

Hiring a Professional Local Government Manager, Administrator, or Coordinator

Hiring a professional manager or administrator can be one of the most important decisions a local government body can make. A good choice in a manager or administrator can lead to years of efficient, positive management and leadership which enhances the quality of life in the community, maximized resources and makes the lives of the elected officials easier than they may have thought possible. A bad choice can lead to controversy, contention, additional expense, and, ultimately, a possible termination action. This is not to say that any candidate who has been terminated before is automatically a bad choice, a large percentage of the nation's qualified and experienced managers have been terminated at one time or another. It tends to be part of the job because of the high visibility, political nature of the position. There's a saying in the career field that goes; "There are two kinds of managers, those who have been fired and those who will be fired." However, you'd prefer not to have to be among those communities who have made the decision to terminate their manager or administrator.

There are some important decisions and considerations that maximize your chances of getting a "good fit" between your community and the manager/administrator you select. Here it is important to note that the "fit" is so important because very good communities can select very good manager/administrators and, through no fault of either, the two personalities simply do not mesh. Hence, a community searching for a manager/administrator needs to use every tool available to ensure they find the right person to "fit" their community.

Executive Search Firms

There are approximately twenty major executive search firms that specialize in local government manager and administrator searches for communities on a national level and numerous other such firms that specialize in a particular state or region. They are frequently owned and staffed by former managers and administrators and have an excellent level of knowledge of the duties of the position the community is attempting to fill. A few of the more prominent national firms are:

- The PAR Group
- The Mercer Group
- The Waters Consulting Group
- Springstead Associates

Some examples of primarily local and regional firms are:

Public Administration Associates, LLC	(Wisconsin)
The Brimeyer Group, Inc.	(Minnesota & northern Iowa)
Waldron Associates	(Pacific Northwest)

The services of executive search firms vary in price, either set fee or a fee based on a percentage of the hired candidate's first year's salary, and service level. Some firms will do the entire search, up to and including the interviews, and present the community with two or three finalists who have already had their background checks done and are prepared to begin work if selected. Others will simply provide guidance for a search conducted by the local government or provide a level of service somewhere between the two. Most reputable firms will guarantee their search will produce an acceptable candidate for a specific tenure.

If a community decides using an executive search firm is the path they wish to pursue, they should produce a Request For Proposal (RFP) and ask for bids from several firms so they can compare services and fees to ensure they get the best service for the best price.

Job Search Sites

There are numerous places on the internet to seek candidates for open positions and for candidates to seek new jobs. Probably the most widely used for local government management and administrative positions is www.govtjobs.com. This web site is updated daily and specialized in government positions from clerical and utility positions to City Manager and County Administrators. There is normally an extensive list of open positions, nationwide, for candidates to consider. This is also great place to find out what other units of government are paying for salaries and what qualifications they are demanding. However, one must bear in mind that regional differences in compensations were sometimes extreme. A large metropolitan community may pay a salary of \$250,000 per year or more while a lightly populated rural community/county may pay as little as \$40,000.

Such sites are generally an inexpensive method of announcing the position opening to the widest range of qualified candidates. One negative aspect of using such sites are that the number of applications may be overwhelming for desirable positions. For example, a few years ago the Colorado Springs City Manager position search advertised on such sites. There advertisement yielded over 400 "qualified" candidates; all with graduate degrees in public or business administration and a minimum of five years city management experience. While such large responses are rare, forty to sixty applications are not uncommon and the local government or an assigned committee must screen the applications if they do not use a professional firm. A note of caution is in order here to avoid disappointments. While an assumption that the community in which one is residing is the best possibly place to live and work, and the assumption that

everyone should want to live and work there, is quite common, such a community may not be appealing to most available candidates for any number of reasons and it is not unheard of to get as few as three or four applications from qualified applicants, depending on your salary scale, locale, proximity to large metropolitan areas, or a host of other factors not considered to be negative locally.

Professional Organizations

Most professional organizations associated with local government post local government position openings on their web pages or in their newsletters for generally reasonable costs. Advertising with such organizations ensures most applications are from professionals in that field. For recruiting a city manager, village administrator, county administrator, or county administrative coordinator in Wisconsin, the best choices are probably the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA); the Wisconsin City Managers Association; the Illinois City/County Managers Association (ILCMA); and the Minnesota City/County Managers Association. These organizations are most likely to have to attention of candidates who are already in or willing to relocate to Wisconsin.

