



**To Know Where You're Going, You Must Know Where You Are:
A Study of CAO Education and Career Trajectories in Ontario, Canada**

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Abstract

Ontario municipalities are governed by provincial legislation, which provides a framework of powers and duties to be addressed through local government function. The senior municipal staff member is often known as the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). They are the operational apex of municipalities, but not much is currently known about the education and career traits of Ontario municipal CAOs.

A 27-question survey was adapted broadly from Hatcher et al. (2023) and disseminated to Ontario municipal CAOs, Deputy CAOs, and equivalent senior administrators in spring 2025 to obtain primary data on education and career traits evident in the profession. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analyses as exploration tools.

Results suggest that Ontario municipal CAOs are middle-aged and white, are likely in their first CAO role, and have been in their current role for 4.46 years. CAOs begin their first role at 45 and are equally as likely to progress through the clerk's department, finance, or planning. More women responded than men, which is suggestive that the gender imbalance at the CAO position may be narrowing.

CAOs identified mentorship and opportunities as the primary influence to career progression. Challenges align with professional publications and illuminate political and public relations pitfalls and negligible work/life balance as primary impediments along with resource deficiencies and development challenges.

These results can be used by professional organizations to improve career development and professional offerings to their respective memberships. It is expected that professional organizations will also leverage this information to reinforce advocacy efforts on behalf of municipal CAOs.

Acknowledgements

If I'm being honest, after I completed a Masters in Geography (formally, in 2017), I didn't think I'd be back doing another graduate degree, but life has a weird way of showing you what you don't know, even when you think you do.

I applied to the MPA program on a whim in January 2023. Given that I normally put a lot of thought and background analysis into my decisions (hence the general quantitative nature of this paper), from-the-hip decisions are rare. Luckily, this one panned out well. There are a number of people to thank for that.

This research project doesn't get completed without numerous significant elements aligning, and certain people encouraging its completion. First, I want to acknowledge the OMAA for having an interest in this work and actively advertising the survey to its membership. Thank you, Scott! Without your interest, I'd have been writing on something else entirely for this paper, but I think this project is more timely and important.

I'd also like to thank Professors Joe Lyons, Martin Horak, and Zack Taylor for their guidance and input on this project through 2024 and into 2025. Their consistent attention during project development led to an in-depth, well-rounded piece, and a plethora of data that, frankly, requires more than 40-some pages to do it justice. I am sure the Canadian Municipal Barometer will be interested in some of these findings.

I should also thank Hatcher et al. (2023) for their survey instrument, which ended up being easily translated into the Ontario context, and indeed the Canadian context even though this paper does not extend that far.

Another note on the survey and this paper: Surveys only succeed and papers are only applicable if the people responding are providing honest, professional input. If you were one of the respondents to this survey, thank you for your time!

An acknowledgement section cannot exist without specifically mentioning some of the great people I met in the MPA program, who I am glad to call friends rather than colleagues. SL, JG, KK, KM, CD, RY, RB, and many others who I'm always happy to have a beer (or four) with – you've all helped me keep my wheels on the road these last two-plus years. I'm not sure I'm here without all of you.

And most importantly, to MG and my family, with their unwavering support for whatever pursuit I seem to conjure up, even when it means I can't seem to fully relinquish the cozy womb that is academia. Whether I can now, well, I suppose that chapter has yet to be written...

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Introduction

This paper focuses establishing a comprehensive snapshot of the Ontario municipal Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). It utilizes a 27-question survey adapted broadly from Hatcher et al. (2023) to collect data on demographics, political traits and opinions, education credentials, and career trajectories of the individuals currently employed in the role across the province. An international overview of the CAO role is provided. Emergent issues facing the CAO role are identified within broader legislative and municipal operational contexts, and discussion of the current landscape of CAO-related public administration research in the United States and Canada concludes with insight into applicable literature gaps. This section begins by providing a brief contextual summary along with the overall organization of the paper, including discussion of the study question and objectives, which inform the research.

This study seeks to explore the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)¹ function in municipalities in Ontario, Canada. The primary question is: “what education credentials and career traits are currently held by those individuals currently comprising the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) function in municipalities in Ontario, Canada.”

By virtue of asking *what* of the data, the study is inductive and descriptive, meaning it starts with observations and then ask questions of the data to ideally result in an over-arching theory. It is also exploratory as it attempts to describe a current credential-related snapshot of Ontario municipal CAOs while discussing relevant options for additional future research opportunities.

¹ As an important note, this study uses the terms ‘Chief Administrative Officer’ and ‘CAO’ generally. The survey was disseminated to CAOs, Deputy CAOs, and equivalent senior administrators, so ‘Chief Administrative Officer’ and ‘CAO’ will be used throughout this paper as umbrella terms to generalize all applicable positions, including different names for the CAO role such as City Manager, County Administrator, Town Manager, and others in a similar methodology to StrategyCorp (2024). The exception, however, is Section Two – Literature Review – to ensure the integrity of multi-jurisdictional literature is maintained.

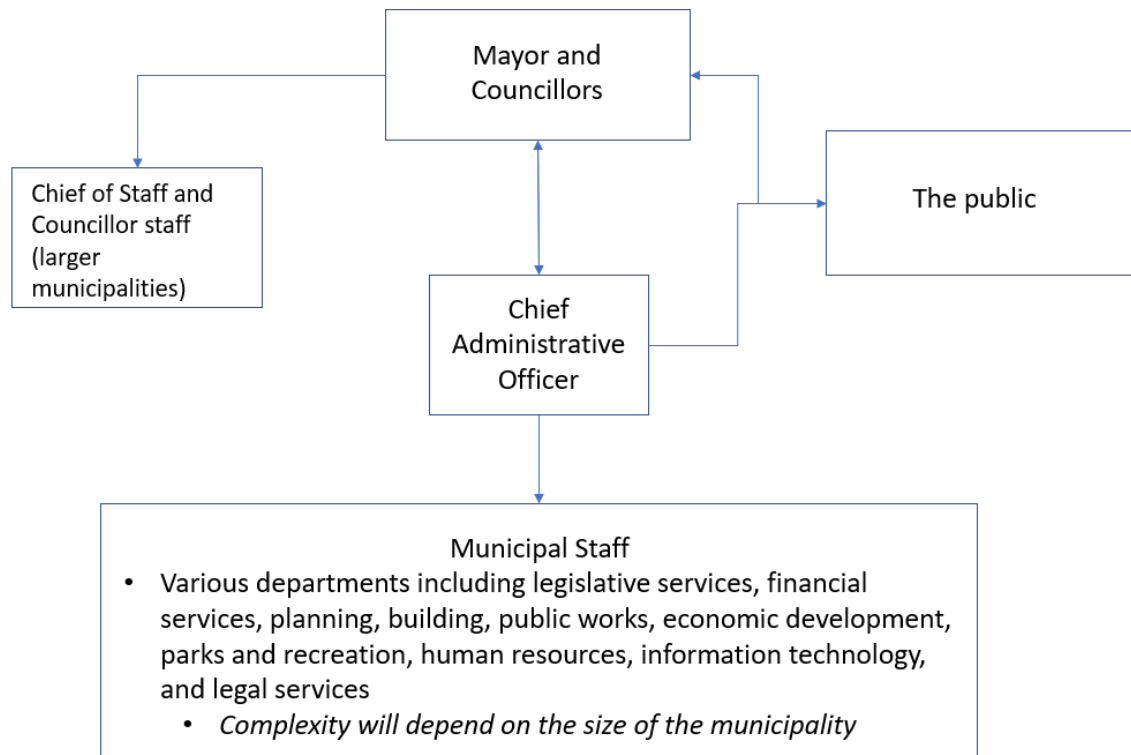
There is significant relevance to this study. The Ontario Municipal Administrators' Association (OMAA) is the Ontario professional organization for municipal CAOs and provides services and professional development opportunities to its membership on an annual basis including such offerings as mentorship opportunities, partnerships with other organizations for professional development, and two annual workshops with professional seminars. OMAA is desirous of a dataset that sheds light on the current composition of the CAO profession. They have engaged Western's Local Government Program to develop a survey for its membership to obtain this data, which will then inform future professional development opportunities and advocacy efforts to better serve their membership and locate the CAO as a permanent and necessary fixture in provincial good governance.

Background

But what is a municipal CAO? The CAO is the top municipal employee and is the only employee within a municipal structure that reports directly to council. CAOs are the conduit between staff and council. They are a keystone of good governance (Fenn & Siegel, 2017) and ultimately responsible for implementation of council's policy decisions (Tremblay, 2018). In Ontario and unlike certain statutory officer positions, a CAO is not mandatory (Tremblay, 2018); a council can choose to employ one or not. The Municipal Act provides that a CAO may be appointed to exert "general control and management of the affairs of the municipality for the purpose of ensuring the efficient and effective operation of the municipality" and other duties as may be assigned (Ontario, 2001). The position is therefore at the discretion of council, and the CAO has limited legislative protection from a council desirous of changes to the organizational structure. CAOs must lead in three ways to be successful, including out to the community and

third-party organizations such as the media and other public-sector bodies (Siegel, 2015; Siegel, 2010) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Typical municipal organizational chart, including CAO leadership directions



Adapted from Mitchell (2021)

Significant legislative and provincial policy change has also been evident in recent years². These changes have inarguably accelerated the increased complexity of municipal government administration, thereby increasing the responsibility shouldered by CAOs and their staff to competently execute their roles. Some of the largest changes have been focused on infrastructure and development to support more housing, and have further increased in 2025 due to amendments to Ontario Regulation (O.Reg) 530/22 and the associated expansion of strong mayor powers in Ontario to another 169 municipalities (Ontario, 2025a,b)³, which may act to

² Primarily Bill 23, but also Bill 109, Bill 3, and upcoming asset management requirements under Ontario Regulation 588/17. These are generally addressed in Section 3.

