This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

[http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30051859](http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30051859)

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

**Copyright**: 2013, Association of School Business
Career Management

- Take Charge of Your Career
- SBOs Share Their Career Paths
- Options After Retirement

ALSO: 2012 Bridges to the Future Recipients
The Increasing Importance and Imperative of the School Business Manager

Fundamental changes in the profession are occurring as the enormity and primacy of school business work come to be recognized.

By Karen Starr, Ph.D.

One important effect of increasing localized school autonomy, authority, responsibility, and accountability has been a growing yet understated recognition that effective business management is an essential component of educational leadership. The 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. In the current fiscal climate, governments worldwide are demanding further reforms for education to become more “cost-effective” and efficient, to increase performance, and to be responsive to more sophisticated “consumers” with increasing expectations, while being more transparent and accountable and demonstrating VFM—value for money. As a consequence, the business associated with education is coming into sharper focus.

High Expectations
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
• Management of buildings, facilities, and resources.

Besides these key tasks, business managers oversee the work of frontline education support staff and their ongoing 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 apply for 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 and Rogers 2010)—are increasingly parts of these efforts.

School business managers oversee large- and small-scale facilities development and maintenance. They must ensure value for money, while complying with rigorous external inspections, audits, and regulatory requirements. Governments now require documented “evidence” for many operations and decisions—a responsibility that business managers are increasingly shouldering on behalf of educational professionals.

The Big Picture
School business management necessitates simultaneous “big picture” and fine-detail insights and oversight, multitasking, and high-level drive, commitment, and energy in environments that present untold interruptions and unexpected events. They have to be highly organized, efficient, and flexible; keep meticulous records; develop effective operational procedures; be proficient in the use of a range of software programs; possess excellent communication skills; take initiative; be able to prioritize; remain calm and polite; and cope with the stresses of juggling tasks and constantly changing focus.

Business managers increasingly assume responsibility for many tasks that were traditionally the preserve of teachers or educational leaders: pastoral care; teaching assistance; management of the work of integration and multicultural aides, chaplains, and well-being workers; organization of excursions, camps, and breakfast programs; and coordination and organization of casual relief [substitute] teachers.

They oversee yard duty and bus duty rosters. They are involved in marketing, writing grant applications, fundraising, and other extended services. Almost half the business managers said they are involved in timetabling [scheduling], 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 among education support staff.

Consequently, 55% of business managers participating in the research believed their role statement [job description] 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.

Recognizing 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 position description, all-embracing as it is, still includes the ubiquitous catchall phrase “any other duties as required,” recognizing that it is impossible to capture all responsibilities that come under the [purview] 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 organizational 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.

**Fiscal Responsibility**

Overseas research backs up these beliefs. United Kingdom studies suggest that business managers save up to 35% of principals’ time, while the net return on investment for schools hiring a qualified business official can exceed 80% (NCLSCS 2011; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010). Where school business is managed by a dedicated professional, education leaders report higher rates of job satisfaction (McKinsey & Co. 2007).

Business managers save money, covering all or most of their own salaries within a three-year period (NCLSCS & TDAS 2009). A study into the working lives of school leaders found that principals mostly work between 50 and 80 hours per week, with respondents reporting working at nights, during weekends, and on holidays to keep up with occupational demands (MDG 2010). Those working with business managers reported delegating business, administrative, and compliance work that would have taken an estimated 19 extra working hours a week.

School business management necessitates simultaneous “big picture” and fine-detail insights and oversight.

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 related 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 reinvested, creating benefits for students and teachers. Business managers are “indispensable” (Woods 2008). Educational leaders work in multiprofessional teams, with interdependence required among educators, business staff, 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 provide a sound rationale for their appointment, professional advancement, and positioning as education business leaders.

**References**


NCLSCS (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services). 2011. *Why have a school business manager?* Nottingham, UK: NCLSCS.

NCLSCS & TDAS (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services & Training and Development Agency for Schools), 2009. *Discover the benefits of school business managers: Develop the bigger picture.* Manchester, UK: TDAS.


Karen Starr, Ph.D., is chair of School Development and Leadership, Faculty of Arts and Education, at Deakin University in Australia and a member of ASBO’s Editorial Advisory Committee. Email: kstarr@deakin.edu.au. This article is reprinted with permission from *The Australian Educational Leader* Volume 34 Number 4. It has been edited to conform to *School Business Affairs* style.