



*Job Hunting Handbook for  
Local Government Professionals*

The full text of the *Job Hunting Handbook for Local Government Professionals* is available online as a free members-only benefit at [jobs.icma.org](http://jobs.icma.org). If you are not a member, this is one of many membership benefits that will advance your career. To find out more, visit [icma.org/membership](http://icma.org/membership), call 202-962-3680, or email [membership@icma.org](mailto:membership@icma.org).



Each time we turn on the tap in our kitchens, set the trash out for pickup the next day, or cruise through our neighborhoods on newly paved roads, we access our local governments. Providing essential community services that ensure the quality of our lives is what local government is all about.

ICMA is the professional and educational organization for chief appointed managers, administrators, and assistants in cities, towns, counties, and regional entities throughout the world. Since 1914, ICMA has provided technical and management assistance, training, and information resources to its members and the local government community. The management decisions made by ICMA's nearly 9,000 members affect more than 100 million individuals in thousands of communities--from small towns with populations of a few hundred to metropolitan areas serving several million.

ICMA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that offers a wide range of services to its members and the local government community. The organization is an internationally recognized publisher of information resources ranging from textbooks and survey data to topical newsletters and e-publications. ICMA provides technical assistance to local governments in emerging democracies, helping them to develop professional practices and ethical, transparent governments. The organization performs a wide range of mission-driven grant and contract-funded work both [in the U.S.](#) and [Internationally](#), which is supported by Federal Government Agencies, Foundations and Corporations.

### **ICMA members are committed to**

- Representative democracy
- The highest standards of honesty and integrity in local governance, as expressed through the organization's Code of Ethics
- The value of professional management as an integral component of effective local government
- The council-manager form of government as the preferred local government structure
- The value of international association, and
- Ensuring diversity in local government in the organization.

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# Preparation

Preparation is the key to a successful job search, and the preparation phase includes finding vacancies that you're interested in applying for, doing your homework by learning as much as you can about each position and community, preparing your resume and cover letter, selecting and contacting professional references, and, if you're seeking a senior position, perhaps making your interest known to an executive recruiter, or "headhunter." You should not feel that you're on your own, adrift in the turbulent sea of job hunting. Whether you're seeking specific leads on available positions or general advice about career options and job-hunting approaches, many resources are available to you.

Before you begin, however, you should reflect a moment on two factors that are themes throughout this handbook: your responsibilities under the ICMA Code of Ethics and the strong possibility that that your job search will take place at least partly in the public eye.

***Ethics*** Integrity and hopefully a stellar reputation are attributes that you bring to the table along with your education, expertise and experience. An integral part of a successful job search is maintaining your commitment to the highest ethical standards of the profession. The ICMA Code of Ethics outlines your professional obligation to present accurate credentials, be respectful of colleagues, keep your word when you accept a position and commit to serve a minimum of two years in order to render a professional tenure (the sidebar on the next page shows the guidelines that apply most directly to job hunting). These obligations apply to *all* ICMA members seeking employment in local government regardless of position. While this handbook covers in detail those aspects of the ICMA Code of Ethics that specifically address job search issues, it's recommended that you review the entire Code before you launch your search. Even the most seasoned individuals have found themselves in ethical hot water because they hadn't adequately considered the ethical component of decisions they made during career moves.

***Confidentiality*** Applicants for positions in the public sector should not have any expectation of confidentiality. Often local governments are required by law to disclose the names of applicants and/or those who are on the "short list" for interviews. Even if the law doesn't require disclosure, a commitment to transparency, especially in filling very senior positions in the organization, will lead local governments to provide details on potential candidates. You need to be aware of this as you prepare and submit applications, select references, accept invitations for interviews, and visit the new community where you want to work.

## Finding the vacancies

By actively seeking out leads, reading professional publications, and networking, you can start on the path of identifying the right job for you. Resources for identifying job vacancies include current and

former local government officials, retired administrators, senior ICMA staff, ICMA Range Riders and Senior Advisors in many states, executive recruiters, ICMA's online [JobCenter](#), state municipal league directors and staff, directors of college and university public administration programs, the [National League of Cities](#), the [National Association of Counties](#), the [National Association of County Administrators](#), the [American Society for Public Administration](#), and a variety of local, regional, state/provincial, and national professional organizations.

If you're a recent graduate, resources include MPA program directors, professors, your school's career counseling office, and the [National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration](#). Depending on your career focus, you may find direct job postings or leads in the newsletters, Web sites, and other communication vehicles of professional associations in planning, human resources, finance, or other areas. In addition, local municipalities post current job openings on their own Web sites and with regional cooperative listing services.

