



National Association of Social Workers
NASW California Chapter Web: www.naswca.org
NASW National Web: www.socialworkers.org

Social Work Job Search Strategies

This document is designed to support social workers conducting a job search. Whether it is the first or final job search, it is critical to utilize the most effective job search strategies, which have changed dramatically over the past decade. This document is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide, but a place to start. Every individual brings a unique set of qualifications, experiences, and goals to a job search; consequently, in some ways, each job search must be customized.

Social Work Associations and Organizations

Social work associations and organizations are valuable resources because they can help the job seeker to network with other like-minded professionals, learn or enhance specialized knowledge and skills, and access listings of available jobs and related resources. Only a few of the NASW benefits and resources related to job search are listed here:

NASW California Chapter Website

NASW-CA Career Website: <http://www.naswca.org/?page=156>

NASW National Career Center

The NASW National Career Center: <http://careers.socialworkers.org/>

Factors Impacting the Job Search

It is important to be realistic about how much time and effort is required to find a job in California. Like most other processes, the job search varies from individual to individual and is influenced by numerous factors, but almost always takes more time than expected. In California, the average time frame is 9 to 12 months for a professional job search. However, the job search may be shorter or longer depending on many variables, such as the job seeker's age, experience, interviewing skills, professional and personal connections, time devoted to effective job search activities, desired position and salary requirements, and geographic location. A few of these factors are outlined in greater detail here:

- **Geographic Location:** Prior to implementing a job search, it is critical to define and prioritize the desired geographic areas. Job seekers are encouraged to prioritize their top three geographic locations while keeping in mind that they must decide how far they are able or willing to travel. It is also critical to research the number and type of jobs available, the median salary range for these jobs, and general economic trends for a specific city or county. Resource: The California Labor Market Information and Career Center, www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov
- **Time of Year:** For many employers, hiring activity is lighter in some months than in others. January to April and September to October are frequently the busiest hiring times, and the summer and the end of the year may be slower.

- **Areas of Specialty and Special Skills:** Researching demographic and labor market trends can tell the job seeker a lot about which specialty areas may offer more job opportunities within a specific geographic location. Due to the diversity of the state's population, those who represent minority groups and who are bilingual are highly sought after. Job seekers must ensure that they hold the appropriate state credentials to work in specialized fields, such as substance abuse or school social work.
- **Time Dedicated to Job Search:** Generally speaking, the more time and consistency job seekers dedicate to the most effective job search activities, the sooner their search is likely to be successful. Unfortunately, many job seekers rely on strategies that are no longer viable or spend too much time participating in only one or two activities (such as applying for jobs but not actively networking). Job search experts report that if a person is unemployed, he or she needs to plan on spending 30 hours per week in job search activities.
- **Professional and Personal Connections:** The job search generally goes more quickly for those who have widespread and active professional and community connections. Generally, if a person has been working in a community for several years and is professionally well-known and respected, he or she will have more opportunities to network and have the distinct advantage of being known in the profession.
- **Ability to Market Oneself:** The ability to effectively market oneself is critical in any job search. Effective marketing includes creating customized cover letters and resumes that result in interviews, performing well during individual and group interviews, and taking advantage of every opportunity to network in a manner that results in job leads. All of these skills require self-awareness, forethought, skill, and practice. Every job seeker is encouraged to objectively evaluate his or her job search skills (networking, resume writing, self-marketing, interviewing, and so forth) and implement strategies for improvement. For example, many experts recommend that job seekers record a "mock interview" and, with a friend or colleague, review the recording to assess areas for improvement.
- **Computer and Internet Literacy:** Because the vast majority of employers generally require job seekers to apply online, it is critical to have access to a reliable computer, have a valid email address, and be computer- and Internet-savvy. Increasingly, many employers do everything by e-mail or online, including notifying the applicant of an interview and even making a job offer. Due to all of the recent changes, numerous books and web tutorials are available that show how to use the Internet to find job listings, post resumes, and network through social networking sites.

Creating a Job Search Plan

In addition to setting realistic goals for obtaining a professional position, dedicating time to job search activities, and implementing strategies for improving job search skills, it is also imperative to develop a job search plan. As with most goals, having a well-thought-out plan of action tends to make job seekers more successful. Some of the key factors in developing a job search plan include the following:

- **Perform a Self-Inventory:** Whether this is the job seeker's 1st or 15th job search, one key step is completing a thorough self-inventory of skills, abilities, expertise, and accomplishments. Job seekers need to be able to clearly communicate what makes

them unique and exactly how they can benefit the employer. For this step, *The Job-Hunter's Survival Guide* by Richard N. Bolles can be very helpful.

