (Qualtrics, 2022). The researcher contacted participants who volunteered for the interview portion of the study within three days of the survey submittal and set interviews at a mutually agreeable time within ten days of the survey submittal.

Observation and Secondary Data. The researcher closely observed participants throughout the interview process and captured verbal and non-verbal communication, actions, and environmental factors (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). In addition to taking field notes, the researcher digitally recorded the interview session to support repeated viewing for data collection and transcription purposes (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Using observational techniques and interviews helped the interviewer understand the participant's thoughts, feelings, and overall perspective on succession planning at the agency (Klem et al., 2022). The researcher used secondary data from publicly available Federal Government sources to facilitate comparisons to further substantiate the research findings at DoN agencies in Southern MD (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

Data Organizational Plan

The researcher received a large volume of data to review, code, and analyze (Sale, 2022). The researcher stored the data collected and research findings on her personal password-protected computer with an additional password required to open the relevant file for added security. To keep the data organized, the researcher took notes using Microsoft Word® and used Microsoft Teams® to record the interview digitally. A distinctive advantage of using Microsoft Teams® was the capability to download a transcript from the recording (Microsoft, 2022). However, this feature of Microsoft Teams® was unavailable and the researcher used Otter.ai to assist with developing the transcript. While the researcher had to check the transcript for accuracy, the transcription assistance immensely sped up the transcription process. The researcher ensured that all information was secured and encrypted to protect the identities of participants.

The researcher used NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to gather, sort, measure, analyze, interpret, store, and protect the data collected from the interviews (Sale, 2022). NVivo allowed the researcher to manage the data analysis, synthesis, and document the rigor in the qualitative data analysis for this study (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). NVivo provided excellent analytical scrutiny by defining codes, screening, synthesizing responses, aggregating data into common themes, providing analytics, extracting data, and supporting queries; however, it did not replace the researcher's analytical skills (Houghton et al., 2017). The researcher used NVivo to group information into common threads and themes for interpretation, exercising caution to limit bias (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The interview method of collecting data encouraged in-depth feedback and allowed individuals to provide a detailed response to the research questions. It helped respondents elaborate beyond the questions asked and permitted them to provide candid, clear, and sincere answers. It stimulated the individual's experience and provided insight into their interpersonal skills and expertise.

A significant disadvantage of using the interview method was that it could become challenging, tedious, and lengthy. Although respondents were encouraged to answer questions based on their personal and real-life experiences, this flexibility increased the difficulty level when making systemic comparisons to develop overall conclusions (Hammarberg et al., 2016). While NVivo assisted with data organization, it did not eliminate the effort required to read, group by a common theme, document, or analyze findings. The researcher recognized that without rigorous and robust analysis, a fragmentation or over-simplification of the data could result (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012).

Summary of Data Collection and Organization

Using semi-structured interview questions and a time limit of 30 minutes helped the interviewer and interviewee stay focused on the research topic. To help protect the identity of participants, the interviewer identified interviewees by number when compiling data for analysis. The researcher kept a tracking matrix that linked the participant to their specific number in a separate file in case follow-up is needed. If field issues occurred during data collection, the researcher could lean on the design flexibility of the qualitative case study format and adjust to fill any gaps experienced with data collection and organization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used NVivo to collect, organize, sort, group into themes, analyze, store, and protect the data collected from the interviews. The researcher selected the fee-based NVivo package based on the needs of the project and functionality available with the software platform.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in qualitative research was the process of coding and organizing collected data into themes, analyzing the data for similarities or connections, and making an interpretation of the information evaluated (Johnson et al., 2020). Researchers who conduct data analysis work discover the meaning and significance of the information in the data set (Lester et al., 2020). Creswell & Poth (2018) discussed the data analysis spiral, which described the steps researchers use to organize, memo, classify, interpret, visualize, and develop a final account of the findings. The researcher collected data from various sources, including semi-structured interviews, surveys, observations, and secondary records to use in her analysis (Lester et al., 2020). While CAQDAS software helped organize and code the data, the researcher used her intellect to connect the data themes in a meaningful way to draw perceptive conclusions based on an interpretation of the data (Lester et al., 2020). The researcher presented the findings using tables and detailed interview responses to describe the study's results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The process steps the researcher used to analyze the data collected as discussed in the below paragraphs.

Emergent Ideas

Using a case study approach, the researcher first read through all the text collected and made margin notes before grouping similar comments together to formulate initial codes about the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reading through all the information allowed the researcher to identify and organize the data by significant themes for further investigation (Creswell & Poth). The researcher memoed emergent ideas by studying all the information gathered to answer questions about the content and context of the data (Luning et al., 2022). The researcher compared the emergent ideas memoed to the field notes from observations, interview transcripts, and digital recordings to ensure that the researcher correctly related the participant's responses in the correct context (Luning et al., 2022). Memoing is an ongoing process that helps the researcher record their thoughts at the moment they occur rather than trusting the idea to memory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the significant amount of data collected during the case study, memoing was a critical part needed to facilitate the review of the data from an alternative perspective which can lead to the discovery of new insights previously overlooked.

Coding Themes

The next step in data analysis is to describe, classify, and interpret the data by forming codes and grouping similar thoughts and ideas together (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher developed a codebook to assist with the sorting and grouping of feedback by theme (Sale, 2022). Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research and allowed the researcher to examine the transcript data collected to identify common themes for further exploration (Ward, 2018). The researcher developed themes based on a blended approach of deductive (top-down) and inductive (bottom-up) reasoning to identify or classify codes that best characterize the feedback collected (Sale, 2022; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher began developing the codebook after the first few interviews to manage and organize the data collected for this study (Sale, 2022). The researcher conducted several coding cycles to adequately capture all the concepts, themes, or patterns to ensure a comprehensive feedback analysis (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Interpretations

The researcher developed and assessed interpretations as part of the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretation required the researcher to creatively and critically evaluate the information to make informed and carefully considered judgments about the data

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretative process allowed the researcher to conduct a comprehensive review of the data and enabled the researcher to acquire deep and thorough insights into the data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The interpretative process was iterative, meaning that the researcher repeated, adjusted, and advanced her understanding of the information with an exhaustive review of each interview transcript and supporting data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Practical interpretation required the researcher to immerse herself in the data to develop thoughtful insights and meaningful conclusions about the information collected (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Data Representation

In addition to a descriptive narrative, the researcher used tables as a visual display to illustrate participant data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Visual displays assist readers with understanding the study findings and demonstrate a certain level of credibility, trustworthiness, and completeness that supports the data analysis process (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). The researcher reviewed all data collected to determine the most effective format(s) to increase the trustworthiness and transparency of the study when presenting the findings (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). For clarity, all visual displays included accompanying text (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis for Triangulation

The researcher used data as part of the analysis to increase the credibility and validity of the case study research findings (Farquhar et al., 2020). The triangulation for this qualitative study included multiple primary and secondary sources, including interviews, surveys, observations, and secondary data, to generate the information for analysis (Farquhar et al., 2020). Triangulation is frequently used in flexible design approaches using qualitative research methods to limit biases and substantiate validity, reliability, and quality (Roulston, 2018). Although triangulation could make comparing data more complex, the researcher ensured that comparisons between the data was appropriate and justified (Roulston, 2018). The researcher worked to establish trends or patterns regardless of the data collection method used (Stahl & King, 2020). The researcher leaned heavily on qualitative analysis methods for triangulation by conducting interviews with participants who are grade level GS-11 or above in OPM Contracting job series 1102 and employed by DoN activities in the Southern MD area. Additionally, the researcher used a mixed-methods approach by using a survey that includes a multiple-choice quantitative component, followed by several qualitative fill-in questions. The survey also allowed participants to volunteer to contribute further by participating in semi-structured interviews with the researcher.

Summary of Data Analysis

The researcher used NVivo to manage the data analysis, synthesis, and document the rigor in the qualitative data analysis for this study (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). NVivo provided excellent analytical scrutiny by defining codes, screening, synthesizing responses, aggregating data into common themes, providing analytics, extracting data, and supporting queries (Houghton et al., 2017). While NVivo was beneficial with qualitative analysis, it did not replace the researcher’s analytical skills to make connections and derive meaning from the data (Houghton et al., 2017). Triangulation helped limit biases and substantiate validity, reliability, and quality (Roulston, 2018).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity were critical elements that the researcher demonstrated when conducting qualitative research to justify the findings. Reliability in qualitative research considers the dependability and transparency of the researchers’ methods while striving to limit any biases the researcher had based on her experience, position, or opinion (Noble & Smith, 2015). The qualitative research construct required that the researcher display trustworthiness and honesty to establish that her data gathering methods, analysis, and findings were reliable and valid (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When considering validity, the researcher attempted to relate the level of accuracy between the data collected and the conclusions drawn from the information (Noble & Smith, 2015). Part of establishing validity was demonstrating an understanding of the data gathered so the researcher could accurately reflect the information to others (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reliability

The researcher used several techniques to increase the reliability of the study and its findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used high-quality digital recording technology to make a video recording of each interview to capture audio and non-verbal communications (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Using video recordings of the interview session and interviewer notes ensured the depiction of information in the correct context for analysis, and thus increased the credibility and confirmability of the research (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher used Otter.ai transcription software to assist with accurately documenting the interview. Transcription software facilitated the process and allowed each participant to review the written transcript to confirm that the interview transcript accurately depicted the interview conversation, which increased the dependability of the document (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher was the only individual who sorted and coded data, increasing consistency with the data analysis process and avoiding inconsistent analysis that could occur with multiple researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher would consider using an intercoder agreement if numerous researchers coded the information for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To ensure that the findings from this study were reliable, the researcher developed trust with the participants. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is evident when readers exhibit confidence in the research findings and understand that replicating the exact results is not always possible due to the qualitative nature of the project (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability create trustworthiness in research activities. The researcher established credibility by demonstrating that the findings are dependable, applicable, and congruent by accurately reflecting the participant's perspective (Daniel, 2019). Credibility connects the findings with reality using triangulation, member checking, or prolonged engagement with participants (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Transferability in qualitative research asserts that research patterns and descriptions from one study may apply to another by offering valuable lessons to research conducted in similar contexts or settings (Stahl & King, 2020; Daniel, 2019). Dependability in qualitative research offers that findings are specific to a fixed time and place, but may provide consistency across multiple data sets (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Additionally, the researcher increased the dependability of her findings using peer debriefings to validate the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Confirmability relates to the study's objectivity and the exclusion of the researcher's biases from the interpretation of the data (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

Validity

Substantive validation suggests that the researcher must first and foremost understand the research topic based on multiple sources and documentation to validate the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher conducted a rigorous process to collect, analyze, and evaluate all findings to provide reliable results (Cypress, 2017). The researcher did not require follow-up interviews because all findings were accurately derived from the data and coded into major themes. Strategies the researcher used to validate her findings included 1) bracketing to limit or acknowledge biases; 2) keeping detailed and accurate notes and records; 3) recognizing different perspectives to add credibility; 4) clearly describing analysis methods and resultant conclusions, and 5) using more than one data triangulation method to exhibit rigor in the process (Noble & Smith, 2015). Additionally, the researcher reached data saturation with the less than the proposed based on the eligible population (Gill, 2020). Data saturation occurred when the information collected becomes redundant, and no new information related to the codes, themes, or theories on the research topic was collected (Gill, 2020). Using multiple strategies allowed the researcher to engage in a journey of discovery to interpret and explain the findings.

As part of the validation process, the researcher used member checking by asking each participant to review their interview transcript to review, correct, delete, or edit the original interview to ensure accuracy and validate the data collection process (Motulsky, 2021). No participant asked to add information to their transcript, so no additional follow-up was required (Motulsky, 2021). The researcher did not ask participants to review a summary of the major themes and the preliminary analysis derived from the data (Motulsky, 2021). Instead, the researcher discussed the findings with several peers to assist with data validation (Motulsky, 2021).

Bracketing

Bracketing was one method the researcher used to mitigate any adverse effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the study (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). The scholarly literature discusses three forms of bracketing (1) phenomenological attitude (epoché); (2) phenomenological psychological reduction; and (3) transcendental phenomenological reduction (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). The epoché concept is when the researcher makes no assumptions or judgments about the study or its participants and required the researcher to have an open mind to embrace a fresh perspective without leaning on previous knowledge or biases (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological psychological reduction construct required the researcher to focus on subjective appearances and meanings by bracketing the world to focus on the subject's experiences (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). The transcendental phenomenological reduction suggested that researchers conduct the study from a view seen by God to emphasize a perspective beyond the researcher's existence and the natural world (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021).

For this research study, the researcher used the epoché bracketing approach and explicitly informed participants of the purpose of bracketing by including the method and contribution to the research study (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The researcher used reflective journaling to document her critical thinking and introspective analysis (Meyer & Willis, 2019). Reflective journaling helped the researcher provide a written record of her field experiences, interview techniques, thematic connections, and other areas that may require adjustment to facilitate the research plan (Meyer & Willis, 2019). Avoiding personal bias when collecting data and interpreting the findings increased the rigor of the research study and developed more robust results (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021).

Summary of Reliability and Validity

All researchers must take an ethical approach when conducting research and relating their findings regardless of the topic or research method. Researchers should consider their moral conventions, political beliefs, and diversity assumptions to develop fresh perspectives on issues not previously contemplated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers must act with integrity and credibility to provide accurate, valid, and reliable conclusions, or their findings become useless

(Cypress, 2017). Additional validation sources include viewing the data through a researcher, participant, or reader's lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using multiple lenses may help discover any discrepancies in the research, which could cause the researcher to perform additional work to justify or validate the conclusions presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers who demonstrate honesty and integrity when conducting their research are "working for the Lord and not for human masters" (Colossians 3:23, NIV).

