

Aspire to Be an Administrator: Views from Those Who've Been There

by Franklin Wu

Career pathways of local government administrators seem to be an intriguing subject among young professionals working in local government. While it is safe to assume that every administrator has unique personal career experiences, little is known about whether any pattern or any factors may influence the career development of a local administrator. Does formal education make a difference? What are the potential obstacles? Would gender have any effect on the outcome?

A young professional I mentored asked these exact questions. Not really knowing much about the subject, I carried out some research and quickly realized that information is limited and empirical research almost nonexistent. To gain a better insight, there is no better place to start than by asking the municipal administrators who are already in these positions and learn from their opinions and personal experiences.

To accomplish this task, a survey was designed to probe the various elements that play a role in the career pathway of an administrator. An online survey consisting of 21 questions was sent to all 357 municipal administrators in the province of Ontario, Canada. A total of 105 administrators responded, resulting in a 29.4 percent return rate.

Data were sorted to identify significant patterns worth noting. The results generally confirm several common perceptions about career pathways of administrators. Several surprises also turned up, and they may dispel a few myths.

I. EDUCATION

In the pursuit of a local government manager career, it is generally an accepted view that formal education is a significant success factor. Surprisingly, our respondents offer a different perspective. When municipal administrators were asked to rank the significance of a number of factors they considered most important in helping them move up in rank, formal education ranked seventh in priority sequence. Education was behind performance, communication skills, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, experience, and supportive family.

The respondents were also asked to determine whether there was any difference between holding a bachelor's degree and a post-graduate degree for shaping their careers. Conventional wisdom leads us to believe a post-graduate degree provides a definitive edge over a bachelor's degree, but 89 percent indicated no difference. This view is contrary to most municipal administrators' job postings, which require a post-graduate degree.

Upon further analysis of the data, it was evident that 71 percent of the total respondents came from local governments with a population size of under 20,000, suggesting a close correlation between lesser educational requirements and small municipalities. Administrators from larger municipalities offered a different perspective.

Of the 29 percent of administrators from municipalities with more than 20,000 populations, 73 percent indicated that a post-graduate degree is more important than a bachelor's degree in their pursuit of a career in municipal administration. So, if your career goal is to be an administrator in a small community, there does not appear to be any need to rush off to get an MPA or MBA. But if your career plan includes a move to a larger local government, it may be prudent to consider a post-graduate degree.

Does any one particular discipline of studies offer an appreciable edge over others? The data yielded three distinct groups of studies.

Figure 1. Factors Important to the Success of a Local Government Administrator in Ontario, Canada, by Percentage.

Competency factors	Most important	Somewhat important	Neutral	Not very important	Least important
Leadership skills	83.3	15.2	1.5	0	0
Performance record	78.7	19.7	1.6	0	0
Communication skills	73.8	24.7	1.5	0	0
Experience	73.2	25.4	1.4	0	0
Interpersonal skills	72.3	27.7	0	0	0
Supportive family	39.0	48.5	7.9	3.1	1.5
Post-graduate degree	31.6	33.4	18.4	11.6	5.0
Bachelor degree	25.4	47.7	17.5	6.3	3.1
Having a mentor	15.9	28.6	25.4	17.5	12.6
Networking	15.4	40.1	27.7	7.7	9.2

Source: Author's survey.

Top-tier disciplines

Business administration	20.20%
Urban planning	20.17%
Public administration	18.80%

Second-tier disciplines

Accounting/finance	7.20%
Law/legal	5.70%
Engineering	5.70%

Third-tier disciplines

Human resources	1.40%
Economic development	1.40%
Recreation	1.40%

Other disciplines 18.03%

The survey results showed that planning, business, and public administration degrees accounted for 59.17 percent of the educational background of municipal administrators. It's easy to understand why business and public administration are two of the most relevant disciplines, but it is not clear why individuals with an urban planning background enjoy such a significant edge over other disciplines.

The answers to this are somewhat linked to the views of the respondents as they were asked to rank the factors that were important in influencing their career pathways.

2. FACTORS INFLUENCING CAREER PATHWAY

The second most important question for many has to be: What are the critical factors that contribute to landing the position of a municipal administrator? If you are in the municipal administrator recruiting business, there are ample expert opinions from which to draw in designing your own selection criteria.

Few opinions are available, however, from those who have gone through the selection process and then landed the municipal administrator positions. If the goal of a council or a professional recruiter is to find a candidate who shares the same views and values as the council, the survey results may offer some insight in order to reduce a potential mismatch, which I suspect is one of the major causes of administrators' short tenure.

With this in mind, the respondents were asked to rate separately several competency factors that they thought were either most important or least important in assisting them on their career paths. The responses to these individual factors were then grouped in accordance to their order of the most important factor (see Figure 1).

Respondents' answers clearly establish three distinctive groups of factors. The top group of leadership, performance, communication, experience, and interpersonal skill factors contains a high concentration of people skills. These competencies weighed heavily in the minds of the administrators.

Somewhat surprising is the relatively low rating of the education factor. Education and experience usually go hand in hand in every municipal administrator job posting, and they are generally considered to carry similar if not equal weight in candidates' overall evaluations. Our data suggest otherwise, and those in the recruiting business may want to recalibrate their weighing system.

Easily lost in the consideration of one's career pathway is the factor of a supportive family. For those who aspire to be an administrator where internal promotion is not an option, it could mean relocation and uprooting family. With 39 percent of the respondents considering this factor most important and 48.5 considering it somewhat important, it is worthwhile to discuss career plans with family. Work-life balance is a critical component of any career plan and pursuing your dream as an administrator should not be an exception.

