

**COUNCILLOR EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE IN SENIOR  
OFFICER HUMAN RESOURCE MATTERS: LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT IN VICTORIA**

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**Abstract**

The Bains' Report (1979) provided the impetus for considerable change in local government across all Australian states. In the state of Victoria, this embraced the replacement of the Victorian Local Government Act 1958 with a new Act in 1989 (VLGA 1989). One of the key features of the new Act is a significant reduction in external influence on the nature of local government employment. Under VLGA 1989 local government units (LGU) gained virtual autonomy over staff matters, including senior positions. The Act also prescribed a clear division between political activities and administration functions (Self, 1997). In particular, the ability of councillors to influence senior officer human matters was restricted to only the CEO's position. While considerable research has occurred in local government since the implementation of the VLGA 1989 (Kloot, 1999; Van Gramberg and Teicher, 2000; Tucker, 1997; Self, 1997), little attention has been given to the perceptions of councillors on local government change. More specifically, little consideration is given to whether or not this aspect of the Act is being translated into practice and if their role in senior officer human resource matters achieves or exceeds their expectations. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring this issue across all local government units in Victoria.

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# **COUNCILLOR EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE IN SENIOR OFFICER HUMAN RESOURCE MATTERS: LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN VICTORIA**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Under the VLGA89, Councils consists of elected councillors (s.5). The Act confers powers on Councils to “enable Councils to meet the needs of their communities” (s.1.b) and then goes on to list purposes (s.6), objectives (s.7) and functions (s.8). The purposes and objectives that councils should work towards include the provision for good government to manage, improve and develop resources of the district and to provide equitable services. The functions that councils are asked to perform include the provision of general public services such as fire prevention, services regarding health, education welfare, planning and land use, property, recreation, culture, transport and related infrastructure (Schedule 1). Councils are provided with the necessary powers to effectively perform these functions as indicated in the Act: ‘a Council has the power to do all things necessary and convenient to be done for or in connection with performance of its functions and to enable it to achieve its purposes and objectives’ (s.8.3).

One of the vital resources that councils (or for that matter any organisation) utilises to perform these functions effectively and efficiently is its human resources; the council staff. However, like other organisations, Councils also need to have processes and procedures to ensure effective and efficient contributions from their council staff. There are of many ways organisations seek to achieve align staff with the organisations aims, objectives and policies, and a study at Australian Commonwealth Government level suggests that control over the human resource matters is a key factor (Pullin and Haidar, 2003c). Importantly, in respect of local government councils in Victoria, although the Act (VLGA 1989) states that ‘Council has the power to do all things necessary’ in reality it does not provide councils with the power to control council staff. While Councils have power over the human resource (HR) matters in respect of the CEO, it is the CEO under the Act who has power over the HR matters of all other council staff. In other words, statutorily, Councils are provided with only indirect control over their human resources for all council staff, other than the CEO. Are councillors content with these arrangements or would they prefer more influence than they have? Do they indeed abide by the letter of the law and have little direct influence over these matters? Or, do they actually exert influence over these matters in practice.

This research seeks to explore these issues by examining councillor views on their expectations and experiences in senior officer human resource management. It seeks to establish if there is a gap or significant difference between the degree of influence councillors have over six key human resource functions and the degree of influence they believe they should have over these functions. To achieve this the paper considers the background in Victorian local government councils prior to the enactment of the Victorian Local Government Act 1989 and then briefly examines the councillor/senior officer relationship prescribed in the current Act. The research methodology is then discussed followed by the findings and conclusions.

## **BACKGROUND**

During the 1960s and 1970s local government throughout Australia was considered to be ‘unnoticed, unesteemed and, so many claimed, under-financed; its elected members were stereotyped as self-important and self-interested and its tasks dismissed as unexciting’ (Bowman, 1976, 3). This lack of recognition can, in some part, be attributed to the uncomfortable position of local government as the third and lowest tier of government in a three-tier system. It also stems from the fact that the powers of local government are dependent and wholly derived from the Acts of each of the State Parliaments where they are created (Bowman, 1976).