Summary of Section 2

Section 2 reiterated the purpose of the study and discussed the researcher's role, the research methodology, eligible participants, and how the researcher collected, organized and validated the data collected. This section also expanded on the applicability of the research method and design selected for this study. The researcher provided an in-depth discussion on the eligible population and the characteristics that would qualify an individual to participate in the study. The sampling methodology discussed the desired sample size and other sampling attributes that should provide the best candidates to participate in this study. The researcher explained the use of surveys and interviews as the primary data collection methods and provided details about ensuring the security of the information gathered. The researcher also discussed her approach to ensure that the data is reliable and valid.

Transition to Section 3, Application to Professional Practice

In section 3, the researcher presented the research findings and shared discovered themes, an interpretation of the themes, and how the findings related to major areas of the research proposal. Section 3 included the study's application to professional practice and a discussion on how the results of this study could improve succession planning practices at DoN agencies in Southern MD. Application strategies the organization could leverage using findings from this study are also discussed. Section 3 included the researcher's recommendations for further study, along with her reflections on the professional and personal growth experienced as part of the dissertation experience. The researcher also included a biblical perspective of how succession planning concepts relate to and integrate with a Christian worldview.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice

Overview of the Study

This qualitative research study focused on the research questions proposed in Section 1 and contributes to the body of knowledge that stresses the need for organizations to conduct succession planning to analyze skill deficiencies, identify talent pools, and provide training and development opportunities to build a pipeline of potential successors. This study concentrated on the lack of succession planning in Federal Government organizations, specifically Department of the Navy (DoN) agencies in St. Mary's county in Southern Maryland (MD), and its impact on maintaining organizational effectiveness. Participants were advised that this research study sought to understand how DoN agencies in the Southern MD area could increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline to ensure that a pool of trained candidates exists when vacancies occur. The researcher asked participants to relate their thoughts, feelings, or rationale using the open-ended interview questions provided in Appendix A as a guide. Participants provided in-depth and thoughtful answers to each question, with some giving interesting perspectives on the research topic. The researcher used Microsoft Teams® to create a video recording of the interview and Otter.ai to develop a written transcription to document the session (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher also used her written field notes from the interview session to record all findings in the correct context for analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The researcher provided participants an opportunity to review the written transcript of their interview for accuracy before aggregating the data for analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). No additional follow-up with participants was required.

The researcher received surveys from about 10% of eligible procurement group (PG) participants using the Survey provided in Appendix B. The researcher conducted interviews between 31 October 2022 through 16 December 2022, using the Interview Guide supplied in Appendix A, with thirty-three participants. All participants were DoN acquisition employees in Southern MD currently or formerly employed under the OPM Contracting series, 1102 at the GS-11 (or equivalent) through GS-15 (or equivalent) with at least two years of experience in the 1102 job series. The researcher only interviewed participants who provided their written consent to the video recording and use of their responses as part of this research study. The researcher achieved data saturation after about fifteen interviews with those individuals providing consistent feedback in the major thematic areas identified in this section. Although not required, the researcher conducted interviews with eighteen additional volunteers because they agreed to participate before the deadline set by the researcher. The added contributions further strengthened the study by substantiating the findings previously identified by the first fifteen participants. No new information was discovered from the additional participants. The study volunteers demonstrated a significant level of experience, with twenty-seven participants demonstrating over six years of experience with the organization and thirty participants at grade levels of GS-12 and above. Tables 1 and 2 provide the mix of participants' grades and experience levels for informational purposes.

Table 1: *Participant's Grade Level*

Experience Level	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total
GS-11 and below	3	9%
GS-12 and GS-13	16	45.5%
GS-14 and above	15	45.5%

Table 2: *Participant's Experience Level*

Experience Level	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total
Under 5 years	6	18.2%
6 – 10 years	6	18.2%
11 – 14 years	9	27.2%
15 or more years	12	36.4%

Themes Discovered

The researcher used surveys and semi-structured interviews to collect information on the four research study questions. The survey focused on closed-ended questions and demographic data collected for comparison purposes. The semi-structured interviews included thirteen open-ended questions with the flexibility to expand as needed. The researcher completed thirty-three video interviews. The researcher imported survey data and interview transcripts into a CAQDAS called NVivo to facilitate the coding and analysis process. The researcher used NVivo to gather, sort, code, and analyze the research findings for grouping into common themes (Sale, 2022). NVivo was an excellent tool for documenting qualitative responses to open-ended questions and personal insights to promote rigor (Sale, 2022). During the data collection and analysis process, the researcher discovered several dominant themes based on the research questions posed in Section 1 to increase the candidate pool of qualified employees available to compete for future CO positions. These themes included: (1) learning and development, (2) knowledge sharing and transfer, (3) retaining employees, and (4) improving recruitment strategies.

Theme 1: Learning and Development

Learning and development programs are a fundamental component of the succession planning process because people are the organization's greatest asset (Talent development tips, 2022). Investing, cultivating, and developing employees' skills is more important than ever, especially given how the work environment rapidly changes (Talent development tips, 2022). Agencies have to become more agile and reinvent how they facilitate learning and development by leveraging the virtual environment with online classroom training, on-the-job learning, and meaningful mentoring and coaching interactions using virtual tools (OPM, 2022b). In particular, this study discovered a robust learning and development program for Entry-Level Employees (ELEs).

The ELE program is an agency-established, cohort-based development program to provide ELEs with the foundational knowledge necessary to succeed in the contracting job series. The three-year program includes a combination of classroom learning, on-the-job training, shadowing, and rotational assignments to integrate the theoretical with experiential learning opportunities. The agency-sponsored ELE program provides new employees with a structured and rigorous eight-month training curriculum to engage them and ensure they develop the solid foundational contracts knowledge required for a contract specialist to succeed (P6, P11, P12, & P13, 2022). ELEs continue in the program for another twenty-eight months and receive on-the-job, rotational, and job-shadowing assignments (P1, P13, & P11, 2022). The ELE program allows employees to be immersed in a real team and gain experience doing procurement actions before attending Defense Acquisition University (DAU) procurement classes (P9 & P12, 2022). The program puts all new specialists on the same playing field and teaches them contracting basics before joining a team (P28, 2022). Also, properly developing the ELEs will help ensure the agency has qualified folks to move into leadership positions when senior employees retire (P33, 2022).

The ELE program is an excellent example of the agency investing, cultivating, and developing employees' skills using a variety of training and professional development techniques. Several participants recognized the absence of a similar program for mid-level employees (MLEs) (P6, P12, P22, & P26, 2022). The agency needs to apply the ELE training concept to their MLEs to grow their skill sets to become excellent contract specialists capable of competing for CO positions (P6, P12, P22, & P26, 2022).

Theme 2: Knowledge Sharing and Transfer

The need for more experienced employees to share and transfer their knowledge emerged as another dominant theme of this study. The organization's ability to manage its knowledge resources relates directly to its sustainability and future growth capabilities (Abdalla et al., 2022). Senior employees sharing lessons learned with more junior employees and engaging in conversations about how to apply that knowledge to future efforts is something that knowledge-intensive agencies promote amongst their workforce (Wesemann, 2021). However, the ability to capture, define, codify, store, and share that information is a continued concern as experienced employees leave or retire (Abdalla et al., 2022).

Several employees discussed the use of ELE roundtable discussions which focused on sharing information with ELEs, with some noting the need to expand the roundtable discussion concept to MLEs (P3, P12 & P17, 2022). The ELE roundtables are great because people ask questions that others may be thinking or something nobody thought to ask (P12, P17 & P29, 2022). Once a month, a CO and a senior GS-13 will be on the call, and the ELEs will join (P17, 2022). Anyone can ask questions, and the group discusses the questions and provide answers with examples (P17 & P29, 2022). The roundtable format is a safe space that gives people the confidence and willingness to ask questions without feeling like an idiot because they do not know something (P12, 2022).

The application of the roundtable discussion to share and transfer knowledge was evident, with participants citing regularly scheduled ELE and CO roundtable discussions as the primary method of knowledge management (P3, P7, P12, P17, P19, & P29, 2022). However, the PG does not consistently utilize the roundtable discussion model across the organization, with participants noting the absence of roundtable discussions for MLEs (P3, P12 & P17, 2022). Several participants suggested that the PG should hold roundtable discussions for MLEs because they are an excellent place to share information with others in the organization (P3, P12 & P17, 2022).

Theme 3: Retaining Employees

The attrition of capable and competent MLEs continues to be a top organizational concern because the consequence of losing seasoned and high-performing employees is significant (Alshehhi et al., 2021). High turnover rates create disruption and adversely affect the organization and its employees. PG employees demonstrate a niche skill set and are experts in the federal acquisition process, which requires years of training and experience to become competent (Choi, 2020). To facilitate retention of the skilled workforce, the PG organization has embraced more flexible and creative work options, including telework and remote work for PG employees (Alshehhi et al., 2021). While flexible work options seem to be helping with retaining employees, the agency must continue to create a pipeline of employees trained to assume positions of increasing responsibility (Tao & Zhao, 2019).

Interview participants offered increasing employee engagement, flexible work arrangements (telework and remote work), and promotional opportunities as options to retain employees (P1, P3, P7, P9, P11, P12, P19, & P28, 2022). The hook to get mid-level contract specialists engaged and wanting to stay at the agency for a long-term career is to replicate what we are doing with the ELE program (P29, 2022). Assign them a mentor to engage and inspire them (P29, 2022). Take them to meetings with the program office, fleet customers and on travel to educate and show MLEs the work products (P29, 2022). Employees involved with the program and CO teams feel part of something larger than themselves (P29, 2022). Employees who sit on the sidelines working on mundane actions will not remain engaged (P29, 2022). Engaging employees may help with retaining employees who complete the ELE program to ensure we have qualified people to perform work at the CO (GS-14) level because not enough qualified senior GS-13s want to promote to GS-14. (P11 & P27, 2022). Removing the fear surrounding the CO job to ensure that employees are capable and confident when making procurement decisions may also help employee retention and engagement (P11 & P27, 2022).

The ELE cohort has helped create a work environment where people want to work and stay in the PG (P22 & P25, 2022). The PG takes ELEs and puts them in a quasi-classroom-like setting to teach them the nuts and bolts of contracting, which has been an enormous success (P25, 2022). The PG struggles a little bit with balancing the remote work environment and engaging employees, so they feel they are part of the organization (P25, 2022). When new employees start, supervisors should discuss their future career goals to check their heartbeat in this career field (P32, 2022). Understanding what motivates employees and advising them about the long-term growth possibilities and benefits of staying in the contracts career field could help the command engage and retain employees (P32, 2022).

Maximum telework distinguishes the 1102 employees from other working environments, such as the program offices, where they require many employees to come into the office, so staying in the PG is pretty enticing (P17 & P23, 2022). However, the command needs to better communicate the criteria for employees to work remotely and live outside the local commuting area (P13, 2022). There is a perception that GS-14s and GS-15s have the opportunity to remote work, but other employees do not (P20, 2022). Sometimes, employees requesting remote work are very junior and have yet to master contracting concepts (P13, 2022). Four or five employees recently left the PG because the agency would not allow junior employees to work remotely (P1 & P13, 2022).

MLE attrition is often a result of employees not getting promoted at the agency once they graduate from the ELE program as a GS-12 (P13 & P15, 2022). Some GS-12s apply for their GS-13 and are not promoted because they failed to demonstrate the requisite knowledge, skills, or abilities required to hold a CO position; however, promotion criteria are subjectively applied (P13 & P15, 2022). So instead, employees apply, get promoted at another agency, and leave the PG (P13 & P15, 2022). To avoid losing good employees, interview panel members must exercise good judgment and flexibility when applying subjective criteria to decide which applicants are qualified for the CO position (P18, 2022). Additionally, the certification process used to hire people through USA jobs is problematic, and the agency is missing well-qualified candidates who did not make the certification (P18, 2022).

To improve retention, participants agreed that the agency needs to focus on engaging employees in the workplace by increasing their sense of belonging with opportunities to connect and individually contribute to organizational goals and purpose (P16 & P20, 2022; Deloitte, 2021). The PG does not clearly communicate the expectations and participation requirements regarding telework and remote work options. Additionally, providing promotion criteria with defined experience, knowledge, skills, and ability requirements will help remove some of the subjectivity from the promotion interview process and ensure that interviewers evaluate the employees fairly.

Theme 4: Improving Recruitment Strategies

Improving recruitment strategies was another consistent theme among interview participants. Recruitment is a labor-intensive and time-consuming process to seek out and attract talented, motivated, and capable people who could perform the work assigned by the organization (Sobocka-Szczapa, 2021). Organizations recruit new employees to backfill current openings and to ensure adequate staffing levels are maintained as attrition occurs (Sobocka-Szczapa, 2021). Recruiters must consider the organization's present and future needs when interviewing job candidates (Sobocka-Szczapa, 2021). Recruiters should provide prospective recruits with honest and realistic employment expectations to ensure that individuals that accept employment understand the job requirements (Sobocka-Szczapa, 2021).