³ On April 9, 2025, the Ontario published a media release advising of the expansion of strong mayor powers to an additional 169 municipalities effective May 1, 2025. This requires amendments to Ontario Regulation 530/22

more broadly erode the authority and therefore effectiveness of the CAO role in Ontario municipalities. There is obvious import to this study and, in light of this, obtaining data on the current CAO profession is paramount. The associated data collection and analysis is meant to comprehensively explore education and career-related data, compare results with prevailing international literature, and identify any obvious similarities or differences.

Study Objectives

Considering these intentions, the research findings in this study are guided by the following general study objectives:

1. To examine the existing CAO literature and relevant legislative changes impacting municipalities and CAO role.
2. To collect relevant data associated with education and career traits of current CAOs in Ontario, including political alignment and service perceptions and role and key demographic indicators.
3. To explore the education and career traits associated with Ontario municipal CAOs and establish a snapshot of the current profession, including any trends.
4. To provide usable data to municipal professional organizations to better improve collaboration, professional development offerings, and appropriate policy advocacy.
5. To present opportunities for future research related to CAO education and career traits across Canada.

under the Municipal Act, 2001. This paper discusses some of the mechanisms behind the expansion in Section Three. The author notes that the survey in this study was released and closed prior to any amendments to Ontario Regulation 530/22 coming into effect and therefore the strong mayor data collected by way of the survey is no longer representative of the breadth of the potential effects.

Paper Organization

This paper is organized into seven sections. This section establishes a brief background of the CAO role and legislative context while highlighting the primary intent of the research and its objectives. Section Two presents a literature review in both the American and Canadian contexts, covering previous studies on various characteristics of the role, including numerous studies that highlight the individuals that comprise the role with specific focus on key demographics and career trends such as CAO turnover. Section Two is presented before the background section to ensure increased granularity and focus on the Ontario municipal CAO as the paper progresses. Naturally, Section Three contains background review of the Ontario CAO environment including a brief history of CAO position and its importance to good governance before delving specifically into the Ontario CAO and the applicable legislative environment and recent changes that have affected its stability. Section Three concludes with specific reference to emergent strong mayor powers and the associated need for professional advocacy efforts. Section Four discusses the study's methodology and rationale, survey development and dissemination, and data organization and analysis techniques. Section Five provides a detailed review of the results of the data collection and analysis, along with significant findings in respect of the education and career traits currently comprising the CAO role in Ontario. Section Six draws key conclusions to the study, while ensuring to elaborate upon any known study limitations. Section Seven concludes the paper by suggesting some possibilities for future research into the modern Canadian municipal CAO.

Literature Review

The intent of this section is to provide a detailed review of applicable literature, including professional publications, which establishes a snapshot of both the challenges facing the CAO role and the commonly-held traits of those operating within the role. This section also seeks to place the research within existing discourse by identifying literature gaps that it intends to address.

American Literature

In light of the fluctuating municipal environment, the role of the CAO has gained visibility and increased levels of interest locally, but very little is generally known and understood about key aspects of the role across Canada, and more crucially, within similar legislative landscapes, such as within individual provinces. In fact, few studies exist that analyze the education accomplishments and career trajectories of CAOs in Canada. This stands in stark contrast to the plethora of CAO literature that exists in the United States.

American studies on the CAO have existed since the 1920s when the Progressive Era period introduced Council-Manager dynamics to larger cities as a method to combat rampant, corrupt political machinery (Ammons, 2008). American studies have been particularly commonplace over the last three decades, including extensive studies of leadership and role dynamics, and interface with political leadership (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Svara, 1999); and, discussions of incumbents' ambition and motivation (Lasseter & Daman, 2023; Teodoro, 2011).

CAO tenure and turnover has been substantially studied since Floro (1955) originally considered the dynamics influencing how city managers stay or move by modelling responses from acting city managers on the notion that existing city managers had little to no job security. This thought

appears to have maintained its integrity over time, and the study of CAO tenure has become increasingly important to understanding CAO career dynamics (Lee and Lee, 2019). Modern CAOs tend to view their tenures similar to those of professional sports coaches, where their time is short and oft tenuous (Ammons & Bosse, 2005). In the early 2000s, the average tenure for an American CAO was approximately six years (Hanbury et al., 2004; Watson & Hassett, 2004), with 40.7 percent of CAOs having served for less than four years (Watson & Hassett, 2004). As of the early 2020s, this statistic had not appreciably changed (Hatcher et al., 2023).

CAO turnover is impacted by push-pull factors. Common push factors include tension between council and the incumbent and associated erosion of political support (Feiock et al., 2001; McCabe et al., 2008) and local economic downturns (McCabe et al., 2008; Ammons & Bosse, 2005). Mayoral turnover, in particular, can undermine a CAO's tenure as the two roles tend to work closely at the apex of the organization (McCabe et al., 2008; Hassett & Watson, 2002; Feiock et al., 2001). Conversely, mayoral and political stability are associated with long-tenured CAOs (Watson & Hassett, 2003). Turnover of this nature may cause pull factors to appear more attractive to CAOs seeking growth and stability. Key pull factors often include individual goals and career objectives (McCabe et al., 2008). Approximately half of CAOs are not promoted from within an organization, reinforcing the importance of pull factors in CAO attraction and retention (Hatcher et al., 2023; McCabe et al., 2008). Geography, however, is a limiting factor, and CAOs tend to move laterally within the same geographical area, particularly if there are cities of similar populations and approximate levels of economic prosperity, that possess similar political dynamics (Yi & Chen, 2022). However, future research would be needed to confirm individualistic pull factors "on why the cities to which they relocated attracted them and what drove them to seek promotion, horizontal, or demotion turnover" (Yi & Chen, 2022, 538).

Given prevailing interest in CAO turnover, it follows that education and career paths are also heavily studied (Watson & Hassett, 2004) as one influences the other. Academic and professional studies focusing on demographics and education have been published for decades and, even today, still tend to align and demonstrate a degree of inertia in the role regarding specific demographic typologies. Education plays an important role in the career trajectory of CAOs. This, along with the characteristics of a CAO, allow for opportunities and career advancement where desired (Teodoro, 2011). Turnbull (2010) notes that city managers often climb the ladder internally, first acting as assistant city manager prior to advancement. Demographically, Nelson and Stenberg (2018) illustrate that American city managers are becoming older and more educated - the latter in response to the increasingly complexity of governance and management. The authors confirm previous findings that the city manager profession remains homogenous: dominated by white men, with little change to the diversity of the role nationally despite efforts by professional organizations to affect this change (Nelson and Stenberg, 2018). More recently, Hatcher et al. (2023) completed a nationwide analysis of CAOs to address an American literature gap around small and medium-sized municipalities (1312). The study comprised municipalities greater than 10,000 population and sought data on education and career trajectories and key demographic indicators. Hatcher et al. (2023) concluded that CAOs are generally white men, and between 45 and 64 years of age. They generally have obtained a Master in Public Administration and have been in their roles an average of 7.25 years (Hatcher et al., 2023).

Gender disparity among city managers is a noted and persistent issue. American MPA programs graduate more women than men, but less than half of city managers are women (Beaty & Davis, 2012). The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) publishes regular

reports on their membership. In 2021, 34 percent of their membership were women (ICMA, 2022); a disparity which still exists. Men are promoted more often to senior roles than women (Catalyst, 2022). DeHart-Davis et al. (2020) studied the public sector gender gap more in the United States and concluded that one universal theory for the disparity does not exist, despite its import (DeHart-Davis et al., 2020). However, the inertia related to traditional work/life roles and work/life balance may play a significant part in slowing the closure (DeHart-Davis et al., 2020; ICMA, 2020; Webb Farley et al., 2020) along with deficient mentorship opportunities and career-based support networks (French & Eskridge, 2021; Wayman, 2019).

It is worth noting that there may be some differences between American city managers and CAOs. There is some thought that city managers drive more policy as a primary actor than CAOs, and therefore have more authority and responsibility despite the two titles providing the same overall executive function to their municipality (Ammons, 2008). However, the same study notes: “[d]ifferences in [these] positions are negligible. The differing needs of differing cities served are what make the differences. Trying to find *real* differences between managers and administrators is like splitting hairs (31)”. This study seems to demonstrate that nuance between the two titles may be tied more so to the size of the municipality and local- or state-based legislation than any deliberate intention to differentiate between the two. It also underscores the depth and intricacy of American CAO literature, become so granular as to debate marginal gradations in the function across the country.

Canadian Literature

The terms ‘city manager’ and ‘CAO’ in Canada appear to mean the same general thing despite differences in provincial legislation, and are often used interchangeably to describe the top administrator role (StrategyCorp, 2024). O’Flynn and Mau (2014) may be the most detailed

Canadian education and career-trait study to be completed to-date. The authors studied 217 CAOs nationally to establish a general snapshot of key demographic and professional indicators. The study followed a seminal work by Plunkett (1994), which concluded that the CAO profession in Canada at the time was dominated by older Caucasian men. O’Flynn and Mau (2014) confirmed that this demographic continues to be prevalent in the ranks of senior municipal-sector leadership, with 75 percent of respondents identifying as men, and an overall 40 percent over the age of 55. A majority of respondents were highly-educated with graduate-level degrees, and possessed long tenures (20+ years) as municipal public servants (O’Flynn & Mau, 2014). Recent American literature aligns well with O’Flynn & Mau (2014), suggesting some homogeneity across borders despite differing political and administrative dynamics. The survey instrument, however, appears to have been targeted to larger municipalities. Based on 2021 census data, 99 of Ontario’s 444 municipalities (22.2 percent) have a population over 25,000, whereas in O’Flynn & Mau (2014), 44.7 percent of studied Ontario municipalities fit this cohort. Larger municipalities have twice the effective representation, and small- and medium-sized municipalities are under-represented.

