

# Leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

JANUARY 2012



## beyond 9 to 5: working as a consultant

While you may not have planned on becoming a consultant when you first joined the social work workforce, consulting can provide social workers with a host of opportunities throughout their careers. As a consultant, you offer your skills, knowledge and expertise to organizations. These opportunities can be found in a wide range of work environments including public and private nonprofits or the research, policy, academia or clinical arenas. Your role as a consultant can involve providing recommendations, solutions, or expertise on specific projects for organizations. All social workers, including those considering a shift in career focus, seasoned professionals or even new graduates may want to consider consulting opportunities.

The benefits of becoming a consultant are that you generally have the freedom to set your own hours and as well as the latitude to select clients and projects that you find interesting. Some projects can be short or long-term, allowing you to balance work commitments with other priorities. However, if you choose to consult full-time, there may also be challenges that come along with consulting contracts. For example, you are no longer guaranteed a steady paycheck, benefits or health care and are not provided with office space and administrative assistance. On another note, if you are employed full-time, you want to

make sure there is no conflict of interest if you are thinking about consulting with another organization.

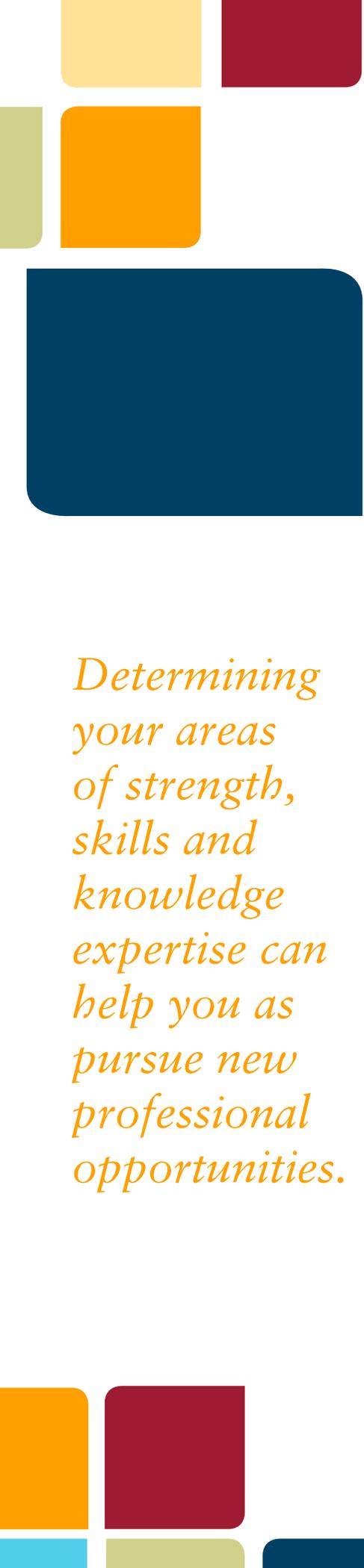
Whether you are considering starting your own consulting business or taking on short-term assignments, consider the following.

### » **THINK ABOUT YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT PREFERENCES.**

Social workers interested in becoming consultants should seriously consider their work preferences to determine if consulting is indeed a good fit for them.



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*Determining your areas of strength, skills and knowledge expertise can help you as pursue new professional opportunities.*

For example, consider if you prefer working regular hours or having a steady paycheck or prefer to be part of a team. As a full-time consultant, you often give up the benefits that come along with more traditional employment. For example, you will have to be diligent about managing your paperwork so that you pay your taxes properly. In addition, you will have to consider the need and cost of professional liability insurance which can protect your personal responsibility when fulfilling your professional obligations.

» **DETERMINE YOUR AREA OF STRENGTHS AND KNOWLEDGE EXPERIENCE.**

The social work profession can provide you with opportunities to develop a range of skills and expertise in different areas. For example, some clinical positions may have strengthened your group counseling skills where as other positions may have allowed you to focus on program development or management. Think about what skills and expertise you can offer as a consultant (e.g., group facilitator, grant reviewer, program developer, etc.). There are several online tools that can help you think about your strengths and skills in different areas.

» **DETERMINE YOUR CONSULTING FEE.**

Social workers seeking to work as consultants need to determine how they intend to be compensated. Compensation can be worked out in several ways including doubling or tripling your hourly wage, determining a daily rate or setting a fee for the project (Consultant Journal, 2011). Social workers will need to determine potential overhead costs (e.g., office space and equipment, internet, phone access, office supplies, etc.) and taxes when determining a fee. Examine the IRS tax requirements carefully to ensure you are paying your taxes properly as an independent contractor. Depending on your income, you may be required to pay taxes quarterly. One way to determine the best approach is to ask your colleagues

who have worked as consultants doing similar work.

» **TAP INTO YOUR NETWORK.**

Social workers interested in pursuing consulting opportunities can tap into their network for potential contracts. Attending networking events and remaining active on online tools such as LinkedIn can be useful in seeking work.

The social work profession can provide you with a number of consulting opportunities throughout your career. Determining your areas of strength, skills and knowledge expertise can help you as pursue new professional opportunities.

**RESOURCES**

» **National Association of Social Workers**  
[www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org)

Center for Workforce Studies provides information on the social work workforce. This information includes helpful resources to enhance professional skills.

Doelling, C.N. (2005). *Social work career development: A handbook for job hunting and career planning* (2nd Edition). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Perlmutter, F.D. & Crook, W.P. (2004). *Changing hats while managing change: From social work practice to administration* (2nd Edition). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Whitaker, T. (2009). *The results are in: What social workers say about social work*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Whitaker, T. (2009). *Workforce trends affecting the profession*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

**REFERENCES**

Consultant Journal. (2011, November). *Consulting Fees*. Retrieved from <http://consultantjournal.com/blog/consulting-fees>