

Pay It Forward...

*A Compilation of Career Advice
Articles from Members of the
American Society for Public
Administration (ASPA)*

*Created for Attendees of
ASPA's Student and New
Professional Summit*

*March 23-24, 2007
Washington, DC*



*Advancing excellence
in public service . . .*

PA TIMES
A Powerful Voice for Public Service...

William E. Solomon

As a practitioner in the public service I have often had to serve on interview panels. On average, there could be 200-300 applicants for an administrative position in Miami-Dade County. It is important to find ways to make your name stand out in the crowd of applicants.

I would like to take this opportunity to pass on some suggestions to students and new professionals that might help you move upward within our profession:

- As a student, try to choose research papers that could potentially provide beneficial information to an organization with which you might want to work for in the future. A copy of your paper should be given to the organization.
- Make certain that you are computer literate and proficient with at a minimum Excel and Word. I have found that many applicants do not have sufficient computer skills to be able to handle the level of difficulty they encounter in even entry-level administrative positions.
- Contact the organization you want to work for and find out if there are volunteer opportunities available in the area you want to ultimately work. Serving as a volunteer and doing an exemplary job, gets your name out there within the organization.
- Actively participate on a committee in your local ASPA chapter. This provides you with a wonderful opportunity to network with professionals currently in the field. Attendance at local ASPA events will also enable you to meet potential employers in a professional setting.
- If you are an ASPA member, be proud of this and make certain that your resume indicates you are a member. Membership in ASPA shows a desire to be more than the regular potential employee.

It is important to do things that make you stand out from the field of applicants. If you aren't a member of ASPA, I strongly suggest that you join. ASPA provides networking and professional development opportunities for public service professionals and academicians in our field. ASPA provides a forum for practitioners and academics to discuss policies and issues at meetings, seminars and conferences. I have tried to provide some general information for students and new professionals that could prove useful in finding a position in the public service.

I wish all of you the best of luck in your career choices and future advancement.

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Warren Barclay

There is an old saying in real estate that there are only three things that are important, "Location, Location and Location." Well in looking for job opportunities in State and local governments, it could similarly be stated that it's "the Web, the Web, and the Web." Most States and major cities have woken up to the web as their portal to the job applicant. They are not all sophisticated, but slowly and surely they are getting there.

A Few Tips

Most States and many counties and municipalities either require you to be a resident or prefer it, so go after governments where you now reside or plan to live, and plan accordingly.

Some organizations have compiled listings of pertinent web sites for your search of agencies. For instance, go to key web sites to look up State Personnel agencies, such as the National Association of State Personnel Executives (NASPE) at www.naspe.net/index.cfm?PageID=21 and the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR) at <http://ipma-hr.org/index.cf?navid=81&id=235&tcode=nws2>.

Be aware that in this evolutionary period of web development, web sites seem to keep changing. So even the best collection of web sites you may bump up against what I call "a rotten site," a bad apple that either has changed and brings you to the new web site or just gives you an error message because it does not link you to the new web site and stops you in your tracks. In these cases, you might want to try going to the main web page for that state and start fresh from there. This can be frustrating. Have patience, count to ten, and strive not to hit the computer too hard.

If you find a good web site, this usually will mean that you will be able to find out how to apply for jobs in those jurisdictions. This can range from completing an on-line application and having it electronically submitted, to the more old fashion method of either printing an application from the web site and mailing it back to the jurisdiction or actually physically going to an office to pick up an application. Remember, everyone has not entered the 21st century.

Once You Get an Interview

I am now going to jump ahead and optimistically say you have applied for a job, possibly taken an exam or some other review process, and have qualified for a position and have been called in for the big interview.

Based on a study that was reported in the IPMA-HR Bulletin of May 27, 2005 and conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), besides using the organization's web site to find out how to apply for a job, the applicant should take the time to study the organization before the interview. This will make you stand out from other applicants. In other words, do your homework to get to know the organization. This will make you better prepared for the interview. It will enable you to better respond to the interviewer's questions, and maybe more importantly, you will be able to ask the interviewer more relevant and creative questions. This should help impress those who are interviewing you, and take you a huge step closer to the promised land of "employment"!

Now, get thee to thy computer and tap and click away!