Interview participants discussed the need for better outreach to the local high schools and nearby colleges and universities to promote job opportunities (P24 & P28, 2022). The command established pipelines with nearby colleges and universities years ago, but has not continued cultivating those relationships (P24 & P28, 2022). The PG needs to reestablish those connections and create outreach opportunities to ensure a steady influx of interested candidates qualified to interview for positions (P28, 2022). Participants suggested that the PG leverage its alumni resources by asking junior employees to participate in career fairs at their alma mater (P28, 2022). College students might easily relate to recent graduates, and agency employees could discuss job opportunities with their former professors to assist with identifying potential recruits (P28, 2022). Additionally, the PG needs to conduct outreach with the local high school guidance counselors to educate students about how the base supports the warfighter and job opportunities to consider as they prepare for college (P24 & P28, 2022). Familiarity with the college coursework required for a job in federal procurement could help students have a career goal in mind when they start college instead of scrambling for a job when they are about to graduate (P28, 2022).

P3 discussed the opportunity to recruit experienced personnel from other agencies by leveraging the telework environment.

> "I've been on interview panels where the announcement has gone out to all the agencies, but we only intend to promote someone from within. We've interviewed many different people, and there have been great people from other agencies that are GS-12s or GS-13s looking for a lateral, but leadership doesn't want to pull them in. We're like that, that could be a future CO one day like, you know, broaden your view of the world here and let's look long term. We should consider those really good people from other agencies at the GS-12 and GS-13 levels. I think telework and remote work are huge incentives. I can tell you that during the recent GS-13 promotion panels, we had seventy-eight candidates. We interviewed about thirty-five people, and every single one wanted to telework or remote work. Every. Single. One" (2022).

Socializing the duties, benefits, and importance of the contract specialist position in the Federal Government could inspire students to pursue a career in the contracting field. Promoting the rewards of a career in civil service and understanding how employees make a positive difference for military service members may assist with recruiting future employees (Fadairo et al., 2020).

Interpretation of the Themes

The discovered themes and research findings from this project identified a need for the PG to better assess talent gaps in the workforce and develop a Mid-Level Development Program (MLDP) to fill those gaps to build a robust pool of employees with the specialized acquisition skills needed to ensure organizational effectiveness (Deloitte, 2021). Additional findings related to the recruitment and retention of qualified personnel to ensure workforce members demonstrate the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet current and future mission requirements (Devlin, 2019). This qualitative case study relied on generating meaningful conversations to obtain detailed answers to the interview questions from the Interview Guide (Appendix A) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher asked participants the same set of questions to provide consistency, reliability, and rigor to document results to support the study's credibility (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012).

Theme 1: Learning and Development

While participants praised the ELE program, many commented on the lack of a similar development program to cultivate the skill set of MLEs (P6, P11, P12, P13, P22, & P26, 2022). Several employees mentioned a mid-level development plan that was created some time ago. This plan is a Microsoft Word® document that includes helpful guidance and suggested skills for employees to master so they are competitive when promotion opportunities arise. The organization must ensure its workforce remains relevant by investing in learning and development programs to keep employees engaged and current on ever-changing policies and regulations (Talent development tips, 2022). While this mid-level development plan is a helpful document, it is not a structured program that provides the rigorous training, immersive learning experiences, or developmental opportunities an MLE needs to compete for CO positions.

Interview participants discussed the need for a MLDP similar to the ELE training program (P6, P12, P22, & P26, 2022). The mid-level development plan is a document aimed at helping GS-12 and GS-13 employees self-assess their knowledge, skills, and abilities (P13, P26, & P28, 2022). It is not a structured program or interactive tool but more of a roadmap or checklist to mark what programs an employee worked on and the experiences gained (P26, 2022). The employee can assess their needs or gaps against the suggested qualities and experiences that make a candidate qualified for a GS-14 CO position (P26 & P28, 2022). Employees are responsible for actively managing their careers (P13 & P28, 2022). Employees who desire to move up in the organization should work with their supervisor to identify the skills needed and how to fill any noted gaps in their portfolio (P13 & P28, 2022).

There is not a lack of MLEs that could become COs; there's just a lack of prepared MLEs ready to become COs (P26, 2022). The command struggles with developing MLEs into COs, so focusing on establishing a MLDP will ensure that not just a handful of people are prepared to take on that role. (P11, P22 & P26, 2022). Leadership has recognized the need to create and make available training to fulfill CO training needs to ensure the command develops well-qualified specialists even if they are not interested in the CO role (P4, P22, & P26, 2022). The PG could better distribute the workload and assign deputy or assistant COs to the team in addition to the GS-14 CO to help employees get some experience doing CO work (P4, P8, P24,

& P26, 2022). Doing something now is essential because many people will retire in the next eighteen months, and while there may be many opportunities to promote people, they may not be qualified (P26, 2022).

The MLEs told senior leadership they needed more focused, relevant training instead of taking more Defense Acquisition University (DAU) classes (P22, 2022). Leadership often assumes MLEs get most of their training on the job because they do the bulk of the work (P4 & P11, 2022). However, the contracting role is so expansive that it requires years of experience and training to become proficient and confident because things are constantly changing (P4, P11, & P17, 2022). Hopefully, employees are gaining that experience and ability to become successful COs, but the PG must provide them with specific training and experience with different types of contracting. (P4 & P11, 2022).

An excellent place to start is to educate the specialist workforce on what it means to make decisions as a CO and understand the anatomy of the CO decision process (P12 & P26, 2022). The CO is ultimately responsible for everything on the contract, and many people are reluctant to take ownership of things beyond their span of control (P8, P12, P27 & P28, 2022). Leadership has to place more accountability on the stakeholders for their input rather than hold the CO responsible for everything (P28, 2022). This research study highlighted the need for a MLDP to grow MLEs into senior contract specialists and COs (P6, P12, P22, & P26, 2022). Allowing MLEs to experience different programs, projects, and contracting methods is essential to cultivate their skills and abilities.

Theme 2: Knowledge Sharing and Transfer

The application of the roundtable discussion to share and transfer knowledge is not consistently utilized across the organization. The agency holds regularly scheduled monthly ELE roundtable discussions but does not apply the concept to MLEs. Although a few employees mentioned that the COs (GS-14s) would have a roundtable discussion with other COs, and some COs would hold a roundtable discussion with their teams, only those employees in attendance benefit. Employees noted a lack of roundtable discussions for MLEs to ask more senior employees questions and benefit from them sharing their knowledge and lessons learned.

Most departments hold monthly CO roundtables and share information at those meetings (P3, P7, & P19, 2022). Sometimes senior leadership attends, and the group discusses workload topics, questions, concerns, or comments (P7, 2022). The subject is provided a week or so in advance, and everyone engages by freely and openly discussing their questions, knowledge, experiences, and advice (P3, P19, 2022). The roundtable format allows participants to freely share information by discussing the topic and lessons learned within that safe environment (P7 & P19, 2022). Sometimes people share new policies or uncommon issues that a CO experienced. Everyone in the group is engaged, open, honest, and freely shares good and bad experiences (P3 & P7, 2022).

Since shifting to a virtual work environment, some CO teams hold bi-weekly meetings with the team to check in, catch up on things, and ensure everybody has the same information (P21, 2022). Employees can participate if they have time, but it is not required (P21, 2022). The group will usually pick a topic for discussion, and participants will share their knowledge and experiences with everyone. (P21, 2022). Senior folks who provide their expertise, lessons learned, and personal experiences, whether they were successes or failures, will help others learn (P4, 2022). Sharing knowledge and experiences to teach others is all part of being a good leader (P4, 2022).

This research study found a gap in the knowledge management process at the agency. While the PG uses roundtable discussions to share and transfer knowledge with ELEs and COs, MLEs were left out. Employees noted the unavailability of regular roundtable discussions for MLEs, limiting their ability to benefit from knowledge-sharing practices. Furthermore, other than the roundtable discussions, no participant discussed the availability of a lessons-learned database or other methods of structured knowledge management. The inability of the agency to manage and share experienced employees' tacit knowledge and organizational expertise with others for future use is concerning (Mazorodze & Buckley, 2020). Without senior employees sharing their lessons from their projects, PG employees may repeat mistakes and miss opportunities to take advantage of best practices or innovative approaches to improve the process of future procurements (Rowe & Sikes, 2006).

Theme 3: Retaining Employees

Interview participants were concerned about retaining MLEs (P11, P27, & P29, 2022). They offered that the PG does not actively engage MLEs in managing their careers using the talent management board (TMB) to understand their career goals and how the organization can help them achieve those goals. Using TMB at the GS-12 or GS-13 level could help identify those interested in the GS-14 and above positions (P13, P24, & P25, 2022). However, the PG should provide information about the different Program Management Air (PMA) Offices, what they do, and the different contract experiences offered to help employees select where they might want to go (P3, 2022). The TMB tool should give leadership a dashboard they can click into and query the data to search for employees needing specific experiences to fill a gap or use the information to select someone as a senior specialist for a program that could benefit their career (P13 & P22, 2022).

One method of sharing information is for employees to use the TMB tool to self-identify their career goals, experiences, and gaps (P3, P4, & P25, 2022). When discussing rotations or movements, leaders could use the TMB data to see the talent and the gaps in their organization to set up a growth path for employees (P3, P4, & P25, 2022). The TMB should provide employees with more personalized and helpful feedback to assist employees with being more competitive for future promotion opportunities (P4 & P25, 2022). Supervisors should have regular conversations with their employees about their career goals and what they are looking for experience-wise (P4, P14, & P25, 2022). Some people left the command or moved elsewhere outside of the PG because they were not offered the different procurement experiences needed to advance their careers (P14, 2022).

Aside from job satisfaction, adequate pay is probably the next thing when retaining workers (P8, P10, 2022). It’s no big secret that federal workers are paid quite a bit less than their civilian counterparts, so adequately incentivizing and rewarding high performers and those employees doing CO work is essential (P4, P8, & P10, 2022). In some cases, employees were reluctant to pursue promotion opportunities because the nominal pay increase, if any, was not worth the enormous workload (P8 & P25, 2022). Others leave because even though they performed many CO job duties, they were not adequately compensated for their work efforts (P5, P8, & P29, 2022). Losing senior specialists puts the CO and other team members at risk for burnout because they have to take on an additional workload (P5, P8, P29, 2022).

PG leadership must stop taking advantage of MLEs doing most of the work (P18 & P24, 2022). Leadership expects the MLEs to train the junior folks and pick up the slack when they cannot perform (P11, P18, P24, & P27, 2022). Supervisors often overload their high-performing MLEs because they can meet necessary deadlines (P18 & P24, 2022). However, the PG needs to stop overloading senior employees because junior employees are stripped of the opportunity to learn, and senior employees will experience burnout and leave the agency (P18 & P24, 2022).

Participants discussed the need for better career management guidance, adequate monetary compensation, and leadership to balance the workload more evenly to avoid burning out high-performing employees as options to increase retention (P5, P8, P18, P24, & P29, 2022). The TMB tool should provide a career dashboard with defined criteria for employees where they can actively manage their careers based on individual goals. While few options exist to increase salary for Federal Government employees, the PG could better balance and distribute the workload to avoid overloaded and overworked employees.

Theme 4: Improving Recruitment Strategies

Improving recruitment strategies was another significant finding from this research study because recruitment is labor-intensive and time-consuming (Sobocka-Szczapa, 2021). It seems that recruiters do not consistently present and future needs of the command when interviewing job candidates (Sobocka-Szczapa, 2021). Interview participants discussed the need for better outreach, promoting the virtual work environment, and adequately describing the benefits of the job to potential employees (P24 & P28, 2022).

One way to better recruit qualified workers is to get the word out about the opportunities available on the base (P7 & P12, 2022). The surrounding area is relatively small, and it seems that the agency relies on word of mouth to find employees (P7 & P12, 2022). However, they are missing those qualified candidates who do not have a connection to someone who works on base (P7 & P12, 2022). The agency lacks outreach with the local high schools and colleges (P24 & P28, 2022). If students begin college with a contracting career goal in mind, they could tailor their college coursework to have options when they graduate (P24 & P28, 2022). Understanding what coursework is pertinent for a job in the procurement field would ensure that students are prepared to join the workforce once they finish their degree program (P28, 2022).

The command needs to take a more holistic approach to the recruiting process to match prospective employees with a career field that best suits their talents and skill sets (P7, P12 & P17, 2022). Part of recruiting the right people is getting them engaged and interested in a career in procurement early (P17 & P28, 2022). While employees come and go, the PG must recruit smarter and search for those potential employees interested in higher-level positions (P28, 2022). If the PG hires people who do not aspire to move up in the organization or understand that a procurement job is often stressful, it should not be a surprise when they do not apply for GS-14 or GS-15 positions (P17, P27, & P28, 2022).

Increasing the applicant pool will be instrumental in finding employees who could take on the CO role (P10, 2022). With the expansion of telework and now remote work possibilities, the agency has many opportunities to expand its applicant pool and help the organization tremendously (P10 & P27, 2022). However, being honest with people about what the job entails and what the local area offers is paramount (P11, 2022). The PG has seen an influx of applicants from other agencies not allowing telework or remote work (P11, 2022). Although PG employees are predominately teleworking or working remotely (outside the local commuting area), employees will sometimes have to support in-person meetings (P11, 2022).

The need to establish a pipeline of potential candidates by reaching out and building relationships with local high schools and colleges was discussed by several participants (P24 & P28, 2022). The agency needs to communicate the rewards and benefits of a career in civil service to college-bound students to strengthen the pool of qualified candidates who could interview for potential employment. Additionally, leveraging the virtual work environment may help attract and retain employees because the remote and rural nature of the Southern Maryland area is not always appealing to young professionals.

