

Filling the Leadership Pipeline

By Net Assets



What if there are no obvious candidates on tap to take over the senior finance/operational reins? How to identify and attract your next generation leaders? Cast your net wide, and prepare for competition.

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This article is part of a series from the January/February 2017 Net Assets. See the other articles:

- [The Next Generation of Leadership: Masters of Reinvention](#)
- [Money Matters for Next-Generation Leaders](#)
- [The New Guard: Profiles of 12 New Independent School Leaders](#)

Long tenures and promoting from within are hallowed traditions at independent schools — with the notable exception of senior finance positions, which are often filled by second-career professionals. Expect for-profit companies, higher education and other nonprofit sectors to become even more popular launch pads as schools seek increasingly sophisticated analytical skills and specialized knowledge.

Start with some recruitment fundamentals, recommends Doug Cooney of [Deerfield Associates Executive Search](#). Define what you want out of a hire, learn how to package and market the opportunity, have an excellent interview team on campus, engage the candidate — and sell them on the job. “The more personalized the search, the more effective.”

This is especially true for positions so new they have no precedent or career path. Gabriel Lucas recently conducted a search for a “knowledge hub manager” at a school. “Who has been that before?” asked the principal of [Ed Tech Recruiting](#) and co-founder of ATLAS

(Association of Technology Leaders in Independent Schools). “Who has run a library, been an innovation and curriculum manager and served as a director for all things technology?” By and large, “there’s just not a deep pool” within independent schools to handle the shift to academic and curriculum design. “Quite often we have found the top candidate is not the typical rising-up-the-ranks independent school technology leader.”

Winnowing names to a final list of candidates might take three to four months, depending on the pace of the institution hiring.

Begin succession planning well in advance of a search. Cast your net wide — possibly even nationally or internationally. Define the key priorities and skill sets needed and wanted in the role going forward. Cooney said his typical independent school CFO search might involve as many as 300 calls to potential candidates and referral sources within what he calls his “Doug Club” — well-placed individuals in relevant spheres. Winnowing names to a final list of candidates might take three to four months, depending on the pace of the institution hiring, with that roster typically including one to two individuals from independent schools and the rest from higher education, other not-for-profits, financial services and consulting disciplines, he said.

Jane Armstrong, managing partner of education search firm [Independent Thinking](#), sometimes supplements advertised searches by going through schools’ alumni databases — for instance, seeking an MBA alumnus who has been involved with the school. Your school’s audit firm might also have sources, she said.

In any case, prepare for competition. In a hypothetical search for a smart, strategic and dynamic school CFO, it’s likely that “the person they want is in much demand not only by education but by other sectors. You have to broaden your sphere to get the best talent,” Cooney said. Armstrong surmised that such talent is also ambitious and looking for advancement potential. “Tomorrow’s administrators are presenting themselves with terrific credentials,” she said, noting professional development programs from NBOA as well as NAIS, regional independent school associations and specialized offerings from the likes of Harvard and the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

Could your next-gen leaders be closer to home — perhaps among existing employees, trustees or parents? “Some talent should be home-grown,” said Frank Aloise, chief financial officer at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy in Philadelphia. “They know the culture of the school.” But while the business office might seem like an obvious training ground for a business officer, that’s not always the case, said Jeff Shields, NBOA’s president and CEO. For instance, while the controller might seem the likely choice for succession, “controllers don’t necessarily desire to be the business officer, just as the business officer doesn’t necessarily have the desire to be the head of school.”

Likewise, longtime leaders who retire and then go into consulting don’t always bring the “new thinking necessary for success in the future,” said Philip Cork, assistant headmaster for finance and assistant treasurer at St. Andrew’s School in Boca Raton, Florida. Rather, “our schools will thrive because we develop people from within who are eager to learn new skills and apply them.”