In addition to these sources, don't underestimate the importance and value of professional

### **Job Hunting and the ICMA Code of Ethics**

The [ICMA Code of Ethics](#) provides guidance for members at every stage of the job-hunting process. The full code is available on the ICMA Web site. Take particular note of the following guidelines:

**Seeking employment** Members should not seek employment for a position having an incumbent administrator who has not resigned or been officially informed that his or her services are to be terminated.

**Professional respect** Members seeking a management position should show professional respect for persons formerly holding the position or for others who might be applying for the same position. Professional respect does not preclude honest differences of opinion; it does preclude attacking a person's motives or integrity in order to be appointed to a position.

**Credentials** An application for employment . . . should be complete and accurate as to all pertinent details of education, experience, and personal history. Members should recognize that both omissions and inaccuracies must be avoided.

**Appointment commitment** Members who accept an appointment to a position should not fail to report for that position. This does not preclude the possibility of a member considering several offers or seeking several positions at the same time, but once a *bona fide* offer of a position has been accepted, that commitment should be honored. Oral acceptance of an employment offer is considered binding unless the employer makes fundamental changes in terms of employment.

**Length of service** A minimum of two years generally is considered necessary in order to render a professional service to the local government. A short tenure should be the exception rather than a recurring experience. However, under special circumstances, it may be in the best interests of the local government and the member to separate in a shorter time. Examples of such circumstances would include refusal of the appointing authority to honor commitments concerning conditions of employment, a vote of no confidence in the member, or severe personal problems. It is the responsibility of an applicant for a position to ascertain conditions of employment. Inadequately determining terms of employment prior to arrival does not justify premature termination.

networking. If you currently work in local government, your network no doubt includes managers and colleagues in other communities, members of professional associations, and mentors from earlier positions. In you're a student or a recent graduate, a network can also include alumni from your school who work in local government. Your network can help you locate job leads, make other connections, gain information about communities and positions, and perhaps help you in the application process.

Finally, for those in mid-career and senior positions, executive search firms (discussed later) are an excellent source of information on career planning, options, and leads. If you make your career plans known to recruiters, they can put you in touch with a wide range of local governments. When the right job comes up, they can contact you immediately and help you apply for the position.

Your search for vacancies may present you with the first situation in which the ICMA Code of Ethics applies to the job hunting process. As you talk with people in your network, you may hear gossip indicating that someone is about to be terminated and that a job is about to become vacant. Unless the incumbent has resigned or been officially notified that his or her services are to be terminated, you should not apply for the position.

## **Doing your homework**

Once you've identified positions for which you want to apply, your next job is to learn more about them so you can craft a resume and cover letter tailored for each one. The effort you put into this homework will benefit you in several ways. First, it will help you determine your "fit" with the organization and community; and second, the knowledge and familiarity you're able to share in an interview will prove you to be a serious candidate. Realize that if you don't take the time to prepare, and other candidates do, it will show.

Homework includes studying and securing background information on the position, the organization, and the community. In years past, applicants relied on information received directly from the potential employer supplemented by hours visiting the local library and researching public documents. Today, the Internet provides information at an applicant's fingertips.

When scouring the Internet, you should visit the municipal Web site and the Web site of the local newspaper. Conduct a search on the municipality and its leadership, governing body agendas and minutes, organizational chart and budget, capital improvement program and other documents. Read random issues of the newspaper to develop an overall picture of the community. Be sure to read the issues published immediately prior to the job vacancy to understand why the job is vacant and what caused the former officeholder to leave, and read issues published just before the last election for insight into the makeup of the governing body.

Unless the employing jurisdiction is nearby, a field visit at this stage of the application process may not be realistic, particularly for students or recent graduates. If you can visit the community, however, walk around, stop in at local shops and restaurants, and attend a meeting of the governing body. Stop by the local library and review budgets, reports, and studies kept on file. Familiarize yourself with the general history of the area and brush up on current events and significant projects.

Many of the sources suggested earlier in the section on "Finding the vacancies" can also provide information. Tap your personal network for colleagues from nearby communities or from the same state, and see what you can learn from them. People in your professional associations who are

familiar with the community and the position can provide helpful advice and information: don't hesitate to contact them to get their perspective—even if you don't know when personally.

The information that you'll need and the extent of research that you'll do will vary depending on the type of position in which you're interested. You should, however, learn as much as you can about the position, organization, and community regardless of the level of the position.

