

Social Work Job Search Strategies

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Introduction

This short and concise document is designed to assist social workers who are considering or conducting a job search. The goal is to provide an overview of effective strategies that will facilitate a social work job search whether it is the individual's first or final search. It is not a comprehensive guide as there are many such books already available through the library, book stores and online.

This document briefly address topics such as preparing for the job search, researching salaries, preparing for interviews, overcoming common obstacles, creating a viable plan of action, the importance of networking, and the use of websites and other resources.

Whatever the reasons for the current job search, the job seeker is well advised to create a plan and implement it in a consistent and dedicated manner. While a job search can be challenging, finding just the "right" match i.e., one's "dream" job is well worth the time and effort. Especially when one considers just how many hours a week are spent on the job and the importance of holding a job that is enjoyable and that lends to one's career goals.

Everyone reading this document brings his or her set of unique qualifications, expertise, experiences and career goals. Consequently, this document covers many key factors related to job search; however, all readers are encouraged to determine which areas of job search they may need additional help and to use the websites and resources listed in this and other documents to do further research and study.

For information regarding social work job search resources such as commonly used job search websites, books, publications, newsletters, etc., visit the NASW-CA Chapter's website at www.naswca.org by clicking on the "Career Center" tab and printing the document titled *Social Work Job Search Resources*.

Social Work Career Development

The following documents can be viewed on the NASW-California Chapter's website at www.naswca.org under the "Career Center" tab at the top of the page.

- *Exploring Social Work as a Career*
- *Financial Aid Resources for Social Work Education*
- *Social Work Job Search Strategies*
- *Social Work Job Search Resources*

Job Search Time Frames

It is important to be realistic about the time it may take to find one's perfect job. As with most processes, it varies from individual to individual, is influenced by numerous factors, and tends to take more time and effort than one might expect.

With that said, the *average time frame* is 3-6 months; however, it can take two months or 12 months all depending on the job seeker's experience, qualifications, interviewing skills, professional and personal connections, motivation, dedication to job search activities, job goal, salary requirements, geographic location, etc.

A few of the factors (but not all) that impact the amount of time a job search requires are outlined in greater detail below:

Geographic Location

Clearly, the larger the city, the more jobs there are; however, this generally means more competition and a higher cost of living. Prior to implementing a job search, it is important to find out about the number and type of available social work jobs, the median salary range for these jobs and general economic trends for that state and city. This is especially important if one is considering moving to another state or city.

Time of Year

Generally speaking, there are some months that are better for job search than others. There tend to be more jobs advertised January through April while May through August it often slows down. It may pick back up in September and October but generally slows down a great deal from November 15 through January 10 (often referred to as the "holiday" season).

Professional Experience and Salary Requirements

If the individual has an advanced degree, 20+ years of professional experience and is looking for an annual salary of \$60,000 or more, it may take a longer than 3-6 months to find that perfect match. An individual moving from field to another (child welfare to medical social work) may also find it will take longer than the average period of time.

Areas of Specialty and Special Skills

Researching the demographic and labor market trends can tell the individual much about the areas of specialty that may have more job opportunities for a specific geographic location. For example, since the passage of the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) in California, there is a significant and growing need for social workers with expertise in mental health throughout the state.

One of California's major employers is the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDC-R), which expects to have up to 900 Clinical Social Work (CSW) positions available over the next few years. Child welfare and gerontology are other specialties that offer greater number of job openings in California. Due to the diversity of the state's population, those who represent minority groups and/or who are bilingual will usually find more job opportunities.

Time Dedicated to Job Search

If one is unemployed, the average amount of time that it takes to do a through job search is 20-25 hours per week. If one is employed full-time, it is important to dedicate at least 6-10 hours per week to job search activities. The key to any job search is creating a plan and consistently dedicating sufficient time to job search activities. Job search is an activity that takes self motivation and being pro-active while keeping focused on the desired outcome.

Professional and Personal Connections

Job search is generally easier and quicker for those who are well-known and have a variety of professional and community connections. Clearly, if a person has been working in a community for several years and is professionally well connected, he or she will have more opportunities to network, hear about jobs and be more likely to be given interviews. It is often true that "who you know" is important and can be used to one's advantage during a job search.

