Executive Summary

Despite relatively equal numbers of men and women represented in mid-level municipal management, only 12% of current city managers are female. Much is known about the challenges women face in career advancement, yet there is less clarity on what strategies women use to overcome these challenges. This research examines how female managers use career advancement strategies and their perceived effectiveness. Respondents indicated that there is no “one magic strategy” rather employing more and a diversified set of strategies helped respondents succeed and strategies needed to vary based on career stage.
Background

Current thinking supports the notion that barriers still exist in the career advancement of women, with most of the literature focused in the private sector. Barriers such as the glass ceiling, which is the invisible barrier that keeps women and other minorities from reaching upper management levels in the organization regardless of qualifications, along with gender bias, and lack of mentors are commonly cited. Other studies focus primarily on the barriers women face outside of the workplace, in the home. Between housework tasks, childrearing, and their spouse’s career, women often feel they must choose between a career and a family. And many choose the latter. This study explores the extent to which these barriers exist, along with testing the usefulness of career advancement strategies against the literature.

Strategies

Though the literature presents detailed accounts of the challenges women face in pursuing and maintaining a career in local government management, there is little discussion of the strategies successful managers have used to overcome these barriers. Most “advice” on career advancement strategies is focused on women in the private sector. Three of the most common strategies are: mentoring, “working harder,” and networking.

1. Mentorship. A mentor is defined as “higher ranking, influential, senior organizational member with advanced experience and knowledge that are committed to providing upward mobility and support to a protégé’s professional career.” Though much of the research on women and mentoring originates from private sector sources, public focused research confirms this as an issue for women in public service. Davidson and Burke (1994) argue that “mentors play a critical role in career development” and that “they may be even more critical to the career success of women than men.” In fact, “more women than men who advance to corporate management have mentors, and women who fail to reach these levels cite the absence of mentors as critical to their failure.” Furthermore, “[p]ersons with mentors have been found to have more organizational policy influence and access to important people and resources, and higher promotion rates, income, and income satisfaction.”

2. Working Harder. The notion that women have to work harder at the same position as their male counterparts is often discussed in the gender and leadership research. In a three year study of female executives to determine which factors contributed to a woman’s success, Morrison et al. found that “women, more than men, were also required to take career risks, to be tough, have a strong desire to succeed and to have an impressive presence.” Other activities classified as “working harder” include: working longer hours, taking on tasks that no one wants, and taking leadership positions whenever possible.

3. Networking. The third strategy commonly mentioned in women and leadership literature is networking through membership in professional or community based organizations. These associations can be either formal or informal.

The literature suggests a tangible benefit from being part of a network. In fact, “Kram and Isabella (1985) examined the role of peer relationships and found they provided a range of developmental supports for personal and professional growth” and that the benefits from peers “were similar to those obtained from mentors.”

However, women face several challenges in networking. First, “[i]t has been suggested that women lack access to informal networks with male colleagues—the “old boy” network.” Furthermore, “women may not be aware of informal networks and their importance and potential usefulness, they may not be as skilled as men in building informal networks, and may prefer to communicate with others.
similar to themselves. However, if they are able to establish these relationships, women can experience a range of benefits, including obtaining knowledge of best practices and a peer sounding board and support group.

Despite the research conducted on the strategies women can use to overcome barriers and advance their careers, there is a clear gap in the perceived benefit of these strategies for female city managers. Thus, my research question is: How do female managers employ career advancement strategies and what is their perception of the usefulness of such strategies?

**Research Methodology**

I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews from a national convenience sample of current female city managers during December 2011-January 2012. The sample was constructed using ICMA’s “Who’s Who” database of city managers of communities with populations above 50,000 and found 25 female managers with contact information listed. Male managers were not included in the sample. I contacted 22 of the managers in random order through an email and follow-up call. Of the 22 contacted, ten managers verbally consented to speak with me. The remaining twelve either could not or would not participate in the study. Though the sample was drawn from a national database, nearly half of the managers I contacted reside in California. As a result of this bias, five of the ten managers interviewed live in California. The other managers reside in Washington, Virginia, Minnesota, Florida, and Colorado.

