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Assessing Municipal Strategic Plan Quality in Ontario: An Examination of Municipal Size, Consultant Involvement and Strategic Plan Quality Components

Subject keywords: Strategic Planning, Quality of Municipal Plans

Geographical keywords: Ontario, Local Government

MPA Research Report

Submitted to:

The Local Government Program
Department of Political Science
The University of Western Ontario

Eliza Durant
Part time Student
July 2024

Abstract

The strategic plan is an important document for a municipality, serving as a roadmap for achieving its long-term goals by addressing the community needs. The quality of the strategic plan, as determined by the characteristics within the plan, can provide an understanding of what constitutes a quality plan. This research evaluates and scores 40 strategic plans from Ontario municipalities with populations below 50,000 to identify key characteristics of a quality plan. The research seeks to understand what components within the plan contribute to a higher quality plan. A review of variables affecting strategic plan quality including municipal size and consultant derived plans or in-house developed plans impact strategic plan quality are also examined. The strategic plan review provides insight into best practices and common challenges for municipal strategic planning, offering insights for policymakers and municipal leaders seeking to enhance their strategic plan.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this research paper as well as the courses in the Local Government Program at Western University would not have been possible without the support and assistance of *many* individuals. First, the support from my husband, Lance, my parents, in-laws, and my two children, Owen, and Maddox. I appreciate all your patience, support, and encouragement while mom was doing her 'homework' during the course. I appreciate you all for allowing me to take the time away to focus on my studies. Your support has been a course of my strength and motivation, and I hope I inspire you all to achieve your goals and dreams, even if they look a little different. Thank you, Dayna Pinkerton, for allowing me to room with you for three years while I completed this program in London.

Secondly, my colleagues whom I work with day to day who are inspiring and always pushing me to do better and the City of Port Colborne for supporting this journey from the very beginning. Lastly, to all the wonderful people and amazing friends I have met on this journey including the various professors and mentors. Thank you!

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1. Overview

1.1. Background

As municipal governments continue to face challenges including wicked problems, it is important to understand how these issues may be interconnected, and municipal leaders can work together to support and solve similar challenges. The strategic plan is a document that supports a municipalities organizational aims and objectives (Elbanna, Thanos, and Colak, 2014). While each municipality is unique in terms of its location, size and identify, the challenges faced by municipal governments can overlap. These overlapping issues may include fiscal constraints, infrastructure maintenance, affordable housing, homelessness and poverty, climate change and environmental sustainability, transportation and traffic congestion, governance and civic engagement and adapting to new technological advancements. Addressing these challenges not only requires strategic planning but collaboration with key stakeholders, innovative solutions tailored to the municipality and community engagement.

Strategic planning is defined as a deliberate and disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions to shape and guide what an organization is, what it does and why it does it (Bryson, 2011). Originally derived from private sector practices, strategic planning has become a standard practice in most Ontario municipalities (Johnsen, 2021). The documents may address the entire municipal organization including economic development, infrastructure, public services, environmental sustainability, and social well-being. These plans may involve consultation with stakeholders and community members to ensure alignment with local priorities and values. The strategic planning process is

continuous, involving review and reflection, acknowledgement and documentation of existing conditions, determination of goals and objectives, and planning the means to achieve these directives. According to Bryson (2018), when done well, strategic planning is an intelligent practice.

1.2. Research Questions

The research paper contributes to the literatures on evaluation planning and plan quality by considering the following research questions:

- a) Why are some municipal strategic plans in Ontario higher quality than others?
- b) Does the involvement of consultants impact the quality of municipal strategic plans in Ontario?
- c) What areas within the municipal strategic plan contribute to an enhanced quality plans when the plan is developed by a consultant compared to an in-house developed strategic plan?

1.3. Report Structure

To answer these research questions, the report will be structured as follows:

Section 2 – Literature Review

A review of the literature will provide the background for municipal strategic planning including introducing the plan quality framework to be used to assess the plans, including the identification of limitation of the plan quality approach.

Section 3 – Research Design

An overview of the research design is provided in this section. This includes a discussion of the overall research aim, case selection and the approach to the data collection and analysis.

Section 4 – Research Results

This section will aim to present the results of the research including the plan quality scores for each municipality, the relationships between the scores and specific variables including population size and consultants derived plans.

Section 5 – Discussion of Findings

This section will attempt to highlight the strengths of the study including a discussion of the research results in relation to the research questions.

Section 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

The report will conclude with a brief overview of the recommendations including next steps for research.

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. Municipal Strategic Planning

The municipal strategic plan establishes long-term goals, prioritizes actions to achieve the goals, and allocates both human and financial resources (Bryson, 2018). In Ontario, municipal governments will often use the strategic plan as the primary guiding document to support Council's directions. It provides the connectivity between a municipalities' ability to reveal the 'how' toward achieving its goals and supports the increasing demand from the public for addressing accountability and transparency (Bryson, Hamilton Edwards

& Van Slyke, 2018; Elbanna, Andrews and Pollanen, 2016). The strategic plan process, when conducted well, serves as a communication tool that can improve the quality of decision making (Vandersmissen, George and Voets, 2022).

The process of strategic planning plays a crucial role in guiding the development and management of the municipality. It involves concepts, procedures, and tools to determine the organization's direction and resources required to achieve its objectives (Bryson, 2011). Like an individualized fingerprint, the strategic plan should reflect the challenges and interests for the municipality (Szostak et al., 2020). While each strategic plan for a municipality is unique, the strategic plan will often contain similar components such as vision, mission, municipal facts, strategic objectives, action plans, implementation and evaluation.

While effective implementation of the strategic plan is crucial for its success, Lee, McGuire and Ho Kim (2018) identified how the strategic planning process, including the importance of the design and detail within the plans matter. In their research, they measured the contents of the strategic plan and found cities characterized by a more robust strategic plan, as measured by the design of their plan, impacted the response to emergency crisis with statistically significant improvement (Lee et al., 2018). If strategic plans can be reviewed by their content and measured, the fundamentals of the plan can provide valuable information to understand the quality of a strategic plan.

