



Succession Planning and Sustainability of Family-Owned Healthcare Businesses

*Akeremale, Ayeyemi Stephen¹, Dixon-Ogbechi, N. Bolajoko², & Jude Ememe³

¹*University of Lagos Business School, Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)
Programme – Nigeria.*

²*Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Lagos, Nigeria.*

³*University of Lagos Business School, Nigeria.*

*Corresponding Author: drakeremale@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between succession planning and the sustainability of family-owned healthcare businesses. Family-owned healthcare businesses often face challenges due to changes in management that threaten their continuity and long-term operations, primarily because of inadequate succession planning practices. This research adopted an exploratory desk-based approach and reviewed succession planning through four key dimensions: mentorship programmes, identifying critical roles, assessing employee potential, and employee development plans. Relevant empirical literatures on published articles, journals and studies on succession planning and sustainability in the past 20 years were selected, based on key themes that align with the research objectives. A total of 40 journals were judgmentally sampled for this study. The data generated from the secondary sources were analysed and presented using content evaluation considering the thematic and narrative analysis to bring out nuanced opinions and viewpoints as well as interpretations. The research reveals that success planning enhances the sustainability of an enterprise through stability of its leadership, restores the trust on the enterprise, and ensures continuation of health care services. The other significant aspect of this analysis is that the preparation and training programs are important aspects towards creating the future leaders. The following are the important recommendations for family-owned health care enterprises: First, establishing mentoring program will ensure a good transition of knowledge. Secondly, it will be important to identify the real leadership positions. Thirdly, regular assessments of the potentials of employees should be carried out using the standardized approach. Finally, it will be important to plan the career path of each employee.

Keywords: family-owned healthcare business, leadership continuity, mentorship, succession planning, sustainability.

1. Introduction

Corporate leaders, managers, and organizations have become aware of the necessity of having efficient succession planning for enhancing sustainability in today's environment (Othman et al., 2024). In this regard, business sustainability can be described as a capability of an organization to sustain its viability and success in the light of economic, social, and

environmental factors (Chungyalpa, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2024). Succession planning (SP), on the contrary, can be defined as an organized, systematic and strategic approach to preparing for a potential successor for occupying the position of one leaving his/her post. It is also known as a strategic process of skill development for future potential leaders via learning, education, and training activities without

preference (Barnett & Davis, 2018). This paper considers the following main aspects of SP including: mentorship programs, identification of critical leadership positions, evaluation of employees' potentiality, and development plans for employees. Mentorship programs provide knowledge transfer from senior leaders to junior members. Critical leadership positions should be identified first. Evaluation of employees' potential helps to determine potential leaders in the organization. Employee development plans provide structured pathways for leadership capacity building through training, mentoring, and job rotation. The dependent variable, business sustainability, encompasses growth and expansion, resource efficiency, innovation and repositioning, and reducing business risk (Abiodun et al., 2025).

It has been observed that most family businesses struggle with continuity because of factors such as lack of successful leadership transitioning and succession as well as inadequate sustainability. In addition, Aiyeku et al., (2010) posit that family-owned businesses in Africa are short-lived and have lifespans that rarely transcend those of their original founders because they are less formal or institutionalised than their counterparts in developed economies. Family-owned businesses constitute a large segment of the global economy, yet the majority fail before reaching the second or third generation, and family-owned healthcare businesses are not an exception. According to Burns (2019), only about 30% of family-owned businesses survive the transition from the first to the second generation, and only 12% remain after transitioning to the third generation. In the healthcare industry, the consequences of failure tend to be greater due to the level of regulation, capital requirement, professional licensing, as well as maintaining the credibility and reputation of the organization and professionals in

delivering healthcare services. However, with the many possible causes of such high levels of failure rates, poor successions planning appears to be an important issue that could stand in the way (Burns, 2019; Nwuke et al., 2020; Nwuke & Adeola, 2023). In light of the high number of failed family-owned healthcare companies and the crucial nature of succession planning in sustaining these organizations, there is a need to explore the relationship between succession planning and family-owned healthcare companies' sustainability. The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of succession planning on the sustainability of family-owned healthcare businesses. Specifically, this study seeks to (i) explore the influence of mentorship programmes on business sustainability; (ii) examine the influence of identifying critical leadership roles on sustainability; (iii) investigate the relationship between assessing employee potential and sustainability; and (iv) determine the influence of development plans on sustainability.

