

Career Alternatives for Managers: The Choice Is Yours

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There never was a local government manager who didn't at one time or another reflect that "...maybe I'd be happier doing something else!" Whether the cause was a particularly disastrous council meeting, the realization that you had been away from home four evenings in a row last week, a meeting with a former colleague who is happy in a new and different career, or just plain curiosity—all of us have thought about making a change. Few actually have followed up on the impulse.

The typical career path in local government management is a curiously linear one. You start out at the bottom, perhaps as a student intern. After your first job as an administrative assistant or another entrance-level staff person, you move on to an assistant manager position or perhaps to that of city manager in a small town. Then you become a city manager in a larger city, or a county manager, and move up through a series of constantly bigger communities.

Now, it's true that there are many variations on this theme, but it is the most common progression. There are a couple of problems connected with this pattern. One is that as you move up the ladder, the number of cities available becomes steadily smaller, and the number of serious competitors grows steadily larger. The other is that you develop "tunnel vision" and begin to see local government management as your only possible career path.

There is, however, an amazingly broad array of alternative career opportunities available to managers. Because most managers are focused on the traditional career path, they seldom give these alternatives serious consideration. The purpose of this article, then, is to examine a number of these options in the hope that one or more of them might interest a manager considering pursuing another career.

A Reasonable Alternative

The choice nearest at hand is one that few managers have ever considered: a position as assistant manager. Psychologically at least, this appears to be a step backward. Why would someone, having climbed to the top of the ladder, want to step down one rung?

Maybe for a lot of reasons! Many managers genuinely enjoy and are good at the administrative aspects of management. They like budgeting, organizing, coordinating, and so on. They are "POSCORB people." They don't enjoy nearly

as much those parts of the manager's job that entail dealing with community politics, engaging in a dialogue with numerous publics, selling the locality's programs to the citizens, and talking with the media. These are "outside" activities, and they are "inside" people.

On the other hand, a number of managers, especially in mid-sized and large communities, find that they do not have time to do both the inside and the outside jobs well. They enjoy the public aspects of the position and would be happy to have someone else take charge of the day-by-day administration of the organization.

When you consider an assistant manager position, though, you should make sure that the manager genuinely intends to hand over the direct administration of substantial portions of the organization to you. Nothing can be worse than finding out after you are on board that the manager is unable or unwilling to keep his or her hands off the wheel.

More Alternatives

Another option is the management of special districts. Many managers don't like to think about special districts, but they are a fact of life, and they are not going away. Many special districts, especially medium-sized ones, have found that they can no longer depend on appointing managers who have come up through the rank and welcome outside applicants. And most managers have had experience in managing utilities, for instance. There is something intriguing about managing an organization like a utility whose revenue is guaranteed and whose policy board only meets once a month for two hours.

Yet another possible alternative change, for city managers, is to county administration. The roles and responsibilities of counties vary immensely from state to state. In some states, counties are general-purpose local governments that provide all of the municipal services plus a lot of others. In other states, counties are merely administrative arms of the state. In some, a great difference exists between the roles and responsibilities of urban counties and those of rural ones.

Whatever their status, a growing number of counties have created county administrator positions with responsibilities similar to those of city managers. A fair number of city managers have moved over to county administration and have found the work challenging and rewarding. Burke Raymond served as city manager in four cities before becoming the county administrator of Jackson County, Oregon, where he recently retired after 13 challenging and satisfying years.

Former municipal managers are certainly in a better position than most to understand the motivations of and to work successfully with the city managers

in their counties. The relationship between a county administrator and a full-time governing body, however, often is different from a relationship between a city manager and a part-time council. If you are considering this move and want more information, you might want to attend one of the county administrators' sessions at the next ICMA annual conference. County administration is a real growth area within the field of local government management.

State and Federal Positions

The next step up in the hierarchy is state government. Opportunities for management positions in state government vary considerably from state to state. In some states, management appointments are a matter of political patronage, while in others, a tradition exists of promoting from within or hiring only managers with previous experience in state government.

Many state agencies, particularly the more progressive ones, have hired a number of former city managers. In Oregon, for example, the executive department, general services, human resources, water resources, and the Oregon Liquor Control Commission have each, at one time or another, been led by former city managers. All of these departments, it should be noted, perform functions with which city or county administrators are familiar.

As a state manager, I found that once a state budget had been adopted, I had considerably more freedom to manage within the limits of that budget than I had had as a city manager. Besides, there is a certain attraction to an organization whose policy board only meets part of the time. In some states, the legislature is in session for only a few months of the year.

Then there is, of course, the U.S. government. At one time, in the golden years of the 1960s and '70s, the Department of Housing and Urban Development actively sought city managers to staff programs both in Washington and at the regional level, but this is no longer the case because a large proportion of federal funding now is routed through state governments.

There remain numerous opportunities, however, for managers who are looking for federal employment to find openings in lower- and middle-management and management-technician positions, where the skills of city managers are immediately applicable. The nice thing about the federal government is that federal offices are located throughout the United States, which means that managers who want to change careers can continue to live where they are, if they want or need to.

It is possible for generalist managers and technicians to move from one federal organization to the other, and with good salaries and fringes, too. To research positions that are available, you may visit a variety of federal Web sites. For the

manager who wants to pursue an alternative career without relocating, the federal government may offer the chance to do just that.

Yet Further Options

Management of not-for-profit organizations will be one of the hottest growth areas for the next decade. Not only are NFPOs proliferating, but also more and more activities formerly carried out by local governments now are being performed by NFPOs.

Too, existing organizations have discovered that they need managers with real experience and management skills, not just knowledge and skills in the area(s) in which the organization operates. NFPOs tend to provide services that appeal to many managers' strong desire benefit the public or in some way improve the human condition.

