

# The Emergence of the Outsider: Tracking North Carolina City/County Manager Career Paths

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**What professional paths do people take to become city or county managers?** After all, most of our citizens are barely aware this position exists in our communities or that it might be a desirable career goal.

Research typically focuses on the complexities of the local government management profession rather than the career paths of local government managers.

The literature pertaining to city and county manager career paths supports the notion that managers have usually taken a traditional route to their positions. They begin as interns or administrative assistants, rise to the manager position in a small municipality, and eventually move on to the manager position in larger municipalities.<sup>[1]</sup> Other research did identify alternative paths to a manager's position but failed to recognize those who began their careers outside local government management.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 2013, ICMA published a guidebook called *Breaking into Local Government*, which recognized **the career paths of local government managers were changing from the traditional one due to the constraints caused by the Great Recession and the impetus of the mass wave of retirement.**<sup>[3]</sup> ICMA surveyed members who identified as having past careers in state/federal government, non-profits, the private sector, and the military to understand why they changed careers, where they began once they broke into local government, and which skill sets were transferable between fields. This publication further solidified my hypothesis that there is a significant group of managers whose career paths were not being recognized in the literature.

Through a survey and resume collection of current North Carolina City and County Managers, my research looked to support the notion that an additional career path category -- the outsiders -- must be added to the literature. **The outsider category is comprised of managers from the military, non-profit, federal/state government, and private industry backgrounds.**

## **SURVEY RESULTS:**

The survey and resume collection of North Carolina City and County Managers resulted in 123 responses. From my results I was able to support my hypothesis that **there is a seventh distinct**

**category missing from the existing literature – the outsider. Out of the 123 respondents, 56 did not begin their careers within local government management.**

Instead, they transitioned into the field after working in either non-profits, the military, state/federal governments, or private industry.

Private industry dominated the outsider category, with non-profit, federal/state government, and military origins being of similar proportions. Private industry respondents came from a variety of industries, including legal, sales, marketing, sports management, real estate, engineering, and consulting. Many of the respondents who came from non-profit organizations had held executive director positions.

Military respondents included a former U.S. Navy Master Chief, U.S. Army Officers, U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sergeant, and members from the U.S. Coast Guard.

Respondents who came from state or federal level backgrounds were formerly part of the United States Department of Agriculture, North Carolina State Treasurer's Office, North Carolina Department of Correction Administrative Services, North Carolina State Auditor's Office, and the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

**Future research should consider testing the outsider hypothesis on a national scale to see if this path is a far reaching trend among local government managers.**

As the aftershocks of the Great Recession wear off and the mass wave of retirement starts to wind down, it will be interesting to see if fewer people choose to transition from these outsider careers into local government management.

As the ICMA publication recommended, more information should also be collected from outsider managers to better understand which skills they found transferrable between fields and which they

felt they were lacking. For example, many managers in the ICMA article expressed that they experienced a steep learning curve when it came to public finance and had to acclimate to working in the public arena in a politically neutral position. **It raises the question as to whether or not these outsider managers may need training in certain topic areas to quickly understand specific functions or develop any unique skills needed to manage a local government.**

Finally, as local governments struggle to fill their top executive positions due to mass retirements throughout the next decade, **more targeted effort to attract individuals from outside fields might be necessary to fill in the recruitment gaps.**

[1] DeSantis, Victor S., Charledean Newell. "Local Government Managers' Career Paths." *The Municipal Yearbook 1996*. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association.

[2] Watson, Douglas J. and Wendy L. Hassett. "Career Paths of City Managers in America's Largest Council-Manager Cities." *Public Administration Review* 64, no. 2 (03,2004): 192-199.

Steward, Kurt A., II. "The Career Paths of City Managers: A Quantitative Approach for Determining the Impact of City Population on City Managers' Career Paths." Order No. AAI3391637.

[3] International City/County Management Association (ICMA). 2013. *Breaking Into Local Government: A Guidebook for Career Changers*. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association