Representation and Visualization of the Data

The following section provides a detailed discussion of how the data collected in this research study relates to the critical areas of the research proposal, namely the research questions, the conceptual framework, anticipated themes, the literature review, and the research study's problem statement. The researcher used interview inquiry and asked open-ended questions related to the research questions to collect qualitative responses for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The informal interview encouraged an open and honest exchange with research participants providing spontaneous and unscripted responses to each question. The researcher designed the interview questions to collect the necessary data to answer the research questions posed in Section 1. The researcher used Otter.ai to transcribe the video recording from each interview and compared the Otter.ai produced transcription against accuracy. The researcher provided the finalized transcript to each participant for review, update if needed, and ultimate validation of the transcript (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once validated, the researcher coded, reviewed, and organized the interview transcripts by the emergent themes discovered using NVivo (Sale, 2022).

Relationship of the Findings

This section describes the researcher's findings as a result of the study. This flexible design case study focused on the critical need for agencies to conduct succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant CO positions in the Federal Government (Adewale et al., 2011). This study was designed to fill the apparent knowledge gap with the organization's lack of a systematic and methodological succession plan to ensure organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021). The research questions presented in Section 1 were crafted to elicit thoughtful and detailed responses from participants to help justify the need to plan for succession (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Suppose the agency does not develop a pool of qualified and capable candidates to compete for CO positions promptly. In that case, there is a significant risk that employees are unqualified or incapable of filling the critical and indispensable role of CO, which will adversely affect organizational effectiveness.

The Research Questions

Section 1 of this study provided four research questions designed to explore the succession planning for COs at DoN agencies in Southern MD. The questions included (1) How are Federal Government agencies challenged with succession planning? (2) How can agencies increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline? (3) How can DoN agencies tailor their learning and development programs to focus on developing CO skills and abilities to plan for succession effectively? and (4) What strategies are available for leadership to explore to increase retention of employees with critical acquisition skills to maintain organizational effectiveness?

The research questions were designed to facilitate discussion with participants about the challenges of succession planning and draw out suggestions for developing employees and increasing the number of potential candidates in the CO pipeline. The research questions asked participants to share their thoughts on why succession planning is a challenge in the Federal Government and the consequence of not retaining employees with the critical acquisition skills needed at the senior contract specialist and CO levels. Each research question was addressed during the interview process as follows:

Research Question 1. RQ1 asked: How are Federal Government agencies challenged with succession planning? Research question 1 was answered through participants' responses to interview question 10, which asked participants to "Please identify the challenges you see with CO succession planning at the DoN agencies in Southern MD." The primary challenge participants identified was that the agency lacks a robust pool of qualified candidates capable of competing for the CO position because there is no training program to prepare candidates for the CO role (P1, P3, P4, P15, P22, & P26, 2022).

There is no formal training program for contract specialists to develop them into COs using on-the-job, classroom, rotations, job shadowing, lessons learned, and cross-training techniques (P1, P3, P4, P15, & P26, 2022). To develop a pool of qualified candidates, MLEs need to rotate amongst teams and departments to experience different types of work products to grow their skillset (P3 & P22, 2022). The PG should assign complex, challenging, and meaningful workload items to MLEs to help them develop the skills, confidence, depth, and breadth of experiences needed to become a CO (P4, P7, P10, & P20, 2022). Leadership often assigns the most complex work to senior employees, and mid-level or junior specialists only support the larger effort by doing a small subset of the work (P20, 2022). The agency needs to give MLEs opportunities to build their skills and confidence, so they will feel comfortable stepping into a CO role in the future (P20, 2022). The PG must allow MLEs to demonstrate they can do the work. Employees who want the CO job lack experience, and many senior and experienced GS-13s are not interested in the CO role or responsibility (P18 & P20, 2022).

Research Question 2. RQ2 asked: How can agencies increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline? Research question 2 was answered through participants' responses to interview question 11, which asked, "How do you believe DoN agencies in

Southern MD can increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline?" The participants discussed the need for a MLDP to increase the pool of qualified candidates capable of performing the CO role to solve the succession planning challenge identified above by developing a pool of candidates (P11, P22 & P26, 2022). Participants suggested that the agency consider offering a MLDP to provide employees with classroom training, experiential learning, and professional development opportunities to ensure employees acquire the depth and breadth of experiences and knowledge to perform the CO role (P6, P12, P22, & P26, 2022). Again, several participants pointed out that the agency does not have a formal training program to develop contract specialists into COs (P1, P3, P4, P15, & P26, 2022). Actively or regularly rotating employees to ensure they become well-rounded contract specialists would positively impact the skill level of the prospective pool of CO candidates.

As mentioned, the agency does not offer a MLDP to develop contract specialists into COs (P1, P3, P4, P15, & P26, 2022). There should be a training program similar to the ELE or Leadership Development Programs for MLEs to ensure they obtain the necessary skills, knowledge, and experiences to succeed in the CO role (P1 & P15, 2022). Interested candidates would apply, get their supervisor's endorsement, and interview for a spot in the program (P15, 2022). Once candidates are selected, they participate in a training program that prepares them for the GS-14 CO position, like a CO internship (P15, 2022). Most COs and supervisors can identify the employees on their teams that demonstrate the correct skill set and provide them with the encouragement they need to advance in their careers (P9, 2022). The agency should consider offering incentives or some reward system for developing people (P9, 2022).

The agency needs a solid bench of candidates to choose from when GS-14 vacancies occur (P4 & P16, 2022). To create that bench, the agency has to provide the proper training and preparation, including ensuring that candidates understand that a specialist's and a CO's jobs are very different (P4, P8, 2022). Many people say they are not interested in being a CO because they see a lot of COs working all hours and do not want to be on call constantly (P4, P6, P8, & P29, 2022). Adequately incentivizing and rewarding people could help motivate qualified candidates to apply for a CO role (P4 & P20, 2022).

Conducting a TMB for MLEs would help leaders identify their personnel's talents and skill needs/gaps to develop a succession planning strategy to ensure the organization remains effective (P4 & P8, 2022). Employees can self-identify their skills and gaps by sharing information in the TMB tool (P10, P25, & P28, 2022). The TMB tool does not currently allow leadership to query data meaningfully to identify employees' needs and set up a growth path (P3, P22, & P25, 2022). By reviewing the data from the TMB, leaders should understand their folk's career goals and could help MLEs get the right experiences, training, and skill sets to be competitive for CO job opportunities in the future (P25, 2022).

Research Question 3. RQ3 asked: How can DoN agencies tailor their learning and development programs to focus on developing CO skills and abilities to plan for succession effectively? Research question 3 was answered through participants' responses to interview questions 5, 6, and 7, which asked participants (Q5), "How can DoN agencies tailor their learning and development programs to focus on developing CO skills and abilities to plan for succession effectively?" (Q6), "Have you participated in any leadership development programs at the agency? If so, please indicate the timeframe and which program(s)?" and (Q7), "What training and experiences do you believe are necessary to become a capable CO?" respectively.

Participants discussed the need for a MLDP to develop contract specialists' knowledge, skills, and abilities at the GS-12 and GS-13 levels (P1, P3, P4, P15, & P26, 2022). There should be something for the MLEs, like how they move the ELEs, where they do something for two years and then move to another team to get different experiences (P1, P3, P4, P15, & P26, 2022). Occasionally the PG will swap some GS-12s or GS-13s around to balance the workload better, but leadership does not regularly offer MLEs opportunities to voluntarily move around the organization (P1, P15, & P26, 2022). A MLDP would provide MLEs with the skills and experiences needed to become high-performing senior specialists who could compete for GS-14 CO positions when openings occur (P1, P15, & P26, 2022). This training concept would also facilitate the growth of a highly qualified mid-level workforce capable of performing more complex work assignments and allowing teams to balance the workload appropriately (P26, 2022).

Additionally, some participants noted the need to develop employees' leadership skills and other soft skills, such as communication and conflict management (P8, P9, & P27, 2022). Many people leave the PG because they are not trained to manage people, deal with conflict, or effectively communicate with others (P13, P15, P16, & P17, 2022). They are trained to know contracting and acquisition procedures and policies (P15, 2022). Soft skills and leadership training are necessary for contract specialists and COs to lead others and communicate effectively (P8, P9, & P27, 2022). Employees are not equipped to deal with problematic people from the PMA, which is a culture shock for many people (P15, 2022).

COs need a solid knowledge base of the FAR and DFAR regulations to understand the different contract types and procedures (P14, 2022). However, COs also need soft skills like leadership, conflict management, and communication (P8, P13, P14, & P21, 2022). Some COs are incredibly smart and know acquisition policies and procedures; however, if their interpersonal skills are terrible, people leave (P14, P17, P19, & P21, 2022). Many leadership development classes offer training on soft skills to help communicate and deal with others and understand how people think and process information (P8, P13, P14, & P22, 2022).

Research Question 4. RQ4 asked: What strategies are available for leadership to explore to increase retention of employees with critical acquisition skills to maintain organizational effectiveness? Research question 4 was answered through participants' responses to interview question 12, which asked, "Please describe how you think the agency can increase the retention of 1102 employees with critical acquisitions skills to maintain organizational effectiveness?" Participants recognized the importance of retaining a skilled workforce because of the agency's investment in learning and development (P13, P15, P16, P17, 2022). Participants again emphasized the need for leadership training and soft skills development to communicate effectively, lead people, manage people, and deal with conflict (P13, P15, P16, P17, 2022). People need to feel engaged, have a sense of belonging, and feel that what they do is valuable and meaningful (P16, P21, & P22, 2022). Focusing on developing the CO's leadership skills is critical because MLEs are the skilled workforce and backbone of the organization (P31, 2022).

Participants also noted the need to ensure that MLEs could perform CO work because many retirement-eligible employees plan to leave the organization in the next few years (P3, P21, P27, & P32, 2022). With all the people eligible to retire, there is a concern about the potential lack of experienced COs capable of signing contracts without violating the procurement rules (P3 & P27, 2022). It appears that the emerging workforce is not necessarily up to the challenge of the CO role or responsibilities (P21, 2022).

Sometimes, people leave the PG because a contracting career is stressful and not for them (P17, 2022). Sometimes high-performing employees get frustrated and leave because there is little incentive to continue to carry a heavy workload and produce high-quality work products when some people do the bare minimum and squeak by (P17, 2022). The CO job is demanding, and the PG does not have enough skilled people to manage the large workload (P27, 2022). Additionally, some people are poor performers, but the PG cannot remove them (P27, 2022). Trying to get the work done with incapable people makes the job even more difficult (P27, 2022).

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposed in Section 1 provided the researcher's methodology using a formalized framework to guide the exploration and interrelationship between the proposed concepts (Lynch et al., 2020). The framework also provided a recommended approach using qualitative methods to analyze and present the research findings discovered as a result of the study (Lynch et al., 2020). This research study explored the concepts of talent management, leadership development, performance management, and knowledge sharing and transfer as part of this research project and their impact on the Federal Government's ability to plan for succession (Lynch et al., 2020). Senior leaders and acquisition critical employees were identified and confirmed as the actors fundamental to the succession planning construct (Deloitte, 2021). This research study also explored options available to agencies to increase employee retention and lower employee turnover rates to maximize opportunities for organizational effectiveness through succession planning efforts (Jackson & Dunn-Jensen, 2021).

Concepts.

Knowledge Sharing and Transfer. This study found that the organization encourages a knowledge-sharing culture. However, knowledge-sharing is not a formal process to ensure all employees benefit. The information related during those roundtable discussions encourages employees to share their institutional memory informally and transfer their tacit knowledge to others (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2019). Sharing occurs through conversations to help the organization avoid losing institutional knowledge when an employee retires or leaves the organization (Siewert & Louderback, 2019). The researcher did not find any evidence of efforts to record or document the tacit knowledge or lessons learned shared by the employee to preserve that institutional knowledge or experiences (Wesemann, 2021). Knowledge sharing is particularly critical for succession planning because the organization may struggle to fill the information gaps left behind when a senior employee departs (Siewert & Louderback, 2019). Several employees discussed using ELE and CO roundtable discussions that focused on sharing information with specific employee groups. Several participants noted the need to expand the roundtable discussion concept to MLEs (GS-12s and GS-13s) and the need for good mentors to share information (P3, P12 & P17, 2022).

The ELE roundtables are great because people ask questions that others may be thinking or something nobody thought to ask (P12, P17 & P29, 2022). Once a month, a CO and a senior GS-13 will be on the call, and the ELEs will join (P17, 2022). Anyone can ask questions, and the group discusses the questions and provide answers with examples (P17 & P29, 2022). The roundtable format is a safe space that gives people the confidence and willingness to ask questions without feeling like an idiot because they do not know something (P12, 2022). The PG should hold roundtable discussions for MLEs because they are an excellent place to share information with others in the organization (P3, P12 & P17, 2022).

Participants discussed the benefits of pairing people with a mentor or buddy as an excellent method to share information and knowledge (P2, P22, & P33, 2022). Employees should at least establish a relationship with an informal mentor they can reach out to and ask questions (P3, 2022). Working on work-related products with a mentor allows employees to hear lessons learned and a forum to exchange ideas (P20, 2022). It can be intimidating for a more junior employee to pick up the phone and cold call somebody with questions, so establishing a relationship with a senior employee would help avoid that issue (P2 & P17, 2022). A more structured or rigorous mentor-mentee program could assist with employee development because some senior specialists and Cos share and mentor more than others (P7, 2022). Some COs are very good at explaining their thought process and allowing employees to ask questions about their deals to help them learn (P9, 2022). However, some employees assigned as mentors are not dedicated to the agency or job, refuse to share information with others, and often drive good employees away (P10, 2022). The PG is responsible for ensuring that employees who serve as mentors demonstrate the capability and willingness to help others (P10, 2022).