The staffs of state municipal leagues contain a number of former city or county managers. In fact, many league directors have come from the profession: Jim Miller, the executive director of the League of Minnesota Cities, for instance, is a former city manager. Many state leagues also keep a roster of former city or county managers who are interested in serving as interim managers. Some managers have developed nearly full-time careers as interim managers. The executive director of your state's municipal league probably is the best person to question on this possibility.

A career alternative that has been selected by a large number of local government managers is that of consulting. Basically, a manager can follow one of two paths. One is to join the staff of an existing consulting firm. A large number of these firms exist, ranging from gigantic international corporations to the much smaller companies that may serve a region, a state, or even an urban area. All of them regularly recruit staff from the ranks of practicing managers; they pay well and tend to reward good performance. The downside is that you will travel a lot and work long hours, and you will be expected to bring in new business. Among the best sources of information on opportunities in consulting would be some of the consultants who have worked for you.

The other path is simple. Declare yourself a consultant, and go out and look for work. You will be surprised at the number of your colleagues who may have assignments for you. They can trust you because they know you and your abilities. Besides, you will cost a whole lot less than your big competitors, with their high salaries and overhead. You also will be in a position to take on simple, short-term projects that they cannot afford to touch.

I ran my own consulting company for seven years, made enough money to raise six kids, handled many challenging assignments, and traveled to a lot of interesting places. The biggest drawback of being a sole proprietor, however, is

that you have to spend more time than you might like to in looking for future work. If you want to find out more about this option, talk to some of the people who are doing it.

Managers Make Excellent Teachers

Then there is higher education. Not many people realize how many former managers have entered the world of higher education. Here, there are three paths you might follow.

The first would be, of course, a teaching job. The conventional wisdom is that you need a doctorate to teach at the university level, and it is true that a Ph.D. or a D.P.A. is certainly not a hindrance to getting a teaching job, but there are a substantial number of people out there teaching without one of these degrees than you might expect.

If you are going to teach with just a master's degree—and I taught at the graduate level for more than 20 years without a Ph.D.—you do need to demonstrate ability and to gain experience. One of the best ways to rack up this experience is to teach as an adjunct professor, for which you will not need a doctorate. If you do a good job, your employer will keep you on, thus allowing you to gain experience and demonstrate competence. If you don't have a college or university in your area, try your luck at teaching management or government classes at a community college.

A second path in higher education would be to obtain an administration position. Most colleges and universities have come to realize that the things that make people great academicians do not necessarily make them good managers. A significant number of former managers have proven themselves successful as vice presidents of administration or as the holders of positions with similar titles. George Hanbury was the city manager of Fort Lauderdale before becoming vice president for administration at Nova University. Some people acquire a doctorate before coming on board, but most do not.

The third path within higher education would involve joining the staff of one of the institutes of local government service, or similar establishments offered by the local branches of state universities as staffs of consultants and trainers who provide services to local governments. Here, experience and ability are definitely more important than the degree(s) you possess.

Private Sector Possibilities

Last, but certainly not least, is the private sector, or the for-profit organization, including businesses that are big, medium-sized, and small. If you are interested in going into business for yourself, you need to seek the help of one of the variety of agencies, both public and private, that exist to help startups. You also can benefit from talking with people who have built successful

businesses in the area that interests you. If your aim is to manage in the private sector, then you need to start thinking carefully about what you want to do, with whom, and where.

I happen to believe that ICMA really does stand for “I can manage anything.” I believe that most managers have the skills and experience to succeed as managers in the private sector. I spent 10 years there before entering city management, and I have returned to the private sector both as a manager and as a consultant since then.

I have seen few private management situations that approached the complexity and difficulty of the world that a typical local government manager faces every day. It’s a different world with different rules, but management skills are definitely transferable. A thoughtful account of these differences was included in the June 1999 issue of *PM*, in an article entitled “Public or Private Sector Work: The Eternal Question,” by Dave Millheim.

Part of the reason that our profession lacks a good feel for the success of former managers in the private sector is that we don’t have a tracking system with which to gain this understanding. When a manager leaves the public sector, he or she sort seems to disappear over the horizon. A few outstanding successes have been noted, like that of Ted Tedesco, a manager and an ICMA president who went on to become a vice president of American Airlines. But such an example, while inspiring, strikes most managers as well beyond their reach.

The success of former managers in the private sector frequently goes unrecorded. One reason is that managers often hesitate to seek an alternative career because they feel that once they leave city or county management, they will never be able to return. There is nothing to indicate that this is so. I personally know a fairly large number of managers who have quit the profession and returned to it later. In many cases, they returned, not because they failed in an alternative career but because they found that they missed local government management.

Councils can find the idea of hiring a manager who has experience beyond city management an attractive one. The manager who hired me for my first city management position told me that the 10 years I had spent in aerospace gave me a leg-up over the other candidates.

Numerous Opportunities

The purpose of this article has been to make city and county managers more aware of the many opportunities that are open to them. How you choose the career change to pursue and how you pursue it are points that will have to be discussed in a future *PM* article. In the meantime, if any of the career

alternatives covered in this article seem interesting to you, I suggest that you seek people on your preferred career path and ask them for information. There are few things that people like to do so much as to talk about what they do and how they like it. If you decide you are interested in an alternative career, the next questions are which career and how to pursue it.

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He was an engineer and analyst in aerospace for nearly a decade, has operated his own management consulting and training company, and has built and administered a cable television system. He also has taught graduate public administration classes, full- and part-time, at four universities. He is looking forward to finding out what his next career will be.

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