
Local Government Management:

It's the Career for You!



International
City/County
 **ICMA**
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What Is the Local Government Management Profession?

Recognizing the complexity involved in providing citizens with the services that they need on a day-to-day basis, many communities have opted to hire a professional local government manager. Professional managers go by various titles—city managers, county administrators, town managers, chief administrative officers. No matter what they are called, these senior appointed officials have the same basic mandate: to deliver public services effectively and efficiently.

Professional managers bring to the communities they serve technical knowledge, academic training, management expertise, and a dedication to public service. Individuals attracted to the local government management profession hold dear the values of public service and ethics. These values are expressed in the Declaration of Ideals of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), their professional association. In addition to these stated ideals, ICMA members agree to a strict Code of Ethics governing their conduct.

More than half of U.S. cities with a population of more than 10,000—and an increasing number of counties—are run by a combination of appointed professional administrators and elected officials. Council-manager government is the most common form of government that provides for professional management. Under this form, the elected council is responsible for making policy decisions and providing legislative direction. The council usually consists of between five and nine members, one of whom is selected or elected as mayor. To implement their policies, the council hires a professional manager who has management expertise and problem-solving skills. Council-manager government thus combines the strong political leadership of an elected mayor and council with the strong managerial expertise of the manager.

Professional administrators are also present in an increasing number of mayor-council governments in which the mayor is elected by the community at large. Since mayors in mayor-council governments often assume more administrative responsibility than in council-manager government, the appointed administrator in this form may have fewer responsibilities than those outlined in this brochure. The structures of the council-manager form of government and the mayor-council form of government are outlined in the box below.

<p style="text-align: center;">Council-Manager Form of Government Voters Council Manager Department Heads</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Mayor-Council Form of Government Voters Mayor-Council Department Heads</p>

What Does a Local Government Manager Do?

Local government managers are similar to corporation presidents or other chief executives in that they are responsible for the overall performance of their organizations. As the top administrator, the manager organizes and directs a team of department heads, supervisors, technicians, and support staff to implement programs and deliver public services. Many managers, particularly those in larger communities, have assistants who take on substantial administrative responsibilities.

The primary responsibility of the local government manager is to implement the policies of the elected officials for whom they work. In council-manager government, the manager assumes responsibility for preparing the annual budget, hiring and firing personnel, and directing day-to-day operations.

In addition to supervising the local government's daily operations, managers work with elected officials and citizens to plan for the future of the community—to define and carry out the vision of the community by setting goals and establishing strategies for reaching these goals. Managers meet regularly with legislators and citizens to discuss current problems and future initiatives.

Local governments face a wide range of issues and problems, and there is no more gratifying intellectual opportunity than to dissect, analyze, and guide them toward solutions. Perhaps even more significant than the manager's direct involvement is the opportunity to create a dynamic environment in which persons can deal with these issues creatively and energetically . . . I have little doubt but that local government administration is one of the most challenging and fulfilling careers available."

Douglas Harman, President and CEO, Fort Worth Convention/Visitors Bureau, and Former City Manager, Fort Worth, Texas

Local government managers must identify, understand, and address specific problems that face their communities, such as crime, homelessness, or a deteriorating infrastructure. They must be prepared to deal with federal and state mandates, population and demographic shifts, and other changes that affect public service demands. For the community to remain economically competitive, the manager may need to find ways to encourage business investment and economic development in the jurisdiction.

Specific duties of local government managers depend on the population of the community, the number of departments and employees, and the size of the manager's staff, as well as the goals that are set by the council. In small jurisdictions, managers may do most or all of the tasks described here; in larger jurisdictions, assistant managers and staff perform many of the duties under the manager's supervision.

Typical responsibilities of administrators in council-manager communities include:

1. Meeting with the elected council to determine the policies that have been set by the council and to inform council members and citizens about the operations of the local government. The manager may discuss problems and recommendations, propose new building or traffic plans, or discuss issues that affect the community and its citizens.
2. Hiring department heads, administrative personnel, and other employees, and supervising top appointees.
3. Preparing the annual budget, submitting it to elected officials for approval, and implementing it once approved.
4. Soliciting bids from government contractors and selecting or recommending the appropriate individual(s) or organization(s) to perform the work.
5. Ensuring that laws and policies approved by elected officials are enforced equally throughout the city.
6. Investigating citizen complaints and problems in the administrative organization and making recommendations for changes to elected officials.
7. Managing the daily operations of the city or county by completing administrative reports, corresponding by mail and telephone, and performing many other duties needed to meet community needs.

