



Assessing Succession Planning in Public Institutions: A Mixed-Methods Study of Immigration and Citizenship Services

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how succession planning shapes institutional performance at the Immigration and Citizenship Services Headquarters in Malawi, a public agency whose security-sensitive work depends on scarce specialist skills.

Research Methodology: An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted. Survey data from 168 officers were analyzed with partial least squares structural equation modeling, and the patterns were then explained through 16 interviews and two focus group discussions analyzed thematically.

Results: Leadership development ($\beta=0.27$), the formal policy framework ($\beta=0.21$), talent identification ($\beta=0.18$) and knowledge transfer ($\beta=0.15$) improved performance directly. Top management support worked only through employee commitment, while political and administrative interference weakened the policy-performance link, cutting its slope from 0.35 to 0.07. Interviews traced these patterns to appointment-based succession, discretionary transfers, informal mentoring and knowledge loss at retirement.

Conclusions: Succession planning pays off when it is codified, protected from interference and carried through structured mentoring and knowledge systems.

Limitations: The cross-sectional, single-case design and perceptual performance measures restrict causal claims and statistical generalization.

Contributions: The study offers the first disaggregated, mixed-methods evidence on succession planning in a Sub-Saharan immigration agency, modeling commitment as the mechanism and interference as the boundary condition.

Keywords: Employee Commitment, Institutional Performance, Political Interference, Public Sector, Succession Planning

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1. Introduction

Public institutions deliver services that markets will not supply, and their staying power rests on a steady flow of capable leaders. When a senior officer retires, is transferred or leaves without warning, an agency with no prepared pipeline loses tacit knowledge, working relationships and decision capacity in a single stroke ([Obianuju, Ibrahim, & Zubairu, 2021](#)). Succession planning, understood as the deliberate identification, development and placement of successors for critical roles, has therefore moved from an administrative convenience to a core element of strategic human resource management ([Cragun, & Ulrich, 2024](#)). Recent public-sector scholarship places it inside the wider

professionalization agenda, since a civil service that cannot reproduce its own leadership will struggle to sustain any reform it starts ([Manzini, & Malatjie, 2023](#); [Nwosu, 2026](#)).

The problem is especially sharp in immigration and citizenship administration. Immigration authorities guard national borders, issue identity-defining documents such as passports, permits and citizenship certificates, and operate under constant security, diplomatic and digital-transformation pressure. Their work calls for legal, forensic-document, border-management and information-systems skills that are built slowly on the job and cannot simply be hired from the open labor market. Leaders in such agencies are also expected to steer digital service reforms while keeping daily operations running, a dual task that makes leadership continuity even more valuable ([Melawati, Murliasari, Judijanto, Saefudin, & Rahman, 2026](#)). A leadership vacuum can therefore delay permit processing, weaken border integrity and erode public trust within a short time.

Despite this importance, the evidence base on succession planning in public organizations remains thin. A systematic analysis of 32 empirical studies found that the research is concentrated in healthcare, education, small enterprises and family firms, with little attention to the public sector ([Al, & Alwi, 2023a](#); [Al, & Alwi, 2023b](#)). A broader review of 174 papers showed that conceptual work outnumbers empirical testing and that formalizing the succession process is a managerial necessity rather than an option ([Obianuju et al., 2021](#)). A review of the education sector reached a similar verdict about fragmented and largely descriptive evidence ([Upadhyaya & Lele, 2022](#)). African studies have started to appear, covering commercial public enterprises in Namibia ([Maseke & Muadinohamba, 2023](#)), public employees in Kenya ([Mark, Simiyu, & Omondi, 2025](#)), the health sector in Sierra Leone ([Kanu, 2025](#)) and public organizations in Tanzania ([Makame, Ali, & Machano, 2026](#)). In Malawi, however, talent management research has focused mainly on nurses in public hospitals ([Dzimbiri, 2021](#); [Dzimbiri, & Molefi, 2022](#)), leaving core security and administrative functions largely unexamined. To our knowledge, no study has investigated succession planning in an immigration and citizenship agency in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Three further weaknesses in the literature motivate the present study. The first is that most studies treat succession planning as a single, global construct, which hides the question of which specific practices actually matter for performance. A second weakness is that few studies examine the mechanism through which succession planning works, even though theory points to employee commitment as a likely channel ([Basir, 2026](#); [Härenstam, Björk, & Corin, 2024](#)). The third is that the public-sector context, and in particular political and administrative interference in appointments and transfers, is rarely modeled, although it may quietly cancel the effect of formal systems ([Gajduscheck, & Staronova, 2021](#); [Kim, Jung, & Kim, 2021](#)).

The state of the art can be summarized as two research streams that have so far developed in parallel. The first stream, rooted in human resource management, documents the benefits of talent management and succession practices for retention, satisfaction and performance ([Pomaranik, & Kludacz-Alessandri, 2024](#); [Thomas, 2026](#)) and increasingly frames succession as a dynamic capability rather than a replacement routine ([Cragun & Ulrich, 2024](#)). Leadership-oriented work adds that transformational and stimulating leaders are central to succession programs in public universities and public agencies ([Ahmad, Ngah, & Mohamed, 2022](#); [Mark et al., 2025](#)). The second stream, rooted in public administration, shows that politicization of recruitment and promotion erodes merit, morale and performance ([Brewer, Kellough, & Rainey, 2021](#); [Duong, 2021](#); [Campbell, 2026](#)), that formal merit rules often coexist with informal patronage in hybrid appointment systems ([Mamshae, 2025](#)), and that citizens tend to support protections against political interference ([Jensen & Piatak, 2026](#)). Recent evidence on top-level succession in the public sector also shows that the choice between insiders and outsiders responds to performance pressures ([Chen & Ling, 2026](#)). What is missing is a model that brings the two streams together and tests, within one institution, how specific succession practices create value and under which political conditions that value disappears.