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Wendy Haynes

Throughout my career, I've been blessed by sage advice from mentors, colleagues and friends. The following list distills a few insights that have endured many tests and I hope will be as helpful to you as they have been to me:

Along the way

- Treat those you meet with respect and good will. That's the right thing to do. AND you may one day find yourself being interviewed by, working for or appealing to those you encountered along the way!
- Take the time to listen to peoples' stories, especially those of individuals who are pursuing work that interests you. If you attend carefully, their stories will provide insights that will be useful to you in your quest.
- Remember that most of us will have many careers throughout our lives. We can have it all eventually—just not all at the same time!

Networking and growing

- Interact with people who work in areas that interest you. Your local ASPA chapter events, continuing education or graduate classes and volunteer activities all offer excellent networking opportunities. Consider each person you meet to be a potential resource as a reference, informational contact, employer, employee or colleague.
- Give of yourself to a cause that matters to you, preferably related to your professional aspirations.
- Build your work product portfolio. In the classroom, select assignment topics with an eye to areas that will be of interest to future employers. In your current job, offer to help a more experienced colleague with a project that's related to where you want to move in the future.
- Keep up with technology and be aware of the impact of technological change on the organizations that interest you.

Resumes and interviews

- Update your resume/CV frequently and include the date of the revision. Always send your resume with a cover letter that highlights the relevant aspects of your experience, education and accomplishments.
- Pay attention to how you feel and what you sense in encounters with prospective employers. Certainly, you want to impress them with what you have to offer, but they must also demonstrate that their organization is a good fit for you.
- Follow-up meetings and interviews with a note. E-mail works, but a letter is better. Summarize what transpired, suggest a next step and thank people for their time.

On the job

- Negotiate schedule changes and due dates in advance. If you can't make a deadline, let your compatriots know and work it out ahead of time.
- Look around you when you're heading off on a new project. Have you asked for and obtained the support you need? Is anyone following you? If you answer no to either question, stop and regroup. You can't do it by yourself.
- Remember: Others may define loyalty and trust differently than you do. Be clear about what you stand for and be aware of the rules of the game in your various environments. You may not abide by those rules, but make that an informed choice and not simply a byproduct of ignorance.

Believe me when I say that I don't always follow this advice, but things seem to turn out better when I do. Good luck!

Wendy Haynes, ASPA's president for 2006-2007, brings several decades of public service to her current work as associate professor and MPA coordinator at Bridgewater State College. A self-described "pracademic," Haynes has served in leadership and analytical roles at all levels of government on both U.S. seaboards. She writes and consults on a variety of topics, including megaprojects, affordable housing, homeland security and performance management. E-mail: haynes_w@hotmail.com

Marc Holzer

Public service as a career is on the upswing. More undergraduates are considering careers in the public sector, and more seasoned professionals are opting out of the private sector, transitioning to public sector and not-for-profit careers. Although public service is an exceptionally rewarding career path, simple assumptions and stereotypes may limit the career possibilities of anyone entering government or the many not-for-profits that deliver government services.

Thinking "out of the box," some unorthodox strategies may help accelerate the careers of new public sector professionals:

Never Say No: Too many people limit their career possibilities by worrying about taking on more assignments without being relieved of some other aspects of their work. But work is not zero-sum, requiring some tasks to be subtracted if others are added. Taking on more work may not be as difficult as it seems, and "raising the bar" may help you raise the level and quality of your work. There is probably more of an upside--such as increased confidence in your abilities, opportunities to excel, and confidence that you can deliver--than a downside in terms of getting overloaded. This is not to naively assume that there are no limits on a person's time or the intrusion of work on personal concerns, but simply to suggest that competent people can often exceed their own expectations. In crisis situations, for example, young professionals often gain rare opportunities to excel, and they do in fact meet those challenges.

Destroy and Search: Professionals are sometimes fearful of leaving their positions before finding others. But too many public servants unnecessarily suffer boredom, underutilization, dead end jobs, or even verbal (and perhaps physical) abuse. Sometimes it is simply necessary, or worth the risk, to force yourself into the job market, and resigning can certainly force the issue, pushing you to consider creative alternatives. Having some savings or taking out a loan makes this choice much easier, but the bottom line is: why suffer tens of thousands of hours of employment that is psychologically unrewarding? Why be a clerk if you are capable of being an executive? Why waste years on the same routines, when you can continually solve new problems? Why push along paper if you would really rather be pushing along projects? Why be tied to the office if you would rather be in the field?

