

Job Search, Networking, and Interviewing Tips for Social Workers

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Also consult our guide *Resumes and Cover Letters for Social Workers*.

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Starting Your Job Search: First, Assess

Assess your skills, interests, and accomplishments. What have you enjoyed most in your courses, clinical internships, and other experiences? What impact have you had? What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Identify the populations, issues, work settings, and benefits you prefer. Think about the work culture, theory base, and supervision you want. Consider geography: A large city offers a wider range of employers than rural/suburban areas. If loan forgiveness is important, research the options and requirements in advance.

The Next Steps: Informational Interviewing and Networking

Talk with people in your target setting and geographic location. Most people enjoy discussing their work and offering advice and information to those starting out. They may suggest others to contact, thereby expanding your network. Email to arrange informational interviews or message people through LinkedIn. Conferences, trainings, and lectures can be excellent networking opportunities, too.

Networking is about building relationships. It's not appropriate to ask a networking contact for a job, but if they know of any leads, they may share them. You can tap into the unadvertised job market this way and gain information to strengthen your resume, cover letter, and interview skills.

Contact Smith alums to hear about their social work career paths and to ask their advice about getting started in the field. Join the Smith College and Smith SSW LinkedIn groups, that of your undergraduate institution, and social work professional groups such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

Don't overlook the obvious. Former supervisors and colleagues, SSW students and faculty, alums from your undergraduate school, friends, and members of professional associations such as your local NASW chapter may all be, or lead to, additional networking contacts.

Try to meet with networking contacts at their workplace so you can see the work environment, and perhaps meet their colleagues. If this isn't possible, arrange a phone appointment.

You may contact anyone whose work and organization interest you, even if you don't know them. Explain your interest in their work and career path. Be specific but brief, and try to initiate a conversation.

Networking protocol: Send an email or handwritten thank-you note within two days of your meeting.

Resources for Your Job Search

[Our website](#) has many useful resources for your search:

- [Social Work Resources](#) - job sites, licensing information, funding resources, fellowships, and more.
- [Handshake](#), a database of jobs received by the Center, searchable by field and location.
- [Career Field Links](#) - resources for non-profit, human services, government, and international fields.

[The United Way](#) website for your target location will list and link to its local funded agencies and partners.

[Idealist](#) lists non-profit sector jobs in the US and abroad—a great resource for macro-level and clinical roles.

Directories and client referral networks used during your clinical internships may be helpful.

Search online and use social media to identify potential employers. Example: “human services agencies Denver.” Look for interesting organizations, not just job postings, and people to reach out to.

Professional associations can be excellent sources of information about the social work field, job boards, and social networks. Some are listed on our website, and you’ll find others online.

Placement firms can help you locate temporary, part-time, contract, per diem (per day), or *pro re nata* (p.r.n., “whenever necessary”) opportunities until you get established in your new location.

Post-MSW Fellowships offering clinical supervision, experience, and a stipend can be an excellent way to build clinical and/or research experience and hours toward licensure. Of varying length, start date, and focus, they often have early application deadlines. A brief list appears on our website.

For a long distance job search research and contact organizations for informational interviews. Use professional associations, social media, and the websites of social work schools in your target location. Consider volunteering for appealing organizations in your free time to build your network while giving back to your community.

Career fairs can be a great “one-stop shop” to meet employers and gain confidence talking about yourself. Research your target employers and practice introducing yourself beforehand. Dress professionally, bring extra resumes, and have some good questions ready.

REMEMBER: Unlisted jobs are best discovered through networking and contacting organizations that interest you. Use a variety of tools and techniques in your search. Be proactive.

Preparing for Job Interviews

Research the organization. Study its website, written materials, and social media presence. Talk to people who work there. Learn about the client population, theory base, programs, staffing, culture, and budget constraints. Think of questions you may be asked, and some you’d like to ask.

Know the licensure requirements in the state where you’re interviewing found on the [Association of Social Work Boards](#) website. Click on “Licensees” at the top toolbar, then “Find a licensing board.”

