

Creating YOUR Social Work Career, Phase 4: Cultivating Your Purpose

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Editor's Note: This is the fourth (and final) installment 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 have shared these ideas with readers of The New Social Worker. We will be discussing this article in a live online chat on February 15. {mosgoogle right}

Welcome back to the final column dedicated to exploring what's on your social work horizon. Our previous three columns invited you to clarify your unique purpose, understand the purpose of social work, and to use the insights you gained to begin to create your purpose. We hope that in reading through the articles and in trying out some of the exercises, you have increased your confidence in relation to how you go about seeking out the career you want. Our message should be really clear by now—you are in charge!

The final phase, and the topic of this column, explores how to cultivate your purpose and includes tips on how to ensure that you remain connected to WHY you are a social worker. Keeping yourself grounded in this knowledge will provide you with a way to continue to be motivated and inspired and assist you to grow a career that resonates deeply with who you are. You'll be challenged to feed your passions, nurture your interests, and develop ongoing strategies to fulfill your potential. Let's get started!

Let's imagine that all that reflecting and clarifying, seeking and connecting has paid off, and you have found yourself work that fits well with who you are and what you want to achieve. Well done! We knew you could do it. What now? Is that it? Will you live happily ever after sheltered in the warm glow of a job that meets your needs? Well...we don't mean to bring you down, but chances are if you breathe a sigh of relief and think your career is now sorted...think again! Like anything in life, things change. We change. When we change, our career needs change. This is a good thing! If our purpose is to choose work that resonates with who we are, we will need to regularly review and reflect, to ensure that our careers grow alongside us. Just like spring cleaning, New Year's resolutions, or end of year reviews, our careers need a regular injection of reflecting and re-setting our goals, to keep them fresh and challenging. Whether it's a monthly, twice yearly, or annual review, ask yourself the following questions:

What have I achieved?
 What goals have I not yet reached?
 Do I want to let go of or re-fashion any of my previous goals?
 What new goals or experiences interest me?
 What do I want from the next year?

Answering the above questions will give you a mechanism for re-evaluating your career needs and allow you some time to build new visions for your future. There are lots of great Web sites that help with goal setting, and all of them make the following point really clear—WRITE IT DOWN. There seems to be something in the process of turning your daydreams into concrete words on a page that increases the likelihood of your actually working toward those goals! You might like to consider designating a journal to just this purpose. It can be fascinating reading down the track, as you chart your progress!

While a regular review is essential, that's not the full story when it comes to cultivating your career. There are many things you can do to make your experiences brighter and more meaningful. Our number one tip for breathing life into your career is the importance of the Power of Association. Yes, it deserves the capital letters! We can't underestimate the value of seeking out and associating with inspiring, uplifting, and encouraging people. By joining with other social workers or like-minded professionals, we can find ways to celebrate and be proud of who we are.

Let's imagine the following scenario—it's late, it's cold, it's raining, and you've just worked a grueling shift. It also happens to be World Social Work Day, and there's an event to get together and celebrate. You know you should go, but well...you're tired and the thought of your couch and the TV is very appealing. You know what we're going to say, don't you? Yep...go!!!

We speak with many social workers in our roles and without a doubt, the ones who are energized and motivated by their work are the ones who are a part of a network. They have a sense of belonging. They feel a part of something bigger than their particular job in their particular field of practice. Being a part of a supportive and positive professional network is the number one thing you can do to enhance your experience of enjoying your profession. Note, we said positive—if you're associating with people who spend their network meetings or monthly catch-ups moaning and groaning about how horrendous and depressing everything is, perhaps you want to find some alternative groups. The power of association is two-fold. If you associate with negativity, chances are you'll be negative; associate with positive, uplifting, supportive, and encouraging people, and well, you can work it out!

If there's nothing in your area to be a part of, make use of the wonderful social work resources on the Internet to find others, or consider starting something yourself. One social work new grad we know of was feeling isolated being the only social worker in the emergency department of the hospital she worked in. She decided to reach out and create the support she needed, so she contacted all of the other hospitals in her city and established a "Social Workers in Emergency" group. We're not worried about her career at all, because she knows that making the effort

will enhance her experiences of her career. What can you be a part of?

Another tip for cultivating your career is to make a commitment to lifelong learning. Our social work degrees have provided us with a ticket into the profession, but if we want to keep ourselves motivated and excited about our careers, we need to keep learning. One of the foundation ways to do this is to seek out and proactively engage in professional supervision. In our work, we have learned that social workers who have regular supervision are more likely to be satisfied with their careers, and if they're not, they have a mechanism for working toward improving them. Supervision ensures that we can continue to grow and develop as social workers.

Lifelong learning can also be realized through continuing professional education. Many organizations and professional associations offer regular courses and events on particular topics of interest. Is there a new skill you'd like to acquire? Would you like to build your knowledge of a new field of practice?

The benefits of attending these sorts of courses and events are two-fold. Not only do you gain new skills and knowledge, but you also connect with new people who may just become important parts of your social work community. Further study is another great way to keep yourself moving forward. Remember how challenged you felt at the university? That feeling of being on the very cutting edge of developments in social work is available to you anytime in the form of post-graduate study. Challenge yourself by learning something new!

Don't have a lot of time? We don't know how many times we've said this...but thank goodness for the Internet!! It's packed full of articles, blogs, forums, chat rooms, organizations, and inspiring people, all of which provide you a tangible way to cultivate your career interests. Reach out, there's always someone there!

Finally, we want to give you some really great news. There's a simple, convenient, and foolproof way to ensure that your experience of your career continues to be a positive one, providing you with ample opportunities to grow and thrive. It's also totally in your control and completely free. It's your ATTITUDE. And it definitely deserves all capitals!

Your thoughts create your reality. If your attitude is not leading to the experiences you want, be proactive and change it. We all need to step up and take responsibility for the direction our careers take. At one time or another, many of us assume a role of powerlessness, blaming a bunch of circumstances for the reasons we can't get where we want to go. Telling ourselves that it's our boss's fault, the industry is to blame, or that we don't have the right skills or qualifications will not help us become all that we can be. Rather than waiting for the perfect set of circumstances to come your way, why not put yourself in the driver's seat of your own life and choose your attitude? Rather than get stuck in a negative thought pattern, think about what you can do to turn it around. As Maya Angelou wrote, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

By following the tips above, you will ensure that your career keeps pace with your changing needs. It's not difficult, but it takes commitment and requires ongoing action and attention. Given that we all wish for meaningful work that enriches our lives and adds value to our daily experiences, it's well worth the effort!

That brings to a close our four-part "Creating YOUR Social Work Career" series. Where to from here? We encourage you to use this framework as a tool that you can revisit over and over again to reconnect with and build upon your "bigger picture" purpose. Our message challenges you to be proactive, take control, and create the life you really want. Dream big and believe in yourself! It makes a world of difference.

Find parts 1-3 of Lyndal and Amanda's career series here:

Part 1: Clarify Your Purpose

http://www.socialworker.com/home/Feature_Articles/Professional_Development_%26_Advancement/Creating_YOUR_Social_Work_Career%3A_Clarify_Your_Purpose/

Part 2: Understanding the Purpose of Social Work

http://www.socialworker.com/home/Feature_Articles/Professional_Development_%26_Advancement/Creating_YOUR_Social_Work_Career%3A_Understanding_the_Purpose_of_Social_Work/

Part 3: Creating Your Purpose

http://www.socialworker.com/home/Feature_Articles/Professional_Development_%26_Advancement/Creating_YOUR_Social_Work_Career%3A_Creating_Your_Purpose/

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