

ON HIRING GENERATION Y

In the midst of the current concern about the “next generation” is an added, growing confusion and often disapproval of how members of Generation Y behave in the work world, including how they look for work in the first place.

As a son of baby boomers who place a high value on newspaper classifieds and personnel offices, I can attest firsthand to the friction that can arise when sitting at the computer for hours is misinterpreted by boomer parents as “being a bum” when it is, I would argue, actively looking for work.

I am 25 years old and, along with the majority of my generation, I almost exclusively use the Internet to hunt for jobs. If I am totally honest, I somewhat mistrust jobs that aren't posted online because I feel that, if they're not, it may be an indication that the organization is resistant to change, something that notoriously chafes people my age.

While my hunting certainly includes job aggregator sites like Monster and Career Builder, to a greater extent it involves the job posting pages of specific organizations. I get on Google, head to a city or county's Web page, find the job postings, and peruse the open positions.

If I'm qualified for one, I hope and pray that the local government uses a helpful service like NeoGov's governmentjobs.com to accept online applications. If it doesn't, I go through the grueling finger work of refilling out form after form of the job application. Then I hit “send” and move on to the next city's Web site.

I sometimes wonder, though, whether this method of interaction with organizations, a method that looks to become even more common, causes all of us applicants to blend into a fog of electronic applications, indistinguishable except for stamps of “qualified” and “unqualified.” Features like paper stock, handwriting, or coffee rings no longer add any personality to an application, as many responses are reduced to checkboxes, all fields are populated with the same default font, and all applications are printed out in the same format.

I worry about this situation not because I am especially fearful of the idea of technology turning me into an anonymous automaton but rather because I suspect that this lack of personal contact may serve to amplify the ample advantage that “connected” individuals already have towards landing a job. Because we don't personally go into human resource or personnel offices, doffing our caps and charming the employees behind the desk, Generation Y-ers often have no face-to-face interaction with any staff at an organization at all before an interview.

In a situation like this, when many communities actually advise against sending unique résumés and limit spaces for additional information to 600 characters, is it any wonder that the injection of a personal touch like the recommendation of a coworker or the recognition of a name can have a noticeable impact on the fate of a particular application?

The important thing to remember, however, is that Generation Y thrives on change and innovation. While the inclusion of the Internet in the application process is a foregone conclusion, the terms of the online application are totally up to the vision of local governments. Human resource departments could hold monthly online chats or call-in webcasts, where the personnel staff could become more familiar with the personalities and intellects of potential job seekers over the course of time and also provide direction to help interested, intelligent, uninitiated young people begin to make their way in local government management.

These events needn't necessarily be for specific job openings; they could simply serve to introduce job seekers to the organization and eliminate some of the impersonality of the Internet. Social networking is another option; building Web space where job seekers could be allowed to build intricate profiles, including outside interests and more detailed educational and work experience, may also help bridge the technological divide.

There are endless opportunities for improving the disconnect between Generation Y and those in hiring positions. Taking advantage of these

options, however, will require local governments to embrace technology in a way that has not yet happened on a large scale.

The Internet is fundamentally interwoven into the lives of people my age and even more so for those younger than me. Local governments would do well by us to accept the Internet's utility and work toward taking advantage of all its potential, rather than slowly implementing technological solutions well after they become standards. Local governments need only to break away from archaic, faceless forms and start getting to know their future employees.

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INSPIRATIONS FOR THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE

I have worked in local government for 16 years. I began my career when I was 18 years old at Santa Fe County, New Mexico, as an animal control officer. During these 16 years, I worked my way up the ladder to the county's highest appointed position, county manager.

Today I have come to realize that the basic things, or shall I say the things that I feel should be basic in local government—treating the public well, working hard, and always being willing to go above and beyond the call of duty—apply whether you are the animal control officer or a local government manager.

As I moved up the career ladder, I noticed that working for local government became more and more difficult. Supervising employees, for example, was difficult, and being exposed more to the political side of local government at times seemed too much to handle.

