



Winning the War for Talent: The Elected Official's Role

by Frank Benest

City governments are in a war for talent, and we are losing the war. City agencies face a continuing “retirement wave” of baby-boomer managers and professionals exiting careers in local government, resulting in a leadership crisis and brain drain.

This talent crisis features two challenges:

1. We have not adequately prepared professionals in the city government pipeline to advance and take over major management responsibilities; and

2. Young people are not pursuing city government careers. Survey research of university students indicates that at best they know little of local government work and at worst, they view this work as bureaucratic and unexciting.

To exacerbate matters, talent is mobile. In our competitive job markets, talent can easily leave for a better job elsewhere.

Why Elected Officials Should Care

As an elected official, you may have a great policy agenda that will enhance your community. However, your policy agenda is powerless without talent to implement those ideas and make them come to life. As Thomas Edison is attributed with saying, “Vision without execution is hallucination.”

continued

Frank Benest, Ph.D., is former city manager of Palo Alto and currently serves as the International City/County Management Association liaison for Next Generation Initiatives; he can be reached at frank@frankbenest.com.

Certainly your ability as an elected official to make a positive difference in your community is based on your policy ideas and direction, yet it is also based on attracting, retaining and “growing” talent to achieve your agenda. In terms of putting your policy goals into action, it is all about talent.

The Dimensions of the Talent Challenge

To explore the nature and scope of the talent crisis, Cal-ICMA (the California affiliate of the International City/County Management Association) conducted research that included:

- A survey of 272 city managers, human resources directors and emerging leaders;
- Eleven focus groups throughout California involving 372 senior managers; and
- A series of interviews with thought leaders from the corporate high-tech and nonprofit sectors.

The research found that:

- In the face of the baby-boomer retirement wave, local governments have not adequately built a talent pipeline;
- Local governments can no longer rely on “stealing” talent from other agencies. More than ever, public agencies need to cultivate talent from within;
- Talent retention is largely about learning, challenge and engagement. Employees who are learning and growing are more likely to stay with an organization;
- Winning the war for talent is more about organizational culture, including political culture, than money (assuming that an agency pays competitively); and
- Elected officials play a key role in helping their city governments attract, retain and foster talent.

The Impact of a Toxic Political Culture

The senior managers and emerging leaders in the statewide survey and focus groups indicated that talented professionals pay a

lot of attention to the political culture of particular city governments. For example, after reading the announcement of an enticing vacant position in your city, talented professionals will typically attend a city council meeting or two and/or watch videos of several council meetings. Will they see:

- Disrespectful interactions and infighting among council members?
- Community members attacking staff who present professional recommendations that may be unpopular?
- Council members talking issues to death without taking any action?
- Council members adding yet another priority to staff's full plate without considering other priority projects already underway?
- Council members showing no appreciation for staff's efforts to address difficult problems in the community?

If these forms of toxic political culture characterize council meetings in your city, why would a talented professional join you? Why would a talented professional stay with you?

Furthermore, are you and your elected colleagues driving talent away?

Department managers certainly have a responsibility and role in helping the city council improve the political culture. For example, managers can work with the council to:

- Schedule priority- and goal-setting sessions with the council;
- Remind the council about focusing on established priorities;
- Recommend actions that allow staff to take “smart risks” and promote innovation; and
- Propose — with the council's support — protocols for civic discourse at council meetings.

However, elected officials ultimately must own their political culture and commit to better behavior. Otherwise, a negative political culture will undercut efforts to

accomplish community goals and the city's efforts to attract and retain professional talent.

Starting the Conversation About Talent

Because attracting and retaining talent is about organizational culture, the Cal-ICMA Talent Initiative recommends that city councils begin to address their talent challenges by engaging top management in a discussion of the organization's Employee Value Proposition (EVP) — the unique set of rewards and benefits employees receive in return for the skills, capabilities and commitment they provide to the organization.

To start the conversation about the organization's EVP, the council and top management must address three questions.

Why would a talented professional want to join our organization and stay with us? Possible answers include: Our city government provides challenging opportunities to make a difference; we provide training and professional development opportunities to promote staff advancement; we demonstrate appreciation for the work of staff; and as a council-staff team, we get things done.

Why would a talented professional be reluctant to join our organization and remain with us? Possible answers include: Our city government does not provide flexibility on when or how to do the work; our legacy technologies are out of date and we have not invested in new technologies; council members have “zero tolerance” for mistakes and therefore undercut innovation; and there is much conflict and infighting among council members.

What are a few action steps that we must take to enhance our EVP and become more competitive for talent? Possible answers include: The council will support flexible scheduling and telecommuting when appropriate; we will invest in new technologies to enhance the way staff members do their work; and we will support measures promoting civility in the council chambers.

Available Talent Development Resources for Your City

The Cal-ICMA website features the following resources to help your city government attract talent:

- The full report and an executive summary from its Talent Initiative “Talent 2.0”;
- “10 Ideas to Better Attract, Retain and Grow Talent”;
- A best practices compendium; and
- “Stay Interview” questions.

Visit www.cal-icma.org and click on “Talent Initiative.”

Interested in Learning More About This Topic?

Want to hear more about positioning your city to win the war for talent? Attend the session “Bringing Cutting-Edge Talent Strategies to Your Organization” at the League of California Cities 2018 Annual Conference & Expo. Frank Benest will join a panel of city officials addressing this issue.

The session will be held Thursday, Sept. 13, from 2:45–4:00 p.m. See the conference program or app for location details.

Of course, after the conversation, the city council and top management must take action to enhance the EVP.

How Elected Officials Can Better Attract, Retain and Nurture Talent

Although retooling “stodgy” organizational cultures requires the active involvement of your city manager and other senior managers, it must also involve elected officials’ active participation.

Consider these 10 ideas for elected officials — in partnership with top management — to help the organization better attract, retain and nurture talent:

1. Conduct a conversation with the full governing board and top management about your local government’s EVP;
2. Ensure that governing board meetings are conducted in a business-like manner, even if major policy disagreements occur;

3. Do not allow community members, other stakeholders or other governing board members to attack staff at governing board meetings or community meetings (disagreements about policy recommendations are fine, but not personal attacks);
4. Encourage professional staff to take smart risks to promote innovation. If staff are committed to excellence, treat mistakes or missteps as opportunities to learn and get better;
5. Take action after a thoughtful discussion of different perspectives and then give staff direction, recognizing that everything may not be perfect. Allow staff to make adjustments along the way;
6. Express appreciation in public and in private for good staff efforts in executing the governing board’s policy agenda;
7. Ask how top management is providing learning opportunities to develop inside talent and adequately fund employee development;
8. Ensure that the organization is offering internships and management fellowships to “hook” younger talent on careers in local government;
9. Make governing board meetings a “safe” place for mid-level staff to present reports, improve their presentation skills, interact with governing board members and otherwise stretch and grow; and
10. Ask how top management provides flexibility in scheduling and determining where and when work is done. Support flexibility and wellness proposals.

Got Talent?

As an elected official, if you want to achieve your policy agenda and make a positive difference in your community, you need talent. Without talent, it is all just policy talk. ■