

Creating YOUR Social Work Career: Clarify Your Purpose

Contributed by Lyndal Greenslade, BA, BSocWk, MAASW, and Amanda Vos, BSocWk, MAASW (Acc)

Editor's Note: This is the first in a 4-part series on creating YOUR social work career! I am delighted that Lyndal Greenslade and Amanda Vos of the Australian Association of Social Workers will be sharing these ideas with readers of The New Social Worker. {mosgoogle right}

Working with social workers at the Australian Association of Social Workers Horizon Career Centre has allowed us a window into some key truths about finding and sustaining a career in the human services. Over the coming year, we're thrilled to be able to share our four-phase, "Creating YOUR Social Work Career" framework with readers of The New Social Worker. Together, we will purposefully and proactively create the career experiences of our dreams! We will start with Phase 1: Clarify your purpose.

Regardless of whether you are a new graduate or seasoned professional, we have identified that seeking out opportunities and staying happy in your career requires that you first gain clarity on your purpose. For many of us, spending time committing to a process to identify our career purpose just isn't something we've found the time to do during our hectic time at university. We get many calls and e-mails from new grads just like you, who contact us because they're feeling confused about what to do once they graduate. You've worked hard for years, celebrated your graduation, and proudly framed your degree. Now that you've finally made it, the next big part of your journey begins. The job search. Given how demanding the student experience can be, we may hit this new phase without ever having taken the opportunity to really reflect on what we want. If this sounds like you, let us share how this might play out if you don't take the time to hit the PAUSE button and get clear on this stuff.

If you are unclear on what sort of work you want to do, how you want to work, why you want to work the way you do, what you value, and ultimately WHO YOU ARE, then trying to find work may not be easy. In our experience, people who begin their job search without having gained these insights end up in two possible scenarios. The first is that they apply for anything and everything that is advertised and often go through many rejections. The second is that they get lucky and get the job. Often, though, given that they've not really thought it all through, they end up finding out they don't really like the work. Depressing? Absolutely. The good news is there is a way to ensure that this doesn't happen to you!

So, if you're feeling unsure, hesitant, bewildered, overwhelmed, burned out, or that you're running around in circles, don't despair! If you're not feeling any of the above--even better! You can ensure you never do! The process we're going to describe will help to get you unstuck if you're stuck and allow you to plan out a career that connects with your individual values, beliefs, and motivations.

The first phase in creating your social work career involves gaining some clarity on your purpose. This is big picture stuff (very exciting!). Gaining insight into WHO you are, and WHY, is the foundation step in purposely creating your social work career. When you know yourself well, you will be equipped to reach out for experiences that resonate with your unique purpose. Through committing to this process, you are beginning a journey that will take you to where YOU need to go.

Begin by thinking through the following reflective questions. These will help you to focus in and gain insight into who you are and what motivates you. Consider keeping a social work journal and recording your answers to the questions above. They may change over time, and they'll be a great resource to revisit when you need to reconnect with what drives you.

- What do I value?
- What qualities in people do I admire and why?
- If I looked back over my life, what experiences do I want to have had?
- What challenges me?
- What makes me laugh?
- What am I passionate about?
- What would I like to learn?
- What sparks my interest?
- Who am I associating with? Are they a positive and uplifting influence?
- What is my life purpose?

Your answers will provide you with the foundation building blocks to design your career path, so take as long as you need to find an answer that sits right with you. If you get stuck (and hey, the last question on that list should definitely slow you down!), try writing down the first thing that comes to mind. If this doesn't capture it, write the next thing that comes to mind. Keep going until you find an answer that's so powerful that you feel like crying or shouting or smiling or dancing...this means you've got it!

The next step is to identify your key strengths. When you know what you're good at and what you enjoy, you can ensure that you use these daily to enhance your experiences. There are many wonderful tools on the Internet to help you to identify your key strengths. We like the Values In Action (VIA) Strengths Survey found at <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx> and the Strengths List at <http://www.thehappinessinstitute.com>. By completing the VIA Strengths Survey, we were able to identify our top five

strengths, and they were spot on! We know that by using these strengths daily in our work and lives, we are able to experience a greater level of satisfaction and happiness. Fantastic!

Now that you've devoted some time to knowing yourself a little better, you can move on to the next step, which involves building on your newly gained insights to focus in on your purpose in social work. Through reflecting on the questions below and perhaps asking them of social workers you admire, you will be able to grow your vision of what your social work career can look like.

- Why did I choose to study social work?
- Why do I want to be a social worker?
- Which social work writers/practitioners inspire me, and why?
- How have they influenced me as a social worker?

During our own years as social work students, we read about or met social workers whose approaches to their work really resonated with us and led us to think "that's why I want to be a social worker!" If you spend some time examining why this might be, you will uncover what you need to be doing to feel deeply connected to your own work. The possibilities are endless!

A final step in this first phase of our "Creating YOUR Social Work Career" framework is to put it all together into a simple statement of purpose. We like to call it our "tag line" or career objective. You can even include it on your résumé to help employers get a picture of what you're all about (more on this in Phase 3). This statement will be so useful to you throughout your career, as it will guide your path and provide you with a way to check in every now and then to see if you're still on track. It can be as simple and broad, grand and dramatic, or detailed and specific as you want. You may find that it sums up way more than your career aspirations, but also captures your life "mission." It's powerful stuff! In the interests of giving you some examples, we have included ours in our sign off at the end of this article.

If are feeling like it's all too much work...take heart and stick with it! By putting in the time now, you will ensure that you find what you need to grow and develop your social work careers (and yourselves!) so that you can make the most of all that time you spent writing assignments and sitting exams. This process allows you to PAUSE, take stock, and plan with purpose, instead of just reacting to job vacancies that may not be right for who you are and how you need to practice your profession.

Next edition, we'll present Phase 2 of the Creating YOUR Social Work Career framework—Understanding the Purpose of Social Work. Now that you have more clarity on your own purpose, the next step is to delve deeply and uncover how you might use yourself to contribute to the purpose of social work. Exciting stuff!

Meanwhile, if you'd like to send through your observations and realizations that have unveiled themselves during Phase 1, e-mail us at info@horizonemployment.com.au We'd love to hear from you!

With warm regards from Oz,

Amanda Vos—Assisting social workers to fulfill THEIR potential; and Lyndal Greenslade—Changing the world; one engagement at a time!

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