
Social Work Job Search Strategies

Adapted by the National Association of Social Workers - New Jersey Chapter¹

200 Metroplex Drive, Suite 404, Edison, New Jersey 08817
Phone: (732) 248-1590 or Toll Free in NJ (800) 932-2565

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Social Work Job Search Strategies

Introduction

This document is designed to guide and assist social workers who are either beginning or considering beginning a job search. Our goal is to provide you an overview of effective strategies that will facilitate a social work job search whether it is your first or final search. This is not intended to be a comprehensive guide; you can find additional job search books and materials at your local library, bookstores and online.

This document briefly addresses topics such as preparing for the job search, researching salaries, preparing for interviews, overcoming common obstacles, creating a viable plan of action, the importance of networking, and the use of websites and other resources.

Whatever the reasons for your current job search, we advise you to create a plan and implement it in a consistent and dedicated manner. While a job search can be challenging, the reward of finding just the right match (i.e., your “dream” job) is well worth the time and effort. This is especially true when you consider how many hours a week are spent on the job. So when job hunting, it is important to look for a job that is both enjoyable and that lends itself to your career goals.

Each of you reading this document brings with you your own set of unique qualifications, expertise, experiences and career goals. Consequently, this document covers many key factors related to job searching. All readers are encouraged to determine the areas of job search where you may need additional help and to use the websites and resources listed in this and other documents to do further research and study.

For additional information regarding social work job search resources, such as job openings, interview tips, resume building, and career coaching opportunities, etc., visit NASW JobLink: The Social Work Career Center at <http://careers.socialworkers.org>.

The Social Work Career Center

The following information can be viewed at the NASW JobLink website at <http://careers.socialworkers.org>.

- *Exploring Social Work as a Profession*
- *Loan Forgiveness Resources for Social Work Education*
- *Social Work Job Search Strategies*
- *Social Work Job Search Resources*

NASW-NJ also lists Social Work job opportunities in the Classifieds section on the NASW-NJ website (www.naswnj.org); in New Jersey FOCUS, our Chapter’s bi-monthly Newsletter; and in newSWire, our weekly electronic newsletter.

Job Search Time Frames

It is important to be realistic about the time it may take to find your perfect job. As with most processes, it varies from individual to individual, is influenced by numerous factors, and tends to take more time and effort than you might expect.

With that said, the *average job search time frame* is 3-6 months; however, it can take as few as two months or as long as 12 months depending on your experience, qualifications, interviewing skills, professional and personal connections, motivation, dedication to job search activities, job goal, salary requirements, geographic location, etc.

A few of the factors (but not all) that impact the amount of time a job search requires are outlined in greater detail below:

Geographic Location

Clearly, the larger the city, the more jobs located there; however, this generally means more competition, not to mention a higher cost of living. Prior to implementing a job search, it is important to find out about the number and type of available social work jobs, the median salary range for these jobs and general economic trends for that city and state. This is especially important if you are considering moving to another city or state.

Time of Year

Generally speaking, more jobs are advertised from January through April than during the summer months of May through August. The job market may pick up again in September and October but generally slows down a great deal from November 15 through January 10 (often referred to as the "holiday" season).

Professional Experience and Salary Requirements

If you have an advanced degree, 20+ years of professional experience and are looking for an annual salary of \$60,000 or more, it may take longer than 3-6 months to find that perfect match. Likewise, if you are changing from one field to another (e.g. from child welfare to medical social work) you may also find that it will take longer than the average period of time to find the right job.

Areas of Specialty and Special Skills

National Labor Trends

Researching the demographic and labor market trends can reveal much about those areas of practice that may have more job opportunities. For example, in 2008 the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos060.htm>) issued a report indicating the employment of child, family and school social workers was expected to grow by 19 percent. This rate is faster than the average growth rate for all occupations. Additional growth in the social work profession can be attributed to the growing elderly population, which is expected to create greater demand for senior health and social services, resulting in particularly rapid job growth among gerontology social workers.

State Labor Trends

According to a report released in June 2008 by the NJ Department of Workforce and Labor (http://wd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/lpa/employ/indoccpj/st_index.html), total job growth in the Health Care & Social Assistance sector (which includes social workers) is projected to increase by 21% during the 10-year period from 2006-2016, primarily in social assistance and ambulatory care services.