Leadership Development. Training and development programs can help organizations build a pool of employees with the skills required to fill critical positions (Ali et al., 2019). Although several participants discussed the need for leadership training to develop soft skills, including leadership, communication, and conflict management techniques, a surprising result of this research study was the lack of participants who applied for formal leadership training (P3, P8, P13, P14, P21, & P28, 2022). The command offers two primary leadership development programs, the Journey Leadership Development Program (JLDP), which is for GS-9 through GS-13 level employees, and the Naval Leadership Development Program (NLDP), which targets employees at the GS-13 and above level. The command also offers the Foundational Leadership Development Program (FLDP) for employees with five years or less at the command. However, the FLDP is not as widely promoted as the other programs. Each program targets different aspects of the DoD Instruction 1430.16, which focuses on Growing Civilian Leaders. Of the thirty-three participants interviewed, only three people participated and graduated from a formal leadership program. One participant was recently selected for NLDP and just completed their first course in the program.

COs need a solid knowledge base of the FAR and DFAR regulations to understand the different contract types and procedures (P14, 2022). However, COs also need soft skills like leadership, conflict management, and communication (P8, P13, P14, & P21, 2022). Some COs are incredibly smart and know acquisition policies and procedures; however, if their interpersonal skills are terrible, people will leave (P14, P17, P19, & P21, 2022). Many leadership development classes offer training on soft skills to help communicate and deal with others and understand how people think and process information (P8, P13, P14, & P22, 2022).

Several participants reported that participating in a leadership development program did not help advance their careers, while others stated they were too busy to apply (P1, P5, P7, P14, P13, P15, P16, P17, P19, P21, P24, P26, & P27, 2022). The perception is that formal leadership programs do not help in a contracting career, have any added value, or help specialists get a CO warrant (P6, 2022). PG leaders seem to value job performance and on-the-job experience over participating in leadership development programs when considering employees for promotion opportunities (P3, P11 & P28, 2022). The application process to apply to the JLDP or NLDP program is agonizing. Many employees do not spend the time or effort to apply since PG leadership does not emphasize the long-term value of employees developing leadership skills early in their careers (P3 & P28, 2022). Several participants have not participated because they felt that their workload made it impossible and the priority was to get the work done over participating in those programs (P1, P5, P7, P14, P16, P19, P21, P24, P26, & P27, 2022). Others related that they applied for leadership programs several times, were not selected and got discouraged (P4 & P30, 2022)

Performance Management. Performance management is an ongoing process used to identify and measure an employee's performance through a performance appraisal and discuss opportunities for further development based on individual and organizational goals that involve talent management (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Performance management involves supervisors coaching and providing regular feedback to improve or enhance an employee's performance beyond annual evaluations (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Responsible leaders use performance management to learn if employees are overworked, overburdened, or experiencing burnout from an unhealthy work-life balance (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021).

However, several participants disclosed that few supervisors ask employees about long-term career goals during their mid-year or annual performance appraisal (P12, P19, P23, 2022). Although individuals are responsible for their careers, leadership needs to engage with employees to identify qualified candidates for future opportunities and those employees with skills not used to their highest potential (P23 & P30, 2022). Conducting performance management could provide valuable insights about employees, including understanding their short and long-term career goals and if they are overworked or experiencing other difficulties in the workplace (P8, 2022). Supervisors should assist employees with career path development by helping them create an Individual Development Plan (IDP) tailored to their specific needs (P8, P13, & P26, 2022). The IDP serves as a roadmap for employees to help them achieve their career goals while allowing supervisors to monitor their progress and provide advice to help them develop further (P8, P13, & P26, 2022).

Talent Management. Talent management is a subset of performance management that focuses on identifying high-performing employees as potential leaders, evaluating their strengths, identifying skill gaps, and assessing their readiness to assume critical acquisition and leadership positions (Nowak & Scanlan, 2021). Leaders should recognize the potential mismatch between the essential skills necessary for employees to succeed in the CO position, the skills demonstrated by employees, and a plan to resolve any discrepancies (Makarius & Srinivasan, 2017). Additionally, leaders must avoid bias and ensure equitable consideration and respect for all employees regardless of race, class, or gender (Painter-Morland et al., 2019).

The agency recently conducted a TMB for only GS-14 and above employees, which helped identify those employees planning to retire in the next few years (P22, 2022). Using TMB at the GS-12 or GS-13 level could help identify those interested in the GS-14 and above positions (P13, P24, & P25, 2022). The MLE TMB would identify the talents, skill needs, and gaps in the workforce and leaders' time to develop a succession planning strategy to ensure the organization remains effective when senior employees retire and MLEs are promoted (P4 & P8, 2022). Employees can self-identify their skills and gaps by sharing information in the TMB tool (P10, P25, & P28, 2022). By reviewing the data from the TMB, leaders would understand their folk's career goals and could help MLEs get the right experiences, training, and skill sets to be competitive for CO job opportunities in the future (P25, 2022). The TMB should provide employees with more personalized and helpful feedback, so they know the experiences and knowledge they need to demonstrate to be competitive for future promotion opportunities (P4 & P25, 2022). Supervisors should have regular conversations with their employees about their career goals, growth opportunities, and what they are looking for experience-wise (P3, P14, & P25, 2022).

Theories.

This study provided evidence of Human Capital Theory and Servant Leadership Theory in practice, although no participant mentioned either theory explicitly.

Human Capital Theory. Human capital theory emphasizes the benefits of investing in human capital with an expectation of improved performance and productivity at the individual and organizational (Ju, 2019). Human capital theory also highlights the need to develop talent to create a pool of candidates available to compete for critical positions when vacated (LeCounte et al., 2017). Organizations that invest in their employees and offer them opportunities to grow with the agency find that employees achieve organizational goals and reciprocate the investment with their loyalty (Ali et al., 2019). In addition to using on-the-job training and traditional classroom learning, participants discussed the need to develop employees using professional development opportunities such as rotational assignments, job shadowing, cross-training, and others to improve performance and productivity (P3, P7, P11, P12, P13, P15, P18, P20, P23, P26, P27, & P29, 2022; Moussa et al., 2017).

PG Leadership should offer MLEs cross-training and rotational assignment opportunities both within and outside the PG to help them expand their knowledge base and bring back lessons learned to their teammates (P3, P7, P11, P12, P13, P15, P18, P20, P23, P26, P27, & P29, 2022). Understanding the complexities of other positions (e.g., other PG departments, program office, legal, comptroller, etc.) can help specialists add value to the procurement process because they are expected to know more than the contracting process (P3, P7, P11, P12, P13, P15, P18, P20, P23, P26, P27, & P29, 2022). Chances for experiential learning provide hands-on experiences and a better perspective about how the organization works instead of just reading about it in a book or having someone talk about it (P18 & P27, 2022). Employees retain more knowledge by performing the relevant work when rotating to different programs or departments and gain the depth and breadth of experience required to succeed in the CO job (P7, P27, P11, P26, P27, & P29, 2022).

Several participants suggested using job shadowing more often to allow employees to broaden their experiences by watching someone in their position (P6, P14, P16, P23, P24, & P31, 2022). Some COs allow employees to shadow them COs and help them understand the decision-making process from the CO perspective (P6, P12, & P23, 2022). Also, allowing GS-13s to get a limited warrant and step up slowly to the GS-14 CO role (unlimited warrant) would be very helpful (P6, P14, P16, P23, P24, & P31, 2022).

(P12, P15, P17, & P21, 2022).

Several others suggested that to prepare specialists for CO positions, the PG should provide leadership and management training (P8, P12, P15, P17, & P21, 2022). COs and senior specialists are always viewed as leaders in the procurement process regardless of their pay grade or responsibilities (P12, P15, P17, & P21, 2022). People look to the CO to be that leader, not just because of the authority in their warrant, but because they recognize their authority from technical knowledge through experience (P12, P15, P17, & P21, 2022). Some people are excellent contract specialists but not necessarily good supervisors or managers (P8, P15, P17 & P21, 2022). Just because someone is qualified to be a CO based on experience and knowledge does not necessarily mean they will succeed or enjoy that role (P8 & P15, 2022). The command should provide training on managing people because good interpersonal skills are essential to succeeding in the CO position (P9, P15, P17, & P21, 2022). The PG could hold workshops with focused, hands-on training with scenarios acted out by individuals already in the position (if you're in this situation, how would you handle it?) to teach how to deal with difficult situations and difficult people (P21, 2022).

Servant Leadership Theory. Servant leadership theory posits that leaders encourage their employees to work purposefully, use their creativity to suggest organizational improvements, and develop into independent thinkers who take ownership of their work product (Cable, 2018). Servant leaders are committed to providing employees with training opportunities and challenging work assignments (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). Servant leaders lead by example and inspire employees to make a difference and add value to the organization (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). Unfortunately, many leaders struggle to empower employees with decision-making authority and often neglect to provide the support structure necessary to ensure their success (Quain, 2018). Leaders using the servant leadership model should understand how to balance the workforce's needs with the organization's (Kalhorn, 2020).

Supervisors should be more thoughtful about distributing and assigning workload (P25, 2022). It might be more practical to move employees around to help them grow and to ensure they learn and develop the skills necessary to become a leader in the organization (P25, 2022). The organization should consider issuing more limited CO warrants to GS-13s for lower dollar actions to help more evenly distribute the work (P6, 2022). Providing GS-13s with a limited warrant allows them to gain experience and the responsibility for reviewing and providing feedback on junior employees' work products using a team-lead concept (P6, P9, P12, & P25, 2022). Allowing senior GS-13s to exercise their limited warrants and supporting their award decisions will help give them the confidence to apply for promotion opportunities and hold an unlimited warrant (P12, 2022). Unfortunately, some GS-13s avoid using their warrant because they are intimidated by the responsibility or not confident in their position (P9, 2022). Most PG GS-14 COs are selected from the GS-13 team leads holding limited warrants (P13, 2022).

Actors.

The actors identified in Section 1 of this research study were acquisition critical employees and senior leaders. The actors who participated in this study were acquisition critical employees who were contract specialists (GS-11/12/13), COs who hold a limited warrant (GS-13), COs who hold an unlimited warrant (GS-14), and supervisory COs who hold an unlimited warrant (GS-15). No Senior Executive Service (SES) level leaders participated in this research project. The contract specialists and COs provided feedback on the general problem of the lack of succession planning within the Federal Government. The specific problem addressed in this research study was the possible lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD, resulting in a potential inability to recruit, train, and retain individuals with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the critical acquisition roles of CO inherent to maintaining organizational effectiveness.

The research study's feedback supported the agency's need to engage in succession planning practices. Succession planning practices include identifying the skill sets needed for critical positions and providing employees with the training, experiences, and knowledge required to assume CO positions when vacated (Koppolu et al., 2021). CO personnel fulfill a critical role because they are the only individuals with the authority to procure goods and services on the government's behalf (Weisman & Richards, 2019). The supervisory COs that participated acknowledged the need to closely monitor attrition trends to minimize the loss of employees with specialized knowledge and critical expertise because of its detrimental impact on Federal agencies (McCarthy et al., 2020). Additionally, supervisory COs discussed the need to regularly evaluate their workforce to determine their talents, skills, gaps, career goals, and potential using robust performance management practices utilizing tools like the TMB (Nowak & Scanlan, 2021).

Leadership could use the TMB tool more effectively by making it interactive for employees and supervisors (P24, 2022). A career dashboard where employees and supervisors can populate data and keep track of progress would help with talent management (P13 & P22, 2022). Supervisors should use the TMB data to discuss short and long-term career goals with their employees every chance they get (P24, 2022). Leadership should use the information in the TMB to understand their employee's career goals, desires, capabilities, and growth areas (P3, P8, & P25, 2022). When an opening occurs on a team, leaders could review the TMB data first to see if someone needs a rotational opportunity or if the vacancy aligns with where someone wants to go before doing a hiring action in USA jobs (P25, 2022).

Constructs.

Succession Planning Leads to Organization Effectiveness. Many factors contribute to how succession planning impacts organizational effectiveness, business continuity, and the retention of high-performing employees in a competitive marketplace (Al Suwaidi et al., 2020). This research supports the theory that managing talent and developing a pool of employees capable of competing for CO roles will ensure organizational effectiveness (Al Suwaidi et al., 2020). However, the organization's bench strength is limited because of a lack of breadth, depth, critical skills, and talent available across the PG to fulfill the CO role (Nowak & Scanlan, 2021). The agency needs a solid bench of candidates to choose from when GS-14 vacancies occur (P4 & P16, 2022). To create that bench, the agency has to provide the proper training and preparation, including ensuring that candidates understand that a specialist's and a CO's jobs are very different (P4, P8, 2022). Although the organization engages in some knowledge-sharing efforts, it is not consistent across the entire PG enterprise (Younas & Bari, 2020). The study substantiated some mismanagement of talent, leading to missed opportunities to recognize employees who can help the organization achieve its goals, increase efficiencies, and effectively use its resources (Kareem, 2019). Succession planning is critical to ensuring organizational effectiveness by providing continuity of operations and ensuring that capable individuals fill key positions and have the institutional and intellectual knowledge to succeed in their new roles (Siewert & Louderback, 2019).

Effective succession planning relies on the agency conducting talent management, providing developmental opportunities, and retaining skilled employees to achieve organizational effectiveness (Carter et al., 2019). Holding a TMB for MLEs would help leaders identify their personnel's talents and skill needs/gaps to develop a succession planning strategy to ensure the organization remains effective (P4 & P8, 2022). Employees can self-identify their skills and gaps by sharing information in the TMB tool (P10, P25, & P28, 2022). Making the TMB tool interactive for employees to populate data and keep track of progress would help with career pathing and allow senior leaders to manage their talent (P13, P22, & P24, 2022).

