

Creating YOUR Social Work Career: Creating Your Purpose

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

Editor's Note: This is the third 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 are sharing these ideas with readers of The New Social Worker. We will be discussing this article in a live online chat on October 19. See next page for details. {mosgoogle right}

Welcome back to another column dedicated to exploring what's on your social work horizon. The last two installments centered on clarifying your unique purpose and understanding the purpose of social work. We're guessing that if you spent some time reflecting on the exercises in the last two columns, you have gained some valuable insights into who you are and how the work that you do will contribute to maximizing human potential. If you're still feeling unsure, that's okay. Reflection is a process that often takes time to reveal its full meaning, so don't rush it...you'll get there!

This edition's column moves you beyond the thinking and reflecting stages to proactively begin creating YOUR purpose. We'll share with you some tips on how you can use your newly gained insights to develop career possibilities that will allow you to work with your strengths and purpose. It's all about reaching out and making connections, so get ready for action!

The first step in this process is to begin to map out your areas of interest. By choosing this approach, you can be sure that you will be doing more than finding a job—you'll be taking an active role in creating a long-term career that delivers the experiences you most want to have. This process is all about seeking. You know the old adage "seek and you shall find"? Guess what. It really works! Most of us seem to bypass the seeking stage or simply limit it to a "job search" of available vacancy listings. This could work, but wouldn't it be preferable to dream really big and explore all the possibilities for your social work career? Of course it would! That's why this stage is all about actively seeking out information, resources, organizations, ideas, inspiration, and most importantly, interesting and uplifting people.

The Internet is a fantastic and accessible tool for beginning your search. By typing key words into an Internet search engine, you will have access to a vast array of information that will allow you to build your map of interests. Using the example in last edition's column, let's say you've discovered during self-reflection that you highly value fairness and feel passionately that individuals deserve the right to freedom. Additionally, you identified that one of your strengths is leadership, and you are really excited about putting these together to seek career experiences that drive social change. You might take these insights and look for opportunities to be involved with organizations and/or events that advocate for and promote change for marginalized groups. Let's say that your interest was further sparked by the plight of refugees in your community, who you felt were perhaps not being well treated or adequately resourced. To map out where in social work these interests might best fit, you could type in "social work refugee programs" and follow this with a locality.

Given that here at the AASW Horizon Career Centre, we're all about authenticity, we just gave it a go and found...wait for it...four government organizations, three non-government organizations, one media release for an event, and two coalitions all located in our city. And that was all on the first page!

You can use your search results to build a map of all the roads that may lead to opportunities to fulfill your purpose in social work. Copy down the names and contact details of organizations, bookmark their Web pages, build up a file of articles, and research which fits with your interest and take note of who wrote them. Follow the leads in each resource that grab your attention, and think big!

Be sure that in addition to major coalitions and government organizations, you explore professional organizations, events, training, and conferences, magazines, journals, and online publications. Don't forget that you can go way beyond the traditional realm of social work to include films, books, theatre, art...whatever excites you the most. The aim is to develop as wide a pool of resources as possible.

Your search may lead you to realize that there's a lot going on in the world of social work. The sheer amount of programs that exist is proof that social work is a happening profession! So take a moment to feel great about the fact that you're a part of a vital and uplifting profession that makes a valuable contribution to the world.

Now it's time to take your map and use it to reach out and make positive connections with the social work community. We've all heard the phrase often used in relation to finding work—"It's not what you know; it's who you know." This is so very true, and it's one of the reasons why it makes sense to build a network of contacts. But it's not the only reason, and it may not even be the most important reason. We recommend approaching this step with a different kind of "vibe." Rather than making connections aimed at meeting your immediate needs, we suggest you approach people solely because you're sincerely and genuinely interested in them. Be clear that your essential motivation is not for this person or organization to hand you a job on a platter, but rather that you want to share that you are inspired by their work (be it an article, program, or project) and would like to know more about it. This is a really powerful approach, and here's why. People will go out of their way to make contact to complain, but very rarely do so to share something positive, so it's really refreshing to receive a call or e-mail from someone who tells you that they like what you're doing and want to know more.

Lyndal would like to share with you at this point that she often contacts people who are doing research or have written an article that inspires her. The joy that comes back to her by reaching out in this way is extremely sustaining.

Example e-mail:

Dear John,

Warm greetings. I hope this e-mail finds you really well!

My name is Lyndal Greenslade, and I'm the Career Services Social Worker, currently working at the AASW Horizon Career Centre. I was reading your article published in the latest Journal of Social Work and wanted to share how inspired I had been by your new parenting program. What a fantastic initiative!

John, I completed a field placement in a parenting program and have a lot of material on the topic and contacts with others doing similar work. If there is anything I can do to assist, please let me know. I would be more than happy to share resources if it would be of any help. I will be in your area next Tuesday for the day and would welcome the opportunity to meet for coffee. It would be wonderful to learn more about your project.

E-mail is a great way to catch me. Alternatively please find my phone numbers below.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kindest regards
Lyndal

So, be clear that your first motivation is to connect through genuine compliment, and be aware that other benefits may include that you will be building a supportive social work network and, yes, you may indeed be the person they call when a vacancy eventually comes up. But that's not the central point...got it?

Below is an example of an e-mail that uses the principle of connecting through compliment, to give you an idea of how it can be done. The main points are to share with the person what they're doing that has sparked your interest and impressed you, consider how you can add value to them, perhaps by offering to assist or sharing resources you've come across, and finally, be specific about what you would like to happen as a result of your contact. If you'd like the chance to visit their organization or meet them for coffee...ask! And don't freak out if you don't get a reply back. If you reach out often enough, you only need one or two responses to begin a snowball effect (e.g., "You should meet up with my colleague— here's her number."). If you do meet up in person, remember to stay focused on them and listen for ways you can add value to their work. If it fits with the flow of the conversation (i.e., if they ask you what you do), go ahead and mention that you're looking for new opportunities. You don't need to conceal that you're interested in working in their area, but don't make this the central focus of the conversation. Consider sending off a "thanks for your time, it was fantastic because..." follow up e-mail. This is a great idea, because hey, good manners are important and people genuinely appreciate them.

The steps in this phase are designed to be repeated over and over again. If you consistently follow this process every time you locate something that fits with your social work purpose, you will ensure that you are able to grow supportive networks that are both personally and professionally enriching. You will stay at the "cutting edge" of developments in your area of interest, increasing the likelihood that when job opportunities do arise, you are not only aware of them, but you are knowledgeable and connected.

Finally, you will provide a steady stream of inspirational moments, as you connect with people who are out there doing the work that resonates most with you. Creating YOUR purpose will open up a world of experiences and opportunities for you that will echo through your social work career, wherever it may take you! Be bold. Be brave. Take the lead.

Next edition, we explore how to cultivate YOUR purpose, with tips on how to ensure that you remain connected to WHY you are a social worker and be proactive and intentional about HOW you do this. You'll be challenged to feed your passions, nurture your interests, and develop ongoing strategies to fulfill your potential. And fulfilling your potential is always a good thing!

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