Changes to the municipal environment require additional effort to ensure positive demographic changes at the top of the profession. Sutton (2023)’s professional paper focused on gender disparities at the CAO-level in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region of Ontario. Based on a quantitative study of 110 CAOs, the author concluded that the prevailing Ontario gender gap (O’Flynn & Mau, 2014; Coulter, 2011) still exists but can be navigated through identification of promotion gaps and opportunities, mentorship arrangements, and rejection of stereotypes and prevailing societal expectations around roles (Sutton, 2023). These findings appear to align with general American and Canadian datasets and provide additional impetus for professionals and

their organizations to encourage positive demographic trends. Graham and Helmer (2023) found a 54-46 man-woman proportional split for Alberta CAOs, which is more narrow than Ontario-based (Sutton, 2023; Coulter, 2011) and national (O’Flynn & Mau, 2014) analyses, suggesting some enhanced degree of parity in Alberta and clear progress in addressing the gender gap for top administrative roles.

Coulter (2011)’s professional paper studied CAO career progression in Ontario by analyzing the 100 largest single- and lower-tier municipalities⁴. The study identified women CAOs as more prevalent in small municipalities, with a fewer number of women CAOs in general. Coulter also noted that the average CAO tenure was 4.24 years – approximately two years fewer than American studies (Hanbury et al. 2004; Watson & Hassett, 2004), and aligned with Ontario election cycles despite no apparent relationship between mayoral turnover (Coulter, 2011). Ontario municipalities exhibited significant turnover, having a 16 percent chance of CAO turnover in a given year, based on 163 changes in the role over the 100 municipalities over the ten-year study period (Coulter, 2011). No interviews were conducted, however, to provide insight into the dynamics surrounding specific instances of CAO turnover and what push or pull factors may apply.

The average tenure for a permanent Alberta CAO is even shorter – two to three years, with shorter tenures associated with smaller municipalities, and median tenures in most cases less than the mean, which is indicative of a few long-tenured CAOs as population outliers (Graham & Helmer, 2023). It is worth noting that smaller municipalities are present in significantly greater numbers than cities in Graham and Helmer (2023), and therefore, the population mean is likely closer to two years for the province. Graham and Helmer (2023) further note that the tenure for

⁴ Population-based.

Alberta CAOs has been decreasing for the last twenty years. “Shorter CAO tenures and higher rates of turnover mean more costly transitions: dollars spent on recruitments or severance packages; significant organizational disruption; and, importantly, a reduced opportunity for incumbent CAOs to reach peak performance in their roles. (1)” Interviews determined that political and administrative dynamics were key push and pull factors acting upon CAO perceptions of a municipal work environment, and there was general consensus that political dynamics have become worse over time (Graham & Helmer, 2023).

Professionally since 2016, StrategyCorp has annually interviewed CAOs as a part of their sector analysis. These publications tend to focus on issues facing municipalities through the CAO’s perspective, or challenges facing the CAO profession more generally (StrategyCorp, 2024; 2023; 2022). While StrategyCorp tends to focus on Ontario, they vary their approach year-over-year⁵ to ensure periodic capture of different types of municipality, which has the obvious benefit of greater inclusion, but limits the direct comparability afforded by maintaining a consistent methodology. Often, the challenges that are magnified by StrategyCorp’s annual efforts are commonly related to infrastructure and financial demands (2024, 2023, 2022), recruitment (2024), information technology and cybersecurity (2024; 2022), leadership challenges (2024, 2023, 2022), and shifting provincial dynamics (2024, 2022). These publications do not focus on any comprehensive and applicable demographic information that could be used to paint a current picture of those individuals in the CAO profession and how these traits may be shifting over time, but do shed light on overarching challenges facing modern CAOs and effective leadership.

⁵ 2016 – Ontario larger municipalities, 2017 – Ontario small and medium municipalities, 2018 – Canada-wide, 2019 – Ontario northern and upper-tier municipalities, 2020 was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 2021/22 returned to Ontario to survey all sizes and structures of municipality (StrategyCorp, 2022). 2023 and 2024 continued with the same methodological focus on Ontario (StrategyCorp 2024; 2023).

Leadership is an important CAO trait. CAOs are required to lead in three directions: up, out, and down (Siegel, 2015; Siegel, 2010), and “need to ... hav[e] a strategic vision for the municipality and [need to bring] people onto their vision” (Gunn et al., 2014, 863). The best CAOs have also developed the ability of strategic foresight for the organization and, crucially, for their people through proactive training and development to improve corporate culture and to ensure the requisite skills exist for the organization to be effective (Gunn et al., 2014).

McIntosh (2009) studied CAO situational leadership nationally via survey, focus groups, and interviews, discovering that while leadership challenges are disparate across jurisdictions and between sizes of municipality, other matters such as council/staff dynamics and effective performance evaluations are integral in allowing CAOs the latitude to effectively manage between policy and tasks as the role requires. Erosion of the CAO-council relationship may lead to push factors and encourage a CAO to relocate (Mitchell, 2021). It was also identified that political acuity is an important trait, the importance of which increases with municipal size and that good managers may not make good CAOs unless they understand the political realm well enough to be effective (McIntosh, 2009). A lack of efficacy in this regard may lead to underperformance and dismissal.

Municipal CAOs have a high rate of attrition, with termination sometimes coming as a surprise to the incumbent (McIntosh, 2009). In the case of a termination in Ontario, OMAA’s CAO Employment Guidelines recommend strong employment agreements with robust termination clauses to insulate incumbents from the impact and associated potential financial hardship, and assist councils in onboarding and establishing clear expectations for their CAOs. Clear expectations for all parties, including clarity around performance evaluations, may aid communication and therefore retention (Mitchell, 2021; Municipal World, 2019), including

communication and agreement on specific outcomes and activity measures to define success in the role (Gunn et al., 2014). Clarity, however, also extends to legislation and council-versus-CAO roles and responsibilities. Mitchell (2021) studied the CAO-Council relationship through surveys and interviews and concluded that standardized, established principles for these two important roles may aid in stabilizing relationships and avoiding any “scope creep” and associated tensions (Mitchell, 2021), which may then reduce the effect of push factors on CAO departure.

Some investigation has been performed on recruitment and retention of senior managers and CAOs in Ontario, with a focus on succession planning and developing existing staff for internal promotion due to potential external recruitment barriers, especially for small or remote municipalities (Szarka, 2017). Requisite investment and training for succession planning establishes a foundation for additional knowledge and skill development within an existing staff complement, which improves organizational culture (AMCTO, 2012), particularly with the ever-present impacts of senior staff retirement in the public sector and potential loss of knowledge capital (AMCTO, 2013). Professional organizations are attuned to the need for career pathways into the municipal sector, especially for small, rural, and northern communities (AMCTO, 2022). However, Szarka (2017) does not explicitly discuss what skills, background, or traits may be required to internally develop a CAO to succeed within an ever-changing municipal environment. Indeed, establishing an optimal background and skill set outside of the need for political acuity and leadership may be a nebulous concept and futile venture. Professional organizations are clear that “[t]here is no single pathway to becoming a CAO” (OMAA, 2025b) and certain councils may seek certain skills needed to tackle specific priorities rather than adhering to a defined CAO archetype. OMAA states that their current membership includes

CAOs from varied backgrounds, including, clerks, economic development, planning, libraries, and law (OMAA, 2025b), but how varied is statistically unknown.

Literature Gaps

As the municipal landscape evolves, it is increasingly important to understand the demographic and professional characteristics of municipal CAOs. While studies exist on varied aspects of education, career, and demographic aspects of the CAO profession across Canada, the author is not currently aware of a recent study that focuses specifically on Ontario, nor one of sufficient depth to establish a current and reasonable snapshot of the profession. A literature gap exists in this area of study, specifically a recent Ontario-based survey of municipal CAOs that covers key demographic, education, and career progression aspects and establishes a detailed picture of the current Ontario municipal CAO. This study seeks to address this gap while also exploring deeper personal traits, including career opportunities and challenges faced by incumbents in the role.

Ontario CAO Environment

This section further introduces the CAO role in the context of Ontario municipal governance frameworks, including an overview on council/staff relations and the CAO's integral job as a conduit between both; discussion of changes to various pieces of legislation in recent years that have either affected the CAO's administrative importance or added significant complexity to municipal operations and policy considerations; and, consideration of ongoing CAO-related professional advocacy efforts.

Legislative and Operational Framework

Ontario municipalities are established and governed by a network of provincial legislation, which, in combination, provide a framework of powers and duties to be addressed through the local government function. Municipalities are legal corporations and are the level of government in closest proximity to residents. Municipalities operate with two distinctive wings to the organization. On one side is municipal council. As elected representatives, they set policy direction. While on the other are municipal staff, which are administrative in nature and implement council's policy directives while providing timely, professional advice to council. As administrators, they are hired for their knowledge and expertise.