The interview protocol had three main sections mirroring the primary research questions. The protocol elements drew heavily on the literature but also allowed for the collection of unanticipated responses. The first section explored the barriers and challenges managers have personally faced during their career. The second section tested the three primary strategies mentioned in the literature: mentorship, “working harder,” and networking. The final section delved deeper into work-life and family challenges that are so often mentioned in literature, along with the practices that have helped managers balance their personal life with their careers. Finally, I asked the managers to share other practices they have personally employed that were not discussed earlier. A description of my sample and the complete interview protocol can be found in Appendices A and B.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Obstacles**

This study evaluated six common obstacles to female career advancement: gender bias, family obligations, the perception of one’s abilities by the board, colleagues, or former bosses, lack of a mentor, lack of confidence in one’s abilities, and lack of professional development opportunities. Managers were also asked to provide information about obstacles not included in the six tested. Results from the interviews reveal that there is not one single barrier that all female managers believe they have faced. However, gender bias and family obligations were the two barriers most frequently cited among participants, as sixty percent of managers responded “yes” for each. Details about these obstacles can be found in Appendix C.

**Strategies**

Despite the multitude of research that explores the obstacles women face in management, many women are able to overcome such obstacles and become the manager. But the strategies these managers use to do so are less available. The second section of my interview was designed to gain insight into how women have been successful in pushing beyond the challenges they have faced.

The three probed strategies I used in this section are based on literature on women and leadership.
Mentorship

A mentorship experience is mentioned consistently in the literature as an important component of a successful career. The interview indicated that 80% of the respondents had had a traditional mentorship relationship, and 50% reported having multiple mentors. All of the managers who had at least one mentor felt that the presence of this relationship was important. When asked to rate their mentorship experience on a 1-5 scale (with 5 being that mentorships were extremely important), the average score of managers who had a mentor was a 4.5. This finding is consistent with both the public and private sector leadership literature.

The eight managers that had mentor relationships reported a total of 20 mentors. Of the 20 mentor relationships, only two developed as part of a structured program. The rest were developed mutually and organically, which could mean that formal mentorship programs are either not as prevalent, or desirable as more natural relationships in local government. Further, the use of multiple mentors suggests that different mentors were more/less appropriate at various points in the manager’s career. This notion is supported by study participants, as a few managers reported that promotions were often coupled with the development of a new mentor relationship.

Research on mentorship in the City Management profession has found that both genders prefer same sex mentors. But because “there are significantly fewer women in the universe of possible mentors,” the participants’ mentors were most often males who were superior in the organization. Only three of the managers reported having a female mentor, and several of those who did not have a female manager felt as though this was an obstacle to their advancement.

Working harder

The second strategy I explored was the notion of “working harder.” All managers in my sample reported that they are hard workers, and mentioned various activities that they engage in (either currently or in the past) that classified as such. Sixty percent of participants reported that they have worked longer hours than others, and forty percent each have taken on projects that others do not want and/or taken leadership positions on projects. The mean rating (on a 1-5 scale) of “working harder” was a 4.6.

However, though all of the managers reported working harder, 40% clarified that they did not feel that they had to work harder than anyone else to advance their career. Rather, these women simply consider hard working as part of their personality and were interested in their work. Furthermore, there is a performance component that is not captured only by “working hard.” The managers in my study perceived this practice as required for both male and female advancement. Thus the common saying, “women must work twice as hard as men to be thought half as good” may not necessarily be true in the context of city management.