The study answers the following questions: (i) What is the relationship between mentorship programmes and business sustainability? (ii) How does identifying critical leadership roles influence business sustainability? (iii) How does assessing employee potential influence business sustainability? (iv) How do development plans influence business sustainability?

2. Literature Review

Concept of Succession Planning

Succession Planning is a key management process used by organization to distinguish, evolve and groom employees who are talented with leadership potentials to fill the gap when they become vacant. The vacancies indicated arises from resignation, retirements, lack of workforce or due to unforeseen circumstances (Barnett & Davis, 2018). Succession planning is cost efficient as promotion internally are less expensive

than other recruitment process. Succession planning is a critical phase that develops a culture of continuous learning and leadership which is to ensure reliability, growth and strength.

Succession Planning Approaches and Tools

Mentorship programs are universally recognized as the main succession planning instrument which supports leadership continuance and business sustainability. Empirical studies by Kifordu (2024) and Awogbemi et al. (2022), unveiled that mentorship promotes the transfer of knowledge, preparation for leadership roles and the survival of the business.

Identifying critical leadership roles guarantees that the effort of succession planning focuses on the positions that are necessary to the survival of the organization. Rothwell (2010) highlights the identification role as the elementary of effective succession planning with observational support from Veldsman (2013).

Assessing high potential employees helps organizations in identifying future leaders thereby supporting continuity and improved performance. Also, placing capable individuals in leadership role enhances sustainability.

Employee development plans give standardized paths for leadership capacity building through training, mentoring and rotation on the job. Investigation shows that well designed development plan strengthens the organization.

Concept of Business Sustainability

Business sustainability refers to the ability of a business to meet its instantaneous need without compromising its future needs. Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) ambition plays a critical role in enhancing firm worth and profitability, linking sustainability practices to both financial and non-financial performances. Growth and expansion, resource efficiency, innovation and repositioning and reducing

business risk are four areas covered by business sustainability (Abiodun et al., 2025).

Innovation Operations

Innovation operations refer to the narrative and designs of business procedure to improve productivity and operational effectiveness. Innovation in operations helps businesses to improve the ability to respond to the changes in the market, in order to enable firms to remain competitive. Integration of innovation into daily missions promotes a sustainability culture (Abiodun, et al., 2025). Companies are using technologies to streamline their workflow which causes reduction in cost while maintaining high quality outputs.

Resource Efficiency

Family-owned businesses that concentrates on resource efficiency see major improvements in the performance of employee and their productiveness, which in turn contributes to the country's GDP positively (Majid et al., 2023). Ultimately, resource efficiency not only improve profits but also support general sustainability of the business.

Environmental Sustainability

Environmental Sustainability guarantees that businesses oversee their activities in ways to preserve, promote and protect natural ecosystems for generations to come. This involves reduction of greenhouse gas emission, minimize pollution, conserve biodiversity and enhance responsible resource deployment (Abiodun et al., 2025).

Succession Planning in Healthcare Family-Owned Businesses

Succession planning in family-owned businesses is the key process of preparing future leaders to guarantee the business continuity across generations (Ugoani, 2020). Family-owned businesses must develop strategies carefully in order to support long-term growth. This is critical in industries like healthcare where consistent patient care, regulatory compliance and

professionalism determine long term success.

The study anchors on Stewardship Theory, developed by Donaldson and Davis (1991). Stewardship theory is a governance framework which assumes that managers, executives, and corporate leaders act in the best interests of an organization rather than pursuing personal gain. Buttressing, Donaldson and Davis (1991) posits that managers, especially family members who are on control of the firm, are motivated to act as good stewards of the business, noting it as an extension of family heritage. Unlike agency theory, which prioritizes control mechanisms to prevent self-serving behaviours, stewardship theory lay emphasis on relational aspects such as trust, empowerment, and leadership responsibility.

While, steward as a concept, has applications beyond its original meaning, often resulting into misunderstandings about the premise of stewardship theory, Waldkirch and Nordqvist (2016) opined that the concept has strong religious connotations, in which stewardship denotes a duty to care for resources as a divine responsibility. Thus, steward can be seen as anyone entrusted with responsibility, care, and accountability, making decisions on behalf of a principal while prioritizing the principal's interests above all else. Accordingly, intrinsic motivation is one of its core principle, as it suggests that managers derive fulfillment from achieving organizational success rather than pursuing financial incentives or personal enrichment (Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2023). This theory encourages a collectivist perspective where the leader focuses on the long-term well-being of the organization and other stakeholders rather than personal benefits (Chrisman et al., 2021). Furthermore, this theory advocates for a long-term perspective that requires the decision-maker to consider long-term implications such as stability and

sustainability. In addition, the theory encourages participatory leadership, where decisions involve collaboration between top leaders and employees to ensure that their common objective is achieved (Freeman et al., 2020). This means that stewardship theory goes beyond the agency theory and offers an alternative model for leadership and governance that entails ethical management, creation of value in the long-term, and less administrative interference.