## **Your resume**

“You have ten seconds to make an impression.” While the resume and the accompanying cover letter may be your first step in responding to a job opportunity, it's not the first step in the recruitment process. That first step has already been taken by the organization offering employment. As a result, the advertisement to which you're responding has been carefully and subtly crafted to yield a pool of candidates who not only qualify for the position but also “fit” the organization and its needs. As the primary written vehicle for communicating your experience, accomplishments, relevant skills, and overall qualifications, your resume is the document that permits the employer to compare you with other applicants. It is also the means by which you make your first impression. When you're an applicant, the resume and cover letter are the only elements in the recruitment process entirely within your control.

The people who review your application can be just as influenced by the appearance and organization of your resume and cover letter as they are by your actual experience. These documents offer you an opportunity to create a good first impression and to distinguish yourself from the other applicants in the minds of the reviewers.

### **What should a resume do?**

Your resume should help you stand out from the competition and be invited for an interview. The first hurdle, of course, is to demonstrate that you're qualified for the job. If your resume shows that you meet the minimum requirements, it will go into the stack reserved for qualified applicants. A subsequent screening of the resumes will result in a smaller group of candidates for further review and consideration and ultimately a preliminary interview.

The initial review of a resume might be done in a matter of seconds, and the decision to give further consideration to a particular applicant will largely depend on the impression and information conveyed by the resume. In some cases, resumes are placed in databases and searched by key words to narrow the field of applicants.

It's no easy trick to prepare a resume that will stand out from the others and inspire someone to invite you for an interview. You may have the necessary credentials, but if your resume doesn't convey this, you won't be interviewed.

Don't expect anyone reading your resume to do your work for you and to read between the lines. The resume must communicate both your track record and your personality. It should suggest that you're organized and conduct your affairs in a businesslike fashion. It should send positive messages about your abilities and illustrate that you are current and innovative in your professional field. It should suggest whether your experience has been broad or narrow and whether your efforts have resulted in significant accomplishments. It should provide clues about your management and supervisory capabilities and indicate that you are career-oriented and stable. Finally, it should

provide insights into your career growth, professional achievements and skills, and personal management style.

When it comes to conveying specific, factual information about your background and experience, the resume should put you and your background in perspective. Among other things, it should provide a clear, consistent, and understandable profile of your education, previous employers, and other work-related activities, and it should be specific as to your scope of responsibility and accomplishments. If you're a recent graduate and/or have little professional experience at this point in your career, you can include experience in internships, summer employment, significant class projects, and relevant extracurricular or volunteer activities as examples.

### **Who will review my resume?**

Depending on the situation, resumes may be read and screened by either a professional or a layperson. Possible reviewers include personnel specialists, selection committees, local government administrators or department heads, elected officials, or executive recruiters. Based on their individual backgrounds, perceptions of the position, educational history, and other variables, each reviewer draws his or her own conclusions as to whether your resume should be selected for further consideration.

When you apply for a position, be aware that in some places your application materials, including resume, cover letter, salary history, and references, may be considered public documents available and open to review. In these cases, especially for high-profile positions such as city or county manager, local media in the jurisdiction to which you're applying may review your application materials and contact your current or past employers. You should make a point of finding out in advance whether your application could become public. If so, and if you still choose to apply, be prepared to answer questions from the media—and from your current employer.

### **How do I write a resume?**

Set aside quality, uninterrupted time in order to prepare your resume. Begin by assembling a rough draft of basic facts: your contact information, employment history (including summer jobs, if you're a recent grad), and education. Next, reflect on each position you've held, your roles and responsibilities, and your key professional accomplishments, and list them. You'll probably end up with a lengthy list, and you can draw on this list to create a "basic" resume of your experience.

Your basic resume should, of course, honestly portray your experience and accomplishments. Importantly, however, when you plan to apply for a specific position, your resume should be tailored to that position so that the person who reviews it can see that you meet the candidate profile. When applying for a position, begin with your basic resume and then tailor it accordingly. By taking the time to tailor your resume, you'll present yourself as a more attractive candidate for the position.

As you write your resume and prepare your other application materials, keep in mind that the ICMA Code of Ethics has a guideline saying: "An application for employment . . . should be complete and accurate as to all pertinent details of education, experience, and personal history. Members should recognize that both omissions and inaccuracies must be avoided." The ICMA Committee on Professional Conduct, which enforces the Code, takes this guideline very seriously, and members have been censured for misrepresenting their educational attainments or omitting jobs from their



resumes. Short tenures in a position or organization, regardless of the cause, should be included in your resume.

### **What format is most effective?**

In most situations, the *chronological resume* is the best choice for the local government applicant. This format paints a clear picture of your job history by placing your work experience in reverse chronological order (with the current or most recent job appearing first) by employer. Its easily understood format tells the reader where you've been professionally and what you've accomplished.

