

The 20-Year Manager: Factors of Longevity

Douglas J. Watson and Wendy L. Hassett

It often is assumed that the life of a local government manager is one of frequent relocation from community to community to advance his or her career. But a small percentage of managers stay in a single community for most of their careers. In a study whose results we reported in recent issues of *Public Administration Review*, published by the American Society for Public Administration, we identified and examined this special group of managers. At the time of our research, 143 city managers nationwide had been serving the same community for 20 years or more. Our interest in doing the study was to name the factors that led to the long service seen among this small category of city managers, when the typical length of service for managers in any one city is much shorter.

The average tenure of managers in a council-manager city has been lengthening over the decades. In the 1960s, the average was 3.5 years; in the 1970s, it was 4.4 years; in the 1980s, it was 5.4 years; and in 2000, it was 6.9 years (Watson and Hassett 2003, p. 73). This interesting development indicates greater stability for the council-manager form of government in American cities. The factors that have kept the long-serving managers in their city governments for 20 years or more may also be contributing to the increased longevity seen in other cities.

Push and Pull for Career Moves

The academic literature has identified a number of factors that lead to turnover of managers. Some of these are "push" factors that force managers to leave their positions involuntarily. ICMA reported in its latest survey that only 3 percent of the managers who had left their positions in the year prior to the survey left under pressure. Of those who left involuntarily, 10 percent were fired, 20 percent were forced to resign, and 70 percent reported that they had left on their own but under pressure to do so (Renner 2001, p. 39).

Earlier studies have identified political conflict as a major factor in career moves by city managers. The conflict can be among the elected officials or between some elected officials and the city manager. One of the long-serving managers described a change in political fortunes in this way: "Unfortunately, the new mayor seems to resent at times the role of the administrator and would instead prefer to run the town himself. . . . This has been most frustrating for the past five years, and it may mean having to relocate to another location in order that I might fully enjoy and experience the manager's role in the community" (Hassett and Watson 2002, p. 623).

Historically, political conflict has played a major role in disrupting the careers of managers. Because the manager serves at the pleasure of the council, a change in elected leadership can often spell trouble for a manager appointed by the previous group of elected officials. Even though the manager does his or her best to remain above elective politics, elected officials and other political groups in the community link the manager with the mayor and city council that hired him or her.

Some managers face problems because their adherence to their professional standards flies in the face of the different value system held by some elected officials. For example, if the paradigm for local governance is one of particularism and favoritism, the manager's belief in universalism and fairness will not be well

accepted. Some people elected to office want to be able to use the local government to benefit themselves and their friends. In these cases, conflict is inevitable.

The factors that have kept the long-serving managers in their city governments for 20 years or more also may be contributing to the increased longevity seen in other cities.

Educator James Svava has identified two patterns of interaction in city governments, one based on cooperation and one on conflict (Svava 1990, p. 27). Even though council-manager government is based on the concept of cooperation, managers realize that politics are very much a part of their daily existence. Author Richard Stillman noted that “the acid test of survival for managers is their ability to come to grips with the complex political realities of the communities in which they operate” (Stillman 1974, p. 104).

Managers also are “pulled” away from their current jobs by opportunities for professional advancement. The well-accepted path for career advancement is to move to progressively larger communities and to jobs of greater responsibility. They often start their careers as assistants to city managers, then move to small cities as city managers. After a few years there, managers often take positions in larger cities, then move to yet larger cities over the course of their careers. It is not unusual for a senior city manager to have served in six or seven cities over the course of his or her career, as a review of ICMA’s online membership directory, *Who’s Who in Local Government Management*, illustrates.

A local government manager who stays in one community for an extended period of time is the exception. Only 4.5 percent of city managers active in 2000 had been in their cities for more than 20 years. After identifying the 143 long-serving managers, we surveyed them to determine the factors that led to their longevity. We identified certain community factors and personal factors that played explanatory roles.

Profile of the Long-Serving Manager

The long-serving city manager is a well-educated, married white male who works in the same state where he grew up. He has worked in only one (59.4 percent) or two (27 percent) localities throughout his career and enjoys a deep involvement in the civic life of the community he serves. The stability of the average long-serving city manager runs counter to the case of the stereotypical manager, who moves from community to community every few years searching for a better and grander opportunity.

All of the 143 managers were Caucasian, and 98 percent of them were male. Renner reported in 2001 that 88 percent of all city managers are males, and 95 percent are Caucasian. The long-serving city managers represent more closely the race and gender of the city manager of the 1970s, when they began their careers in local government. Most of these city managers were married.

Nearly 75 percent of them had spouses who worked outside the home. Some of these managers reported that their wives had recently retired, so it is likely that, for most of their careers, these were two-income families. Many of the managers were married to women who were lawyers, bankers, or teachers and had independent standing in their communities.

Sixty-nine percent of the long-serving managers had master’s degrees, mostly in public administration. Two percent of them reported that they had law degrees, and another 22 percent had earned at least a bachelor’s degree. The ICMA survey showed that 63 percent of all city managers had master’s or other advanced degrees, with 26 percent reporting bachelor’s degrees as their highest academic achievement. While most of the managers of 20 years’ or longer standing have stayed close to home or returned there and might be considered local appointees, most of them have strong educational credentials for their positions (Watson and Hassett 2003, p. 75).