Volunteer for Visibility: Professionals like to think of themselves as mentors, and they are often eager to mentor new professionals they meet outside of the office. ASPA is a voluntary organization, with many opportunities for visibility, for volunteer roles with substantial responsibility, and with seemingly limitless networking potential. People

with very limited jobs can often succeed at higher level positions in professional organizations, on local elected and appointed boards, in not-for-profits and similar venues. The competencies they exhibit in unpaid positions may then be the basis for career-changing referrals. In fact, you may surprise yourself, your friends, and your colleagues in the public sector with your leadership in the voluntary sector.

Then, one very conventional step is often overlooked by job seekers:

Check Your C.V.–Accidents Happen: misspellings, wrong words, incomplete citations, and many more. Job seekers should not rush their c.v.s into print, neglecting to have a friend, or even a paid editor, review it for such errors. I have seen many c.v.s and cover letters set aside due to sloppy presentations. Why build a strong record of qualifications, and then negate that effort by failing to attend to the details of a strong presentation?

No career is more rewarding than public service. Those careers are valuable and should be built on the basis of both careful preparation and purposive risk taking.

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Don Klingner

Getting the Benefits You Need from Work

Whether you're just starting your public service career as a new grad or moving into it as a mature professional, you'll get lots of advice. These suggestions focus not on finding jobs or working into them, but on an area often overlooked—getting the benefits you need from work.

Today's economy reflects a shift by private corporations away from pensions and health benefits. Many public agencies are now under increasing pressure to do likewise.

While it's easy—and somewhat accurate—to blame this trend on pressures to maintain corporate profits by shifting health care and retirement costs onto public programs like Medicare and Social Security, the biggest culprit is demographics.

As “baby boomers” born between 1946 and 1964 approach retirement, relatively fewer younger employees are pay into Social Security and other defined benefit pension systems. As both average life expectancy and health care costs continue to increase, something’s got to give.

Here are some tips that may help you avoid getting caught in this crunch:

- Retirement planning is a “three-legged stool”—Social Security, employer-sponsored pensions, and personal savings. Individual retirement accounts (IRAs)—called 401(k), 403(b), or supplemental retirement annuities (SRAs)—let you put away money that accumulates interest on a tax deferred basis. The sooner you start and the more you can save, the better off you will be.
- Health insurance is complex; medical emergencies or accidents can be disastrous. The variety of health care plans is bewildering, but you need some coverage against catastrophic illness or injury.
- If your employer contributes some of the premiums, compare alternative health insurance policies side by side to try and assess their strengths and weaknesses.
- If your employer provides no health insurance coverage, or if you are working as an independent contractor, see what kind of coverage you can get based on your parents’ or spouse’s employment.
- If you can’t find coverage through an employer, investigate options through professional associations like the American Society for Public Administration. Any group coverage you can get is likely to be cheaper than individual policies.
- Check the Internet as well. When I googled “online insurance quotes,” I got 63 million hits in .37 seconds. Your employer may also offer accounts that allow you to pay health care costs in pre-tax rather than after-tax dollars.
- Life Insurance: When you think about it, life insurance is counter-intuitive. You pay the premium betting you’re going to die; the insurance company accepts the policy betting you’re going to live. And most of the time, you do. So employers and professional associations (like ASPA) offer term life policies that are very cheap for those in their 20s and 30s.

- Long-term Disability: As you get older, disability is a more pressing issue. Remember to “bank” your annual and sick leave if at all possible—the longer the waiting period before this insurance kicks in, the less it costs.

For more information about any of these tips, seek the advice of your employer’s personnel office or benefits counselor. If you don’t, nobody will do it for you. You’re in charge, and it’s your future!

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Claire Mostel

Ok, so you have your degree, and you’re seeking a position that you feel is worthy of your talent and education. You’ve got an interview; you’ve done your research, updated/edited your resume, so now what? There are a lot of candidates with BPAs and MPAs—what is going to make you stand out?

Interview Tips (you may think these are no-brainers, but you’d be surprised...)

- Dress appropriately—you are not going clubbing.
- Keep jewelry simple, don’t make accessories the focal point.
- If you have tattoos, try to conceal them; unusual body piercings, leave them at home—you can “express” yourself after you secure the position.
- Lose the wad of gum before the interview.
- Make eye contact with all the interviewers.
- Don’t rush your response—answer the questions completely.
- If you are asked to give examples in the body of a question, do it!