In Ontario, the apex municipal staff member is often known as the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and is tasked with "exercising general control and management of the affairs of the municipality for the purpose of ensuring the efficient and effective operation of the municipality" (Ontario, 2001). The CAO reports to council as a whole and is council's only direct report (O'Flynn, 2011). Given the import of the role and the little legislative protection it receives, CAOs have the complex and delicate task of leading a municipal organization in three distinct

directions: down, operationally, to staff; out, to stakeholder groups and the broader community and media; and, up, politically, to council (Siegel, 2015; Siegel 2010). CAOs tend to spend much of their time managing operations and policy matters (O’Flynn, 2011); however, managing up is a particularly sensitive task, requiring deft handling and political acuity for the CAO. The CAO functionally reports to council so it cannot explicitly manage council. However, the CAO should be politically- and technically-astute enough to influence through acuity and general knowledge (Siegel, 2015; Siegel, 2010; McIntosh, 2009). Municipal administrative professionals possess varied technical backgrounds with specific expertise and, in many cases, professional designations in recognition of their knowledge. A council represents the electorate and comprises those from varied walks of life; there is no education or knowledge requirement to run for or serve on council (Cuff, 2019). Municipal councillors are commonly “part-time amateurs” (Siegel, 2010:143) having full-time employment. They tend to be close to their communities, which allows them to be informed representatives for their constituents, but often lean heavily on the administration to provide technical guidance (Siegel, 2010).

In light of these nuanced, complex dynamics within local government, the CAO role has been called the “lynchpin” between the council and staff (Fenn et al., 2016: 3), has been espoused as a key municipal pillar in the areas of good governance (CAMA, 2022), and is effectively shifting to a more strategic leadership role within municipal governance rather than focusing strictly on hands-on operational management (Szarka, 2017).

Canada and the United States both have CAOs at the local level. The United States broadly employs the same administrative-political structure adapted by Canada almost 100 years ago, and like Canada, the American CAO reports to Council and provides general executive and administrative leadership. However, American and Canadian local governments evolved

differently through adoption of different institutional forms and degrees of consolidation or fragmentation (Taylor, 2014). This means that American CAOs' overall responsibilities and spheres of influence may differ between location in response to unique local institutional forms and applicable state legislation.

Changes to the Legislative Environment

Development and Finance

In Ontario, the role of the CAO has been impacted in recent years by development- and administrative-related legislative changes that have redirected municipal priorities, thus affecting the security of the CAO position in municipal government and the ability of the CAO to effectively manage and lead. A number of pieces of legislation have adopted that impact municipal planning and development processes. Bill 109 necessitated planning act changes to shift site plan approval from council to staff in an attempt to reduce bureaucracy (Bayham, 2022). Bill 23, which received royal assent in November 2022, amended numerous pieces of legislation affecting planning and municipal administration, development charges, new home construction, and underground infrastructure. Bill 23 was another attempt to encourage more rapid housing development in Ontario municipalities while curtailing new build price increases (Bayham, 2023) and aligns with provincial government targets of 1.5 million new homes over a ten-year period (Ontario, 2022). The impacts to municipal finance and infrastructure are further exacerbated under Ontario Regulation 588/17, as amended, which requires updated asset management planning for all Ontario municipalities by July 1, 2025. This regulatory deadline requires municipalities to identify all municipal infrastructure and establish modelling for proposed levels of service (Ontario, 2021). The juxtaposition of these two pieces of provincial legislation should be concerning for both municipal administrators and councils. Provincial

emphasis on increased housing development calls into question the province's ideal form of development. Municipal planning is governed by provincial legislation considered in tandem with municipal planning documents that differ between municipalities, and are often locally-developed and -focused. Since the 1960s, Canadian municipalities have increasingly sought denser urban forms, which better utilize existing infrastructure and are often more cost-effective (Burchell et al. 1998; Burchell and Mukherji, 2003; Trubka, Newman, and Bilsborough, 2010). Any increased low-density urban development under the guise of aligning with province-led housing initiatives combined with decreased development charge revenue may place significant strain on financial- and development-related municipal resources. There may be the enhanced obligation on the part of municipal administrations to find creative avenues that strike an actionable balance for both council as a policy board and local taxpayers, alike, which may necessitate a priority on development-minded knowledge at the CAO level in Ontario municipalities.

Strong Mayors

In September 2022, the Ontario legislature adopted legislation which introduced strong mayor powers to Ontario⁶ (Ontario, 2022b). Under Bill 3, strong mayor powers were disseminated to forty-seven municipalities in Ontario (Ontario, 2023b), and, as of May 1, 2025, amendments to Bill 3 and O.Reg 530/22 extended strong mayor powers to an additional 169 municipalities⁷ (Ontario, 2025). Strong mayor powers include the hiring, firing, and management of not only the CAO, but certain senior staff members as well (Ontario, 2022a). These specific powers blur the boundaries between Ontario's weak-mayor system and the CAO role. Professional organizations have raised concerns about strong mayor powers due to their potential impact to the role in

⁶ Toronto and Ottawa first.

⁷ Municipalities with councils greater than 5 were selected as a part of the extension of strong mayor powers.

Ontario municipalities and the risk of centralizing political powers away from council as a whole (CAMA, 2022). Another concern is politicized leadership. Naturally, when politicians and staff work together to oversee a municipal government, tensions may exist along the lines of differing expertise and opinions, which may stem from differing personalities and priorities (Ashton et al., 2007). The relationship between politicians and staff may be increasingly problematic at the municipal level, as business and therefore, disagreements, are often aired in open council sessions, and any disagreement or tension may be construed negatively by on-lookers members of the public (Ashton et al., 2008). Individual traits such as disposition, political alignment and acuity, and municipal tenure may weigh heavily on an administrator's ability to weather off-regular tensions. In the realm of strong-mayor powers, it is reasonable to assume that a strong mayor may seek a CAO more aligned with them personally or politically and therefore easier to work with towards mayoral and provincial priorities. 54 percent of strong mayors⁸ currently retain the powers to appoint and/or dismiss the CAO (AMCTO, 2024). In response, an astute CAO may strategically shift their own priorities or quickly augment certain political or personality traits to better align with a strong mayor, thereby politicizing the leadership position and calling into question the objectivity and separation of the CAO from Council.

Sector Advocacy

Ontario strong mayor powers have blurred the lines delineating CAO and mayoral responsibilities, necessitating greater advocacy from municipal professional organizations such as the OMAA on behalf of their membership, and the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks, and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) more broadly as more than half of Ontario

⁸ This data is from October 2024 and therefore does not incorporate the additional 169 municipalities that received strong mayor powers, effective May 1, 2025.

municipal CAOs are also AMCTO members (Arbuckle, 2025). Municipal professional organizations have been clear in their advocacy efforts around the CAO role, specifically definitional clarity for the CAO position versus council responsibility (AMCTO, 2022) and the requirement for all municipalities to have a CAO as a pillar of good governance and apolitical public service (OMAA, 2025a). Before May 1, 2025, the impacts of strong mayor legislation had been relatively minor, with only eleven percent⁹ of Ontario municipalities granted these powers (Ontario, 2023b). However, Taylor (2023) asserts that “[t]he implementation of strong-mayor powers is likely to be very different – and the risks arguably greater – in smaller Ontario cities that have fewer senior managers, flatter management structures, and less elaborate rules and procedures (14)”. It is reasonable to assume that the impacts and risks associated with the expansion of these powers amplifies inversely with the size of the municipality, which means the CAO position in smaller municipalities will be increasingly eroded.

⁹ Of the 444 municipalities in Ontario, 30 are upper-tier governments (Ontario, 2023a). Before May 1, 2025, 47 of the remaining 414 lower or single-tier municipalities had strong mayor powers.

Methodology and Analysis

This section describes the methodology and analysis techniques applied to complete the study and report key results. Topics covered include identification and rationale for the type of study and unit of analysis, data types and survey design, ethics approval, survey conduct including hosting, dissemination, data collection, and analysis procedures and statistical techniques.

Study Design

The study is a primary research-based, multiple-variable analysis. It employs a 27-question survey instrument broadly adapted from Hatcher et al. (2023) to obtain data directly from Ontario municipal CAOs on various education credentials and career traits. The Ontario municipal CAO is therefore the unit of analysis, and crucially, includes positions of CAO, City Manager, Town Manager, and other applicable titles (StrategyCorp, 2024). This also includes Deputy CAO roles within larger municipalities or forms of enhanced Clerk or Administrator/Clerk roles within smaller municipalities that do not explicitly have a CAO. An assumption is that each municipality has at least one individual appointed with actual or *de facto* CAO responsibilities, and therefore the number of potential cases for this study is at least 444. It is noted that the exact n potential cases is unknown as the organizational structure for all 444 municipalities was not analyzed as a study pre-cursor; organizational structures vary wildly between municipality type and size. Many larger municipalities have Deputy CAO positions, which are permitted to act in the CAO's absence. This role is often absent from smaller municipalities.

Data on municipality type and size, and key demographic indicators including age, gender, and self-identified visible minority status are also to be collected to compare traits between various

categories of municipality or demographic cohort. Year of birth was sought to determine the age of a respondent. As the survey was administered in the middle of 2025, it is reasonable to assume that two respondents born in the same year would return different ages if born in, for example, January and August. Using Year-of-Birth standardizes the age of the respondents relative to the study year and allows for conversion to a standard age for purposes of analysis.

The survey also includes questions associated with political alignment, and municipal role perceptions towards service delivery. These questions were included as a pilot for potential expansion of the Canadian Municipal Barometer (CMB)¹⁰, which would include local government administrators. Political alignment was presented on a 0-10 left-right unidimensional scale. Despite assertions that a left-right scale is a problematic construct and associated self-reported data may be biased (Bauer et al., 2015), the overall illustrative purpose of political alignment data may prove contextual when discussed alongside strong mayor legislative changes. Municipal role perceptions were presented as Likert-scale-based questions.