During this same 10-year period, it is projected that Social Assistance jobs in NJ will see an increase of almost 25,000 jobs (34%), Nursing and Residential Care facilities jobs are expected to increase by over 19,000 jobs (24%), and home health care service jobs are projected to increase by 13,000 jobs (46%). Counselors, Social Workers, and Other Community and Social Service jobs are projected to increase by almost 11,000 jobs (18%).

Due to the diversity of our state's population, those who represent minority groups and/or who are multilingual may find more job opportunities available to them.

Time Dedicated to Job Search

According to most job search experts, if you are unemployed, you should treat your job search like a full time job. That means that on average you should be prepared to dedicate *at least* 20-25 hours per week to your job search activities, including but not limited to: searching help wanted ads in

newspapers and online, networking and attending professional events, writing cover letters and thank you letters, and attending interviews.

If you are employed full-time, it is important to dedicate at least 6-10 hours per week on average to your job search activities. The key to any successful job search is creating a plan and sticking to it. Job searching is an activity that requires self-motivation and the ability to be pro-active. Stay focused on your desired outcome.

Professional and Personal Connections

The job search will be generally easier and quicker for you if you are well known and have a variety of professional and community connections. Networking will increase your access to information about jobs and likely connect you to people who may have a valuable “in” to your area of practice. It is true that “who you know” is important and this can be used to one’s advantage during a job search.

Ability to Market Yourself

The ability to appropriately market and sell your self is important in a job search. This includes being able to create dynamic cover letters and resumes that result in interviews, to perform well during interview situations, and to take advantage of networking opportunities in a manner that is professional and appropriate. All of these skills require self-awareness, foresight, and practice.

Preparing for the Job Search

Aside from setting realistic goals for the time it may take to find the right match and the number of hours required each week to implement job search activities, you must prepare for the job search by developing the following:

Cover Letters

A cover letter must be easily customized to summarize your education, experience, skills and accomplishments specific to each job announcement and to the sponsoring organization or company.

Resumes

A resume must effectively promote your skills, expertise, experience and accomplishments while being easily customized to fit the requirements of each job announcement.

References

You should prepare a list of at four professional references that can easily highlight and expand on your qualifications and accomplishments in specific work environments. You may also want to prepare extra references that are specific to certain settings and alternate the references you provide based on the type of job. For instance, if you were applying for a social work research or policy job, it would be useful to include a research professor or colleague in your references, rather than providing 3 clinicians as references.

It is crucial that you brief your references before providing their names to employers. Do not list an individual as a reference without first asking his or her permission. You should also provide all of your references with a current resume and a few key selling or “talking” points about your skills and abilities. It is also useful to let your references know when you’ve actually given their name to a potential employer so they know to expect the call.

Job Search Plan

A job search plan will include activities such as researching labor market trends and salaries, participating in networking activities, searching job listings, researching and applying for positions, researching and preparing for interviews, and writing thank you notes. An example of a job search plan and one-week calendar of scheduled activities is provided later in the document.

The NASW Center for Workforce Studies (<http://workforce.socialworkers.org/>) may be useful to you when researching career trends. The website includes nationwide information on workforce data and demographics, salary and employment trends.

Networking Plan

A networking plan will include a variety of activities that allows you to meet and inform others about your qualifications and desired job goal. There are numerous books on the subject and the key is to find strategies that will be appropriate, comfortable and successful for you as an individual.

A networking plan might include emailing a resume to professional and personal acquaintances along with a short note explaining the type of job one is seeking. Another example would be to attend meetings, events, conferences, etc. and be prepared to share a 1-minute summary of your experience and job goal with those you meet.

It is important to point out that talking about the difficulties one encounters in the job search is not appropriate conversation at a networking function. The best strategy is to always be positive, enthusiastic and concise about what it is that you offer as an employee.

An example of a networking plan and related activities is provided later in the document

List of Job Search Related Websites

It is important to create a list of job search websites that are specific to your job goal and user friendly i.e., one that is efficient and easy to revise and use. While some job search websites offer jobs related to all professions, there are many that are very specific to social work.