Ability to Market One's Self

The ability to appropriately market and sell one's self is important in a job search. This includes being able to create dynamic cover letters and resumes that result in interviews, to perform well in interview situations, and to take advantage of networking opportunities in a manner that is professional and appropriately. All of which requires self awareness, fore thought, and practice.

Preparing for the Job Search

Aside from setting realistic goals for the time it may take to find the right match and the number of hours required each week to implement job search activities, one must prepare for the job search by developing the following:

Cover Letters

A cover letter must be easily customized to summarize one's education, experience, skills and accomplishments specific to each job announcement and to the sponsoring organization or company.

Resumes

A resume must effectively promote one's skills, expertise, experience and accomplishments while being easily customized to fit the requirements of each job announcement.

References

A list of at least six professional references should include individuals that can easily highlight and expand on the job seeker's qualifications and accomplishments in specific work environments. It is crucial that the job seeker prepare these references by providing them with a current resume and a few key selling or "talking" points. In other words, ensure that the references are prepared when they receive a call from a prospective employer.

Job Search Plan

A job search plan will include activities such as researching labor market trends and salaries, participating in networking activities, searching job listings, researching and applying for positions, researching and preparing for interviews, and writing thank you notes. An example of a job search plan and one-week calendar of scheduled activities is provided later in the document.

Networking Plan

A networking plan will include a variety of activities that allows the job seeker to meet and inform others about his or her qualifications and desired job goal. There are numerous books on the subject and the key is to find strategies that will be appropriate, comfortable and successful for the individual job seeker.

A networking plan might include emailing a resume to professional and personal acquaintances along with a short note explaining the type of job one is seeking. Another example would be to attend meetings, events, conferences, etc. and being prepared to share a 1-minute summary of experience and job goal with those you meet.

However, it is always important to point out that talking about the difficulties one encounters in the job search is not appropriate conversation at a networking function. The best strategy is to always be positive, enthusiastic and concise about what it is that you offer as an employee.

An example of a networking plan and related activities is provided later in the document

List of Job Search Related Websites

It is important to create a list of job search websites that are specific to the job goal and user friendly i.e., one that is efficient and easy to revise and use. While some job search websites offer jobs related to all professions, there are many that are very specific social work. It is important to create a list of job search sites that best suits the seeker's specific job search goals.

For example, while monster.com and careerbuilder.com list jobs for all occupations including social work, there are many websites dedicated to social work jobs such as the NASW-CA Jobs Bulletin found at www.naswca.org under the "Career Center" tab. Additionally, the reader will find numerous job search websites listed in the document titled *Social Work Job Search Resources*.

Copies of Important Documents

It is important to be prepared with copies of university transcripts; copies of professional credentials, licenses, and certificates; recent letters of recommendation, and professional writing samples. Depending on the job and the organization, some or all of these may be required.

Access to Computer and Email

Given that 90% or more of job opportunities are now advertised on the Internet and that the sponsoring organization or company generally requires one to email an application, cover letter and resume, it is critical not only to have access to a computer and a valid email address but to be computer literate.

Because of all of the recent changes, there are books dedicated to how to manage a job search utilizing the Internet to post resumes, find jobs, research salaries, labor market trends, network through innovative email messages, apply to jobs, etc.

For example, there are organizations such as Los Rios Community College District that require everything be done by email. In fact, they only communicate with applicants (including sending invitations for interviews) by email and no longer send any communication by mail.

Identifying and Overcoming Obstacles

Whenever one sets a goal there are usually obstacles to identify and overcome and job search is no exception. For example, some job seekers have difficulties when it comes to performing well in interviews while others may not feel comfortable networking and "marketing" themselves.

It is important to identify one's potential obstacles and create strategies that will overcome them prior to implementing the job search. Interestingly, social workers are sometimes hesitant to ask for help yet job search isn't a skill that is often taught in school and usually requires one to learn and practice new skills to be successful.

Strategies for Overcoming Common Obstacles

1. Creating well-written customized cover letters and resumes that effectively market and sell one's education, skills, experience and accomplishments, i.e. documents that result in interviews.

