Understanding Attitudes of Job Security and Job Satisfaction among Local Television News Directors, Using Managers from Two Other High-Profile Professions as Comparison

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Prologue: Lessons from baseball

"If you don't win, you're going to be fired.
If you do win, you've only put off the day you're going to be fired."
– Leo Durocher, 46 years as a major league baseball player or manager

Words like these from 20th-century baseball legend Leo Durocher are well known to sports managers and coaches of any era, especially this era. The jobs of the 30 men currently managing clubs in Major League Baseball include overseeing 26 active players (plus others injured or otherwise inactive), a dozen or so coaches, and a product on the field that's measured zero-sum, win-or-lose, every game in a 162-game season that stretches over more than half a year. Add to that managing the expectations of a dollars-and-cents-minded front office, voracious media, and a social-media emboldened fan base. Any fan can see how the job of today's manager is a tinderbox, seemingly with little job security. Indeed, the average tenure of the current crop of major league managers is only between 3 and 4 seasons; the longest-tenured is Kevin Cash, who completed his 11th season with the Tampa Bay Rays in 2025. Stunningly, nine of MLB's 30 clubs – 30% - will start the 2026 season with new managers.

The comings and goings of baseball managers are well chronicled in local and national sports media. Whenever a new manager comes or goes, there's a news conference with reporters and cameras and live streams that fly instantly around the Internet. The announcement of a transaction (hiring, firing, resignation) is typically followed by sound bites from the manager and their supervisor, often the team's president or general manager. It's a massive public show, one that is immediately followed by hours, days, or months of baseball analysts, pundits, and legions of highly connected and engaged fans pronouncing their own judgments on the transaction.

The job of a local television news director shares many of the same types of responsibilities and pressures as that of a baseball manager. But while the comings and goings of a news director are no less exciting or traumatic inside the newsroom, they're far less heralded or understood, especially outside the station building or industry. Indeed, many news director arrivals are announced internally through a meeting or by email, with a brief bio and generic quotes promising excitement and success. Here's a prime example borrowed from a recent station announcement: "<Name> is a bold, forward-thinking leader who understands where local news is headed and how to connect with audiences on every platform. His passion for impactful journalism makes him the perfect choice to lead our newsroom into the future." (The name and station have been redacted.)

Sadly, many news director departures are announced by a terse email from the general manager or the human resources leader, perhaps three sentences, that says, "<Name> is no longer with the station. We wish her/him the best in the future. <Another Name> will manage day-to-day operations while we look for our next news director."

Because the job is similarly complex, with high stakes and high pressure, operating in a relentless 24/7/365 environment, the cost to the organization of making any change is high, especially in terms of money, morale, and momentum. Likewise, the cost to the news director is extraordinary, in terms of potential pay disruption or relocation. Because there are 210 defined Nielsen markets with local television stations, and because they may only be 2 or 3 news directors employed at any one time in any market (top 20 markets perhaps 5 to 8), many experienced news directors have moved from one station in one market to another, some many times over a career. Sometimes this is a career strategy, as moving from a smaller to a larger market often results in a larger, more experienced staff to manage, more responsibility, a city with more amenities, and a higher salary. This is another direct comparison with baseball managers, many of whom begin their managing careers leading minor league teams in front of smaller crowds, making a lot less money.

The purpose of this essay

I aim to help the profession and the academy better understand the complex position of the local television news director and the people who hold it, with the hope of identifying future ways to create greater job security and job satisfaction for this group. Included here is a review of relevant academic literature, along with the results of a 2024 survey of attitudes from a few dozen people currently holding the job. I add a few recommendations at the end.

Before going further with a comparison of these two professions, I'll add a third profession into the mix: a local government city manager. A city manager is most often employed by municipal governments categorized as "council manager", where the elected mayor and council represent the constituents and vote on ordinances, budgets, and contracts. The mayor and council hire, fire, and oversee the professional city manager, who, in turn, is the day-to-day manager of city operations, supervising department heads such as the police chief and directors of finance, human resources, planning, zoning, and maintenance.

While a local city manager (or executive) brings a different skill set to his/her position, the daily variety of the job and the pressures, as well as the impact of the manager's success and tenure, are like those of a baseball manager or a local television news director. But there's one crucial difference: the city manager often comes with an education that prepares them for the role in management. An entire academic discipline – public administration – is available to those seeking employment or skill development in this field. That is not the case for baseball managers, many of whom were former players or coaches without even an undergraduate college degree. Likewise, specialized education is generally not the norm for local television news directors, who might have journalism degrees but haven't been formally trained in managing people or in running a department or a business.

Deeper connections

These three jobs – television news director, baseball manager, and city manager – are remarkably alike in many ways. Here are five:

1. These managers work primarily in the shadows of people – many of whom they supervise – who are the organization's true public faces. In local television news, the anchors and reporters are the ones showcased in the product and promoted in the community. In baseball, the players are the ones fans pay money to watch. They're the ones who play the game in hopes of being immortalized in victory or extraordinary performance. A baseball manager, however, does play a public role, sitting in good view of television cameras at the front of the dugout, cheering or consoling players as they come off the field, and making appearances on the field when changing pitchers or arguing with umpires. City managers often sit on a dais with elected leaders during official council meetings, and, of course, their names are frequently prominently displayed on the Contact Us pages of local city websites. However, very few local television news directors play a public role. When I was a news director, I often told colleagues and friends that if they ever saw me on their television, something had gone horribly wrong, and my appearance on their screen was not part of my plan.