The duties of assistant managers also vary widely. The size of the jurisdiction, the needs of the community, the strengths of the manager, and the skills assistants bring to the job all play a role in determining specific responsibilities. Some assistants work as the manager's "second in charge" or deputy, with all department heads reporting to them; others manage specific projects or departments. Most assistant managers handle a few specific functions of the local government such as personnel, risk management, or public relations.

"The city manager's job is not an easy one. The demands are significant, but the personal job satisfaction is great. City managers play a crucial role in the life of their communities."

David R. Mora, City Manager, Salinas, California

What Is It Like to Work as a Local Government Manager?

Most local government managers work long hours, often during the evenings and weekends. But managers explain that there is rarely a dull moment during these long hours; they enjoy their work because of the variety of activities in which they are involved. It is difficult to describe a “typical” day of the local government manager—every day is different.

Managers attend regular council and committee meetings, which are often held during the evening. Their responsibility for supervising department heads means that they must also hold staff meetings to assess progress and plan strategy. Local government managers meet regularly with community leaders, business leaders, and groups of citizens to address their concerns and facilitate action. As a leader in the community, the chief executive officer is often invited (and expected) to attend civic functions. In addition, local government managers must be on call at all hours to handle emergencies.

Is the city manager’s job fun? Yes, it has provided many enjoyable experiences. Is it a stressful job? Certainly, but what job isn’t? Is it a rewarding job? Yes, for someone interested in working on a local government level and dealing directly with community residents, it can be a very rewarding career.

David J. Unmacht, County Administrator, Scott County, Minnesota

The manager’s office is usually located in city hall or the county office building. Out-of-town travel is likely to consist of meeting with leaders of neighboring communities or officials at other levels of government. Because the demands of local government management are many and changing, professional managers attend training sessions and conferences to learn about new federal and state mandates, innovative management techniques, and successful approaches and programs that have been used by their colleagues to solve community problems.

At times, managers may work under pressure to meet commitments or to solve problems that arise. Because managers serve at the pleasure of the council who may dismiss them at any time, they are encouraged to have employment agreements that outline severance arrangements. The average length of time that local government managers hold a position is six years.

Common Structure of the City Manager’s Office

City Manager
Assistant City Manager
Assistant to the City Manager
Administrative Assistant/Administrative Analyst
Administrative Intern

What Courses Will Best Prepare Me for a Career in Local Government Management?

The educational and professional backgrounds of local government managers have changed over the years. In the early years of the profession, few managers held advanced degrees; instead, many were recruited from the ranks of civil engineers trained to build and maintain the community’s infrastructure (e.g., bridges, roads, and water systems). Today, aspiring managers generally obtain undergraduate degrees in political science, public administration, or business. An increasing number of local governments require a master’s degree in public administration or business.

A city manager is by definition a generalist. I enjoy being involved in different things each day, which keeps the job enjoyable for me. . . . The most interesting part of the job is finding creative ways to solve problems and to provide better service at lower cost to our citizen-customers. I enjoy working with the mayor and council and our department heads and commissions to solve problems and to make improvements to our town. I enjoy dealing with some of the hands-on, day-to-day problems, particularly when I can see that something I have been involved in has results in an improvement in our service delivery to the public or in the quality of life in our community.

Russell W. Blake, City Manager, Pocomoke City, Maryland

During high school, a college entrance program with courses in political science, economics, government, and other social studies subjects is recommended. Local government managers also need strong English and math skills. Participating in student government and community activities may help you determine your interest and ability in government careers.

While a bachelor's degree in political science, public administration, or business may qualify you for some local government management positions, an advanced degree in these fields will increase your competitiveness. A master's degree in public administration, which would include courses such as public financial management and legal issues in public administration, is recommended but not required. Many local governments offer internship programs that provide students or recent graduates with an opportunity to gain practical experience.

At the current time, there is no required path to a career in local government—no tests that you must pass or certification that you must earn. But, not surprisingly, few candidates are hired as local government managers immediately upon graduating from college. A more typical career path would begin with an entry-level position as an administrative assistant or a budget analyst in the manager's office, the budget office, or a line department. In addition, local government managers are committed to increasing their knowledge and skills through continuing professional development.

The box on the previous page shows a typical hierarchy of positions in the manager's office. It is not necessary to advance through each step of the hierarchy—not all these positions even exist in every local government. Any position in local government that would provide you with an opportunity to gain experience working with the mayor and council and to learn about planning, budgeting, and other aspects of running a city or county would be a good stepping stone toward the top position. Experience in public service at other levels of government, a solid background as a manager in the private sector, or a military career may also provide the right skills and experience for the local government management profession.