I reached a point in my career when I began to question what I was doing and whether I could continue. At first, I justified continuing for the retirement

benefits. At Santa Fe County, we have a 25-year retirement plan, and when I started questioning myself, I was just about halfway there.

The retirement answer wasn't enough to counter the effects of sleepless nights before I had to discipline an employee and observing political paybacks. Both were having an effect on my peace of mind. I decided, however, that it wasn't time for me to retire.

As I started to contemplate leaving local government, I was asked to become the deputy county manager. In this position, I knew I would have such new challenges as being in charge of the day-to-day operations of the county and not just one department. One of my new duties was to introduce new hires to the county and tell them what kind of organization they had just joined.

The best way I could explain the type of organization they were joining was to share my personal story with them: This was the kind of organization Santa Fe County was. This is the kind of organization most local governments are. Local governments throughout the county are organizations where today's accountant, custodian, or public safety official could be tomorrow's city or county manager.

New employees responded to that thinking, so much so that we started using it at Santa Fe County as a recruitment tool. Employees started asking me how they could advance and whether I could offer the secret to my success. I had thought that working at Santa Fe County was always about helping the public, but now I decided it could also be about helping employees.

Today, my inspiration and my passion are to help local government employees everywhere to be successful. City and county employees provide a service that the public cannot receive elsewhere. I enjoy a successful life both personally and professionally thanks to a solid religious foundation and my successful career in local government.

Here I share what I have learned so that other government employees can enjoy their careers.

Love your job with heart, soul, and mind. If you don't love your job in local government, you need to start looking

for someplace else to work. We spend too much of our lives working not to love what we are doing. This statement about loving your job with all your heart, soul, and mind applies anywhere you choose to work.

Treat the public as you want to be treated, with courtesy and respect.

If you want to be successful in local government, you should treat the public well, too. Some basic rules include always returning phone calls and e-mail requests the day you receive them. Get back to the public when you say you are going to.

As county manager, I emphasize to all employees that, in local government, customer service skills are as important as any other skill somebody can possess. Someone's certificate, education, or experience doesn't mean much if that someone can't communicate with the public and doesn't treat the public right. There will always be room on my staff for the employee whose only skill may be providing good customer service.

Work diligently, but reserve days off for yourself and your family. Eight hours a day, five days a week is enough time to get your work done. If you are not getting work done in that amount of time and you have to stay late or take work home in the evenings and on weekends, there's something wrong. In life, you have to allow time for work, time for exercise, time for play, and time for rest. Enjoy your days off, and don't spend your time off thinking about work.

Honor the governing body and elected officials. The county commissioners, city councilmembers, and other elected officials have worked hard to get elected and must continue to work hard if they are going to be reelected. Even if you don't agree with their views or positions on the issues, the fact is that they ran for office to make a difference in the community you live in and are willing to devote their time and energy to this. That should be honored and respected.

Treat fellow employees as you want to be treated. Never gossip about a fellow employee. Never be rude to a

fellow employee. Always be willing to provide assistance to a fellow employee. Always be willing to show your co-worker how to do your job.

Do not desire the boss's position. In many local governments, the turnover rate for bosses is pretty high. This may be the case at the local government you work for, and if it is, be loyal to your boss while that person is your boss; and after that person is gone, be loyal to the successor.

In doing this, you actually aren't just being loyal to your boss but to the local government you work for. In local government, sooner or later you'll get your chance if you work hard and treat the public well. But, as the saying goes, "Be careful what you ask for. Someday you might get it."

Seek career development through hard work and educational training. Develop your skills. Do you want to move up to the next level? Find out the qualifications for the job and go out and get them.

Work hard in your current position, always be willing to go the extra mile without the extra pay, and leave no room for doubt when the position you're after opens up. There is no chicken-or-egg debate here. Hard work comes first; the promotion to a higher position and the salary increase follow.

Most if not all local governments provide educational training opportunities for employees. Take advantage of this. Go to seminars, training sessions, and even get your college degree or advanced degree on the government's tab. The more education and training you have, the more valuable you become to the organization.

Do not misuse your local government management position. Sooner or later, you might be asked by a member of the public to do something that is not legal or is unethical. *Do not do it.* I explain to staff that, if they really want to help somebody out, they need to make sure they follow all the rules.

Do not place your personal ambitions above the well-being of the organiza-

tion. After you start to experience success in local government, you may toy with the idea of running for political office. Most cities and counties require an employee running for office to take a leave of absence a few months before the election. I think that if an employee is serious about running for office, that employee shouldn't just take a leave of absence. That person should quit working for the local government as soon as the decision to run is made.

Do not participate in political activities. The biggest myth in government is that those who are successful are those who are politically connected. The truth is that those who are successful are those who work hard and treat the public well.

Employees think that, because they have attended a political function or two or have worked for the city or county for a long time, they understand politics. If you work hard and treat the public well, the winner of the election will be irrelevant to your personal success in local government.

These 10 inspirations are applicable to employees in every level of city and county government.

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■ WHEN PUSH CAME TO SHOVE: INSOURCING AND WESTON, FLORIDA'S REACTION TO LEGISLATIVELY MANDATED REVENUE SHORTFALLS

In an October 2007 *PM* article describing Weston as a local government that contracts out all of its services for residents—Weston directly employed only three administrators and used ap-

proximately 400 contract service workers—we indicated some circumstances that account for this highly atypical phenomenon.

Among them were Weston's charter provision that "traditional municipal services shall be rendered through contract providers and not city employees" and the absence in Weston of budgetary pressures that made it unnecessary to calculate whether hiring municipal workers was more cost-efficient than using contractors. Principle and practical worked smoothly together.

That has now changed.

In its 2007 session, Florida reformed its local property tax legislation. The reform requires local governments to reduce their ad valorem millage rates for fiscal year 2008 so as to derive no more ad valorem revenues than garnered in the prior year, regardless of growth in property values. In Florida, this "rolled back" rate put an end to local governments' revenue stream from Florida's growth in property values.

For cities like Weston, which has relied on growth in the value of existing properties to fund service expansion and cover service cost increases, this state law puts a severe crimp in service delivery to local citizens. It also highlights the conflict between the perceived political benefits of tax cutting for state political leaders and the adverse consequences faced by local politicians and city administrators as they are forced to curtail local services.

The impact on Weston for fiscal year 2008 was a loss of \$1.7 million in ad valorem revenues as the millage rate was reduced by 14 percent from 1.5235 to 1.3215. (The general fund 2008 budget came to \$34.8 million, so the loss represents a 5 percent decline.) To compensate for this revenue contraction, the city eliminated or reduced some of its nonessential services, such as holiday lighting, its traditional July 4th celebration, hard-copy reports, and cultural events.

Weston also restructured its service contracts when it realized that it would now have to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of hiring personnel versus contracting out. Fortunately Weston was in the process of contract renewal with one of its major service providers,

which had furnished administrative, public works, and parks and recreation dedicated personnel to the city.

Although the existing contract provided the contractor with a 1.5 multiplier of base salary for senior personnel, its last offer to renew the agreement anticipated a multiplier of 1.75. The city manager and assistant city manager/chief financial officer viewed the 1.75 multiplier as unreasonable in light of the tax reform's impact on municipal finances.

The transition of six senior management positions (assistant city manager/ chief operations officer, director of communications, director of public works, director of parks and recreation, director of landscaping, and treasurer) from the contract provider to city employee status could be accomplished at a multiplier of 1.35 and an initial savings of \$220,000. In addition, transferring some of the other senior staff—administrative, public works, and parks and recreation dedicated personnel—to other Weston contractors could be accomplished at a multiplier of 1.45 and a savings of \$450,000.

These two actions alone would account for 39 percent of the expected revenue shortfall, and they were implemented in late 2007. As a consequence, Weston transitioned from three to nine municipal employees.