As a process adopted by municipalities in Ontario, assessing strategic plans can reveal valuable information about plan quality. When constructed well, the development of the strategic plan in a collaborative working environment can identify goals and actors to

improve program outcomes (Lee et al., 2018). Surprisingly, Deloitte and Touche (1992), identified the failure of companies to implement their strategic plans to be as high as eighty percent. The process of the strategic plan in developing the plan itself is only as good as the implementation. The identification of key characteristics in the strategic plan provides an opportunity understand the functionality and quality of the plan.

The literature speaks to evaluation as a method gaining attention in the public sector (Gradinaru & Rudolf, 2017). Evaluation can and has been applied against a variety of plans including climate change plans, official plans, transportation, social issues, etc. The core characteristics evaluated within the municipal strategic plans have been used for plan quality studies including transportation plans, climate change plans, homelessness. Studies on plan quality using an evaluation approach have revealed connections between the process of strategic planning efforts and program outcome success. For example, Poister, Pasha and Edwards (2013), found stronger organizational performance in US local transit agencies because of formal strategic planning. The methodology of reviewing plan quality can be used to score and understand strategic plan quality.

2.2. Strategic Plan Quality Evaluation

The plan quality evaluation framework is a tool to assess the effectiveness, efficiency and feasibility of a strategic plan in achieving its intended goals. The plan quality framework provides an analytical lens to measure the content within a plan and provide a score based on the strengths and weaknesses identified within the plan (Potts, 2017). The theory in assessing plans suggests higher quality plans are more effective, leading to better goal achievement as compared to lower quality plans (Berke & Godschalk, 2009; Guyadeen,

2018; Potts, 2017). It is this premise and supporting literature that will be used to guide the research to further explore municipal plans in Ontario and whether plan quality is affected by municipal size and consultant influence.

The ability to analyze and score core the components within the strategic plan can reveal insights about the quality of the plan. Guyadeen et al., (2023) reviewed the quality of municipal strategic plans using the plan quality framework characteristics to evaluate the quality of plans in Canadian municipalities. More specifically, the evaluation seeks to understand sections of the municipal strategic plan including fact based, stakeholder engagement, broad generalized goals, implementation and monitoring and evaluation and are incorporated into the plan. Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson (2009) noted that much variation exists across plans regarding their quality. Guyadeen et al., (2023), evaluated strategic plans for the 100 most populous municipalities in Canada to find plans are often underdeveloped. The plans scored poorly on characteristics including fact based, stakeholder engagement, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

The ability to conduct an evaluation on strategic plans on municipalities in Ontario will increase the size of scored plans for the Ontario dataset. The research will compare against those strategic plans in Ontario that have already been evaluated to understand if the missing components are similar and to understand why some municipalities are choosing to invest time, resources and money to create quality strategic plans. Guyadeen (2018) identified monitoring and evaluation as a high-quality plan characteristic. Elbanna et al., (2016) found the process of strategic planning has a positive and significant impact with managerial involvement. Bryson, Crosby and Bryson (2009) argue that strategic plans

group people, teams and units together, motivating organizations to implement strategies and goals. To enhance organizational direction and involvement, it appears spending resources to prioritize the strategic plan, is money well spent. George (2020) found successful strategic plan implementation is influenced by connecting people, process, and plans.

The plan quality research is a common methodology to conduct comparative research and professional evaluation of plans after their development (Lyles & Stevens, 2014). Through the process of systematic evaluation, plans can be reviewed to understand their strengths and weaknesses to be able to judge the quality of the plan meets a desirable standard (Berke and Godschalk, 2009).

2.3. Research Design

This section describes the research design. The study is focused on evaluating existing strategic municipal plans in Ontario with a population less than 50,000. Using the plan quality evaluation framework, as identified in Guyadeen et al., (2023), the study will score the characteristics within 40 municipal strategic plans.

The selection of municipal plans was randomly selected attempting to collect an equal range of representative municipalities with a population under 50,000. The population range of the municipal strategic plans assessed ranged from 313 to 46,589 people. The municipal strategic plans selected also had to be accessible, current and available to view from the municipal website.

Secondly, in this study the results from Guyadeen et al., (2023) was used for the analysis as these plans were previously evaluated and scored but with a population of 50,000 or more.

Only those municipalities from Ontario were used for the analysis. This provided the study with an extra 20 municipalities in Ontario with a population over 50,000 to add to the existing data and use as part of the assessment to assist with the research questions. The following graph provides a list of sampled municipalities used in the study and their populations.