Anticipated Themes

The anticipated themes previously identified in Section 1 and discovered as a result of this research study were the need for employee engagement and training and development. The study's findings did not overtly discuss the role of senior leadership and their need to demonstrate transparency, trust, and emotional intelligence to engage and successfully train and develop employees. However, the participants recognized the need for employee engagement and related it to the discovered themes, including (1) learning and development opportunities, (2) knowledge sharing and transfer, (3) retaining employees, and (4) improving recruitment strategies. Additionally, the researcher slightly modified the anticipated theme of training and development to learning and development opportunities to capture participant feedback better. Although the anticipated themes of building transparency and trust, emotional intelligence, followership, effective listening, and respectful inquiry were not specifically discovered as part of this research study, the discovered themes require tenants of each anticipated theme for successful implementation.

Anticipated Theme: Employee Engagement. Employees who are engaged demonstrate increased job satisfaction and a commitment to remain with the organization because of their emotional commitment to the agency's mission and goals (Kruse, 2015; Yanchus et al., 2020). Engaged employees demonstrate enthusiasm, passion, and energy when performing their jobs, which helps inspire employees to achieve more and strive for excellence (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2018).

The agency-sponsored ELE program provides new employees with a structured and rigorous eight-month training curriculum to get them engaged and ensures they develop the solid foundational contracts knowledge required for contract specialists to succeed in their jobs (P1, P9, P11, P12, & P28, 2022). Monthly CO roundtables help employee engagement because employees freely and openly share information and discuss their experiences and advice based on a particular topic or question (P3, P7, & P19, 2022). Part of the recruiting process is to get people excited and engaged early (P17 & P28, 2022). Recruiters are responsible for better explaining the organizational goals and the benefits or detriments of a career in the contracting job series (P17 & P28, 2022). Candidates interested in higher-level positions in the PG demonstrate a long-term commitment to the agency (P17 & P28, 2022).

To increase retention, leaders need better training in their soft skills to communicate effectively, lead teams, manage people, and deal with conflict (P2, P3, P14, P15, P16, P19, P22, P23, P24, & P29). Ensuring their people feel valued and their workload is manageable by building a sense of community is an important step (P2, P19, P22, 2022). People need to feel engaged, have a sense of belonging, and feel that what they do is meaningful (P16 & P20, 2022).

Although individuals are responsible for their careers, leadership must engage with employees to identify qualified candidates for future opportunities (P23, 2022).

While this study found some evidence of the organization developing, engaging, and empowering their employees, the findings revealed that continued efforts are needed to ensure the employee's emotional commitment to the organization and its goals (Raley & Buller, 2019). Participants specifically suggested increased engagement with MLEs by establishing a MLDP to ensure that employees are supported and guided to reach individual potential and organizational goals (P1, P15, & P26, 2022).

Anticipated Theme: Training and Development. The need to prioritize human capital investment with training and development programs is a common method to increase employee satisfaction and reduce employee turnover (Mello, 2019). Knowledge-intensive agencies promote learning and development by providing opportunities for classroom learning, rotational assignments, cross-training, and other professional development options so employees can apply that knowledge to future efforts (Wesemann, 2021). Organizations that want to create a learning-intensive work environment should provide employees with opportunities to learn by performing new and challenging tasks to develop the employee's confidence, proficiency, and commitment (Wallin, 2020). Employers should offer experiential learning and professional development opportunities to equip future leaders for any challenge they may face (5 reasons to invest, 2019). Recent studies show that many organizations are shifting their focus from formal education and training to using development programs with experiential experiences to engage in professional learning (Wallin, 2020). The PG has created internal growth potential with the ELE program; however, once an employee completes the program, there is no formal career growth program (P5, P6, P12, P26, & P22, 2022). Applying the ELE training program concept and developing a

MLDP would allow the mid-level specialists to grow their skill sets (P5, P6, P12, P26, & P22, 2022). If the PG moves MLEs around to different areas, provide them opportunities for new experiences to help them grow, they are better prepared for future promotion openings (P5, P6, P12, P26, & P22, 2022).

This research study found evidence of career pathing with the ELEs but a significant gap in learning and development opportunities for MLEs to prepare them for a CO role. Many participants commented on the success of the ELE program and the need to develop a similar program to create internal growth potential for MLEs ((P6, P12, P22, & P26, 2022; Sokolowsky, 2022).

The Literature

The researcher conducted an extensive literature review on succession planning demonstrating a significant need for organizations to develop succession planning strategies because formal succession plans only exist in only about 35% of organizations based on a recent study (Robinson, 2020). The same study also noted that two-thirds of retirement-eligible Federal workers did not transfer their knowledge to junior employees because there is no formalized process to guide them to impart their knowledge to others (Robinson, 2020). Wesemann (2021) noted the need for agencies to improve their human capital development practices, including learning and development programs, mentorship, and knowledge transfer.

This research study substantiated the literature review findings that noted the need for agencies to improve their human capital development practices, including learning and development programs, mentorship, and knowledge management. The initial results revealed a significant gap in the development of MLEs and a need for the agency to address the gap with a career pathing program focused on MLEs. Participants suggested creating a MLDP, modeled after the successful ELE program to help with talent management (P1, P3, P4, P15, & P26, 2022). Using a MLDP would allow MLEs to increase their skill sets and enable the issuance of more limited warrants to balance the workload better and avoid burnout. Additionally, the MLDP should include coursework to develop an employee's soft skills and equip MLEs to lead and manage people better.

The need for increased knowledge management was also a recurring theme discovered as a result of this research study. The agency relies on roundtable discussions to share and transfer knowledge; however, roundtable discussion opportunities are unavailable to all employees. The agency lacks regular roundtable discussions for MLEs. Additionally, establishing a method to capture and manage tacit knowledge is critical to not repeating mistakes and benefitting from best practices or innovative approaches to improve the process of future procurements (Rowe & Sikes, 2006). The study results further confirmed the need for the agency to act and implement a formalized succession planning process to avoid a significant development gap and potential attrition because the MLEs were not provided opportunities to learn and grow with the organization.

The Problem

The general problem applied in this research study was the lack of succession planning within the Federal Government, resulting in an inability to train and retain employees with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the CO role integral to maintaining organizational effectiveness. The challenge of identifying, developing, and retaining talented MLEs capable of performing the CO role was apparent based on participant feedback. The specific problem addressed was the possible lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD, resulting in a potential inability to recruit, train, and retain individuals with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the critical acquisition roles of CO inherent to maintaining organizational effectiveness. The research findings collected during the study through surveys and participant interviews provided specific and substantial evidence of a gap related to MLEs in all four thematic areas: (1) learning and development, (2) knowledge sharing and transfer, (3) retaining employees, and (4) improving recruitment strategies.

This research study revealed a robust learning and development program for ELEs, but no similar program for employees to continue to grow in the contracting career field. However, the study exposed a significant gap in the agency's learning and development curriculum. The agency lacks a program focused on cultivating the skills of the MLE to help them become excellent contract specialists capable of competing for CO positions. The study uncovered gaps in how the agency manages knowledge sharing and transfer. While some employees benefit from roundtable discussions to share and transfer knowledge and lessons learned, all employees were not invited to participate. Participants highlighted a need for the agency to coordinate and lead monthly roundtable discussions for MLEs so they could benefit from knowledge-sharing practices (P3, P12 & P17, 2022). Furthermore, other than the roundtable discussions, there is no other method of structured knowledge management to capture the tacit knowledge and organizational expertise of experienced employees, which increases the risk of repeating mistakes and missing opportunities to take advantage of best practices for process improvements. The 2022 FWPR, included knowledge transfer as a high-level priority with Federal Government agencies (OPM, 2022b).

This study discussed retention practices with participants who suggested that the agency should increase employee engagement and career pathing opportunities to encourage individual commitment to organizational goals (P3, P21, P27, & P32, 2022). Participants suggested enhancing the TMB tool to provide an interactive career dashboard to allow employees to actively manage their career goals (P13, P24, & P25, 2022). The study also revealed a need for better communication from leadership on telework and remote work participation requirements and workload management to avoid overloaded and overworked employees. Additionally, providing promotion criteria guidance would help remove some subjectivity and guesswork from the promotion interview process for employees and interviewers. Finally, the study exposed a significant need to establish a pipeline of potential future job candidates by reaching out and building relationships with local high schools and colleges. Participants discussed the need for the agency to communicate the rewards and benefits of a career in civil service to students to strengthen the pool of qualified candidates who could interview for potential employment in the future (P24 & P28, 2022). The 2022 FWPR, included recruitment as a high-level priority with Federal Government agencies (OPM, 2022b).

Summary of the Findings

The research questions were designed to understand the extent the agency engages in succession planning for the CO role. Based on this research study, there appear to be limited professional development opportunities for the MLEs to acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become capable of fulfilling the CO role. Many MLEs do not acquire the needed knowledge, skills, and abilities from on-the-job training on their current team. However, each team does not always offer the required depth and breadth of experience to become competent and capable in the CO role. This study also discovered a need to increase knowledge-sharing across the PG using the roundtable discussion model for MLEs, increased mentoring, better recruiting outreach, and more retention incentives. The study found a need to create a MLDP to ensure that the PG provides all MLEs with the same training and development opportunities.

Even if the MLE does not desire to become a CO, the knowledge and experiential learning provided through a MLDP would ensure their continued success as a senior contract specialist.

This study highlighted the need for increased employee engagement to keep people excited and productive in the workplace to reduce turnover. Providing tools to help employees plan their career paths and providing mentoring support would also increase retention. The study further found a need to build relationships with local high schools and colleges to establish a pathway to a career in federal contracting. Helping students understand the rewards and benefits of a civil service career will strengthen the pool of qualified candidates who could interview for potential employment in the future.

Application to Professional Practice

This qualitative case study revealed several business practice shortfalls that prevent the PG from creating a pool of well-qualified senior contract specialists capable of performing the CO role. The research findings fell into four themes: (1) learning and development, (2) knowledge sharing and transfer, (3) retaining employees, and (4) improving recruitment strategies. While the study findings suggested options to address all four thematic areas, the research questions were designed to understand the extent the agency engages in succession planning for the CO role. Based on the results of this research study, the top three areas where PG could improve business practices are employee engagement, learning and development, and knowledge management. Addressing the gaps noted in this section could improve the number of capable candidates performing senior contract specialist duties, with some interested in promotion opportunities to the GS-14 CO role.

Improving General Business Practice

First, based on the findings from this research study, the agency must improve employee engagement. The PG could improve its practices by better defining contracting job demands and providing job resources (Saks, 2022). Common job demands were work overload, unclear roles, conflicting directions, and impossible deadlines (Saks, 2022). Job resources could include increased compensation, career opportunities, a supportive work environment, or challenging work (Saks, 2022). The study found that most employees exceed their work hours without additional compensation to meet the job demands because of their commitment to the warfighter. Increasing the skill level of MLEs will help avoid overburdening high-performing employees at risk for job burnout.

The PG could also improve employee engagement by providing career pathing guidance, support, and tools. PG leadership takes a hands-off approach that relies on employees to take personal responsibility to self-manage their careers. To further improve employee engagement, PG leaders should participate in career development practices to demonstrate care and commitment to employees (Runhaar et al., 2019). When organizational leadership creates a supportive and collaborative work culture, employees remain engaged and committed to their jobs despite complex or demanding tasks (Coleman, 2018). Supervisors and managers should assist employees with their career goals ensuring they understand the capabilities and skills they need to demonstrate for promotion (Runhaar et al., 2019).

Second, there appear to be limited learning and development opportunities for MLEs to acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become capable of fulfilling the CO role. The agency heavily relies upon on-the-job training to develop MLEs. While on-the-job training is necessary for professional development, some teams do not offer the variety of contracting experiences MLEs need to become proficient as senior contract specialists or COs. MLEs unable to rotate to other groups and experience work of increasing complexity to challenge their problem-solving and critical thinking skills become bored, disengaged, and stagnate in their career progress.

The improve learning and development practices, the agency needs to create a MLDP to engage MLEs and develop their hard and soft skills. Hard skills are those technical skills learned through hands-on experiences or in the classroom, including contracting policies, procedures, and practices (Hirudayaraj et al., 2021). Soft skills are a combination of interpersonal skills (e.g., leadership communication, conflict management), personal attributes (e.g., confidence, resilience), cognitive abilities (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making), and affective skills (active listening, empathy) learned over a lifetime, used to augment an employee's technical skills (Hirudayaraj et al., 2021). A MLDP that provides experiential learning and professional development to further cultivate an employee's skillsets would supply the agency with a robust pool of candidates qualified for the CO role.

Third, the agency needs improvement in effectively managing organizational knowledge. During the past twelve months, PG experienced a 10% workforce reduction due to retirements and other attrition factors (NAVAIR, 2023). Of those employees who left the agency, 76.6% were GS-12/13s, and 13.4% were GS-14s or above (NAVAIR, 2023). With so many experienced employees departing the agency, documenting senior staff members' intellectual capital and professional knowledge is critical. While the PG has some practices in place to transfer and share knowledge, such as roundtable discussions, those events were held with only a subset of employees. The PG holds regular roundtable discussions with Entry Level Employees (ELEs) and COs; however, MLEs were expressly excluded from those knowledge-sharing events.