For example, while websites such as monster.com and careerbuilder.com list jobs for all occupations including social work, there are many websites dedicated solely to social work and social services jobs such as NASW JobLink (<http://www.socialworkers.org/joblink/default.asp#>) and the NASW-NJ Social Work Classifieds found at www.naswnj.org.

Additionally, specific Social Work job listings can be found at the following websites:

Allied Health Careers.com - <http://www.alliedhealthcareers.com/>
American Public Human Service Association - <http://www.aphsa.org/Job/SearchJob.asp>
Clinical Social Work Association - <http://www.associationsites.com/page.cfm?usr=cswa&pageid=3664>
Council on Social Work Education - http://careers.cswe.org/home/index.cfm?site_id=392
Idealist - <http://idealist.org/>
iHire Social Services - <http://www.ihiresocialservices.com/>
Non-Profit Oyster - http://careers.nonprofitoyster.com/c/search.cfm?site_id=78
Opportunity Knocks - <http://www.opportunityknocks.org/JobseekerX/>
Social Service.com - <http://socialservice.com>
Social Work Job Bank- <http://www.socialworkjobbank.com/>

Copies of Important Documents

It is important to be prepared with copies of university transcripts; copies of professional credentials, licenses, and certificates; recent letters of recommendation, and professional writing samples. Depending on the job and the organization, some or all of these may be required.

Access to Computer and Email

Given that 90% or more of job opportunities are now advertised on the Internet and that the sponsoring organization or company generally requires an application, cover letter and resume to be submitted via email, it is critical not only to have access to a computer and a valid (and professional sounding) email address but also to be computer literate.

For Example, NASW members are able to create an online professional profile, upload their resume, create job agents, as well as apply and manage their applications to jobs through the use of the NASW JOBLINK Website at <http://careers.socialworkers.org>.

There are books dedicated to how to manage a job search utilizing the Internet to post resumes, find jobs, research salaries, labor market trends, network through innovative email messages, apply to jobs, etc. Check your local library or bookstore for more information.

Identifying and Overcoming Obstacles

Whenever you set a goal there are usually obstacles to identify and overcome. The job search is no exception. For example, some job seekers have difficulties when it comes to performing well in interviews while others may not feel comfortable networking and “marketing” themselves.

It is important to identify your potential obstacles and create strategies that will help you overcome them prior to implementing your job search. Interestingly, social workers are sometimes hesitant to ask for help yet job searching isn’t a skill that is often taught in school and usually requires one to learn and practice new skills to be successful.

Common Obstacles and Strategies for Overcoming Them

1. *Obstacle: Creating well-written customized cover letters and resumes that effectively market and sell your education, skills, experience and accomplishments, (i.e. documents that result in interviews).*

Many job seekers have difficulty creating well written, effective, dynamic and concise cover letters and resumes that effectively promote their qualifications. If you are experiencing this problem, it would be wise to consult with a job search expert or obtain help through other avenues.

There is a wide selection of books and online resources specific to writing cover letters and resumes. One suggestion is to spend a couple of afternoons in a local bookstore or library reviewing such books. Another suggestion is to have several other professionals (friends, colleagues, or references) review your cover letters and resumes and provide comments and suggestions.

A frequent error made by job seekers is that they fail to take the time to customize each and every cover letter and resume for each specific job announcement and sponsoring organization. This mistake significantly decreases the chances of obtaining an interview, especially when one is faced with a very competitive market. Remember that depending on the job and geographic location, you may be one of several hundred applicants.

Lastly, while this may seem too simple, the fact is that employers and recruiters constantly complain about grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes in the cover letters, resumes and applications they receive. Understandably, when you are creating up to 3-6 sets of applications and customized documents per week, there is definitely room for error. It is critical, therefore, that before any communication is sent to employers (emails, attachments, cover letters, applications, resumes, thank you cards, envelope labels, etc.) it be checked twice for errors. All word processing programs have spell checkers and grammar checkers that may catch obvious mistakes, but nothing can replace a human editorial eye.

