STRATEGIC SUCCESSION PLANNING OF SME'S IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

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Strategic succession planning (SSP) is essential for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) longevity and continuity, yet its application in the built environment remains underexplored. Despite the acknowledged importance of SSP, empirically validated models in the context of SMEs in the built environment are scant. This paper conceptually validates this knowledge gap by mapping existing academic literature. Factors influencing SSP within SMEs internationally are mapped, the results of which are used to formulate a conceptual framework from related fields, which can be applied in this discipline. By synthesising current knowledge, this research highlights the paucity of studies in the field of the built environment, onto which a proposed framework is developed, based on wider disciplines. The value of this work is that it subsequently validates the need for a tailored, bespoke SSP framework, to support business continuity, maintain competitiveness, and foster sustainable growth in built environment SMEs. The value proposition lies in the contribution to literature on the subject, particularly in the discipline, by addressing a currently under-theorised area, which is crucial for the sector's resilience.

Keywords: strategic management; strategic planning; knowledge management; leadership transition

INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are fundamental to economic progress, stimulating job creation, innovation, and overall competitiveness (Bibi *et al.,* 2023). They serve as the bedrock of entrepreneurial activity and are essential for both employment levels and economic prosperity (Bibi *et al.,* 2023). Strategic planning is a cornerstone of SME success, providing a framework for understanding their current standing, defining their future aspirations, and establishing the necessary objectives to achieve them (Murphy, 2013). Within this strategic framework, strategic succession planning (SSP) emerges as a critical component of robust organisational management, ensuring the continuity and long-term health of these vital economic entities. The need for research on SSP in the built environment sector arises from the reality that, although the academic exploration of succession planning has a legacy that traces back to the early 20th century and has seen considerable evolution, its distinct implementation in this field remains unexamined (Perrenoud, 2020; Perrenoud *et al.,*

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2017). The construction industry has traits that require customised approaches to succession planning, as emphasized by the demand for research specific to the industry (Kim, 2010). In this setting, effective succession planning is vital due to the accounting principle of 'going concern,' which presumes the ongoing operation of established entities (Bibi *et al.,* 2023), even though the tenures of their leaders are limited. The built environment sector is also vulnerable to a range of disruptions (Armstrong *et al.,* 2021), from significant crises to ordinary change management. Moreover, change in the built environment sector is often impeded by organisations choosing short-term solutions instead of making structural adjustments (Thompson *et al.,* 2023). As a result, succession planning is increasingly viewed as a strategic necessity for boosting organisational performance and ensuring long-term growth (Salau *et al.,* 2022), especially within SMEs in the built environment, where leadership changes can profoundly affect project continuity, client relations, and the preservation of specialised expertise. This study is inspired by the realisation that, even with an extensive body of knowledge and established best practices in succession planning, the methods for effective, consistent, and systematic implementation are still ambiguous (Ip, 2009, 2006), especially within built environment SMEs, where empirically supported models are absent (Gunnoe, 2015; Perrenoud, 2012; Salau *et al.,* 2022). This discrepancy is crucial because SSP has far-reaching consequences, influencing political arenas due to its effects on economic stability (Ip, 2006; Salau *et al.,* 2022), leading government entities to promote proactive planning within SMEs (Ip, 2009). Current studies indicate that SSP is frequently subjective, shaped by personal experiences and organisational settings (Ip, 2009; Ip *et al.,* 2006), which obstructs the adoption of systematic methods and highlights the necessity for customised strategies that cater to the distinct project-oriented nature and unpredictable market of the built environment (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2017).

The limited empirical investigations concentrated on this sector, compounded by the elevated failure rates of small enterprises resulting from insufficient succession planning (Salau *et al.,* 2022), emphasize the critical importance of this research endeavour. This study aspires to identify optimal practices and innovative methodologies that SMEs within the built environment sector can adopt to enhance their succession planning frameworks; thus, securing their enduring viability and prosperity within an ever-evolving industry context. Although succession plans entail a distinctive and frequently personal aspect, it is essential to consider the diverse elements constituting an organisation's structure and culture; hence, the objective of this research is to integrate the pertinent literature to derive overarching themes that establish a regulatory framework and robust foundation for crafting effective succession strategies congruent with the unique requirements and values of these organisations. Considering the context, the principal research inquiry through the lens of examining the literature is articulated as; what determinants/value criteria and obstacles affect the efficacy of SSP?