2. In local TV news and with most baseball teams, the manager is often paid less than the team's stars, such as the anchors or the best players. In baseball and in some large TV markets, there have been exponential differences between the salaries of the anchors and their bosses. While in local news, those oversized anchor salaries have been significantly trimmed in the past few years, with declining viewership on the broadcast platform, in baseball, the stars' salaries keep on ballooning. As for city managers, this may be a point of difference. In some council-manager cities, the elected mayor and city council receive very little compensation, with their work being deemed part-time. Since the city manager acts as the chief executive officer of the city government, their salary is generally the largest in the organization.

3. In all three jobs, the manager must answer to numerous public stakeholders. Baseball managers and city managers often do interviews or news conferences with journalists or appear at public events. News directors often meet members of the public at community events or forums, and most also manage a high volume of community or one-on-one engagement via phone, email, and social media.

4. In all three jobs, the manager is often the last to be celebrated when the staff or team performs well, but often the first to be blamed (or fired) when things go off track. A well-repeated line in baseball is that you can't fire 26 players, so if you want to make a quick change, you fire the manager.

5. Each of these managers supervises multi-layered teams with diverse job responsibilities and skills. And it's likely that, as the manager came up through the ranks, he or she specialized in only one of those skills, positions, or job experiences.

    a. A baseball manager must understand pitching, catching, fielding nine different positions, throwing, and hitting. If they played before they coached or managed, chances are they played only one or two of the nine positions.
    b. A city manager must understand the basics of all city services, including budget/finance/HR, planning, utilities, roads, and public safety.
    c. Today's news director must understand the basics of field newsgathering (reporting and videography), newscast producing and directing, technical elements (graphics, audio), emerging digital platforms (including streaming or social media), plus legal and ethical concerns.

    It's also incumbent on the manager, with or without formal training, to learn how to deal with people in all areas of their lives. The manager may have authority over their employees or players only during work hours, but their influence and connections span 24 hours a day. A television news director, I learned from personal experience, is seemingly always the second person someone shares their personal bad news with (after a spouse or a parent). This goes for something like "my pet just died," or "I just found out I have cancer," or "our employee just wrecked one of our vehicles." The same goes for external events, like a mass shooting for a news director, or a major water outage for the city manager, or a sudden injury or illness for one of the key players on a baseball. The people skills a successful manager must develop – often with only on-the-job training – to keep one's head above water are critical and common to all three jobs studied here.

Review of relevant research – baseball

"Managing is getting paid for home runs someone else hits."
– Casey Stengel, baseball manager 1934-1965

"I am probably the only guy who worked for Stengel before and after he was a genius."
– Warren Spahn, major league pitcher 1942-1965

Casey Stengel managed some of the best squads ever to play a season (7 World Series championships, three additional American League pennants with the New York Yankees, from 1949-1960), as well as some of the worst (the woeful first four seasons with the expansion New York Mets, 1962-1965).

Did Stengel's managerial skills magically disappear in 1961? Of course not. Expansion teams like the 1962 Mets are built primarily from end-of-the-bench castoffs from established

clubs. Much more goes into the success of a baseball season than the manager's skill alone. Longtime Baltimore Orioles manager Earl Weaver understood similarly, "People often talk about how many games a manager can win, but what wins games is how the players perform."

They make it seem simple.

Researchers have sought to understand better the complex connections among the manager and his athletes, the club/organization, the community and fans, and the competitive environment, including rival teams and their players and coaches.

Many of the academic journal articles cited around baseball and its managers do not come from traditional sport science journals. Baseball managers are a subject of study in a broad array of journals, including Management Science, Managerial and Decision Economics, and the Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization. Baseball is a popular sport that permeates American culture, and it's a sport that, if not simple, is at least accessible and understandable to most Americans and many academic researchers across a wide variety of disciplines.

Researchers David Strang and Kelly Patterson (2014) evaluate managers' comings and goings based on two forms of performance feedback – experiential and vicarious. Experiential feedback is that which an organization uses to make decisions based on its own outcomes against its own standards. Often that feedback comes down to this: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If the team is winning games on the field and placing well in the standings, and if the fans are happy and buying tickets and merchandise, then everyone gets praise and more substantial rewards for (obviously!) a great strategy and execution.

On the other hand, when the team slumps and falls short of expectations, and when the crowds thin and grow restless in the stands, even a sound strategy executed by an experienced and successful manager will be questioned and perhaps even thrown out. And the manager himself becomes exposed and vulnerable to an unplanned and unwanted job change. It's a "win-stay, lose-shift" logic.

In a closed-fishbowl environment such as professional baseball, it's easy for one team to keep tabs on the other teams. A team that struggles – either for a single year or for many – will look across to its competitors to analyze the strategies and people that are winning at that moment. This is called vicarious feedback (Strang and Patterson, 179). Whatever the successful organizations are doing, on the field and in the front office, becomes the hot flavor of the month for other teams aspiring for that success. Their strategies are mimicked. Their people are poached.

Often, a team will hire someone with long-term successes in their history but will fire based on short-term outcomes. The Texas Rangers are a good example of this. The Rangers played their first 50 seasons without winning a World Series championship. In their 51st season in 2022, the team stumbled to a frustrating 68-94 win-loss record and a 4th-place finish in a five-

team division, 38 games behind their archrivals, the Houston Astros. To make matters worse, the Astros that season won their second World Series title in six years. The Rangers reacted in the offseason by increasing their payroll to attract more top-shelf free agents. And then they persuaded 67-year-old Bruce Bochy, a surefire lock for baseball's Hall of Fame, out of retirement to skipper the 2023 team with "win now" expectations.