Under the heading of “working harder,” three managers discussed management style. They shared what they felt was the most effective management style for women in a field that is dominated by men. Women in leadership roles face the unique dilemma of balancing hard and soft. In the words of one manager, “the workplace is built by men for men.” But there is some disagreement among female managers on whether women should assimilate into the male culture and “act like a man” because it makes them more relatable, or if embracing their gender leads to more authenticity as a leader. Two managers argued for the importance of assimilating into the traditional, male dominated managerial culture and not “expect[ing] others to treat you differently because you’re a woman,” while one adamantly championed “staying true to yourself.” Though these strategies are full of stereotypes and generalizations, management style is something that at least some women managers struggle with in their careers.
Networking

All ten managers interviewed reported belonging to professional and/or community organizations. The mean importance of networking was rated as a 4.6. But managers largely felt that membership alone is not enough to advance one’s career. Rather, active participation and relationship building is key in gaining the benefit of using networks. Several managers reported that they take a leadership role within their associations, and that the benefit comes from active participation.

While all ten members of my sample are members of a mixture of formal and informal organizations and associations, there are few other similarities. These managers’ motivations for joining such associations range from receiving an enormous benefit from learning about best practices and connecting with others, to feeling as though they are obligated to join, to simply enjoying getting out of the office every now and then.

The managers also differed in their thoughts about which type of network is more beneficial. Some of the managers have come to depend on the support they receive from community-based or informal organizations, while others feel that membership in local groups is risky because it can blur the lines between friendship and professionalism. Instead, these managers find that their membership in national, professional-based organizations does not include this dilemma.

In-depth look: Family

The third major component of my interview protocol focused in on the challenges female managers faced specifically in balancing their career with a family, the practices managers use to achieve this balance, and how effective such strategies really are.

Most managers believe not only that career has impacted their family, but that family has also impacted their career. Eight of the ten managers interviewed reported that they have personally faced familial challenges due to their career, and these challenges have manifested themselves in a variety of ways. Commonly mentioned challenges these female managers face are they have to miss events such as vacations and school functions, their “me” time suffers, and their ability to fulfill their role as a spouse is impacted.

According to a study conducted by Kelly et al., female city managers were much more likely to be living alone, never married or divorced, and living without dependents other than their male counterparts. All of the managers in my sample are currently married, which is inconsistent with these findings. However, three of the managers in my sample are divorced. Though I did not probe them on whether they believed their career was a factor in their divorce, one of the managers did volunteer that her career was a factor. Additionally, two of the city managers do not have children, which is also consistent with the study by Kelly et al. However, eight of the managers I sampled do have children. Generally, these managers say that their career did not impact their decision to have children, but it may have influenced the timing of such events, as some of the managers waited to establish themselves professionally before growing their families. Overall, a majority of managers in my study had both a family and a career, which is inconsistent with the literature.

Work-life Strategies

The managers in my study employ a combination of multiple strategies to balance work and family. The most widely used and effective strategy is a strong partnership with their spouse. One manager told me that “my spouse takes on more traditional ‘female’ roles—he cleans and stays home to watch our son,” while another manager reports that she and her husband “negotiate all of the time about everything.”
about everything to make sure that all household tasks get done and kids’ activities are attended.” Yet another manager stated that her husband was able to retire when she became the city manager, thus having a lot of flexibility.

Furthermore, two of the managers reported that they actually had more flexibility upon becoming the manager than they did previously during their careers. Some have found that they are able to schedule time with their family in the same way they plan for any other meeting.

Technology is another tool that these managers use to create a flexible work schedule because it allows them to remain connected with their work, even if they cannot physically be in the office due to a family circumstance such as a sick child. However, this technology has a downside in that managers, regardless of gender, can never completely be “off the clock.” While some of the women in my study admit to doing work while they are at home, they find it helpful to set boundaries with their council and staff about which circumstances warrant an out-of-office contact. Another manager reported that she waits until her children are asleep before engaging in any work that she may have brought home.

Ultimately, many of the managers interviewed do not believe that they have completely succeeded in balancing their work and family lives, but they seem to have found arrangements that they find personally sufficient.