Although its role across state boundaries may vary from one to the other, local government essentially provides a range services and support activities for their communities which are often

best managed at a local rather State level (Aulich 1999). Since the mid-1980s, many local governments, particularly those in regional areas, have become increasingly involved in a diverse range of economic development activities as economic rationalism and industrial restructuring have taken their toll on their traditional industrial, manufacturing and in some cases agricultural employment bases (Pullin, 2002).

The structure and organisation of local government itself in Australia has not escaped these changes and was subject to considerable scrutiny as early as the mid-1970's. This scrutiny resulted in the publication of the findings of the Board of Review of the Role, Structure and Administration of Local Government in Victoria, chaired by M.A. Bains (BRRSALGV 1979). The Bains' Report described local government in Australia as 'a rather peculiar system which survives to the present day' (BRRSALGV, 1979, 8). A system where 'municipalities could engage only in those activities which were specifically authorised by statute. Arrangements such as these did much to dampen municipal initiative and vitality' (BRRSALGV, 1979, 8). Being a creation of State government in Australia, local government is essentially geographically useful but has 'never been local self-government: rather, it is State government writ small' (Bowman, 1976, 3). Local councils in Victoria have been described as 'waste-bins for unwanted State functions' or, less unkindly, as comprising a 'portmanteau of activities' (Bowman, 1976, 3).

Even though its status may be considered by some to be relatively low compared to the other two tiers of government in Australia, local government commands significant social and economic influence in the community (Aulich, 1995). Given this, it is not surprising that local government has been the subject of much reform (Van Gramberg and Teicher, 2000; Albin, 1992; Albin, 1995; Tucker, 1997; Wensing, 1997). From the 1960s to the late 1970s Australian local government went through a reform stage in its development which included moves to 'enhance the representative nature of local government' to re-fashion 'internal practices to improve strategic planning and financial management systems as well as (generally unsuccessful) efforts to initiate amalgamation of councils' (Aulich, 1999, 13). While some reform success could be claimed, Aulich (1999) contends that by the late 1970s the impetus appeared to dissolve due to financial pressures and a lack of management flexibility and resolve. Even though this may be the case, it was during this period that the foundation was being laid, through the Board of Review of the Role, Structure and Administration of Local Government in Victoria (BRRSALGV, 1979), for the concerted reform of local government in that state, which occurred more than a decade later.

An important feature of local government in Australia is that like its Federal and State counterparts, its structures and processes are founded on representative democracy. Through the power of individual votes, the electorate in each prescribed council area are able to select their representatives, the councillors, on a majority basis for a limited term of office. From there on in, the performance of councillors are open to public scrutiny and judgement through the ballot box in future elections, should they so stand, and by oversight from the office of the relevant Minister for local government in each state.

The role of local government councillors should not be underestimated. In combination, councillors form councils which make decisions affecting all members of the Australian community and visitors to our shores. Their decisions in financial terms influenced an annual revenue budget in 2002/2003 of over \$19 billion and an asset base of over \$168 billion (ABS, 2002 - 2003). Local government councillors are not alone in the process of managing revenue and assets and as with other levels of public management in Australia, they rely heavily on their relationship with public servants. In the case of local government these are senior offices, career managers who are employed and paid to provide advice and guidance and implement the policy framework and decisions of elected councils.

## **VICTORIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1989**

The influence of the Bains' Report (BRRSALGV, 1979) on the nature and outcomes of Victorian

local government reform during the 1990s should not be underestimated. Many of the report's principles and recommendations provided the basis and informed the development of the Victorian Local Government Act 1989 (VLGA, 1989). The new Act was essentially a change agent, the intent of which was to significantly alter the management and governance of local government in Victoria (VLGA, 1989).<sup>1</sup> Considerable attention was given in the new Act to the nature of senior officer employment, the organisational structure of local government units and the relative role, function and relationship between councillors and senior officers. Many of the employment relations restrictions placed upon local government units by the VLGA 1958 were removed. Councils were empowered to establish their own structures and recruit people to their needs rather than the needs of the certification process. For example, the Act stipulated that:

- (1) A Council must establish an appropriate organisation structure.
- (2) A council must appoint as many members of council staff as it thinks necessary for the performance of its functions and the exercise of its powers under the Act and any other Act.
- (3) A council must appoint as a member of Council staff a person to be its chief Executive officer. (VLGA, 1989, s.94, 80)

Not surprisingly, although many of the restrictions of the 1958 Act were eliminated, councils were not totally free in matters of the senior officer ER. The Act (VLGA, 1989) established guidelines for council conduct and the requirement to follow certain procedures. However, the guidelines were not onerous and were generally aimed at ensuring equity in employment opportunity and avoiding patronage. In terms of recruitment, for example:

a council may only appoint a person to fill a senior officer's position after it has invited applications for the position in a notice in a newspaper circulating generally throughout Victoria and has considered all applications received by it that comply with the conditions specified in the service.<sup>2</sup> (VLGA, 1989, s.94, 4)

The new Act makes other specific provision for senior officers. It provides that the employment of senior officers be regulated by a limited term contract of up to 5 years duration. This renewable contract must specify performance criteria for the purpose of annual performance review by the CEO (VLGA, 1989, s.95A & 97A). The Council has been vested with the authority to review the CEO's performance, also on an annual basis (VLGA, 1989, s.97A).

The 1989 Act also stipulates a politics-administration dichotomy in Victorian local government (VLGA, 1989). This was not previously the case under VLGA 1958. The advent of the politics-administration dichotomy can be linked to the Bains' report which identified an unsatisfactory state of affairs with the 'regular intrusion of councillors into administrative details' (BRRSALGV, 1979). Tucker (1997) states that councillors viewed this intrusion as an 'entailing right'. They were almost obliged 'to interact directly with council employees, and to give those employees detailed guidance on specific issues coming to their attention as elected representatives' (Tucker, 1997).

In forming its conclusions, the Bains' report identified three roles for councillors (1) to represent their electorate, (2) to formulate and decide on policy, and (3) to review council's performance in general. The report also identified three roles for council officers, (1) the execution of directives and policies, (2) administrative control and operation, and (3) the stimulation of policy formulation and development. The 1989 Act specifies a division in responsibilities between councillors and council officers in concert with the Bain's recommendations (BRRSALGV, 1979, 134-140).

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria is not isolated in undergoing local government reform. Wensing points out that all states in Australia have undertaken 'substantial reviews of their local government Acts' (1997, 90).

<sup>2</sup> This restriction has recently been diluted somewhat and CEOs can now be offered re-appointment without the position being re-advertised (LG(G)A 2000, s.3).

In addition to the implementation of council policy and day to day management of council operations, the Act allocates authority and responsibility to the CEO for 'appointing, directing and dismissing the Council's staff', including senior officers (VLGA, 1989, s.97). It is this issue that is explored in this research from the councillors perspective. We seek to determine, having had in some cases over 12 years experience of this system, whether or not councillors believe that their level of influence over senior officer human resource matters is appropriate compared to their experience under the 1989 Act.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a quantitative approach where a questionnaire survey was utilised to develop a wider understanding of the population's views on the issues being considered. The main objective was to collect and examine aggregate data from a representative sample of the population to ascertain their behaviour and action across more than one organisational setting (Fielding and Fielding, 1986). The aim of the questionnaire survey was to develop an understanding of the degree of influence expected and experienced over senior officers human resource matters.

The questionnaire was modified for this research and is based on other questionnaires developed in previous research (Pullin and Haidar 2003; Pullin 2002; Haidar and Pullin 2001). It uses six human resource dimensions as a proxy for senior officer human resource matters. These are recruitment, promotion, staff development, compensation, appeal and dismissal (Stone 1995).

The data collection concentrated on all local government units (LGU) in the State of Victoria, Australia. Seventy-nine LGU were identified in this category. The Web pages of each of these units were accessed for the names and contact information of their elected councillors and 622 councillors were subsequently identified. The questionnaire was sent to all 622 councillors comprising the total population of elected officials in Victorian LGU. Of these, 162 completed forms were returned which equates to a response rate of 26 percent. This rate is considered satisfactory for this type of survey where no follow-up was applied.