And that's exactly what happened. Bochy's Rangers won the club's first-ever World Series after a dominating playoff run that included a dramatic seven-game series win over those rivals and defending champion Astros. The fans were overjoyed. There were champagne and gold rings for the players, and a first-ever championship banner at the home stadium for the fans. For Bochy, it was his fourth World Series ring; he had won three previous for the San Francisco Giants a decade before.

But the Rangers' success was short-lived. The team faltered in 2024 and 2025, in part because of injuries, and in part because the offense that had powered the 2023 championship run had mysteriously disappeared, especially in 2025. And with Rangers ownership and fans frustrated that the ultimate success of 2023 had not been replicated with largely the same rosters the next two seasons, the owners changed the manager. The future Hall of Famer was asked to step aside and was offered another job in the organization. Meanwhile, the team went looking again for another field leader. It turned to a much younger former player, Skip Schumaker, who brings only two seasons of managing experience (and no championship rings).

Strang and Patterson also evaluate another key area of this field: when is it better to hire an experienced leader like Bochy or promote (or recruit) someone stepping into the manager role for the very first time. Their specific analysis of this goes beyond the focus of this essay, but it, too, is a common decision point for hiring local television news directors.

The researchers (180) note that these hiring decisions are based on risk assessment and tolerance because they are critical to the team or organization's short-term success, and the cost of failure is extraordinary, especially when better results don't materialize.

There is one key difference between hiring leaders for baseball and for news. "Organizational leaders seek to hire capable managers, but they also wish to act in ways that build rather than erode support among their stakeholders." (195) Because baseball teams perform and win or lose in full view of the public, there's an extra layer to the hiring process – fan reaction – that is not a concern for hiring local television news directors.

Other researchers have taken similar angles to measure the impact of baseball managers.

Kahn (1993) surveyed baseball data from 1969 to 1987 – 19 seasons – to try to measure the impact of managers on team outcomes (winning) and individual player performance. His primary question is, "What does a firm get when it invests in a high-quality manager?" (531) Kahn uses a manager's salary as a proxy for his public worth and reputation. Kahn's study

involves a series of lengthy algebraic equations using common baseball statistics as many of the variables. His findings: Managerial quality had "a positive, usually significant effect on team winning percentage," and that "major league baseball teams appear to be getting a bargain when they hire better managers." (543)

There is, however, contrasting research from two decades ago that says baseball managers – even experienced and successful ones – have much less impact on a team. Studies from Smart and Wolfe (2003) and Smart, et al (2008) say that there is a correlation between managers' experience and their pay. That makes sense. In the second article, the authors suggest that a manager will become even less vital to their team's performance and success because of the mass adoption of advanced analytics to understand better what happens in a game and predict outcomes based on that data.

One thing that makes baseball easy to study with quantitative data is the public availability of every statistic for every game, as well as a public record of team and player performance from every season. Also, the record of who's employed by what team, when, and for how long is easily sourced in record books and online. That kind of analysis can also be done for public administrators, such as city managers, when they're measured on outcomes based on public city data. This is not the case for television news directors, because private companies don't divulge to researchers or the public at large statistics like employee rosters, employee performance, and team outcomes as measured by key scorekeeping tools like audience or engagement metrics (Nielsen ratings for on-air, Google or Comscore for online, for instance).

One study directly connects baseball to public administration. Hill (2009) examines what happens when organizations frequently turn over managers. He draws a direct comparison between baseball managers and public city managers, like this essay. The 28th president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, studied public administration (559) and used that study to inform his decisions as our nation's chief executive. Hill's analysis, looking at both public administration and baseball, leads him to conclude that 1) managers do make a difference in the actual performance and outcomes of the organization, and 2) that manager tenure and stability have positive impacts on performance. (567) That said, Hill continues, "Organizationally speaking, some change is to be desired; however, this relationship is not necessarily linear. In fact, too much change leads to a drop in performance," which even experienced and savvy managers cannot overcome.

Review of relevant research – public administration

"The City Council and I found ourselves at an intersection that is common in a Council-Manager form of government. Today, the City Council voted to remove me from my position as Austin's City Manager."

– Spencer Cronk, Austin city manager, 2017-2023 (Cronk)

When a baseball manager leaves voluntarily or is replaced, there's a measurable impact on the players and the team assembled in the locker room. And often, given how contracts are written, a manager's involuntary departure has a significant impact on the club's financial bottom line as well. Buyouts for a manager's departure can cost millions of dollars, just so the club can gain the freedom to spend another sum of millions on a contract for the new manager.

In public administration, the dollar figures are usually lower, but not insignificant. The Austin city manager quoted above, who was fired by a vote of the city council, left with a year's salary and benefits totaling nearly half a million dollars. (Girtman) There are other impacts too, as measured by a litany of scholarly articles by researchers who study the field. Those include the outright cost of recruiting and hiring the next manager, as well as disruption to leadership, strategy, and communications. It makes sense to see that longer tenures with success in key measures lead to a better-functioning local government.

A relevant study from Mani (2014) identifies four factors that go a long way to determine a local manager's tenure:

1. The person: This focuses on hiring a skilled, experienced, competent manager and ensuring that person is compensated so there are fewer opportunities and temptations to take a higher-paying job elsewhere.

2. The job: The primary concern here is who makes the decisions? In a council-manager government, the elected council generally sets policy, and the manager leads the team of city staff responsible for carrying it out. Especially in the city manager (chief executive) role, there is often conflict over decisions that fall in the middle, between setting policy and executing on it. This can occur even when the mayor, council, and the manager agree on both strategy and tactics. Hiring second-level leadership is often a point of contention. Who gets to hire whom for what role? If the city manager has no hire/fire authority over a person they directly manage, awkwardness, tension, and sometimes outright hostility can emerge. Personal work style is another concern. Even if there is minimal conflict over strategy and tactics or people, personal styles can rub the wrong way, increasing the likelihood of the manager's departure.