Regarding corporate governance, the theory encourages responsible leadership whereby financial success is tied to other aspects like environmental and social welfare. Stewardship theory is highly important in succession planning due to its focus on ethical leadership. In particular, the theory can encourage ethical behavior among managers and leaders, especially when they work in family-owned firms that operate in the healthcare industry. Besides corporations, this theory is significant in governance within the public sector and technology development. Governments and policymakers integrate stewardship principles into long-term economic planning, resource efficiency, and ethical governance, ensuring sustainable public administration (Donaldson, 2008 in Kolawole et al., 2025). In spite of its relevance to organizations and its applications, its notion which assumes that managers will always act in the best interest of organization, is criticized not to always be the case, specifically, in environments where self-interest and personal gain take precedence (Davis et al., 1997). Also, Donaldson (2008) in Kolawole et al., (2025) argued that too much emphasis on trust and autonomy, can lead to managerial entrenchment, where executives act without sufficient oversight, potentially compromising shareholder interests and long-term business sustainability.

Empirical Review

Succession planning and family business outcomes examined by Akindele et al.,

(2022) found that mentoring significantly predicts sustainability, role modeling predicts survival and training complements growth. This empirical evidence indicate that sustainability is energized when development of the successor is multi-dimensional, which then aligns with the demanded skill and professionalism of healthcare businesses.

As investigated by Ogbonna et al., (2024), succession planning strategies and sustainability of family-owned businesses in the South-Eastern Nigeria found that significant mentoring predicts business continuity, while coaching predicts survival.

According to Olubiyi and colleagues, succession planning has significantly impacted family business continuity which highlighted how planning for succession in leadership supports organizational stability in long term. This supports the argument in family-owned healthcare businesses that mentoring and communication can support patient trust, internal stability and sustain reputation. Kifordu (2024) examined the relationship between succession planning and family business survival in Delta State, and concluded that mentoring improves work performance behaviour. This contributes to succession because mentees are more likely to become mentors in the future which reinforces a cycle of capability development that support business continuity.

Although succession planning has become prominent topic in academic discourse especially in family-owned healthcare businesses. Most Nigerian studies that examined family-owned business, faces different challenges such as strict regulatory requirements, compliance to professional standards, the critical need for patient trust and need for uninterrupted service delivery. Methodically, the prevailing dependence on cross-section survey designs and correlation-based analyses limit the understanding, practical implantation and

broader impact on sustainability outcomes. Employing qualitative method aims to address this overlooked aspect. This focus on offering much needed localized empirical perception in order to improve the extant body of literature.

3. Methodology

Exploratory research design was used and data were collected through desk research. Explorative research provides a contextual understanding of the research topic and the relationship between succession planning and sustainability in family-owned healthcare businesses. Relevant empirical literatures on published articles, journals and studies on succession planning and sustainability in the past 20 years were selected, based on key themes that align with research objectives. A total of 40 journals were sampled for this study. The data generated from the secondary sources were analysed and presented using content evaluation considering the thematic and narrative analysis to bring out nuanced opinions and viewpoints as well as interpretations. The content analysis focused on succession planning and sustainability themes as stated in the research objectives and questions.

4. Result and Discussion

This study investigates succession planning and the sustainability of family-owned healthcare businesses. The desk research was based on secondary research, which involves collecting, reviewing, and analysing existing information and data produced by others. A sample of 40 articles was reviewed for this study. The analysis focused on understanding the research problem and identifying patterns of responses supported by the data, presented in Tables 4.1 to 4.4 according to the research questions.

Regarding the relationship between mentorship programmes and the sustainability of family-owned healthcare

businesses, out of the 40 articles studied, 8 (20%) provided relevant information, as presented in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Presentation of data on the relationship between mentorship programs and the sustainability of family-owned healthcare businesses.