The novelty of this study lies in four elements. It disaggregates succession planning into five practices, namely talent identification, leadership development, knowledge transfer, top management

support and the formal policy framework, rather than treating it as a single index. It models employee commitment as a mediating mechanism and political and administrative interference as a moderating boundary condition in the same structural model. It applies an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design in which interviews and focus groups are used to explain the statistical patterns rather than merely to illustrate them. Finally, it does so in an immigration and citizenship agency, a security-sensitive setting that has been absent from the succession planning literature.

Against this background, the study examines the effect of succession planning on institutional performance at the Immigration and Citizenship Services Headquarters (ICS-HQ) in Lilongwe. It sets out to establish the current state of succession planning practices, to test the direct effects of the five succession planning dimensions on institutional performance, to test whether employee commitment mediates these effects, to test whether political and administrative interference moderates the effect of the formal policy framework, and to explain the quantitative patterns through the lived experience of officers and managers.

The study contributes in several ways. Theoretically, it combines human capital, resource-based, social exchange and institutional perspectives into a single testable model. Empirically, it presents the first mixed-methods evidence from an immigration agency in the region. Methodologically, it integrates Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and reflexive thematic analysis through a joint display. Practically, it generates evidence-based recommendations for public service reform in Malawi and in comparable settings. The remainder of the article reviews the literature and develops the hypotheses, describes the methodology, presents and discusses the results, and closes with conclusions, limitations and directions for future study.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis/es Development

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

Succession planning is the systematic process of identifying critical roles, assessing and developing high-potential individuals, and preparing them to occupy those roles when they fall vacant ([Al & Alwi, 2023b](#)). It differs from replacement planning, which simply names individuals for specific vacancies, and from workforce planning, which forecasts aggregate staffing needs. Contemporary accounts stress that succession is continuous and developmental, so that the organization keeps renewing its leadership capability as its environment changes ([Cragun & Ulrich, 2024](#)). In public institutions this capability also depends on leadership styles that encourage subordinates to grow into larger roles ([Ahmad et al., 2022](#)).

Institutional performance in this study refers to the consistency and quality of service delivery, leadership continuity and process efficiency. This definition suits public agencies, where profit is not the main goal and where performance is judged by reliability, responsiveness and the ability to adapt during reform ([Herman et al., 2026](#); [Palupi & Rachmawati, 2026](#)). Employee commitment refers to officers' emotional attachment to the institution and their intention to remain in it, while political and administrative interference refers to discretionary influence over appointments, postings and promotions that bypasses formal criteria ([Kim et al., 2021](#)).

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Human Capital Theory (HCT)

[Becker \(1964\)](#) argues that investment in training and development raises productivity and generates returns for the organization. Applied to succession, talent identification and leadership development are investments in a pool of successors whose capabilities will sustain performance when incumbents leave. Recent studies in public healthcare and in Tanzanian public institutions confirm that talent management practices are associated with better performance and retention ([Pomaranik & Kludacz-Alessandri, 2024](#); [Thomas, 2026](#)).

2.2.2 Resource-Based View (RBV)

[Barney \(1991\)](#) holds that resources which are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable produce lasting advantage. Institutional memory and specialized immigration skills are scarce and hard to copy, and they are lost when experienced officers exit without passing on what they know. Knowledge transfer research shows that such knowledge moves through people, tools and routines, and that its transfer has to be deliberately organized ([Argote et al., 2022](#)). Structured succession is one of the main routines through which an agency protects these resources.

2.2.3 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

[Blau \(1964\)](#) emphasizes reciprocal obligations between employers and employees. When officers see transparent development opportunities, they respond with commitment and a desire to stay, which in turn improves performance. Recent studies show that leadership practices raise performance partly by strengthening organizational commitment ([Anggraini et al., 2026](#); [Basir, 2026](#)), and that trust running through the chain of command shapes both unit performance and turnover intention in public organizations ([Härenstam et al., 2024](#)). SET thus supplies the mediating mechanism in the present model.

2.2.4 Institutional Theory

[DiMaggio and Powell \(1983\)](#) show how organizations adopt structures to conform with external expectations and gain legitimacy. In politicized bureaucracies, formal systems may be adopted symbolically while informal norms continue to govern actual decisions. Studies of senior civil service systems describe exactly this pattern of formal merit rules sitting on top of informal political practice ([Gajduschek & Staronova, 2021](#)), and institutional pressures have been found to shape how talent management is carried out in public healthcare ([AlDayel et al., 2025](#)). Evidence from Uganda further shows how well-drafted legal frameworks can fail when enforcement is weak ([Katusiimeh et al., 2026](#)). Institutional theory therefore explains why interference may blunt the effect of formal succession policies.

2.2.5 Theoretical Integration

HCT and RBV explain why succession practices improve performance, SET explains how they do so through commitment, and institutional theory explains when formal practices fail. Taken together, these perspectives form the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

2.3 Empirical Review

Evidence from the Omani civil service shows that communication, rather than formal management endorsement, drives succession planning effectiveness ([Al & Alwi, 2023a](#)). The systematic reviews converge on two points: succession planning is under-researched in public bodies ([Al Jahwari & Alwi, 2023b](#)), and it works best when it is formalized and participatory ([Obianuju et al., 2021](#)). In South Africa, succession strategies have been examined as part of the effort to professionalize the public service through the National School of Government ([Manzini & Malatjie, 2023](#)). African evidence has also examined the drivers of succession planning in Namibian commercial public enterprises ([Maseke & Muadinohamba, 2023](#)), the link between leadership and succession management in the Kenyan public sector ([Mark et al., 2025](#)), perceptions of succession practices in the Sierra Leone health sector ([Kanu, 2025](#)) and the effect of succession planning on performance in Tanzanian public organizations ([Makame et al., 2026](#)).