METHOD

This study employed a critical literature review, conducted with a systematic approach, to meticulously analyse, synthesize, and evaluate existing scholarship pertinent to SSP within SMEs in the built environment. Its aim was to critically assess current understanding, identify key determinants, value criteria, and obstacles (as per the research question: what determinants/value criteria and obstacles affect SSP efficacy in this context?), and thereby establish a robust foundation for the proposed conceptual framework (Grant and Booth, 2009). The systematic search for literature involved querying academic databases and employing citation chaining, with no specific end date applied to capture foundational work, though recent publications were prioritised for contemporary relevance. Key databases, including Google Scholar (for broad academic and grey literature reach), ProQuest, Taylor and Francis (for extensive peer-reviewed journal collections), and ResearchGate (for contemporary research and networking), were utilised. Search terms robustly combined core concepts, such as ("succession planning" OR "leadership transition") AND ("construction" OR "built environment") AND ("SME" OR "small and medium enterprise"). Citation chaining (Wohlin, 2014) from pivotal articles was then applied to identify further significant contributions.

A two-stage screening process (title/abstract review, followed by full-text assessment), adhering to systematic principles (Moher *et al.,* 2009), guided study selection. Inclusion criteria were designed to prioritise publications offering substantial and nuanced insights into SSP determinants, value criteria, or obstacles within SMEs, specifically those with clear applicability to, or focus on, the built environment. This rigorous selection process yielded a core set of 28 publications. These were determined to be pivotal to the research question, collectively providing a rich and comprehensive evidence base essential for the depth of critical analysis undertaken in this study. Key data, arguments, and conceptual elements concerning SSP were then meticulously extracted from this curated corpus. A thematic synthesis was subsequently performed, involving an iterative process of coding the extracted data to identify, critically evaluate, and categorise recurring concepts and challenges. These distilled themes (Table 1) directly informed the architecture and development of the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1), providing a critically appraised foundation for future scholarly inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Determinants and Value Criteria

This literature review addresses this deficit by analysing existing scholarship, identifying research gaps, and building a foundation for future inquiry. Key themes emerging from this analysis (summarised below and detailed in Table 1) inform the creation of a SSP framework.

Strategic Alignment and Pre-requisites

Rothwell (2005) highlights that effective succession planning must be intricately aligned with the overarching strategy of the organisation to guarantee continuity and uphold superior performance. Success is contingent upon proactive planning that is propelled by robust internal leadership commitment. Barnett *et al. (*2008) asserts that organisations are required to meticulously evaluate their strengths and weaknesses to establish explicit priorities, formulating plans that are both documented and adaptable. Comprehending both internal dynamics and external adversities, such as market fluctuations and evolving workforce values, is essential, considering the historical inclination to overlook planning and the disparity between acknowledging its necessity and achieving successful execution (Sullivan *et al.,* 2013).

Organisational Culture and Knowledge Management

A supportive company culture that prioritises collaboration and knowledge sharing, championed by senior management, is fundamental for effective succession (Fong *et al.,* 2009). With demographic shifts like the retirement of experienced employees, mechanisms are vital for capturing and transferring valuable knowledge, particularly unspoken or 'tacit' expertise (Gabriel *et al.,* 2020). Flynn *et al. (*2018) recognises that valuing employees' intellectual capital as paramount. Developing leaders at all levels prevents the loss of crucial experience, and the overall organisational culture must align with business objectives to support the succession process. The built environment sector relies heavily on experiential, often site-based, tacit knowledge. The retirement of experienced employees poses a significant risk of knowledge loss. Intellectual capital is tied to technical expertise, project history, and client insights. In the built environment sector, there is limited research in what the most effective, practical methods for capturing and transferring complex, context-specific knowledge.

Timing and Transition

Rothwell (2011) asserts that initiating succession planning early provides a distinct strategic advantage, preventing operational delays caused by leadership vacancies. This requires proactive workforce planning to anticipate future needs, potential retirements, and departures, thereby addressing talent gaps before they become critical (Barnett *et al.,* 2008). Rather than a one-off event, succession planning should be treated as a continuous, ongoing process involving regular assessment and candidate preparation (Ibrahim *et al.,* 2021). Ensuring smooth leadership transitions, potentially using defined handover periods, is essential for minimising disruption and facilitating effective knowledge transfer.

Recruitment, Selection, and Leadership Development

Organisations must carefully weigh promoting internal candidates against hiring externally, often adopting a balanced approach to leverage both existing knowledge and fresh perspectives (Gabriel *et al.,* 2020). Barnett *et al. (*2008) emphasizes that the selection processes should be rigorous, prioritising long-term potential over solely current performance. Hor, *et al. (*2010) builds upon this by asserting the Identification of future leaders early allows for targeted development, providing the necessary training and experiences, such as mentoring and practical assignments. These leadership development initiatives are most effective when tailored and explicitly aligned with the company's strategic goals (Bibi *et al.,* 2023).