The *functional resume* arranges your work experience according to general areas of proven ability in the organizations that have employed you rather than according to a time frame. The functional resume is recommended only if your level of experience is so great that you cannot cover it chronologically in the space of two or three pages. Even then, think twice before using any format other than the chronological resume. And be sure not to omit positions from a listing of your experience.

While some employers continue to accept resumes by regular mail, many now have a preference for electronic submittal. Thus, job seekers should be prepared to forward resumes and other application materials to prospective employers electronically. The cover letter and resume should be attached in a Word or Adobe format to an electronic message.

If a hard-copy resume is required, it should be prepared on a computer in a current Word format and printed on high-quality white or ivory paper using a laser jet printer. Above all, it should look neat, businesslike, and professional. "Mass produced" resumes are not recommended. If your resume appears to have been printed in quantity, the reviewer will probably believe that you're engaged in a wide-ranging search and are not serious about the specific position. You want your resume to look as if you prepared it individually for each job.

### **How long should my resume be?**

As a general guideline, the resume should be complete without being burdensome. Bear in mind that the reviewer may be reading a large number of resumes, and the more effort he or she has to put into reading a resume, the less chance it has of ending up in the interview stack. But take care not to sacrifice clarity in an effort to save space. Avoid using abbreviations (except perhaps for abbreviations of state names), and be sure not to use "shorthand" that the reader may not understand.

If you're a recent graduate, or if your years of experience are fairly minimal, a one-page resume may be sufficient. Typically, however, an experienced candidate cannot sufficiently cover all of his or her experience and education on a single page. Furthermore, a single-page resume stands a higher chance of being overlooked or accidentally attached to the back of another applicant's resume. A standard professional resume is two to three pages in length, which is sufficient to convey current and past experience, accomplishments, and education. A lengthier resume may give the reviewer the impression that the candidate is unable to deliver information concisely.

### **What does a basic resume include?**

Your resume needs to anticipate and answer questions that a prospective employer will have when considering applicants. It's important to include key items of information so that your experience, responsibilities, and accomplishments are clear. When the reviewer reads your resume, there should

be no question about where you went to school; what degrees you received; your current and past work experience, including the name of each employer, job title, and dates of employment; and professional and related activities. And, of course, there should be no question about how to contact you.

Traditionally, a “Career Objective” section was used at the top of the resume. A more modern approach might be to include a brief professional profile that summarizes your career. Guidelines for preparing a chronological resume are presented in the following paragraphs, and a sample resume appears in Appendix B.

**Contact information** Your name, mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number(s) should appear at the top of the resume. This information can appear in a style of your preference, but it is recommended that it be in a larger font, centered, and bold. The last thing you want a reviewer to forget about you is your name. It’s fairly common for an employer to contact candidates electronically, so you should provide an e-mail address that you check regularly. Phone numbers (with area code) may specify your work, home, and mobile information. It’s wise to review your outgoing voice message on each of these contact numbers to ensure that it presents you in a professional manner.

**Education** List your academic degrees and other educational accomplishments in reverse chronological order. This information should indicate the school(s) you attended, your major or principal course of study, and the degree(s) you received. If you’re currently pursuing a degree, make it very clear that the degree has not yet been awarded. It is not necessary, nor is it recommended, to list your education prior to college. For applicants with significant experience, detailed information about your grade point average is not essential, but you may wish to include such academic honors as graduating Summa Cum Laude, membership in Phi Beta Kappa, or significant scholarships or fellowships. If you’re a recent grad, you may want to note your grade point average and provide examples of relevant courses.

If you’ve been working for a number of years, it’s important to show that you keep up to date with current management practices and issues in public administration and that your education is continuing. Don’t waste space on your resume listing minor seminars and workshop sessions that you’ve attended, but do reference other relevant coursework or educational activity after college on a selective basis. For example, it’s important to note participation in programs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the Senior Executive Institute at the University of Virginia, or another recognized program. Your goal is to show some familiarity with relevant subject matter and to demonstrate a pattern of continuing education.

**Professional experience** Your work experience represents the most important part of your resume. In reverse chronological order, summarize your career history. Devote a paragraph to each position you have held, including the most detail for your current or most recent job and placing less emphasis on positions you held earlier in your career. Use numbers and facts, if possible. Each listing in the “Professional Experience” section should provide the reader with an overview of your responsibilities and duties and illustrate your accomplishments and effectiveness.