In Malawi, the available evidence comes from public hospitals. [Dzimbiri \(2021\)](#) found that talent management practices as a whole did not translate into higher satisfaction among nurses, while [Dzimbiri and Molefi \(2022\)](#) proposed an interactive model linking talent management to work outcomes. Together these studies point to weak implementation of talent management in Malawian public services, but they say nothing about succession in security institutions. Research on knowledge also shows that public organizations face real risks of knowledge loss when experienced staff leave

([Souto & Bruno-Faria, 2022](#)) and that knowledge transfer between older and younger employees depends on how each group views the other over time ([Fasbender & Gerpott, 2021](#)). Table 1 summarizes the studies most directly comparable to the present one.

Table 1. Summary of selected empirical and review studies (2021-2023)

Scope	Study	Context and method	Key findings	Limitation relevant to this study
Global (Middle East)	(Al & Alwi, 2023a)	Survey of 160 employees, Omani civil service	Effective communication significantly improved succession planning effectiveness; top management support was positive but insignificant; most respondents judged current practices ineffective	Single-country, cross-sectional; no performance outcome or mediator; no qualitative explanation
Global (review)	(Al & Alwi, 2023b)	Systematic review: 259 records screened, 32 included	Studies spread across healthcare, education, SMEs, family and private firms; limited public-sector focus	Review only; calls for public-sector evidence
Global (review)	Obianuju et al. (2021)	Systematic quantitative assessment of 174 articles	Conceptual articles outnumber empirical ones; formalized, continuous, participatory succession is a management imperative	Does not test mechanisms; few empirical African public-sector tests
Local (Malawi)	Dzimbiri (2021)	Cross-sectional survey, 834 nurses, public hospitals	Talent management overall did not raise job satisfaction; staffing, talent development and talent deployment were the strongest predictors	Health sector; outcome is satisfaction, not institutional performance
Local (Malawi)	Dzimbiri & Molefi (2022)	Cross-sectional survey, registered nurses, public hospitals	Proposed a model linking talent management with job satisfaction, innovative behavior, engagement and career orientation	Health sector; no succession-specific focus; no moderator

Table 1 shows that the comparable studies are either reviews, single-country surveys without a performance outcome, or health-sector studies that do not address succession directly. None of them combines a mediator and a moderator, and none uses qualitative data to explain its statistical results. Read together with the wider literature, the review reveals three gaps. There is a contextual gap, because no study has examined succession planning in an immigration and citizenship agency in Malawi or the surrounding region. There is a conceptual gap, because succession planning is rarely disaggregated, which leaves unclear which practices drive performance. There is also a mechanism-and-boundary gap, because commitment as a mediator and political interference as a moderator have been largely untested. This study addresses these gaps through a disaggregated, theory-integrated, explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach.

2.4 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

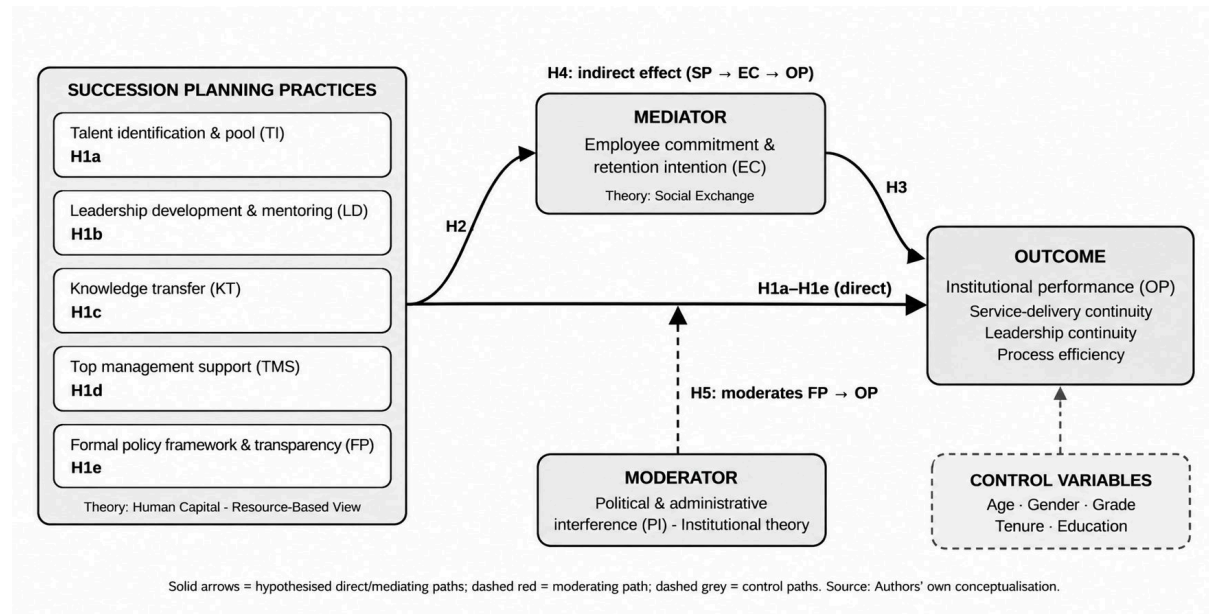


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of succession planning and institutional performance

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that guides the analysis. The five succession planning practices appear on the left as independent variables. Each is linked directly to institutional performance on the right and indirectly through employee commitment, which sits in the upper middle of the figure as the mediator. Political and administrative interference appears at the bottom as a moderator acting on the path from the formal policy framework to performance, while age, gender, grade, tenure and education are included as control variables.

Human capital and resource-based reasoning suggest that each succession practice adds to the institution's stock of ready leaders and protected knowledge. Identifying talent early allows the agency to concentrate scarce training resources on officers likely to step up, and leadership development turns potential into demonstrated capability (Becker, 1964; Thomas, 2026). Knowledge transfer keeps rare procedural and technical know-how inside the institution (Argote, Guo, Park, & Hahl, 2022; Souto, & Bruno-Faria, 2022). Visible support from senior managers signals that succession is a priority, and a formal policy framework makes selection criteria predictable (Al, & Alwi, 2023a; Obianuju, Ibrahim, & Zubairu, 2021). The following hypotheses are therefore proposed.