What Other Qualifications Are Needed?

The local government management profession is a highly competitive field requiring a range of skills and abilities. Managers are hired on the basis of their administrative and leadership abilities, educational background, and professional experience without regard to political affiliation.

The major character trait is "wanting to make a difference." That is important. The advantage of working at the local level is that you can see the results immediately, they are tangible. If you don't get the streets plowed or the potholes filled, the effects are immediately visible.

Norton Bonaparte, Town Manager, Glenarden, Maryland

In a two-year research project conducted by ICMA, members identified personal integrity as the quality most essential for local government managers to possess. (The other practices that were identified are listed below.) Because everything the manager does may be held up for public scrutiny, possessing high ethical standards and demonstrating ethical conduct is essential. Managers must be able to enforce the

policies and regulations established by the council regardless of personal or political convictions and provide fair and equitable service delivery to all citizens within the community.

Self-confidence, dedication, and a willingness to work long hours are important character traits for local government managers. As the local government's chief executive officer, the manager must also possess leadership skills and an ability to work with all types of personalities. Solving the problems of the community requires good decision-making skills and sound judgment. The ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing is essential. Good managers work well under stress—the job often requires them to work under tight deadlines and close public scrutiny. Above all, a manager must be dedicated to improving the quality of life for the individual and the community.

**Practices for
Effective Local Government Management**

Staff Effectiveness
Policy Facilitation
Functional and Operational Expertise and Planning
Citizen Service
Quality Assurance
Initiative, Risk Taking, Vision, Creativity, and Innovation
Technological Literacy
Democratic Advocacy and Citizen Participation
Diversity
Budgeting
Financial Analysis
Human Resources Management
Strategic Planning
Advocacy and Interpersonal Communication
Presentation Skills
Media Relations
Integrity
Personal Development

What Are the Employment Opportunities?

Today, there are approximately 4,000 communities with council-manager government and many more that have professional administrators. The local government management profession has been growing slightly for the last few decades; continued growth is expected as cities and counties without managers hire them. On the other hand, attempts by governments to cut costs and streamline operations may reduce the number of entry-level positions at the local level.

The number of women and minorities who have entered the profession has grown substantially in recent decades. Statistics compiled by ICMA indicate that the percentage of women holding municipal and township offices has more than doubled in the past 10 years.

Salaries for local government managers vary widely depending on the population and demographics of the community and the region in which it is located. In 2003, the average annual salary of a city manager was \$92,472, ranging from \$56,437 in towns with fewer than 2,500 residents to \$217,893 in cities with a population of more than 1 million. The average salary of county managers in 2003 was \$106,511 while the average salary of a county chief administrative officer was \$79,077.

Opportunities for employment may not be plentiful in a particular geographic area; be prepared to relocate if necessary. Not surprisingly, jobs in local government are likely to follow current demographic shifts. During the past decade, the Census Bureau reports that the fastest-growing region was the West at 19.7 percent and the second fastest-growing was the South at 17.3 percent.

For more information about specific career opportunities, contact the personnel or human resources office of the cities or counties in which you would like to work. Your state's local government management association, league of municipalities, or other organization of local governments may also know of job openings. You may also want to consider ICMA membership; ICMA's member publications offer information about issues facing local governments and professional administrators, as well as news of job openings and other career information. Additional information on ICMA membership and related publications follows. Also check ICMA's Web site at *icma.org*.

Local government management is a career for people who want to get things done, who desire to make their community a better place to live, and who are committed to the highest professional ethics and ideals of public service. The future is good for individuals with the proper education, motivation, and willingness to relocate. There will always be a need for qualified managers as local government continues to become more complex.

For me, at least half the pleasure comes from that intangible goal of
"making a difference" to my community. At the local level, our
odds are better and the results more tangible.
Arlene Loble, City Manager, Wilsonville, Oregon

How Can I Learn More?

ICMA membership is available to full-time students at a special rate. For a membership application or to learn more about ICMA products and services, contact:

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ICMA Declaration of Ideals

"ICMA was founded with a commitment to the preservation of the values and integrity of representative local government and local democracy and a dedication to the promotion of efficient and effective management of public services. To fulfill the spirit of this commitment, ICMA works to maintain and enhance public trust and confidence in local government, to achieve equity and social justice, to affirm human dignity, and to improve the quality of life for the individual and the community. Members of ICMA dedicate themselves to the faithful stewardship of the public trust . . ."