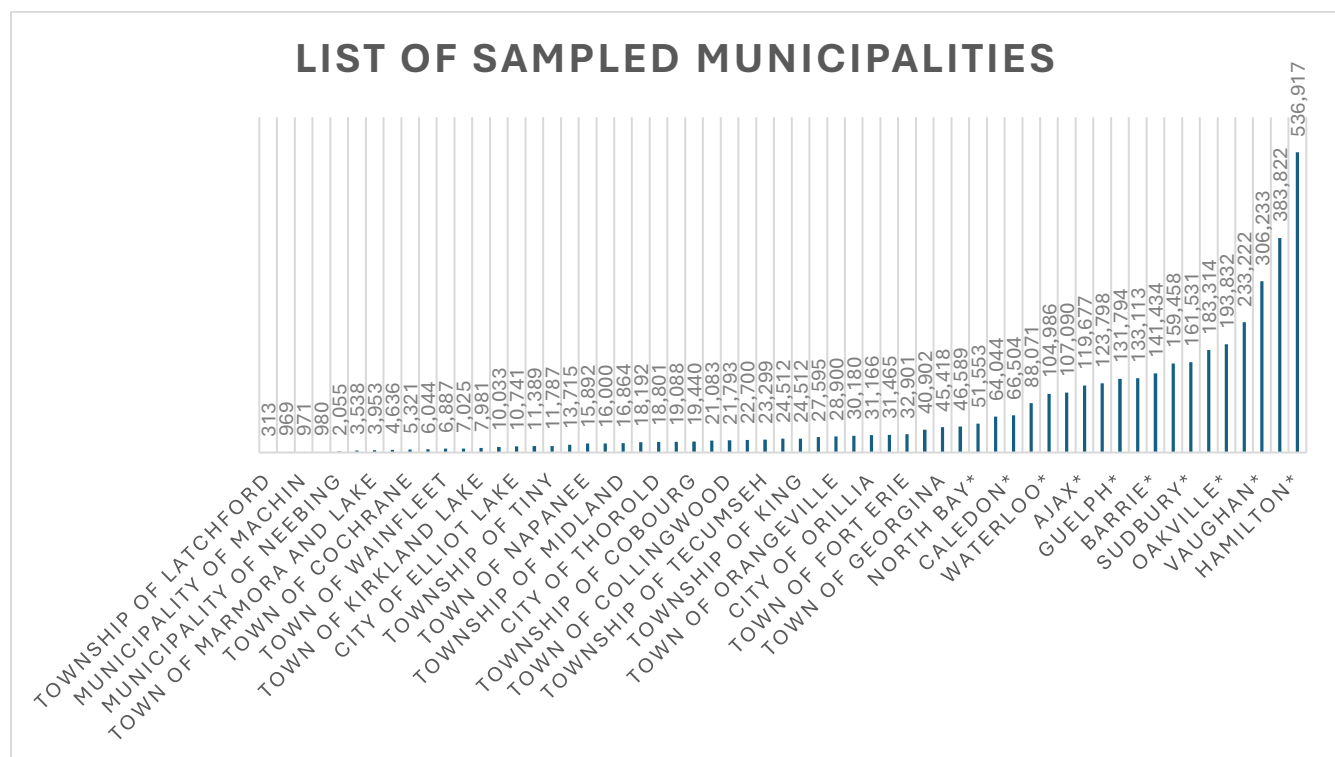


Figure 1: List of Studied Municipalities and Population

Municipalities with an asterisk represent strategic plans where the data was obtained from Guyadeen et al., (2023) where the population represents 50,000 or more. The City of Toronto was also used in the study but is not displayed in the graph.

2.4. Analysis on Plans

The study by Guyadeen et al, (2023) analyzed plans at a national level, reviewing the most populous municipalities in Canada. The results of the study provide a solid foundation for understanding the quality and state of municipal strategic planning in Canada (Guyadeen et al., 2023). Although, across such a large geographic area, understanding the quality of plans in a smaller geographic context, at the provincial level provides additional contributory research. By focusing on Ontario municipalities with smaller populations, this study will allow for the ability to leverage trends or patterns of localized municipal strategic plans. This may help isolate the variables within the research questions including understanding if population impacts plan score and consultants influence and impact.

2.5. Plan Quality Evaluation Framework and Coding Protocol

The first part of the research will evaluate 40 strategic plans of municipalities in Ontario with a population less than 50,000. The evaluation will be conducted using the plan quality evaluation framework and coding protocol. The coding protocol was developed to capture the strategic plan elements identified by Bryson (2018). These evaluation criteria consist of 30 indicators including mandate, mission statement, vision statement, values and guiding principles, fact base, stakeholder engagement, broad/generalized goals, issue-specific goals/objectives, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, coordination among departments and outside organizations and plan organizations and presentation.

2.4. Plan Quality Indicators

The assessment of the plan evaluation assigns a score of 1 if the indicator was successfully identified in the plan and a 0 if the indicator is not found within the plan. One additional

evaluation component that the author noticed is being included into municipal strategic plans is a Land Acknowledgement. This current evaluation framework does not account for this, but the incorporation of the Land Acknowledgement will be noted as a separate item as it is an important component because it recognizes the historical and ongoing relationships between Indigenous peoples and the land on which the municipalities operate. By acknowledging the traditional territories and Indigenous peoples, municipalities demonstrate respect for Indigenous rights and sovereignty, and promote reconciliation efforts through the municipal strategic plan. The research will record whether the plan contains a Land Acknowledgement statement.

Lastly, to answer the second research question, the evaluation will note whether the plan was completed in house or from a consultant. The following table provides an overview of the key indicators and description of the indicator to be evaluated.

Indicator	Description of Indicator
1. Mandate	Does the plan identify at least one formal mandate related to the municipality? <i>Formal mandates include any mention of laws or regulations that the municipality must follow.</i>
	Does the plan identify at least one informal mandate related to the municipality? <i>Informal mandates include norms and expectations (e.g., meet the needs of the community)</i>
2. Mission Statement	Does the plan identify a mission statement? <i>Mission statements are broad clarifications of the plan's purpose.</i>
3. Vision Statement	Does the plan identify a vision statement? <i>Vision statements clarify what the organization should look like and how it should behave. These can be written using aspirational language.</i>
4. Values and Guiding Principles	Does the plan identify a set of values and guiding principles to which the municipality subscribes/ascribes?

	<i>Values and guiding principles are aspirational words/phrases that inform all aspects of municipal decision making (e.g., accountability, transparency, equity).</i>
5. Fact Base (<i>Empirical foundation of a plan</i>)	Does the plan mention conducting a SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis to support the strategic plan?
	Does the plan include a list of discussion of external factors/outside forces that affect the municipality and/or influence its actions? <i>Look for discussion of political, economic, social, technological, or environmental forces.</i>
	Does the plan include a discussion of internal factors/forces influencing or affecting the municipality such as resources, challenges to current processes, and issues with performance?
	Does the plan mention the current population of the municipality?
	Does the plan mention the future population of the municipality?
	Does the plan include a demographic profile of the municipality? <i>Example: population breakdown by age, income levels, education, etc.</i>
	Does the plan include a description of the current economy of the municipality? <i>Example: main economic activities or industries.</i>
6. Stakeholder Engagement	Does the plan include a discussion of how stakeholders – citizens, interest groups, municipal employees, politicians and other groups – were engaged in developing the plan?
	Does the plan include an explanation of <i>why</i> stakeholders were involved?
7. Broad/Generalized Goals	Does the plan include goals? <i>Goals are broad or generalized statements or phrases.</i>
8. Issue-specific Goals/Objectives	Does the plan include issue-specific goals or objectives that follow from the broad/generalized goals? <i>*Confirm direct link to the broad/more generalized goals.</i>
9. Implementation (Commitment to implement the plan goals/objectives once adopted)	Does the plan include a separate section that addresses what needs to be done to implement the plan?
	Does the plan prioritize actions for implementation?
	Does the plan identify specific organizations with responsibility for implementation?
	Does the plan identify timelines for implementation

