

leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

JULY 2012

securing the social work job you seek: advice for the interview process

In a competitive employment market, social work job seekers need to make the most of the interviewing process. The interview is your opportunity to communicate how your skills and experience meet an employer's job requirements—and to demonstrate how your personality fits with the organization. Careful consideration of the steps leading up to, during and after an interview will help you project yourself in the best possible light to a potential employer—and improve the odds that you will secure the job you seek.

» GATHER INFORMATION FROM AND ABOUT YOUR PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER

When you receive a call to schedule an interview, ask questions that will help you prepare: What are the names of the people with whom will you be meeting? What is the interview process - is this a screening interview followed by a second interview? How much time has been allocated for the interview? If you don't have one, can you be e-mailed a detailed job description in advance of the interview?

Take the time to learn as much as possible about all levels of the organization. Look thoroughly at the organization's website. Review their mission statement, annual report and

strategic plan. Research the department or division that you would be working within. Look at the department's programs, services and staff. Look closely at the job description and make sure you understand all the duties and responsibilities the position entails. Research your interviewer(s) as well. Understand their roles within the agency and their respective backgrounds. Do a Google search and see what they are involved in professionally.

» PRACTICE MOCK INTERVIEWS AND PREPARE CAREFULLY FOR PROBABLE QUESTIONS

Conduct practice interviews in the mirror or with friends and colleagues. Ask your social work school's career development



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Before any job interview (and ideally, before beginning a job search) review the content on your Facebook pages, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media accounts.

office if they will conduct a mock interview with you. Prepare brief and concise answers for common interview questions such as:

- › Can you tell me about yourself?
- › What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- › What specific skills do you have that relate to this job?
- › Why are you interested in this position? What can you bring to this agency?
- › How would your experience and background contribute to your success at this organization?
- › What kind of experience have you had working with different populations?
- › What attracts you to this type of work? Why do you want to work for this particular organization?
- › What is your work style?
- › How do you prioritize tasks during a work day? How do you handle a high workload?
- › What do you think makes a successful team environment?
- › Tell me about a time you had to make a quick decision. What was the outcome?
- › What would you like to be doing five years from now?

Create a list of questions *you* may want to ask during the interview, to help you determine if the position is a good fit for you. Intelligent and substantive questions create a positive impression and demonstrate your interest in the position and the organization. Examples might include:

- › Can you give me more detail about the position's responsibilities? What skills are you looking for, ideally?
- › Within the areas of responsibility, what are the two or three most significant things you would want me to accomplish?
- › Is this a new position? If so, why was it created?

- › How will my performance be evaluated?
- › How would you describe the culture of this organization?
- › What is your average staff to client ratio?
- › What are the agency's funding sources?

Be prepared in the event that an unskilled interviewer asks an illegal or inappropriate question about your ethnicity, religion, race, sexual orientation, marital status, or other personal topic. You can refuse to answer, ask why the question is relevant, or address what might be the underlying issue. For example, you might reply to the questions, "Are you married?" or "Do you have children?" by asking about the time and travel commitments that the job entails.

Toward the end of the interview, an employer typically asks if you have any additional questions. You should be prepared to ask one or two, which underscore your interest in the position. Avoid asking a question about salary and benefits during an initial interview. Appropriate questions might include:

- › Is there anything about my background and experience that we didn't cover today that would be helpful for you to know?
- › What are the next steps in the selection process?

» **KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVIEWS**

In addition to the traditional one-on-one interview, social work job seekers should be prepared for other interview formats:

- › **Phone Screening Interviews:** Employers often screen applicants in a short (typically 30 minutes or less) phone interview, to narrow the candidate pool and assess whether a more in-depth interview is worthwhile. Screening interviews are also an important tool for long-distance job hunters. For a successful phone

interview: try to be on a landline if possible, in a quiet place where you can concentrate and won't be interrupted. Sit at a table with a pen, paper and your résumé close by. Write down the name of the person with whom you're interviewing. If more than one person is on the line, ask for a questioner's identity and refer to them by name when you respond. Listen intently and take notes throughout the interview.

