

How to Successfully Recruit a City Manager In the 21st Century

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The most important decision any city council will make is the selection of a city manager. It's more important than any budget, general plan or land use decision. Understand the gravity of the decision: The new city manager will have a major effect on your organization and community, one that will endure well beyond your term in office. Today, hiring a city manager requires a large investment, and a mistake can be costly. A successful recruitment can help your city achieve its true potential.

Here are some practical suggestions for successfully recruiting a city manager in the 21st century. Intended for elected officials and interim managers, these tips include input from the California City Management Foundation leadership and a number of top professional search consultants.

Assess Your Situation and Needs

First and foremost, it is essential that the city council meet to evaluate the state of your city and tenure of the previous city manager. Take stock and discuss what worked - and what didn't. Be honest with each other.

Next, determine what the council wants from the new city manager. Certainly, there should be a discussion about the experience, knowledge, skills, abilities, personal traits and level of education that are expected. More importantly, be clear about the needs of the organization and the key priorities you wish the new city manager to address. Don't take an "I'll know it when I see it" stance at the start of the recruitment.

Assess primary challenges and opportunities for your new city manager. Are they to:

- Balance the budget?
- Manage growth?
- Improve services?
- Resolve community disputes?
- Redevelop the downtown? or
- Resolve internal organizational problems?

Similarly, assess your city's needs. Are you looking for:

- An ambassador/ombudsman to personify the city in public?
- A field marshal to galvanize city employees toward service goals?
- A master planner with vision and technical skills to oversee development?
- A financial wizard to solve a structural budget crisis and untangle accounting knots?
- An economic development/redevelopment guru to replace blight and slums with exciting new retail stores and housing?
- An operations manager to reorganize your staff and streamline processes for effectiveness and efficiency? or
- A "status quo" manager to keep things moving forward while avoiding controversy and conflict?

Most importantly, you need to fairly assess your city's strengths and challenges in attracting top candidates. Ask yourself:

- Does your city have a reputation for political stability?
- Does your community have a history of dealing fairly with city managers?
- What were the tenures of previous city managers?
- How strong is your financial base?
- What is the state of your organizational health and labor relations?
- Is your city a good place to live and raise a family?

If your city has been going through a volatile political period, you might consider hiring an interim city manager until things calm down. This may improve your chances of attracting a top candidate later.

It's a Tight Market

A second major point in searching for your city manager is to understand that it is a very tight market for talent. City managers are part of an aging workforce, which is also reflective of the councils they serve. Several decades of government bashing have demeaned public sector work for many. There is a huge cadre of 55- to 60-year-old managers who are retiring because they can. The next generation has not had as much tenure, and there are few Generation X managers in the pipeline. The pool of candidates is shrinking as fewer assistant city managers wish to move up. Many are choosing to avoid the stress and exposure that comes with filling the role of city manager.

So if you are looking for a manager with lots of experience, expect to recruit managers at the tail end of their careers. Younger people are less likely to take the risks of city management. Many won't apply. Recruiters agree that the gap is worse than it looks. We suggest that you make an early decision whether or not to hire your assistant city manager or other internal candidate for the position. Don't waste the time or money on recruiting if you have a viable internal candidate. What's more, many city managers will not apply if there is an internal candidate under consideration. These days, it pays to look at operating department heads as well. It may also be necessary to think outside the box and consider candidates from special districts and regional agencies or consultants.

Be clear on what the market demands and what you are willing to offer top candidates. City councils are very concerned that city managers' salaries are rising - along with expectations. You should consider what comparable cities are paying and the next highest-paid position in your own city. Recognize that if you are not willing to offer a competitive salary and benefits package, no recruiter can help you obtain top quality candidates.

Employment contracts are now the norm. Decide if you prefer that the new city manager live in your city. Housing assistance is critical in some markets. Spouse relocation is increasingly common. It's imperative that the council decide, up-front, how flexible it is willing to be in the city manager's compensation package. This is of great help to potential candidates.

Should You Recruit a Recruiter?

Early on, the council should decide whether to use a professional recruiter. There are many benefits of doing so. Recruiters and search consultants have verifiable track records, knowledge of candidates, objectivity and external expertise, and offer a greater comfort level for candidates. Many high-caliber city managers will not respond to advertisements; they must be recruited. One expert asserts that 75 percent of top candidates would not have applied for open city management positions had they not been contacted by recruiters. The recruiter can give candidates an honest appraisal of what's being said between the lines in the brochure. Most make lots of calls to city managers to find out who they think might be a good fit for your city. They will often target city managers who are successful and content in their current cities. These managers, if induced to apply, can make the best candidates of all.