- Asked to list your computer skills? Do it, and give examples (spread sheets, reports, memos, etc.)

This is the time to make the good impression—if you dress inappropriately at an interview, what can your prospective employer expect once you are hired?

How to Stand out at Your Current or Future Job

- Read, read, read—a real newspaper or online, books, journals, magazines; stay current in your field, learn from other’s mistakes, see what’s happening in other communities.
- Don’t be afraid to “borrow” an idea that is working somewhere else—there is nothing wrong with copying a successful program or best practice—put your own spin on it. Just don’t claim it solely as your own; admitting that you read/heard about a program shows that you are resourceful.
- When you present your “new idea” to your boss, be prepared—anticipate questions on implementation, etc.
- Don’t get discouraged or give up; if you think it’s a good idea, chances are someone else will also.
- Prepare yourself—attend workshops, professional development opportunities, etc., especially those that are put on by your local ASPA chapter—this will also be a great networking opportunity.
- Work/dress at the level you seek to attain, not at your current position; don’t limit yourself to your assigned tasks, take the initiative to learn or do new things.
- Attending a conference (ASPA, hopefully)? Have you gone to a conference or chapter event and felt isolated, overlooked, or ignored? Don’t give up!
- Don’t be shy—introduce yourself and talk to other attendees—remember, their aloofness might be shyness also. If you make friends at a meeting, you won’t be alone the next time.
- Attend conference meetings—most are open to the general membership.

- Introduce yourself to a national council member, chapter president or board member; say that you would like to become more involved and volunteer to serve on a committee. If you have special skills (newsletter, public relations, fund-raising, etc.), mention specific ways you can assist.
- Don't be intimidated by someone's "stature"—approach the author of a book you've read or a presenter from a panel you just sat in on—it's a good ice-breaker—and can result in a good contact or future mentor!
- If you are still tongue-tied, think about who you would like to meet, or what you would like to volunteer to do—then send an e-mail or letter to that person!
- If you attend a regional or national conference and don't know where to start, go to the registration area or look for someone who has a badge that identifies themselves as staff—ask for a push in the right direction.
- Once again, don't give up—there are plenty of ASPA members who are inclusive—you just have to find them!

ASPA member Claire Mostel has been employed by Miami-Dade County for 15 years and by Miami-Dade County Team Metro for the past 11 years. She has been an active member of ASPA for 16 years at the local, regional and national level and has served as chapter president, on National Council and several national steering groups, and is the chair for SECoPA 2006-2007. Mostel is also an adjunct professor at Barry University. E-mail: ctel@miamidadegov

Ann Hess Braga

I have spent a LONG time earning the appropriate degrees in traditional school settings. Very little in my years of education prepared me for the nuts and bolts of running a city department or the responsibility of screening and hiring professional and support staff. Individuals who are coming out of school, with little more than summer jobs or internships, find the job search process challenging, to say the least.

Many new professionals neglect to mention their “non professional” job experience in their resumes and during interviews. In so doing, they risk submitting an incomplete resume and losing the opportunity to highlight assets that could be valuable to potential employers. New professionals face a host of challenges and I hope these hints help.

It's Not about the Title, Stupid!

We all know that job titles do not reflect reality; if they did, my title—Staff Director – would better convey the responsibility of putting a wad of duct tape on the end of a wooden pole and reaching into the copy machine to get paper out. It needed to get done.

Before entering the professional world, I worked at a department store, McDonalds, a plastics factory and as a resident assistant in the dorms, among other things. Each job, in addition to life experience, added to my skill set. The path has not been direct, but everything has had value—maybe not seen at the time, and not usually identified in the title or job description.

Having looked at nearly 2,000 resumes, including my own, I know that job titles do not mean much. I now look for how the skills learned in the applicant's past, tangible and intangible, translate into the position I am trying to fill in the organization where I work.

What to do? – RADAR

- Re-examine your resume and identify the skills you have developed, not just the jobs you have held. The skills you list may be concrete, such as use of computer programs, or they could be the ability to work with a diverse group to arrive at consensus.
- Assess your life experience for skills; not everything is learned “on the job.”
- Dissect the job description to match skills you have with those directly or indirectly listed in the advertisement.
- Analyze the organization through web sites, press clippings, and discussions with those who live there if you are thinking of moving. ASPA members in the area can be a wealth of information.
- Reflect the job and organization needs in your cover letter or email to show how the organization can benefit from you. Also, include your thoughts on how you can benefit from the organization.