2. *Obstacle: Networking in a manner that is professional, appropriate and optimizes the number of people who are aware of your qualifications and the job search goal.*

Like anything else, networking is a skill that can be honed and developed. Networking may be difficult for you if you are an introvert, have moved to a new geographic area, or are new to the social work profession. However, it can still be done in a manner that will support and assist your job search.

One job seeker (an introvert and new to social work) chose to send an eye catching greeting card to everyone she knew. This card included a short note explaining her recent MSW degree and move into a new career as a case manager in a medical setting. Of course, she included a resume that supported her goal. She also attended at least three networking functions a month and was prepared with business cards that highlighted her qualifications, job goal, and contact information.

Professional associations like NASW generally hold monthly meetings, events and conferences that can be great networking opportunities. Of course, it is important to attend those meetings and events that are most in alignment with your job goal.

Be open to going new places and meeting new people. The key is to be creative, flexible and understand that networking is an effective and valuable job search strategy for everyone.

3. *Obstacle: Preparing sufficiently so that you are successful during interviews.*

Preparing for interviews includes researching the organization and reviewing potential interview questions so that you are well prepared to answer in a manner that demonstrates and highlights your qualifications.

One of the most frequently asked interview questions is, "What do you know about our organization?" Another is, "Why do you want to work for this organization?" Researching the organization and knowing about its vision, mission, goals, programs and services is paramount in being able to answer questions and demonstrate you are the right person for the job.

Interviewing takes skill, practice and preparation. Once again, there are numerous articles and books and online resources regarding interview questions and skills. Job seekers are well advised to read about (a) common interview questions, which have changed over the years and (b) how to best answer these questions.

Many of the questions are behavior specific, for example, "Describe a situation in which you disagreed with your supervisor regarding a policy that you had to implement and how you handled it?" Another example would be, "Describe a time when you failed to meet a goal and how you dealt with it?"

One of the most effective strategies is to have someone video tape you in a "mock interview." This will provide you with a wealth of information regarding important but often overlooked factors such as your facial expressions, eye contact, body mannerisms, verbal habits (long pauses, repeating words or phrases, etc.) and overall appearance of confidence and calmness. Keep in mind that for a few lucky individuals, interviewing skills may come fairly naturally, but for most of us, it is something that requires new skills acquired through study and practice.

4. *Obstacle: Developing support systems and strategies for handling the rejection that is inherent in any job search.*

Especially if one is unemployed, it is advisable and helpful to have one or more support systems in place. Given that the average job search takes 3-6 months, those who are unemployed often deal with feelings of rejection and isolation. Even under the best of circumstances, job search can be challenging and it is easy to become discouraged.

Sharing one's experiences and challenges with family, friends, colleagues and other job seekers can provide much needed support. Another strategy is to start or join a support group for job seekers. For example, The Workforce New Jersey Public Information Network (WNJPIN) offers a Professional Service Group (PSG) that acts as a self-help group that connects professionals with other professionals to find new jobs. WNJPIN also provides One-Stop Career Centers throughout New Jersey that are staffed with qualified professionals who assist job seekers in obtaining employment or the necessary training to meet the demands of the present workforce.

For those who are employed full-time and looking for another job, it is often difficult to consistently dedicate 6-10 hours per week to the job search. Setting goals and having a support system that helps to keep you accountable can be very helpful. For example, setting the goal of applying to at least two to four jobs a week and having to report weekly to someone else on whether you've accomplished the goal or not, may be one way to support your search.

Creating a Viable Job Search Plan

Once you are assured that everything is in place and that you are ready to implement your job search strategies, it is a good idea to actually sit down and sketch out the following:

1. *Determine how many hours will be dedicated to job search activities per week and when these hours will be scheduled into your weekly calendar.*

Just as with exercise, studying and other activities, you need to make a commitment to your job search, setting aside specific timeframes, and holding yourself accountable. Set specific goals such as dedicating 20 hours per week to job search activities with measurable outcomes such as applying for 2-5 positions per week and being invited to 3-6 interviews per month.

2. *Develop a list of job search activities that includes specific networking activities, a list of job search websites and a list of other job search listings and resources, such as professional newspapers and journals.*

Creating a list of websites can be done by bookmarking the website, saving it in the "Favorites" file or creating a list in a Word document. One job seeker created a list of websites in a Word document and grouped them by how often she visited the websites. This was efficient for her because all websites were located in one document, which was easily accessed and revised.