In terms of age distribution, 95 of the respondents (59%) were aged over 50 years, 40 respondents (25%) were between 41-50 and the remaining 27 respondents were 40 years or under. Male councillors comprised 119 of the respondents (74%) compared to 42 females (26%). One respondent declined to indicate their gender. In years of experience as a councillor, 47 (29%) of respondents were in their first year, 34 (21%) had completed 1 year but were still in their first terms of office, a further 34 (21%) were in their second term of office and 47 (29%) had completed more than 2 terms.

All 162 surveys were useable and the questions were encoded and data entered utilising 'SPSS, version 11.5 for Windows'. Frequency distributions were determined and screened for data entry and other errors. The questionnaire tested 12 main variables reported in this paper through statements on a five point 'Likert' type scale. On this scale 1 = Not be influential, 2 = Be somewhat influential, 3 = Be influential, 4 = Be very influential, and 5 = Be Decisive. Each statement was coded as a variable in SPSS 11.5 for Windows and responses entered as appropriate. The conventional 95 percent confidence level was adopted as an acceptable level for all statistical tests (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996).

The first stage of data analysis involved the calculation of mean values and standard deviations for the statements relating to each dimension. This surface level of analysis provided an important initial understanding of the data. It also indicated the extent to which respondents favoured each of the dimensional statements and the spread of their responses. The mean value for each dimensional statement was then tested for significant difference in terms of the councillors expected and received values. The appropriate statistical test to determine differences in the mean of a population is the *t* test (Howell, 1985). In this study a paired-samples *t* test is used to

determine the difference between expected and received mean values of paired statements. The test establishes the significance of the difference, if any, either positive or negative, between each pair. In the event that a significant positive or negative difference between the paired statements cannot be established, the population's response can be said to be statistically the same in terms of the issue being tested.

Paired-samples *t*-test are usually 'used when you have only one group of people (or companies, or machines etc.) and you collect data from them on two different occasions, or under two different conditions' (Pallant 2001, p181). However, paired-samples *t*-test can also be used, as we do in this study, to measure the response of groups of people to two different questions. Although the paired *t* test result will indicate that if there is a difference between the paired-samples it is unlikely to have occurred by chance, it does not on its own provide an indication of the magnitude of the difference. One way to achieve this is to calculate an effect size statistic. This study uses eta squared for this purpose and interprets the values using the following guidelines: '.01 = small effect, .6 = moderate effect, .14 = large effect' (Cohen 1988 in Pallant 2001, p. 184).

One of the assumptions of the *t* test is normality in the sample (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996; Coakes and Steed, 2001). In some of the individual dimensional statements the data violated this assumption. However, the *t* test 'is robust with regard to this assumption – it gives fairly accurate results even if the assumption is not satisfied' (Welkowitz et al., 1982, 163). 'Moderate departures from the assumption that the population possesses normal probability distributions do not seriously affect the distribution of the test' (Mendenhall et al., 1989, 406). The normality assumption in *t* tests can also be violated without affecting the validity of the hypothesis if the sample is large enough (Gravetter and Wallnau, 1996; Heiman, 1992; Howell, 1985). A sample size of  $n = 30$  is quoted as large enough for the *t* test to be valid even though the data may not conform to a normal distribution (Heiman, 1992, 339).

This is a relational rather than causal study and as the unit of analysis is the individual in their workplace, it is analytical in nature (Sekaran, 1992). It adopts a field study approach and examines individual experiences in their natural organisational setting, supported by secondary data analysis. The variables utilised in the study were not controlled, manoeuvred or manipulated and no artificial setting or contrived circumstances were created.

## **FINDINGS**

The mean value for each dimension of the role of councillors in human resource matters in terms of their beliefs (expectations) and experiences are indicated in Table 1. The mean values indicate a consistent expectancy by councillors that they should be between 'somewhat influential' and 'influential' across all human resource dimensions tested in this study. In all cases the mean value of their experience across each of these dimensions is less than their expectancy, but is this difference significant and if so, what is the magnitude of the difference?