3. TIME, AGE, AND LONGEVITY

Everyone in the local government field recognizes that it takes time to reach the highest position in an organization, but few have any idea how many years it will take or how many promotions or job changes are needed to get there. Some have given up the dream and are resigned to the notion that it is not worth the venture as retirement looms by the time they get to the top.

Our data suggested that the fear of a long journey is more of a myth than a reality, as 41.90 percent of the respondents achieved the top municipal job within 10 years from their first entry job in a local government. This number rises to 80.90 percent within 20 years.

If most individuals enter municipal service at the age of 25, they can reach the top by age 45, which leaves plenty of years to move to larger communities before one would even contemplate retirement.

The above observation is validated by the responses to a similar question where respondents were asked to identify the age group at which they assumed their first position as a municipal administrator:

Under 40 years of age =	48.40%
Under 45 years of age =	65.50%
Under 50 years of age =	85.80%

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Based on the survey results, it would appear that localities have little to fear about losing a whole generation of administrators owing to pending retirement.

What should be of concern is the short tenure for an administrator, as our survey data indicated a weighted average of 4.85 years that an administrator in Ontario stays at the top position in a given municipality. ICMA reports that the average tenure of a city or county manager in the United States is 7.2 years. No shortage of opinions exists on the causes

of such a short tenure in Ontario, and this would be an interesting research subject. Certainly many incumbent administrators would relish such knowledge.

Unless you have no issue with the potential short tenure and you are blessed with a supportive family to move around, the true challenge may not lie with getting that first job as an administrator but rather trying to stay on long enough to truly make a difference to the organization. For some administrators, 4.85 years may be just long enough to get to know the council members and the senior staff.

Few people, if any, will step into an administrator's position fresh from their university classes. It is safe to assume everyone will start somewhere in the private or public sector and work up the ladder. The survey data suggest that on average an individual will achieve 2.50 to 3.00 promotions before reaching the top, with an average time of 4.48 years between promotions.

If you are working on a career plan to be an administrator, this information may be helpful for charting your personal path with realistic and attainable time frames.

4. GENDER

No one needs to be reminded that there are few female colleagues at the many administrators' functions, at least at the ones I have attended in the past decade. Before we speculate on the cause, it is important to see whether the survey results support this casual observation.

We classified the total of 357 municipal administrators listed in the Ontario municipal directory according to gender and matched gender with population size of the municipality to see how female administrators were represented overall and to determine if there was any significant difference in the size of municipalities they represent.

Female administrators made up 29.58 percent of all municipal administrators in the province of Ontario, or just a little less than one in three administrators. This

proportion leaps to 38.30 percent in municipalities with less than 20,000 in population. This percentage drops to about 12.50 percent, however, in municipalities above the 20,000 population mark. This is a significant under-representation as female administrators at this municipal population level represent just a little over one person per every 10 administrators. Although women have almost as many opportunities as their male counterparts in landing a position as administrator in small municipalities, one has to wonder if there is a glass ceiling preventing women from moving to larger communities.

The point here is not to seek an answer to this question but to raise awareness among the potential female administrators and assist their understanding of a subject that seldom draws attention from researchers and municipal practitioners.

5. OTHER OBSERVATIONS

There were several other interesting findings. The most surprising data are that 57.10 percent of municipal administrators have worked for the private sector and 33.30 percent have experiences in other levels of governments. This leaves a scant 9.60 percent of municipal administrators with career paths solely within the confines of municipal government.

This finding clearly confirms that a pathway toward a career as an administrator involves promotional steps outside a local government environment. Whether this increases an individual's chances of becoming a municipal administrator remains unknown, but this finding contradicts the popular belief that administrators generally lack private sector experience or experience outside the municipal environment.

From a career planning perspective, 53.90 percent of the respondents made career plans to be municipal administrators. This leaves 46.10 percent in the category of "accidental administrators," those who neither dreamed nor planned to be one. Although the data do not suggest that having a career plan in place would

Breakdown of Local Government Administrators in Ontario on the Basis of Gender, 2008.

Population of municipality	Male administrators		Female administrators	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Under 20,000	145	61.70	90	38.30
20,000–50,000	55	88.71	7	11.29
Over 50,000	50	86.21	8	13.79
Total	250	70.42	105	29.58

Source: Ontario Municipal Directory, 2008.

help an individual's quest for the top municipal job, the data may provide a road map and help cope with surprises along the journey.

Administrators deal with problems and issues that constantly challenge their ability and resourcefulness to put out fires and to survive the occasional crisis. Therefore, it is not unusual to find administrators willing to share a few horror stories and some personal experiences.

All these trials and tribulations led me and many of my colleagues to believe that municipal administrators must hate their jobs. But, before you jump ship, you may want to know that an overwhelming 98.40 percent of the administrators said "yes!" when asked if they enjoy their positions.

The survey questionnaire did not probe the reasons for such an ex-

traordinary high rate of satisfaction and that, too, would be an interesting subject for a separate study. Regardless, there is a simple message for the municipal administrator wannabe. If you have already "given your head a shake" and still want to be a municipal administrator, go for it! **PM**

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- Causes of Manager Turnover

PM Fast Facts

The ICMA Fund for Professional Management

In the past year:

- The Fund gave citizens' groups in six communities a total of \$43,490 to support their efforts to adopt or retain professional local government management and the council-manager form. Five of these campaigns were successful.
- Donations to the Fund increased 9% from the previous year, while the number of donors increased 11%.
- ICMA introduced new functionality on icma.org/donate to accept online and recurring, automatically drafted contributions.

To learn more, visit icma.org/fund or contact Abigail Lundy at fund@icma.org.