Herbert Waltzer, Philip A. Russo, Jr., and W. Robert Gump

Professional Networks and Local Officials: A Missing Link in Small Government Management

Local officials who belong to professional associations can serve their constituencies better than officials who belong to no associations. Not only do member officials have access to new ideas and better ways of doing things, they are also more likely to recognize when local problems require outside help and to know where to get that help. Based on a survey of 152 officials in three rural southwestern Ohio counties.

The need for rural and small local governments to strengthen their public management capacities tends to be overlooked because of the highly visible problems of larger cities. Yet, even though we are an increasingly urban country, nearly half of us live in communities with fewer than 50,000 residents, and a third of us live in communities with fewer than 25,000 residents.

Rural and small local governments face increasingly complex problems that tax and often exceed their management and fiscal capacities. They often need help and, according to a 1985 survey we conducted, officials who are more connected to public management networks are more likely to perceive a need for technical assistance in dealing with local problems. Despite that, we also found that a high percentage of local officials were not especially interested in joining professional organizations.

Those who provide assistance to small local governments do need to identify and understand the problems of managing small communities. But our findings reinforce one of the conclusions of a report issued a decade ago by the Office of Management and Budget: "it is really the problem of getting the horse to drink that needs attention, not the problem of finding the water in the first place, or building larger reservoirs."

Local governments in rural and small communities, like all government jurisdictions, rely upon a body of knowledge and technology to perform their tasks and cope with their problems. One important mechanism to obtain this expertise is the organizational link of local officials to the knowledge base and technology of public management. Two types of links seem most important: membership and participation in professional and governmental organizations, and the use of periodicals dealing with local government issues. With the knowledge and understanding offered by these links, and with the continuing professionalization of public management, officials can improve the quality of local government services.

The networks of national, regional, and State professional and government organizations offer local officials information, expertise, and contact with peers, providers of technical assistance, and the changing body of public management.

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About the Survey

Our data are drawn from a survey of elected and appointed officials in the small cities, villages, and townships in three rural counties in southwest Ohio. We asked officials to report their organizational memberships, public management meetings recently attended, and the periodicals they found useful in performing their jobs. They also indicated the local government functions for which they felt a need for technical assistance and indicated their recent experience with technical assistance services. The survey findings allow us to draw some conclusions about the relationship between the network connections of these officials and their awareness of public management problems and assistance available to help cope with these problems.

Some statistics on the counties and officials surveyed:

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35% rural</td>
<td>62% rural</td>
<td>82% rural</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Local governments—
- 9 cities (over 5,000)
- 26 villages (under 5,000)
- 36 townships

Local officials—
- 10 years in public service (average)
- 7 years in present position (average)
- 36% with some college or a college degree

Respondent categories—
- Municipal executives: chief executive officers, appointed or elected
- Municipal council members: including mayors in jurisdictions with appointed chief executive officer
- Township officials: including trustees and clerks

Response rate—
- 34% overall (152 of 443)
- Municipal executives 38% (31 of 81)
- Council members 28% (61 of 217)
- Township officials 41% (60 of 145)

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management knowledge and technology. If officials in small communities are not linked into these basic organizational and communication networks, they will probably not have access to technical assistance and other services and may be less innovative in their management.

To see how well local officials are connected to these networks of public management assistance, we surveyed the officials of the small cities, villages, and townships in three rural counties in southwest Ohio about their memberships in professional organizations, their attendance at meetings, special seminars, and training sessions of professional associations and government agencies, and their use of the periodicals published by professional associations and government agencies.

Organizational Memberships

We asked executives of small cities and villages to report on their memberships in the larger professional community of public management. Since these officials have principal responsibility for initiating, implementing, and supervising the policies and service delivery programs of their municipalities, and for technical assistance initiatives and innovation in policies and practices, it is particularly important to know how much significant contact they have with professional public management associations.

Moreover, municipal council members and township trustees, for whom public service is a part-time activity, are less likely to belong to such professional associations. We asked municipal executives to list the professional associations...of which you currently are a member or of which you have been a member within the past three (3) years.