Author	Freq	%	Opinion
Nnabuife & Okoli (2017); Awogbemi et al. (2022); Kifordu (2024); Dike et al. (2025)	4/8	50%	These authors argue that mentorship enables effective transfer of managerial skills, leadership competence, and business values from founders to successors, thereby ensuring survival and continuity of family-owned businesses.
Veldsman (2013); Akindele et al. (2022)	2/8	25%	These authors argued that mentorship should be included within a formal and deliberate succession framework to achieve leadership continuity and long term sustainability
Ezenekwe & Nnabugwu (2025)	1/8	12.5%	The authors believe that mentorship contributes to cultural, environmental sustainability and marketing, arguing that mentoring strengthens organizational culture, communication and leadership effectiveness
Asikhia et al. (2021)	1/8	12.5%	These authors support mentorship by emphasizing leadership development and knowledge transfer as essential elements of effective succession planning.

The majority (50%) of the studies identified mentorship as a direct driver of sustainability, while 25% viewed mentorship as effective only when rooted in structured succession planning, and 12.5% each linked mentorship to broader

sustainability or implied it through institutionalised succession systems.

Regarding the influence of identifying critical leadership roles, 12 articles (30% of the total 40) provided relevant information, as presented in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Presentation of data identifying the critical leadership roles that influence business sustainability in family-owned businesses.

Author	Freq	%	Opinion
Rothwell (2010), Veldsman (2013), Keener & Seborra (1994), Asikhia et al., (2021), Kifordu (2024)	5/12	36.36%	Identifying critical leadership early prevents leadership gaps during succession, which directly improves continuity and long-term sustainability.
Charan et al., (2011), Akindele et al., (2022), Nnabuife & Okoli (2017)	3/12	27.27%	Identifying critical roles allows organizations to prepare successors through mentoring, training, job rotation and leadership development.

Becker & Huselid (1998), Groves (2007)	2/12	18.18%	These authors focus on healthcare organizations and maintain that identifying key clinical and administrative leadership roles improves operational stability, performance and service continuity.
Barney (1991), Becker & Huselid (1998)	2/12	18.18%	They argue that organizations that identify and invest in key leadership positions are more likely to remain sustainable over time.

All twelve studies (100%) found that the process of role identification plays an important part in ensuring sustainability. The largest number of studies (36.36%) indicated that identifying the most important leadership roles ensures the absence of leadership vacuums during the transition period, thus contributing to

sustainability, while 27.27% stressed the possibility to develop successors using role identification such as training, mentoring, job rotation and leadership development. As for the evaluation of the potential of employees, ten research papers (25% out of 40 in total) contained relevant information, which is shown in the table below.

Table 4.3: Data presentation concerning the effect of identifying the potential of employees on business sustainability in family-run healthcare businesses.

Author	Freq	%	Opinion
Rothwell (2010), Charan et al., (2011), Akindele et al. (2022), Dike et al., (2025), Asikhia et al., (2021)	5/10	50%	Assessing employee potential enables organizations to identify and prepare future leaders early which directly enhances long-term sustainability.
Garman (2004), Huselid (1995), Becker & Huselid (1998)	3/10	30%	These authors noted that evaluating employee capability and future potential improves productivity, stability of the workforce and organizational performance.
Collins (2001), Ulrich & Smallwood (2012)	2/10	20%	Employee potential is seen as a strategic resource that enables organization to build great leadership capacity and sustain competitive advantage over time.

All 10 studies (100%) recognised employee potential assessment as a contributor to sustainability, with the majority (50%) noting that it enables organisations to identify and prepare future leaders early, directly enhancing long-term sustainability.

Lastly, in regard to development plans, there were ten articles (a quarter of the total forty) that had related information, as shown in Table 4.4 below.

Table 4.4: Representation of data regarding how development plans affect sustainability in family-based healthcare businesses.

Author	Freq	%	Opinion
Rothwell (2010), Ulrich & Smallwood (2012), Akindele et al. (2022), Dike et al., (2025)	4/10	40%	These authors argued that structured development plans prevent leadership gaps and ensure long-term sustainability.
Becker & Huselid (1998), Kim (2012), Asikhia et al., (2021)	3/10	30%	This group emphasizes that employee and leadership development plans improve organizational performance which are essential for sustainable healthcare businesses.
Garavan et al., (2012), Collins (2001), Goleman et al., (2013)	3/10	30%	These authors conceptualize development plans as long-term strategic investments that build organizational resilience, leadership effectiveness, and sustained competitive advantage.

All 10 articles (100%) support the notion that development plans enhance the sustainability of family businesses in the health care industry, with 40% highlighting the importance of such plans in preventing leadership gaps and ensuring sustainability.