Recent graduates can include internships, college jobs, summer jobs, and similar experiences as part of their career history, highlighting their relevance to the position for which they are applying.

Applicants with more experience can reference internships or other experiences that are relevant to their careers but should not list information regarding high school, college, or part-time jobs unless there is a substantive reason for doing so.

When providing information about current and previous work experience, focus on your principal responsibilities (those areas for which you're responsible and which you're capable of handling) and accomplishments (what you've actually done). You should highlight the variety of experiences you've had, but do not include a narrative from a class specification or job description. Similarly, do not talk in general terms. Position titles may not adequately describe your duties and responsibilities, so be specific and relate your responsibilities and accomplishments to particular employers and positions. Be concise and use action verbs (e.g., developed, supervised, implemented).

Provide the following information for current and past employers:

- Title of your position
- Name of the employer, location, and dates of employment (provide both the month and year to avoid any suggestion that you're trying to hide a "gap" in employment)
- Relevant data about the employer (e.g., city or county population, services provided, number of employees, size of budget)
- Information about your area and scope of responsibility (e.g., reporting structure, services provided, number of employees supervised, and size of budget for which you are responsible), including specific examples
- Accomplishments, including specific examples (this is where you have the opportunity to tailor your resume to the position for which you are applying).

Again, information on current and past work experience should be complete without being burdensome. If you have had short tenure in a position, you may choose to include a brief explanation for leaving it.

***Professional activities*** Include professional activities that demonstrate the nature of your administrative leadership skills and your involvement, activity, and leadership in the profession in general. Include membership in related professional organizations and any articles and publications that you have authored. Unless you have very few years of experience, don't list every speech you've given, every conference you've attended, every course you've taught, or every certificate you've received. Again, it's important to be selective. List the most important activities, the nature of the activity, the offices held, and/or the honors received. In summary, this section should suggest that you have a commitment to the profession. If space permits, a simple listing of significant memberships can be helpful and impressive.

***Military service*** If you held a military commission or a professional assignment, you may wish to include it as a listing in the professional experience section of the resume, and you can list significant service assignments, activities, and awards. If you did not serve in any capacity that is significant in terms of professional development, you should include only your service dates on the resume.

***References*** Unless specifically required in the application process, do not list references within your resume. You may say "References available upon request." It's a fairly standard practice for

employers to obtain a signed release from the applicant prior to contacting references. This release designates specific individuals named by the applicant who may be contacted.

If you choose to include references along with your resume, prepare a separate page with their names and contact information. As mentioned earlier, depending on state laws, application materials may become public documents open to inspection by local media who are not bashful about contacting current employers or references. Consider the potential negative consequences of submitting references in advance of an interview offer or in advance of an offer of employment.

For further information on references, see the section entitled “Selecting your professional references.”

***No personal information and photographs*** There is no value in including personal data in the body of the resume. It detracts from your message and places the resume reviewer in the awkward position of having access to information that he or she otherwise is legally prevented from requesting. Photographs are not necessary and not recommended.

***Attachments*** As a rule, the only attachments that should be included with your resume are those specifically requested by the prospective employer. Unnecessary attachments may have a negative effect on your consideration for the position. If you use them, keep them to a minimum and be sure they are relevant, recent, and of specific interest. Do not attach letters of reference or recommendation, college transcripts, or certificates. But if you’re a recent graduate, be prepared for a prospective employer to ask you to arrange for a transcript to be sent.

***Keeping your resume current*** Experienced professionals know that it’s a good idea to keep your resume current. Although you may not be actively seeking new employment opportunities, keep a list of special projects and assignments, successes, and accomplishments so that you’ll be prepared to update your resume if and when it becomes necessary.

## Your cover letter

### What is the purpose of a cover letter?

The cover letter tells the reader who you are, indicates your interest in the position, and briefly shows how your professional accomplishments, interests, and skills match the needs of the position. The cover letter is nearly as important as the resume and should be an “original masterpiece.” In many cases, the reviewer will not even read a resume unless it is accompanied by a cover letter.

A good cover letter will impress the reader not only with your skills and experience, but with your understanding of the organization and the position, thereby improving your chances of “winning” this first round of the competition. Your goal at this point is to have your resume considered carefully and to be invited for an interview. Again, you need to make yourself stand out from the crowd and show why you’re a top candidate.

### How do I prepare the cover letter?

Like the resume, the cover letter should be neat and businesslike, give a good first impression, and be tailored to the specific position for which you’re applying and to the community where it’s offered. It

should direct the reader’s attention to the particular skills and accomplishments that make you a strong candidate for the job. See Appendix C for a sample cover letter.

