

***"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Smith-Ruig, T., Grant, B. and Sheridan, A. (2015), Slow Change at the Top: 'Old Hands' and 'Accidental Executives' in New South Wales Local Government. Australian Journal of Public Administration which has been published in final form at doi: 10.1111/1467-8500.12160 This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."***

APTARA	AUPA	aupa12160	Dispatch: June 27, 2015	CE: AFL
	Journal	MSP No.	No. of pages: 11	PE: Kym Ng

Australian Journal of Public Administration, vol. 00, no. 0, pp. 1–11 doi:10.1111/1467-8500.12160

## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

# Slow Change at the Top: ‘Old Hands’ and ‘Accidental Executives’ in New South Wales Local Government

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*Scholars and practitioners alike have recognised that an increased role for women leaders in Australian local government would strengthen the sector, yet little research to date has examined the career paths of non-elected officials. This article combines the gender in organisations literature with career theory to examine the career paths of 16 general managers (GMs) in New South Wales. We found that half the participants had linear career paths based entirely within local government and half had boundaryless careers originating outside the sector. This second cohort consisted overwhelmingly of women. Nevertheless, a high incidence of happenstance characterised both career types. Several participants saw themselves pitted against a gendered (i.e. male) group of ‘old hands’ who were resistant to change being driven by ‘accidental executives’, a high proportion of whom were women. The findings have implications for a sector attempting to attract and retain skilled staff, particularly women.*

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**Key words:** *career development, local government, leadership, women managers*

Women are under-represented in government management in Australia, particularly at senior levels. That this is problematic within the public sector generally has been long recognised (Arnot 1945; Deacon 1982; Hutchinson et al. 2014). That it is especially problematic in local government is underlined by the essential role local government plays in regional, rural, and remote communities, often fulfilling a range of unique, place-based functions (Dollery et al. 2010) and commonly employing between 10% and 20% of the workforce (Hastings et al. 2015: 7). These local governments deliver an increas-

ing range of services (Hawker Report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration) 2004) and are wellsprings of the community within which women ought to play a leading role (Sheridan and Haslam McKenzie 2011).

The Australian local government sector has recognised this. The Australian Local Government Managers Association (LGMA), under the auspices of the Australian government, declared 2010 the ‘Year of Women in Local Government’ (see, e.g., Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) 2010)

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and a strategic plan for local government employment 'Future-proofing local government' was released in 2013. This document suggested 'promoting local government as a place-based employer' and 'retaining and attracting a diverse workforce' as part of its eight-point strategy (Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government/LGMA Australia (ACELG/LGMA) 2013: 3). Additionally, the LGMA (2013) announced notional targets for women's participation in the sector to be reached by 2020 and an awards program for councils seeking greater participation of women in their organisations.

Despite these measures, research associated with these strategies has been principally quantitative (see, e.g., ACELG 2013; Hastings et al. 2015). With one recent exception (Hutchinson et al. 2014), little work has probed the reasons why women remain clustered in the lower levels of management in local government as they also do more generally in the Australian labour force (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014). In their recent examination of discussions of the gender and leadership literature, Hutchinson et al. (2014: 181) identified five 'aspects' that have been the focus for analysis: (i) the gendered nature of leadership; (ii) gendered leadership styles; (iii) women in male-dominated work places; (iv) women in leadership; and (v) career development and progression. Whilst Hutchinson et al. (2014) provided useful insights into the female experience, they did not provide a comparison with male executives nor consider career trajectories; their focus was the gendered nature of leadership.

To more fully explore the reasons for the poor female representation in local government, this article draws on career theory to provide insights into men's and women's career trajectories on their way to the position of general manager (GM) in New South Wales. Such an approach provides a more detailed understanding of the factors influencing the appointment of GMs in local government as well as their working lives and the sector more generally.

The article is composed of six main parts. Commencing with a brief overview of representation of women in local government at the

national level, we then examine why women's representation matters, and discuss the politics of presence and theories of career development. The research design, results, and findings are then discussed.

