WHEN YOUR SUCCESSORS DON'T WANT THE JOB

The changing appeal of executive leadership and what it means for succession

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Who actually wants the role

Becoming chief executive has long been regarded as the culmination of a successful career. The same expectation often applies to other executive appointments: greater responsibility and a place on the executive team are treated as the natural destination for ambitious people. I wonder how many of the people we are preparing for those positions would choose them today.

After more than thirty years working in executive search and leadership advisory, I know how much attention organisations devote to identifying future leaders. Someone's ability to take on a senior appointment, however, tells us little about whether they would accept it. A succession plan needs to establish both. This question extends beyond the CEO. Organisations prepare people for finance, operations and people leadership, often over several years. Their readiness is tested through broader responsibilities and development programmes. It is easy for participation in that process to be taken as evidence that the individual wants the appointment, even when the conversation about their own ambitions has never been explicit.

What ambition looks like is changing

Deloitte's 2026 Gen Z and Millennial Survey offers a useful perspective. Among UK respondents, 5% of Gen Z and 3% of millennials identified reaching a leadership position as their primary career goal, although 84% and 73% respectively remained interested in leadership at some point. Work-life balance was the top career goal for 20% and 24%.[1] The survey covers younger workers generally. It cannot tell us how many future CEOs or CFOs might decline an offer. It does give us reason to question the assumption that capable people will make promotion their priority. Globally, respondents cited stress and burnout, excessive responsibility and work-life balance among the main barriers to leadership.

An executive can be ambitious about growing a business or developing a function without wanting the most senior title. They may value the influence and independence their current position allows. We need to understand what they want to achieve before interpreting their appetite for promotion. Turning down promotion can still be interpreted as a lack of ambition. That interpretation risks overlooking someone who wants a greater challenge within their existing field or who has weighed the personal consequences of a different role. A succession discussion needs room for those answers, especially where the organisation has already invested in a preferred candidate.

CHAIRWOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

What are we asking people to take on

Senior leadership has never been easy. The demands are changing, particularly in complex international businesses, and the people accepting these roles need confidence that the organisation understands what delivery will require. A CFO in an industrial manufacturer undergoing transformation may have to balance financial performance with investment in technology and capacity. In aerospace and defence, an operational leader's decisions may have consequences across long delivery programmes and supply chains. These responsibilities bring choices whose full commercial effects may take years to emerge.

Boards should examine whether the authority and support available to an executive match those responsibilities. A CEO recruited to transform a business may find the board uncomfortable with the unpopular choices required. A CFO may be expected to improve short-term performance while investment plans work against that expectation. A chief people officer may be asked to deliver organisational change without the commitment of the wider leadership team. An experienced candidate is entitled to ask how the business intends to resolve those tensions. The answers will influence whether they regard the role as an opportunity they can realistically deliver.

Candidates may be willing to accept considerable responsibility when the expectations are clear. What can make an appointment less attractive is being held accountable for an outcome while lacking influence over the decisions that determine it. Before asking someone to commit, a board should be able to explain which choices will be theirs and where its own support will be needed.



How secure is the succession plan

Boards and executive teams may spend years developing internal successors. People are assessed, given broader responsibilities and encouraged to prepare for future appointments. Their progress can reassure the organisation that it has credible options when a position becomes vacant. That reassurance depends on knowing whether those people want the roles.

An executive with the capability to become COO might prefer running a substantial division. Another may have the experience to become CFO but be unwilling to accept the position in its current circumstances. Either decision may be reasonable. The risk lies in discovering it only when an appointment is imminent. A board may have several plausible successors on paper and far fewer who would accept the job. By the time a senior executive announces their departure, there may be little opportunity to address a candidate's concerns or prepare someone else. Establishing willingness earlier gives the business a more accurate view of its options.

People also need to feel able to express reservations. If admitting they do not want the top job could damage their reputation, remuneration or future opportunities, they have little incentive to be candid. They may continue through development programmes while privately questioning whether the appointment is right for them.

Where several capable executives hesitate about the same position, the board should examine what their concerns have in common. Responsibilities may be poorly defined, the relationship with the board may be difficult, or candidates may have seen previous executives struggle to deliver what was expected. Repeated reluctance may reveal a problem with the position itself.



