

The First 10 Years After an Unpaid Internship

by Joshua Smith

For me May 10, 1999, began in a small motel room in Chillicothe, Missouri. My wife Linda and I (and our cat Ali) were nearing the end of a trip that began a day and a half earlier. On May 8 we had left Palm Harbor, Florida, with a rented trailer that contained all of our worldly possessions and a printed e-mail confirming a job offer for the city of Waukeez, Iowa, as an unpaid administrative intern.

Waking up in Chillicothe on that spring morning, I was concerned about getting the trailer to our final destination, which was an apartment complex in West Des Moines, Iowa. I had to have it unloaded and turned in before 5:00 p.m. I also needed to find an unwrinkled suit, dress shirt, and tie in our packed possessions and be at a city council meeting in Waukeez that night at 7:00 p.m. so I could be introduced as a new (albeit nonpaid) employee.

Up to that point in my life, I had had little interaction with city government. The only city council meeting I had attended was while I was vacationing in Daytona Beach Shores, Florida, during my senior year of college. I did not attend that council meeting because I was interested in local government but because it was a requirement for a class I was taking in public administration, and I needed a copy of the meeting agenda as proof of attendance.

My path to the internship in Waukeez was circuitous. After graduating from a small, private college in South Dakota, the University of Sioux Falls, with a bachelor's degree in organizational behavior and management, I accepted a job as a store manager trainee for JCPenney in Clearwater, Florida. While completing the training program, I attended night school to earn an MBA. During this time, I read the book *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. This book has had a tremendous impact on my career as a public administrator.

The career path that JCPenney outlined after I completed its training program was not the most exciting. I was interested in working for one of its international stores or working at the corporate office in Plano, Texas. What I was not interested in for the first 10 years of my career was being arbitrarily transferred from small store to small store at the whim of the company.

MY FIRST DECISION

After many discussions with my wife, I convinced her to leave the warm climate of Florida and move back to our home state of Iowa and for me to immediately pursue two things: a job that did not pay anything and a second master's degree—this one in public administration at Iowa State University.

The logic I employed to reach this conclusion was simple: I ultimately wanted a job where I could choose the community I wanted to live, and because most communities had professional staff, I would have ample opportunity to go where I wanted.

To cement this decision, I called a high school classmate who was the only person I knew who worked for a local government. That call was to Doug Boldt, who is the city manager of Tipton, Iowa (at that time he was the director of public works). Apparently I called too early in the morning because Doug was still sleeping. He was nice enough, however, to answer my questions, which verified (in my mind) that I was making the right decision.

I remember thinking to myself as I was driving the U-Haul to Iowa the morning of May 10 that the career path of a city manager was not much different from a store manager of a JCPenney. You completed an internship or training program, became a department manager or perhaps an assistant manager, and finally you reached the pinnacle—you become the manager!

I remember sitting with the public at the May 10 city council meeting with a large agenda packet in my

Joshua A. Smith Leadership Blueprint

Remain strategic. Ensure that my work—and that of my executive team—is strategic. All of our goals and activities need to be aligned with the overarching goals and mission of the larger organization. Any individual who reports directly to me will have a set of measurable objectives during a specific time frame.

Be persistent and work hard. Success is a marathon, not a sprint. Never give up.

Accept accountability. Hold myself accountable to the highest standards of behavior. The litmus test for every action will be: Would I be comfortable with the details of my actions on the front page of a newspaper?

Embrace responsibility. Appreciate and embrace the responsibility that comes with being a leader. Always realize that many people depend on me.

Value meetings. Embrace the importance of team meetings and individual one-on-one meetings. These meetings are not a nuisance or a distraction. They are the day-to-day manifestation of leadership.

Create a top team. Create a team of A players. My goal is to hire, retain, and promote only the best. If someone is a C player, my job is to turn that person into an A player or help locate another role that provides a better chance to be an A player. I will hold my team accountable to the highest standards of performance and behavior.