INTERVIEWS—Adopt the SHOW ME principle. Demonstrate it, don't just say it.

Take it from someone who has conducted a lot of interviews, these phrases should never be heard in an interview or seen on a cover letter/resume. If they are, provide an example as a part of your statement, not after prompting.

- “I am a team player, or work well with others.” Discuss with a specific example of the different types of roles you have taken in projects or assignments, and the results.
- “I am a people person.” Discuss how your past experiences have provided you with opportunities to meet, work with, or lead individuals with different working styles, as well as educational, life, cultural histories.
- “I can multi task.” With specifics, discuss how you have dealt with multiple tasks and assignments, what you do to organize, and how you deal with the impossibility of getting everything done at once.
- “I know how to resolve conflicts.” Discuss the tools and skills you have developed, with examples.

And finally, when asked if you have any questions, never say “I have no questions.” There are always questions and your questions convey to interviewers want your interest in the organization. They need to hear it!

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Russell Williams

Question Your Motives

The ability to offer career advice has become increasingly problematic as the word “career” is less well defined than it was 20 years ago. A career used to be a lifetime professional pursuit. Increasingly, people move frequently from one field of endeavor to another, from one job to another, for a variety of reasons, almost using a TV channel-surfing approach to employment.

Let’s stretch that analogy. With embarrassment, I admit to having spent more than a few hours engaged in channel-surfing. It is easy to blame that behavior on the dearth of good programming, despite the myriad of options available. However, it was often the case that I didn’t really know what I wanted to watch when I picked up the remote control to begin with. I just thought it would be nice to watch some TV.

So what does that have to do with “career” advice about public service? Consider the following.

Because of both professional necessity and personal interest, over the years I have discussed with many individuals—entry-level, mid-level managers, senior executives, students, prospective students, and academics—just why it was they either started working in or became/remained interested about some area of public service. As you might expect, there were any number of reasons given. Often mentioned were phrases such as: “concern for others,” “giving back,” “making a difference,” and “doing the right thing.”

Yet, not infrequently, pressing for answers beyond the glib phrases yielded only more glib phrases—often accompanied by an inability to distinguish between public service and just another job (or degree program to pursue or abstract research question to analyze)—and no expressed sense of genuine excitement or satisfaction about being in public service.

If holding a public service-related position is just another job, then there is less impetus to even consider a “career” in public service in the classic sense of the word. Also reinforced is the idea that public administration is not, in and of itself, a true profession.

Such individuals left me with the impression of people who perhaps started out wanting to “make a difference,” but, having no real personal sense of what public

service was or entailed, were just channel-surfing, hoping to find something interesting and fulfilling. They really hadn't considered what it was they were trying to do when they got started. More dishearteningly, at every university where I have taught MPA classes, there have always been students or prospective students who told me they were just looking to obtain a master's degree. It seems unlikely that a career in public service is something they were considering.

Of course, one can start in a specific job or field of endeavor no intention of making it a career and then unexpectedly discovering it is truly something special. Stories of such things happening have long been around. However, as already pointed out, current norms are not supportive of such serendipitous outcomes happening frequently. On the other hand, it is not reasonable to expect that everyone currently involved in public service should expect to make a true career of it. Life has a way of changing our plans.

So, as an unabashed believer in public service as a calling and the value of James Perry and Lois Recascino Wise's concept of public service motivation, my advice to those entering into or currently engaged in the various aspects of public service, is to first make an honest assessment of what motivated them to consider public service to begin with.

Those who then develop a knowledge of and appreciation for the unique qualities of this calling and the particular part of it they are involved in can make an informed decision about truly making public service a career.

This advice, of course, does not represent new knowledge. Yet it often bears repeating. There is no question that professional career-minded public servants, be they associated with government or nonprofit organizations, are crucial to the ability of those organizations to function for the public's benefit over the long term. Without them, there will be no mentors, no institutional memories, and no experienced leadership. If you are not content with channel-surfing and the presumption that public service is just another job, then for you the possibility of really making a difference exists.

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