10. Monitoring and Evaluation (Help track the progress toward achieving plan goals and policies)	Does the plan include a separate section that addresses what needs to be done to monitor and evaluate the plan?
	Does the plan identify departments responsible for monitoring and/or evaluating the plan?
	Does the plan identify a timetable for updating the plan based, in part, on results of monitoring changing conditions?
	Does the plan include indicators for monitoring and evaluating the plan?
	Does the plan include sources of data for the indicators identified?
11. Coordination among departments and outside organizations (Participation and support from other departments and organizations outside of the municipality)	Does the plan include at least one connection with other municipal plans/programs/departments inside the municipality? (e.g., official plan documents, climate change initiatives, economic development plan, etc.)?
	Does the plan include at least one connection to organizations outside of the municipality? (e.g., conservation authority, NGO, etc.)?
12. Plan Organization and Presentation	Does the plan contain an executive summary or similar section that provides an overview/summary of the plan?
	Does the plan include a table of contents detailing plan chapters and subheadings?
	Does the plan use clear illustrations (e.g., diagrams and graphs)
13. Land Acknowledgement	Does the plan contain a land acknowledgement?
14. Plan Preparation	Does the plan reference the use of a consultant or was the plan completed in house by staff?

Hypothesis

- 1) Municipalities in Ontario with a higher population produce higher quality strategic plans compared to municipalities with a smaller population.
- 2) Municipal strategic plans prepared by consultants result in higher quality plans compared to those prepared in house municipal plans in Ontario.

2.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Strategic Plans

The primary source of data for this research are the municipal strategic plans for 60 Ontario municipalities. The 40 Ontario municipalities with a population under 50,000 were scored by the researcher, and the other 20 Ontario municipality scores above 50,000 population were derived from Guyadeen et al. (2023). The evaluated strategic plan was the latest plan available that could be downloaded from the municipal website for download. If a municipality did not post an accessible strategic plan on their website or did not have a strategic plan, that municipality was not used in the study. If the strategic plan had been updated or changed from Guyadeen et al. (2023), then the plan from the study was used. The strategic plans were evaluated using the plan quality framework indicators. The score was recorded against for each of the indicator frameworks and data was then saved in an excel spreadsheet for analysis, including a separate column for Land Acknowledgement and consultant.

2.6. Limitations

There are limitations to the research design that warrant discussion. The coding framework used to evaluate the strategic plans requires a level of reliability during the process to ensure consistency in the process. While this coding framework is designed to identify whether the indicators are present or not within the strategic plan, to ensure consistency in the methodology, the researcher coded 3 plans that were previously coded by Guyadeen et al. (2023), to ensure alignment with the coding process.

The table below shows the results for the scoring between Guyadeen et al. 2023 and the researchers review and coding score for City of Burlington, City of Hamilton and City of Niagara Falls.

Municipality	Guyadeen et al. (2023) Coding Score	Author's Coding Score
City of Burlington	4.92	4.92
City of Hamilton	3.99	4.32
City of Niagara Falls	5.91	5.80

The results revealed that while the coding was not identical, the values and ranges suggest that this methodology was suitable to move ahead without concern.

Secondly, the indicators selected through the framework are focused on key aspects that compare them across the board. There may be instances where within the municipal strategic plans new techniques are overlooked because they simply do not fit inside the box of this framework, and thus may not receive proper credit. One example is the Land Acknowledgement, which is being identified but not being actively tracked as part of the framework. As part of this study, the research will document will track which plans contain a Land Acknowledgement statement, but no score or points will be assigned to this category to keep the consistency with the scores from Guyadeen et al., (2023).

3.0. Research Results

Strategic plans with high strategic decision quality make it clear to the organization about the direction and what it wants to achieve (George, 2020). The results from scoring the plan quality characteristics received a number between 0.00 to 1.00. A value of 0 assigned suggests the characteristic is not present in the strategic plan and a score of 1 suggests the

information was contained within the plan. The maximum points a municipal strategic plan could achieve is 9. The average plan scored a value of 4.25, with the highest plan scoring an 8.4 and the lowest scoring a 0.2.

The findings from the assessment of the strategic plans with municipalities less than 50,000 in Ontario are presented below in the Table.

Category	Result (n=40)
Mandate, Mission, Vision, Values and Principles	47%
Fact Base	28%
Stakeholder Engagement	30%
Broad/Generalized Goals and Issue Specific Goals	85%
Issue Specific Goals	75%
Implementation	38%
Monitoring and Evaluation	14%
Coordination	28%
Organization and Presentation	51%
Average Municipal Plan Score	36%

The average municipal plan score is 36%. This score is lower than expected suggesting there is significant room for improvement of municipal strategic plans in Ontario municipalities. The broad/generalized goals and issue specific goals characteristic category scored the highest characteristic at 85%. This finding is consistent with Guyadeen et al., (2023) who also revealed the broad/generalized goals and issue specific category scored the highest in national plans across Canada. In comparing the results against municipalities with a population over 50,000, the category scored 100% on the broad/generalized goals and 95% on the issue specific goals, suggesting this category did better overall where municipalities have a higher population.

The lowest scoring category of the plan elements was monitoring and evaluation at only 14% of the plans, followed by fact base and evaluation and coordination all scoring less than 30% found within the strategic plans. This insight reveals the strategic plans may be lacking in key areas, resulting in the potential concerns for issues of implementation, direction and accountability. Without the incorporating these characteristics into the strategic plan, the municipality may not have a means of to measure, understand and report back to Council, staff or the residents.

The second analysis will attempt to understand how the consultant plans can influence the contents within a municipal strategic plan. The findings are presented in the Table, *Plan Quality Evaluation Results*.