Another source for job listings, meetings, events and conferences is professional associations. For a comprehensive list of social work and related professional associations, visit http://healthlinks.washington.edu/social_work/associations/. Joining and becoming active in professional associations can build professional competence and expertise, build and expand connections and provide multiple networking opportunities.

Once again, it is worth repeating, you must be creative, flexible and committed to developing a set of strategies that works best for your personality and particular employment goal. The key to effective networking is finding and applying the very best strategies that work for you.

3. *Treat the job search as if it were a job. An important job.*

Considering the average amount of time that is spent at work (statistics indicate that today's full-time jobs require more than 40 hours per week) and the importance of holding a job you enjoy, it makes sense to commit your time, energy and resources to the process.

Also, if you are currently unemployed, don't allow unemployment to cause you to forgo your structures and routines. It is important to create and maintain a schedule, both for the success of your job search and your personal mood and well-being. For the unemployed, searching for a job should be just like going to work. Get up in the morning, exercise, shower, read the newspaper or

whatever works for you. And then when its 9am “report to work.” Go to your desk or the library, log into the computer and begin searching job listings, working on your resume, and writing cover letters. Sleeping all day or staying home in your pajamas may seem like a luxury at first, but eventually these habits will erode your mood and motivation and undermine your ability to conduct a successful job search.

Keys to Setting Job Search Goals

Job Titles

Sometimes it may be difficult to target a job specifically by the job title. In this case, it is advisable to clearly define your expertise and interests. For example if your expertise is in employment and training and workforce issues, there might not be just one job title that fits your search criteria. Consequently focusing on the areas of expertise may be more productive on business cards and when networking. You must be able to communicate clearly and concisely what you wish to do.

Job Location

While some job seekers are flexible and open to many geographic locations, it is advisable to define one to three top geographic locations as your priority. As with many things in life, setting priorities and focusing on one priority at a time tends to render more results. Job search can be challenging and time consuming even with a defined job goal in one geographic location (for example, a school social worker in Northern New Jersey).

Performing a job search across several states or even for three or more cities can quickly become overwhelming. Although it surprises many, job seekers who are most specific about their skills, accomplishments, expertise, job goal and desired geographic location are frequently more successful than those who are open to “doing anything.”

Professional Accomplishments

While most job seekers tend to focus on their professional experience, education, and skills, it is just as important, if not more so, to be able to delineate your professional accomplishments.

*Example of **Expertise***

- Clinical Social Worker in Gerontology (CSW-G) NASW Certificate

*Example of **Experience***

- Served as a case manager in adult protective services for 5 years with Middlesex County

*Example of **Skill***

- Speak, read and write Spanish and familiar with cultural issues for those from Central America.

*Examples of **Accomplishments***

- Invited to be the keynote speaker at the American Society on Aging Annual Conference 2005.
- Promoted to section supervisor after only six months due to demonstrated leadership skills.
- Created an innovative and dynamic orientation and training for new employees and interns.

Sample Job Search Plan

Job Seeker: 56 yr-old, recently moved to Piscataway, New Jersey

Qualifications: MSW, 20-yrs of professional experience, 10-yrs as a manager

Job Goal: Manager within an adult out-patient mental health setting

Location: Middlesex County

Hours per week: 24 or more hours per week dedicated to job search activities

Measurable outcomes:

- (1) Visit 25 job listings (websites, journals, newspapers) per week
- (2) Apply to 2-3 positions per week
- (3) Obtain 4 interviews per month
- (4) Create a *Networking Plan* with specific strategies and timeframes
- (5) Attend 4-6 networking events per month
- (6) Make at least 5-10 networking calls per week
- (7) Join and become active in the Social Work Managers Association
- (8) Switch NASW membership from PA to NJ to receive newsletter, etc.
- (9) Attend the local NASW Middlesex/Union Unit meeting once a month
- (10) Research social work salaries in Central New Jersey during the next 30-days
- (11) Research books on salary negotiation within the next 30-days
- (12) Chat with a selected non-professional “coach” by phone once a week
- (13) Attend at least 1 social work conference in the next 60-90 days
- (14) Explore volunteer work a few hours a week in mental health setting

