The Experiences of Being a Victorian Local Government Chief

Executive: Is Gender a Factor?

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The Experiences of being a Victorian Local Government Chief Executive: Is Gender a factor?

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the variations in experiences of female and male CEOs in Victorian local government, in order to establish if gender in any way either facilitates or hinders career development and experience.

This paper is based on a DBA research study that broadly examined the career development and identity of Victorian local government chief executives. Phenomenography is the selected qualitative approach, as it provides a framework for describing experience and examining variations in experience. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 CEOs and Councillors and the interview transcripts formed the basis of the research data. Research findings were subsequently substantiated by the research participants.

The paper examines career path and development and ultimately the experiences of being a CEO.

The study identified a strong and recurrent theme of institutionalised sexism within the sector and as such finds that the experiences of females and males do differ in a number of ways. The identity of CEO is almost always assumed to be male. Female CEOs experience more scrutiny than their male colleagues and suggest that their actions reflect not only on them as individuals but also on all women. Female CEO performance also appears to be evaluated more severely than their male colleagues and in many instances performance outcome is seen as being gender based.

Keywords: gender in organisations, gender and work, gender barriers, glass ceiling
INTRODUCTION

Victorian local government organisations, like many others in Australia and overseas, exhibit low levels of female representation at senior management levels, despite high numbers of female employees overall. Sinclair (1998) states that the proportion of female senior executives in the Australian Public Sector is 16% compared with 4 to 5% in the private sector. Local government employs fewer staff than the other two tiers of Australian government, but is the most male-dominated across all management levels (Paddon 2005). Local government employs 125,000 staff, 40% of whom are women (ABS 1997). Victorian local government organisations in 2005 employ 36,797 staff of whom 23,044 (62.6%) are female, a higher percentage than any other State or Territory government (Victorian Grants Commission 2005). At State and Territory government level 61% of 828,000 employees are women, and at the Commonwealth level 46% of the 392,500 staff are women (ABS 1997). Despite the number of women employed in Victorian local government, employment rates of females at more senior levels within Victorian local government are still only marginally higher than other local governments but lower than other tiers of government (Paddon 2005). At the time of this research, of the 79 local government chief executive roles in Victoria, nine are held by women. In order to gather data on the experiences of both male and female CEOs, seven male and seven female CEOs were interviewed, and seven councillors were also interviewed.

The low proportion of senior positions held by women became a research focus some 30 years ago (Adler 1999). Since then there have been numerous studies examining barriers to women’s success at more senior levels and some studies examining women’s success. The majority of these studies are based on the experiences of women in the private sector with few studies focusing on the public sector. Even fewer studies consider the experiences of chief executives officers (CEOs) within the public sector, and only one study particularly investigates women’s representation in Australian local government (Paddon 2005).
The emphasis of such investigations has changed significantly over the past 30 years. Early studies focused on determining the reasons for the low levels of female representation at senior levels, which was often attributed to women’s deficits and their differences from their male counterparts (Jardim & Hennig 1990; Riger & Galligan 1980). In the late 1980s and 1990s the research emphasis shifted towards organisational structures and policies, and the ways in which these impacted on female representation at senior organisational levels (2000a; 2000b). This research predominantly examined how organisational structure and policies created barriers to women’s advancement.

In more recent times the research into women’s representation in organisations has emphasised the identification of women as potential leaders and attempts to give female leaders a voice and identity. Sinclair (1998) suggests that leadership is a social construct and is therefore determined by collective experience, expectations and beliefs, and that embedded in this construct is a sense of leadership being associated with masculinity. In this context, the more recent research focus is on understanding the self-representation and language of management, and exploring how this impacts on women’s career achievements (Lamsa & Sintonen 2001). It is in this context that this study was undertaken.

Relatively little empirical research has compared the career development and identity of female and male CEOs, and few studies have considered the experiences of women who have achieved senior management status, in particular the position of chief executive. In trying to understand why so few women reach senior positions, the research has predominantly been tackled with a view to understanding and identifying the barriers to women’s career progression. The more recent research approach represents an alternative way of understanding women’s under-representation at senior levels by not only focusing on career barriers but by examining the career path and experiences of women who have attained senior positions.

