

# CEOs: How far have you come?

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## The system of local government has evolved over the course of time.

Today, Chief Executive Officers are the recognised leaders of local governments. Currently in Western Australia, we have 138 local governments, directed by their CEOs, who are responsible for managing their organisations and implementing the decisions of their elected members.

The position of CEO is part of a much longer history than you might consider. Throughout history, the need for some form of government has prompted certain community members to rise to the challenge. The role of CEO can actually be traced back to historical figures like the Town Clerks of prior centuries.

How much have these historic and significant roles changed – or remained the same? Upon close reflection, CEOs have strong similarities to these historical counterparts.

## Town Clerks

Town Clerks have been recorded as one of the oldest public servants in local government; a role that was traditionally selected from reliable people, usually with a religious background, but most importantly, those who were committed to the task and were intellectually competent enough to do it. The nature of these local government roles has been thoroughly documented, with similarities between the roles bearing titles such as 'Chief Secretary', 'Chief Clerk' and 'Under Secretary' during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in England. These titles may seem quaint, yet the characteristics of those forebears still resonate with the roles and responsibilities within local governments today.

You may find their duties surprisingly familiar: preserving and inspecting records, providing professional advice and making informed decisions based on expert opinion for their local community. Evidence from memoirs and documents suggest that these clerks managed internal operations and aided the financial management of the local government. These days, part of this role may be delegated to

## Key Points

- CEOs of local governments have a long and interesting history
- They may not even have been paid for doing their job back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century!
- John Carpenter was one of the oldest-documented Town Clerks in history
- There remain many similarities with the roles of hundreds of years ago

another officer within the organisation, such as the Director of Finance and Corporate Services.

## Differences?

How generous were the salaries of Town Clerks? It has been estimated that top earning Town Clerks had the potential to be awarded a generous annual salary of approximately 200 British Pounds in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This could be considered equivalent to almost \$350,000 today!

However, not all were so lucky: many public officials within local, more rural parishes were actually unpaid, and service within the parish was 'compulsory'. This became a rotational role within the parish. As Thomas Gilbert, a writer from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, explained, "it is an office of great burden" which gave those delegated little choice in the matter.

## "You may find their duties surprisingly familiar..."

To add to this, in rural parishes, public office service was often linked to land-holding and ownership, which limited and restricted who was even able to become involved with their local government. This demonstrates the vast differences between then and today, as we have shifted to more egalitarian and fairer times in terms of opportunity (and salary!) and a professionalisation of the role.

## Similarities?

As one of the oldest documented and best-remembered Town Clerks of London, John Carpenter's recorded time in office illustrates a strong connection to more modern times. His memoir was written by Thomas Brewer, who has presented Carpenter's story as a prominent Town Clerk of London in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and author of the first book of English Common Law: the *Liber Albus*.

Elected on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1417 by the Common Council, Carpenter served his time under both the reigns of Henry V and Henry VI. His life and career illustrates the connection today's officers and CEOs have to political history.



During this period, Clerks were elected and employed 'to signify a learned man, or a man of letters'. With a scholarly background and specialising in law, he built himself an honest and reliable reputation in the academic realm, and began his experience with the local government by loyally serving under his predecessor. In this way, he demonstrated his academic capability and commitment to his work.

Look at the local government CEO of today. There are still a number of CEOs who serve loyally under their predecessor before rising to the office themselves. Most CEOs have some kind of academic qualification. There are qualified engineers, town planners, accountants and business graduates to be found amongst the ranks of the modern CEO.

Carpenter was described by Brewer as a 'man of attainments superior to many of his contemporaries, of intellectual capacity, and of

high moral worth'. Carpenter and others like him are relevant in unravelling the history of specific roles in local government in modern times, reminding us of our long and steady roots. They can also remind us of the value in sustaining commitment and loyalty to a local region.

CEOs today may not be styled as Town Clerks once were, as 'ecclesiastical persons'. However, they are, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still chosen on performance, dedication and merit, just like Carpenter hundreds of years ago.

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