

# In Brief



## EMPLOYMENT

### Fair Share

A consultant's tips for navigating shared positions

BY ALISON WUENSCH

Small local governments often have limited resources to work with, including staffing. This is true for many of the small governments dotting Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, where employee counts can be quite small. This can also be the case for nonprofits dedicated to local government. However, two small local government nonprofits in Allegheny County came

up with an innovative way to approach this situation—a shared employee. Me.

I got started in local government through an internship program that placed local undergraduate and graduate students with local governments for specific projects. It is a fantastic program that invites students seeking internships to the world of local government, supplementing their internship experiences with educational resources and experiences in local government, as

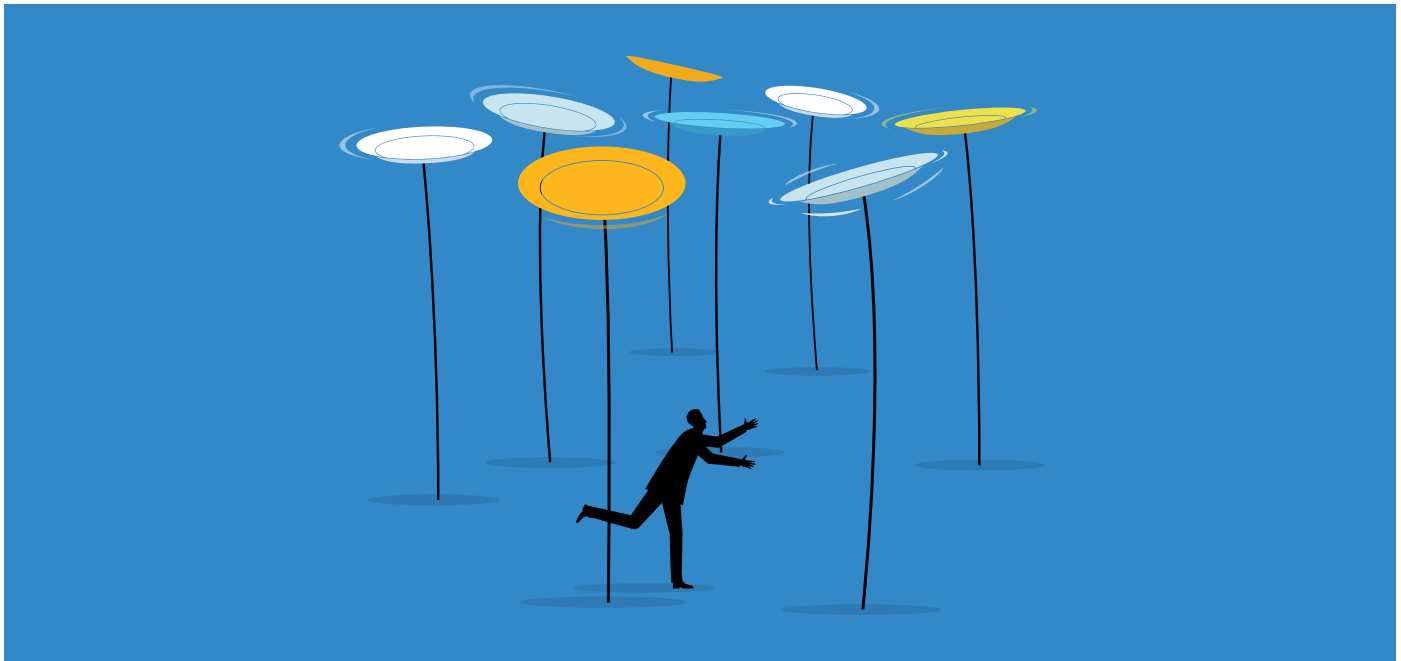
well as support from the staff of the local government nonprofit.

I fell in love with local government during this internship. While getting my degree in public policy, I always thought I would land in state or federal government, not aware of the possibilities in local government. My career advisor at school directed me to this internship, for which I will be forever grateful. I had an enriching and empowering professional experience not only at my placement site, but also through relationships with the nonprofit staff and fellow interns.

Naturally, when I graduated a year later, I turned to the local government nonprofit that hosted my internship program for advice or potential opportunities on how to pursue a career in local government in Allegheny County. I was just hoping for a nudge or two in the right direction, so I was surprised when the executive director got back to me about a possible position with the non-profit itself.

The executive director is a well-respected and inspiring woman in the local government community, and I was excited about the possibility of working with her, but she cautioned me that the position was a bit unusual. It was a shared position between her local government nonprofit and another local government nonprofit based in Allegheny County. I was immediately hooked on the idea. I was incredibly eager to learn about and support local government in the area, and I was excited by the idea of hearing perspectives of local government leaders throughout the county, building relationships with many local governments, and supporting their activities.

The idea was powerful and innovative, but its execution was more difficult. The board members of both organizations recognized the potential of this idea, given that both organizations were heavily involved with local government activities throughout Allegheny County and worked with many of the same individuals, local



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governments, and partner organizations. One organization focused primarily on education and local government support services. This organization leads several fantastic flagship educational programs, including a municipal intern program and a course for newly elected officials in Southwestern Pennsylvania. In addition, they provide financial health assessment services with the assistance of local consultants, produce webinar series, host networking events, support community and economic development activities, including blight mitigation, and, at the time of my tenure there, were working on launching a code enforcement program aimed at drawing more young people into code enforcement. The other organization was a membership organization for local governments throughout Allegheny County. They also ran a retirement program for

member governments, maintained distinct membership organizations for different municipal designations in Pennsylvania, and hosted conferences and events for their local government members. In addition, they ran a small consulting service for local governments staffed by consultants who had spent their careers in local government.

On paper, these two organizations meshed well. Many suggested that the education focus of one nonprofit was complementary with the membership focus of the other nonprofit. Unfortunately, however, it was not that straightforward in practice. But even after leaving my position with these two organizations, I remain convinced about the potential power of sharing staff between organizations, whether they be nonprofits or local governments themselves.

### Lessons learned

Based on my experience, I believe there are a few key principles to put in place before embarking on sharing an employee. First, create and enact a specific shared vision for the position, rather than a loose plan. Initially, both executive directors seemed ready to jump in, and due to the unique nature of the position and the fact that the boards of both organizations were on board, I was under the impression that there was a specific plan and vision for my newly created position. I failed to ask enough questions about this initially, and my bosses were too resource-constrained to help me develop a plan and expected me to drive my position. There is both freedom and risk in that, but ultimately, there was no shared vision for the position beyond being another resource

for them to call upon when there was so much work to be done in both organizations.

This leads to my next lesson learned: When creating a shared position, ensure that job duties align, not just the missions of the respective organizations. The respective missions of the organizations fit together quite well on paper. Both organizations had been working together for years and served similar but distinct purposes in the local government ecosystem of Allegheny County and southwestern Pennsylvania. But I quickly learned that this did not mean that my job duties for both organizations were similar. With one organization, my responsibilities depended more on my previous experience and knowledge of local government in Allegheny County, as well as my recent graduate degree in public policy; while with the other organization, my responsibilities were more strictly administrative. This dissonance in my identity as an employee led to frustration and ultimately led me to move on from the position. Neither working culture was right or wrong, but I did not realize until after I started how different the two organizations viewed work culture and job responsibilities, and their leaders didn't realize it, either.

Which leads to my third lesson learned: Sharing an employee requires tightly integrated communication between the executive directors of both organizations, not just between the employee and the respective executive directors. Initially, I had a joint interview with both of the executive directors. When I started my position, I was under the impression that there was frequent communication between the two, suggesting that not only would I have frequent communication with both of them, but they also had frequent communication with each other, not only regarding my position but also other aspects that come with serving similar local government ecosystems in Allegheny County. I quickly learned that this was not the case and was often requested to relay information between my bosses. This approach proved to be inefficient and not as effective as if we

had all been in communication with each other at the same time.

Additionally, part of the challenge of effective communication was that I had two different email addresses, one for each organization. This quickly proved to be challenging, and I ended up relying on one email address more than the other, which likely led to confusion not only for me but also for the people I was communicating with. This helped contribute to the two parts of the position feeling very distinct.

Scheduling and work environment also contributed to the compartmentalization of my job responsibilities. I spent Monday and Tuesday with one organization, Wednesday and Thursday with the other organization, and half a day with each on Friday. This division of time during the week left me feeling like I never had enough time to dig into either part of my job, and left me feeling like a part-time employee of both organizations. Additionally, both organizations had different in-person and remote expectations that sometimes varied from week to week, adding to my feeling that I didn't have a consistent schedule.

## Sharing an employee is a shared commitment

Overall, the concept of a shared position is powerful and innovative, but it must be carefully conceptualized and planned out to make it work well, both for the organizations and for the employee. While the concept of a shared position may be appealing to organizations that are resource-constrained and see the value of one position adding capacity to multiple organizations, the position itself must be carefully envisioned and planned. It is likely tempting for organizations to focus on the added capacity that a shared employee will bring and not the experience of the shared employee, but the experience of the shared employee must be a priority. Prior to hiring for a shared position, the organizations involved must agree on:

- A specific shared vision, including details and a job description.

- A tightly integrated communication plan between organizations and the shared employee, not just between the shared employee and the respective supervisors of each organization.
- Alignment between job duties for all organizations involved, not just between the missions of the involved organizations.
- Thoughtful scheduling and work environment to avoid overly fragmenting the position.

With these lessons in mind, a shared position can provide long-lasting value to all those involved, but careful thought must be given to the sustainability of the position. I am indebted to both organizations for taking a chance on me and nurturing my passion and appreciation for local government, but ultimately, I did not feel I was providing value to the local government ecosystem in Allegheny County and southwestern Pennsylvania as I had hoped. Ultimately, a shared position must be a value add for both the organizations involved and the employee to make this model sustainable. There is certainly a path forward in which a shared position between organizations can serve these purposes, but for this to happen, all parties involved must be well-prepared. I give my employers credit for trying something new, and I intend to encourage rather than dissuade organizations from forming a shared position. However, it is important to be mindful of the risks involved and only move forward with a clear and shared understanding among all parties. ■



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