

*(Editor's Note: This article is the first in the Career Talk column by Regina Praetorius and Laura Lawson, two social workers who are also experts in the area of career development.)*

## **ASSESSMENT**

Consider your options. What are your strengths? If currently employed, are your talents being used? Is there something else out there that might benefit you more?

## **BEGIN DECIDING WHAT YOU DO AND DON'T WANT**

Ask yourself these questions: What has worked for me before? What has not? What have I observed in others' work lives that I would be comfortable or uncomfortable with experiencing myself? What is my dream job?

## **CANVAS GEOGRAPHIC AREAS OF INTEREST**

Do you prefer a big city or a small town? What is the job's proximity to family and friends. What social services are available in the area? What opportunities exist for city, state, and federal employment? How willing are you to commute?

## **DECIDE ON GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**

Knowing the availability of social work jobs and the support network of social workers in an area can be helpful, not only in making a decision to move, but also as a resource for finding job openings. Check with the state's NASW chapter for this information. Remember to keep the list short (3-5 cities).

## **ESTIMATE COST OF LIVING AND SALARY**

Now that you've narrowed it down, cost of living will help you determine how much money you must make to meet your basic needs. Good resources include <http://www.salary.com> and <http://www.aier.org>.

## **FINALIZE GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**

After looking at cost of living, is it feasible to meet your needs in the area? Once you've compared the benefits and shortfalls of each area and finalized the list, begin your job search.

## **GENERATE LISTS OF METHODS OF LOOKING**

For social work, the newspaper is still one of the best resources. This doesn't mean the Internet should be ignored—just used with caution.

When deciding on job search Web sites, investigate the following: Are social work employers using this resource (run a search a couple of weeks in a row)? What is the charge for employers to post positions? Most social work employers' budgets have little money allotted to hiring. Other resources include employer Web sites (many ONLY advertise on their own sites!), newspapers online, and state sponsored Web sites. Don't forget associations like NASW!

## **HELP YOURSELF BY STREAMLINING**

Don't use narrow criteria. Social work positions end up in the oddest of categories. The most typical are Government, Nonprofit, Community Service, Education, and Health/Medical.

Probably the best option is to search by location. Avoid keywords! Oftentimes, social work positions will never mention "Social Work," "BSW," or "MSW."

Take advantage of e-mail notification (if not available, find out when the Web sites are updated and search after each update).

## **IMPLEMENT A PLAN FOR WEEKLY SEARCHING**

Develop a schedule for weekly searching. We often lose steam after doing all the groundwork and never make it to this step. Don't lose motivation—go for it!

## **JUMP IN, BUT WAIT A MINUTE...**

More is involved in a job search than just knowing where it is you want to be and what jobs are available.

## **KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT**

Be aware of your particular areas of expertise when beginning the job search. Stick to your interests when applying for positions. Don't take the first thing that comes along.

## **LICENSURE ISSUES AND STATE LAWS**

Research which exams are required for different levels of licensure (available through the

Association of Social Work Boards at <http://www.aswb.org>).

If you are already licensed and looking to move to another state, start by finding out what exams and supervision criteria are required for the new state's licensure. If you meet the requirements, contact that state's board about transferring your credentials. Usually, this requires paying a small fee rather than starting the process over again.

Make sure you are aware of and familiar with additional legislation that will regulate your practice.

## **MAINTAIN MOTIVATION**

Do not become stressed. Take time to relax and maintain perspective. If you are tired of trying to get the job you want, you may be tempted to settle for any job at any pay regardless of cost of living or your area of expertise.

You can prevent this in several ways. First, keep copies of all correspondence—preferably in electronic format. (Have backups!) Next, get a 2nd opinion: Have colleagues, friends, or your alma mater's career office review résumés, cover letters, thank you letters, and interviewing skills. Finally, keep a binder or folder of all job postings for which you've applied.

If you are not considered for a position, ask why. There may be some value in knowing, so you can remedy the issue in the future.

## **NETWORK THROUGH NASW AND NEVER SAY NEVER**

State chapters are a hub for networking, professional development, and support. Chapter offices often have information about licensure, job openings, and professional development. For Chapter contact information, see <http://www.socialworkers.org/chapters>.