3. The local community (municipality): External factors, such as the community's overall health and prosperity, affect the average tenure of a city manager. Mani points to research that says the more prosperous the community, the longer the manager's tenure. Perhaps that's because more prosperous communities are more attractive places for a manager to want to live. There may also be more pressure on the manager when the community is financially struggling, even if the struggles began long before the manager was hired.

4. The election system: Different types of election setups, including at-large or districts or hybrid, have been shown to influence tenure of the non-elected manager. Further, local volatile political climates in the community certainly affect the city manager's job

satisfaction and job security. For instance, if voters wholly replace a five-person council in a single election or in back-to-back votes, policies will no doubt change, and sometimes the jobs of the hired help (including the city manager) are at risk.

Mani's research offers factors to help increase tenure among city managers:

1. Previous tenure: Hiring a manager with long tenures in their past is a key indicator of future tenure length. Even though many sought-after managers have advanced degrees in public administration, education is not necessarily a strong predictor, since higher degrees can lead to that person being poached to work elsewhere for more money or a bigger opportunity.

2. Appropriate responsibility and oversight: City managers who are given greater day-to-day leeway over the city budget and city staff are more likely to stay.

3. Relationships with elected officials: There's generally a honeymoon period after a manager gets hired. After all, the manager's managers (the council) are all the ones who hired the manager in the first place. But as those faces change through new elections or other turnover, relationships must be re-established. This requires trust and communication, even when the council and the manager agree on strategy and tactics. After all, a different-leaning new majority on the council could bounce the old city manager just as easily as the previous council hired them.

Mani's research showed that most city managers in her survey moved their way up the ranks through other organizations rather than just climbing the ladder in one organization. This is similar to both baseball and television news organizations, where many managers move from job to job and city to city, chasing their dreams, bigger salaries, and more responsibility. To be sure, some second-level managers in city government and television news plant themselves in one place and slowly rise, sometimes to take the job as primary leader.

Watson and Hasset (2004) identify four city manager career paths: 1) ladder climbers, 2) lateral movers, 3) long servers, and 4) single-city careerists. Further, they find that ladder climbers and single-city careerists make up the class of large-city managers they surveyed. They say previous research has said nearly 80% of large city managers were hired from outside, only 46% of city managers in the largest cities were outside hires. That indicated large cities might be doing a better job of developing executive leaders from within.

News directors, look at Watson and Hasset for advice on ladder climbers and single-city careerists.

Tekniepe and Stream (2010) reinforce the notion that turmoil in local politics can lead to higher turnover among managers. Still, higher levels of education and promoting managers from within can help achieve longer tenure and greater stability.

Review of relevant research – local television news

There is no contemporary study of local television news directors that compares to the listed efforts of the researchers highlighted in the literature review for public administration. And for nearly 30 years, there was no significant research at all to better understand the role of the news director and their feelings about their job.

Our review of previous studies begins with Vernon Stone, a professor at several universities, including the Missouri School of Journalism. Stone wrote several studies on the fast-maturing field of television news beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, now 40 to 50 years ago. Stone (1986) noted that female television news directors had jumped from less than 1% in 1972 to 14% in 1986, but that minority (non-white) representation in the news director's office had risen only to 3%. (746)

From 1972 to 1986, Stone noted that local TV news went from a promotional or community service to the station's primary moneymaker. Thus, with a corresponding growth in the size of the news staff, local TV news directors had begun to shift their primary day-to-day focus from journalistic activities to managerial activities. (747) Stone noted a divergence in the hiring of local television news directors and local newspaper editors: that the television leaders had already begun to migrate from market to market and station to station more frequently than their local newspaper counterparts. And just as concerning, more than half of news directors surveyed in 1983 said that opportunities in professional development would likely lead them out of the news business altogether.

Stone served as research director for the Radio Television News Directors Association for more than 20 years, each year surveying news directors across the country, compiling hiring and salary statistics to track key industry trends. Bob Papper picked up this work from Stone in the early 2000s. Papper and Syracuse/Newhouse colleagues Keren Henderson and Tim Morabito continue that work today. Their breadth of yearly research, sponsored by the same professional association (now titled Radio Television Digital News Association), surveys hundreds of local news directors and tracks several points of data, including 1) how many hours of local news on air each day, 2) staff sizes for large, medium, and small markets, 3) salaries, also broken down by market size (ranked 1-210 by Nielsen), and 4) newsroom profitability. Their 2025 edition included responses to why employees were leaving their newsroom jobs. The most-reported answers included 1) salary, 2) work-life balance, and 3) burnout, but many other responses were submitted. There's no special breakout for responses from news directors, but experience suggests they leave their jobs for reasons like those of the local television employee pool at large.

For decades, research on local broadcast news was sparse, and local television news directors – their attitudes, interests, concerns, careers, and fears – were apparently not a

subject of interest. Searches of library databases like *Academic Search Complete*, *Communication and Mass Media Complete*, and *Communication Source*, from 1990 to 2020, turn up almost nothing on news directors' attitudes toward their jobs and careers.

That changed in the current decade. With most local newspapers collapsing over the past 15 years, local television newsrooms now employ the most journalists in most markets. Large markets will have four or more competing local television newsrooms; smaller markets maybe two or three, even as consolidation has taken place at scale over the past 15 years. Survey data from Papper, et al, (2025) show that newsrooms in Nielsen markets ranked 26 (Nashville) to 50 (New Orleans) employ an average of 65.9 full-time employees, while newsrooms in markets ranked 101 (Tri Cities, TN/VA) to 150 (Wichita Falls-Lawton) employ an average of 28.6 full-timers. The largest staff size reported in 2025 was 154 full-time employees. Local television news's business models may be threatened, but there are still plenty of jobs doing journalism in these hundreds of local newsrooms.