- › **Group or Panel Interviews:** This format – whereby more than one person is interviewing you – can be challenging. Employers often use this format to save time or to observe how well candidates work within a group. Group interviews are common in government, education, and social service agencies. In this format, it is important to pay equal attention to all interviewers. When people are introduced, write down their names and titles. When a question is asked, address everyone in the room when you respond. Avoid the mistake of focusing your attention primarily on the most senior person or the friendliest face. Remember that all interviewers are part of the hiring decision.

» ON THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW: PROJECT PROFESSIONALISM IN YOUR APPEARANCE AND BEHAVIOR

Your interview attire communicates your level of seriousness about the position and the agency. Wear professional business attire to the interview, even if the agency has a relaxed dress code. Err on the side of conservative clothing and accessories - and avoid wearing anything that will detract from your presentation. A good rule of thumb is to dress for an interview the way the executive director of the agency would dress for meetings with key staff from a major funding organization.

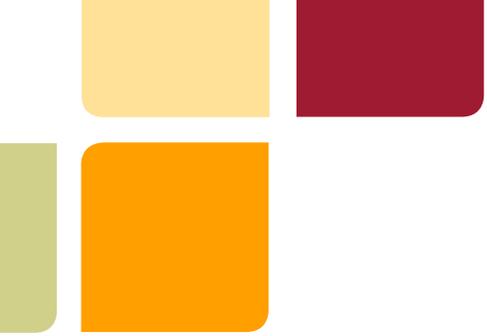
When you arrive at the agency, be respectful and polite to anyone you encounter before the actual interview. Shake hands with everyone to whom you are introduced. Administrative staff and other gatekeepers often communicate their impressions of potential hires to interviewers. Turn your cell phone and other electronics completely off and don't reach for them again until your interview is completed and you have left the agency. Be an attentive listener and maintain eye contact. Keep the tone of the interview positive, serious and honest. Don't joke with your interviewer or ask personal questions of him or her. Avoid speaking in generalities. If you don't know an answer to a question, don't bluff. Demonstrate your confidence, as well as your

Employers often form an impression *before* they meet you

A résumé is only one tool that an employer has to form an impression of you prior to the interview. Before beginning the interview process, make sure that *everything* about you projects a positive, professional image.

Review your voice mail messages: The first contact a prospective employer has with you may be through your voice mail. Make sure the voice mail messages on your mobile and home phones are clear, appropriate and professional.

Review your on-line profile: Before any job interview (and ideally, before beginning a job search) review the content on your Facebook pages, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media accounts. Ask friends and mentors to review them as well. Increasingly, employers are reviewing publically available on-line profiles of potential employees. In some cases, employers may ask for login information during an interview, to view material hidden by privacy settings. Ensure that everything on your social media accounts is material you would be comfortable showing to people with whom you are not "friended." Your personal life shouldn't be so incongruous with your work life that a prospective employer would question your credibility or judgment.



willingness to learn. At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewer for his/her time, and shake everyone's hand before you leave.

» **DEMONSTRATE YOUR INTEREST AND APPRECIATION FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW**

Send thank you notes (hand-written or emailed) and any requested information within 24 hours. Express appreciation for the interviewer's time, summarize your qualifications, clarify any remaining issues or concerns, supply references if requested, and indicate your enthusiasm for the position and the agency. Keep your thank you note short but sincere, and make a copy for your files. It's also appropriate to send a follow-up note to anyone at the organization who assisted you in your job search.

» **RECORD YOUR THOUGHTS AND IMPRESSIONS ON EACH INTERVIEW**

Following an interview, record your thoughts and impressions in a notebook, including questions you might have handled differently. Regardless of the outcome, view each interview as a learning experience – and an opportunity to become a more effective interviewee.

RESOURCES

Social Work Career Development: A Handbook for Job Hunting and Career Planning

By Carol Nessler Doelling
2nd Edition; NASW Press; 2005

A comprehensive reference for all social workers, this handbook includes strategies for networking and researching the job market, self-assessment exercises, interview planning, and information on preparing resumes, curriculum vitae and portfolios, among other topics.

The Social Work Career Center

An on-line NASW resource - offers extensive career development tools for social work job seekers: www.socialworkers.org/joblinks/default.asp