We should point out one advantage to increasing the number of senior management directly employed by Weston. Under the prior organizational structure, with the city manager as the only senior civil servant in the city, he was also the only individual fully involved in the day-to-day operations of the city and the only repository of the city government's operational historical memory.

As there was no evident successor to the city manager, much hinged on the city manager's health and his incentive to remain in Weston. All this has changed decisively with the appointment of the six new senior managers to Weston's payroll.

Was there some erosion to the principle of Weston's not relying on city employees? Certainly, but not without reason. Weston continues to maintain its contract principles with respect to

virtually all of its services and service employees. But when a few key senior personnel could be brought aboard at significant cost savings in a situation forced upon Weston by mandates included in state law, one might claim that the principle—which is certainly not absolute—was justifiably bent.

Consider that the trade-off opportunity confronting Weston was unusual but opportune. In contrast with other cities faced by the budgetary deficits, whose authorities must decide which and how much to cut back on local services, Weston had an option in addition to eliminating some nonessential services, which it did. Instead of further reducing services to the public, possibly carving into the essential, Weston could reinterpret the city's charter and meet the public's service needs in the least deleterious manner. It opted to stretch the principle in order not to prune key services.

Time will tell whether stretching the rubber band will ultimately cause it to snap. As long as the state statute limits revenue growth and as long as service costs rise—as they have in the past and will undoubtedly continue in the future—Weston's ability to deliver its traditional range of quality services will be challenged.

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■ WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

HOW PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION PAYS DIVIDENDS FOR EMERGING AND EXPERIENCED LEADERS

As the exodus of the baby boomer generation continues, we can expect to see more young professionals—with less experience—moving into higher positions within local government. This is

happening at a time when the profession itself is becoming more complex.

Managers are no longer just administrators. In today's environment, managers must also be skilled in policy development, community relations, and a variety of other content areas that expand far beyond traditional management skills. In total, the applied knowledge assessment targets 18 content areas that managers must master to be successful in local government.

To be prepared to step into new

for the city of Eugene, Oregon, also received a promotion during his time with ELDP. While his new position gave him job experience, Petry found that his involvement in ELDP guided his personal development. When presented with a choice between two advancement opportunities, Petry relied on his experience with ELDP to weigh the options.

He chose his current position because parking engages all content areas of the applied knowledge assessment.

Don't underestimate the formal and informal mentoring opportunities in your own organization. Ask your department heads and other senior staff to help you identify emerging leaders in your city or county.

positions, less-experienced managers need opportunities to develop the wide range of skills that are required. ICMA is responding to this need through the Next Generation Initiative, which includes the ICMA Emerging Leaders Development Program (ELDP).

In this article, ELDP participants discuss the importance of being proactive with professional development—especially mentoring—for both emerging and experienced leaders.

PERSONAL IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS

I was a member of the inaugural ELDP class and completed the program earlier this year. I chose ELDP because I felt that my on-the-job training was simply not enough. Just before completing the program, I accepted a position as assistant city manager and had previously worked as a management analyst in Des Moines, Iowa. In my former position, I did not have supervisory responsibilities, but I knew that the next step in my career would require supervisory skills. I needed a better, faster way to develop those skills, and ELDP helped me get there.

Jeff Petry, parking services manager

His experiences have ranged from talking directly with unhappy customers, to policy facilitation, to supervisory experience. "Over time," he says, "experience on the job likely would have equipped me with many of the skills I learned through ELDP."

"I just didn't want to wait," he added, on viewing professional development as a catalyst for career advancement. "Looking around the country and the profession, there are so many opportunities that are available to emerging leaders now. However, it is hard to be competitive for those positions without strong professional development, especially mentoring, to supplement the lack of experience."

One of the unique features of ELDP is a requirement for each participant to work with a mentor to complete the curriculum components. Mentors are seasoned, experienced managers who volunteer to work with participants during their two-year program. My ELDP mentor was Mark Levin, city administrator, Maryland Heights, Missouri. Though I was fortunate to have several wonderful mentors in the city of Des Moines, when it came to analyzing issues within the city or weigh-

ing career advancement opportunities in other places, it was helpful to have an objective opinion from Mark.