So, it's good that more academic research is focusing on the role of the leaders of these newsrooms.

Lysak and Henderson (2025) studied how upheavals in the world (such as COVID-19) and in the newsroom (such as industry consolidation) have impacted management roles in broadcast newsrooms. News directors are often caught in the middle, trying to lead content creation guided by their journalistic values and local sensibilities, while maintaining good standing with corporate leaders who now oversee vastly larger groups of stations. For instance, after a years-long series of acquisitions, Nexstar Media owns 200 stations across markets of all sizes in the United States. News directors are now often the department's HR leader, dealing with employee needs and crises now more than ever. They're also in charge of creating new content and new programs for all new platforms. Social media has occupied a significant share of a newsroom's attention for the past 15 years; many stations now support a wide array of platforms far beyond the staples of Facebook and X, including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and others. (Papper, et al 2025)

The COVID-era rush to streaming is another primary example. Many stations are now producing hours of programs per week solely for streaming. Staff sizes have not kept pace with the increase in hours of live production and content generation. Almost every newsroom is producing more content with fewer people than in years past.

Burnout has become a focus for researchers in the current decade. The 2023 edition of the RTDNA staff/salary research (Papper, Henderson 2023) reported that more than two-thirds of all news directors said they had seen more evidence of staff burnout compared to the past. The researchers provided a number of anecdotal snippets of quotes from respondents on the subject, with themes like "no longer fun", "flared tempers", "exhaustion", "too many job vacancies, and no pipeline for reinforcements", "more sick days", and "people quitting even before their contracts were up".

Similar themes were evident to Roman and Beasley (2024), who studied the post-COVID attitudes of 20 local television reporters in a wide range of market sizes. Like most jobs in journalism, the TV reporter job comes with long hours, challenging and sometimes unpredictable work schedules, and ever-present deadlines. In local news, those deadlines used to be associated with various newscasts, spaced throughout the day. Now, those deadlines are virtually nonstop for some reporters, who are now expected to appear in or contribute content to through-the-day streaming shows, as well as be active on social media. Further, many reporters now act as MMJs – multimedia journalists – shooting and editing their own video and scripting their own taped stories and live appearances. And they must drive themselves to and from their stories, which limits the time they can spend on the rest of the work. There's no longer much time in a reporter's day, actually, to report on something – make phone calls, dig through records, research the subject, and secure interviews.

The COVID-19 pandemic created even problems and pressures for reporters. Many reporters were kept out of their newsrooms for more than a year. That limited their ability to engage with friends at work. Meantime, they were being sent out into communities to engage with outside people for their stories at a time when the spread of the virus made it dangerous to do so. Additional health concerns arose for reporters who cared for children or lived with others.

The researchers say that reporting in the COVID-19 era left many of their survey respondents considering (and eventually taking) careers outside local television news.

The mass explosion in expectations for the quantity of content creation (TV, digital platforms, streaming, 24/7) has also led to burnout among television journalists. (Higgins-Dobney 2024) Journalism has always had a creative element, but the factory-work mindset – "get it on NOW!" – has taken a lot of time away from a reporter's ability to tell a story more creatively, as well as the time needed to tell a more in-depth story and not just a slapdash summary report. Time is not the only missing element. Corporate cost-cutting and the standardization of available technology/equipment have taken away some of the tools that enabled more creative work.

The previously mentioned conversion to all MMJ "one-man bands" is, of course, a major concern. One respondent to this research said of his partnership with a photographer, "They think visually. I think in words." (8) But the job now requires a reporter to do both.

"I love my job and I do miss my job, but I would never go back to my job."
– A former local television sportscaster (Hull)

A similar paper (Hull, 2025) focuses on local sports broadcasters. This is a corner of the local television newsroom that has seen severe job cuts over the past two decades, even as the overall sports business has exploded. The sports staff I led in the 1990s for an ABC affiliate in

Oklahoma City covered the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, several small colleges, and dozens of high schools, as well as every Dallas Cowboys game, home or away. We had seven people on the sports team to do it. That same sports department today lists only two sports reporters on its website, and that market now has an NBA professional sports team as well.

Hull points to similar studies conducted back in the early 2010s that showed only low levels of job dissatisfaction or burnout, but that has changed wholesale in recent years. The respondents to his interview questions provided detailed reasons for their dissatisfaction or for having already left the business. Given the research already shared here, the answers offer no additional surprise.

But what about the news director? What do they think about their jobs?

"The secret of managing is to keep the guys who hate you away from the guys who are undecided."
– Casey Stengel.

While there's a dearth of research directly aimed at news directors' attitudes toward their job satisfaction, in this post-COVID era, we can look back at three papers from the past.

Cleary (2008) highlights one long-standing challenge in the news business, especially in broadcast news: the dearth of training and professional development. She notes that effective training and opportunities for skills and leadership development are one way to keep workers engaged with their jobs. Her focus is on two roles in the newsroom: the news director and the newscast producer. The latter is usually not a management position but one that produces newscasts and plays an outsized role in how news reaches viewers through the station's newscasts.

Even though both positions value training, and even though the news director makes many decisions regarding the newsroom's budget, they don't have complete control over what they can spend, and they can't unilaterally raise their budget to accommodate an expense like training.