A survey is the preferred method for this type of study. As an exploratory and descriptive study design, a broad dataset is required and it is imperative the data come directly from the unit of analysis as a self-reported dataset. Individual CAOs are best able to speak to their own education and career credentials, and perceptions and opinions on related matters. The study is seeking broader, *thinner* information from the analysis units rather than the deeper, more narrow information sought in a case-based approach.

¹⁰ The Canadian Municipal Barometer was established in 2019 and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). It is a multi-organizational national research partnership focused on improving local democracy. Currently, mayoral and citizen surveys are conducted annually (CMB, 2025). There is, however, the potential to expand the breadth of the CMB to include local government administrators. Some of the questions included in this paper, and as discussed in the Study Design section, are a pilot for expansion.

The analysis is mixed methods with a large-*n* to standardize responses. Quantitative descriptive statistical analysis was applied for the majority of the questions, while qualitative content analysis was used on the three opinion-based, open-ended questions at the end of the survey to ascertain input from respondents on benefits, strengths, and challenges that have affected their careers. Many questions were adapted from Hatcher et al. (2023) to obtain objective data, however, some will be self-reported perceptions or opinions on certain topics pertaining to municipal roles in service delivery and are therefore subjective in nature. To assist in the overall design and ensure professional support, the OMAA was consulted during the study design in the to ensure utility to the organization and its immediate needs.

Because the study is primary-research based and uses human participants, ethics approval was required. Non-Medical Research Ethics Board approval was granted in March 2025. The survey was hosted on Western Qualtrics and was live from March 24, 2025 until April 25, 2025. A longer live period was planned, similar to Graham and Helmer (2023), to ensure a wider window for participation by the target professional demographic. To recruit participation, OMAA disseminated a recruitment email and invitation to its membership on March 24, 2025, which was followed by multiple reminder emails sent at intervals over the survey's live period to encourage ongoing interest and improve the response count. Web-based surveys often return a higher response rate when combined with recruitment and invitation materials (Sammur et al., 2021). During the survey's live period, data was collected and monitored in Qualtrics. Upon closure of the survey, the data was downloaded for review, organization, and analysis.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods analysis was performed, including the organization, categorization, and conversion of the data. Certain responses had their categories combined to tease out cumulative

trends if any appeared evident. Full and partial survey responses permitted. Where a respondent chose to skip over a question, the blank entry was removed from the analysis as necessary, particularly where variables were to be compared against each other, resulting in a range of n responses across the overall analysis.

Open-ended data was generated as text-based responses rather than numerical. In certain cases, data had to be converted to permit analysis. For instance, if a response of “4 and a half years” was provided to the question “Please identify how long you’ve been in your current role”, the response was *cleaned* to represent numerical data as “4.5”. In some cases, reasonable interpretation of a text-based response was required. Responses including “just less than 2 years” or “just more than 3 years” were interpreted numerically as “1.75” or “3.25”, respectively, to ensure data could be realistically considered as a part of the larger dataset. Such interpretations comprised less than ten percent of responses per category and are not anticipated to have a significant impact on the resulting analysis.

Quantitative analyses focused on descriptive statistics, specifically studies of categories of responses, and mean data, presented in this paper in variously-formatted tables. Qualitative analysis of open-ended, opinion-based data was aligned closely with the primary themes employed by Hatcher et al. (2023). However, unlike Hatcher et al. (2023), content analysis software was not used to thematically categorize responses. Primary themes were already established by Hatcher et al. (2023) and the intent of this study was a direct comparison with their study. Categorization was done via visual inspection and interpretation of the responses. This approach is further noted in the Limitations section of this paper.

Results and Discussion

This section provides a general overview of the survey results and locates the findings in the context of the broader North American literature. Results for all sections of the survey are covered, with two exceptions. First, the discussion surrounding the strong mayor data is limited due to recent legislative updates expanding strong mayor powers (Ontario, 2025a,b) and therefore affecting the overall sample size. Second, although the survey presented respondents with five questions on municipal service delivery and social responsibility, these questions were included as a pilot to assist the CMB and are outside the general scope of education and career trajectories covered in this paper. Political alignment, however, is discussed in this section due to its potential implications for CAOs and strong-mayor political dynamics.

Results Overview

141 full or partial survey responses were received. This is a significant improvement over previous Ontario literature and provides what the author believes to be the largest Ontario municipal CAO education and career trait dataset acquired to date. A definitive response rate cannot be established for this study however, because of the unit of analysis. CAOs, Deputy CAOs, and equivalent senior administrators were captured within the scope of this study, and since a number of larger municipalities have a Deputy CAO, or multiples in some instances, the overall n is more than the 444 total Ontario municipalities and generally unknown within the study's scope, but the number of responses remains a significant success and is an important contribution to the pool of Canadian CAO literature.

Table 1: Municipality type/size, and demographics of respondent Ontario CAOs			
Category	Response	n	Valid %
Type of Municipality (n = 141)	Lower-tier	97	68.8%
	Upper-tier	12	8.5%
	Single-tier	32	22.7%
Municipal Population (n = 141)	Over 250,000	12	8.5%
	50,001-250,000	29	20.6%
	10,001-50,000	50	35.5%
	5,000-10,000	29	20.6%
	Under 5,000	21	14.9%
Gender (n = 131)	Man	61	46.6%
	Woman	68	51.9%
	Prefer not to say	2	1.5%
Age (n = 123)	Under 40	11	8.9%
	40-49	29	23.6%
	50-59	61	49.6%
	Over 60	22	17.9%
Race (n = 131)	Identified as visible minority	6	4.6%
	Did not identify as a visible minority	123	93.9%
	Prefer not to say	2	1.5%
Highest Education Obtained (n = 132)	No post-secondary	4	3.0%
	College	20	15.2%
	Bachelor's	40	30.3%
	MPA or MBA	37	28.0%
	Other Master's degree	29	22.0%
	PhD	2	1.5%

Municipality Type and Size

The majority of respondents were from lower-tier municipalities (68.8 percent) and the most common municipal population cohort was 10,001 to 50,000 (35.5 percent). The overall distribution of respondents across all municipal types and population groups provides a reasonable cross-section of the CAO role in the Ontario municipal sector. 31.2 percent of single- and lower-tier municipalities were captured, along with 30 percent of upper tiers. Small municipalities (those with 10,000 population and under) are also represented by a 35.5-percent capture (Table 1).

Professional Demographics

The average Ontario municipal CAO is 52 years of age, and 49.6 percent are between 50 and 59 years of age. They are generally white (93.9 percent); only 6.1 percent of respondent CAOs

identified as visible minorities. This result remains consistent with previous research (Hatcher et al., 2023; Nelson & Stenberg, 2018; O’Flynn & Mau, 2014; Plunkett, 1994) and is indicative of a profession that has yet to reflect the cultural diversity of society. However, respondent CAOs were mostly women (52.7 percent). Although the majority is slight, this is a notable departure from previous Canadian research that concluded the majority of CAOs are men (Sutton, 2023; O’Flynn & Mau, 2014; Plunkett, 1994). Given this is one study, a conclusive change is not possible, but data are indeed suggestive that a narrowing may be occurring in Ontario (Table 1).

Table 2: CAO gender by municipality size

Category	Gender	
	Men	Women
Over 250,000 (n = 11)	36.4%	63.6%
50,001 to 250,000 (n = 26)	50.0%	50.0%
10,001 to 50,000 (n = 43)	51.2%	48.8%
5,001 to 10,000 (n = 29)	48.3%	51.7%
Under 5,000 (n = 20)	40.0%	60.0%

There does not appear to be a substantial difference in the gender of CAOs by municipal size. Women CAOs tend to more often oversee the smallest cohort (Under 5,000), which is consistent with Coulter (2011), but also the largest cohort (Over 250,000) of municipalities. This difference is largest for municipalities over 250,000 population, where women CAOs encompass 63.6 percent of the respondents and is an interesting departure from previous literature. The three middle cohorts are all generally even though. This is important as the capture in these three categories comprises 76 percent (n = 98) of the total municipalities studied by gender (n = 128). CAOs in these middle groupings between 5,000 and 250,000 population are at relative parity regarding gender (Table 2).

Education and Career

CAOs are highly-educated (Hatcher et al., 2023; Nelson & Stenberg, 2018; O’Flynn & Mau, 2014), and this study adds to this scholarship. The findings identify that 81.8 percent of

respondent CAOs have at least a Bachelor's-level university education, and the majority (51.5 percent) have obtained a Master's degree or greater. Masters degrees in Public Administration or Business Administration (MPA/MBA) were the most common category (28 percent). Men are more likely to have an MPA or MBA (33 versus 24 percent), while women were likely to have a Master's degree but in another area of study (27 versus 16 percent) (Table 1).

Highest education was also analyzed against age to determine if the qualifications of CAOs have been shifting over time. This appears to be the case. 90.9 percent of CAOs under 40 years of age have a University-level education, compared to 83, 79, and 77 percent, respectively, for the 40-49, 50-59, and Over-60 age cohorts. Results are strongly suggestive of ongoing educational inflation in the profession.

Overall, approximately 30 percent of all CAOs 40 and older have an MPA or MBA. The 30-39 age cohort is only 18.2 per cent. This is a marked departure from other age cohorts, but may simply be a matter of timing as many MPA/MBA graduates, for example, complete the program while in middle-management roles, and CAOs that complete these programs may do so to make themselves more marketable to larger municipalities at later ages.