Plan Quality Evaluation Results					
Plan Quality Characteristic	Mean Plan Quality Evaluation Score (N=40)	Mean Plan Quality Evaluation Score (N=60)	Consultant Plan Average Score (N=10)	In-House Derived Plan Score (N=50)	Maximum Value
Mandate, Mission, Vision, Values	0.47 (0.59) *	0.50	0.56 (0.70) **	0.49	1
Fact Base	0.28 (0.28) *	0.29	0.47 (0.29) **	0.25	1
Stakeholder Engagement	0.30 (0.35) *	0.30	0.35 (0.25) **	0.29	1
Broad/Generalized Goals	0.85 (1.00) *	0.88	0.80 (0.50) **	0.9	1
Issue Specific Goals	0.75 (0.95) *	0.83	0.90 (1.00) **	0.82	1
Implementation	0.38 (0.33) *	0.37	0.60 (0.37) **	0.32	1
Monitoring and Evaluation	0.14 (0.28) *	0.18	0.18 (0.20) **	0.18	1
Coordination	0.28	0.45	0.55	0.43	1

	(0.68) *		(0.75) **		
Organization and Presentation	0.51 (0.34) *	0.47	0.63 (0.66) **	0.43	1
TOTAL	3.96 or 36% 4.8 or 53% *	4.28 or 47.5%	5.04 or 56% 4.72 or 52%	4.11 or 45%	9
*values derived from Guyadeen et al. (2023) where N = 20 for Ontario municipalities with 50,000 or more population **values derived from Guyadeen et al. (2023) where N = 2 for Consultant derived plans					

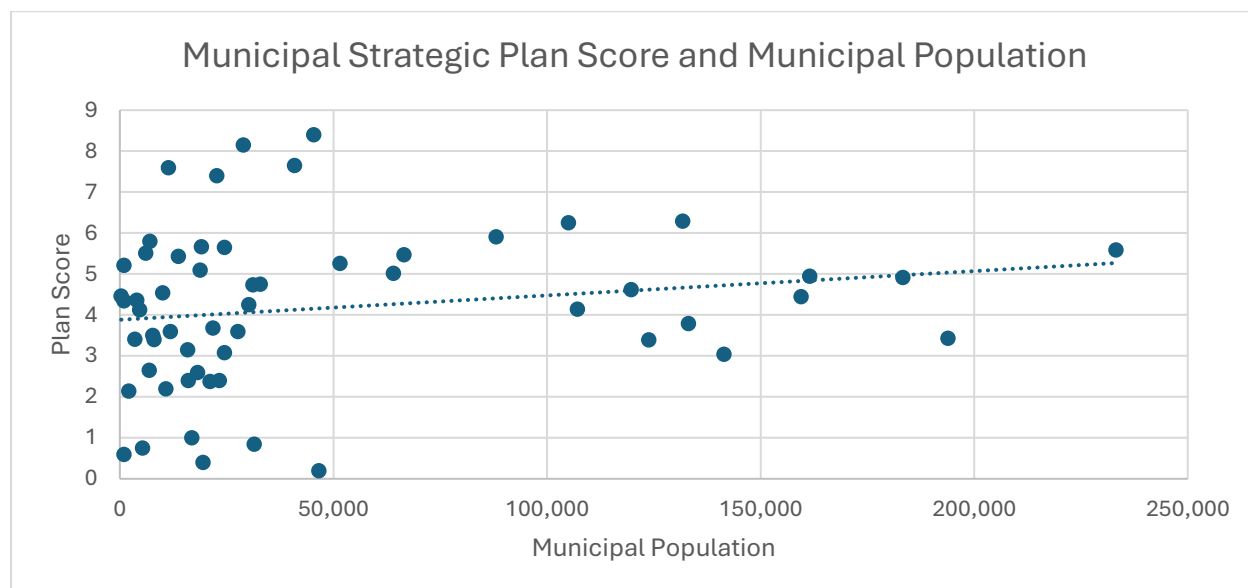
In reviewing the Table of Plan Quality Evaluation Results, out of the 9 characterization categories for a total of 60 municipalities, where N=20 had a population above 50,000 and N=40 had a population less than 50,000, those with a population of 50,000 or more scored higher in the characterization categories in 6 of the total 9 categories. In summary, the average score from all the plans where N=40 for 50,000 population or less was 3.98 out of a total possible score of 9 or 36%.

3.0. Discussion of Findings

In reviewing the scores against municipal population, it would appear there is a positive linear correlation between population size and municipal plan score, but this trend is not statistically significant. While the municipal population is not a variable measured in the coding framework to reflect plan score, it is thought that other underlying variables could be worth further exploration.

The reason population was selected for the analysis was because of the ability to identify underlying factors, such as municipal budget to develop the strategic plan, staff expertise, etc. For example, municipalities with a higher population would have a larger tax base to draw and have more ability to spend resources to fund and support the municipal strategic plan. This research did not seek out the cost or staff time spent on municipal plans.

Without a definitive correlation, the first hypothesis can not be supported in that higher population municipalities produce higher quality strategic plans.



In the graph comparing municipal population and plan score the underlying factors that may contribute can include consultant expertise, budget allocation, resource allocation, etc. that may be a result of the trend. Secondly, there are cases where smaller population municipalities do produce high quality scoring plans. Thus, the low scoring municipalities should strive to understand how to increase their municipal plan score through the incorporation of key characteristics that are identified within higher quality plans. A review for each of the characterizations will follow.

Mandate, Mission, Vision, and Values

The mandate, mission, vision and values category scored 0.47 for municipalities with a population less than 50,000. This is interesting that less than half of the municipal plans clearly identified or stated in their plans their set direction or target. This category is not difficult in stating a high-level idea of where the municipality wants to achieve. The lack of

data in this category may suggest that plans prepared in house may be prepared by staff who lack the skills and expertise of the components to include in the strategic plan.

Out of a score of 1, surprisingly plans prepared by consultants did achieve a higher value, but not significantly. It is concerning that plans being developed and prepared by consultants may not be achieved the targets of a quality strategic plan.

Fact Base

This category serves as the empirical foundation of the plan. It provides the backbone and sets the stage for the remainder of the plan. In the fact base category, the average score was low at 0.28 out of a possible score of 1. This was also found in municipal plan with a population over 50,000 suggesting municipal plans need to do a much better job at stating their facts. This is an easy category to score points in because of the data and information is largely already available, such as current population and demographic profiles of the municipalities such as age, income levels, education, etc. Guyadeen et al., (2023) noted the fact base category in plans with a population over 50,000 often failed to provide a robust base of empirical evidence to support the plan's goals.

Out of a possible score of 1, even the highest score for this category was a 0.85 completed by the City of Woodstock, suggesting there was no plans that were able to meet the expectations within this category.

