

leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

JULY 2011



OUTSIDE THE LINES: maximizing the flexibility of a social work degree

Many of you probably had an idea of what you wanted to do with your social work degree before you joined the workforce. Some of you may have wanted to work within a child welfare system or a school system while others wanted to conduct research or advocate on critical policy issues.

One benefit of a social work degree is that the job possibilities are endless. A social work education allows social workers to explore different types of employment. This flexibility allows you to join a broad range of work environments throughout your career. As a social worker you can focus on public and private non-profit management, research, policy, academia or clinical work. Whether you are a new social worker or a seasoned social worker considering a job change, it is important to know how you can maximize the flexibility of your social work degree.

Considering the following:

- » **TAP INTO THE STRENGTHS AND KNOWLEDGE AREAS GAINED FROM EACH EXPERIENCE.** Social work allows you to work in a wide range of areas to develop a host of strengths and knowledge areas. For instance, some direct practice positions allow you to develop or strengthen your crisis intervention or group facilitation skills while some macro social work positions allow you to deepen your research and advocacy skills. With each position, you can increase your range of strengths and content expertise—preparing you for your next position. Make sure you



National Association of Social Workers
750 First Street NE, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241



The social work field is so broad that there is always potential to learn something new.

document the knowledge and skills attained from each position. While it may be time-consuming to do this, this information can help you to create and update your resume and cover letter, prepare for an interview or complete your next self-evaluation. If you are a seasoned social worker, this type of assessment is also helpful in rethinking the direction of your social work career.

» **DON'T FORGET YOUR**

ACCOMPLISHMENTS. The different social work positions that you hold will allow you to experience a variety of roles. It is important that you do not forget to track your career accomplishments. These could include but are not limited to, leadership positions, participation in task force or committees, presentations, license certifications and/or programs that you helped to create (Doelling, 2004). For example, serving as a representative on a county task force can demonstrate your leadership skills. It is important to recognize your achievements as they can illustrate the depth of your experience to potential employers as well as lead you to other areas of social work in the future.

» **EXPERIENCE DIFFERENT WORK**

ENVIRONMENTS. While your work preferences will change throughout your social work career, it is important to understand your current workplace preference (e.g., social change vs. service delivery, cross-disciplinary teams, generalist vs. specialists, etc.). For instance, right now you may lean more towards a direct practice setting, but in the future, you may prefer a setting that allows you to do more “big picture” thinking to affect policy change. The social work field allows you the flexibility to explore jobs in different settings. Try to visualize what you want and enjoy in a position—this will help to identify jobs that are a good match with your skills and preferences.

» **ALLOW YOURSELF TO EXPLORE NEW**

AREAS. If you are interested in exploring new areas, make an effort to learn about related topics. Connect with social

workers who are working in those fields or get training to develop new skills. Perhaps you have been working in direct practice as a foster care social worker for 10 years and are ready to do something different. You have always been interested in writing and training others. One way to transition to a new position as a trainer is to deepen your writing or training skills through workshops or specialized classes. In addition, you could explore a new focus area by identifying relevant links to your current work (e.g., intersection of domestic violence and child welfare, etc.).

» **GIVE YOURSELF ROOM TO GROW.**

The social work field is so broad that there is always potential to learn something new. Make sure you give yourself room to grow. Keep up with current trends in the field and make your professional development a priority. One way to do this is to seek out different learning opportunities (e.g., trainings, conferences, Continuing Education Units, etc.). Connecting with like-minded professionals can also help to give you fresh perspectives throughout your career.

Social workers can be very effective in creating change in numerous settings throughout their career. Building your skills and knowledge can help you to move through your social work career path at your own pace.

RESOURCES

National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies provides information on the social work workforce. This information includes helpful resources to enhance professional skills.
www.socialworkers.org

REFERENCES

Doelling, C.N. (2004). *Social work career development: A handbook for job hunting and career planning*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.