The average CAO has 29 years of overall professional experience, generally focused on the public sector. Although 62.1 percent of respondent CAOs claim to have some degree of private sector experience versus only 18.6 percent in the non-profit sector. They are also equally as likely to have started their career in Legislative/Clerks, Finance, or Planning before progressing into a CAO role (Table 3).

Table 3: Career paths of chief administrative officers

Category	Response	n	Valid %
In how many other municipalities have you served as a CAO or Deputy CAO? (n = 135)	No other municipalities	82	60.7%
	1 other municipality	27	20.0%
	2 other municipalities	13	9.6%
	3 other municipalities	7	5.2%
	4 other municipalities	3	2.2%
	5 or more other municipalities	3	2.2%
Please select the option that best describes the function where you first worked in your career (n = 135)	Public Safety	5	3.7%
	Legislative/Clerk's	24	17.8%
	Planning/Economic Dev't	24	17.8%
	Engineering	8	5.9%
	Public Works/Water&WW	7	5.2%
	Parks and Recreation	10	7.4%
	Finance/Budgeting	24	17.8%
	Deputy CAO	2	1.5%
	CAO	2	1.5%
	Other	29	21.5%
Please select all the sectors where you have worked in professional positions (n = 140)	Private sector	87	62.1%
	Not-for-profit sector	26	18.6%
Please select the option that best describes how many years before you plan to retire (n = 134)	Retiring this year	8	6.0%
	1 to 5 years	44	32.8%
	6 to 10 years	35	26.1%
	11 to 15 years	23	17.2%
	More than 15 years	24	17.9%

60.7 percent of respondent CAOs are in their first CAO role. This is an interesting departure from Hatcher et al. (2023), where significantly fewer CAOs have served only one municipality (30.3 percent) (Table 3). While no specific question on CAO turnover was asked in this study, the results may indicate that turnover and associated geographical movement is more common in the United States, where municipalities are often more fragmented politically and socially (Freemark et al., 2020). Geographically, this may result in fewer local options to which a CAO may choose to relocate. This has the negative impact of requiring a physical relocation in the case of a termination, which may place pressure on a CAO's personal dynamics. This could be hypothetically why Ontario municipal professionals may progress slowly and become CAOs as a one-off career capstone immediately prior to retirement. This study does not delve into turnover and movement between municipalities as a method of climbing the career ladder, however, so

there is no insight into whether CAOs are moving for this pinnacle opportunity or being promoted from within their existing organization.

Table 4: First role by gender

Category	Gender (n =128)	
	Men	Women
Public Safety	6.6%	0.0%
Legislative/Clerk's	13.1%	19.4%
Planning/Economic Dev't	13.1%	23.9%
Engineering	6.6%	4.5%
Public Works/Water/WW	4.9%	4.5%
Parks and Recreation	8.2%	7.5%
Finance/Budgeting	21.3%	14.9%
Deputy CAO	1.6%	1.5%
CAO	3.3%	0.0%
Other	21.3%	23.9%

Table 5: First role by age

Category	Age (n = 123)			
	Under 40	40-49	50-59	Over 60
Public Safety	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	4.5%
Legislative/Clerk's	27.3%	13.8%	18.0%	9.1%
Planning/Economic Dev't	27.3%	24.1%	16.4%	18.2%
Engineering	0.0%	3.4%	4.9%	9.1%
Public Works/Water/WW	9.1%	3.4%	4.9%	4.5%
Parks and Recreation	0.0%	3.4%	9.8%	13.6%
Finance/Budgeting	18.2%	27.6%	18.0%	13.6%
Deputy CAO	0.0%	3.4%	1.6%	0.0%
CAO	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	0.0%
Other	18.2%	20.7%	19.7%	27.3%

When stratified by age and gender, some interesting differences arise. A greater proportion of men come out of Public Safety and Finance, whereas more women CAOs have risen through Planning/Economic development and Legislative/Clerk's (Table 4). Younger CAOs tend to be from clerk and planning backgrounds, while the greatest portion of CAOs in the Over-60 cohort self-reported in the Other category. The Other category was highly-prevalent in the results (Table 5). This could be for a pair of reasons. First, categories such as human resources and law, for example, may be more prevalent in the profession than originally conceptualized, which results in more Other responses than anticipated. Second, it is reasonable to assume with self-reported data that different CAOs view the "fit" of certain roles differently, resulting in inconsistent categorization. The first reason, however, is thought to be more influential in this case.

It is worth noting some trends respecting the prevalence of certain skillsets relative to age. The proportion of Legislative/Clerk's CAOs has an inverse relationship with age, where more younger clerks are becoming CAOs than in older cohorts. The same generally applies to those with a planning or economic development or a finance background. The opposite is true for public safety, engineering, and parks and recreation. CAOs from these functional areas tend to be older, and the proportion increases with age.

Numerous recent legislative changes focus on housing-enabling provincial priorities (Ontario, 2025b; 2023b; 2022a,b). Municipalities are required to support housing through planning and development services and funding, and while planning is a popular skillset for current Ontario CAOs, engineering and other infrastructure-related skillsets are not. Denser development forms are known to be more cost-effective and infrastructure-efficient (Burchell et al. 1998; Burchell and Mukherji, 2003; Trubka, Newman, and Bilsborough, 2010), so having a CAO with planning-related expertise in growth environments is logical; however, there may be an opportunity to encourage those with similar knowledge to become CAOs, such as individuals with an engineering background, which now only account for less than six percent of respondent CAOs. These skills, while possibly warranted in the right CAO for a particular municipality, are not increasingly sought to fulfill housing development at the local level.

Table 6: Tenure in current role, longest municipal tenure

Category		
Tenure in current CAO role (n = 135)	Minimum-Maximum	1 month-34 years
	Mean	4.46 years
	Standard Deviation	4.98 years
Longest tenure in any single municipality (n = 134)	Minimum-Maximum	2-34 years
	Mean	13.67 years
	Standard Deviation	8.41 years

Respondent CAOs have occupied their current role for 4.46 years (Table 6), obtaining that role at the approximate age of 45. The median, however, is only 3 years, indicative of a few long-tenured CAOs that skew the mean higher than the majority of the respondent population. In fact, 54 percent of CAOs have been in their role for fewer than 3 years, while only 9 percent have long-standing tenure of ten years or greater. Mean CAO tenure is consistent with prevailing academic and professional research, which notes a general range of approximately 4 to 7 years (Hatcher et al. 2023; Coulter, 2011; Hanbury et al. 2004; Watson & Hassett, 2004), or less in some cases (Graham & Helmer, 2023). The mean tenure results of this study appear to align generally with the Ontario municipal election cycle, plus some additional time for CAOs and councils to adapt to one another post-election. The aggregate median data, however, is more brief and indeed alarming. Ontario municipalities may experience negative turnover effects over time if they are unable to recruit and/or retain a CAO for an extended tenure, including increased recruitment costs, inconsistent leadership, and loss of organizational effectiveness (Graham & Helmer, 2023). Ammons and Bosse (2005) addresses CAO attitudes toward tenure well:

“Conventional wisdom suggests that turnover among [CAOs] is frequent, that the average tenure in a given managerial post is brief by most professional standards, and that the odds of remaining for more than a decade in a single community are infinitesimally small. Some [CAOs] compare their own tenure and turnover prospects with those of managers of baseball, where careers are tenuous and longevity is rare” (61).

When analyzing by gender, there is no significant difference in regards to the age at which a man starts his first CAO role, versus a woman. On average, men begin their first CAO job at 44, whereas women start at 46. The slight discrepancy may be due to traditional work/life inertia and associated delays in career progression for women (DeHart-Davis et al., 2020), but the difference is relatively minor and may be merely coincidental.

Strong Mayors

Table 7: Strong Mayor municipal CAO appointment

Category	N	Valid %
Strong Mayor CAOs (n = 34)		
Did not hold their position prior to their municipality being granted strong mayor powers	11	32.4%
Were appointed under strong mayor powers	7	63.6%*

*Calculated as a percentage of the 11 respondent CAOs that obtained their position after the implementation of strong mayor powers. Data pre-May 2025.

When the survey was active, it was unknown to the author that sweeping expansion to strong mayor powers under O.Reg 530/22 were forthcoming from the province. The survey, as designed, contemplated a three-part question set for CAOs from strong-mayor municipalities to determine if the nascent application of these powers was influencing CAO recruitment and turnover in strong-mayor municipalities. As a departure from Hatcher et al. (2023), the question of CAO turnover was only addressed under the strong mayor section of the survey and not generally. This is noted later as both a study limitation and research opportunity.

Of the 47 applicable municipalities, 34 responses were received. Eleven identified that they did not hold their position prior to their municipality being granted strong mayor powers, and of those eleven, seven CAOs were appointed under strong mayor powers (Table 7). This paper, however, does not delve further into the implications of the results due to the May 1, 2025 expansion of powers to include 216 additional municipalities. This is discussed further in the Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research sections of this paper.