Three decades ago, Redmond (1994) outlined a case for graduate programs for television news directors, akin to a customized Executive MBA. Such a program, Redmond stated, would offer news leaders formal training in budgeting and hiring and firing, organizational development, people and product management, quality control, leadership, and managing up to the station manager and to corporate leaders overseeing a station-group enterprise.

To date, no such college-level program has emerged, to the industry's detriment. Most news directors, like most journalists, enter the field with a bachelor's degree in journalism or a

related communications field. But for many, formal education stops there. News directors are almost always hired from within the ranks. Many entered the news business as producers, then were promoted to executive producers and, later, to assistant news directors. But there are plenty of examples of reporters, photojournalists, assignment editors, digital producers, and others who have moved up the ladder to take the #1 job. The industry hires news directors only from within news. There are a few former newspaper editors who have crossed over to TV, but nowhere will you find an MBA-trained, skilled manager from an industry outside journalism stepping in to run a newsroom.

Many broadcast companies have instituted their own management training, but the training is often limited to compliance (severe HR issues that could potentially expose the company to liability) or to current and likely temporal initiatives the company is putting forth. Generally speaking, broadcast companies do not offer significant executive-level training for news directors.

There is training from industry groups and non-profit. In general, it's more ad hoc. The National Association of Broadcasters Leadership Foundation runs a 10-month Broadcast Leadership Training class that equips participants for management and leadership development, often advancing them to executive levels within their current companies. News directors are occasionally sent by their supervisors or companies, but only rarely. Each year's NABEF leadership class is typically about 20 people, and participants come from news and other broadcast departments, including sales, marketing, and engineering.

The Poynter Institute, The Carole Kneeland Project, and the Radio Television Digital News Association have played enormous roles in my own personal management development over nearly 30 years. Even without anything more than an ad hoc week-long program and numerous convention-hosted quick sessions, I've cobbled together a rich and deep professional and managerial education. But I've had to do almost all of it on my own, without primary sponsorship from my employers. At most, my employers have given me paid time away from my newsroom duties to attend a training event or a convention. Almost always, I paid my own way. I know of hundreds of former colleagues who would have benefited from the training experiences I've had. Still, they were never able to prioritize their time or their finances to make similar investments. The business is worse for not doing more for dedicated, smart newsroom leaders (future news directors!) who have never had the chance to focus on their own skills development to become more effective in their current work and to help them compete for advancement opportunities.

Finally, in this review, Blankenship and Riffe (2019) surveyed television news directors and their attitudes, just before the COVID-19 pandemic upended their newsrooms and their world. They, too, acknowledged that news directors were an "overlooked group". (197) One of their key takeaways is that news directors working in larger markets were more optimistic than their small-market counterparts about their jobs, their effectiveness in their jobs, and the prospects for journalism and the industry at large. Most importantly, they felt they were

essentially “in step” with their bosses on audience/ratings expectations, but less so on the station's and the company's business goals.

What do today’s news directors really think about job security and satisfaction?

Even though original research isn’t required for this essay, I wanted specific data on news directors’ attitudes toward their job satisfaction and success, as well as their feelings of job stability and security, a topic not yet studied in the academic literature.

Professors Emily Metzgar and Gretchen Hoak helped me build a questionnaire in Qualtrics. Then they pointed me to Kent State’s Institutional Review Board, so I could have the university’s official approval to put this survey into the field. The questions and the resulting responses are attached as an appendix to this essay.

I asked for marketing help from RTDNA (1,000+ members, many of whom are local television news directors) and from Rick Gevers, who publishes a weekly email that tracks each news director who comes and goes. Rick says “The Gevers List” reaches a highly targeted 1,600 email addresses each week, with many of his subscribers being past, current, or aspiring news directors. Gevers wrote a pitch for my survey in his newsletter for two consecutive weeks. RTDNA promoted my survey on its website and in one of its weekly emails. I did not do any further marketing on my own, or via my social feeds, for concerns that doing so might spoil the sample (too many of my friends, even if they otherwise qualified) and that I might not do it precisely according to IRB rules.

The surveys were collected in the final weeks of 2024 and early weeks of 2025.

The responses were fewer than I had hoped, with 43 beginning the survey and 23 continuing through the most critical questions, weeding out anyone who wasn’t a current news director working in a U.S. television newsroom. But the 28 who completed the survey left behind quantitative data and high-quality qualitative data, too, in the form of comments.

To begin the review, the respondents leaned toward being an experienced group, with a mean of 12.25 years as a news director and 6.25 years in the newsroom they currently lead. Overall experience in all journalism jobs was also high, with a mean of 27.07 years. All but one of the respondents who completed the survey are between 30 and 60 years old and are almost equally split between men and women. While no known dataset tracks the average age, experience, and tenure of today’s news director roster, based on my own experience and knowledge, I suspect the respondents to my survey are older and far more experienced than the overall pool of news directors.

The respondents came from 9 of 13 RTNDA geographical regions in the United States. The regions not represented were the Great Plains, New England, and the NY/NJ/PA corridor.

About three-fourths of the respondents lead medium- to large-sized newsrooms, with 26 to 100 employees. Also, three-fourths of the respondents work in Nielsen DMAs ranked 1-100. Those respondents may be the same people, since the larger newsrooms are almost always in the larger DMAs.

Using a 5-point Likert scale, with "5" indicating the most favorable and "1" the least, I asked two questions about respondents' feelings of satisfaction and success in their current jobs.

	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied
Your satisfaction with your current role	2	8	3	5	5

The news directors were evenly split here, in the general sense of satisfied vs dissatisfied.