All the executives of the small cities reported at least one membership, and the average number was 3.7. Two-thirds of these organizational memberships were in national organizations, and most of the remaining one-third included memberships in State professional associations. The most frequently mentioned memberships were in the International City Management Association, Ohio City Managers Association, American Planning Association, Ohio Conference of Community Development, American Public Works Association, National League of Cities, and Municipal Auditors Association of Ohio.

A Guide to the Networks

The 1985 Municipal Yearbook, published by the International City Management Association (ICMA) lists 76 professional and other organizations aimed at local government officials, and it provides information on the specific services each offers (pp. 374-381). James M. Banovetz, editor of the ICMA's very useful Small Cities and Counties: A Guide To Managing Services, notes that these organizations.

"...place primary emphasis upon improvements in the delivery of professional services. Thus, local government organizations work continuously to find new and better ways of providing local public services. The professionals who are employed in local government, and who are active in local government professional organizations, become the critical link through which new ideas are put into practice at the city, county, village, and town level.

Local government officials are well advised to affiliate with, and become active in, the appropriate professional organizations serving their occupational specialties" (pp. 23-24).
The story was different for village executives. Over half reported no current membership or membership within the past 3 years. The average number of reported memberships for village executives was 1.8, with 78 percent in State and local associations for mayors, managers, auditors, and clerks.

Local Officials Attend Few Professional Meetings

We asked all the small local government officials to list "the professional and governmental meetings, conferences, workshops, seminars and training sessions you have attended or participated in within the past three (3) years."

The officials who responded to our survey were not regular and frequent participants in professional and governmental meetings, conferences, workshops, and training sessions that relate to local government.

City executives as a group do participate in professional and governmental meetings, although their level of attendance is modest, averaging three meetings in the past 3 years. But that is much better than the attendance of the other local officials. For example, 77 percent of village executives had attended no meetings; as a group, they had attended an average of slightly less than one meeting in the past 3 years. Among city council respondents, 33 percent had attended no meetings; the average number of meetings attended by city council members was slightly over one in the past 3 years.

Village council members had the poorest attendance—76 percent had attended no meetings in the past 3 years. One village council member reported that the last meeting he attended was 14 years ago when he was first elected and went to the State capital to participate in a "seminar for newly elected councilmen." By comparison, half of the township officials had attended a public management meeting in the past 3 years.

Of the meetings attended, 79 percent were those of State and local professional associations and government agencies. Over half of the national meetings were attended by city executives, who also were the only frequent attendees at meetings of professional associations. The meetings most often attended by city executives were those of the International City Management Association, Ohio Municipal League, and the Municipal Finance Officers of Ohio. City council members most frequently attended the meetings of the Ohio Municipal League and the National League of Cities. Village executives and council members attended a broad array of association and government agency meetings, mostly at the State and local levels. Similarly, 90 percent of the meetings attended by township officials were conducted by State and local organizations. Most frequently attended were those of the Ohio Association of Township Trustees and Clerks, and State and local meetings on specific issues, such as road maintenance, block grants, land use, accounting procedures, emergency services, rural annexation, environmental control, investments, and health.

Local Officials Prefer Local Publications

The final item in the survey asked the rural officials to list "any particular magazines, journals, newsletters, bulletins or reports useful in performing your local government responsibilities." They also were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the publications.

City executives listed, on average, 4.3 periodicals. Moreover, 83 percent of the periodicals noted by city executives are published by national professional associations and Federal agencies, whereas 71 percent of those listed by other city and village officials are published by State and local associations and State government agencies. Village executives, on average, found 1.9 publications useful, 60 percent of them published by State and local professional associations and government agencies.

Forty-four percent of the small city and village officials indicated no periodicals useful to them in their municipal government responsibilities. Only 11 percent of the city executives indicated no useful publications, while 54 percent of the village executives, 33 percent of the city council members, and 62 percent of the village council members found no publications useful. By contrast, only 27 percent of the township officials responded "no useful publications."