Discussion of findings

Research Question I: Relationship between mentorship programmes and sustainability

The empirical findings reveal that in 50% of reviewed papers, mentorship was considered an immediate contributor to sustainability, while in 25%, its effect was observed only within the context of well-established succession planning mechanisms. In line with these conclusions, both Nnabuiife and Okoli (2017), Awogbemi et al., (2022), and Kifordu (2024) empirically confirm that mentorship plays a key role in the transfer of managerial knowledge and values between founders and successors. In turn, the theoretical justification for this assertion comes from Stewardship Theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991), which states that managers are stewards of their organization's heritage.

Thus, it becomes crucial to ensure proper stewardship during generational leadership transition. In practical terms, in the field of health services, mentorship is vital for preserving clinical and administrative expertise and thus ensuring patients' continuity of care. Being a researcher in the field, I can state that mentoring needs to be properly designed and documented rather than improvised in healthcare.

Research Question II: Influence of identifying critical leadership roles on sustainability

In the study, it was revealed that 36.36% of the reviewed research studies have established that identifying crucial leadership roles is an effective means to ensure that there will be no gaps in leadership, which directly contribute to enhancing both continuity and sustainability in organizations. This was confirmed by empirical literature including Rothwell (2010), Veldsman (2013), and Asikhia et al., (2021). From a theoretical standpoint, the Stewardship Theory stresses that responsible stewards need to ensure identification of crucial roles in preparation

for future transitions within their organization in order to avoid any form of disruption. On the other hand, practically speaking in the context of family owned businesses in healthcare organizations, apart from the executive roles, clinical leadership roles should also be identified since not doing so may compromise regulatory standards and erode patient confidence.

Research Question III: Influence of assessing employee potential on sustainability

These results suggest that half of the studies show that measuring employee potential allows organizations to discover and train future leaders early on, thus contributing to organizational sustainability. The empirical evidence to support this finding comes from Rothwell (2010), Charan, Drotter and Noel (2011), and Akindele et al., (2022). The Stewardship Theory, theoretically, underscores that it is the steward's duty to develop organizational talent to guarantee sustainability as part of their fiduciary duty. Measuring employee potential in healthcare organizations practically helps pinpoint nurses, administrators, or other technical staff capable of assuming leadership roles without resorting to costly external hiring whose employees have no organizational experience. As a researcher, I contend that the measurement of employee potential within family-based healthcare organizations is often arbitrary and biased due to family connections and not competency. Thus, unbiased measurement instruments should be used.

Research Question IV: Influence of development plans on sustainability

The research has shown that 40% of examined literature indicated the importance of development plans to avoid leadership vacuum and assure sustainability in the long run. In empirical evidence, Rothwell (2010), Ulrich & Smallwood (2012), and Dike et al., (2025) can confirm this statement. Stewardship Theory is an

additional theoretical support of the above statement as the future welfare of organizations depends on continual human capital development in the organization, which demonstrates the concern of stewards for future generations. For the healthcare setting, development plans must involve participation in leadership seminars, clinical rotation programs, and training in healthcare regulation. In my capacity as a researcher, I would like to stress that family-owned businesses in healthcare do not see the need for the dynamic approach to development planning.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study found out that the success of family-owned healthcare enterprises in sustaining their businesses depends on how effectively their succession planning process is executed. It was determined that mentoring serves as a dependable means of passing down knowledge and facilitating generational continuity.

In addition, this research revealed that recognizing key leadership positions makes it easier to instill responsibility and foster decision-making, both of which are imperative within the heavily regulated environment of healthcare services.

Lastly, employee development programs help prepare for new problems in the healthcare industry.

Recommendations

In consideration of the results and conclusions discussed above, the following recommendations are made:

First, there should be a process put in place to facilitate the formalization of mentorship programs where experienced leaders can mentor upcoming ones. This will facilitate effective knowledge transfer and succession planning, thus contributing towards the sustainability of the businesses (Nnabuife & Okoli 2017).

Secondly, there should be a systematic approach towards defining the leadership

roles within the organizations. This is in light of the importance of role definition stressed by Rothwell (2010) and Kifordu (2024), who found in his study that this contributes significantly towards enhancing sustainability.

Thirdly, regular evaluations aimed at identifying future organizational leaders

should be conducted through assessment. Employee development plans should be developed and implemented. These plans should incorporate individualized professional development, leadership, workshop and continuous opportunities.

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