**Table 1: Councillor Role in Senior Officer Human Resource Matters – Expectation and Experience (n = 162)**

Human Resource Dimension	Expectation (M)	Experience (M)
Appointments	2.62	2.02
Promotions	2.17	1.58
Disciplinary matters	2.24	1.80
Remuneration	2.36	1.77
Training and career development	2.13	1.68
Re-appointment and non-re-appointment	2.62	2.06

A paired samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the difference between expectation and experience across each of the six human resource dimensions. There was a significant difference in councillor role in appointments where expectation was significantly greater (M=2.62, SD=1.465) than experience (M=2.02, SD=1.506),  $t(161)=5.520$ ,  $p<.001$ . The eta squared statistic (0.16) indicates a large effect size. In councillor role in senior officer promotion there was a significant difference where expectation was significantly greater (M=2.17, SD=1.380) than experience (M=1.58, SD=1.313),  $t(161)=5.527$ ,  $p<.001$ . The eta squared statistic (0.16) indicates a large effect size.

When it comes to disciplinary matters, there was a significant difference in councillor role. Expectation was significantly greater (M=2.24, SD=1.531) than experience (M=1.80, SD=1.454),  $t(161)=4.418$ ,  $p<.001$ . The eta squared statistic (0.11) for discipline indicates a moderate effect size. This was not the case with remuneration where the effect size was large (eta= 0.18) and councillors expectation or desire for involvement was significantly greater (M=2.36, SD=1.464) than their experience (M=1.77, SD=1.389),  $t(161)=5.881$ ,  $p<.001$ .

There was a significant difference in councillor role in training and career development where expectation was significantly greater (M=2.13, SD=1.310) than experience (M=1.68, SD=1.269),  $t(161)=4.777$ ,  $p<.001$ . The eta squared statistic (0.12) indicates a moderate to large effect size. The consistency of results between expectancy and experience continued with the councillor role in senior officer re-appointment or non-reappointment decisions. Councillors indicated they expected to be significantly more influential in this area (M=2.62, SD=1.517) than they were (M=2.06, SD=1.543),  $t(161)=5.079$ ,  $p<.001$ . The eta squared statistic (0.14) indicates a large effect size.

Taken together, these findings indicate a systematic pattern of significant difference in councillor role between the degree of their expectation compared to the degree of experience in influencing senior officer HR matters. In four out of the six dimensions the effect size was large and in the other two it was moderate to large. However, is this difference the same across all parts of the respondent sample or do demographic features influence the result. To explore this question, the data was cross-tabulated by gender, by age and length of time as a councillor?

Statistical analysis indicated there was no significant difference in the sample response across each dimension by gender and age. This was not the case by length of time served as a councillor. To analyse councillor time served, the sample was divided into those councillors that had served one term or less (*ONETERMERS*) and those that had served more than one term (*MORETERMERS*). The mean value for each dimension by term served in respect of their beliefs (expectations) and experiences is presented in Table 2. It can be seen from the table that the

mean response between these groups differs across the various dimensions, but is this difference significant and if so, what is the magnitude of the difference?

**Table 2: Councillor Role in Senior Officer Human Resource Matters – Expectation and Experience by Term as Councillor**

Statement: My influence on senior council officer	Sample	ONETERMERS < = One Term Mean (M)	MORETERMERS > One Term Mean (M)
Appointments	Expectation	2.51	2.96
	Experience	1.90	2.44
Promotions	Expectation	2.34	2.22
	Experience	1.58	1.93
Disciplinary matters	Expectation	2.29	2.40
	Experience	1.67	2.20
Remuneration	Expectation	2.42	2.54
	Experience	1.65	2.13
Training and career development	Expectation	2.21	2.30
	Experience	1.59	2.01
Re-appointment and non-re-appointment	Expectation	2.81	2.70
	Experience	1.97	2.46

\* significant difference  $P = <.001$

An independent groups t-test was conducted to evaluate the difference by term of office as a councillor by their expectation and by their experience across each of the six human resource dimensions. We deal with expectation first and then experience.