V. Conclusions, Recommendations, Future research

Based on the results of this study, obstacles are still present for women who pursue a career in city management. Fortunately, strategies exist that current managers perceive as being helpful in overcoming these obstacles. These include strategies such as joining professional organizations, working longer hours, or seeking out a mentor relationship. However, results of this study reveal that none of these strategies is thought of as absolutely essential to success. Rather, the strategies are “tools in the toolbox,” and should be thought as such for aspiring managers.

Furthermore, there is no clear roadmap for using these strategies. Though the managers in the study generally found the three tested strategies to have a benefit for them personally, how prevalent each strategy is in their career, and how exactly the strategies have been employed vary. Thus, there are questions to making these strategies work.

Recommendations and Future Study

This study will hopefully initiate a conversation about how women can use common strategies to advance their careers. However, this study does not consider the role organizations and academic institutions have (or can have) in influencing the use and efficacy of such strategies. Two topics for further research include a look at ways in which organizations can create an environment and culture conducive to mentor relationships and the organizations that provide the most effective types of networks for women. One possible way for national and state associations to facilitate mentorships is emphasizing these relationships at conference sessions and creating formal mentorship networks among interested members.
APPENDIX A
Sample Description

**Family**
- 100% married
- Median length of marriage: 20 years
- Median number of children: 1.5

**Work**
- Amount of time served as a manager: 6 months-25 years
- Median length of service: 3 years

**Education**
- 100% have bachelor’s degrees
- 80% have master’s degrees
- 20% have professional certificates

**Advanced Degrees**

- Business Administration 2
- Public Administration (or similar) 5
- Social Work 1
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

My name is Emily Leik and I am a second year MPA student at UNC Chapel Hill. We spoke earlier and agreed to conduct the interview at this time. Are you still willing to participate at this time? As a reminder, you do not have to answer any question you prefer to skip. You may also stop the interview at any time.

(If agreed to recording) per our agreement, I will be recording this interview to assist with my note taking. I will destroy the recording after I transcribe it.

This interview will ask you about your personal experience with what the literature identifies as some of the obstacles women face in advancing their career, along with your use of some of the practices that are commonly mentioned. The purpose of this interview is to gain a deeper understanding of your career and your personal experiences with these practices.

Are you willing to speak with me at this time?

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT POSITION

To start, would you please tell me about your career history?

PROBES:
Number of places
Education
Locations
Sizes
How long were you in each place?

BARRIERS/CHALLENGES

Can you think of challenges or obstacle you currently face or have faced as you have worked in this field? What are they?

PROBES:
Gender bias
Family obligations
Sexual harassment or inappropriate conduct related to it
Perceptions of your abilities by the board/colleagues/former bosses
Lack of mentor
Lack of confidence in oneself (being risk averse, desire to be perfect)
Lack of professional development opportunities
Other barriers

What strategies have you used to be successful in overcoming these obstacles?
**In the following section I am going to ask you about three practices that have been indicated as helpful in career progress. They are mentorship, working harder, and networking. I am curious to learn if and how you have used these practices.**

MENTORSHIP

The first is mentorship. Did you/do you have a mentor?

If so, tell me about them

Who was it?

  Male/female
  Position/role

When did it develop?

How did it develop?

  Organic/structured
  Who initiated?

What is the current nature of your relationship?

On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being that mentorship did not help you at all, and 5 being that your mentor has had a pivotal role in your ability to succeed, how beneficial do you think having a mentor has been to your career advancement? Why?

WORKING HARDER

The notion that women have to work harder at the same position as men is often talked about in the gender and leadership research. Is this something you think you have observed or personally experienced?

If so, what types of activities did you do to “work harder?”