Stakeholder Engagement

In the stakeholder engagement characteristic, the average score of 0.30 out of a possible 1 was found. This is comparable to the results of Guyadeen et al. (2023), who noted that the average score was 0.35. This is surprisingly interesting as the process of incorporating the

community into the plan has many significant benefits. The plan should serve not only as Councils prerogative but be supported by and driven from the taxpayers of the municipality. In the analysis, it would suggest that this category scored poorly, including completing a discussion of why stakeholders were involved and whether stakeholders were engaged during the development of the plan. This is a very significant area for improvement in municipal strategic plans. The plans prepared by consultants scored higher in this category with an average of 0.47.

Broad/Generalized Goals

The broad/generalized goals category score the highest category against the rest of the indicators, suggesting smaller municipalities find value in incorporating their aim.

Although, while incorporated in the plan, stating a broad goal may not be enough information within the document to provide for a solid foundation and understanding for the staff. This will be further reflected in the next quality indicator, issue specific goals.

Secondly, in comparing against municipalities with a population over 50,000, it is evident that larger municipalities would include their broad goals more. Surprisingly, out of the 40 municipalities with a population of 50,000 or less reviewed, 6 did not include any broad goals at all within their plan. The consultant reviewed plans in this category scored lower than the municipal prepared plans. This could be a result of the fact that the consultants are more focused on the specifics of the goals, as opposed to the general high-level category, as it scored higher in the specific goals category.

Issue Specific Goals

The issue specific goals category scored quite a bit lower for municipalities less than 50,000 with a score of 0.73 out of 1.00. The municipalities over 50,000 did a better job at incorporating issue specific goals within their plan at 0.95.

The consultants also did a better job in this category than the municipalities. The issue specific goals were the highest scoring category, 0.90 for the consultant plans, adding emphasis to the consultant focus and purpose of the plan itself. The municipal derived plans scored quite a bit lower in this category, suggesting a good portion of municipal derived plans may be missing key components within their plans.

Implementation

The implementation category was the overall scored low in municipal strategic plans. The consultant plans performed much better in this category, alluding to the fact they understand the importance of not just stating the goals, but ensuring they are achieved. While the score for the consultant is higher, one might expect this number to be higher overall as 60% is concerning when thinking about the effort, involvement and time in generating these documents compared to the actual work involved in executing the plan. This category, in this author's opinion, is one of the most critical, as it sets to stake out and ensure how the goals will be seen.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation category was the lowest performing category within the strategic plans. In comparison to the municipalities with a higher population, the also scored poorly in this category at 28%. This finding suggests strategic plans have significant

room for improvement in this category as few municipalities are aiming to track and report back on their strategic plans. For those municipalities that are tracking and succeeding in this category, such as the Township of Saugeen Shores or Township of Orangeville, these strategic plans could serve as a template for other municipalities to understand how to incorporate these indicators within their plans.

Coordination

The coordination category performed low at 28% in the strategic plans. Municipalities with a higher municipality and those plans prepared by a consultant did better with ensuring the plan related to other municipal plans, departments and programs.

Organization and Presentation

The indicator of organization and presentation did better than larger populated municipalities. This category searched for executive summaries, table of contents, and clear diagrams and graphs to be incorporated within the strategic plan with a score of 54%. While this category scored better than higher populated municipalities, the consultant derived plans did a better job with a score of 63%.

Land Acknowledgement

In reviewing the strategic plans, 9 plans out of the 40 strategic plans with a population of 50,000 or less included a Land Acknowledgement statement. Out of the 20 municipalities with a population of 50,000 or more, 8 municipalities included the Land Acknowledgement statement. Most of the acknowledgement statements were included at the beginning of the strategic plan. While there is no requirement to include a Land Acknowledgement statement, incorporating a statement is a considerate and meaningful practice. There is

significant room for improvement in strategic plans in Ontario to include a Land or Territorial Acknowledgement statement.

Planning with Strategy in Mind

The strategic plans in this study scored relatively low overall. The category of broad and generalized goals was the highest performing out of the indicators, but simply because they are included within the strategic plan doesn't necessarily mean the goals are of any value to the municipality if they are not tied directly to the other areas within the plan. For example, the Township of Blue Mountains noted in their strategic plan document the previous iteration included 118 action items for staff, the initiatives lacked definition, and this impacted the momentum of the plan (Township of Blue Mountains Strategic Plan, 2024).

While the quality of the information within each of the indicators were not examined as part of the study, the indicators can be a sign of the plan quality and do appear to be connected to the success of the municipal strategic plan. This waterfall affects where the incorporation of the components of the plan do affect other areas of the plan. For example, the stakeholder engagement indicator, if conducted properly, is an important component to be able to develop the goals to follow within the plan. In this study, acknowledging the key indicators is an important first start, but it does not necessarily speak to the quality in each section. The literature has suggested that plan quality does matter. The score in one area, even though not reviewing the quality, does impact other sections. For example, stakeholder engagement impacts other sections within the strategic plan and this section if

it represents the community needs would impact other areas within the plan such as the goals.

The monitoring and evaluation indicator category scored the lowest against the other indicators. Out of a total of 40 plans evaluated, 29 of the strategic plans scored a 0 in the monitoring and evaluation category suggesting significant room for improvement and incorporating strategy into the strategic plan. According to the Balanced Scorecard Institute (2008), the strategic planning workshop should begin with the end in mind. More specifically, working towards something measurable where the results are tied to the vision. The strategic objectives are continuous improvement actions that should be documented, measured and made actionable through initiatives and projects (Balanced Scorecard Institute, 2008).

Explanatory Variables - Consultant vs in-house plans

The quality of municipal strategic plans varied but comparing municipal plans completed by a consultant where N=10 against those that were not N=50 revealed some key findings. The average score for municipal plans prepared by a consultant out of a total score of 9 was 5.04 compared to those prepared in-house with a score of 3.98. Regarding the research question, why are some municipal strategic plans higher quality than others, consultant involvement appears to have an impact. The research suggests plans developed with the assistance of consultants often achieve higher quality scores compared to those produced in-house. The following discussion explores the underlying reasons for this disparity and the broader implications for municipal planning practices. This would confirm the second hypothesis that municipal strategic plans prepared by

consultants often result in higher quality plans compared to those prepared in house municipal plans in Ontario.