To customize your letter, draw on the information you gathered about the community in the “homework” phase described earlier.

Address the cover letter to the appropriate person by name, not just by title. If the job advertisement doesn’t give the name, call the listing organization and try to obtain it. The letter should be simple, clear, and no more than one and one-half pages long. Use frequent paragraph breaks for easy reading. Because of the length limitation, you will have to put considerable thought into writing and editing it. In the first sentence, you should attempt to attract the attention of the reader by noting the single accomplishment that best illustrates what you have achieved professionally. In the following sentences, list five or six other significant accomplishments that are most relevant to the community to which you are applying. The reader should want to read your resume. Indicate your enthusiasm for the position and “ask for the job”!

As noted earlier, many employers now request electronic applications, with the cover letter and resume attached to an e-mail message. But if the letter and resume are sent by “snail mail,” print the cover letter on plain white or ivory paper or on personal (not business) stationery. Be sure to mark the envelope “Confidential.”

### **Are my resume and cover letter ready to send?**

Be aware that you will draft and edit your resume and cover letter numerous times before you end up with a good product. Take no pride in authorship. Have a professional associate or a career advisor give your final draft a critical review. If that person says it looks fine, give it to someone else who can be more critical and who can read it from the viewpoint of a prospective employer.

It goes without saying that your resume and cover letter must be correct in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. A misplaced word or poor grammar in your application materials is a quick route to the “reject” stack—in fact, typographical and grammatical errors are the most common reasons for rejection of an applicant’s qualifications.

## **Selecting your professional references**

### **Whom should I ask to serve as a reference?**

No matter how you decide to handle professional references at the initial phase of your job search, select your references with thought and care. They should include individuals who are:

- Distinguished in your organization, your community, and/or in professional circles
- Knowledgeable about your professional accomplishments and work style
- Knowledgeable about your personal character
- Knowledgeable about your career objectives and why you have applied for the position
- Willing, available, and articulate in giving a reference
- Willing and able to maintain confidentiality.

Ideally, your references should be individuals who can comment on your skills, your effectiveness in dealing with people, your personal qualities, and, if you’re an experienced manager, your community

standing, your professional reputation, and your financial management abilities. More specifically, you want your references to be professionals with high integrity, who are advocates of your strengths and abilities while providing candid and honest feedback. It's not likely that every reference will be able to meet all of these criteria, but in combination they should be able to.

Take care not to provide references with whom you have not communicated in recent years. In addition, do not provide personal references (relatives, neighbors, clergy, etc.) unless specifically asked to do so. And don't be tempted to "name drop."

Be sure to ask individuals' permission to list them as references. If you don't, they'll be caught unaware when contacted. Be sure to explain to your references your desire for the job, your future interests, and any new accomplishments of which they may not be aware. Provide them with a copy of your resume to furnish additional information about your background and to make it easier for them to respond to questions from a prospective employer. Your references should be willing to comment on both your positive and your negative attributes. Make it clear that you want them to give honest opinions.

Just as you tailored your resume to fit each specific position, you must carefully select your references for each application. For example, if you currently work in general administration and are seeking a position as a human resources director, try to identify an HR professional who has worked with you and who can speak to your proficiency in that area. It may be appropriate to include a former subordinate if your new job will be a supervisory position. Rotate your references, especially if you're applying for several positions during a short period of time. First, you should select references based on the skills you want to spotlight for each particular position. And second, it's common courtesy to value your references' time and not have two or three people contacted by every potential employer.

As you think about the best reference, consider also when you will notify your current employer that you are seeking another position. From a tactical perspective, it's best if they hear the news from you rather than from an elected official, staff member or reporter! Depending on the level of confidentiality you hope to maintain, you may not want to list references from your current place of employment at this stage. If this is the case, be specific, asking the prospective employer to refrain from contacting your current employer at this point in the process.

Your references will change depending on your career status. Following are suggestions for professionals at different stages of their careers.

***Recent graduates*** If you're a recent graduate and have little or no work experience in the field, don't overlook the many people who can comment on your work ethic, communication skills, technical abilities, and professional goals. Consider current or former professors, faculty advisers, leaders from community or volunteer organizations, and even peers. Whether you worked at a fast food restaurant or a chemistry lab in the past, former supervisors from any field can provide potential employers with insight into your abilities.

***Emerging leaders, new professionals, non-CAOs*** If you're a department head or assistant manager, use your boss as a reference if you can. If you're doing a good job, this should not be a problem. If for some reason you can't or don't want to use your boss, seek the assistance of another local government executive. Someone in your field should always be named as a reference to comment on your professional attributes. Colleagues, department heads, professionals in other communities who



may have worked with you on projects, business leaders or other professionals who have worked with you in the community can also be good sources.