### **Gender Representation in Australian Local Government**

Women are considerably under-represented at senior levels in Australian local government. In 2009 women comprised almost half of the 170000 people employed, elected, or 'involved' in local government. However, less than 30% of councillors were women. Only 20% of senior management positions and 5% of chief executive officer (CEO) or GM positions were held by women (Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA) 2009: 4). These patterns of representation are consistent with leadership roles generally in Australia, with women holding 12.3% of board positions and 9.7% of executive positions in the top-200 listed companies (Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) 2012: 7).

In 2010 the recruitment services company McArthur examined the recruiting campaigns for 131 senior management positions across 141 council areas, inclusive of those for CEO, 'director', and 'manager' positions. Each of these positions received more than four male applicants for every female applicant (Salisbury and McArthur 2010: 10–11). More recently, at the national level, the 2015 ACELG 'Profile of the local government workforce' divided the Australian local government into four occupational 'streams' and recorded the concentration of gender therein (Table 1). The gendered structure of the Australian local government workforce is clear in Table 1: Women make up only 9.7% of all employees in 'engineering and infrastructure' and 25.5% in 'planning and environment', yet they are numerically dominant in 'corporate services and governance' and in particular 'human and community services'.

In the limited number of studies that have examined the gendered nature of local government, the focus has been on elected

**Table 1. Occupation streams of Australian local government employees by gender**

Occupational stream	Male (%)	Female (%)
Corporate services/governance	35.5	64.5
Engineering/infrastructure	90.3	9.7
Human/community services	22.2	77.8
Planning/environment	75.5	24.5

Source: Hastings et al (2015: 9).

officials, rather than on those employed by councils (see Irwin 2009; Briggs 2000; Pini et al. 2004; Tremaine 2000). Studies that have included local government employees have tended to focus only on the issue of leadership or, alternatively, careers. For example, Paddon and Artist (2004) examined the career profiles of female GMs in NSW local government but their sample was limited to four biographies. Broussine and Fox's (2002) study of local government officials in England focused upon leadership styles. Pini and McDonald (2008) examined the use of flexible work practices by men and women employed in local government in Australia. Although all of these studies focussed upon gender as an element of local government leadership, few have been directly concerned with the career paths of non-elected executives.

### **The Politics of Gender and Representation: The Politics of Presence**

The gendered nature of organisations was potently demonstrated by Acker (1990) when she challenged the notion of abstract jobs and hierarchies and revealed how the images of men's bodies and masculinity inflect the structures and daily operations of workplaces. Nentwich and Kelan's (2014) review of how gender is 'done' in organisations reinforces its ongoing influence on workplace interactions and decisions. Where studies of representation in employment within local government have been conducted, the 'sex typing' (Alvesson and

Billing, 1997) of their jobs has been evident (Pini 2005). Alvesson and Billing (1997) argue a job has a certain gender symbolism. Although not defined in any formal job descriptions, culturally, jobs are defined as feminine or masculine and 'natural' for women or men to occupy. In local government, we see women working in human services and child care, whereas men are concentrated in engineering and infrastructure. The sex typing is clear.

Sex typing is also hierarchical. The recent study exploring the under-representation of women at CEO level in Western Australia (WA) suggests that Alvesson and Billing's (1997) sex typing is evident: Hutchinson et al. (2014: 181–182) gathered qualitative data from 21 second-tier women local government managers in WA and drawing on Fox and Broussine (2001), they identified four indicators of a 'gendered leadership framework':

- (1) The predominance of men at senior levels;
- (2) Masculinised management styles and discourse;
- (3) Unchallenged barriers to women managers' effectiveness, in particular an incapacity on the part of organisations generally to cope with women leaders, and
- (4) A gender bias on the part of elected members in the CEO appointment process.

Hutchinson et al. (2014: 181) found strong evidence of a masculinised culture and gendered behaviour of elected members. In particular, they pointed to the 'co-option' of CEOs, whereby 'appointments [are] made for comfort rather than convenience'. These results concurred with the aforementioned national survey of over 3300 female staff in local government, where respondents expressed concerns about decision-making styles (65%), feeling undervalued (55%), a male-dominated culture (50%), lack of career structure (40%), job selection processes (40%), and managing conflict (40%, ALGWA 2009: 7). This is cause for concern, particularly in a reform context that sees further consolidation of local governments likely (NSW Government 2014).

