

Career Compass No. 3: Getting Ready for the Next Opportunity

In our latest installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest answers a question with advice and tactics on navigating turbulent career waters:

- *In this deep recession, there are few opportunities to get a better job with another local government or even a promotion in my own local government agency. Thankfully, my position is not being eliminated. However, how do I best prepare myself now for opportunities that will arise when the economy turns around in the next several years?*

First, let me challenge the assumption that there won't be any opportunities for promotions. As baby-boomer managers retire (even during a recession), there will be a cascade of promotions and opportunities to move up. Even if the vacant manager or professional positions are eliminated and there is some restructuring around those vacancies, oftentimes a lead worker or unit leader will take on more responsibilities, a better job title, and usually more pay.

In fact, I would suggest that you be on the lookout for such restructuring opportunities as baby-boomer managers or others leave or retire. You should figure out how your unit or several related units could re-form and thus save money for the organization. Then you should pitch your idea to your manager or department head. You may find career advancement as the department reorganizes.

Second, even without these kinds of opportunities, you should begin to prepare for the economic rebound. Just as organizations need to make targeted investments in times of recession so they can take advantage of better economic times, so too should individuals. Here are some ways to reinvest in yourself and position yourself for the future:

1. Undertake a self-assessment

With the help of a coach (more later about coaching), your manager or a colleague in your professional network, do a self-assessment of your skills, education, past experiences, capabilities, and capacities. Where are you strong? What is lacking? What do you need to learn? Who is missing in your network? How do you better position yourself for future opportunities? Self-reflection needs to precede and then guide action.

2. Become a "go-to" person

In the coming years, local governments will continually restructure and resize. Consequently, organizations will need flexible and ever-learning individuals to take on new challenges and assignments as agencies morph. Don't wait to be asked—volunteer to take on new responsibilities. In the process, you will acquire new skills, experiences, and relationships, inside and outside the organization.

3. Focus on learning agility

To take advantage of these opportunities, individuals must be open to new kinds of learning. Because technical know-how quickly becomes obsolete as organizations experience accelerating change on all fronts, learn-how will become more important than know-how. Therefore, you must practice learning agility. Here's the basic approach: Take on new and "stretching" job assignments, research issues from many different sources and perspectives, and test out new ways of addressing the problems you encounter. Learning comes from doing.

4. Develop a "big picture" view

Most local government people are located in department or professional silos and do not develop a big picture view of the organization, the community, or the local government business. In this new era of continual restructuring and increasing organizational fluidity, a big-picture perspective becomes very valuable.

So, how do you develop a big picture view? Here are some suggestions:

- Consciously interact with staff outside your silo
- Develop relationships with representatives of community and business groups, other local governments, and nonprofits
- Schedule yourself to visit and listen in on the staff meetings of other units and departments of your local government
- Read professional literature not relating to local government (e.g., *Fast Company* magazine)
- Debrief after governing board meetings or significant experiences with your manager or coach and ask questions about why things happened the way they did.

5. Volunteer for a special assignment or internship

Based on your self-assessment, you should identify and create a special assignment or "internship" for yourself. For instance, figure out how to

do a part-time, time-limited internship in the Budget Office and gain the support of your supervisor as well as the budget manager. Sell your proposal on the value-added for your unit and the Budget Office.

6. Focus on professional development

Get further involved in ICMA and your state association or some other professional association. Attend a conference, sign up for a committee or lead an association project and thus enhance your network and develop new skills. Better yet, participate in ICMA's Emerging Leaders Development Program or Leadership ICMA.

7. Grow your network

A large network of professional contacts is helpful in identifying job opportunities, offering career advice, and simply providing social support, especially in these tough times. You should try to identify ways that you can assist colleagues in your network (e.g., occasionally send them an interesting article) and they will help you. Plus it is fun to have friendly colleagues whom you encounter at local government meetings. Now is the time to develop additional relationships with ICMA range riders and managers and other colleagues in the region and state.

8. Get a coach

Everyone needs a coach to discuss career development or problematic situations at work. Participants in ICMA's Emerging Leaders Development Program are all assigned a coach. Your state association (e.g., California, Florida) may offer a free coaching program. Or simply approach a senior manager in your local government or another jurisdiction and ask for coaching. Remember—coaches love to coach!

9. Update your resume

In this down period, you should update your resume and ask colleagues or coaches to critique it. Then you will be ready when an opportunity arises.

10. Practice interview skills

Assuming that a few job openings do occur in your agency or other local governments in the region, you need to apply for appropriate positions, customize your resume, and practice and hone your interview skills for the future. Good interview skills are like any other skill—it is a matter of practice.

Times will get better. Will you be ready for future career opportunities?

Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California.

Discuss this article at forums.icma.org in the Career Development discussion area under "General Discussion."

Related News Stories

[Career Compass No. 2: Defining Your Value In Uncertain Times](#)

[Career Compass No. 1: What Skills Are Most Important for a Manager \(And How Do I Develop Them\)?](#)

For related news, information, and resources, visit [Career Resources](#) in ICMA's Resource Center.

© 2009 International City/County Management Association
ICMA is the leading organization for information on professional local government management. Its membership includes city managers, county managers, and other chief appointed officials and assistants in local governments throughout the world. ICMA's mission is to create excellence in local government by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide.