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One important effect of increasing localised school autonomy, authority, responsibility and accountability has been a growing yet understated recognition that effective business management is an essential component of educational leadership. Education business is expanding and becoming more complex and requires propitious oversight. As a result, school business managers are being quietly yet rapidly thrust into the spotlight. Despite the lack of fanfare or headline-striking attention, significant and widespread fundamental changes are occurring as the public and education professionals wake-up to the enormity and primacy of school business work.

Education takes approximately one third of government budgets in most advanced societies, and in the current fiscal climate, governments worldwide are demanding further reforms for education to become more ‘cost-effective’ and efficient, to increase performance, to be responsive to more sophisticated ‘consumers’ with increasing expectations, while being more transparent, accountable and demonstrating ‘VFM’ – ‘value-for-money’. As a consequence, the business associated with education is coming into sharper focus.

Research involving business managers across all sectors and levels of education in all Australian states in 2010 and 2011 produced valuable information about the role they currently play (Starr, 2012). They are responsible for:

- financial management (budgeting, cash management, accounting, forecasting, investments);
- strategy and governance;
- human resource functions;
- compliance, accountability and legal oversight;
- managing buildings, facilities and resources.

Besides these key tasks, business managers oversee the work of ‘front-line’ education support staff and their on-going professional learning and development. Business managers have to keep up-to-date with government policies, systems, programs and legislation, while being responsible for meeting the demands of numerous stakeholder groups. They manage extended services and relationships with suppliers, parents, the community and professionals from other agencies. Business managers are expected to be entrepreneurial and creative to extract utmost business benefits for institutions and their students. They identify and make application to new sources of funding and secure savings by eradicating wastage and duplication so that maximum funds are targeted at teaching and learning. Swaps, sharing, cross-institutional cooperation and mutual usage schemes - prosumption measures (Botsman & Rogers, 2010) - are increasingly part of these efforts. School business managers oversee large and small scale facilities developments and maintenance. They must ensure ‘value for money’, while complying with rigorous external inspections, audits and regulatory requirements. Documented ‘evidence’ is now required by governments for many operations and decisions - a role that business managers are increasingly shouldering on behalf of educational professionals.

School business management necessitates simultaneous ‘big picture’ and fine detail insights and oversight, multi-tasking, and high level drive, commitment and energy in environments that present untold interruptions and unexpected events. They have to be highly organised,

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Business managers increasingly assume responsibility for many tasks that were traditionally the preserve of teachers or educational leaders: pastoral care, teaching assistance, managing the work of integration and multicultural aides, chaplains and well-being workers, organising excursions, camps and breakfast programs, and coordinating and organising casual relief teachers. They oversee yard duty and bus duty rosters. They are involved in marketing, writing grant applications, fund-raising and other extended services. Almost half the business managers said they are involved in timetabling, teacher deployment and student allocation and believed these are the kinds of service that should be delegated to liberate educators from administrative activities. This situation is creating a closer, symbiotic relationship with education peers and giving rise to a paraprofessional status amongst education support staff.

Consequently 55 per cent of business managers participating in the research believed their role statement did not accurately reflect their current working lives. Interviews demonstrated the willingness and ability of business managers to assume responsibility for tasks above and beyond those indicated in their employment contracts. Incumbents believe they possess essential business expertise, while many educational leaders may not. In this sense, they say they often assume an educative function within school leadership teams.

Recognising that many role statements inadequately portray the reality of most business managers’ working lives, members of the Association of School Business Managers in Victorian State Schools developed a generic position description. This document highlights key attributes deemed essential for performing duties concerning human resources management, finance, student administration, general office management, policy, technological management, buildings and facilities management, marketing, after school and vacation care programs, governance and council reporting, school transport, catering, and other non-specific tasks within education. The role description, all-embracing as it is, still includes the ubiquitous catch-all phrase ‘any other duties as required’, recognising that it is impossible to capture all responsibilities that come under the remit of business managers.

Business managers believe educational leaders benefit from their work. They:

- save education leaders’ time and effort, enabling them to focus on educational matters;
- save money, ensure organisational efficiency, effectiveness and viability;
- source and secure resources and services for the benefit of students and teachers;
- contribute business knowledge to decision-making, ensuring more comprehensiveness.

Overseas research backs up these beliefs. United Kingdom studies suggest that business managers save up to 35 per cent of Principals’ time, while the net return on investment for schools hiring a qualified business official can exceed 80 per cent (National College, 2011; PwC, 2010). Where school business is managed by a dedicated professional, education leaders report higher rates of job satisfaction (McKinsey, 2007). Business managers save money, covering all or most of their own salaries within a three year period (NCLSCS and TDA, 2009).

A study into the working lives of school leaders found that Principals mostly work between fifty to eighty hours per week with respondents reporting working at nights, during weekends and holidays to keep up with occupational demands (MIDG, 2010). Those working with business managers reported delegating business, administration and compliance work that would have taken an estimated nineteen extra working hours a week. Business managers create ‘soft-savings’ by enabling educational leaders to reduce their time on business matters to focus on educational work. These ‘soft-savings’ don’t include the greater job satisfaction derived by Principals who also reported reductions in work anxiety about business-related matters, especially those relating to finance, operational procedures and strategic management. These findings are also supported by Southworth’s UK study (2010).

Resources that are saved - including time - are able to be re-invested, creating benefits for students and teachers.

Business managers are ‘indispensable’ (Woods, 2008). Educational leaders work in multi-professional teams, with interdependence required between educators, business and support staff for effective school operation. Complementary knowledge and skill sets are required for
optimal results. The direct and indirect savings business managers create, provides a sound rationale for their appointment, professional advancement and positioning as education business leaders.

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REFERENCES


“...the extraordinary evolution of education business management...”

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