

Answer: Succession Planning

Question: What can we learn from Alex Trebek about Human Capital Management?

By Leslie Beauchamp

November 10, 2020

Alex Trebek, the long-standing host of "Jeopardy!" for more than 32 seasons, passed away on November 8, 2020, leaving some feeling like we have lost a steadfast friend who has been in our lives for decades. In March of 2019, Trebek went public with his Stage 4 pancreatic cancer diagnosis. Fans poured in adulation and well-wishes and Trebek continued to host throughout his cancer treatment. His last taping was October 29, 2020, leaving his fans with six weeks of "Jeopardy!" to be aired through December with him at the helm. It's hard to think of "Jeopardy!" without thinking about Alex Trebek, and vice versa. The position of host is so connected to Trebek that this position clearly required a succession plan.

Over the last year, we saw some hints that the leaders of "Jeopardy!" were working with Alex Trebek to ensure a respectful and smooth transition for a new host. How do you determine which positions in an organization need a succession plan and what do you do once you identify them? First, conduct a **Position Review**. Let's try it with using the position of Host of "Jeopardy!"

- **Single Incumbent:** Is there only one person that performs the duties in this role or even knows what the responsibilities and duties are?
 - Yes. Alex Trebek has been the only host since the show has been syndicated and he never missed an episode.
- **Difficulty to Replace?** Does this position require a specific skill set? Did the person in this role design a tool or process that nobody else knows? Did the expertise in the role take years of experience and training to develop? Can skills needed for the position only be developed by working in the organization? Is the person in the role so beloved that the transition to another person would be difficult even if they are qualified? Is there expertise that is genuinely rare and very difficult to come by?
 - There are many announcers and hosts. Alex Trebek has suggested that he believes that Alex Faust, LA Kings announcer, or Laura Coates, CNN legal analyst would be good replacements.
 - Is specialized knowledge of the show and appeal to the fan-base a major qualification? The show hosted a G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All-Time) tournament in January, featuring Ken Jennings, who beat Brad Rutter and James Holzhauer. Perhaps this was to help determine fan-appeal or expertise. Ken Jennings has since been made a Consulting Producer during the 37th Season.
 - Alex Trebek also jokes that Betty White should replace him because the audience wants someone who is younger and funnier. She is actually older at 98 years old.
- **Likelihood of Exit:** Is this a position where someone would become eligible to retire within a few years or less? Is this a position that faces attrition because there is a lack of promotion or growth opportunities? Is this a position where retention is less likely due to pay, position stressors, or workplace culture?
 - Alex Trebek said he enjoyed the job, the interaction with his co-workers and contestants, and that they pay was good. However, due to his health and his age, he was likely to retire when his last contract ended in 2020 so they were planning for a transition even before his passing.

For any of the roles in your organization where we find single incumbents, specialized expertise or characteristics that would make replacement difficult, or a greater likelihood for exit, you need a succession plan. Start by **determining a pool of possible successors**. If you have no immediate pool, you need a plan to develop a pool of successors. This doesn't mean you are anointing someone for the position, but you are identifying people who are likely to be successful and ensuring they have the skills and knowledge they need, if the position were to come open up for applications.

In looking at the pool of successors that have been mentioned for Trebek's host position, let's consider what each of them might need to be successful applicants by considering Knowledge Transfer Strategies as defined by the Ohio Department of Administrative Services (2011). For each of the Knowledge Transfer Strategies, consider pros and cons of using this technique and then determine an overall recommendation for either the position or for each candidate in the pool. The Knowledge Transfer Strategies include:

- **Job aids:** *Easily accessible reference guides to help people perform a task in real time, with little to no training (check lists, desk manuals, process maps, etc.)*
- **Process documentation:** *Process map or outline that captures from start to finish how a task is performed.*
- **Best practices:** *Routines, strategies, and other approaches to a pursuit that have worked well in other settings and might be applicable to this setting. These "Best Practices" might be learned from professional networking, polling employees, or research.*
- **Job shadowing:** *Couple a less experienced employee with a veteran who will share knowledge, demonstrate practices, and answer questions.*
- **Document repositories:** *Electronic and/or paper documents that contain important information about job-related matters that are easily accessible and interpretable.*
- **Job rotation:** *Structured program in which one or more people are placed into different roles, offering opportunities for learning new tasks and responsibilities.*
- **Skill/Knowledge/Task inventories:** *Document containing a list of staff members, with an assessment of their competencies related to a variety of tasks/skills needed to do relevant work. Leaders can use the inventory to evaluate individuals and initiatives that require support.*
- **On-the-job training:** *Real-time opportunities where lesser-experienced employees learn new skills, processes, procedures via hands-on structured support.*
- **Action plan:** *Document showing and tracking important knowledge transfer milestones.*

(Ohio Department of Administrative Services, 2011, p. 21)

Perhaps, the leads at "Jeopardy!" decided that since there were several people with TV and host experience but only a few who had audience recognition and "Jeopardy!" experience, that they needed a way to ensure this latter pool had deeper experience with the knowledge and skills of TV hosting and production. By bringing on Ken Jennings as a co-producer and brand ambassador this past season, it is possible that they were allowing him to gain more of the TV host and production side of the role, possibly through Job Shadowing and On-the-Job training.

Will Ken Jennings be the next host? The answer is yet unknown, but the organization did enact a succession plan to support knowledge transfer for a role that many would say is irreplaceable.

For a more complete guide to Succession Planning, view [The Succession Planning Manager's Toolkit](#).

About the Author: *Leslie Beauchamp is a REIL-Extend Field Specialists for the Maricopa County School Superintendent's Office. Ms. Beauchamp is a frequent TXTS4 Leaders contributor.*

References:

Goodwin, J. (2020, November 8). 'Jeopardy!' episodes hosted by Alex Trebek will air through December 25. CNN Business. Retrieved from https://www.kctv5.com/jeopardy-episodes-hosted-by-alex-trebek-will-air-through-december-25/article_e2a48b6d-9471-54b0-aa73-1e64c2bf91ed.html

Ohio Department of Administrative Services (2011). Succession Planning: Ohio's Talent for Tomorrow and Beyond. *Learning and Development: Project Management Program*. Retrieved from http://www.das.ohio.gov/Portals/0/DASDivisions/HumanResources/LPD/pdf/Succession_Planning_Mgrs_Toolkit.pdf