***Experienced executives*** If you're a manager applying for another manager position, you can be sure that the prospective employer will want to discuss your performance with a member of your current governing body. Rarely will a governing body hire a new administrator without talking to the current employer. While this is often uncomfortable, the best thing you can do is to be prepared for it. As noted above, it's best to disclose your candidacy for a position to your governing body (at a minimum to the mayor or chair) before they hear the news from another source. It's also acceptable to ask the mayor, chair, or another governing body member who supports your desire for career advancement to serve as a reference.

***Career changers*** If you're a career manager seeking to move from another field into local government, provide the typical references from former supervisors, boards of directors, and colleagues. If you have experience working with cities or counties or the broader public, include references who can spotlight your work in those areas.

***Managers "in transition"*** If you're a manager "in transition" who has resigned under pressure or been fired, be sure to offer to provide references who can verify your explanation of events leading to your resignation or termination. These references may be separate and distinct from your position-specific references.

### **What information should I provide regarding my references?**

Whether you provide reference information with your resume or later in the recruitment process, key information should include the person's name, position, and employer; e-mail address; and telephone number(s). Verify contact information to ensure that it's correct. In addition, provide a description or explanation of your relationship to the reference: boss, colleague, peer, governing body member, community representative, subordinate. Do not make it difficult for the prospective employer to contact your references.

### **Maintaining your references**

A critical part of developing a good reference is maintaining one. Update your references regularly on how your search is progressing. When you're contacted by prospective employers or invited for interviews, let your references know. A good reference will be interested in your progress. Remember that many of your references are active in the field and can provide job leads and encouragement during your search.

Don't forget to thank your references—over and over. When you finally land that position you've been trying for, let them know so they can share the celebration. A good reference can make all the difference in the final selection.

### **Working with executive search firms**

Some employers, and some job-seekers at relatively senior levels, work with an executive search consultant, or "headhunter" to assist in placement. Executive search consultants are personnel experts who are retained by the employer to actively recruit and screen qualified applicants for a position.

Executive recruiters work on behalf of their client governments or agencies rather than for candidates. A search firm may offer its services nationwide or focus on a particular geographic region and/or industry specialty.

The use of executive search firms in the field of local government began in the mid-1970s. Today, with the increasing numbers of baby boomers retiring and the resulting “war for talent” in local government, cities and counties often opt for the services of search firms to help them market job opportunities and identify and recruit qualified candidates.

### **Why do local governments use executive recruiters?**

Although executive search can be performed by in-house human resource departments, many local governments find that employing an executive search firm is more expedient, efficient, and effective, especially when they need to fill an important position on the management team. Executive recruiters can offer confidentiality, a network of contacts, objectivity in evaluating candidates, and experience in negotiating terms of employment.

In deciding whether to use an executive search firm, the employer weighs the cost of using a firm against the cost of preparing and executing an advertisement/recruitment campaign, screening and qualifying candidates, and operating without a needed employee for an extended length of time. Often they conclude that the cost is a good investment.

### **What is the role of a headhunter?**

Executive recruitment firms are retained by, and work on behalf of, employers. While the majority of local government recruiters maintain collaborative working relationships with candidates, their client is the local government, and they represent their client in all aspects of the search process. They do not work on behalf of candidates.

That being said, local government professionals should keep in mind that executive recruiters can be a valuable resource in their career growth. Establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with recruiters can benefit you by providing a sounding board for career guidance, assistance in resume preparation, constructive feedback on interview skills, and an assessment of your strengths and experience gaps.

### **How does the executive search process work?**

Once the employer has selected a firm, the multi-step process of professional recruiting begins. Each step is managed by the search firm in partnership with the client:

- Evaluation of the position and employment need
- Outreach through advertising, direct marketing, and networking
- Candidate screening and evaluation
- Preliminary interviews
- Reference and background checks
- “Short list” recommendation to the employer
- Finalist interviews
- Selection and negotiations.



The search begins with an evaluation of the employer's need with regard to the position. The search firm works with the local government to arrive at an understanding of the organization and its culture, the community, and specifics of the position to be filled. The goal of this evaluation is to define and identify the major goals and issues of the organization and community and to develop a consensus profile of the "ideal" candidate for the position. This profile includes academic credentials, professional qualifications, job experience, personality, and leadership and management style. The profile is then used to market the position to prospective candidates.