H_{1a}: Talent identification positively affects institutional performance.

H_{1b}: Leadership development positively affects institutional performance.

H_{1c}: Knowledge transfer positively affects institutional performance.

H_{1d}: Top management support positively affects institutional performance.

H_{1e}: The formal policy framework positively affects institutional performance.

Social exchange theory implies that the same practices also shape how officers feel about the institution. When officers see that talent is recognized, that mentoring is available and that promotion follows clear rules, they read these signals as organizational investment in them and reciprocate with loyalty (Blau, 1964; Anggraini, Bun, & Nainggolan, 2026). Studies on leadership and job stress among public employees similarly show that the way people are treated affects their attitudes toward the employer (Darmadi, Prasetyani, Pratama, & Suwanto, 2026).

H₂: Each succession planning dimension positively affects employee commitment.

Committed officers are more willing to exert discretionary effort, share knowledge and remain through difficult periods, which supports continuity and service quality. Evidence from public agencies shows that commitment and work engagement are linked to adaptive performance during reform ([Basir, 2026](#); [Palupi, & Rachmawati, 2026](#)). Commitment is thus expected both to improve performance directly and to carry part of the effect of succession practices.

H₃: Employee commitment positively affects institutional performance.

H₄: Employee commitment mediates the relationship between succession planning dimensions and institutional performance.

Institutional theory warns that formal rules can be decoupled from practice. Where political actors or senior administrators can override merit-based selection, a written succession policy may exist on paper but lose its practical force ([DiMaggio, & Powell, 1983](#); [Gajduschek, & Staronova, 2021](#)). Politicized recruitment and promotion have been shown to weaken officials' work attitudes and the credibility of merit systems ([Duong, 2021](#); [Kim, Jung, & Kim, 2021](#)), and hybrid appointment systems allow patronage to operate alongside formal merit criteria ([Mamshae, 2025](#)).

Political and administrative interference negatively moderates the effect of the formal policy framework on institutional performance.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The study follows a pragmatist paradigm and an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. A quantitative survey (QUAN) was conducted first to test the hypotheses, and a qualitative phase (qual) followed to explain the results ([Toyon, 2021](#)). The quantitative strand was given priority, and the two strands were integrated at the levels of design, methods and interpretation through a joint display.

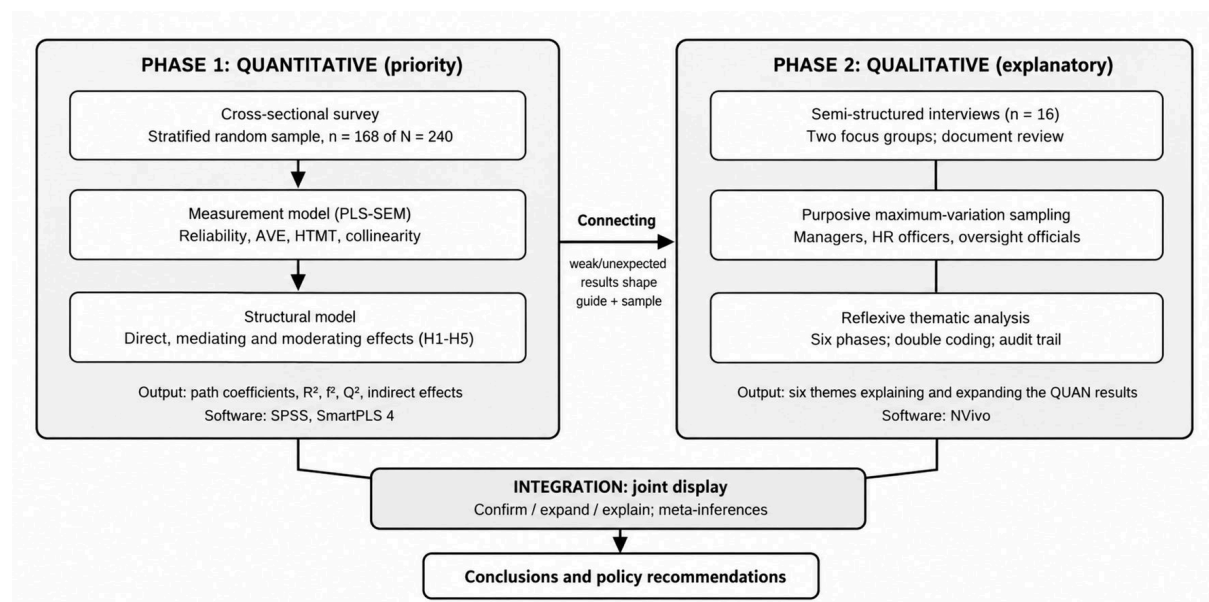


Figure 2. Sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design

Figure 2 illustrates this sequence. Phase 1, shown on the left, moves from the cross-sectional survey through the measurement model to the structural model. The arrow labeled connecting shows how weak or unexpected quantitative results informed the interview guide and the selection of participants for Phase 2, shown on the right. Both phases feed into the integration stage at the bottom, where the joint display produces meta-inferences that lead to conclusions and policy recommendations.

3.2 Study Setting, Population and Sampling

The study was carried out at ICS-HQ in Lilongwe, Malawi. The population consisted of all headquarters officers in professional, supervisory and management grades (N=240). A power analysis in G*Power with $f^2 = 0.15$, $\alpha=.05$, power=.95 and six predictors indicated a minimum of 138 cases ([Kang, 2021](#)). A total of 185 questionnaires were distributed through proportionate stratified random sampling by grade, yielding 172 returns and 168 usable responses, a usable response rate of 90.8%.

For the qualitative phase, purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to select 16 interview participants, including senior managers, middle managers, human resource officers and officials from oversight bodies, together with two focus groups of seven participants each. Sample adequacy was judged against indicators of saturation ([Hennink & Kaiser, 2022](#)), and saturation was considered reached when no new codes emerged in the last three interviews.