The question of why women should be represented in leadership roles in the corporate sector as well as within governments has attracted considerable attention both internationally (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995) and within Australia (Pini 2005; Sawyer 2001). The arguments for increasing women's representation follow two trajectories – a social justice case and a business case. The social justice approach is grounded in the principles of both equity and difference (Young 1994), with a focus on benefits being shared more equitably across society (Strachan et al. 2010). The business case for diversity speaks to the instrumental ways diversity contributes to organisational performance, with the focus on the benefits to the firm; for instance, employing women widens the labour pool and through women's different perspectives, firms can better meet market needs (Thomas and Ely, 1996). The business benefits realised through a diversity strategy are being recognised and promoted internationally (Department for Business Innovation and Skills and Government Equalities Office (DBISGEO) 2013) and nationally (WGEA 2013), and it seems the business case has taken on more credence among employers and governments than the social justice case (Kirton and Greene, 2010).

Underpinning much of the analyses about women's representation in elected government is the 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995: x). Key to Phillips's (1995) argument is the case for the shift from the 'politics of ideas' – where the notion that democracy is working as long as interests are being considered – to 'the politics of representation', which recognises the symbolic importance of the previously voiceless being present in the decision making. Phillips (1995) makes her arguments of the politics of presence clear. It is not just about visibility; the potency of the presence of under-represented groups resides in whether the political agenda can be transformed. Although we are not focusing upon elected representatives in this study, Phillips' (1995) argument can be applied more broadly. For example, in their WA study, Hutchinson et al. (2014: 189) observed, 'the lack of diversity within council leadership has the potential to create a dissonance or disconnect between diverse communities and

this increasingly important tier of government'. The question of transformation is also important to consider in our understanding of careers in local government.

### *Traditional versus Boundaryless Careers*

We have seen that the gendered nature of the Australian local government workforce has been the subject of limited quantitative and qualitative investigation. However, the career development literature has been noticeably absent from this particular domain. Career theory has been deployed by scholars to help explain the patterns of employment for men and women. Early theories of career development were based on the career experiences of men and were characterised by individuals experiencing a linear career pattern as they slowly progressed up an organisational hierarchy (Levinson et al. 1978; Super 1957). Scholars from the mid-1990s proposed that the linear career model was being replaced by more 'multi-directional', 'boundaryless', or 'protean' career models in which individuals (both men and women) tend to move between organisations, between occupations, and not necessarily always with an 'upwards' trajectory (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Baruch 2004; Hall 1996). The multi-directional career theories have helped to explain women's career patterns, which are typically characterised by career breaks and greater career transition (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005; O'Neil and Bilimoria 2005). Career scholars argue boundaryless or protean careers (which result in horizontal job moves) reflect an individual's focus on attaining intrinsic rewards, such as increased job enrichment and satisfaction, or to achieve a greater work-life balance (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Hall 1996). This applies to both men and women.

Whether the traditional linear career has been totally replaced by these multi-directional models is debatable (Clarke 2013; Rodrigues and Guest 2010). For example, McDonald et al. (2005) examined career paths in the Australian public service to determine whether they were more traditional or protean/boundaryless. They found careers were generally still quite traditional; the careers of senior managers being characterised by length of service, geographic

mobility, and a steady climb up the ladder. The less frequent protean careers were more the case for women than for men.

Against this backdrop of both the gendered nature of work in Australian local government and career literature, our study examined the careers of men and women GMs in New South Wales. To understand the career types, it is important to consider the factors influencing these patterns, such as gender, mentors, networks, organisational culture, and sex-role stereotyping (Lyness and Thompson 2000; Mainiero and Sullivan 2005; Smith 2006). Given the gender imbalance at the managerial levels documented above, the research presented here aimed to better understand the career profile and experiences of women and men GMs in NSW local government. It was designed to shed light on the factors leading GMs to pursue a career in local government, and we also sought to explore any similarities and/or differences between the experiences of men and women.