**RESEARCH METHOD AND PROCEDURE**
A qualitative research approach, using a method which explored lived experiences, behaviours and feelings and organisational functioning and culture (Strauss & Corbin 1998) was selected for its suitability to the research topic. One such qualitative research method is phenomenography. It was recognised that this approach would enable particular emphasis to be placed on CEOs describing and explaining their own career development. Phenomenography enables different understandings of reality to be investigated (Marton 1986) and the collective experiences of a group of people to be analysed (Gerber 2001), which was the aim of this research. This method provided access to the specific manifestations of the CEO as a way by which knowledge and understanding of local government CEO career identity and development is determined. This approach emphasises the importance of the research participants’ own accounts, understandings and interpretations of their experiences, with a particular focus on variations in the CEOs’ understanding of their experiences. Phenomenography targets the way that interviewees understand their environment. The desire to identify the different conceptions held on each of the issues (Beers, van Asselt, Vermunt & Kirschner 2003) surrounding the role of local government CEO as reflected by interviewees has led to the development of a new and different understanding of the role of and experiences of local government CEOs.

The research design was based on the aim of giving voice to the research participants and as such validation of the research findings by those participants was regarded as the most ethical manner of validating the findings. It was on this basis that neither the CEOs nor the Councillors were asked to make comment on the other group’s findings. Equal numbers of male and female CEOs were interviewed.

This study was undertaken in two stages. Stage one involved conducting individual interviews with CEOs and Councillors. All interviews occurred in the relevant Council offices. Fourteen interviews were conducted with CEOs (seven males and seven females) and then a further seven with Councillors. This approach was specifically taken so that interview questions for CEOs were derived solely from the pre-established questions and subsequent information
provided by the CEOs, rather than allowing any influence from data collected from the Councillors. As this study primarily related to the career development and identity of CEOs, this data containment was regarded as crucial to minimise the importing of other variables and it also minimised data contamination from influences external to CEO considerations. Each interviewee was provided with a copy of her/his transcript and invited to submit further comments if she/he wished.

Stage two was conducted on completion of analysis of stage one data and involved providing Councillors and CEOs with summaries of the research findings and conclusions. This enabled reactions and responses to the categories and findings developed from the stage one interviews to be gained. Findings relating to CEOs were only presented to the CEO group, and those relating to Councillors were confined to the Councillor group. Neither Councillors nor CEOs were asked to comment on the data collected from the other group.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The findings are presented across three areas relevant to the experience of a Victorian local government CEO.

**Career Development of CEOs**

*Accounting for career development*

Males and females in this study explained and accounted for their career development and experiences differently. The male CEOs characterised their achievement as individually-based and indicative of their individual skill and capacity. In discussing such experiences they make no reference to gender. The female CEOs also identified achievement, but most of them characterised it as something which differentiated them from other women. This was evidenced in a significant number of comments where the female CEOs suggested their achievement of a particular role was either the first for a woman or unusual for a woman. Female CEOs’ career paths are therefore differentiated from those of other women and in this way they see
themselves as standing apart from them. Significantly, these female CEOs experienced a recurring sense of being judged as a woman, rather than as an individual. Gender is always a consideration in explaining most of their career moves.

This is consistent with the findings of Wahl (2001) who similarly argues that men are seen to possess the necessary management skills, not as men but as individuals, and women managers are more likely to be regarded as not having appropriate skills because they are women. As such, judgement of women is based on gender rather than the individual’s own skill base. As cited above, in this study the male CEOs clearly suggested that their achievement was individually-oriented, whereas the female CEOs saw their achievement as a statement more about women, than about them individually. Female CEOs were found to be less willing to attribute their achievements to their own skill and were more inclined to cite significant externalities such as parents, mentors and lucky breaks as the triggers of their success.

**Seeking out challenges**

A common theme was found for both male and female CEOs. Both demonstrated a preparedness to move outside their comfort zone in pursuing career opportunities. Many reported seeking new challenges and learning opportunities and demonstrating a willingness to take risks. The motivation for both male and female CEOs is defined as a desire to keep learning and growing. There was no evidence of motivation for career changes being significantly different between the female and male CEOs. This contrasts with the findings of White, Cox and Cooper (1992) who suggest that whereas females are more likely to be motivated to change roles on the basis of seeking heightened challenges, men are more likely to be pursuing higher positions on the corporate ladder. Early career changes, for both males and females in this study, were primarily based on the pursuit of learning and development rather
than a clear sense of direction and defined career path. Only a few of the males were overtly
groomed for particular roles, notably within the Federal government sector.
Career path

Career paths of the majority of female CEOs were found to have followed those of conventional male careers, with only one female CEO having had significant breaks due to family responsibilities, and another reporting that her partner took on home duties so that she could return to work within three months of childbirth. There is strong evidence of commitment to career by all of the female CEOs, with the majority working full time and minimising breaks, thus showing little difference in career progression from their male colleagues. However Fox and Broussine’s (2001) study of local government found that women CEOs tended to have less vertical career paths than their male colleagues and were often balancing domestic and work responsibilities. While similar issues pertaining to family responsibility were clearly raised in this study, this is not identified as a career barrier by the majority of the female CEOs. As with White’s (1995) findings, this study found that career was central in the female CEOs’ lives and family arrangements were adjusted to accommodate work demands.

Dominant culture

Many of the female CEOs described their conscious efforts to fit into the dominant male culture while simultaneously acting as proud ambassadors for other females. This finding is consistent with current literature suggesting that women appear reluctant to draw attention to their gender, and disposed to fit into the existing culture and work environment (Pringle 1999; Olsson 2002; McConnell-Ginet 2000). It is as if being silent about being a woman may make their (unusual) achievement less noticeable or worthy of comment.

Consistent with the work of Olsson (2000a; 2000b; 2002), and Pringle (1999), the female CEOs appeared to use adaptive strategies to cope with their minority status. Adaptive strategies are noted in the literature as a way for women to integrate and fit into the dominant male culture (Olsson 2002). The strategies used by the female CEOs in this study, included maintaining gender neutrality by ensuring that there was no disruption to the dominant male culture; not openly threatening their male colleagues; presenting as androgynous; using male mentors, and
not drawing attention to the female fraternity. This theme emerged consistently and supports Wahl’s (2001) finding that women find ways to behave which fit the organisational norm and minimise the negative repercussions that could hinder career progress.

Selection Experience

Perceived fit

The overriding conception for both male and female CEOs was that the CEO selection process was based mostly on the perceived fit between the CEO and the Council, as well as Councillors’ comfort with their appointee. This confirms earlier work (Still 1994) which suggests that once a manager has moved beyond middle level management the recruitment process is likely to focus on style rather than substance. CEOs consistently commented that Council was likely to focus on the capacity of the individual to represent their values and direction. The underlying assumption was that, at that particular stage of career development, the requirement was not on technical skill but on political nous and the capacity to manage the diverse range of portfolios and interests in local government. This finding was consistent with that of Fawcett and Pringle (2000) who suggest that senior appointments are more likely to be made on the basis of networks, politics and relationships than on skills and experience alone.

Personal disclosure

The majority of female CEOs suggested that at interview they were asked either directly or indirectly about their personal circumstances. In the one instance where Council did not specifically seek this information, the female volunteered personal information because she felt that Council should know that her family life would not hinder her commitment to the organisation. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Fox and Broussine (2001) whose women respondents reported being subjected to questions at interview that they did not believe were asked of men. Only one male advised that he was asked about family life and his
sense was that this was related to his young age at the time of appointment. The findings noted demonstrate a weakness in the recruitment process of CEOs.

**Role of female Councillors**

Both male and female CEOs believed that female Councillors may be less inclined to appoint a female CEO and in many instances where female Councillors were on the interview panel this may hinder, rather than assist female applicants in achieving a successful outcome. CEOs suggested that female Councillors probably felt threatened by a female CEO, or uncomfortable dealing with a woman in a senior role. This is consistent with the findings of Wacjman (1998) who suggests that many women undermine other women’s authority as they may be less comfortable dealing with women in positions of authority.

**Experience of Being a CEO**

**Overwhelming accountability**

Both male and female CEOs described an overwhelming sense of organisational accountability, with the CEO taking responsibility for all aspects of the organisation and ultimately ‘wearing’ Council’s assessment of organisational performance and effectiveness. This personal sense of accountability was experienced by both male and female CEOs. The role of CEO is also conceived as being the public face for the organisation, with a demand by Council and community for transparency at all times. This overwhelming sense of accountability and 24-hour availability required, as described by the CEOs, appears to be a new research finding.

**CEO culture**

The dominant culture within local government, according to both male and female CEOs, was one of hegemonic masculinity. All CEOs described a homogenous culture dominated by white, middle-aged men. This confirms previous international findings, which suggest that women chief executives are still a rare sight in modern local government and that there is little diversity
in the mix of CEOs (Hunt 2001). McConnell-Ginet (2000) also contends that gendered attitudes continue to favour males over females in executive recruitment. In this study it is evident that such circumstances lead the individuals, particularly women, to feel like impostors who constantly needed to prove themselves. This experience was shared by only one male, who became CEO at a young age and, as such, was not representative of the dominant profile of the CEO as a middle-aged male. In this way management is institutionalised as being male and of a particular age, and women are seen to be the exception.

There was strong congruence between male and female CEOs in describing the role of CEO as a male domain. This finding confirms earlier research (Hunt 2001; Fox & Broussine 2001; Paddon 2005). Local government CEOs, as a group, are not representative of the broader community and were identified by both male and female CEOs as being dominated by middle-aged Anglo-Saxon males and, as such, an homogeneous group.

The sense of the CEO fraternity being the domain of men creates perceptions of responsibility and heightened scrutiny for the female CEOs, who suggested that at all times they were mindful not only of their own performance but also of the impact it would have on other females. This strong sense of responsibility for all women is consistent with the research of Kram and McCollom-Hampton (1998) who found that the success or failures of individual women reflect on all women. In this study the dominant group, middle-aged men, appeared to be unaware of the gender imbalance. A number of these men commented that they were aware that there were significantly fewer women than men at all three management levels within local government but they did not see this as problematic; rather they saw it as a reflection of the particular functions within local government. This is reflective of the strong focus on engineering, urban planning, and other infrastructure services which are perceived to be the domain of men.

The female CEOs appeared strongly motivated to ensure that they did not threaten their male colleagues or the prevailing culture. For many, this was achieved by maintaining gender neutrality, using their male colleagues as mentors in what appeared to be a patriarchal role and
ensuring that the current power balance was not threatened in any way. While the female CEOs were aware of how few in number they were, and discussed it with each other, the topic was seldom broached with their male colleagues.

**Personal cost and support mechanisms**

The role of CEO is isolating and comes at a personal cost. Female CEOs identify the emotional toll of the role, but none of the male CEOs make any direct reference to a personal cost. While most CEOs suggested that networks with colleagues were important, a number of male CEOs suggested that theirs was a very competitive environment where CEOs vied for each other’s jobs and therefore they approached the networks with a level of mistrust.

Female CEOs acknowledged this competitive environment but indicated they had established their own female network. For many female CEOs this support was a lifeline providing a forum where issues could openly and safely discussed. Particularly telling was the suggestion by a number of the females that they could not have maintained the level of openness in the group if male colleagues had been present. This network represented a mechanism for women to test ideas and experiences in a way that allowed them to drop their guard and share vulnerabilities.

**Working with Councillors**

Both male and female CEOs believed the most complex and difficult part of their role was working with Council. Broussine (2000) similarly found that the capacity to work at the political dimension is regarded by CEOs as the most challenging and problematic aspect of the role. Consistent with Kloot and Martin (2001), accountability to Councillors is regarded as high priority. In this study the tension manifested itself, for both male and female CEOs, in the need to manage Council objectives while simultaneously responding to the incongruous needs and wants of individual Councillors. Occasionally, tensions appeared to be placed on the CEO because of political agendas and expectations of an individual Councillor that ran counter to those of Council. CEOs suggested that they had to carefully manage such conflicting
expectations and that they needed to interact at the political interface in an impartial manner if they wished to survive. In determining how to respond to and prioritise the needs of individual Councillors, CEOs reported making political decisions, despite their assertions that they attempted to remain impartial. By virtue of their role and interface with Councillors they inevitably have to make decisions based on the politics of the Council.

CONCLUSIONS

This research found a strong culture of hegemonic masculinity in the senior management levels of local government in Victoria. Female CEOs suggested women in management roles experienced more scrutiny than did their male counterparts and believed that their actions were seen to reflect on other women, not just on themselves. Whilst career path development was similar for male and female CEOs, they accounted for the experience differently.

Both male and female CEOs believed that it was more difficult for women to be appointed to the role of CEO and that, once appointed, they were subjected to much more scrutiny than were their male colleagues.

Both male and female CEOs suggested that the most difficult part of their role involved the political interface, particularly the task of managing the relationship with Councillors.

The experience of the female CEOs is notably different from that of their male colleagues. As a group they are still tentative about their position within the CEO fraternity and have attempted to adapt to the dominant culture and have not in any way challenged it. This is also evident in the relatively cautious manner in which they described their experiences, unlike their male colleagues who were far more open about their thoughts on Councillors. Undoubtedly from both a male and female CEO perspective, gender does play a distinctive part in the experiences of the CEO.
REFERENCES


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