3.3 Instruments and Measurement

The questionnaire used five-point Likert items (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) adapted from validated talent management, commitment and public performance scales. The items were refined through expert review and a pilot test with 20 officers. The constructs measured were talent identification, leadership development, knowledge transfer, top management support, formal policy framework, employee commitment, political and administrative interference, and institutional performance.

A semi-structured interview guide and a focus group protocol explored the existence of succession policies, selection practices, mentoring, knowledge loss, interference and suggestions for reform. Document review covered the human resource policy, the establishment register and retirement projections, which allowed claims made by participants to be checked against records.

3.4 Data Collection, Reliability and Ethics

Surveys were self-administered in person and online over six weeks, followed by five weeks of qualitative fieldwork. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and transcripts were de-identified and encrypted. Because respondents are colleagues within the researcher's host institution, rank-related identity was protected by reporting grade bands only.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Data were screened in SPSS and analyzed with PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was chosen because it suits prediction-oriented, complex models that include mediators and interaction terms ([Hair & Alamer, 2022](#); [Sarstedt et al., 2022](#)). The measurement model was assessed through indicator loadings (≥ 0.70), Cronbach's α and composite reliability (≥ 0.70), average variance extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50) and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT < 0.85). The structural model was assessed through VIF, R^2 , f^2 , Q^2 and SRMR, with 5,000-sample bootstrapping for paths, indirect effects (bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals) and the interaction term, estimated using the two-stage approach. Common method bias was controlled procedurally and checked with full-collinearity VIFs ([Podsakoff et al., 2024](#)).

The structural relationships for institutional performance are expressed in Formula 1. Institutional performance (OP) is modeled as a function of the five succession practices, employee commitment, interference and the interaction between interference and the formal policy framework, with ε as the error term.

$$OP = \beta_1 TI + \beta_2 LD + \beta_3 KT + \beta_4 TMS + \beta_5 FP + \beta_6 EC + \beta_7 PI + \beta_8 (PI \times FP) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

The commitment equation is given in Formula 2. Here employee commitment (EC) is predicted by the five succession practices, and each coefficient a_i corresponds to the first leg of a mediation path.

$$EC = a_1TI + a_2LD + a_3KT + a_4TMS + a_5FP + \zeta \quad (2)$$

The specific indirect effect of each practice through commitment is computed as the product of the path from that practice to commitment (a_i) and the path from commitment to performance (b), as shown in Formula 3. Mediation is supported when the bootstrapped confidence interval of this product excludes zero.

$$\text{Indirect effect}_i = a_i \times b \quad (3)$$

For the moderation test, the conditional effect of the formal policy framework on performance at a given level of interference is obtained from Formula 4, where β_5 is the main effect of FP, β_8 is the interaction coefficient and PI is the standardized level of interference (−1 SD, mean, +1 SD).

$$\text{Simple slope of } FP \rightarrow OP = \beta_5 + \beta_8 \times PI \quad (4)$$

Effect sizes were calculated with Formula 5, in which R^2_{included} and R^2_{excluded} are the explained variances of the endogenous construct with and without the predictor of interest. Values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 indicate small, medium and large effects.

$$f^2 = \frac{R^2_{\text{included}} - R^2_{\text{excluded}}}{1 - R^2_{\text{included}}} \quad (5)$$

3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis in six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A quarter of the transcripts (25%) were double-coded, giving Cohen's $\kappa=0.82$, and an audit trail and member checking were maintained. Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability guided the assessment of trustworthiness.

3.5.3 Integration

The two sets of findings were merged in a joint display, and each pair of results was classified as confirming, expanding or explaining.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Response and Respondent Profile

Table 2. Demographic profile of survey respondents (n = 168)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	96	57.1
	Female	72	42.9
Age (years)	< 30	21	12.5
	30–39	58	34.5
	40–49	56	33.3

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Age (years)	≥ 50	33	19.6
Grade	Junior professional	61	36.3
	Middle management	71	42.3
	Senior management	36	21.4
Tenure (years)	< 5	34	20.2
	5–10	52	31.0
	11–20	49	29.2
	> 20	33	19.6
Education	Diploma/certificate	38	22.6
	Bachelor degree	92	54.8
	Postgraduate	38	22.6

Table 2 reports the demographic profile of the 168 survey respondents by gender, age, grade, tenure and education. The table helps judge whether the sample reflects the structure of headquarters staff and whether the groups most exposed to succession risk are adequately represented. The sample is balanced across grades and tenure bands. About one in five respondents is aged 50 or above, which signals a sizeable cohort approaching retirement, precisely the group whose knowledge a succession system should capture. Early and late respondents did not differ significantly on the key constructs, which suggests that non-response bias is not a serious concern.

4.2 Current State of Succession Planning

Table 3. Descriptive statistics (1-5 scale)

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Talent identification (TI)	2.84	0.91	Low–moderate
Leadership development and mentoring (LD)	2.61	0.96	Low
Knowledge transfer (KT)	3.02	0.88	Moderate
Top management support (TMS)	3.21	0.93	Moderate
Formal policy framework (FP)	2.37	1.02	Low
Employee commitment (EC)	3.38	0.85	Moderate
Institutional performance (OP)	3.05	0.80	Moderate
Political/administrative interference (PI)	3.74	0.89	High

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of the eight constructs on the 1 to 5 scale, together with a verbal interpretation of each mean. It answers the first objective by showing how strongly each succession practice is currently present at ICS-HQ. Succession planning is weakly institutionalized at ICS-HQ. The formal policy framework ($M=2.37$) and leadership development ($M=2.61$) receive the lowest scores, while perceived interference is the highest ($M=3.74$). Top management support is rated as moderate ($M=3.21$), which suggests verbal endorsement without the supporting architecture of policy, mentoring and talent pools. This profile resembles the wider observation that most public organizations claim to value succession but rarely formalize it ([Obianuju et al., 2021](#); [Manzini & Malatjie, 2023](#)).