Many job seekers have difficulty in creating well-written, effective, dynamic and concise cover letters and resumes that effectively promote their qualifications. If this is the case, it would be wise to consult with an expert or obtain help through other avenues. There are a huge number of books and online resources specific to writing cover letters and resumes.

One suggestion is to spend a couple of afternoons in Barnes and Noble or the local library reviewing such books. Another suggestion is to have several other professionals (friends, colleagues, or references) review these documents and provide comments and suggestions.

Another obstacle is that job seekers often fail to take the time to customize each and every cover letter and resume for each specific job announcement and sponsoring organization. This mistake significantly decreases the chances of obtaining an interview... especially when one is faced with a very competitive market. Depending on the job and geographic location, there may be several hundred applicants.

While it may seem too simple, the fact is that employers and recruiters constantly complain about the grammar, punctuation and spelling in cover letters, resumes and applications. When one is creating up to 3-6 sets of applications with customized documents per week, there is definitely room for error. It is critical that before any communication is sent (emails, attachments, cover letters, applications, resumes, thank you cards, envelope labels, etc.) it be checked twice for errors.

2. Networking in a manner that is professional, appropriate and optimizes the number of people who are aware of the seekers qualifications and the job search goal.

Networking may be difficult if one is an introvert or has moved to a new geographic area or is new to the social work profession. However, it can still be done in a manner that will support and assist the job seeker.

One job seeker (an introvert and new to social work) chose to send an eye catching greeting card to everyone she knew. This card included a short note explaining her recent MSW degree and move into a new career as a case manager in a medical setting. Of course, she included a resume that supported her goal. She also attended at least three functions a month and was prepared with business cards that highlighted her qualifications, job goal, and contact information.

Professional associations general hold meetings, events and conferences that can be great networking opportunities. Of course, it is important to attend those that are most in alignment with your job goal.

Many associations may also provide listings of job openings on their website. For example, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has an online listing of nationwide social work jobs while the NASW-California Chapter has an online listing of statewide jobs. Many other social work associations and organizations are highlighted later in this document.

The key is to be creative, flexible and understand that networking is an effective and valuable job search strategy for everyone.

3. Preparing sufficiently so that one is successful during interviews.

Preparing for interviews includes researching the organization and reviewing potential interview questions so that one is well-prepared to answer in a manner that demonstrates and highlights their qualifications.

One of the most frequently asked question is, "What do you know about our organization?" Another is, "Why do you want to work for this organization?" Researching the organization and knowing about its vision, mission, goals, programs and services is paramount in being able to answer questions and demonstrate you are the right person for the job.

Interviewing takes skill, practice and preparation. Once again, there are numerous articles and books and online resources regarding interview questions and skills. Job seekers are well advised to read about (a) common interview questions, which have changed over the years and (b) how to best answer these questions.

Many of the questions are behavior specific, for example, "Describe a situation in which you disagreed with your supervisor regarding a policy that you had to implement and how you handled it?" Another example would be, "Describe a time when you failed to meet a goal and how you dealt with it?"

One of the most effective strategies is to have someone video tape the job seeker in a "mock interview." This provides the job seeker with a wealth of information regarding important but often overlooked factors such as facial expressions, eye contact, body mannerisms, verbal habits (long pauses, repeating words or phrases, etc.) and overall appearance of confidence and calmness.

Keep in mind that for a few lucky individuals, interviewing skills may come fairly naturally, but for most job seekers, it is something that requires new skills acquired through study and practice.

4. Developing support systems and strategies for handling the rejection that is inherent in any job search.

Especially if one is unemployed, it is advisable and helpful to have one or more support systems. Given that the average job search takes 3-6 months, those who are unemployed often deal with feelings of rejection and isolation. Even under the best of circumstances, job search can be challenging.

Sharing one's experiences and challenges with family, friends, colleagues and other job seekers can provide much needed support. Another strategy is to start or join a support group. For example, the California Department of Employment Development offers help with resumes, job search and "job clubs" (support groups) for job seekers. This information appears on its website at www.edd.ca.gov.

For those who are employed full-time and looking for another job, it is often difficult to consistently dedicate 6-10 hours per week to the job search. Setting goals and having a support system that helps to keep you accountable can be very helpful. For example, setting the goal of applying to at least two to four jobs a week and having to report weekly to someone else on whether you've accomplished the goal or not, may be one way to support your search.