To improve knowledge management activities, the PG should leverage its Microsoft 365® tools, including Microsoft Teams®, that link to SharePoint to search, share, collaborate, and store documents. The PG currently uses a knowledge portal in SharePoint to store and share policy documents. However, the PG could record roundtable discussions and produce a transcript of the session in the knowledge portal in SharePoint to capture the intellectual capital of team members. Establishing a Microsoft Teams® channel to ask questions and post answers is another suggested option to document organizational knowledge and experiences.

Potential Application Strategies

Based on the results of this research study, the researcher recommends that the agency apply three specific organizational career management (OCM) practices (1) the creation of a MLDP (mid-level development program), (2) the creation of an interactive career pathing tool, and (3) robust knowledge management using Microsoft 365® tools and SharePoint to engage MLEs (Xie et al., 2023). First, as a part of OCM, the agency should create and implement a MLDP to ensure that all MLEs have similar learning and development opportunities. This study highlighted the need for increased employee engagement to keep people excited and productive in the workplace to reduce turnover. The MLDP will help increase employee engagement, job satisfaction, and career success by reducing negative emotions such as boredom and fatigue, which lead to job burnout (Xie et al., 2023). Organizations that demonstrate an interest in developing their staff contribute to employee engagement by stimulating an employee's positive energy, enthusiasm, and drive to thrive in the workplace (Xie et al., 2023). A MLDP would benefit all MLEs and allow them to become competent as senior contract specialists or COs. Even if the MLE does not desire to become a CO, the knowledge and experiential learning provided through a MLDP would ensure their continued success as a senior contract specialist.

Second, the organization should consider applying OCM by providing an interactive career pathing tool (e.g., career dashboard) that allows employees to assess their talents, capabilities, gaps, and weaknesses relative to their career goals (Runhaar et al., 2019). Providing tools to help employees plan their career paths and providing mentoring support would also increase retention. Supervisors and managers should serve their employees as mentors to assist employees in navigating their career goals using the career dashboard tool. Supervisors or managers could quickly review employees' career ambitions and appropriately guide them with training or professional development opportunities since the organization provides and controls the career development environment (Runhaar et al., 2019). The career dashboard would become the backbone of Talent Management Board (TMB) activities and support the movement of employees to other teams or departments to gain the necessary experiences based on their career goals.

Third, this study discovered a lack of knowledge management practices with MLEs. The agency holds regular and recurring roundtable discussions to facilitate knowledge sharing and transfer with ELEs and COs but not with MLEs. The roundtable discussions were the primary method the agency uses to share and transfer knowledge, but only a limited audience is invited to participate. The lack of roundtable discussions with MLEs is troubling. It could make MLEs feel disconnected and disengaged from agency practices resulting in increased attrition because of exclusion from this knowledge management practice. Additionally, other than the roundtable discussions, there is no other method of structured knowledge management to capture the tacit knowledge, lessons learned, and organizational expertise of experienced employees.

The lack of a method to manage organizational knowledge for future use increases the risk of repeating mistakes and missing opportunities to take advantage of best practices for process improvements. Additionally, there is a significant cost associated with ineffective knowledge management practices. A recent study estimated the cost of inaccessible knowledge at approximately $71M per company (How current knowledge management tools, 2022). Employees spend 102 minutes daily trying to find information that may or may not exist within the organization (How current knowledge management tools, 2022). The study also found that over 69% of employees indicated that they would have avoided critical mistakes if they had access to subject matter experts or the correct information (How current knowledge management tools, 2022). The agency should leverage its existing Microsoft 365® tools and SharePoint to implement a knowledge management system to capture organizational knowledge (Govender et al., 2022). Thus, the need to record roundtable discussions and other knowledge-sharing events to capture lessons learned and relevant experiences from senior staff members is a significant finding.

Summary

The results of this study suggested three strategies the PG could apply to improve its business practices. Increasing employee engagement, experiential learning and professional development opportunities, and facilitating knowledge management are well-documented strategies to increase employee job satisfaction and retention (Lewis, 2023; Thompson, 2021). Employees especially value experiential learning and professional development opportunities, which include on-the-job, job rotations, and mentoring components, to improve their job efficiency and performance (Thompson, 2021). Companies with robust learning and development programs often experience less turnover and greater employee retention rates (PPS & BCG, 2022). Additionally, a happy and engaged workforce can become an extension of the organization's recruitment efforts by advertising and sharing job openings using word of mouth or social media (PPS & BCG, 2022).

Recommendations for Further Study

The scholarly literature on succession planning in the Federal Government was somewhat limited. Despite the OPM highlighting since 2008 that developing and maintaining a multi-generational succession plan is a priority in the Federal Government because determining appropriate staffing levels while preserving institutional knowledge is critical, the study exposed that the PG does not have a formal succession plan in place (OPM, 2022b; Jaynes, 2021). This study reduces the literature gap surrounding the considerable need for agencies to conduct succession planning to analyze skill deficiencies, identify talent pools, and develop successors capable of performing CO duties in the Federal Government when needed (Jaynes, 2021). Additionally, based on in-depth personal interviews of employees, the research findings supported the scholarly literature that substantiated the need for agencies to practice succession planning to maintain their knowledge base and ensure talent availability (Jaynes, 2021). Based on this research study, it is evident that DoN agencies in Southern MD continue to struggle with succession planning efforts in the PG.

A recommendation for the further study of succession planning includes exploring succession planning efforts in other agency career groups (e.g., engineering, logistics, or program management) within the DoN agencies in Southern MD. Another recommendation for further study is for a researcher to expand the study to other DoD agencies' PG groups or other career groups. The results of this study recommended increasing employee engagement, offering additional experiential learning and professional development opportunities, and facilitating knowledge management as succession planning strategies to increase employee job satisfaction and retention. A researcher could compare the findings from other DoN or DoD agencies with the results from this study to determine if those other agencies are performing succession planning efforts. This study concluded that the PG lacks a multi-generational pipeline of candidates that could assume leadership positions, which could lead to organizational instability as senior-level employees retire. A researcher could use the data collected from other DoN or DoD agencies to determine if the lack of succession problem is systemic throughout all career series or isolated to the 1102 contracting career series.

Reflections

The purpose of this flexible design case study was to discover how the PG could increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline and retain them. The study revealed several findings that PG leadership could immediately employ to increase employee engagement, produce highly trained contract specialists, and potentially reduce MLE attrition. This study contributes to the body of scholarly literature on succession planning practices in the Federal Government. Reflecting on the project and the research conducted over the past year, PG leaders must act to create a succession planning strategy that engages employees, provides experiential learning and development opportunities, and manages organization knowledge. If PG leadership cannot retain MLEs, it will be difficult for the agency to develop an effective succession plan.

Personal and Professional Growth

This study gave the researcher tangible evidence to exercise professional growth and implement organizational change. The researcher provided a summary of the findings of this study to senior PG leadership for consideration. Additionally, the researcher shared the study findings and recommendations with those employees who graciously provided their inputs by sending an email using the blind copy option to maintain the anonymity of participants. The researcher will work with PG leadership to implement the suggested strategies of (1) creating a MLDP, (2) creating an interactive career pathing tool, and (3) implementing knowledge management protocols with the PG over the next several years. This project and academic course of study helped enhance the researcher's time management and professional development goals by accomplishing this project while working a full-time job.

The researcher experienced personal growth by refining her writing and research skills. She expanded her knowledge with various business practices, including succession planning processes, that she could leverage in her personal life and professional career. The researcher experienced a renewed appreciation for reading scholarly literature to explore ideas and substantiate personal and professional written documents with peer-reviewed data. Finally, the researcher found that this project helped her personal development goal of pursuing a terminal degree in Business Administration.

Biblical Perspective

Most people would not attempt a cross-country trip without a roadmap to provide the best path to travel. Similarly, leaders are responsible for anticipating the organization's future needs and develop a pool of talented and well-qualified employees to lead contracting teams as the CO. Succession planning allows leaders to ensure the workforce can meet future work demands (Devlin, 2019). Individuals who are selected as COs, but lack leadership skills, are doomed to fail. The PG must develop a vision and department goals using succession planning practices and a Christian worldview lens to help employees achieve fulfillment in the workplace. The PG should offer employees the opportunity to develop their skills and abilities and then assign them meaningful and challenging work that uses those gifts. Moses recognized that successful leadership transitions begin with a plan (Parapat et al., 2020).

As identified in Section 1, Moses followed succession planning steps in his practice. He identified potential candidates, provided leadership development opportunities, evaluated leader effectiveness, chose a successor, mentored the selected individual, provided the newly appointed leader with authority over meaningful assignments, and provided ongoing support (Parapat et al., 2020). Specifically, this research study suggested identifying potential CO candidates using TMB and performance management tools, providing leadership development and mentoring opportunities using a MLDP, giving meaningful assignments to keep employees engaged, and providing ongoing support (Parapat et al., 2020).

Great leaders provide their employees' guidance, support, and mentorship, "for lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers" (Proverbs, 11:14, NIV). Proverbs also stated, "as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another," to further suggest that no individual can do a job alone but instead relies on job shadowing and mentoring to provide examples of how to perform the work (Proverbs, 27:14, NIV). Consider also the Greek proverb, "Society grows great when older people plant trees under whose shade they shall never sit." The metaphor of planting, tending, and cultivating a tree so it develops strong roots to withstand nature's elements and grows tall to provide shade, is directly relatable to the concept of mentorship. Mentors plant and cultivate seeds of knowledge by sharing and transferring their experiences and wisdom to others. Mentors know the importance of supporting and helping others deepen their contracting knowledge roots for future success. Proverbs inspires mentees to "Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end, you will be counted among the wise" (Proverbs, 19:20, NIV).

Exceptional leaders encourage employees to become lifelong learners by offering professional development opportunities because when people, "stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge." (Proverbs 19:27, NIV). Brian Herbert said, "The capacity to learn is a gift; The ability to learn is a skill; The willingness to learn is a choice." For employees who choose to learn, the organization should offer various learning events to expand their knowledge. The Bible reminds followers to remain humble in their learning efforts because people are "always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7, NIV). Some individuals may seek challenges and pursue learning opportunities outside the workplace "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" to expand their knowledge and capabilities further (Romans 5:4-5, NIV).

Reflection Summary

Reflecting on this research project gave the researcher unexpected personal and professional growth. From a personal perspective, the researcher has become more confident with writing about and applying leadership principles. Additionally, she has significantly improved her research skills and found tremendous satisfaction with researching leadership topics. From a professional standpoint, the researcher is hopeful that the findings from this study created a sense of urgency and served as a catalyst for PG leadership to find ways to manage its workforce differently (Kotter, 2012; Plenert, 2012). The researcher recommends that PG leaders follow Moses' leadership example to prepare MLEs for future roles, including senior contract specialists and COs, by implementing a MLDP.

The researcher has volunteered to assist PG leadership with developing a MLDP that incorporates the study's findings and other ideas to grow the current workforce to fulfill the organization's future needs. Using Kotter's change model, the researcher will work to gain buy-in from leadership and implement the MLDP initiative to create a pipeline of highly-qualified employees who are willing and capable of performing the CO role for long-term organizational success. (Kotter, 2012; Plenert, 2012). Kotter's continuous process model requires individuals to think, analyze, act, and evaluate the results from each phase before progressing to the next step in the process (Kotter, 2012). Instead of concentrating on complacency and maintaining the status quo, the researcher is hopeful that the results of this study will inspire organizational changes.

Summary of Section 3

Section 3 provided substantial evidence supporting a need to make some organizational changes to improve its business practices by conducting succession planning strategies. The study found a need to increase employee engagement, offer experiential learning and professional development opportunities, and facilitate knowledge management to increase job satisfaction and retention. The study findings suggested that the PG create a MLDP to offer the training, experiential learning, and professional development opportunities all MLEs needed to succeed as senior contract specialists or compete for CO positions. A MLDP will help succession planning efforts by ensuring the PG identifies, develops, and retains its skilled workforce. Even if the MLE does not desire to become a CO, the training provided through a MLDP will ensure their continued success as a senior contract specialist.

This study discovered a need to increase knowledge-sharing across the PG using the roundtable discussion model for MLEs, increased mentoring, better recruiting outreach, and more retention incentives. This study highlighted the need for increased employee engagement to keep people excited and productive in the workplace to reduce turnover. Providing tools to help employees plan their career paths and providing mentoring support would also increase retention. The study further found a need to build relationships with local high schools and colleges to establish a pathway to a career in federal contracting.

This research project afforded the researcher opportunities to grow personally and professionally. The researcher sharpened her writing, research, and analysis skills as a result of the research study. She strengthened her awareness of leadership theories and strategies and will utilize her increased knowledge to exercise professional growth and implement organizational change. Further, she has worked to exemplify that leadership is about humbling, serving, and helping others become the best version of themselves. The Bible calls for individuals to "humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" and to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others" (1 Peter 5:6, NIV; Phil 2:3-4, NIV). Leaders have a moral responsibility to put others before themselves and demonstrate strong moral and ethical accountability to others.

Summary and Study Conclusions

The specific problem addressed in this research study was the possible lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD. A lack of succession planning could result in the inability to recruit, train, and retain individuals with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the critical acquisition roles of CO inherent to maintaining organizational effectiveness. This qualitative research study contributed to the body of knowledge that stresses the need for organizations to conduct succession planning to analyze skill deficiencies, identify talent pools, and provide learning and development opportunities to build a pipeline of potential successors. The challenge of identifying, developing, and retaining talented MLEs capable of performing the CO role was apparent based on participant feedback.