Candidate Requirements

Qualifications the local government requires of its candidates vary depending on the location, position, and what the community expects from the successful candidate. Commonly, for a City Manager or County Administrator, the hiring governmental body would require a Bachelors Degree in Public or Business Administration or some closely related field, like finance or planning, at a minimum. Most note that a Masters Degree in Public or Business Administration or some closely related field is "highly desirable." Experience in the local government field of 5 to 7 years in a similar governmental position is a common requirement. For instance, a candidate who has been a successful Assistant City Manager in a city of 20,000 population for five years is probably a good candidate for the City Manager position in a city of 8,000 to 10,000 population. An Assistant County Administrator for a county of 75,000 for seven years is a good candidate for the County Administrator position in a county of 32,000 population, as is the County Administrator who has been the successful County Administrator for a county of 22,000 for seven years. Career progression is generally looked upon as either higher level position or larger population. However, a manager moving from a rural community of 25,000 to a major metropolitan suburb of 12,000 is also good career progression because of the increase in complexity of the more urban position. Required residency upon or within a specified period of time after hiring is not uncommon. Residency requirements are more common in rural settings and less common in suburban and urban settings. While residency is usually desirable to the elected officials, it must be recognized that a residency requirement may sometimes limit the number of candidates who are willing to commit to a total relocations of family to a restricted area. More experienced managers with children of middle school and high school age are less likely to be willing to submit to residency requirements.

Compensation

Compensation packages for local government professionals will commonly include medical insurance for the manager/administrator and family, transferable retirement benefits, relocation expenses, and all other benefits applicable to other governmental employees. Additional benefits for membership dues paid to professional organizations and trips to annual professional conferences are frequently part of the compensation package.

Salaries, as noted earlier, depend upon the qualifications of the candidate which have been expressed as essential or desirable by the governmental body; the population size of the community seeking the professional; and the geographic location. More urban areas tend to pay higher salaries; more rural areas pay lower salaries; and some states have higher average salaries than others. For instance, city manager salaries in Illinois average 10 to 20 percent higher than comparable communities in Wisconsin. In general, few experienced local government professionals with significant experience and graduate degrees will consider a position starting at less than \$80,000 per year.

Employment Contracts

An employment contract is a widely accepted part of the hiring process for local government professionals at the manager and administrator level. An employment contract protects the interests of both the new employee and the local government by providing a reasonable assumption of stability for both; a severance provision for the employee if released prior to the contract's end; and a vehicle for terminating the relationship with a manager/administrator who no longer fits the desires of the governmental body without the unpleasantness of a simple termination and possible wrongful termination litigation. Although managers and administrators serve "at the pleasure" of the governmental body, this does not prohibit wrongful termination litigation nor does it prevent a negative image being portrayed upon the community for how it handles a separation. Such information travels quickly in professional circles and can make finding your next manager/administrator difficult. Employment contracts largely eliminate those negatives.

Announcing the position

When a position opening is to be announced for a position at this level, there should be a four to six week window for application submission between the time the announcement is published and closure. This provides time for the candidates to research the community, which any good candidate will do, and provides sufficient time to ensure all interested candidates see the advertisements and can apply. Reference the comment on candidates researching your community, it should always be remembered that you have to sell yourself to good candidates just as much as they have to sell themselves to you. There is a limited and, in fact, decreasing number of qualified local government managers and administrators available so it is not a "buyers market."

Resume review

Generally, there will be far too many resumes provided in application for a position to give an in-depth consideration to all. Additionally, many applications will be from totally unqualified applicants. At first review, approximately 30 seconds per resume, you should identify whether minimum qualifications are met by each candidate. Thirty seconds is usually sufficient to determine whether the candidate has at least a university degree in a related field and has any experience related to the position. If not, the resume is placed in the pile not receiving additional consideration. This first review will often reduce the number of resumes by at least half. Subsequent reviews will take longer and will concentrate on those traits that identified “fully qualified” candidates and, later, “best qualified” candidates.

Telephone interviews

Once the field of candidates has been narrowed to between six and ten highly qualified or “best qualified” candidates, a telephone interview is an excellent and inexpensive next step to further reduce the number remaining in the competition. Telephone interviews provide an opportunity to ask basic questions such as clarifications of resume points and to get a feeling for who you are talking to. Candidates are often less guarded in their answers to phone interviews and a simple question of “Tell me a little about who Joe Smith is?” Open questions like this will frequently reveal issues about the candidate which will solidify your decision as to whether this is a person you want to bring in for an in-person interview or someone you need to move to the rejection pile. Telephone interviews can be conducted by one person or a committee but the questions should be agreed upon prior to conducting the interview and the same questions used for each candidate to ensure fairness. Telephone interviews should be able to help the governmental body reduce the number of candidates still under consideration to between three and six.

