

Introduction

Are you new to the field of social work? Or are you an experienced social worker thinking about changing your specialization? Are you hoping to take that next step into leadership? Or perhaps you are returning to work after a long absence? Wherever you are in your journey, let this book be your guide to a rewarding social work career.

You are reading this book because you want to have a job that is fulfilling and meaningful to you. You are reading this book to find direction and practical tips for your job search. You are reading this book because you want to be strategic about your career journey. You are reading this book because you want to maximize your impact on the clients and communities you serve. You are reading this book because you are an *agent of change*, both personally and professionally. So, jump in, read, and explore!

Social workers are often referred to as agents of change because they join the social work profession with the intention of making the world a better place, to effect change in improving the lives of vulnerable people at the individual, community, and systems levels. Social workers are committed to social justice and to challenging social injustice. Agents of change identify the need for change, advocate for change, and are the catalysts of change.

We think the following definition captures the essence of an agent of change that describes both a social worker and a successful job searcher.

An agent of change is someone who sees a problem in their community, large or small, and does something to take action for substantial change. This person is someone who listens to the people in the community where the issue exists and makes sure that they truly understand the root of the problem before implementing a new idea. This person is someone who is willing to take risks and doesn't always claim to know the answer. They are willing to ask hard questions and help find creative solutions. An agent of change has the courage to think outside the box and makes an impact that is greater than themselves. (Jennifer Ciok, Education Pioneers, quoted in Escalante, 2023, para. 3)

As seasoned career advisors, we are firm believers that everyone should be actively engaged in the management of their careers. Throughout this book, you will

find many parallels between an agent of change and a successful job seeker. In fact, the characteristics of agents of change—assessment, informed decision making, taking action, relationship building, risk-taking, and creativity—are critical in managing your career so that it is rewarding, impactful, and sustaining over a lifetime. This book is written to give you the tools to be a successful agent of change in your career. We encourage you to embrace change and self-advocacy and use this book as a road map to building your legacy.

Why is considering your legacy important? As a social worker, you are committed to making an impact that will be remembered long after you are gone. This impact could be made up of a multitude of “career moments” throughout your life, both modest and significant achievements. A strong legacy can demonstrate the impact of social work to the broader community, including policymakers, funders, and the public. Finally, leaving a legacy can provide a sense of personal fulfillment and satisfaction, knowing that your work has had a positive impact on others and will continue to do so for years to come. We are fortunate to have chosen a career in which we can make a lasting impact nearly every single day. Imagine if we were more intentional about this journey. Imagine what your legacy could be if you mapped it out. For this reason, we have incorporated legacy as part of the career management process throughout the book.

We will start this career journey together by orienting you to the broad field of social work, providing examples of career trajectories and offering practical tips on how to manage your career in social work with intention. We then provide self-assessment tools that will help you determine your best fit in the field based on your current interests and experience. This information will, in turn, help you determine the career direction that will play to your strengths and interests and provide professional fulfillment along the way.

After you identify the next steps in your career path, this book will help you create the tools and strategies to reach your destination through effective branding and networking, including writing your resume and making online and in-person connections. We will provide guidance on your job search, including the application and interview process. We will help you effectively negotiate and evaluate job offers to ensure they meet your needs both personally and professionally. Finally, we will discuss strategies for mid- to late-stage social work career development and provide a framework for maximizing opportunities.

CHAPTER 1: A ROAD MAP TO THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK

Social work is a broad field with diverse career paths. In this chapter, we will discuss the depth and breadth of this profession including the roles and settings that social workers can pursue and the populations they can work with. We will define and give examples of micro, mezzo, and macro social work careers both domestically and internationally. We will include examples of job postings, key skills, and various case studies spanning different stages of a social work career from entry level through seasoned professional.