Creating a Viable Job Search Plan

Once the job seeker is assured that everything is in place and that they are ready to implement job search strategies, it is a good idea to actually sit down and sketch out the following:

1. Determine how many hours will be dedicated to job search activities per week and when these hours will be scheduled into one's weekly calendar.

Just as with exercise and other activities, for most people it requires making a commitment, setting aside specific timeframes, and holding oneself accountable. Consequently, it is always better to set specific goals such as dedicating 20 hours per week to job search activities with measurable outcomes such as applying to 2-5 positions per week and being invited to 3-6 interviews per month.

2. Develop a list of job search activities that includes specific networking activities, a list of job search websites and a list of other job search listings and resources, such as professional newspapers and journals.

Creating a list of websites can be done by book marking the website, saving it in the "Favorites" file or creating a list in a Word document. One job seeker created a list of websites in a Word document and grouped them by how often she visited the websites. This was efficient for her because all websites were located in one document, which was easily accessed and revised.

Another source for job listings, meetings, events and conferences is professional associations. For a list of social work associations, visit http://healthlinks.washington.edu/social_work/associations/. Joining and becoming active in professional associations can build professional competence and expertise, build and expand connections and provide multiple networking opportunities.

Once again, it is worth repeating, one must be creative, flexible and committed to developing a set of strategies that works best for his or her personality and particular employment goal. The key to effective networking is finding and applying the very best strategies that work for you.

3. Treat the job search as if it were a job, an important job. Considering the average amount of time that is spent at work (statistics indicate that today's full-time jobs require more than 40 hours per

week) and the importance of holding a job one enjoys, it makes sense to commit one's time, energy and resources to the process.

Keys to Setting Job Search Goals

Job Titles

Sometimes it may be difficult for the job seeker to target a specific job title such as "medical social worker" and, in this case, it is advisable to clearly define one's expertise. For example if one's expertise is in employment and training, workforce issues, and training, there might not be just one title that works. Consequently focusing on the areas of expertise would be more productive on business cards and when networking. One must still be able to communicate clearly and concisely what he or she wishes to do.

Job Location

While some job seekers are flexible and open to many geographic locations, it is advisable to define one to three top geographic locations as the priority. As with many things in life, setting priorities and focusing on one priority at a time tends to render more results. Job search can be challenging and time consuming even with a defined job goal in one geographic location (for example, a school social work within the greater Los Angeles area).

Performing a job search for several states or even three or more cities quickly becomes overwhelming. Additionally, it is very difficult to network and market oneself for such a large area. Although it surprises many, job seekers who are most specific about their skills, accomplishments, expertise, job goal and desired geographic location are frequently more successful than those who are open to "do anything."

Professional Accomplishments

While most job seekers tend to focus on professional experience, education, and skills; however, it is just important to be able to delineate one's professional accomplishments

Example of Expertise

Clinical Social Worker in Gerontology (CSW-G) NASW Certificate

Example of Experience

Served as a case manager in adult protective services for 5 years with Marin County

Example of Skill

Speak, read and write Spanish and familiar with cultural issues for those from Central America.

Example of Accomplishments

Invited to be the key note speaker at the American Society on Aging Annual Conference 2005

Promoted to section supervisor after only six months due to demonstrated leadership skills

Created an innovative and dynamic orientation and training for new employees and interns

Sample Job Search Plan

- Job Seeker: 56 yr-old, recently moved to San Francisco, CA
- Qualifications: MSW, 20-yrs of professional experience, 10-yrs as a manager
- Job Goal: Manager within an adult out-patient mental health setting
- Location: San Francisco County
- Hours per week: 24 or more hours per week dedicated to job search activities
- Measurable outcomes:
- (1) Visit 25 job listings (websites, journals, newspapers) per week
 - (2) Apply to 2-3 positions per week
 - (3) Obtain 4 interviews per month
 - (4) Create a *Networking Plan* with specific strategies and timeframes
 - (5) Attend 4-6 networking events per month
 - (6) Make at least 5-10 networking calls per week
 - (7) Attend EDD job search “club” two times a month
 - (8) Join and become active in the Social Work Managers Association
 - (9) Switch NASW membership from NV to CA to receive newsletter, etc.
 - (10) Attend the local NASW San Francisco Unit meeting once a month
 - (11) Research social work salaries in San Francisco during the next 30-days
 - (12) Research books on salary negotiation within the next 30-days
 - (13) Chat with a selected non-professional “coach” by phone once a week
 - (14) Attend at least 1 social work conference in the next 60-90 days
 - (15) Explore volunteer work a few hours a week in mental health setting