Phone or email to clarify details about your interviewer(s) and the format of the day. You may have individual or group meetings or role playing exercises. Get directions and parking information.

Practice! The sample job interview questions on page 5 will provide an outline for your prep, but each interview will vary. Practice stating your skills and experience concisely, and prepare a case or two to discuss. Feel free to set up a mock interview at the Lazarus Center.

During the Interview

Social work training gives you many skills for effective interviewing such as the ability to communicate, listen, and read/use body language. See the Interview Skills Checklist on page 7.

Arrive a little early. Phone or email ahead for directions and parking details. Bring extra resumes.

Dress professionally. Interviewees often dress up a little more than staff. Leave the student accessories home.

A smile, firm handshake, and good eye contact will help put you and your interviewer(s) at ease. If being interviewed by more than one person, address your responses to everyone. Use body language and tone of voice to convey confidence and enthusiasm.

Speak positively about former supervisors/experiences. If you and a supervisor didn't get along you might say, "My internship helped me identify my strengths, further training I need, and the supervisory style I prefer."

Practice talking about one or two specific cases that demonstrate your clinical skills. Try to choose a case in which you worked with a similar population. Outline the client's background (age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) and setting; how s/he was referred; and over what time period/frequency you met. Describe their presenting and underlying issues, level of psychopathology, and related background. Detail how you approached treatment and your goals for working together. End by summarizing the progress you and the client achieved.

Be able to explain why you want to work with the *specific* organization and population. This may be briefly touched on if you're asked "Tell me about yourself." Customize your reply to this common interview opener.

Behavioral interview questions are common, for example, "How would you work with a client who came to you presenting with xxx issues?" or "Tell me about the most dysfunctional team you've been on. What was your role in addressing the team's issues?" Practice anecdotes showing how you've handled similar situations using the **STAR** technique: the **S**ituation/**T**ask you handled, **A**ctions you took, and **R**esults you achieved. We can help.

Prepare several questions for the interviewer. By the interview's end, be sure you have a clear sense of the job. Find out what the next step will be and what the decision-making timetable is.

Discuss salary/benefits AFTER an offer has been made. Research the salary range for your experience level and region by talking to people in social work. Bureau of Labor salary statistics and Glassdoor are helpful, too.

When interviewers go "out of bounds." You're not required to answer questions about your age, gender, marital/family/relationship status, religion, ethnicity, disability, politics, or sexual orientation. Most interviewers who ask about off-limits topics don't mean to be unethical, but it is important to be prepared and to decide how you'll answer these questions if they come up.

During a phone or video interview speak clearly and with energy. Arrange a quiet time and space (at the Lazarus Center, if you like). For a video interview be mindful of your surroundings and eye contact. If you must compose your thoughts, say so. If there's silence at the other end, your interviewer may be taking a few notes.

After the Interview

Send an email or handwritten thank-you note within 48 hours. If you had multiple individual interviews or met helpful staff write to them, too. For group interviews, thank the main interviewer. Reiterate your interest, and if you want to amplify an important point, you can mention it.

Follow up. If you're told you'll hear back by xxx date and hear nothing, wait several days and call or email the employer. Express your continued interest and ask when they expect to make a decision. Be patient—the hiring process usually takes longer than employers anticipate. Don't check in too often.

Stay positive and try not to take rejection personally. Remember, it's not just the employer who decides: You, too, are choosing an organization and culture to fit your needs.

When you're offered a job, it's customary to ask for some time before you accept it. Establish a reply date, and if you have any questions, ask the employer. For help with salary negotiation, meet with a career advisor.

Our career advisors are happy to discuss any aspect of your search with you during a phone/video or in-person appointment. To schedule a time, use Handshake, stop by, or call 413-585-2582 during our office hours.

