

The 9-Box Grid: A Practical Guide for Talent Management

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Executive Summary

This article, published by Leapsome, addresses the challenge HR professionals face in making structured, fair, and evidence-based talent decisions amid budget constraints and incomplete data. The author's central argument is that the 9-Box Grid — a performance-potential matrix originating from McKinsey in the 1970s — remains a reliable succession planning tool when implemented with disciplined calibration and data-backed processes. The article outlines a four-step implementation process: defining performance and potential scales, plotting employees, and interpreting placements. It provides role-specific use cases across departments including Engineering, Marketing, HR, Finance, IT, and Legal. Key evidence is largely illustrative rather than empirical, drawing on a quote from a Leapsome internal HR manager and referencing Leapsome's 2024 Workforce Trends Report, which states 50% of HR leaders face budget cuts. The article also catalogues common pitfalls such as subjectivity bias, failure to follow up with development plans, and permanent labelling of employees. Conclusions centre on integrating the 9-Box Grid with Leapsome's product suite to improve succession planning outcomes.

Key Insights

1. The 9-Box Grid assesses employees on two axes — current performance and future growth potential — producing nine distinct placement categories that inform succession planning and development decisions.
2. Subjectivity bias, particularly on the 'potential' axis, is identified as a persistent risk, with managers unconsciously favouring employees who mirror their own skillset or fit stereotypical leadership profiles.
3. The tool's effectiveness is described as contingent on follow-up action: without linked development plans, career pathing, or performance improvement plans, the grid functions as a ranking exercise rather than a strategic instrument.

Practical Takeaways

- Calibration sessions gain accuracy when supported by quantitative performance data — such as review cycle analytics and feedback trends — rather than relying on qualitative impressions alone.
- Timing calibration sessions away from high-pressure periods (e.g., end-of-year financial closing or peak holiday seasons) is presented as a practical factor in improving session engagement and output quality.

Frameworks Mentioned

9-Box Grid — A 3x3 performance-potential matrix used in succession planning to categorise employees across nine combinations of low, medium, and high performance and potential ratings, originally launched by McKinsey in the 1970s.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article provides a clear, accessible explanation of the 9-Box Grid process, including step-by-step implementation guidance, common pitfalls, and role-specific use cases that add practical texture. The acknowledgement of limitations — such as oversimplification of human capability and risk of permanent labelling — adds credibility. **Limitations:** The article is produced by Leapsome, a performance management software vendor, and the guidance is systematically tied to promoting Leapsome's product modules (Reviews, Competencies, Learning, Meetings, HRIS). The sole statistic cited (50% of HR leaders face budget cuts) is sourced from Leapsome's own 2024 Workforce Trends Report, which is not independently verified. The internal HR quote from 'Maria Mehlke' (also referenced inconsistently as 'Maria Hehlke') is attributed to a Leapsome employee, limiting independence. No external academic or third-party research is cited to validate the framework's effectiveness. The article conflates practitioner guidance with product promotion throughout, making it difficult to evaluate the 9-Box Grid as a standalone methodology.

Organizational Practice

Organizations are described as using the 9-Box Grid during structured calibration sessions involving HR leaders and line managers, supported by performance review data, feedback analytics, and competency frameworks. Placements inform development plans, performance improvement plans, role realignment decisions, and leadership pipeline progression across departments including Engineering, Marketing, HR, Finance, IT, and Legal.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader trend toward structured, data-informed talent assessment tools as HR functions operate under tighter budget constraints. The emphasis on bias mitigation and calibration consistency points to growing organisational concern about equitable talent decisions. The integration of the 9-Box Grid with digital HR platforms suggests movement toward automated, analytics-driven succession planning as a mainstream practice. The article also signals a market positioning dynamic in which HR software vendors are embedding classical frameworks into their product narratives to drive adoption.

Validation Status: passed