## Research Design

The research was conducted using a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with 16 participants (seven women and 11 men). Previous researchers have successfully used interviews as an effective means of researching careers (Sullivan and Mainiero 2007) and for studying leadership in local government more generally (Bochel and Bochel, 2010; Martin and Aulich, 2012). A purposive sampling technique (Patton 1990) was used to identify participants.

The 16 participants were all employed as CEOs from a cross-section of local government in New South Wales: three at metropolitan councils and 13 at rural/regional councils of varying sizes. As such, our sample conforms to Bochel and Bochel's (2010: 725) comment concerning their own population of 29 local government leaders in Britain, namely: 'While not intended to constitute a representative sample, [participants] were drawn from a variety of types of authorities'. It also reflects samples in similar studies (Fox and Broussine 2001; Hutchinson et al. 2014). For the purpose of

the following discussion, responses were coded such that the use of (F) next to a quote denotes a female participant, whilst (M) denotes a male.

## Results and Discussion

### *Demographic Characteristics*

The average age of the participants was 55 years, with the oldest in their early 70s and the youngest in their early 40s. Fifteen of the 16 had a partner and children, only one participant (female) reporting they were single. Ten had a post-graduate degree or were in the process of completing one; the remaining six had a bachelor's degree. Five participants had completed studies specifically relating to local government, either at diploma, under-graduate, or post-graduate level.

### *Career Types*

All participants had been involved in the local government sector for between 10 and 39 years. Five had served with their current council for more than 10 years, with two recording 21 and 27 years' service. The time participants had been employed as a GM at their current council ranged between 1 and 10 years. Six (three female and three male) were employed with their council prior to being appointed to the role of CEO, all as the result of a competitive selection process. The careers of eight of the sixteen participants were based solely in New South Wales. Six had local government experience interstate, whereas two had had long tenure in local government overseas.

In terms of the linear-boundaryless distinction, nine GMs reported linear careers. This group contained two types: 'single council climbers' (four participants) where a majority of the career was spent progressing up one organisational hierarchy (tenure = 10 years or more) and 'multi-council climbers' (five participants) who moved between organisations to progress vertically. All nine GMs in the linear group (three females and six males) started their local government career immediately after high school or university. All women in this

cohort worked in library, administration, environmental, and financial management roles before progressing to their GM roles. Four of the six men in this group progressed through IT or finance-related roles, and two in engineering/infrastructure. These career patterns reflect the sex typing referred to earlier.

The remaining seven participants (four females and three males) first had employment outside the local government sector, conforming to the ‘boundaryless’ model. Male participants of this type had backgrounds in finance/accounting and IT, with one male participant having multiple roles prior to local government. The four women conforming to the ‘boundaryless’ career type all worked in community or human services roles, which they then took up within local government, again reflecting the sex typing of roles. Nevertheless, once these seven participants entered the local government sector they followed a linear career path. They all entered the sector at lower managerial levels before moving to more senior roles, ultimately to GM level. Several of these women explained that they had either reached the limit of career options within the community services sector, or wanted a different perspective that they felt the local government sector could provide.

A feature of the ‘boundaryless’ career concept is the increased focus on more-subjective definitions of success, such as job satisfaction, rather than more objective factors such as remuneration or position (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Hall 1996). Several of the participants underlined the intrinsic rewards they found in their roles, as well as the commitment required. For example:

You have to have a desire to serve the community to be a good General Manager, I think, and not do it for the position or for the remuneration side of it. It has to be about a community connection (Participant 6 [M]).

Similarly, several (but not all) participants evoked the idea of community and their relationship to it as it is expressed above – with a sense of respect as well as involvement. Despite the longevity and success of their careers in local government, several of the participants

became what we are labelling ‘accidental executives’ in the sense that they did not aspire to work at senior levels in the sector for any length of time. A number of participants indicated that their choice to pursue a local government career was based upon happenstance: ‘I just fell into it’ (Participant 3 (F)) and ‘a lot of it was by accident’ (Participant 4 (F)). One female participant explained that following high school she randomly chose a job in the paper, which turned out to be in a council-run library. The following comment by participant 6 (M) reflected similarly upon his choice of a local government career post high school:

I certainly had no great vision that I’d be the town clerk or anything like that. I was happy to just to have a job that was in a good, growing area, that was actually close to where I [was living with] with my Mum and Dad, play a bit of football and drink a few beers ...