4.3 Measurement Model

Table 4. Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Items retained	Cronbach α	Composite reliability (ρ_c)	AVE	Min. loading
TI	5	0.86	0.90	0.65	0.74
LD	5	0.88	0.91	0.67	0.76
KT	4	0.84	0.89	0.62	0.73
TMS	5	0.90	0.93	0.70	0.79

Construct	Items retained	Cronbach α	Composite reliability (ρ_c)	AVE	Min. loading
FP	4	0.85	0.90	0.64	0.75
EC	5	0.89	0.92	0.66	0.77
OP	6	0.91	0.93	0.63	0.72
PI	4	0.87	0.91	0.68	0.78

Table 4 reports the number of items retained, Cronbach's α , composite reliability, AVE and the minimum loading for each construct. These statistics establish whether the constructs were measured reliably and whether their items converge on a common meaning before the structural paths are interpreted. All constructs exceed the thresholds for reliability (α and $\rho_c > 0.70$) and convergent validity (AVE > 0.50). Discriminant validity was also established, with the highest HTMT ratio at 0.79 (LD and FP), below the 0.85 cut-off (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Full-collinearity VIFs ranged from 1.38 to 2.41, below 3.3, so common method bias is unlikely to distort the findings (Podsakoff et al., 2024).

4.4 Structural Model

Table 5. Direct effects and hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	f^2	Decision
H_{1a}	TI $\rightarrow$ OP	0.18	2.91	.004	0.04	Supported
H_{1b}	LD $\rightarrow$ OP	0.27	4.12	< .001	0.09	Supported
H_{1c}	KT $\rightarrow$ OP	0.15	2.34	.019	0.03	Supported
H_{1d}	TMS $\rightarrow$ OP	0.12	1.78	.075	0.02	Not supported
H_{1e}	FP $\rightarrow$ OP	0.21	3.35	.001	0.06	Supported
H_{2a}	TI $\rightarrow$ EC	0.21	3.02	.003	–	Supported
H_{2b}	LD $\rightarrow$ EC	0.33	4.85	< .001	–	Supported
H_{2c}	KT $\rightarrow$ EC	0.13	1.70	.089	–	Not supported
H_{2d}	TMS $\rightarrow$ EC	0.26	3.64	< .001	–	Supported
H_{2e}	FP $\rightarrow$ EC	0.29	4.21	< .001	–	Supported
H_3	EC $\rightarrow$ OP	0.24	3.96	< .001	0.08	Supported

The model explains 62% of the variance in institutional performance ($R^2=0.62$) and 48% of the variance in employee commitment ($R^2=0.48$). It shows good predictive relevance (Q^2 predict=0.38) and acceptable fit (SRMR=0.055). Table 5 lists each hypothesized direct path with its standardized coefficient, t-value, p-value, effect size and the resulting decision, which together address the second and third objectives. Leadership development has the strongest effect on performance ($\beta=0.27$, $p<.001$), followed by the formal policy framework ($\beta=0.21$) and talent identification ($\beta=0.18$). Knowledge transfer has a small but significant effect ($\beta=0.15$). Top management support shows a positive but non-significant direct effect ($\beta=0.12$, $\beta=.075$), which mirrors the Omani finding that management support alone is not decisive (Al & Alwi, 2023a). The effect sizes are small to small-moderate, which is typical for individual predictors in behavioral models, yet together the practices account for a substantial share of the variance in performance.

4.5 Mediation Analysis

Table 6. Specific indirect effects through employee commitment

Path	a (SP $\rightarrow$ EC)	b (EC $\rightarrow$ OP)	Indirect Effect	95% CI	Direct Effect	Mediation Type
TI $\rightarrow$ EC $\rightarrow$ OP	0.21	0.24	0.050	[0.009, 0.098]	0.18*	Complementary partial
LD $\rightarrow$ EC $\rightarrow$ OP	0.33	0.24	0.079	[0.029, 0.131]	0.27*	Complementary partial
KT $\rightarrow$ EC $\rightarrow$ OP	0.13	0.24	0.031	[-0.003, 0.071]	0.15*	No mediation
TMS $\rightarrow$ EC $\rightarrow$ OP	0.26	0.24	0.062	[0.018, 0.112]	0.12 ns	Indirect-only (full)
FP $\rightarrow$ EC $\rightarrow$ OP	0.29	0.24	0.070	[0.022, 0.121]	0.21*	Complementary partial

Table 6 decomposes the effect of each succession practice into its path to commitment (a), the path from commitment to performance (b), the resulting indirect effect calculated with Equation (3), its bootstrapped 95% confidence interval and the direct effect. The last column classifies the type of

mediation, which is how H_4 is evaluated. H_4 is partly supported. Commitment partially mediates the effects of talent identification, leadership development and the policy framework, and it fully mediates the effect of top management support. In other words, management backing improves performance only when it is converted into officer commitment. Knowledge transfer is not mediated, because its confidence interval includes zero, which suggests that it operates through systems and routines rather than through attitudes.

4.6 Moderation Analysis

Table 7. Simple slopes of FP → OP at levels of interference

Level of Interference	Slope (β)	Interpretation
Low (−1 SD)	0.35	Strong positive effect
Mean	0.21	Moderate positive effect
High (+1 SD)	0.07	Effect largely neutralized

Political and administrative interference has a significant negative direct effect on performance ($\beta = -0.16$, $t = 2.62$, $p = .009$) and a significant negative interaction with the formal policy framework ($PI \times FP \rightarrow OP$: $\beta = -0.14$, $t = 2.55$, $p = .011$, $f^2 = 0.03$). H_5 is therefore supported. Table 7 reports the simple slopes of the policy-performance relationship at low, average and high levels of interference, calculated with Formula 4, so that the practical meaning of the interaction can be seen directly. Where interference is low, a one standard deviation improvement in the formal policy framework is associated with a 0.35 standard deviation rise in performance. Where interference is high, the same improvement yields only 0.07, so formal succession policy loses most of its value. This pattern is consistent with institutional theory's account of decoupling between formal rules and actual practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Gajduschek & Staronova, 2021).

4.7 Qualitative Results

Table 8. Qualitative themes and evidence

Theme	Description	Source frequency	Linked quantitative result
T1. Succession by appointment, not by plan	Acting and substantive appointments follow availability or discretion rather than a talent pool	14/16 interviews; both FGDs	Low TI mean; TMS indirect only
T2. Absent or unenforced framework	No approved departmental succession policy; guidance is generic and poorly communicated	13/16; both FGDs	Lowest FP mean
T3. Knowledge walks out the door	Retirements and transfers occur without handover; records are paper-based	12/16; FGD 2	Small KT effect
T4. Politicized transfers and promotions	Discretionary postings disrupt development paths and signal that merit is secondary	15/16; both FGDs	High PI; $PI \times FP$ interaction
T5. Mentoring is informal and personality-dependent	Coaching depends on individual supervisors; juniors outside networks are excluded	11/16; FGD 1	LD strongest predictor, low mean
T6. Resource and capacity constraints	Training budgets, digital systems and HR analytics are limited	10/16; both FGDs	KT not mediated

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 16 interviews and two focus groups produced six themes. Table 8 lists each theme, a short description of its content, how often it appeared across the data sources and the quantitative result to which it is most closely linked. The source frequencies show that each theme was raised by a majority of interviewees and in at least one focus group.

The first theme shows that succession happens by appointment rather than by plan. Participants explained that acting positions are filled by whoever is available or favored at the time, not from a pre-identified pool. The second theme concerns the absence of an approved departmental succession policy, with participants noting that the general public service guidance is rarely communicated to staff. The third theme captures the loss of knowledge when officers retire or are transferred without structured handover, a risk heightened by paper-based records. The fourth theme, raised in 15 of 16 interviews, describes discretionary transfers and promotions that interrupt development paths. The fifth theme shows that mentoring exists but depends on the goodwill of individual supervisors, while the sixth points to limited training budgets, weak digital systems and the absence of HR analytics.

4.8 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Table 9. Joint display and meta-inferences

Quantitative Result	Qualitative Explanation	Integration Type	Meta-Inference
FP lowest mean (2.37); FP → OP positive	T2: no approved framework	Confirms	Absence of codified policy is the root weakness
LD strongest predictor ($\beta=0.27$), low mean (2.61)	T5: mentoring informal	Explains	Biggest performance gain lies in formalizing mentoring
TMS direct effect ns; indirect-only via EC	T1, T4: leaders endorse succession verbally but still appoint discretionarily	Explains	Support must be visible in decisions, not statements
PI high (3.74); negative moderation	T4: politicized transfers	Confirms and expands	Policy needs legal insulation to work
KT small effect, not mediated	T3, T6: knowledge loss on exit; paper records	Expands	Knowledge transfer is a systems issue, not just an attitude issue

Table 9 is the joint display. For each key quantitative result it presents the qualitative explanation, the type of integration and the meta-inference drawn from reading both strands together. The table shows how the interviews explain or extend each statistical finding. Both strands converge on a single picture. ICS-HQ has succession intentions but not a succession system, and the system that would make the practices effective is undermined by interference. The integration adds explanatory depth that neither strand provides alone: the statistics show where the effects lie, and the interviews show why they take the shape they do.

4.9 Summary of Hypotheses

Table 10. Hypothesis outcomes

Hypothesis	Path	Outcome
H_{1a}	TI → OP	Supported
H_{1b}	LD → OP	Supported
H_{1c}	KT → OP	Supported
H_{1d}	TMS → OP	Not supported (indirect only)
H_{1e}	FP → OP	Supported
H_2	SP → EC	Supported for TI, LD, TMS, FP; not for KT
H_3	EC → OP	Supported
H_4	Mediation	Partially supported
H_5	Moderation ($PI \times FP$)	Supported

Table 10 summarizes the outcome of every hypothesis tested in the study, drawing together the direct, mediating and moderating results reported above. Eight of the eleven direct paths are supported,

mediation is partially supported, and the moderation hypothesis is supported. The two unsupported direct paths, from top management support to performance and from knowledge transfer to commitment, turn out to be among the most informative findings of the study.

4.10 Discussion

The findings show that succession planning has a significant effect on institutional performance at ICS-HQ, although the effect is uneven across practices. In line with human capital theory ([Becker, 1964](#)), the practices that build competence, especially leadership development and talent identification, deliver the clearest performance gains. This agrees with calls to treat succession as an ongoing, participatory process rather than a one-off replacement exercise ([Obianuju, Ibrahim, & Zubairu, 2021](#); [Cragun, & Ulrich, 2024](#)) and with Malawian evidence that staffing, development and deployment are the most important talent management factors ([Dzimhiri, 2021](#)). It also echoes Tanzanian evidence that succession planning is associated with better performance in public organizations ([Makame, Ali, & Machano, 2026](#)) and Kenyan evidence that leaders who stimulate their staff intellectually support succession management ([Mark, Simiyu, & Omondi, 2025](#)).

Leadership development is both the strongest predictor and one of the weakest practices in place. This combination identifies the largest untapped gain for the institution. Studies of public universities show that transformational leadership styles are closely tied to succession programs ([Ahmad, Ngah, & Mohamed, 2022](#)), and evidence from public sector reform shows that psychological resources and engagement support adaptive performance during change ([Palupi & Rachmawati, 2026](#)). The interviews make clear that at ICS-HQ mentoring depends on personal relationships, so officers outside established networks are left behind. Formalizing mentoring would therefore spread a practice that already works for some officers to all of them.

The non-significant direct effect of senior management support is consistent with the Omani finding that support was positive but insignificant while communication was decisive ([Al & Alwi, 2023a](#)). The mediation result clarifies this pattern: support works through employee commitment, a social exchange mechanism ([Blau, 1964](#)). Recent work on public organizations shows that trust running down the managerial chain shapes unit performance ([Härenstam, Björk, & Corin, 2024](#)) and that leadership affects performance partly through commitment ([Basir, 2026](#)). The qualitative data explain why the direct link is weak at ICS-HQ, as leaders endorse succession in principle but retain discretionary appointment practices, so officers do not perceive credible reciprocity. Support becomes effective only when it is visible in decisions, which is consistent with evidence that local government performance depends on integrating leadership with sound public management practice ([Herman, Amin, Indrawijaya, & Rosita, 2026](#)).

The formal framework is both the lowest-rated practice and a key performance driver, yet its effect drops sharply under heavy interference. This supports institutional theory's decoupling argument ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1983](#)): formal rules that are not protected from discretionary override become symbolic. The pattern matches evidence that merit systems in senior civil services often operate as a façade over informal politics ([Gajduschek & Staronova, 2021](#)), that politicized recruitment and promotion erode merit and officials' attitudes ([Duong, 2021](#); [Kim, Jung, & Kim, 2021](#)), and that patronage promotions reduce career satisfaction among public servants ([Campbell, 2026](#)). It also mirrors the Ugandan experience in which strong anti-corruption laws failed in practice because enforcement was weak ([Katusiimeh, Makara, Ayiga, Mucunguzi, Akena, Kakuru, & Akello, 2026](#)). The study adds to this literature by quantifying a boundary condition that earlier succession research, often described as under-theorized in public contexts [Al and Alwi \(2023b\)](#), had not tested. The finding also strengthens the case for merit protections, which citizens appear to support ([Jensen & Piatak, 2026](#)), and for clear rules governing whether top posts go to insiders or outsiders ([Chen, & Ling, 2026](#); [Mamshae, 2025](#)).

Knowledge transfer has a small direct effect and no indirect effect through commitment. The interviews explain this by pointing to retirements without handover and to paper-based records. Knowledge loss is therefore a systems problem rather than a motivation problem, a conclusion that

fits work on knowledge loss risk in public companies ([Souto & Bruno-Faria, 2022](#)), and on the conditions under which knowledge flows between older and younger employees ([Fasbender & Gerpott, 2021](#)). Studies of knowledge management practices and of digital human resource information systems indicate that structured repositories and digital tools can make transfer less dependent on individual goodwill ([Lestary, Meilita, Marhaini, & Wa, 2026](#); [Tiara, Pratiwi, Ningtias, & Wa, 2026](#)). The archives governance literature likewise links communication and HR development to better record management performance ([Hermawan, Furbani, Nainggolan, Latianingsih, & Awaludin, 2026](#)).

The results should be read against the reform environment of African public services, where service delivery improvements depend on the capacity and stability of the civil service ([Nwosu, 2026](#)). Change readiness during restructuring also depends on how employees perceive the fairness and direction of change ([Fitriani, Hidayatulloh, & Triyonggo, 2026](#)). Institutional pressures can shape talent management in ways that favor compliance over substance ([AlDayel, Alhaider, Abid, & Alsarhan, 2025](#)), which is precisely the risk facing a succession policy that exists without enforcement. Similar concerns about succession practices have been reported in other African public settings ([Kanu, 2025](#); [Maseke, & Muadinohamba, 2023](#)), suggesting that the lessons from ICS-HQ travel beyond Malawi.

4.11 Policy Implications

Table 11. Policy recommendations, responsible actors and timelines

Recommendation	Evidence base	Lead actors	Timeline
Approve a departmental succession policy defining critical posts, eligibility criteria, selection panels and review cycles	FP lowest mean; T2	ICS leadership; HR; oversight bodies	0–12 months
Insulate succession decisions from interference through merit-based shortlisting, documented justifications for transfers and minimum tenure in critical posts	PI × FP; T4	Ministry; Public Service Commission	6–18 months
Launch a structured mentoring and leadership academy, with coaching hours counted in performance appraisals	LD strongest; T5	HR; training unit; Public Service Management	6–24 months
Create a talent pool and critical-position register updated annually from retirement projections	TI effect; T1	HR; heads of division	0–12 months
Mandate handover protocols and digital knowledge repositories before retirement or transfer	KT; T3, T6	ICT; HR	12–36 months
Make leadership visibly accountable through succession KPIs and regular communication to staff	TMS indirect only	Commissioner-level leadership	0–12 months
Monitor and evaluate through an annual succession dashboard (vacancy fill time, internal-fill rate, bench strength)	Performance linkage	Planning/M&E units	12 months onward

Table 11 translates the integrated findings into policy recommendations. For each recommendation it gives the evidence on which it rests, the actors who should lead it and an indicative timeline, so that the recommendations can be sequenced and monitored. The recommendations follow the logic of the results. The policy framework and protection from interference come first because, without them, the other practices lose much of their effect. Mentoring and the talent pool follow because they offer the largest performance gains. Digital knowledge repositories take longer to build and therefore sit at the end of the timeline, while leadership accountability and monitoring run throughout.

5. Conclusions

Succession planning at ICS-HQ is weakly institutionalized, yet where it is practiced it clearly improves institutional performance. Leadership development, the formal policy framework, talent identification and knowledge transfer each have a direct positive effect. Top management support helps only by building employee commitment, and political and administrative interference sharply reduces the benefit of formal policy, to the point of almost neutralizing it when interference is high. The qualitative evidence attributes these patterns to appointment-based succession, discretionary transfers, informal mentoring and knowledge loss at retirement. The central lesson is that succession planning works not simply because it exists, but because it is written down, protected from discretionary override and carried out through structured mentoring and knowledge systems. For immigration and other security-sensitive public agencies, building such a system is a condition for continuity of service rather than an optional human resource refinement.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The study was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the research findings or their interpretation.

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