Performance Monitoring and Evaluation

Obianuju *et al. (*2021) highlights that incorporating clear performance metrics and transparent incentives within the succession plan helps track candidate progress and enhances employee motivation. Gunnoe, (2015) reinforces this and asserts it is crucial to regularly evaluate the overall effectiveness of the succession strategy, assessing its impact on organisational outcomes and ensuring its continued alignment with strategic objectives. This evaluation, which should consider the company's unique context and potentially use statistical methods (Salau *et al.,* 2022), allows for necessary adjustments to keep the plan relevant and effective. Further research is urgently needed on specific operational challenges facing project-based SMEs in the built environment. A priority is creating effective methods for capturing and sharing essential tacit/experiential knowledge inherent to this sector, reducing workforce retirement risks. Future research should also examine how these SMEs' unique project-driven nature and resource constraints affect strategic planning execution, appropriate leadership training for technical staff, knowledge-sharing cultures in changing teams, and relevant succession success metrics. Addressing these research needs is crucial for developing customised frameworks to improve resilience and lower high failure rates in leadership transitions within this vital sector.

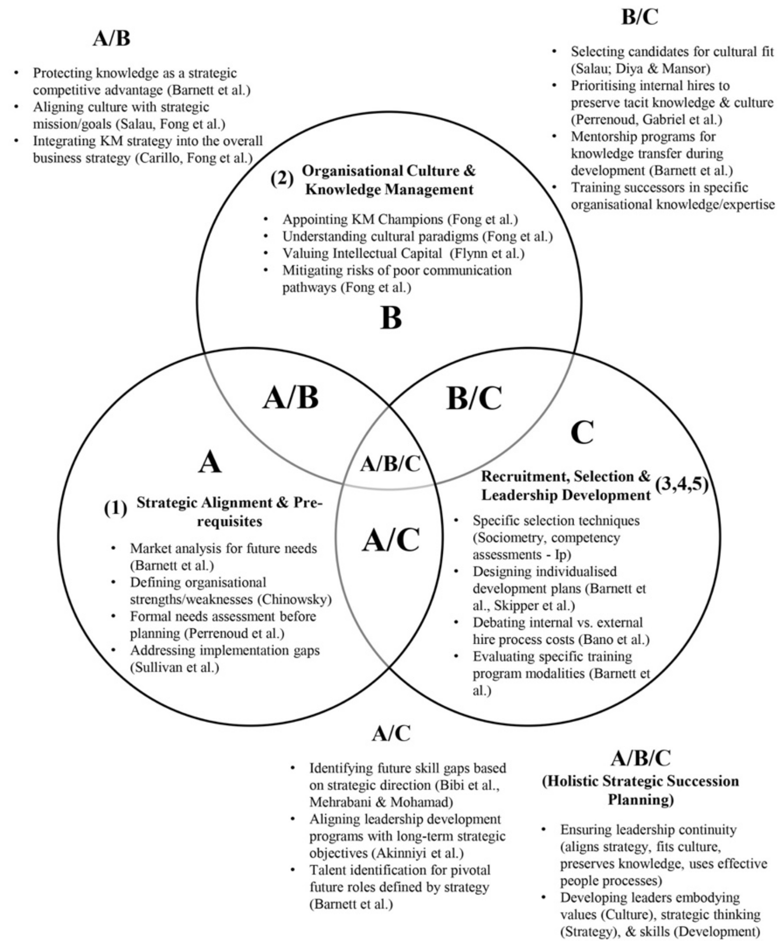
Following a thematic analysis of the chosen literature, key elements were identified, including determinants, criteria (Table 1), and obstacles.

Table 1: Strategic Succession Planning Main Themes, Sub-Themes and Scholars

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Relevant Scholars
Strategic Alignment and Pre-requisites		
	Integration with Strategic Goals	Gabriel *et al.,* (2020), Rothwell (2005), Sullivan *et al.,* (2013), Carrillo *et al.,* (2004), Chinowsky (2001), Bibi *et al.,* (2023)
	Formalisation and Documentation	Wang (2004), Barnett *et al.,* (2008)
	Understanding Internal and External Dynamics	Perrenoud *et al.,* (2017), Sullivan *et al.,* (2013), Rothwell (2011), Bano *et al.,* (2022), Perrenoud (2012), Handler and Krams (1988)
	Extent of Implementation and Pre-requisites	Perrenoud *et al.,* (2017), Sullivan *et al.,* (2013), Rothwell (2011), Miller (2005), Obianuju *et al.,* (2021), Barnett *et al.,* (2008), Flynn *et al.,* (2018)
Organisational Culture and Knowledge Management		
	Culture of Knowledge Sharing	Fong *et al.,* (2009), Flynn *et al.,* (2018)
	Preservation of Intellectual Capital	Flynn *et al.,* (2018), Perrenoud *et al.,* (2020), Fong *et al.,* (2009), Rothwell (2005), Carrillo (2004), Gabriel *et al.,* (2020), Perrenoud (2012), Diya and Mansor (2019), Obianuju *et al.,* (2021)
	Culture Alignment	Fong *et al.,* (2009), Salau (2022), Flynn *et al.,* (2018)
Timing and Transition		
	Proactive Planning and Timely Implementation	Rothwell (2011), Barnett *et al.,* (2008), Ibrahim *et al.,* (2021), Skipper *et al.,* (2008), Bibi *et al.,* (2023), Ip *et al.,* (2006)
	Smooth Transition and Knowledge Transfer	Sullivan (2013), Skipper *et al.,* (2008), Gunnoe (2015), Ip (2009), Barnett *et al.,* (2008)
	Addressing Talent Gaps	Gunnoe (2015), Rothwell (2011), Perrenoud *et al.,* (2017)
4Selection, and Leadership Development		
	Internal vs. External Candidates	Perrenoud (2017), Bano *et al.,* (2022), Gabriel *et al.,* (2020), Payne *et al.,* (2018)
	Rigorous Selection Processes	Barnett *et al.,* (2008), Bibi *et al.,* (2023), Mehrabani and Mohamad (2011), Thompson *et al.,* (2023), Gunnoe (2015), Skipper *et al.,* (2008), Hor, F. C. *et al.,* (2010), Ip (2009)
	Targeted Leadership Development	Gunnoe (2015), Barnett *et al.,* (2008), Bibi *et al.,* (2023), Wang *et al.,* (2004), Skipper *et al.,* (2008), Salau *et al.,* (2022), Akinniyi *et al.,* (2018)
Performance Monitoring and Evaluation		
	Explicit Performance Metrics	Obianuju *et al.,* (2021), Gunnoe (2015), Akinniyi *et al.,* (2018)
	Evaluation of Development Programs	Akinniyi *et al.,* (2018), Gunnoe (2015), Salau *et al.,* (2022), Wang *et al.,* (2004)

The findings from this analysis informed the development of the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1. As highlighted by Jabareen (2009), conceptual frameworks serve to organise information and guide research. This framework synthesizes the literature themes identified, providing a descriptive map of SSP components. Furthermore, it prescriptively offers SMEs an adaptable structure for developing robust succession strategies, aiming to aid understanding of SSP's multifaceted nature for leadership continuity. While the thematic analysis provided descriptive insights from the literature, the conceptual framework synthesizes these findings into a structured representation to enhance understanding.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Integrated Core Pillars of Strategic Succession Planning



Obstacles to a Successful Strategic Succession Plan

Successfully executing SSP requires more than just defining criteria; it demands a clear understanding and proactive mitigation of potential barriers. Failure to address these obstacles can compromise the entire process and therefore an understanding of these coincides with the core pillars identified in figure 1. Based on an analysis of the literature, the following key challenges consistently emerge as threats to the efficacy of SSP:

Organisational Challenges

Organisational challenges in succession planning include dealing with an unsuitable or disinterested successor, where the prospective heir may lose interest or lack the necessary skills and qualifications (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2017), noting that choosing an unprepared successor can have negative consequences (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2013). Insufficient employee development due to a lack of adequate training programs can hinder the preparation of potential successors (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2017; Salau *et al.,* 2022; Stadler, 2011). Communication failures regarding succession planning processes and expectations (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2017), and the absence of clear organisational objectives to guide the process are also significant hurdles (Ip *et al.,* 2006). Barnett *et al. (*2008) highlights organisations may fail to prioritise future leadership needs, focusing solely on replacing specific roles, or experience "planning paralysis" where managers recognise the importance but fail to act, often seeing retirement as distant (Obianuju *et al.,* 2021; Heitner, 2012). Further issues include prioritising immediate replacement over nurturing internal talent (Barnett *et al.,* 2008), a lack of dedication to talent management from SME owners hindering the creation of a talent pool (Salau *et al.,* 2022), an insufficient understanding of knowledge management for transferring critical knowledge (Carrillo, 2004), internal resistance and company politics (Ip *et al.,* 2006), and the need for effective performance management systems to identify and develop potential successors (Ip *et al.,* 2006).