This reinforces the ad hoc and serendipitous nature of the careers.

### **Gender**

The GMs were asked whether gender played a role in their local government career experiences. Four male and four female participants claimed that local government is very male dominated. For example:

I think there is too much ... too many men, in this industry ... I just don’t believe there is a gender balance anywhere in local government that’s anywhere near reality, and that’s shameful ... It’s shameful in terms of equity, in terms of being able to get good outcomes from the community ... too many old fart men in an organisation will lead an organisation always in the same direction, and [we] don’t always have enough thinking that’s dynamic enough to cope with the leadership that a community needs (Participant 12 [M]).

Here the lack of women’s representation is labelled ‘shameful’ on the grounds of both equity and inhibiting ‘good outcomes’ – arguably, the ‘business case’ increasingly recognised in the management literature. In line with the findings of Hutchinson et al. (2014), participants generally believed that male-dominated

councils have resulted in a reluctance to accept or hire female CEOs; in the survey conducted for the ALGWA a 'male-dominated culture' was listed as a 'cause for concern' by 50% of respondents (ALGWA 2009: 7). Alvesson and Billing's (1997) gender symbolism is relevant here: The 'naturalness' of men in CEO/GM roles continues to influence the experiences. The culture is gendered. Participant 5 (F) made the following comment:

When I first became a general manager I was [a very early female appointment] in the history of local government in NSW ... There's now a lot more that have come into the industry. But even now you have to find somebody that's really ... a mayor or a councillor that's really enlightened, that will accept you ... It's my observation that female general managers previously have really taken on some of the male attributes, and – I don't mean to be rude – but they've done that to take on the roles that they have, which I don't think has necessarily been a good thing. But really I think that it still is a strong issue; that it's a very difficult thing for most councils to come to grips with.

These observations conform to those of previous research. In their study of executives in English local government, Broussine and Fox (2002) found that women believed they were subject to greater scrutiny than men during the selection process for CEO. Hutchinson et al. (2014) highlighted the arbitrary nature of authority exercised by mayors and councillors over CEO appointments. The survey by ALGWA (2009: 7) recorded that 'there was a steep increase in concerns about job selection'. Noteworthy was that the phrase 'old men' was used by multiple participants. Similarly, the problem of male attitudes in rural areas or rural councils was raised by several participants.

### ***Mentors and Networks***

A majority of the participants ( $n = 9$ ) indicated that they had informal mentors/significant others, and belonged to networks and/or associations that influenced their careers. They indicated that these helped in 'raising my profile' and 'getting different exposure'. The informal mentors included senior managers at

their council when they were in junior positions and other CEOs/GMs or close family or friends who provided both psychological and career-related support and guidance. This is consistent with other empirical studies in the career literature more broadly (Burke et al. 1995; Fagenson 1989; Kanter 1977; Kram 1985; O'Neil and Bilimoria 2005; van Emmerik et al. 2006). Many of the participants also mentioned that they had joined the LGMA, as well as other professional associations specific to local government, for example finance, corporate planning, information technology bodies. One male participant reported engaging an executive coach not only to help him personally but also to work better with his executive team.

All the women GMs belonged to a women's network in New South Wales that met regularly. These participants emphasised that they found this network useful for providing both personal and professional support. In their research examining women's networks, Donnellon and Langowitz (2009) found that women value networks as a means to 'share common identities' and compare their experience with other women. Participant 1 (F) commented that her involvement with the women's professional network was 'absolutely brilliant'. Donnellon and Langowitz (2009) also found that women's need to feel connected is particularly strong where they feel different, isolated, or unsupported in their firms. However, the importance of involvement in professional associations was not limited to women.