Sample Questions for an Informational Interview When Networking

- What do you find most meaningful in your work? What are the frustrations?
- How does your Smith SSW training and experience relate to what you're doing now?
- Has your social work experience differed very much from what you imagined it would be? How?
- What tasks take most of your time? How many hours a week do you work? What are your working conditions?
- How much time do you devote to administrative tasks?
- What kind of lifestyle choices have you had to make? Do you work evenings or weekends?
- What advice do you have for someone entering the field? What do you wish you'd known before your first job?
- I'm interested in locating organizations with loan forgiveness options. Do you have suggestions?
- What additional training, special programs, or other experience does one need to advance and be successful?
- Tell me about the work culture at your organization. How is feedback given?
- What current issues and trends do you see in the field?
- I'm looking for strong and supportive supervision. Can you suggest where I can find it?
- Are there any organizations in the area you think would be a good fit for me given my interests in xxx?"
- How did you find your position?
- Are there other people you suggest I contact? May I use your name in contacting them?

Sample Questions Asked at Social Work Job Interviews

- Tell me about yourself/Walk me through your resume. (May have slightly different answers.)
- Why are you interested in this position? This organization?
- Tell us about your first year (or second year) internship.
- How would your supervisor describe you and your work? How would your colleagues describe you?
- What was the most difficult case you worked on and why? On reflection, what would you do differently?
- What are you looking for in a supervisor? What would you do if you and a supervisor did not agree or get along?
- Discuss a case of your choice.
- What is your theoretical orientation? What authors have been most meaningful to you in your practice? Why?
- How did you get into the social work field? Why did you choose Smith?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses? What would be most challenging for you about this position?
- Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?
- What client population is most challenging for you? Why?
- We see many clients of xxx population. What do you see as the issues of this population?
- Your training is psychodynamic and our emphasis is on CBT. Why are you interested in our approach?
- Here is a description of a client. What's your assessment and diagnosis? What treatment plan would you follow?
- How would you assess whether someone was suicidal?
- Give an example of a crisis you handled.
- What experiences prior to your placements have added to your knowledge and ability as a social worker?
- Have you ever supervised other people?
- This job involves coordinating services. Describe how you have developed relationships with other agencies.
- Tell us about a group you've facilitated.
- How much experience have you had working with people taking medication?
- Tell us about your experience with brief intervention therapy.
- What's your experience with cross-cultural treatment? How do you exemplify multi-culturalism everyday?
- Why should we hire you?

SAMPLE ALUM NETWORKING EMAIL

Dear Ms. Lassiter:

I am in my final summer at the Smith School for Social Work and will be relocating to the Chicago area after receiving my MSW this August. If it's convenient, I would enjoy meeting with you when I am on break in Chicago the week of July 8—12 to hear about your experience working with at-risk youth in the area.

I see from the Chicago Youth Services website and your LinkedIn profile that you provide outpatient mental health services to adolescents and facilitate group sessions on self-harm. This is interesting to me because I have conducted research on the increase of self-harming behaviors in college women, and I have previous background working with inner-city youth. My post-Smith goal is a clinical position centered on adolescents that offers strong supervision.

I will call you next week to see if you'll be able to meet with me during my break. If you like, feel free to email me or to connect on LinkedIn. I look forward to meeting you.

Best,

Susan Gregory

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Interview Skills Checklist

Use this checklist to assess your interview strengths and areas needing improvement. Check the column to the right of each quality which best describes the degree to which you feel you have this quality now. For each item which you checked as hard, brainstorm with a friend or advisor ways to improve. Do you need to develop it more or demonstrate it more effectively?

Quality	This is hard for me	50/50	This is easy for me
Experience with diverse populations			
Interest and ability in the field; clear, in-depth understanding of social work			
Body language, eye contact, poise, hygiene			
Personal energy, vitality			
Assertiveness (not passivity, not aggressiveness); leadership			
Able to present a clinical case articulately and with confidence			
Self-awareness; understands strengths and areas needing growth			
Perceptiveness, alertness			
Team player			
Broad range of interests and experience			
Sense of humor			
Self-confidence			
Motivation			
Independence			
Sense of audience			
Ability to handle tension and stress			
Ability to communicate effective clinical skills			
Handling inappropriate questions			
Listening skills			