A recruiter-led search for a city manager can cost anywhere from \$18,000 to \$30,000. It may be tempting to ask your human resources department to conduct the search to avoid the expense of hiring an outside search consultant. The danger here is that many human resource departments don't really know what the

councils are seeking in candidates and don't have the time or the expertise to do the level of outreach that consultants provide. Therefore, they are less likely to attract the best candidates for your city. Also, candidates may be skeptical of a human resources department's ability to keep their interest in your position confidential.

It might also be wise to engage the community, at the outset, in developing a profile of the desirable candidate. Most successful searches also include wide publication and extensive personal outreach. An advertisement, brochure and application materials need to be developed. They should not be puff pieces, full of the same old stuff about your city. Candidates want to know what they are getting into, good and bad. Websites are increasingly important in making the opportunity known to potential candidates.

Recruiting Schedule

As far as a schedule for the recruitment, shorter is better, especially with firm deadlines. Most are too long and lose candidates along the way. It is best to avoid involving the public in the selection process, which is viewed negatively by top candidates. Remember, it is a two-way process, so respect each other's time. Make every effort to respect the confidentiality of candidates, at least until they are finalists for the position. Decide early on how to manage media relations.

"Round robin" interviews - where those reporting to the city manager have the opportunity to interview candidates - are sometimes conducted. In general, it is not smart to involve the stakeholders in the interview process itself. Candidates can't afford the exposure in their current cities, and city managers like to be chosen by the city councils they will serve. If you must do it, first have the city council narrow the field to two to three top candidates; then expose only the finalists to a panel of department directors or community leaders the day after the interviews. Make sure everyone signs confidentiality agreements. Know that this can be a major barrier to inducing quality candidates to apply to your city.

The Interviews

When it comes time to decide the interview format and questions to be asked, make sure to schedule sufficient time for the interview and select an off-site location that is comfortable and devoid of distractions. City hall is not a good site.

Develop thought-provoking and relevant questions, and discuss in advance what might be good answers to the questions. Make sure that all of your interview questions are legal and appropriate, and ask the same questions of each candidate. Assume at least two rounds of interviews. Make sure they see the real city council; this is no time to fake it.

It's very common after the first day of interviews to focus very heavily on a particular candidate. Don't fall in love until a full background check has been conducted. This should include talking to previous employers and co-workers - not just those listed by the candidate as references. Furthermore, dates and titles of service and educational credentials should be verified. You may want to have your top candidate sign a release holding your city harmless in order to obtain this information.

Today, background checks are much more comprehensive than in the past, thanks to the Internet. Within a short time, it's possible to get civil, criminal and other information on your finalist, as well as what the press has said about the candidate in recent years.

At this point, it is appropriate for members of the council to express their individual feelings about the finalist and take a straw vote to determine where the council stands. It's time for everyone to be completely honest about any reservations or concerns before offering the position. In the case of split votes, keep the process going to achieve consensus, if not unanimity. It is very important to incoming city managers to have strong support on their councils.

Once you are certain that the candidate is, indeed, who you thought you interviewed, it's time to negotiate a package. The city council should be involved with the recruiter or city attorney. The negotiation needs to be conducted very carefully and constructively. It sets the tone of the relationship. A poor negotiation can lead to a bad outcome. Make it as pleasant and productive as possible. Once the negotiations are complete, you need to make a media announcement and set about introducing the candidate to your community and staff. Think it through.

If you're not satisfied with the initial result of your recruitment efforts, recruit again. Consider an interim or acting city manager to hold the fort while you get it right. The stakes are simply too high for your council and community to settle for second best.

Making Sure the New Manager Gets a Good Start

It is crucial that you immediately begin building a relationship with the new city manager. Set aside plenty of time for the city council and the new hire to get clear on priorities, community issues and how you wish to handle emergencies. Acknowledge disagreements on what constitutes success. Put in place a regular evaluation process for the new manager. All this can be done in the context of a council/manager retreat or council/manager goal-setting process.

If you follow these guidelines, your chances of success in finding a top manager for your city are greatly enhanced. You'll have to tailor your recruitment process for your city and its particular needs, but this is no place to cut corners or save nickels. Successfully recruiting and hiring a highly qualified city manager, who is a good fit for your community, can provide lasting benefits to your city. Moreover, hiring the right city manager makes your job as a council member smoother and more satisfying. Give the recruitment the care and thought that it is due. It may be the greatest service you render your city.

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