

Leadership Ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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the tech-savvy social worker: prepared for the challenges of 21st century practice

Because many social workers spend a great deal of time interacting with clients, they may not recognize the importance of being familiar and comfortable with current technology.

As technology develops, however, so does the need for technological proficiency among social workers. This topic has gained increasing attention not only at NASW but also in the social work literature, which now includes multiple articles on topics such as the ethical use of technology use among social workers (Bartley Young, 2009; Reamer, 2008), the role of social media in social work (Zgoda, 2009), and the use of technology in both social work practice (Mallon & Houtstra, 2007) and education (Smith, 2009).

Social workers who lack technological know-how will not be prepared to meet the many challenges inherent in 21st century practice. To maximize the effectiveness of your practice, consider the following benefits of becoming—and striving to remain—a tech-savvy social worker.

» LOCATING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Printed manuals and reports may not be easily accessible to practitioners and, when they are, quickly become outdated. Knowing how to search the internet efficiently and how to evaluate the utility of online information enables you to locate resources for client use, educational purposes, policy or advocacy work, or research. With this knowledge, you will also be better prepared to support your clients, students, constituents, and colleagues in using the internet and other online tools in a constructive manner.

» MAXIMIZING YOUR SAFETY

Detours, accidents, natural disasters, health problems, family crises, and even threats to personal safety can put you in jeopardy in a matter of seconds. With pay phones becoming increasingly hard to find and maps changing quickly, access to a cellular



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phone and global positioning system (GPS) not only save time but also enhance personal safety. These resources are especially important if you visit clients in the field, but they can be useful even if you commute to one office location on a routine basis.

» **RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING CLIENT CONCERNS**

Technology, similar to any tool, can both promote and impede human relationships and well-being. People of all ages now engage in, or struggle with, the ramifications of cyberbullying, cyberlurking, cyberstalking, internet addictions, virtual infidelity and violence, and online gambling, pornography, and sexual predation. You may not be an expert in addressing each of these problems, but you need to be able to recognize these challenges and identify resources to help address them.

» **MAKING YOUR SERVICES ACCESSIBLE**

Technology has the potential to both increase and decrease accessibility. Telephone interpretation and electronic translation services facilitate communication with people who have limited English proficiency. Teletypewriters (TTYs) and text transcripts make telephones and videos accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Website design features, screen magnification software, screen readers, and other tools enhance electronic accessibility for people who have low vision or are blind. Knowing the available tools enables you to determine what is needed to ensure access for your clients or employees—and allows you to broaden your reach to other groups.

CONVEYING YOUR MESSAGE

Social workers have been using computer programs for documentation in many settings for years, and this trend will only increase as health information technology becomes more widespread. Database programs are invaluable for tracking resource information and program or research data. Other software programs enable you to prepare and present professional documents and presentations, including web-based presentations, with ease. Adding video and graphic design to your website and other products can increase the visual impact of your message.

» **USING—AND KNOWING WHEN NOT TO USE—SOCIAL MEDIA**

Blogs, chat rooms, electronic mailing lists, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other social media are changing the way we communicate information and relate to each other. These tools can both enhance and promote your practice, including your advocacy efforts. On the other hand, indiscriminate use of social media may allow clients and constituents access to your personal information and threaten your professional boundaries. Finding and maintaining this balance is an unavoidable challenge for the 21st-century social worker.

» **MAINTAINING AN ECO-FRIENDLY PRACTICE**

If your experience is similar to that of most social workers, you have file cabinets, boxes, and piles of resources, articles, and books collected throughout your school years and on the job...and you continue to amass paper at a rapid rate. Flash drives, laptop computers, and other mobile technology tools decrease the need for paper while working on the go. Likewise, online filing and storage systems save not only space in the office but also the paper, ink, and electricity used in printing. Transitioning from printed to electronic formats may not be easy, but doing so will minimize your ecological footprint.

NASW RESOURCES

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