PROBES:

  Taking jobs/tasks no one wants
  Take risks (taking on positions or tasks out of comfort zone that have the potential for failure; not being “safe”)
  Work longer hours
  Take leadership positions on a project

On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being that working harder did not help you at all, and 5 being that this practice has had a pivotal role in your ability to succeed, how effective do you think working harder has been to your career? Why?

NETWORKING

Membership in professional or community organizations is also considered to be a tool for career advancement. What types of organizations or networks are you a part of?
On a scale of 1-5, how effective do you think your association with these networks has been to your career? Why?

**In this next section, I am going to ask a few questions about your family.**

**PERSONAL INFORMATION**

First, could you tell me a little bit about your family?
Do you have a partner? If so, how long have you been with this person?

Does your partner work? (full-time, part-time?)

Do you have children?
   **PROBES:**
   How many?
   Ages?

**FAMILY**

Much of the literature on women and leadership mentions the challenge women face in trying to balance having a career and having a family. Do you think that your career has had an impact on your decision or ability to have a family? If so, how so?

   **PROBES:**
   Decision to get married
   Ability to fulfill role as a spouse
   Dual career tensions
   Decision to have children
   Ability to raise children
   Time spent with family
   Divorce

What practices have helped you reconcile these struggles, or have helped improve your ability to balance life and work?

   **PROBES:**
   Is the work schedule flexible at all?
   Did you delay marriage?
   Did you delay childbirth?
   Do you have a stay at home partner?

On a scale of 1-5, how effective have these practices been in helping you to maintain balance between work and family?
Now that we have had a chance to discuss some specific career advancement strategies, can you think of any others that you have employed?

How effective do you think they have been?
APPENDIX C
Obstacles Faced During Career

Table 1: Obstacles Faced by Managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacle</th>
<th>% Managers Responding “yes”</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Bias</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Obligations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Mentor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Confidence in One’s Abilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Professional Development Opportunities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Gender Bias

Six managers reported that they had experienced gender bias during their career, but this bias manifested itself in different ways. For example, some managers cited more “traditional” biases such as lower pay. Others noted a more societal view of gender bias, such as their observation of the scarcity of female managers in the profession as a whole. A third group cited more organizational and interactional biases, such as differential treatment by colleagues or their council based on gender.

Family Obligations

Of the managers I spoke with, six discussed their challenges with balancing their career with their family obligations. In fact four of the six managers that reported this barrier did so un-probed, suggesting that this barrier is very salient in the minds of these women.

Lack of Mentor

Most managers did not report the lack of a mentor as being a barrier. This is true even among those managers who did not have a mentor. However, the two managers that did consider the lack of a mentor to be a challenge that they faced specified that it was the lack of a female mentor that was the real barrier.

Lack of Confidence

Most of the barriers I examined are external challenges that constrain the managers. However, a lack of confidence represents an internal, self-imposed barrier. Regardless of the source, all barriers influence a manager’s ability to pursue her career aspirations. Most of the managers exhibited confidence in their knowledge and abilities relating to the job. In fact, only two of the ten managers interviewed reported that they had to overcome a lack of confidence in their own abilities. One manager reported that when considering applying for the manager position, “I didn’t know if I could handle the multitude of things to do.”

Lack of Professional Development Opportunities

Most managers did not feel that they did not have ample opportunities for professional development. However, the two managers that did experience this challenge reported that they felt as though women were invited to fewer professional opportunities to grow and develop than their male counterparts.
Other Challenges

The challenges that the managers in my sample experienced are not limited to the pre-made list I compiled. When asked about additional barriers, two managers reported that they had experienced age bias in their careers. Moreover, one manager explained that she had to overcome the stereotypes others had of her based on the department she worked in prior to becoming the manager.

Two managers reported an additional self-imposed challenge they had to overcome: job security. The position of the manager is much more publicized, political, and thus fragile than other local government positions. Accepting the position of manager is in some ways opening one’s self to the public criticism. The managers that reported this barrier really had to step outside of their personal comfort zone to further their careers.