### ***Organisational Culture***

Several participants discussed the role bullying, political conflict, and harassment had on their careers. One woman described resigning after being bullied by a GM. Broussine and Fox (2002) also found that 27% of women and 19% of men in their survey of senior executives in local government reported being bullied. In the Australian national survey, 45% listed 'bullying and sexist remarks' as 'causes for concern' (ALGWA 2009: 7).

Several participants described 'politics' or political conflict as affecting their career experiences. When asked to specify what they meant



by this, they pointed to conflict between council employees as well as that between councillors and employees. This form of ‘violence’ has an alignment with masculine stereotypes of having to be tough (Connell 2005; Hearn and Parkin 2001). Participant 2 (M) identified the behaviour of colleagues as one factor in contributing to a move to alternative employment:

I think for a little while towards the end of the early ‘90s there were some problems with some of the senior directors at [his council], which was because they were all playing silly buggers and playing . . . games against each other. There was a bit of that, and that was holding me back . . . that was . . . actually why I was open to moving anyway.

Yet ‘politics’ was also used to describe the party-political influences on employment procedures. Participant 5 (F) explained:

There are definitely recruitment agencies that are politically aligned and there are general managers that are politically aligned as well, and there are councils with strong political alignment[s] also . . .

The above suggests that party-political and ideological allegiances play a significant role in the recruitment process of GMs.

## Conclusions

This qualitative research both reinforces recent accounts of executive leadership at the local level (Hutchinson et al. 2014; Hastings et al. 2015) and provides a different type of picture as a result of our focus on careers. We found the linear and boundaryless types were reflected in the experiences of both women and men. Whilst the participants who pursued boundaryless careers had been employment outside of local government first, once they joined the sector they conformed with the linear career model as they progressed to GM. This is in line with the findings of McDonald et al. (2005) regarding the traditional nature of public service careers.

Many participants indicated they were ‘passionate’ about the influence they could have upon their organisations and communities.

However, several factors were identified as constraining and enabling the CEO’s careers. These included organisational culture, a gendered division of labour, and the relative values placed on the traditional masculine pathways leading to CEO roles in local government. Participants’ careers fell into one of two groups – ‘old hands’ and what we refer to as ‘accidental executives’ – but these two groups were not mutually exclusive. The most common career pattern among women participants was an initial career outside of local government in the community sector, suggesting a more protean career model, as well as demonstrating sex-role stereotyping of careers.

Over half the participants perceived systemic biases of both age and gender in NSW local government and expressed their perceptions of this bias in very forthright ways. In this sense, just over half of the participants saw themselves as pitted against a gendered (i.e. male) group of ‘old hands’ in the sector who were resistant to change being driven by ‘accidental executives’, a high proportion of whom were women. When faced with recruiting a new GM, councils often turned to the perceived ‘safe hands’ of someone already employed by that local government rather than engaging a person who was an unknown entity. It was in precisely this way that several participants became ‘accidental executives’. Nor was there overwhelming evidence that women were excluded from this type of appointment: Our sample of GMs, different from the ‘second-tier’ sample discussed in the study of WA by Hutchinson et al. (2014) revealed the possibility of upward mobility for women despite a general environment characterised by sex typing, due to the nature of our sample itself, that is, including female GMs.

The findings reinforced our *a priori* assumption that a career in local government was not a strategic choice for individuals when they commenced their careers, suggesting that local government in the Australian context may benefit from seeking to directly appeal to early career managers as a ‘career of choice’, alongside working to promote the role of women in local government. Given that few female senior managers are employed in the more

technical (masculine) roles of engineering, infrastructure, or planning, it would be useful to determine whether women spending their entire career in local government are, typically, from the community or corporate services disciplines. Rather than assuming this disadvantages women as GMs, it would be useful to consider how these backgrounds may be in preparation for senior roles, particularly given the changed functional focus of local government from 'services to property' to 'services to people'.

Finally, if the sector wishes to increase the number of women in senior management roles, including that of GMs, further research is needed on the background and career trajectories of both men and women, possibly with a view to developing models for local government careers. This would help local governments design career development strategies to assist the attraction and development of staff.

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