There was a significant difference in councillor in appointments where ONETERMERS expectation was significantly less ( $M=2.51$ ,  $SD=1.277$ ) than MORETERMERS ( $M=2.96$ ,  $SD=1.482$ ,  $t(153)=2.018$ ,  $p<.05$ ). The eta squared statistic (0.03) indicates a small effect size. There were no significant differences between ONETERMERS and MORETERMERS expectations in the other five human resource dimensions.

In terms of their experiences, MORETERMERS were significantly more influential than ONETERMERS across all six dimensions except promotions: Appointments - MORETERMERS ( $M=2.44$ ,  $SD=1.534$ ) compared to ONETERMERS ( $M=1.90$ ,  $SD=1.302$ ,  $t(146)=2.301$ ,  $p<.05$ ; eta squared (0.03) indicates a small effect size. Disciplinary - MORETERMERS ( $M=2.20$ ,  $SD=1.667$ ) compared to ONETERMERS ( $M=1.67$ ,  $SD=0.989$ ,  $t(129)=2.396$ ,  $p<.05$ ; eta squared (0.04) indicates a small effect size. Remuneration - MORETERMERS ( $M=2.13$ ,  $SD=1.572$ ) compared to ONETERMERS ( $M=1.65$ ,  $SD=0.1.009$ ,  $t(134)=2.223$ ,  $p<.05$ ; eta squared (0.04) indicates a small effect size. Training and Career Development - MORETERMERS ( $M=2.01$ ,  $SD=1.382$ ) compared to ONETERMERS ( $M=1.59$ ,  $SD=0.979$ ,  $t(140)=2.169$ ,  $p<.05$ ; eta squared (0.03) indicates a small effect size. Reappointment and non reappointment - MORETERMERS ( $M=2.46$ ,  $SD=1.600$ ) compared to ONETERMERS ( $M=1.97$ ,  $SD=1.309$ ,  $t(146)=2.035$ ,  $p<.05$ ; eta squared (0.03) indicates a small effect size.

Therefore, we can safely state that while there was little variation between the expectations of councillors in terms of their length of service, the experiences of longer serving councillors indicated significantly more influence across five of the six dimensions compared to those councillors with less service. However, in all cases the effect size was small. This finding should not be interpreted that the expectancies and experiences of longer serving councillors were in balance. Although not further reported in this paper, a paired sample t test of MORETERMERS indicated that even this group expected to have significantly more influence than they experienced across all six human resource dimensions.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This paper presents a quite different employment relations perspective by seeking the views of elected representatives in a representative democracy. In trying to develop, determine, decide, and have implemented, policy and policy frameworks, these councillors utilise managers for the task, whom they have little direct influence over. The paper does not seek to criticise the regulatory framework, that is for others should they choose to do so, but it serves to illustrate some of the relationship aspects of public sector employment in the context of statutory influence.

It confirms, at least from a senior officer human resource matters perspective, that the political/administrative dichotomy recommended by the Bains' committee and enacted under the Victorian Local Government Act 1989, is alive and well. It also identifies that while the detachment of councillors' influence over human resource matters might be the practice in Victorian local government, it is not entirely to the preference of elected officials. The paper also indicates that although longer serving councillors were able to exert greater influence than those that had served fewer terms, the level of influence still did not meet their expectations.

The results of this research also suggests that some councillors, those ones who tend to have more experience, are able to have more influence on these matters than that prescribed by the VLGA89. Although our findings suggest that they go beyond the Act to perform the range of functions they are required to by the Act, there is no hint that this is with bad intention. Rather, for practicalities state, they operate in shades of grey in a somewhat black and white situation.

These finding are also supported in previous work by the authors which examined responses from senior officers on these matters Pullin and Haidar, 1999). Based on these findings, we argue that influence over the HR matters of council staff in Victorian local government councils can be perceived as a concurrent jurisdiction, where some councillors routinely involve themselves more than others.

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