Dawn Irvine, budget analyst, Peoria, Arizona, participates in the first-ever ELDP city cohort with other emerging leaders in the city of Peoria. Members of the cohort study assigned materials, submit questions for group discussion, and participate in monthly conference calls. The cohort calls itself a “brain trust” of individuals who share in free-flowing dialogue about various concepts related to public administration.

Irvine credits mentoring with enhancing their discussions. “Mentors play a vital role in the success of an individual mentee. Those of us whose mentors have actively engaged in our professional development have benefited greatly from their wisdom and experience, sometimes by learning what not to do.” Palmer agrees that mentoring can provide a powerful surrogate for firsthand knowledge. “Short of actually experiencing it on your own, the best way to learn is to discuss a decision or scenario with someone who has been through it.”

WHAT DOES A MENTOR GAIN?

Mentoring clearly has strong advantages for the mentee, but what can entice more seasoned managers to take on the role of mentor? Many managers already feel stretched from juggling the high demands of their jobs and personal commitments. The threat of another appointment on the calendar can be enough to dissuade some managers from mentoring.

But for those interested in getting more involved with the Next Generation initiative, becoming a mentor is good place to start. It is not as rigorous or as time-consuming as some opportunities, such as taking on an adjunct teaching position. In fact, the only requirement is a simple willingness to share what one knows.

Mentees appreciate candor from mentors who are willing to share lessons learned from their personal experiences in the profession. This was true for Petry who, when seeking advice on his own professional development,

requested reflection from his mentor. “I asked my city manager to tell me what he would tell his 30-year-old self about becoming a city manager.”

Everyone with experience in the profession has the talent to be a mentor. Still, it is important for mentors to prepare by taking time to be thoughtful about what and how they will share with their mentees. Katy Singlaub, county manager for Washoe County, Nevada, and an ELDP mentor, offers this advice: “Get a regular schedule of conversations and honor them. Be mindful and intentional about what you want to share, and share the personal dimensions and challenges as well as the professional ones.”

“Mentees will benefit from those experiences as much as the career guidance,” Irvine adds. “The most effective mentors have an innate ability to truly listen, take the time to learn about their mentees’ experience, and challenge their mentee to expand his or her perspective.”

For Singlaub, ELDP provided her first formal opportunity to be a mentor. Singlaub learned about the program when her community’s assistant county manager became involved as a participant. She supported sending an employee through the program because “it is a responsibility to the next generation of Americans to do all we can to ensure that local government leadership in the future is even more skilled and even better prepared than we were.”

In fact, many mentors are drawn to the role by a philosophical commitment to preparing the next generation. The experience, however, can be as equally fulfilling and enriching for the mentor as it is for the mentee. When asked what surprised her about the experience, Singlaub replied, “I learn as much as my friend and mentee does, I’m quite sure!”

She went on to say, “Having the opportunity to stop and think strategically about another person’s future makes me a better manager, better leader, and a better person for my own community.”

If you’re interested in becoming a mentor, explore formal opportunities that are available. In addition to

the Emerging Leaders Development Program sponsored through ICMA, a number of state organizations sponsor formal mentoring programs. One example is the Cal-ICMA Coaching Initiative that helps prepare mid-career professionals for advancement by pairing them with veteran managers.

Finally, don’t underestimate the formal and informal mentoring opportunities in your own organization. Ask your department heads and other senior staff to help you identify emerging leaders in your city or county. Invite those leaders to join you informally for lunch or coffee to discuss their development goals. Be forthcoming in sharing your insight and, above all, create an environment that is safe for asking questions.

Jeff Petry joined the development program after being encouraged to do so during just such a meeting with his city manager. Petry says, “ELDP is providing the structure to achieve my career goals over the next 25 years. I am challenged every day and continue to grow personally and professionally—all this from a lunch conversation with an engaged city manager.”

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