What hesitation can tell us

We value executives who exercise judgement and question assumptions. Those qualities can also make someone cautious about accepting an appointment. A thoughtful candidate will examine the financial position, the board's expectations and the decisions they would have authority to make before committing. A candidate may question whether the proposed strategy is realistic or whether the business is prepared for the changes it expects them to deliver. I would be more concerned about someone accepting a demanding appointment without examining the circumstances than someone who took time to understand the risks. The board should be willing to discuss the concerns that emerge.

Throughout my career, I have seen how confidence and enthusiasm can influence perceptions of leadership potential. Neither tells us enough about how someone will perform once appointed. A candidate's reservations deserve the same careful examination as their enthusiasm. Boards need to distinguish someone who does not want executive responsibility from someone who wants the role but has legitimate concerns about the conditions in which they would perform.

The cost of getting it wrong

If preferred internal successors decline promotion, an organisation may have to search externally at short notice. An external appointment can bring exactly the experience the business needs, but the urgency may limit its choices and prolong uncertainty within the executive team. That disruption can be especially difficult during transformation or financial pressure.

Remuneration alone may not make a position attractive. The quality of the board, the relationship with the chair or chief executive, and the freedom to make decisions will influence a candidate's view. Personal demands may also outweigh the additional rewards. ACCA's Global Talent Trends 2026 found that, among respondents expecting to move roles within two years, 52% expected that move to be outside their organisation. Separately, 54% of respondents had ambitions to become entrepreneurs or business owners.[2] These findings concern finance professionals generally; they do not establish that future CFOs are turning away from executive appointments. They do show why employers need to understand the alternatives people are considering.

Progression beyond the executive committee

Some highly capable technical or operational leaders want to take on larger projects or work across international markets without becoming a functional director. If conventional promotion is the only way to recognise their contribution, the business may push them towards a position they do not want, or lose them to an employer offering another route.

Greater strategic responsibility and opportunities to lead important programmes can provide progression, provided the remit and accountability are clear. Businesses still need an effective executive committee. They also need ways to recognise people whose strongest contribution lies elsewhere. The alternative should not be an honorary title or a larger remit without the resources to fulfil it. It needs a contribution the business values, with a clear way to recognise it. Otherwise, an apparently flexible career path may simply add work while leaving the individual's prospects unchanged.

There is value in allowing exceptional people to remain in roles where they can do their best work. Their decision to stay should not leave them with fewer opportunities to develop or contribute to the business's future.

Four questions worth asking

Alongside the assessment of performance and potential, I would want whoever is responsible for the appointment to ask:

01 Do you genuinely want this position, or is it a progression you feel expected to pursue?

02 What would make you hesitate about accepting it?

03 What would you need from the board and wider leadership team to be confident you could succeed?

04 If we offered you the position within the next twelve months, how likely would you be to accept?

An uncertain answer needs a follow-up: what might change it? People should be able to answer honestly without fearing that their future with the business will suffer. If someone doubts the board's commitment to the strategy, the board should examine the substance of that concern. These conversations also need revisiting as ambitions and circumstances change. A succession plan should reflect what people want now, alongside what they could be capable of doing.

The time to ask is now

An executive's hesitation may concern the organisation, the responsibilities or their own circumstances. The response should reflect what they have actually said. A change in reporting relationships or a clearer mandate will not resolve a decision grounded in personal priorities; equally, asking someone to become more confident will not fix a role that is poorly defined.

I do not believe ambition is disappearing. But a board that has invested years in developing successors needs to know whether they would accept the roles, and what might prevent them from doing so. Some answers may concern the demands of the position; others may challenge the board's own expectations or behaviour. Understanding those reservations before a vacancy arises gives the organisation time to respond. It also makes the succession plan a more reliable account of the leadership choices actually available to it.

Sources

1. Deloitte 2026 Gen Z and Millennial Survey. UK findings and global barriers to leadership. The sample concerns Gen Z and millennial workers, not a study of C-suite successors.

2. ACCA Global Talent Trends 2026. Career mobility and entrepreneurial ambitions. The 52% figure applies to respondents expecting to move roles within two years.

About the author

Michelle Carson is the Founder and Executive Chairwoman of Holmes Noble, an international executive search and leadership advisory firm she established in 2005.

With more than three decades of experience in the industry, Michelle has advised boards and senior leadership teams across publicly listed, privately owned and private equity-backed businesses.

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