Expertise and Specialization

Consultants often can provide an objective viewpoint that can be invaluable in strategic planning. Their outside status allows them to identify issues and opportunities that internal staff might overlook due to familiarity or ingrained bias. This fresh perspective can lead to more creative and effective solutions, enhancing the overall quality of the strategic plan. Additionally, consultants are not influenced by internal politics, which can sometimes constrain the vision and ambition of in-house plans.

Resource Allocation

Developing a high-quality strategic plan requires substantial time and resources. Municipalities that contract consultants can leverage their extensive resources, including access to advanced planning tools, software and research capabilities. The consultants can dedicate their full attention to the strategic planning process specifically, compared to in-house staff who may have to balance this task with regular responsibilities. This focused effort can result in more thorough and detailed plans.

Stakeholder Engagement

Effective stakeholder engagement is crucial for the success of the municipal strategic plan. The process of engaging stakeholders as part of the municipal strategic plan process is widely cited within the literature (George, 2021; Johnsen, 2018). A consulting firm have more experience and established methodologies for engaging a wide range of stakeholders including residents, businesses and community organizations. Their ability to facilitate

inclusive and participatory processes ensures that the strategic plan reflects a broad spectrum of community interests and values, leading to greater buy-in and support.

Benchmarking and Comparative Analysis

Consultants are well positioned to conduct benchmarking and comparative analysis with other municipalities. They can draw on their experience and data from various projects to identify benchmarks and best practices that can be adapted to the specific context of the municipality they are working with. This comparative approach can help municipalities set realistic, yet ambitious goals, learning from success and challenges of others.

Continuous Improvement and Innovation

Consultants are often at the forefront of innovation in strategic planning. They are continuously updating their knowledge and skills to stay competitive in the market. As a result, municipalities that engage consultants benefit from the latest tools, techniques and approaches in strategic planning. In-house teams may not have the same opportunities to pursue this type of professional development, which can lead to stagnation and reliance on outdated practices.

Limitations of the Research

The evaluation of the municipal strategic plans scores each plan against each other, based on whether specific categories were included and present within the plans contains limitations. The first limitation is based on the content within the plan is not the underlying factor of how the plan functions within the municipality. While a plan may achieve a high score, without measuring and testing the plan itself, it essentially is only a framework for

the municipality and requires proper process, methods and implementation to ensure its reality.

4.0. Conclusion and Recommendations

Evaluation has gained much attention in the public sector as increased demands for accountability and the transparency. Using an existing plan quality framework to analyze municipal strategic plans in Ontario municipalities with a population of 50,000 or less, allowed for an analysis on the quality of the plans. The scores of the plans were supported by the literature in seeking to understand why some plans are higher quality than others in Ontario. The attempt to seek out variables relating to municipal size and consultant influence revealed municipal size had little to no impact. The second analysis revealed municipal strategic plans often scored higher when completed by consultants than those plans completed in-house. This is consistent with the findings from Lee et al. (2018) and Tama (2015), suggesting the quality of the strategic plans matter, as in the ability to identify content, design and detail within the plan. The incorporation of indicators that make up the strategic plan document can provide an opportunity for the municipal plan to score higher. The inclusion of key components, in a logical and orderly manner, may allow for the strategic plan document to flow and contain a logical structure, which may be connected to why consultants can outperform against in house developed municipal strategic plans.

The high scoring plans in the study, both developed by consultants, including the Town of Orangeville and City of Woodstock, reveal the strategic plan components are present and organized. These high scoring municipal strategic plans can serve as exemplary templates

for municipalities looking to complete their municipal strategic plans in house. Further research on the high scoring plans and whether they are successfully implemented within the municipality would be of value.

This research offers insight into to sections to be incorporated into the municipal strategic plan requiring improvements. The analysis revealed many strategic plans are performing low when using the evaluation framework to review their content with an average score of 36%. This number suggests significant room for improvement in quality and content within municipal strategic plans and further studies could explore the rational for the lack of a quality plan. This is consistent with Guyadeen et al., (2023) where most strategic plans across Canada were underdeveloped in incorporating their plan quality characteristics. One observation is the areas where both studies could achieve higher points through the framework is in areas that require minimal effort, such as fact base. This category attempts to capture and provide an understand the municipalities existing position including existing population, demographics and current economy. Incorporating this likely already existing municipal information into the plan should not be a difficult task as part of the development of the strategic plan. Although, it takes an understanding from the authors to be aware of key pieces, how they fit and support the strategic plan. This lack of existing knowledge for in-house developed strategic plans then reflects a poor quality municipal strategic plan, possible having issues with implementation and overall success. Future research could explore the quality of the implementation between those plans with consultants and those completed in house.

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Appendices

#	Jurisdiction	Population	Plan Date C is for Consultant	Land Ackn owle dge ment	Mandate, Mission, Vision, Values	Fact Base	Stakeholder Engagement	Broad/Gene ralized Goals	Issue Specific Goals/Ob jectives	Implement ation	Monitorin g and Evaluatio n	Coordi nation	Organizat ion and Presentat ion	Total
1	Township of Latchford	313	2008-2010		0.6	0.2	0	1	1	1	0	0	0.66	4.46
2	Municipality of Machin	971	2023-2027 C		0.6	1	0	1	1	0.75	0.2	0	0.66	5.21
3	Township of Horne-Payne	980	2023-2027 C		0.6	0.14	0	1	1	0.75	0.2	0	0.66	4.35
4	Municipality of Neebing	2,055	2020-2024		0.6	0.71	0	0	0	0.5	0	0	0.33	2.14
5	Municipality of Casselman	3,538	2024-2028	Yes	0.8	0.28	0	1	1	0	0	0	0.33	3.41
6	Town of Marmora and Lake	3,953	2020		0	0	1	1	1	0	0.2	0.5	0.66	4.36
7	Municipality of Greenstone	4,636	2023 C	Yes	0.8	0.42	0	1	1	0.25	0	0	0.66	4.13
8	Town of Cochrane	5,321	2022-2025		0	0.42	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.33	0.75
9	Municipality of Tweed	6,044	2024-2026	Yes	0.8	0.42	0	1	1	0.25	0	0	0.66	4.13
10	Town of Wainfleet	6,887	2017-2018		0.4	0	0	1	1	0.25	0	0	0	2.65
11	Town of Blue Mountains	7,025	2020-2024		0.6	0.14	0	1	1	1	0.4	1	0.66	5.8
12	Town of Hanover	7,688	2023-2027 C		0	0	0	1	1	0.5	0	1	0	3.5
13	Town of Kirkland Lake	7,981	2024-2026		0.4	0	1	1	1	0.5	0	0	0	3.4