To recruit candidates, the firm places advertisements in appropriate professional publications and Web sites. It then engages in research and networking—contacting existing sources, pursuing leads, contacting prospective candidates, and beginning to screen the most promising ones. The firm conducts personal interviews of the leading 10 to 20 candidates and conducts reference and background checks.

The search firm then provides a "short list" of recommended candidates to the employer for further consideration. It's important to recognize that many applicants are eliminated from continued consideration, not because they are unqualified, but because they may not fit the recruitment profile or because other candidates have better credentials. The search firm also provides the employer with a list of all applicants for the position.

The employer then selects finalists (typically up to eight), and the recruiter arranges for interviews. The recruiter also serves as a resource for the finalists, providing additional information as they further consider the opportunity and giving feedback on their personal and professional credentials, resume, interview skills, and experience gaps.

Once a single finalist is selected through the interview process, typically the recruiter works with the employer and the finalist to negotiate an agreement and compensation package. The recruiter usually assumes an intermediary role, providing information about salary and benefits practices in other communities, and serving as a conduit for exchange of information to reach consensus.

Typically, the search firm stays in touch after the new hire comes on board to help smooth the transition and assure that the employer is satisfied with the hire. Most search firms guarantee their placements for a period of one or more years and will conduct another recruitment if the person they placed leaves for any reason or is terminated for cause.

Finally, search firms protect the candidate's confidentiality within the limits of local and state statutes and guidelines, and they subscribe to a policy of open recruitment and announcements.

### **How to work with a headhunter**

For years, many job candidates regarded executive recruiters as intimidating and unapproachable. The demographics of the executive search industry are changing, however, and recruiters now understand that every client could be a future candidate and every candidate could be a future client.

Perhaps forgetting history, today's recruiters are often amazed at how few individuals contact them about particular openings. Recruiters view such contacts as opportunities to establish an ongoing relationship, and they encourage candidates to phone or send an e-mail. While recruiters typically have heavy travel schedules and commitments, many of them are happy to talk with individuals about specific positions or simply to provide career feedback and counsel.

If you do contact a recruiter, respect the recruiter's time and your own. You'll create a good first impression by being organized, by describing yourself and your career objectives in a clear, concise,

and objective fashion, and by dealing straightforwardly. How you handle this contact determines your chances of becoming a prospect, and perhaps later a candidate, to that recruiter. Keep the recruiter informed of progress in your career by checking in from time to time.

Whether or not you take the initiative, at some point in your career you're likely to receive a call from a recruiter. If this occurs, you can be sure that the recruiter is doing one or more of the following: (1) sounding you out as a possible candidate if the recruiter believes you match the profile for a specific position or (2) determining whether you might be a source—in other words, whether you can suggest a candidate or two for a position. Although you may not be interested in the position, this is a good opportunity to establish a relationship with the recruiter by making referrals of potential candidates and letting the recruiter know your own career objectives and preferences. Discuss goals, objectives, and special projects that you've been working on, as well as desirable geographic locations where you'd like to move or your commute and family limitations. In brief, don't squander the opportunity to make yourself memorable to that headhunter.

If you do choose to apply for the position, do your homework as described earlier. Start with the position profile, which is an outline of what the employer is looking for. Recruiters use a variety of instruments and processes to get to the best "fit" for their clients, and you should be prepared to do your part by completing a questionnaire, for example, or responding to calls and e-mails. You don't need to appear desperate, but you should be respectful and professional; your behavior will affect how the recruiter presents you to the client.

If you accept an invitation for a finalist interview with the employer, the recruiter will expect your commitment to continue. But if you've learned something that has made you decide to bow out, do it before scheduling the interview and explain your reason to the recruiter. Candidates who withdraw from a recruitment process at a later date are seldom actively pursued again by the recruiter.

If you participate in a finalist interview but are not selected, ask the recruiter for feedback. Although it may be difficult for the recruiter to explain an employer's selection—it may have come down to "fit"—accept any feedback you get and learn from it. And remember that if you're not a good "fit" for the position, you wouldn't have been happy in it.

Although few executive search firms would admit to having a "black list," they're not very forgiving when a job seeker takes advantage of them. Recruiters work hard to build a trusting relationship with their clients, and that relationship is jeopardized when a job seeker lets them down. Two of the most common embarrassments for recruiters are (1) the selected candidate declines an offer because he/she was not serious about the job in the first place or the family refuses to relocate; and (2) the selected candidate receives an offer and then uses it to extract a counteroffer from the current employer. Needless to say, taking advantage of a local government or a recruiter—or anyone else involved in the search process—is not a wise career move. On the other hand, establishing a good relationship can be an investment that pays off with little cost except an occasional phone call.