Political Alignment

Table 8: Chief administrative officer political alignment (left-versus-right)

Category			
Political Alignment (n = 134)	Minimum-Maximum	0-10	
	Left (0-3)	25	18.7%
	Centre (4-6)	89	66.4%
	Right (7-10)	20	14.9%
	Mean	4.9	
	Standard Deviation	1.65	

Table 9: Chief administrative officer political alignment by gender

Category			
Political Alignment - Men (n = 61)	Minimum-Maximum	1-9	
	Left (0-3)	8	13.1%
	Centre (4-6)	41	67.2%
	Right (7-10)	12	19.7%
	Mean	5.3	
	Standard Deviation	1.52	
Political Alignment - Women (n = 68)	Minimum-Maximum	0-10	
	Left (0-3)	17	25.0%
	Centre (4-6)	44	64.7%
	Right (7-10)	7	10.3%
	Mean	4.53	
	Standard Deviation	1.72	

CAOs are generally political centrists, averaging 4.9 on a 0-to-10 scale representing political alignment, where 0 is far-left and 10 is far-right (Table 8). Both genders demonstrate centrist bias, however, men were found to be more conservative (5.30) than women (4.53). Men have a right-leaning bias (19.7 versus 13.1 percent), whereas women clearly have a left-leaning bias (25 versus 10.3 percent), which informs the overall differences in political alignment (Table 9). This is not a surprising result, as women tend to lean more left (Langsæther and Knutsen, 2025) and self-report positions to the left of men, which has been evident since the mid-1990s (Dassonneville, 2021).

Political alignment was also analyzed against education. While literature is somewhat divided on the degree to which additional education influences political ideology to the right (Meyer, 2017) or left (Dunn 2011), it was found that the more highly-educated a CAO, the more progressive the

respondent, with the sub-cohort of MPA/MBA-holders being the most progressive category (4.49).

Content Analysis – How CAOs Discuss Their Careers

Benefits to a CAO's Career

Table 10: What factors benefited your career?

Primary Themes	% of CAOs identifying this as a primary theme (n = 122)	Example Statements
Mentorship/Opportunities	46.7%	Excellent mentors/Managers/CAO's that saw talent and attributes in me and provided me with training opportunities to advance my skillset
Skills	23.8%	strong work ethic, solid knowledge and research skills, good leadership skills
Education and experience	16.4%	Education beyond degree & experience across multiple departments
Experience	9.8%	A variety of experience in leadership roles, in multiple municipal departments; private sector experience/ background
Other	3.3%	

The themes were taken directly from the statements of the 122 respondents.

Primary themes were designed to mimic those from Hatcher et al. (2023) for comparative purposes. Respondents identified mentorships and opportunities for growth and development (46.7 percent) to be the primary career trajectory benefit. This contrasts Hatcher et al. (2023), which concluded Skills (29 percent) were the primary benefit contributing to career progression. Ontario respondents noted that ‘opportunities for development’, ‘relationship building’, and ‘networking’ played a key role in career progression. Responses specifically referenced ‘mentorship’, but did not differentiate between internal mentorship from existing or out-bound CAOs and external professional organizations that offer mentorship programs and/or host annual professional workshops and conference to aid in networking¹¹. Professional organizations may

¹¹ AMCTO and OMAA both offer mentorship programs, conferences, and workshops for Ontario-based CAOs and municipal professionals. Western's Local Government Program has the same general offering, but restricted to program alumni and current students.

capitalize on these findings to reinforce career opportunities for women. The profession's gender gap is evident in the literature (Hatcher et al., 2023; ICMA, 2020; O'Flynn & Mau, 2014; Beaty & Davis, 2012; Coulter, 2011) but can be navigated through identification of career growth opportunities, and mentorship and support networks targeted to women (Sutton, 2023; French & Eskridge, 2021; Wayman, 2019).

Content analysis results were consistent with Hatcher et al. (2023) for the 'Experience' and 'Education and Experience' categories. Both scored third and fourth, respectively. The overall findings may align with literature (Teodoro, 2011) regarding professional and personal characteristics, including education. Education, for instance, may aid in building the entry- and mid-level career success, but eventually career trajectories reach an inflection point where success is instead guided by the timing and location of opportunities, and the ability for an individual to advertise their skills, or learn more universally-applicable skills such as political acuity and leadership. Other benefits not specifically categorized were rare, but included 'being a local candidate' or being 'hired by their home town'.

Challenges in the Job

Table 11: What is the most challenging area of the job?

Primary Themes	% of CAOs identifying this as a primary theme (n =	Example Statements
Aspects of the CAO role	50.8%	Work/life balance; volume of work and expectations; diverse portfolio; navigating strong mayor changes; being a CAO can be very lonely
Politics/public relations	29.5%	Politicians that only listen to the vocal minority; resident expectations; the ever-increasing bad behavior of the public towards civil servants
Conflict with elected officials	11.5%	Balancing political expectation and keeping Council 'out of the weeds'; managing bad Council behaviour; Councilors wanting favours done for friends and/or business acquaintances
Resource limitations	5.7%	Limited financial flexibility; finance issues; staff recruitment and retention
Other	2.5%	

The themes were taken directly from the statements of the 122 respondents.

StrategyCorp surveys Ontario municipal CAOs annually to ascertain role challenges, which have increasingly included financial and staffing-related resource constraints, and managing contentious public/resident dynamics, and shifting provincial relations (StrategyCorp, 2024). Responses from this study include a significant portion from small- and medium-sized municipalities to ensure a degree of homogeneity in the response coverage. Attributes of the CAO role was the most common primary theme regarding CAO-specific challenges (50.8 percent). This is consistent with Hatcher et al. (2023), which denoted 50 percent in this thematic category. Responses were often specific municipal functions such as ‘finance’ and ‘human resources’, which align with broader professional sector analyses (StrategyCorp, 2024). Development-related topics were also common, include ‘planning’ and ‘building’ generally, but also topic-specific such as approvals related to gravel and aggregate projects, mine development, and core infrastructure projects. Given the breadth of responses, CAOs appear to be called upon to be generalists, rather than a specialists in certain sought-after areas of expertise. This is discussed more in the next subsection. Being a generalist comes with drawbacks, including undoubted deficiencies in certain areas that CAOs, by virtue of their general management role, should have at least cursory knowledge.

Other responses in this category include the lack of work/life balance and the reality for CAOs to address an ever-increasing workload in a complex legislative and service environment. Graham and Helmer (2023) evidenced similar findings surveying CAOs on satisfaction with aspects of their role. Respondent CAOs were most dissatisfied with their own work/life balance (21). In sum, Workload and balance are influenced by a CAO’s responsibility to “manage up” to council by providing key professional expertise (Siegel, 2015; Siegel, 2010) in support of policy decision-making processes. ‘Politics’ was referenced by respondents as a specific challenge in

concert with increased adversarial behaviours from the public and councillors which, some have asserted, have worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. 41 percent of responses refer to politics and public relations, and conflicts among council. These cumulative results are greater than those of Hatcher et al. (2023), which concluded that 31 percent over these two thematic categories. Graham and Helmer (2023) found that “leading up” or managing political dynamics was the most challenging aspect for Alberta CAOs (20). Discord on council, having to tactfully keep council “out of the weeds”, and increasing incivility all act as push factors, dissuading a CAO from continuing their tenure. These challenges are not localized; they are pervasive push factors across the Canadian sector and are evident internationally. Given the glut of CAOs within five and ten years of retirement (39 and 65 percent, respectively) combined with ongoing legislative changes to the mayoral role (Ontario, 2025) and associated unknown impacts to the CAO-Mayor dynamic, it stands to reason that municipalities may be placed in a tenuous position in the short-term if a CAO leaves and a council has to recruit a replacement in an environment that discourages individuals from stepping into a potentially contentious municipality or role. Ontario may soon mirror the challenges facing Alberta CAOs and municipalities alike in recruitment, cost containment, and loss of operational effectiveness (Graham and Helmer, 2023).

Strongest Area of Expertise

Table 12: What is your strongest area of expertise?

Primary Themes	% of CAOs identifying this as a primary theme (n = 124)	Example Statements
Other	26.6%	Generalist; We are a small office of 4 people, so I have something to do with everything
Managing Employees/Leadership	20.2%	Bringing all departmental staff together working as a team in order to be efficient for tax payers; people leadership; mentorship
Corporate Planning	16.9%	Change management/transformation, Org development; strategic planning; strategy
Budgeting and Finance	14.5%	Municipal budgeting and finance; long-term financial planning; asset management
Planning/Economic Development	12.9%	Land Use Planning; Building; Economic development; infrastructure
Human Resources	8.9%	Human resources; Legal

The themes were taken directly from the statements of the 124 respondents.

As with the previous two subsections, the primary themes employed in this section were designed to align generally with Hatcher et al. (2023) for ease of comparison. As a departure from Hatcher et al. (2023), however, the Other category was the most common primary theme (26.6 percent). This category captured two different types of response: 1) responses noted the generalist nature of their role and highlighted this ability as an over-arching strength; or, the response was a specific functional area, often the one from which the respondent started their career, which logically continues to be a strength influencing their progression into and success in the CAO role. It is worth noting that Budgeting and Finance was the 4th-ranked category in this study, whereas it was the top theme (32 percent) in Hatcher et al. (2023). This category remained specifically broken out to directly compare contexts. Clearly, this intimates that more finance professionals progress to CAO in the United States, whereas the breadth of functional areas that lead to CAO development in Ontario is significantly larger. The increased Other responses and generalist comments may align with role challenges and may further be indicative of increased responses from small- and medium-sized municipalities, which are often under-

represented in the applicable literature (Folz and French, 2005). These municipalities often have smaller and flatter organizational structures with more managerial roles reporting directly to the CAO (Taylor, 2023). In this context, it stands to reason that a generalist CAO may be more effective than a specialist; whereas a specialist may be more effective in a larger, more complex municipal environment with a stronger or deeper senior management team, which possesses more skills and knowledge and can be relied upon to address specific projects without regular CAO guidance.