The research findings collected during the thirty-three participant interviews provided specific and substantial evidence of a gap related to MLEs in all four thematic areas: (1) learning and development, (2) knowledge sharing and transfer, (3) retaining employees, and (4) improving recruitment strategies. The results of this study concluded that the PG should apply three specific strategies to improve its business practices as follows: (1) the creation of a MLDP, (2) the creation of an interactive career pathing tool, and (3) robust knowledge management capabilities.

Creating a MLDP will help increase employee engagement, job satisfaction, and career success by reducing negative emotions such as boredom and fatigue, which lead to job burnout (Xie et al., 2023). Organizations that demonstrate an interest in developing their staff contribute to employee engagement by stimulating an employee's positive energy, enthusiasm, and drive to thrive in the workplace (Xie et al., 2023). A MLDP that offers training, experiential learning, and professional development opportunities would allow all MLEs to succeed as senior contract specialists or compete for CO positions. A MLDP will help succession planning efforts by ensuring the PG identifies, develops, and retains its skilled workforce. Even if the MLE does not desire to become a CO, the training provided through a MLDP will ensure their continued success as a senior contract specialist qualified to deliver needed capabilities to the warfighter.

Next, the organization should offer an interactive career pathing tool (e.g., career dashboard) that allows employees to assess their talents, capabilities, gaps, and weaknesses relative to their career goals (Runhaar et al., 2019). Supervisors and managers should serve their employees as mentors to assist employees in navigating their career goals using the career dashboard tool. Supervisors or managers could quickly review employees' career ambitions and appropriately guide them with training or professional development opportunities since the organization provides and controls the career development environment (Runhaar et al., 2019).

The career dashboard would become the backbone of Talent Management Board (TMB) activities and support the movement of employees to other teams or departments to gain the necessary experiences based on their career goals.

Finally, the need to engage in knowledge management practices was another finding from this study. While the agency holds regular and recurring roundtable discussions to facilitate knowledge sharing and transfer with ELEs and COs, the MLEs are excluded from the discussions. Additionally, other than the roundtable discussions, there is no other method of structured knowledge management to capture the tacit knowledge, lessons learned, and organizational expertise of experienced employees. The lack of a method to manage organizational knowledge for future use increases the risk of repeating mistakes and missing opportunities to take advantage of best practices for process improvements.

Although the Federal Government has continued to highlight the need to take a proactive approach to succession planning, only about 34% advertising that they have a formal succession plan (HCMG, 2020; Pastores et al., 2019). Additionally, only about 14% of agencies are proactive and disciplined about using talent management, leadership development, and other retention strategies as part of their succession planning efforts (Rosenthal et al., 2018). With a limited number of new employees entering civil service and projected retirements over the next several years, attracting and retaining the next generation of public servants in jeopardy. Agencies must quickly prioritize succession planning strategies to attract, train, and prepare employees to assume critical acquisition positions, such as the Contracting Officer (CO) role before experienced personnel leave the organization.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

This flexible design case study aims to understand the challenges Federal Government agencies have with including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process (Adewale et al., 2011). Succession planning is a term that refers to the systematic and methodological efforts an organization uses to plan for organizational stability and proficiency (Desarno et al., 2021). This case study's specific problem is exploring the possible lack of succession planning at DoN agencies in Southern MD. A lack of succession planning could result in the inability to recruit, train, and retain individuals with the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the critical acquisition roles of CO inherent to maintaining organizational effectiveness. This study intends to fill an existing knowledge gap by focusing on the critical need for succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant CO positions in the Federal Government (Misch, 2018).

The interview questions listed below will help the researcher gather general information about each participant and their thoughts and opinions relating to the research questions about succession planning challenges at the agency. All participants will have an opportunity to review the interview questions in advance of their scheduled 30-minute interview so that interviewees can thoughtfully consider each question before responding during a digitally recorded interview session. The researcher will use transcription and coding software to group similar themes together to develop meaningful results.

All participation is strictly voluntary, and subjects can withdraw from the study at any time. All answers are confidential, and the researcher will not share your identity with anyone. The researcher will share information collected in aggregate to support research findings and draw conclusions as part of the project. Your support in taking this survey is greatly appreciated and could influence how the agency conducts succession planning for COs. Please answer all questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible.

1. How long have you been employed with any of the Department of the Navy (DoN) agencies in Southern Maryland (MD)?
2. If you were employed at another agency before your current employment, please indicate the agency's name, location, and why you accepted a position at your current agency.
3. Please indicate your current General Schedule (GS) equivalent pay grade and level (e.g., GS-11, step 4).
4. Please elaborate on your ultimate career goal?
    a. If your career goal is to become a Contracting Officer (CO), what work experiences would make you better prepared to assume a CO role in the future?
    b. If your career goal is to change career fields, please describe what might prompt such a change.
5. How can DoN agencies tailor their learning and development programs to focus on developing CO skills and abilities to plan for succession effectively?
6. Have you participated in any leadership development programs at the agency? If so, please indicate the timeframe and which program(s).
7. What training and experiences do you believe are necessary to become a capable CO?
    a. Please describe your thoughts about the training opportunities available to help employees learn the skills needed to succeed in the CO position.
    b. Please discuss professional development opportunities, including virtual or in-person classroom training, job shadowing, rotational assignments, cross-training, or other training options.

8. Please relate your thoughts about senior COs sharing and transferring their experience and knowledge to junior employees.
9. Do you believe agency employees freely share information? Please explain why or why not.
10. Please identify the challenges you see with CO succession planning at the DoN agencies in Southern MD?
11. How do you believe DoN agencies in Southern MD can increase the number of qualified candidates in the CO pipeline?
12. Please describe how you think the agency can increase the retention of 1102 employees with critical acquisition skills to maintain organizational effectiveness?
13. Please share any additional information relative to succession planning with the researcher.

Appendix B: Survey

This survey instrument focuses on gathering the information necessary to understand the challenges of DoN agencies in the Southern MD area, including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process. Specifically, this research study seeks to understand how to increase the number of qualified candidates in the Contracting Officer (CO) pipeline to ensure that a pool of trained candidates exists when vacancies occur. This survey also allows participants to elaborate on their responses to capture their thoughts, feelings, or rationale concerning a particular question. All answers are strictly confidential, and the researcher will not share your identity with anyone. The researcher will share information collected in aggregate to support research findings and draw conclusions as part of the project. Your support in taking this survey is greatly appreciated and could influence how the agency conducts succession planning for COs. Please answer all questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible.

1. Please indicate whether you are military or civilian and your current grade/rank.

   a. Military Rank ________________

   b. Civilian GS (equivalent) - ___________________

2. Please choose your number of years of experience in contracting

   a. 1-2

   b. 3-5

   c. 6-10

   d. 11-14

   e. 15 years or more

3. Which age category best describes you?

a. 21-29

b. 30-39

c. 40-49

d. 50-59

e. 60 or older

4. Please indicate your gender

a. Male ___________

b. Female__________

c. Another identifier (please indicate) _________________

5. Please indicate your highest academic level of education completed.

a. Associate degree

b. Bachelor’s degree

c. Master’s degree

d. Doctoral degree

6. Do you hold a Contracting Officer’s warrant? If yes, please indicate if it is limited or unlimited.

a. Yes ____________

- ☐ Limited Dollar Threshold
- ☐ Unlimited Dollar Threshold

b. No ____________

7. If you do not hold a warrant, do you possess the requisite technical, educational, training, and experiential requirements to obtain one? If not, please indicate any qualification barriers (e.g., training not available)

a. Yes ________________________

b. No ________________________

8. What is your ultimate career goal?

a. Senior Executive Service (SES)

- ☐ 1102 job series, Department Head & Supervisory Contracting Officer
- ☐ Another job series (please indicate job series) _____________

b. GS-15 equivalent

- ☐ 1102 job series, Supervisory Contracting Officer
- ☐ Another job series (please indicate job series) _____________

c. GS-14 equivalent

- ☐ 1102 job series, Contracting Officer with an unlimited warrant
- ☐ Another job series (please indicate job series) _____________

d. GS-13 equivalent

- ☐ 1102 job series, Contracting Officer or Senior Contract Specialist with a limited warrant
- ☐ 1102 job series, Senior Contract Specialist (no warrant)
- ☐ Another job series (please indicate job series) _____________

e. GS-12 equivalent

- ☐ 1102 job series, Contract Specialist
- ☐ Another job series (please indicate job series) _____________

9. If you indicated a career goal within the 1102 job series, please further describe your desire to hold a limited or unlimited Contracting Officer's warrant? Please choose one answer only.

a. No desire

b. Little desire

c. Some desire

d. Desirable

e. Very desirable

f. Strongly desired

10. If your response to question 10 was a, b, or c, please choose all the responses that support the reasoning for your answer.

a. It is a thankless position

b. There are not enough well-trained contract specialists

c. The position responsibilities are not worth the time commitment

d. I do not feel ready to accept that level of responsibility

e. I am unable to gain the experiences or training needed to fulfill the CO role confidently

f. Lack of upward mobility, but significant responsibility

g. Other reason(s) not listed

11. If your response to question 10 was d, e, or f, please choose all the responses that support the reasoning for your answer.

a. Promotion opportunities

b. Advanced training and leadership opportunities

c. Ability to make a difference

d. Other reason(s) not listed

12. If you indicated a career goal outside the 1102 job series, please describe why you may choose to leave the contracting field.

____

13. Please list any additional comments here.

____

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14. Thank you for participating! May the researcher contact you to schedule an interview to follow up your survey responses with an in-depth conversation to gain additional insights into your perspective on succession planning for Contracting Officers? Please choose one answer.

a. Yes ________________

b. No _________________

[If yes] Please enter your name and email address here so I can contact you to schedule an interview.

Name:

Email:

Appendix C: Permission Request Letter

4 August 2022

Director, Strategic Support
[redacted]

Dear Director,

As a doctoral student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctorate of Business Administration degree program. The title of my dissertation is "Succession Planning in the Federal Government." The purpose of my research is to understand the challenges Federal Government agencies have with including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process. This study will specifically focus on the need to conduct succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant Contracting Officer positions in the Federal Government.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research using participants from OPM Contracting job series 1102 at the GS-11 (or equivalent) level or above who are assigned to the Department of the Navy (DoN) agencies in Southern Maryland (MD). DoN agencies in the Southern MD area include the Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR), the Naval Air Warfare Center, Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) Patuxent River, and the Fleet Readiness Center (FRC) Patuxent River. My project requires using interviews and surveys to collect information for this project. Appendix A provides the interview questions. Appendix B provides the survey questions. I will provide all participants with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. My dissertation sections 1 and 2 are attached for your consideration.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed letter on official letterhead or email indicating your approval to Christine Roberts at email [redacted]. Please see the attached response template provided for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Christine Roberts
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Business Administration degree program. The title of my dissertation is “Succession Planning in the Federal Government.” The purpose of my research is to understand the challenges federal government agencies have with including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process. This study will specifically focus on the need to conduct succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant Contracting Officer positions in the Federal Government.

I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study. Eligible participants must be active employees assigned under OPM Contracting job series 1102 at the GS-11 (or equivalent) level or above who are assigned to the Department of the Navy (DoN) agencies in Southern Maryland (MD). DoN agencies in the Southern MD area include the Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR), the Naval Air Warfare Center, Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) Patuxent River, and the Fleet Readiness Center (FRC) Patuxent River.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a survey. It should take approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. Additionally, participants will be asked to indicate in their survey response, if they are willing to participate in an audio- and video-recorded, 30-minute, interview to allow the researcher to obtain additional insights into your perspective on succession planning for Contracting Officers. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy, which should take about 10 minutes. The researcher will share information collected in aggregate to support research findings and draw conclusions as part of the project. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to digitally sign the consent document, complete the attached survey, and email them both to me at [redacted].

Thank you for considering my request. I will contact you to schedule an interview if you have expressed interest in doing so on the survey.

Sincerely,

Christine Roberts
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

Appendix E: Consent Form

Title of the Project: Succession Planning in the Federal Government
Principal Investigator: Christine Roberts, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be actively employed under the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Contracting job series 1102 at the GS-11 (or equivalent) level or above and assigned to a Department of the Navy (DoN) agency in Southern Maryland (MD). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this flexible design case study is to understand the challenges federal government agencies have with including succession planning efforts as part of their organizational process. This study will fill an existing knowledge gap by focusing on the critical need for succession planning to develop a pool of contract specialists qualified to compete for vacant Contracting Officer (CO) positions in the Federal Government.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete the survey attached to recruitment email (time to complete: 15 minutes).
2. Participate in an in-depth one-on-one interview with the researcher. The researcher will use Microsoft Teams to audio- and video-record the interview to allow the researcher to produce a written transcript of the interview for analysis (time to complete: 30 minutes).
3. Participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcript to ensure accuracy (time to complete: 10 minutes).

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include influencing the inclusion of succession planning business practices at federal agencies that could facilitate CO succession planning.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher has access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. The researcher will conduct interviews in a location where others are unable to easily overhear the conversation.
- The researcher will record all interviews and use the recording to transcribe the conversation to assist with developing themes for analysis. Only the researcher has access to the recordings
- The researcher will store and protect all recordings on a password-locked computer and hard copy data in a locked box for three years upon completion of the study. After three years, the researcher will delete all electronic records and shred any written records collected during the project from surveys, observations, and interviews.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Department of the Navy agencies in Southern Maryland. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/ phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, the researcher will destroy the data collected from you immediately, and will not include any of your inputs in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Christine Roberts. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to call or text her at mobile phone: [redacted] and/or email: [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Scott Maltzie, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above. Please return a digitally signed copy of this form to the researcher.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

____
Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date