Treat direct reports as adults. Treat direct reports as bright, capable, responsible adults. I am not all knowing or blessed with superior judgment because of my position. I don't need to be aware of all details, be involved in all decisions, or dictate how they do their work. Treating employees as inferiors and micromanaging is the ultimate form of disrespect and poor leadership.

Open up. Ask questions and be open to other possibilities. Listening as a leader means fighting the natural urge to evaluate and react instead of listening to truly understand another person's view and consider the possibilities.

Encourage innovation. Continually stress the importance of innovation when reviewing operational issues and always be open to new ideas.

hand and thinking to myself that a lot of work had gone into creating the agenda packet, but the council voted quickly and often with no discussion on most of the agenda items.

The one item that did generate considerable discussion was a request for monies that were not budgeted. The expense was for new furniture for the new city hall that was under construction on U.S. 6—the existing city hall

was located in the small downtown area.

I remember how shocked I was that councilmembers were almost rude in their line of questioning and how uncomfortable the city administrator looked when answering the questions. I made a mental note: always be as prepared as possible to answer questions, even unexpected questions, at city council meetings. I remember leaving

the council meeting that night feeling extremely unsure about whether I had made the correct career move.

MY FIRST 30+ DAYS

The first month of the job went slowly. Because I had no experience in any area of local government, the city administrator had me sitting at a folding table in the council chambers and using a typewriter to type labels for the city code books. Sometimes I got lucky: when the city receptionist was out of the office, I was allowed to answer the phone and assist residents with dog licenses and building permit questions as well as work on the quarterly newsletter.

My wife still thought I was crazy because I was working for free and would usually work 45 to 60 hours a week and attend graduate school at nights and on Saturday mornings. At age 25, however, I felt I was already older than several peers who did similar internships at age 21 or 22 and had moved into other, more important roles.

After approximately a month on the job, the city administrator indicated at a staff meeting that the city needed to better coordinate its economic development efforts because of the explosive residential and commercial growth Waukeez was experiencing as a western suburb of Des Moines. I approached the administrator privately after the meeting and begged for the opportunity to coordinate the economic development efforts. I reminded him I had an MBA, was working on my MPA, and was willing to work extremely hard.

After some discussion and negotiation, we settled on an hourly wage (\$7.00) that would become effective in July 1999 and a new salary effective on January 1, 2000 (\$46,000). We also agreed that the city would send me to a basic economic development course in Duluth, Minnesota, in July 1999 and to all three sessions of the Economic Development Institute at the University of Oklahoma, beginning in August 1999. I was ecstatic. After almost two months of working, I was going to

get paid again! Plus, I was no longer the intern but now the director of community development.

The next few months moved quickly as I began to work with development companies on commercial projects ranging from a new McDonald's to courting a large regional mall by a national development company. I also worked with residential developers on the platting process, identifying council issues and helping developers get positive recommendations at the planning and zoning commission meeting and ultimately approval at the council meeting.

Because growth in Waukeez was happening so fast, I was given other assignments, including coordinating

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Waukeez's annexation efforts, creating the city's first-ever capital improvement plan, updating the city's Web page, and restructuring how information was prepared for the council, including agenda format, staff report format, and more.

Approximately one year after I started in Waukeez, the assistant city administrator resigned his position. The administrator approached me and offered me something I never guessed would happen so quickly—a newly titled position of deputy city administrator.

At age 26, I felt I was making great strides. I also felt the chance I took when I left a good position at JCPenney was validated. Since that time, I have served several great communities, beginning with Monticello, Iowa, which offered me the job of city ad-

ministrator at age 26, and I began the position at age 27.

MY ADVICE

Take advantage of training opportunities. The first five years of my career, I did not take advantage of many state association (Iowa City Management Association) or national (ICMA) training opportunities. I felt my time was better used at city hall and not traveling to seminars. When I moved to Wisconsin as the town administrator of Cedarburg, the village administrator of Grafton, Wisconsin, Darrell Hofland, encouraged me to do so.

Many of the initiatives that are important to my current community (sustainability, performance measurement, creating a high-performing organization, and so forth) were items discussed and analyzed in great detail at many of the ICMA seminars and conferences I have attended.