Conclusions and Limitations

Review of Study Objectives

As presented in Section One, the five primary objectives of this paper were:

1. To examine the existing CAO literature and relevant legislative changes impacting municipalities and CAO role.
2. To collect relevant data associated with education and career traits of current CAOs in Ontario, including political alignment and service perceptions and role and key demographic indicators.
3. To explore the education and career traits associated with Ontario municipal CAOs and establish a snapshot of the current profession, including any trends.
4. To provide usable data to municipal professional organizations to better improve collaboration, professional development offerings, and appropriate policy advocacy.
5. To present opportunities for future research related to CAO education and career traits across Canada.

This study reviewed applicable international literature, key professional publications, and Ontario legislation to 1) identify industry trends and environmental challenges facing the CAO profession in Ontario, and identified a literature gap in which to locate this study.

A 27-question survey was developed broadly from Hatcher et al. (2023) and with additional questions associated with the CMB project. The survey was disseminated to Ontario municipal CAOs, Deputy CAOs, and equivalent senior administrators primarily through OMAA to obtain relevant data associated with professional education and career traits. Equivalent senior administrators were included to ensure small municipalities were captured in the data collection.

Review of Findings

141 full or partial responses were received, which is 94 more than O'Flynn & Mau (2014), and builds the largest Ontario municipal CAO dataset to-date. The data collected through this paper is significant. It paints a detailed picture of the Ontario municipal CAO in 2025 and sheds light upon some particularly interesting traits and/or divergences from previous studies or assumptions.

Ontario CAOs continue to be majority white and middle-aged. The majority of respondents, however, were women, which is suggestive, but not conclusive, of an occurring gender shift in Ontario. CAOs increasingly possess both Bachelor's and, importantly, graduate-level education. As municipal government reacts to its parent legislation and becomes increasingly complex, CAOs are required to have a greater degree of education and experience to not only manage highly-qualified staff but to ensure that information is provided in a digestible, competent manner to councils. It is logical for municipalities and recruitment firms to seek out higher-order education and practical experience to address complexities and emergent issues in a timely manner.

CAOs progress into the role predominantly through the Legislative/Clerk's, Finance, and Planning/Economic Development functions. Clerk CAOs are increasingly prevalent in younger age cohorts, while planners are popular as CAOs regardless of age. This, however, does not appear to be in response to development-related changes to provincial legislation, which has reduced due diligence capabilities and shortened municipal development timelines. Having a trained planner at the helm may help to further streamline local planning processes. Interestingly, very few engineers and infrastructure-oriented CAOs currently exist. Given that this is the implementation side of development and planning, it is a curious gap in the profession's

expertise and may have more to do with personality traits and individual preferences, rather than an avoidance of the technical skillset.

65 percent of CAOs are within ten years of retirement, and 39 percent are within five years. The sector is entering a time of not only increased potential progression opportunities for aspiring CAOs, but also an almost-certain sector “brain-drain” as knowledge capital retires. This should be concerning to municipalities and municipal professional organizations, such as the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), due to the impending mass recruitments required to fill upcoming vacancies and the potential that they may not be enough interested individuals to fill the roles. Given the data on the functional areas commonly producing CAOs, opportunity exists for additional partnerships with professional organizations in these areas, such as the AMCTO and Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) to ensure their respective memberships are aware of the CAO career trajectory as not only a viable option, but one with significant multi-organizational support and development opportunities.

CAOs tend to be politically centrist with women CAOs self-reporting as more progressive than men. Given that the strong mayor data in this study was rendered stale due to legislative changes announced during the survey’s live period, it will be interesting to see how municipalities with newly-delegated strong mayor powers address CAO vacancies. A CAO’s relationship with its strong mayor is addressed further in the next section.

Finally, mentorship and opportunities outweigh experience and education with respect to key benefits to a CAO’s career trajectory, while political dynamics, council-staff conflict, and work/life balance all continue to be challenges facing individuals in the role. This should be heartening to professional organizations and other organizations that provide regular mentoring and networking opportunities for their membership, especially to women to address the prevalent

gender gap (Hatcher et al., 2023; ICMA, 2020; O’Flynn & Mau, 2014; Beaty & Davis, 2012; Coulter, 2011). Despite the need for education and experience to approach complex municipal issues, mentorship and progression opportunities are apparently as, if not more, important to a CAO’s career. This may mean that some skills, such as political acuity (Siegel, 2015; Siegel, 2010) and general and situational leadership (Gunn et al. 2014; McIntosh, 2009) may be more important to the CAO than technical, function-specific skills as these skills are considered *soft* and, therefore, teachable across the profession.

This paper will be provided to OMAA for its use in advocacy and professional development efforts as the primary professional organization in Ontario for current and aspiring CAOs.

Opportunities for future research are elaborated upon in this paper’s final section, including some opportunity outside of academia.

Limitations

Municipalities continue to be “creatures of the province” and despite their broad jurisdictional authority are still beholden to legislation and cannot supersede what the province adopts. This study was affected by amendments to Bill 3 and O.Reg 530/22 to expand strong mayor powers to an additional 169 municipalities, effective May 1, 2025. Given that the survey was developed, approved, and operationalized before the effective date and legislative changes were publicized in April 2025 with very little notice, the questions pertaining to strong mayor municipalities were rendered stale and did not form a significant component of this paper. A limitation for this and future studies will endure due to the changing legislative landscape in Ontario under the current Progressive Conservative regime.

Unlike Hatcher et al. (2023), this study does not analyze turnover of CAOs. Specifically, no question pertaining to whether an incumbent was an internal or external hire was given to the

total survey population. This question was included in a logic string tied to strong mayor powers and therefore would not be visible to those respondents who answered “no” to being from a municipality with strong mayor powers pre-May 2025. In hindsight, this is a question that could have been available to all respondents and would have resulted in data that could have been compared against other recent international studies on turnover.

Content analysis was conducted with the same general primary themes as Hatcher et al. (2023) to ensure direct comparison was possible. This meant foregoing application of a content analysis software, such as NVivo, to assist in establishing primary themes in a more objective fashion. Table 12 presented results on self-reported area of greatest strength for CAOs, and identified the Other category as the more common response. Objective content analysis may have teased out a new primary theme from their cohort of responses, and should be considered in future content analysis projects.

Finally, the analysis discussed within this paper does not deeply study relationships between the study’s dependent and independent variables through inferential analyses. The author recognizes the length parameters of this particular paper and, as such, certain deeper forms of inferential statistical analysis are outside the scope of this paper, but could feasibly be considered for future analysis and academic publication.

Opportunities for Future Research

The relative novelty of this study in Canada provides a foundation for future projects. There is the possibility of longitudinal research, focusing on the same suite of questions under the same methodology at five- or ten-year intervals to study how the profession's composition shifts. This may be of interest to professional organizations by ensuring updated data to adapt programming and offerings where needed. As the legislative environment evolves, this form of analysis may also be topical in attempting to tease out causality related to professional trends. It may also be worthwhile to focus in on particular questions to devise deeper analysis techniques and look at case studies versus population-based datasets. For instance, a deeper analysis of strong mayor CAOs in response to the substantial expansion of strong mayor powers (Ontario, 2025a,b) is likely warranted, whether by academia or professional organizations seeking to understand the juxtaposition of a strong mayor and CAO in individual organizations. Political acuity and leadership are important leadership aspects (Siegel, 2015; Gunn et al., 2014; Siegel, 2010; McIntosh, 2009) but may become more so in this environment. A relational analysis of strong mayors and their CAOs along the lines of political alignment, social responsibility, and impacts to the working relationship may shed light on the effectiveness of these relationships in executing provincial and local priorities. Case studies of CAO leadership may also be an area of focus to expand upon Tremblay (2018) in a new legislative context.

There is substantial potential for ongoing, future collaboration between professional organizations, such as OMAA and AMCTO, or third-party consulting corporations such as StrategyCorp, and academia on studies in this sector, and crucially where interest and capacity converge as in this case. There may be opportunity for future MPA students to tackle some of this research as a part of their secondary research papers.

This study proposed to analyze CAO turnover only in the context of strong mayor powers rather than as a population as a whole as in Hatcher et al. (2023). The results are suggestive that Ontario municipal CAOs tend to use their progression to CAO as a career capstone immediately prior to retirement. More Ontario data on CAO turnover could be collected to confirm how, why, and when CAOs are making the leap from senior management to top administrator responsibilities. Crucially, it would be prudent to understand if they are internal or external promotions and, if external, what geographical parameters might apply to CAO turnover as studied in Yi & Chen (2022).

Future research should be cognizant of widespread legislative changes and associated impacts to municipal policy or operations, and should be approached with an understanding that while sector changes may lag legislative changes, there is an influence exerted by the latter on the former. Any changes that impact the CAO role may have implications for the role province-wide, which should be accounted for by any future researcher studying the position.

Finally, there is opportunity for Canada-wide research using a similar method to this paper and Hatcher et al. (2023) or O'Flynn & Mau (2014) to compare different jurisdictions with varied legislative environments. There is also significant opportunity to focus on small- and medium-sized municipalities, which comprise the large proportion of Ontario's local governments and are, as established, often under-studied in the broader literature (Folz and French, 2005). In Ontario, small municipalities often have enhanced Clerk roles (i.e. Administrator-Clerk, Clerk-Treasurer) at the apex of their organizational structures rather than CAOs. These positions often act in a CAO-like capacity to coordinate general administrative practices despite the obvious absence of the title itself. It follows that to truly understand local dynamics in smaller settings,

studies should focus on smaller population centres and the challenges associated with the generalist nature of these positions.

Ultimately, the results of this study will provide results to inform any future CAO research in a broad sense by siting the Ontario municipal CAO role where it currently is, which will hopefully assist in guiding the direction of the profession at large.

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