I then asked for one or two reasons for their response. Here are the six positive responses, either directly quoted or lightly paraphrased for clarity:

- *Coaching – getting everyone to improve. Producing content that is relevant and useful to our audience/readers.*
- *I like my job, my team*
- *Great working relationship with my General Manager and corporate team*
- *Lots of hands off from the GM. Love working with new journalists*
- *I have a really positive and supportive (but also realistic) GM, and we've been working so hard on the culture here that is really is now a great place to work, not only for the employees but for the managers.*
- *Helping young journalists compete, building staff and structure, while dealing with the possible death of broadcast.*

Here are the four mixed responses:

- *Love the job; there are many challenges to doing it well that you have little or no control or influence*
- *It's a huge challenge, getting everyone on the same page while managing radio, TV, and digital stories while prioritizing quality.*
- *I love the job, but the corporation does not provide enough pay or support.*
- *Industry and leadership changes have led to some dissatisfaction, but overall, I'm happy in my current role.*

Ten of the responses were marked either positive or mixed. Thirteen of the responses were judged negative, which could mean the three respondents who marked "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" all gave negative written details.

Here are the negative responses:

- *Lack of support from General Manager*
- *The amount of corporate oversight has never been worse. The expectations of doing our job and being on 24/7 coupled with corporate reports and initiatives changing on a whim.*
- *The job continues to get harder and journalism schools teach less and less. Also, less qualified candidates can find jobs in larger markets.*
- *Underfunded and overworked*
- *Financial uncertainty, expected to do the same amount of work with fewer people*
- *Not enough corporate support/direction, inexperience of journalists*
- *Lack of resources, lack of support*
- *Too far candidates applying for open positions and even fewer qualified candidates.*
- *Salary parameters for hiring staff is very difficult and the demands are more.*
- *Pay and work/life balance sucks*
- *Station culture is a boy's club, new ideas aren't welcomed*
- *Corporation's lack of journalistic integrity*
- *Employees who don't like direction of leadership vision can easily complain to HR, and it becomes a challenge for the ND. News is 24/7 and many of today's new hires don't understand hard news, want to ask tough questions. They want to be a celebrity, not a journalist. Industry has changed.*

Because a news director's sense of job satisfaction and success is often tied to how they feel working for their supervisor (usually, the station's general manager), I asked a similar question of the respondents, only this time the response is based on how the news director estimates how the supervisor rates their satisfaction with the news director.

	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied
Your supervisor's satisfaction with you in your current role	0	2	1	4	16

These numbers reflect a much more positive outlook than the previous set. Here are some of the positive responses the news directors gave for their scores, either directly quoted or lightly paraphrased for clarity:

- *I'm driving positive change in the newsroom.*
- *My supervisor thanks me for a job well done and trusts me with important station information.*
- *High ratings, quality work, low drama*
- *I'm a good partner so that the GM can focus on sales.*
- *I have a wonderful and supportive general manager who consistently praises my work.*
- *He is a new GM and doesn't know much about news. He is able to focus on other departments knowing that the news department is being managed well by news managers.*

And here are a couple of the negative responses:

- *It's more about money than ethics.*
- *The GM is a bully, disorganized, and unethical. We don't get along.*

These responses lead to one final question from this survey: "Do you fear losing your job without notice?" This is a common theme in this essay.

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Often	All the time
Do you fear losing your job without notice?	5	2	7	4	3

Even in this limited data set, and even with most news directors sensing that their supervisors are satisfied with their performance, there's still concern about an unplanned job loss, like what baseball managers and city managers experience.

Recommendations

Even if baseball fans all think they could do a better job than their favorite team's manager, the impact of the manager's leadership cannot be understated. The same goes for city management and for local television news directors.

From personal experience working in the industry, both as a news director and as a corporate leader overseeing product across multiple newsrooms, I know that any change in leadership at the news director level can set a news organization back by 9 months or more. Unless there's a trained and mentored successor ready for promotion, recruiting alone to replace the outgoing news director can take 45 to 60 days, and sometimes up to 6 months. Then

often, there's relocation; moving in; learning the new community and company; building connections; surveying talent, strategy, and execution. The cost of replacing a news director is high, even if an internal promotion is warranted. News directors set critical vibes; any disruption, even just to vibes, can create discomfort and unsettlement, and disrupt momentum toward newsroom or station goals.

From an efficiency and excellence standpoint, leadership stability makes sense to keep the newsroom focused on high-performing daily news coverage and attainment of goals related to content, audience growth, and revenue.

Here are four broad recommendations for further study and support:

1. Like the extraordinary data generated by Papper, Henderson, and Morabito, on behalf of RTDNA, as well as the weekly chronicles of news director movement from industry insider Rick Gevers, I recommend creating an annual tracking study of news director movement, tenure, satisfaction, and success. The Gevers weekly newsletters track each actual individual job movement, but he says there is no central database or searchable record to pull up bulk data or do further analysis. A central data repository built from data captured from Gevers' weekly dispatches would help researchers and the industry better track and understand trends in news director tenure and movement. Also, given that the data from my survey is skewed in favor of news directors with what I expect is far more experience than the average news director, further research needs to include a purposeful effort to attract younger news directors with much less experience.