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL WORK CAREER PLANNING FOR ADVANCEMENT AND FULFILLMENT

This chapter will present a career trajectory model of the Professional Development Cycle of Social Workers (PDCSW), which will provide you with insight into the typical career path of a social worker. From there, we will provide strategic tips on how to advance your career, by either moving forward on your current path or stepping back to gain additional skills. This process also identifies crucial opportunities to enhance your expertise, increase your visibility, and maximize your career prospects. By applying suggested tips and tailoring them to your career trajectory, you will set a path toward your dream job, career fulfillment, and, ultimately, your legacy.

CHAPTER 3: ASSESSING NEED AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: DETERMINE YOUR CAREER DIRECTION

In this chapter, self-assessment is discussed as a critical component of informed career decision making. We will provide definitions, samples, and strategies for gathering information about your skills, qualities, priorities, and knowledge based on self-awareness and reflection on past experiences. Through several exercises, you will gain a better sense of what you would like to do, what skills you have, and what type of organization you find most rewarding. Using this information as a framework, we will share tips on how to identify career opportunities through research and informational interviewing.

CHAPTER 4: CREATING YOUR BRAND IDENTITY AS A SOCIAL WORK AGENT OF CHANGE

Building on the information you have gained through assessments and research discussed in chapters 2 and 3, chapter 4 will help you identify career-defining moments, themes of your work, and “power words” to create an appealing professional brand. You will learn how to create a persuasive bio statement, professional summary, and “elevator pitch” through exercises and samples.

CHAPTER 5: YOUR RESUME, COVER LETTERS, LINKEDIN PROFILE, AND OTHER JOB SEARCH MATERIALS

Creating winning applications—including customized resumes, cover letters, and your LinkedIn profile—is critical to your successful job search. This chapter will outline the essential items you will need to showcase your skills and experience through your application materials. We will show you how to create a resume and cover letter that

stand out in a variety of job search scenarios. We also guide the reader on creating an engaging and welcoming online presence.

CHAPTER 6: IMPLEMENTING YOUR JOB SEARCH PLAN

This chapter will take you through the major steps of the job search, including identifying job opportunities, effectively networking, and creating a winning job application. We provide extensive information on how to prepare for and deliver a successful job interview, including sample responses and interviewer questions that will impress any potential employer.

CHAPTER 7: EVALUATING AND NEGOTIATING JOB OFFERS

You got an offer! Now is the time when all your hard work and strategizing will pay off. This chapter will help you to evaluate employment opportunities, such as deciding whether the job offer aligns with your career goals, assessing the organizational culture of your potential new employer, and reviewing the compensation package. Once you accept your job offer, a smooth transition to your new position is key. We will discuss the process of onboarding and strategies for early success in your new position.

CHAPTER 8: MAPPING YOUR LEGACY AS A SOCIAL WORK AGENT OF CHANGE

Career development does not end when you get the job. Rather, social work is a career of lifelong learning and development. Successful social workers make a commitment to maximize impact or create legacy by sharing their expertise, continuing their education, seeking professional advancement opportunities, and professional networking. This chapter will cover the career management challenges and opportunities that arise over the course of a typical social work career. As we embark on our journey in social work, we must remember that our career is not confined to a single role but is a lifelong dedication to growth and service. Our commitment to making a difference will ripple through the lives we touch, carving out a legacy that extends far beyond ourselves. As we navigate the challenges and opportunities of our careers, we strive to build a legacy that inspires future generations of social workers to continue the pursuit of positive change and empowerment in the individuals, organizations, and communities we serve.

Throughout the book are useful tools for every stage of your career journey, including action plans, takeaways, case studies, and exercises. Appendices provide useful references, including inventories of skills by function, sample resumes and branding statements, and a guide to creating a personal budget to assist with salary

negotiations. This book is not intended to be read from cover to cover and then put back on the shelf. It is meant to be an interactive reference that social workers can employ at any time in their career. We encourage you to take notes in the margins, highlight tips that speak to you, flag inspiring pages, and underline thought-provoking advice. Let us begin this exciting journey!