14	Township of Tay	10,033	2019-2022		0	0.71	1	1	1	0.5	0	0	0.33	4.54
15	City of Elliot Lake	10,741	2022-2024		0.2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2.2
16	Municipality of Kincardine	11,389	2020-2025		0.6	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	7.6
17	Township of Tiny	11,787	2022-2026		0.6	0.42	0	1	1	0.25	0	0	0.33	3.6
18	Township of Saugeen Shores	13,715	2023-2027	Yes	0.6	0	0	1	1	0.5	1	1	0.33	5.43
19	Town of Napanee	15,892	2022		0.6	0.14	1	0	0	0.25	0	0.5	0.66	3.15
20	Town of Bracebridge	16,000	2018-2028		0.4	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2.4
21	Township of Midland	16,864	2023-2026		0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
22	Town of Pelham	18,192	2023-2027		0.6	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2.6
23	City of Thorold	18,801	2020-2023		0.6	0	0	1	1	1	0	0.5	1	5.1
24	Town of Niagara-on-the Lake	19,088	2022-2027		0.6	0.42	0	1	1	0.75	0.4	0.5	1	4.67
25	Township of Cobourg	19,440	2023-2027 *	Yes	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.4
26	Township of Essa	21,083	2019-2022		0.4	0	0	1	0	0.25	0.4	0	0.33	2.38
27	Town of Collingwood	21,793	2020-2023		0.4	0.28	0	1	0	0.5	0	0.5	1	3.68
28	Town of Springwater	22,700	2023-2043 C		0.4	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	7.4
29	Town of Tecumseh	23,299	2023-2026		0.4	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2.4

30	City of Clarence – Rockland	24,512	2015-2021		0.6	0.14	1	1	1	0.75	0.5	0	0.66	5.65
31	Township of King	27,330	2024-2040		0	0	0	1	1	0.25	0	0.5	0.33	3.08
32	Municipality of Leamington	27,595	2015-2025		0.6	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	3.60
33	Town of Orangeville	28,900	2023-2027 C	Yes	0.6	1	1	1	1	0.75	0.8	1	1	8.15
34	Town of Lasalle	30,180	2020-2050		0.6	0.14	0	1	1	0.25	0.6	0	0.66	4.25
35	City of Orillia	31,166	No date		0.6	0.14	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	4.74
36	City of Stratford	31,465	2018-2022 C		0.6	0	0	0	0	0.25	0	0	0	0.85
37	Town of Fort Erie	32,901	2023-2026	Yes	1	0	0	1	1	0.25	0	0.5	1	4.75
38	City of Woodstock	40,902	2013-2031 C		0.6	0.85	1	1	1	1	0.2	1	1	7.65
39	Town of Georgina	45,418	2023-2027	Yes	0.6	1	1	1	1	1	0.8	1	1	8.4
40	City of Cornwall	46,589	2019-2022		0.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.2
*41	North Bay	51,553	2017-2027		0.6	0.14	0	1	1	0.25	0.6	1	0.67	5.26
*42	Norfolk County	64,044	2022-2026		0.2	0	0.5	1	1	0.25	0.4	1	0.67	5.02
*43	Caledon	66,504	2023-2035	Yes	0.4	0.29	1	1	1	0.25	0.2	1	0.33	5.47
*44	City of Niagara Falls	88,071	2019-2022		0.8	0.43	0.5	1	1	0.25	0.6	0.5	0.33	5.91
*45	City of Waterloo	104,986	2023-2026	Yes	0.8	0.43	1	1	1	0.25	0.6	0.5	0.67	6.25
*46	City of Thunder Bay	107,090	2023-2027		0.6	0.14	0	1	1	0	0.4	1	0	4.14

*47	Town of Ajax	119,677	2018		0	0.14	0	1	1	0.75	0.4	1	0.33	4.62
*48	City of Kingston	123,798	2023-2026	Yes	0.2	0.29	0	1	1	0.5	0.4	1	0	3.39
*49	City of Guelph	131,794	2024-2027	Yes	0.8	0.57	1	1	1	0.25	0	1	0.67	6.29
*50	City of St. Catharines	133,133	2023-2027		0.4	0.14	0	1	1	0.25	0	1	0	3.79
*51	City of Barrie	141,434	2022-2026	Yes	0	0.29	0	1	1	0.25	0	0.5	0	3.04
*52	City of Oshawa	159,458	2020-2023		0.6	0.43	0	1	1	0.25	0	0.5	0.67	4.45
*53	City of Sudbury	161,531	2019-2027		0.8	0.57	0	1	1	0.25	0	1	0.33	4.95
*54	City of Burlington	183,314	2015-2040		0.6	0.29	0	1	1	0.5	0.2	1	0.33	4.92
*55	Town of Oakville	193,832	2023-2026 C		0.6	0	0	0	1	0.5	0	1	0.33	3.43
*56	City of Kitchener	233,222	2023-2026	Yes	0.8	0.29	1	1	1	0.25	0.4	0.5	0	5.59
*57	City of Vaughan	306,233	2022-2026 C		0.8	0.29	0.5	1	1	0.25	0.4	0.5	1	5.74
*58	City of London	383,822	2023-2027	Yes	0.8	0.43	0.5	1	1	0.25	0	1	0.33	5.31
*59	City of Hamilton	536,917	2016-2025		0.6	0.29	0	1	1	0.5	0.6	0	0	3.99
*60	City of Toronto	2,731,571	No date	Yes	0.8	0.71	0	1	1	0.5	0.4	0.5	1	5.91

*plan scores with asterisk (#41-60) were derived from Guyadeen et al. (2023)