Sample of a week's job search activities

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8am-12pm	2pm-6pm	8am-12pm	9am-1pm	2pm-6pm	10am-12pm	7:30-9:30pm
Job Search Activities	Job Search Activities	Networking Activities	Networking Activities	3pm Interview*	Research and Reading	Chat with Mentor
Websites, Journals, Newspapers	2pm Job Club*	Interview Preparation	Job Search Activities	Thank you notes	Job Search Activities	Research negotiating salaries
15	16	17	18	19	20	21

Sample Networking Plan

Job Seeker:	28 yr-old who lives in San Diego area
Qualifications:	Recent MSW graduate with experience as a case manager and some volunteer experience in a hospital setting
Job Goal:	Social work case manager within medical setting
Location:	San Diego County

1. Create a list of all friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances and determine which individuals will be called, emailed or mailed.

If emailed or mailed, one could create a brief note similar to the sample note (below) outlining one's qualifications and job goal along with a resume. This job seeker could create an innovative and appropriate "greeting card" with graduation photo that might draw attention and be more impressive than a simple note. Being innovative and creative is a plus when networking and promoting one's qualifications and job goal.

Sample Note

As you may be aware, I recently received my Master's in Social Work and am now ready to move into a social work case manager position in a medical setting here in the San Diego area. My recent MSW along with two years of case management and volunteer experience at a local hospital makes me the perfect candidate. Please keep me in mind should you hear of a position or know of someone who might have an interest in my attached resume. I'm excited about starting my new career and am very appreciative of any assistance that you may be able to provide.

Name
Phone number
Email address

2. Attend 4-6 social work functions or volunteer with organizations or agencies where there are networking opportunities.

Sample of Networking Activities

- Join NASW-California Chapter and attend the monthly Region E (San Diego and Imperial) meetings to network with other social workers and, at each meeting, pass out at least five business cards highlighting qualifications, job search goal and contact information.

Clarification

The NASW-CA Chapter is divided into geographic regions and units so that social workers can attend local events and meetings. Visit www.naswca.org under the "membership" tab to view the geographic regions and units and their related events.

There are also several councils that bring together social workers around special interests such as school social work, social image, healthcare, disaster relief, etc. For a list of councils and related events, visit www.naswca.org under the "membership" tab.

- Volunteer two times a month for the social work department at the local veteran's hospital.

Clarification

The right volunteer situation can be very helpful in networking and building connections, especially if one is new to the area or a recent graduate. The key is to choose the right organization and the right volunteer (or internship) role, one that adds to current skills or provides new skills and works closely with other professionals.

- Over the next six-months, attend at least three social work conferences or events where there are opportunities to network such as the: (1) Latino Social Work Network Annual Conference; (2) NASW-CA Chapter Annual Conference, and (3) Southern California Society for Social Work Leadership in Healthcare.

Clarification

Volunteering is one way to be able to attend conference and events without paying full price and yet, in most cases, having full access to networking activities. However, if the person is employed, he or she has the option of registering and attending selected networking activities.

- Each week call at least three human resource directors at targeted medical facilities to ask about social work jobs, the hiring process and suggestions they may have for someone with a recent MSW wanting to work as a case manager within medical social work.

Clarification

When calling and talking with those in human resources, be professional, be prepared, be specific and be brief. Always ask what strategies or activities they might suggest to someone looking for a job within the field.

3. Create a “Business Card” for Networking Activities

Informal business cards can be easily created, adapted, and printed from any computer. Specially designed paper can be bought for this purpose. If done appropriately, this type of promotion is more effective and economical than handing resumes to everyone.

It is always a good idea to have someone else look the card before printing it. More often than one might suspect, job seekers hand out cards, resumes, etc. with errors or missing key information such as the correct phone number or email address.

Sample Business Card