In-Person Interviews

When the number of best qualified candidates has been reduced to a level which allows for in-person interviews, the governmental body should decide who will participate in the interview process. More than five or six interviewers often becomes unmanageable so, if it is decided that a full county board of supervisors wishes to be present for interviews, questions should be limited to a designated interview panel of six or less. All questions should be agreed upon prior to the interviews and every candidate should be asked the same questions. This ensures you evaluating each candidate in the same manner and protects you from charges of discrimination in the hiring practice after the position has been filled.

Many local governments include some kind of community orientation for their finalists. A community tour performed by a department director or elected official is a common courtesy and allows for more opportunities to observe the

candidate. Some communities go so far as to conduct full-scale assessment centers where all finalists are brought to the community and asked to do written assignments, give presentations, be interviewed by civic or school groups, and attend receptions with local leaders and the public, all of whom may be given the opportunity to provide input on the candidates. In some cases, spouses are also invited for the reception portion of the assessment and can also provide some insight as to how the candidate will relate to the community. A well-informed, experienced candidate will know full well he/she is being evaluated throughout the entire process and should be acting accordingly.

Communities must always remember that, in choosing a manager or administrator, they cannot discriminate in any way that violates federal or state civil rights requirements. EEO and ADA requirements apply.

Background Checks

Background checks are essential in filling a position with this level of responsibility. The local governmental body may want to only check the background of the finalist selected for the position or may require background checks for all finalists being interviewed. Either way, you must have signed permission from the candidates to perform most traditional background checks and will need a date of birth and social security number, possibly also a drivers license number, to conduct checks. This information should be gathered on a form signed by the finalist giving his/her permission for the checks. Formal checks should always included a criminal history check, which can be conducted by our police or sheriff's department, a financial status/credit check, and a driver's license check. Except in rare occasions with extenuating circumstances, you cannot afford to have your administrative manager, who works with government finances and law enforcement on a daily basis, hired with a criminal record or financial issues which could lead to questions about his/her ability to handle governmental finances. Additionally, checks on military service records or other governmental records may be included. Medical records are generally not reviewable for recruitment efforts.

An easy check which can prove invaluable and does not require permission is an internet search. Simply going to sites like google.com and typing in the candidate's full name will often return multiple hits. Checking such other sites as "My Space" and "Utube" may also reveal a great deal about a candidate that they may not want you to know. However, the information on these sites is in the public domain and can be used in your consideration. Remember, if you can find this information about your new manager/administrator, so can your constituents.

Reference checks

Reference checks are good in that you can expect to get detailed information on the positive aspects of a candidate. However, no experience manager or administrator has gained that experience without someone disapproving of his/her management style, decisions, or conduct. To find those negative

opinions, someone from your community can pay a visit to the current location of your selected finalist to chat with people who are likely to have an opinion. Some communities send a plain clothes police officer; others send an elected official. A great deal can often be learned by having your police chief or sheriff give a friendly call to the police chief or sheriff at the location where your finalist is currently working. Law enforcement often has a better feel for the pulse of a community than other people. Again, these kinds of checks should only be done with the finalist's permission and with the understanding that an offer of employment will be forthcoming if the results of these checks do not reveal any serious issues.

Confidentiality

Whenever the law allows, finalists names should not be made public until final interviews are scheduled and an offer of employment is close at hand. Remember, in Wisconsin confidentiality for finalists cannot be guaranteed due to public records law. This should also be noted in your advertisement for this position opening.

Making an offer

Once a decision has been made, a telephone call with a tentative offer of employment is traditional, followed by a written, formal offer of employment to be signed and accepted. Local governments should anticipate the candidate will want to negotiate the compensation package and terms of an employment contract. At this point, unless it is prohibited by law, everything is negotiable and the selected candidate's best opportunity to secure a compensation package that will be acceptable over the term of the employment contract. Almost universally, there will be a demand for a separation clause and severance agreement. Once an offer is made, it should be remembered that the offer constitutes a valid contract and cannot be rescinded without risk of litigation.

Summary

Finding the right manager or administrator for a community is much like finding a mate. Some marriages work out well for life; some quickly end up in divorce. So it is with local governments and their professional managers and administrators. Adhering to applicable labor laws, doing your homework, and using all of the resources available to you will vastly improve your likelihood of a good "marriage" between the local government elected officials and their new manager or administrator.

Alan Probst
Local Government Specialist
Local Government Center
University of Wisconsin-Extension