Be open-minded enough to explore all options and cautious enough to see a wolf in sheep's clothing. When you are deciding to apply for a position, research the organization (from its mission to its funding sources) through Web sites, funding organizations, NASW, and other contacts and colleagues. Networking is an important tool for finding a job and finding out about what a job entails.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Utilize your alma mater's career office and your social work program. Career offices provide résumé reviews, assistance with cover letter writing, job fairs, job listings, and interview training. Your social work program may have a job bank; given social work programs' interaction with organizations for internships, faculty and staff may learn of positions before most!

## **PRACTICE**

Obtain a list of interview questions and practice answering them. University career office Web sites usually have sample questions. A mock interview can provide practice and tips from an expert.

## **QUALIFICATIONS**

You may be interviewed by non-social workers, so be prepared to explain the profession. The NASW Web site (<http://www.socialworkers.org>) and the Occupational Information Network (<http://online.onetcenter.org>) are two resources for this.

In cover letters, thank you letters, on the résumé, and in the interview use the STAR technique. Describe the Situation or Task; the Action you took or would take; and define the Results using numbers, percents, and other measures of success.

## **RESUMES**

A chronological résumé places emphasis on work/volunteer experiences you have had. When applicants have at least three work/volunteer experiences that are directly related to their interests or capabilities, the chronological résumé is the resume of choice.

The functional résumé places emphasis on skills. When an applicant has a variety of experiences or is switching career paths or practice settings, this résumé is the more appropriate choice.

## **SEND IT!**

When sending your résumé, do not fold or staple it. Use résumé paper and envelopes (available at office supply stores).

Fax or e-mail your résumé, when possible. When e-mailing your résumé, send it as an attachment and type your cover letter in the body of the e-mail. Do not fax your résumé from your current job. Even if you've discussed leaving with your employer and have clearance to do this on agency time, your future employer won't know that!

## **TELL 'EM AGAIN IN THE COVER AND THANK YOU LETTERS**

The cover letter is your commercial. Send thank you letters within 24 hours after interviewing. Both should include the position you are applying for and how you found out about it, statements about your qualifications (emphasize the most important experiences/skills), and a closing that thanks them and indicates your enthusiasm.

## **UNUSUAL EMPLOYERS**

Some examples are public health departments, universities, community colleges, employment agencies, and research centers.

## **VALUE-ADDED ITEMS**

Don't forget to tell employers about the extras: volunteering, professional presentations you have given, trainings you have attended, and if you've been published. A great way to have all of these items in one place is to create a portfolio including syllabi, certificates, and other proof of these experiences.

## **WORK IT!—SALARY NEGOTIATION**

Remember the research you did on cost of living? Now is the time to use it. Be prepared to give employers a salary range at the time of the offer. Never discuss salary or benefits until a job offer is made!

## **X MARKS THE SPOT—DON'T JUMP IN!**

Nervousness and anxiety may interfere with your ability to see the potential undesirable aspects of the job. What if you get a call for the job you'd REALLY LOVE? What if you could have gotten more money?

When an offer is made, ask for time to consider it. Ask for organization literature, a copy of the job description, and information on the benefits package. This way, you can go home and look things over minus the anxiety, nervousness, and adrenaline. If you are waiting for a call from another employer, use this time to contact them. Use your current offer as leverage. It may be the push they need!

## **WHY SHOULD YOU? WHY SHOULDN'T YOU?**

Before you sign on the dotted line, weigh the positives and negatives of the job. Examine the results carefully before deciding.

## **ZZZZZZ—REST!**

Now that you've got the perfect job—enjoy it!

*Regina Trudy Praetorius, MSSW, GSW, holds a Master of Science in Social Work from the University of Texas at Austin (UT). She has served as a career counselor at both UT and Louisiana State University (LSU) and is currently conducting research in suicidology. Laura Lawson, MSW, GSW, holds her Master of Social Work from LSU and is a school social worker in Louisiana. While completing her MSW, she served part-time as a graduate assistant career counselor. Both Regina and Laura are certified as graduate social workers (GSW) in the state of Louisiana.*



Written by Regina Praetorius, MSSW, GSW, and Laura Lawson, MSW, GSW

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