Leadership and Management Challenges
As indicated by Barnett *et al. (*2008) leadership and management challenges involve low confidence among organisational leaders in their current succession planning efforts, often believing them to be inadequate or broken. Furthermore, upper management, despite acknowledging its importance, can ironically be a primary obstacle to effective leadership transition strategies (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2017). Ip *et al. (*2006) reinforces this point in stating a lack of sufficient engagement and support from the CEO in the succession planning process also presents a significant challenge.

Resource and Financial Constraints
Resource and financial constraints pose significant barriers, especially for SMEs which often lack the financial and human resources to dedicate to comprehensive succession plans (Bibi *et al.,* 2023; Ip *et al.,* 2006). The direct costs associated with developing and implementing succession planning initiatives (Ip *et al.,* 2006), coupled with insufficient time and resources allocated for the necessary employee training and development, further compound these difficulties (Gunnoe, 2015; Ip *et al.,* 2006).

Financial and Legal Considerations
Financial and legal considerations include a lack of clarity and understanding regarding the various ownership transfer options, particularly for business owners nearing retirement (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2013). Perrenoud et al. (2013) drawing on Hawkey (2002) and Sherman (2003) highlights the difficulty in obtaining an accurate valuation of the business for potential sale or transfer is another common issue. Challenges also arise in securing the necessary capital to fund the succession process, especially for takeovers or reorganisations (Perrenoud *et al.,* 2013; citing: FEE, 2000; Hawkey, 2002; Sherman, 2003). Navigating the intricate legal obligations associated with business transfer, such as changes in legal form and ensuring business continuity, requires careful attention (Co-Operatives, 2003; FEE, 2000; Ip *et al.,* 2006). Finally, understanding and managing the tax issues associated with different types of business transfers (disposal and retention) is crucial (FEE, 2000; SBS, 2004; Ip *et al.,* 2006).

Family Business Specific Challenges
Ip *et al. (*2006) highlights that family businesses encounter specific challenges where personal relationships and emotional ties can complicate the succession process. Disagreements among family members regarding the direction and future of the business can hinder effective planning (Ip *et al.,* 2006). Additionally, family-owned businesses often favour personal, relationship-centred approaches to successor

development, which contrasts with the more formalised, task-oriented methods preferred by non-family businesses, potentially creating conflict or hindering a consistent approach (Ip 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

This literature review has been a targeted examination of the current state of knowledge regarding SSP, confirming a critical deficit in research tailored specifically to the unique operational context of project-based SMEs within the built environment sector. While broad challenges to succession planning are acknowledged in wider scholarship, their specific expression and effect within built environment SMEs remain significantly under-explored. Core principles like strategic alignment and talent development are evident, yet their direct applicability and effectiveness in the built environment is lacking and requires investigation. The importance of this study lies in highlighting this critical knowledge gap. The built environment sector's reliance on experiential, often tacit, project-based knowledge, coupled with the typical resource constraints and project-driven nature of SMEs, makes generic succession approaches inadequate. This lack of sector-specific frameworks can contribute to high failure rates in leadership transitions, risking invaluable intellectual capital and threatening business continuity - a concern for industry stability. Consequently, there is a compelling need for further research that transcends general principles to address the unique attributes of this sector. The conceptual framework presented in this paper provides a robust foundation for developing such tailored approaches. Crucially, although every organisation uses its own set of value criteria, this framework can be employed to develop effective and focused succession strategies that directly meet the needs and fundamental values specific to that organisation. Future empirical investigations must prioritise practical solutions, focusing explicitly on areas vital to built-environment SMEs, including: developing effective methodologies for capturing and transferring crucial tacit knowledge; the cultivation of skilled successors, including relevant leadership pathways for technical specialists; understanding how project lifecycles and resource limitations shape planning; navigating industry-specific risks; addressing precise business valuation challenges; fostering robust knowledge-sharing cultures; and establishing meaningful metrics to gauge succession success in this context. Addressing these gaps through focused future research is not merely an academic endeavour; it is an essential step for empowering built environment SMEs with the tailored strategies and resources required for effective and sustainable leadership transitions. For industry practitioners, such focused inquiry offers tangible pathways to enhance organisational resilience, competitiveness, and long-term viability, mitigating failure rates and securing critical expertise for the future. This research directly contributes vital insights to strategic management and SME literature, advancing theoretical understanding in a complex and currently under-theorised area crucial for the continuity and success of these economic contributors.

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