Figure 1. Most Important Factors Influencing the Longevity of City Managers

	Rank
Job satisfaction	1
Political stability	2
High degree of management latitude	3
Family desires	4
Quality of life in community	5
Salary and benefits	6
Spouse’s employment/profession	7

Communities Where Managers Thrive and Survive

The typical community where a long-serving city manager works, we found, is homogeneous ethnically and racially, with a population of less than 30,000. The local governments are politically stable, with the elected officials committed to the tenets of the reform movement. Managers' tenures appear to be longer in communities where there is less political discord. If homogeneity lessens conflict, then our finding is not surprising.

The early reformers promoted nonpartisan, at-large elections as the basis for a more stable local government. We questioned whether cities with long-serving managers were more likely to have these election features than was the typical council-manager city. Ninety-one of the cities in the study used at-large elections, at least in part, and 80 percent used nonpartisan ballots to elect the members of their governing bodies.

Many of the long-serving managers commented on the importance of a close working relationship with the mayor. Boynton and Wright noted in a 1971 study that mayors and city managers oftentimes form " 'teams' that combine the political and managerial leadership that result in stable political environments for the managers" (Watson and Hassett 2003, p. 74; Boynton and Wright 1971, pp. 28–36). One of these managers reported to us: "The political climate has been stable, and I have been fortunate to basically work for two mayors (more than 20 years between the two)" (Hassett and Watson 2002, p. 625).

Job Satisfaction and Council Relationships

Long-serving managers reported high levels of satisfaction with their careers and with their jobs. Compared with all city managers, as reported in the ICMA survey, 90 percent of these managers responded that they were in the highest two categories out of five possible responses when asked how satisfied they are with their jobs. Only two-thirds of all managers in the ICMA survey reported that they were in one of the two top response categories.

This is especially interesting because Renner reported in the ICMA study that managers in smaller communities were less satisfied than their counterparts in larger cities (2001, p. 40). We interpret this to mean that managers with long tenure in stable cities are quite a bit more satisfied than the average small-community city manager.

An important element of job satisfaction for a city manager is the level of support he or she receives from the elected body. The ICMA study found that 47 percent of all managers reported that their councils were "highly supportive," while another 34 percent were in the next highest category. Among the long-serving city managers, 67 percent responded that their councils were "highly supportive," while 28 percent were in the next highest category. This means that 95 percent of the long-term managers believe that they have strong support from their elected officials (Watson and Hassett 2003, p. 76).

The 20-year managers also had favorable opinions about the effectiveness of their elected bodies. Eighty percent rated their councils in the top two categories out of five possible ones. Only 3 percent rated their councils as not effective. The ICMA survey, which was not limited to the council-manager form of government, found that 58 percent of all city managers placed their councils in one of the top two categories, while 3 percent claimed they were not effective.

What Accounts for Longevity?

The study identified seven factors (see Figure 1) that influence the longevity of city managers: job satisfaction, political stability, high degree of management latitude, family desires, quality of life in the community, salary and benefits, and spouse's employment/profession. Those surveyed were asked to rank the seven factors in order of importance to them in their decisions to remain in one job for so long.

Job satisfaction was chosen as the number-one factor in the managers' longevity, while political stability was second. Clearly, our research showed that the two are closely related. It would be difficult for a city manager to have job satisfaction without a stable political environment in which to work. Furthermore, the relatively

low numbers of mayors that had served many of these cities during the managers' tenure might have contributed to political stability.

Management latitude was the third-rated factor. The managers felt strongly that they had to have the authority to manage if they were to be held accountable and if they were to be effective. A typical response from the 20-year managers was this one: "I have always been able to do my job without undue interference [from the elected officials]. . . . A competent individual needs to be given the opportunity and time to earn the respect of his or her governing body, and then be allowed to proceed with confidence in performing the tasks at hand" (Hassett and Watson 2002, p. 626).

Family stability was the fourth-highest-rated reason for the managers' longevity. Many of them reported that they did not want to take their children away from friends or move them out of good schools. One manager noted: "To relocate would require uprooting my family, [and] leaving friends and [this] community. What value do you place on such upheaval?" (Hassett and Watson 2002, p. 627).

The fifth factor was quality of life in their communities. We found in their written responses great pride in the cities they had managed for 20 and more years, so we feel that only an extremely good offer from another city would entice them to leave a comfortable and pleasing environment.

The sixth factor was salary and benefits. Studies in personnel administration show that pay and benefits are generally dissatisfiers rather than satisfiers. In other words, pay and benefits are not factors in job satisfaction if they are adequate. If they are not adequate, however, then they can be dissatisfiers that can lead a jobholder to seek other employment opportunities.

The long-serving managers rated their spouses' employment as having the least impact of the seven factors on their decisions to stay in the same community for an extended time. They reported that the jobs or professions of many of their spouses were portable. That is, schoolteachers, administrative assistants, executive secretaries, or nurses are much needed in practically any community.

Conclusion

For a manager to remain in one city for a long time, a number of factors must come together. First, the manager probably will be a person who grew up in that community or one close by, will have a high level of education, and will value a stable environment for his or her family.

Second, the community will more than likely be a smaller, homogeneous city where there is political stability. Part of the stability will likely be a supportive mayor who also has served for a long time. Third, the elected officials will support council-manager government and will provide latitude to the manager to do his or her job.

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Douglas J. Watson, Ph.D., is city manager, Auburn, Alabama (dwatson@auburnalabama.org), and Wendy L. Hassett, Ph.D., is assistant city manager of Auburn (whassett@auburnalabama.org). In January 2004, Watson will be professor of public administration at the University of Texas, Dallas, Texas.

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