



The Governance Professional

28 April 2020

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A new councillor once asked me “who do I go to if I want to know something in council?”. My answer was the Governance Advisor.

“Who is that?” asked the Councillor.

It is a question that I often think about in my travels around New Zealand working in the local government sector.

Every local authority has at least one governance professional within its ranks under many different titles. Some local authorities give the role part time to an Executive Assistant, others have a dedicated team with responsibilities to support the governance system at their council.

The people who hold this role go under a range of titles - Committee Secretary, Governance Advisor, Committee Advisor, Administration Officer, Governance Support Officer, Governance Coordinator, the list goes on. Sadly, I once heard a very senior politician ask in a meeting when a particular point was being discussed “whether the typist had got that down for the minutes”! My disappointment at hearing a staff member who holds such an important role in the council structure not being acknowledged for her governance professional role in that meeting, was deep.

So, what is the role of a Governance Professional?

When I ask Governance Professionals what the main ingredients of their job is, it invariably includes at the top of the list the production of agenda and minutes and yes, they are important functions. But the job has much more depth and breadth to it. Other examples of the role include:

- Coordination of reports with the Chief Executive and Senior Managers for the development of a meeting agenda (including public excluded items)
- Advice to staff on the use of the report template
- Advice to the organisation on what agenda items can and cannot be dealt with in a public excluded part of a meeting under the law
- Advice to staff on the expectations of elected members around reports
- The bridge between elected members and staff – see figure 1 below
- Coordination with the chair and deputy chair prior to a meeting for meeting set up, staff attendance, presentation requirements, draft recommendations or further information requirements
- Compliance with the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 for public access to meetings including meeting notification and adherence to statutory timeframes

- Advice to the chair and senior staff in meetings in respect to Standing Orders and meeting protocols (speaking order, time limits for speakers, dealing with the procedure for motions and amendments and dealing with disruptive members of the public, to name a few)
- Information for elected members around conflicts of interest (Local Authorities (Members' Interests) Act 1968)
- Recording of the decisions made at meetings and other requirements for the minutes and publication of the minutes
- Use of technology in meetings (public broadcasting of meetings, members participation using audio or audio visual means and technology in the meeting room (PowerPoint, speaker systems, lighting etc.).)

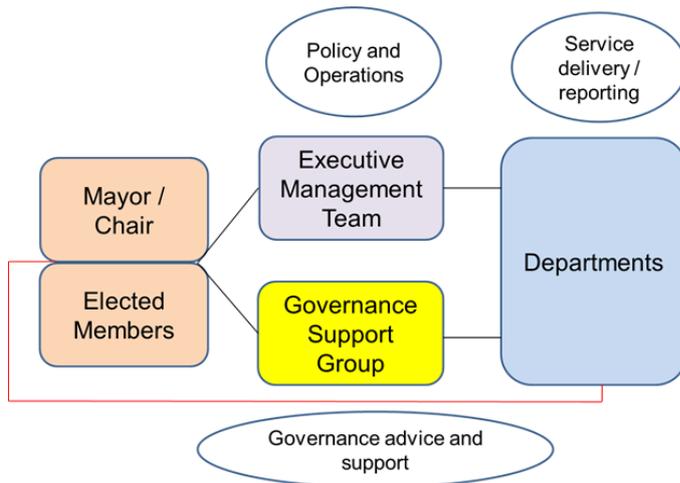


Figure 1 – the position of the governance support group

A number of Governance Professionals hold other roles including the administration of hearings (annual and long-term plans, Resource Management Act hearings, alcohol licence hearings, etc.), processing official information and Ombudsman requests, support for local government election process and representation reviews, and civic function arrangements, again, to name a few.

The following are some observations of the development of the Governance Professional role (not necessarily in a positive manner) that I have observed over the last 15 years.

- Pay – generally not on par with other professional roles in Council and often grouped with basic administration roles which clearly the role is not
- Seniority – the role in years gone past was considered a senior role with influence and providing advice to senior officers and elected members. While this role may still be evident, the recognition of the role being at a senior level is not in many cases. Staff holding the role are often many layers down the management structure to a point where the public and elected members do not see the connection between the responsibility and importance of the role in the overall governance system
- Role with senior elected members – where the role, in the past, was often seated in meetings next to the chair to enable the Advisor to communicate and advise the chair directly, this is often not the case these days. Other senior officers will sit next to the chair – whilst those staff have a technical interest in the meeting, they do not necessarily have the governance advisory role skills to assist the chair and the meeting
- Training – many staff in the role do not get access to governance related training and development opportunities

- Stepping stone – many senior officials in local government of my generation (50+ years of age) who have enjoyed a long career in local government (which is a great sector to work in) used the opportunity “on the way up the management chain” to spend time in the governance team to gain political acumen skills and gain a deeper understanding of the decision making process at a political level. This is not anywhere near as prevalent these days and is a missed opportunity for aspiring senior executives.

What needs to change?

Great question. There are significant benefits for every local authority to have a highly skilled, well trained and effective governance support team (even a team of one) that are effective in managing the political systems and processes needed to enable effective debate and decision-making by elected members. This team will be across all the statutory processes that cover elected members and their specific roles. The Governance Professional will be recognised for the knowledge around the political systems, decision making processes and rules and regulations. They will have excellent communication skills in and outside meetings and will be the “go to” person for staff and elected members around anything to do with the roles and processes that elected members operate under.

And remunerate them for the value that they bring to the organisation as a senior officer with a highly responsible and critical role.

And finally, what the role is not:

- To make and serve refreshments
- A verbatim recorder of who said what at meetings
- Just the administrator who is there to provide information that others forgot or did not prepare for the meeting
- Someone that is put in a corner and ignored!

Steve McDowell – Background

Steve was a Committee Secretary at the Mt Roskill Borough Council and then Auckland City Council in the 1980s. He held senior management roles in governance support, customer services and hearings management from 1989 – 1999 when he was appointed Group Manager Democracy Services until he left Council in 2006 to set up his own consultancy and subsequently established Meeting and Governance Solutions Limited with Vern Walsh in 2008.

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