2. Begin a broader academic study on the news director position holistically, much as has been done in the city manager/public administration field. As long as the local television news directors manage their markets' largest newsrooms, their success in the position remains of vital interest to journalism companies, newsroom staff, and even people in the local community who rely on local news. Such a study could break down the types of skills, aptitudes, and attitudes a current-day news director ideally ought to have before they take on the position for the first time. RTDNA is one organization that could seek and provide funding to sponsor such research. Likewise, several journalism non-profit funders might be interested in providing support. Also, it's possible that one or more of the mainline local television station group owners would offer support for the research in exchange for some additional data that might be offered to them exclusively, based on the needs and goals of that specific company. Additional partnership and support could come from for-profit consulting and coaching firms that advise TV stations on talent selection and development, content, ratings/metrics, and revenue. As discussed above, even experienced journalists who ascend to the news director position don't have direct skills or personal work experience in many of the journalism positions they will now supervise. Those news directors who moved up through the ranks of producers or assignments/digital editors may have never been a field reporter or photojournalist, or vice versa. More critically, these news director newbies rarely have sufficient training in management or leadership. A deeper benchmark study – across relevant outside

industries – should identify the most important business/management/leadership skills that might lead to longer and more successful tenures, and less turnover.

3. Such research could lead to sophisticated training, up to and including graduate education that offers a certification or degree. Many universities offer auxiliary education, either inside individual colleges/schools/divisions or in a division built for continuing and professional education. A cross-disciplinary program connecting a university's journalism school with its business management or leadership school would be a place to start. A remote, online training program would be a must. Because journalism is typically a lower-pay profession with limited high-end salaries, and because profit margins for local television stations have shrunk from perhaps 50% a quarter century ago to perhaps 10% today, cost is a major concern. It's quite possible the aspiring future news director would need to foot the bill for their own training, and of course, they would be doing this training while also doing the full-time job they are currently in. Add on any outside responsibilities like a family, and one can see that a program like this – while highly useful if not outright necessary – would have to fit carefully into the rest of a candidate's life and budget.

   A certificate of completion or accomplishment would be a great asset to present as a credential toward winning a first or future news director job. Existing professional credential programs like PMP for project managers, SHRM for human resource professionals, or CMP for meeting planners might provide useful templates for designing a similar certification for news directors. Again, this might be a useful role for RTDNA, pushing forward its 75-year legacy as a champion of electronic news and newsroom leaders. RTDNA maintains close relationships with several leading U.S. journalism schools, which might make a partnership easier to build.

   The Poynter Institute has, for much of its 50-year history, invested heavily in newsroom leader training. While their week-long seminars (Poynter Leadership Academy, Essential Skills for New Managers, and others) have been fundamental to my own personal career development, Poynter does not currently have a mechanism tying their programs together toward a marketable certificate, and they do not currently teach the depth of skills in areas like financial management or human resources that a certificate program would likely offer.

   For even more sophisticated training, there is already a model program, but for broadcast meteorologists. Mississippi State University has, for decades, offered a remote meteorologist training program for people who want to get into TV weather. Often, the students are working journalists who earn an undergraduate degree in journalism or communications and start their career as a reporter or producer. Then, by some happenstance, like filling in to cover a weatherperson's absence, this employee found a passion for weather. The Mississippi State Broadcast and Operational Meteorology Endorsement program is 3 years in length, requires 17 courses and 53 credit hours. Students who don't know anything about the science of weather learn what they need

to get an academic certificate and the credentials to apply for a seal of approval from the National Weather Association. This trade organization represents operational meteorologists.

4. The previous recommendation requires significant planning and resources, but there are also short-term solutions. One solution would be for researchers to study onboarding for all-new or newly hired news directors, which could lead to focused best-practice training during the first 30 to 90 to 180 days on the job. Twenty years ago, former CBS and CNN correspondent Deborah Potter authored an RTDNA booklet, Incoming: Advice for the Newly Named News Director, which provided a series of astute bullet-pointed checklists to help a new news director adapt more quickly to their new job, their new boss, their new newsroom staff, and their new company organization. Even though this book precedes any newsroom focus on digital content or streaming, or social media, many of the leadership and management ideas in Incoming still hold up. The book sorely needs to be updated to the current age. Both RTDNA and Potter have told me (a few years ago) that the opportunity is open for some enterprising scholar or practitioner to do this.

   Another short-term solution could come from more sophisticated mentoring programs. These exist inside some companies. Also, programs like Poynter and the Carole Kneeland Project offer mentoring or peer-to-peer support as an ongoing part of the learning after their in-person training (a few days) concludes, and all the participants return home to their own offices and newsrooms.

All this and change too

All these recommendations come with an additional caveat: the business of news is changing rapidly, and news directors must learn how to keep up. A news director who doesn't understand the seismic changes in audience interests and consumption behaviors, or in technology, or in journalism values, can render themselves irrelevant and incapable of doing their same jobs five years from now without the curiosity and the capacity of looking around the corner and leading their teams to what's new and what's coming next. That's a different skill set altogether. Some current and aspiring news directors are extraordinarily curious and excited about the future. Others desperately need training to at least develop a series of habits or skills to help them look forward as they need.

In conclusion

As someone who has seen journalism grow and evolve first-hand over the past 40 years, and as someone who believes our greatest days as journalists are still in front of us, I hope we can help people in the essential role of news director feel like they can do better and lead better.

It would be fun to expand a broader and deeper study of news directors to include similar positions like baseball managers and city managers. I suspect the data would be more aligned than not.

More importantly for this project, even the limited data from my survey shows that many news directors have serious concerns about their own job security and satisfaction. Even those who say they love their jobs are concerned about the future. As reported above, the mean number of years of experience as a news director was in double digits. These people have long ago figured out how to do their jobs, at least at a level to stay employed in their first news director job, or have successfully been hired for news director jobs multiple times. And yet, they have concerns about the jobs they're in right now. Purposeful research and focused training should go a long way to increase tenure, reduce turnover, and promote better feelings of security and satisfaction for people who hold these important jobs and those who want them next.

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