In the past three years, I have been fortunate to participate in the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service Senior Executive Institute (SEI) at the University of Virginia, the two-year Leadership ICMA program, and I will attend the second ICMA Gettysburg Leadership Institute in May 2009.

I love that my 10-year anniversary in the profession (May 10, 2009) will be capped with this excellent training opportunity.

Create a leadership blueprint. Just before my most recent performance evaluation, one of my elected officials asked me what my leadership blueprint is. I was embarrassed that I could not to my satisfaction extemporaneously discuss what it is. Thus, I spent an entire Saturday jotting notes and reading sections of some of the books listed ahead. That was the genesis of my first written leadership blueprint (see box on page 23). There is no doubt through the coming years that it may change, but I truly believe the core pieces of the blueprint will stay constant for the next 30 years of my career.

Measure twice, cut once. Several times every week of your career you must rely on your intuition and knowledge to make quick decisions. When the opportunity is available, however, identifying important organizational metrics and creating a performance measurement program will make your job much easier by determining progress toward specific defined organizational objectives.

Read, read, read! I cannot begin to explain how several books have influenced my career. Young administrators should not read only leadership and management books. Some of the books that have heavily influenced my career have been biographies and fiction; works of philosophy and Shakespeare; or history. The top five books I would recommend to a young manager are:

- *Atlas Shrugged* (Ayn Rand)
- *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi* (David Maraniss)
- *Medici Effect: What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us about Innovation* (Frans Johansson)
- *Animal Farm* (George Orwell)
- *Management* (Peter Drucker)

Honorable mention includes several Abraham Lincoln books—*Team of Rivals*; *Tried by War*; and *Lincoln on Leadership*—and any book by Patrick Lencioni.

Surround yourself with young talent as well as older talent. The reason Johansson's *Medici Effect* resonated with me is his discussion regarding associative boundaries that expertise builds. I truly believe that any organization will become stagnant without young, energetic talent infusing creativity and passion into it.

Conversely, maintaining several professional confidants who are older and have been around the proverbial block a few more times than you will prove invaluable when you need sage advice and wise counsel over a vexing issue. **PM**

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Still to Come in This Career Series:

- Aspire to Be an Administrator
- Causes of Manager Turnover

PM How Healthy Are Your Personal Finances?

Need to start a new diet—a financial diet that is? The Virginia Society of Certified Public Accountants (VSCPA) offers these tips to individuals to help get their finances in shape.

1. Start small. You can make simple changes in spending and saving that will improve your financial health for years to come.

2. Open a 401(k) retirement account. Check to see if your employer matches a percentage of your contribution. A matching contribution is free money.

3. Bank your raise (or at least a portion of it). If you don't get used to having the extra money, you won't miss it.

4. Pay down your loans. Make repaying them a priority over discretionary consumer spending.

5. Raise the deductible on your insurance policy. For example, if it's \$100, increase it to \$200. It will have an impact on your premium payments.

6. Be energy efficient. Turn down the thermostat, and turn off the lights.

7. Pay your credit card bill in full each month. You'll

avoid interest charges. Choose credit cards with cash-back rewards and no annual fees. Review your free credit report annually at www.annualcreditreport.com.

8. Dust off your library cards. You can watch DVDs and get books for free. And many libraries offer free Internet access.

9. Kick a spending habit. Smoking is hard on the wallet and your health. Brew your own coffee at one-eighth the price of a latte.

10. Take advantage of free financial resources. Visit VSCPA's consumer Web site at www.FinancialFitness.org for a financial check-up quiz, budget templates, money management articles, and other financial tools. Also, e-mail financialfitness@vscca.com to sign up for a free monthly e-newsletter.

Through community outreach and education, VSCPA's financial fitness campaign is part of a national effort of the CPA profession to educate and increase knowledge on topics related to wise money management and fiscal responsibility.

For more information on the VSCPA financial fitness program, contact Shawnte Reynolds at 800/733-8272; email, sreynolds@vscca.com.