Fewer city council members reported...
Figure 4. Officials who found any periodical publication useful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of local official</th>
<th>No meetings attended</th>
<th>No periodicals read and found useful</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City executives</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village executives</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City council</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village council</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township official</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The periodical most frequently mentioned by city and village executives and council members was Cities and Villages, published by the Ohio Municipal League. Council members rated it highly, but executives did not. City executives also frequently listed and evaluated highly the publications of the ICMA (Public Management, newsletters), the American Planning Association (Planning), and the American Society for Public Administration (Public Administration Review). The periodicals listed by the other categories of municipal officers were too limited and scattered to report. Among township officials, the Ohio Township News, published by the Ohio Association of Township Trustees and Clerks, accounted for half of the mentions of useful periodicals and was well evaluated by the responding officials. The State Auditor’s Messenger also was well received by township officials.

Local Officials Not Well Connected to Professional Organizations

The typical rural and small-community official is not well connected to the public management networks of national, regional, State, and local professional associations and government agencies that exist to serve them. Small-community officials have only limited contact with peers and providers of technical assistance, and awareness of the changing body of knowledge about public management and technology that these associations and government agencies can offer them. Table 1 summarizes the most striking aspect of the data: the percentages of local officials who reported zero memberships, who attended no meetings, and who read no publications.

Over half of all local officials in our survey had not attended a meeting, conference, workshop, or training session related to local government within the past 3 years, and nearly two-fifths listed not a single magazine, journal, newsletter, bulletin, or report useful to them in performing their local government responsibilities. While about three-fourths of all respondents from the small cities attended meetings and found publications useful, three-fourths of all village officials had attended no meeting recently and three-fifths listed no periodical publication. Half of the township officials reported no meeting recently attended.

Table 1—Many officials belong to no professional organizations, attend no professional meetings, and read no professional periodicals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of local official</th>
<th>No organization memberships</th>
<th>No meetings attended</th>
<th>No periodicals read and found useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City and village executives</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City officials</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village officials</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township officials</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All local officials</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NA = data not available.

Technical Assistance Needs and Public Management Networks

Other surveys and case studies document that officials of small community governments perceived their needs for technical assistance to be greatest in the areas of personnel (both training and methods of recruiting qualified individuals), planning, budgeting and finance, economic development strategies, contracting, grantsmanship, computerized management information sys-
The respondents' participation in these their local governments needed the study. Respondents who were our findings indicated a significant technical assistance. If that is so, then are more likely to identify more technical assistance (see box). Moreover, we found no significant differences when we analyzed the possible relationship of technical assistance needs to county, government type, and position of respondent. (We examined those factors to see if there were any relationships to degree of ruralness, local resources, and perspectives of local officials derived from their principal responsibilities.) Local government officials in all three counties, in cities, in villages, in townships, and in elected and appointed positions who were more connected to the networks of professional associations and government agencies reported more need for technical assistance. Officials who were less connected to these networks perceived less need for technical assistance.

A final item: city and village executives were asked, which factors "might keep you from seeking or using technical assistance...." While 87 percent identified the costs of such services as a constraint, 36 percent noted that a principal constraint was in not being aware of or familiar with the providers of such technical assistance and the services they offered.

Our data suggest that officials of small and rural local governments are linked only marginally to the organizational and communication networks that promote professionalism and the exchange of public management information, services, and resources. These networks are important means of transferring problem-solving and management techniques to public officials, as well as for increasing their understanding of the problem areas in their governmental units and for making them aware of available technical assistance and other services. Furthermore, local government officials who are relatively unconnected to professional networks perceive less need for technical assistance. If that is so, then improving the management of local government will depend not only on what the technical experts have to say but also on whether local officials are within earshot in the first place.

For Additional Reading...


Philip A Russo, Jr., W. Robert Gump and Herbert Waltzer, Southwest Ohio Regional Assessment (SWORA) of the Technical Assistance Needed of Small Local Governments (Columbus: Office of Local Government Services, Ohio Department of Development, 1983).