Sample of a week’s job search activities

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8am-12pm	2pm-6pm	8am-12pm	9am-1pm	2pm-6pm	10am-12pm	7:30-9:30pm
Job Search Activities	Job Search Activities	Networking Activities	Networking Activities	3pm Interview*	Research and Reading	Chat with Mentor
Websites, Journals, Newspapers	2pm Job Club*	Interview Preparation	Job Search Activities	Thank you notes	Job Search Activities	Research negotiating salaries
15	16	17	18	19	20	21

Sample Networking Plan

Job Seeker:	28 yr-old who lives in Newark area
Qualifications:	Recent MSW graduate with experience as a case manager and some volunteer experience in a hospital setting
Job Goal:	Social work case manager within medical setting
Location:	Essex County

1. Create a list of all friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances and determine which individuals will be called, emailed or mailed.

If emailed or mailed, one could create a brief note similar to the sample note (below) outlining one's qualifications and job goal along with a resume. This job seeker could create an innovative and appropriate "greeting card" with graduation photo that might draw attention and be more impressive than a simple note. Being innovative and creative is a plus when networking and promoting one's qualifications and job goal.

Sample Note

As you may be aware, I recently received my Master's in Social Work and am now ready to move into a social work case manager position in a medical setting here in the Newark area. My recent MSW along with two years of case management and volunteer experience at a local hospital makes me the perfect candidate. Please keep me in mind should you hear of a position or know of someone who might have an interest in my attached resume. I'm excited about starting my new career and am very appreciative of any assistance that you may be able to provide.

Name
Phone number
Email address

2. Attend 4-6 social work functions or volunteer with organizations or agencies where there are networking opportunities.

Sample of Networking Activities

- Join the NASW-New Jersey Chapter and attend the monthly Unit meetings to network with other social workers and, at each meeting, pass out at least five business cards highlighting qualifications, job search goal and contact information.

Clarification

The NASW-NJ Chapter is divided into 11 geographic units so that social workers can attend local events and meetings. Visit www.naswnj.org under the "About Us- Units" tab to view these units, click the "Calendar" tab to locate their monthly related events.

NASW-NJ also has many Special Interest Groups (SIGs) that bring social workers together in an organized way to advocate, educate, disseminate information, connect people with resources, and promote social action on behalf of clients, themselves, and others. These groups include Addictions; Aging; Children & Adolescents; Corrections; Disabilities; Dialogue on White Privilege; Health Care; HIV/AIDS; International Social Work; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Transgender, Intersexed; Peace; and Private Practice. Join these SIG listservs at www.naswnj.org (About Us → Special Interest Groups)

- Volunteer two times a month for the social work department at the local veteran's hospital.

Clarification

The right volunteer situation can be very helpful in networking and building connections, especially if you are new to the area or a recent graduate. The key is to choose the right organization and the right volunteer (or internship) role, one that adds to your current skills or provides new skills and allows you to work closely with other professionals.

- Over the next six-months, attend at least three social work conferences or events where there are opportunities to network such as the: (1) NASW-NJ Chapter Annual Conference, (2) The Council on Social Work Education Annual Convention, and (3) The New Jersey Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care sponsored Conference.

Clarification

Volunteering is one way to be able to attend conference and events without paying full price and yet, in most cases, have full access to networking activities. However, if the person is employed, he or she has the option of registering and attending selected networking activities.

- Each week call at least three human resource directors at targeted medical facilities to ask about social work jobs, the hiring process and suggestions they may have for someone with a recent MSW wanting to work as a case manager within medical social work.

Clarification

When calling and talking with human resources staff, always be professional, be prepared, be specific and be brief. Always ask what strategies or activities they might suggest to someone looking for a job within the field.

3. Create a "Business Card" for Networking Activities

Informal business cards can be easily created, adapted, and printed from any computer. Specially designed paper can be bought for this purpose. If done appropriately, this type of promotion is more effective and economical than handing resumes to everyone.

It is always a good idea to have someone else to look the card before printing it. More often than one might suspect, job seekers hand out cards, resumes, etc. with errors or missing key information such as the correct phone number or email address.

Sample Business Card