- **Customize Cover Letters and Resumes:** Employers are often swamped with applications and look at each cover letter and resume for no more than 10 to 30 seconds before determining if the person is a potential candidate. Resumes are used to open the door—in other words, to get the interview. A resume must effectively, concisely, and skillfully highlight one's skills, experience, and professional accomplishments as related to the specific job description and employer. Even though there are hundreds of books and articles about how to write an effective resume, many job seekers send out resumes that are poorly structured and contain errors, providing little evidence that the applicants meet even the minimum job requirements.

Increasingly, resumes are first "read" by a computerized algorithm that scores them on how well they match with the listed job requirements. Only those resumes that achieve high scores are passed on to a human recruiter or hiring manager. For this reason, it is increasingly important for job seekers to customize their resumes by using keywords that match those listed in the job posting.

In the *Job-Hunter's Survival Guide*, Richard N. Bolles points out that when posting a resume online, job seekers must concisely and clearly delineate what they most want a prospective employer to first see about them. When filling out online profiles, make sure to complete all questions, and keep these profiles current. Job seekers are encouraged to access free job search guides by Bolles at www.jobhuntersbible.com.

- **Customize References:** Job seekers need to develop a current list of references who have a working knowledge of the job seeker's professional experience, expertise, accomplishments, and job goals. It is advisable for the list to have a minimum of three professional and two personal contacts that are relevant to the last 3 to 10 years of professional experience.

Once it is apparent that an employer will be calling references, it is crucial that the job seeker prepare these individuals by providing them with information about the position and the employer, along with a few key "talking points." In other words, ensure that the references are prepared to give customized, pertinent information when they receive a call from a prospective employer. Job seekers who use the social media site LinkedIn may also ask current or former colleagues to post a short (usually one paragraph) recommendation for them.

- **Customize Networking Activities:** Networking is critical to a job search; however, the manner in which one networks can work for or against a job seeker. As with any skill, successful networking usually takes a bit of exploration, practice, and persistence. While it may seem obvious, job seekers often forget that they should *never* discuss the difficulties encountered in the job search or difficulties with prior employers. The best strategy is to be positive, enthusiastic, clear, and concise about what the job seeker wants to do and why he or she is a perfect match for this type of work. Resource: *Job Search Networking for Introverts* at www.job-hunt.org/guides/Job-Hunt-job-networking-for-introverts.pdf.
- **Create and Maintain a List of Job Search Websites:** As explained in the NASW-CA document "Social Work Job Search Resources," job seekers must create and

maintain a list of job search websites specific, based on which websites are most productive to his or her goal and how often they should be checked.

Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

Whenever a person sets a goal there are almost always obstacles to overcome, and a 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 or marketing themselves. It is very important for job seekers to identify obstacles and create strategies to overcome these obstacles *prior* to implementing the job search. Interestingly, social workers and other job seekers are often hesitant to seek help and feel that they “should know how to do it,” even though highly effective and successful job search skills aren’t taught in universities and require a great deal of self-awareness and practice.

- **Prepare Effectively for Interviews:** Preparing for interviews must include researching the employer and being prepared to answer the most frequently asked questions: “What do you know about our organization?” and “Why do you want to work for this organization?” Knowing about the employer’s mission, goals, programs, services, and culture is paramount in demonstrating that the job seeker is the “best” match for the job. Additionally, 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.” There are many resources for preparing for the commonly asked interview questions and strategies for ensuring the answers are specific to that position and employer.
- **Develop and Utilize Support Systems:** Even under the best of circumstances, most people find the job search to be challenging. For this reason, it is important to develop support systems and strategies for handling the rejection, disappointment, anxiety, uncertainty, and social isolation that are common aspects of most job searches. Most job seekers underestimate the impact of common emotional factors generally inherent in a job search, especially if the search lasts longer than six months.

While sharing one’s experiences and challenges with family and friends can help, it can be even more helpful to have support from other job seekers. For example, the California Department of Employment Development offers both support and help with job search at www.edd.ca.gov/Jobs_and_Training/Experience_Unlimited.htm. There is also a list of support groups at <https://www.myperfectresume.com/how-to/career-resources/support/>.

- **Setting Weekly Goals:** It is often difficult to consistently dedicate sufficient time each week to the job search. Setting specific goals and having a strategy for keeping one accountable can be very helpful. For example, the job seeker can make a weekly report to a friend, colleague, or support group regarding whether weekly goals were met, and any specific challenges or issues faced.

Creating a Viable Job Search Plan

The following reminders can be used in the creation of a viable job search plan:

- Set a specific number of hours per week dedicated to job search activities, including how this time will be scheduled into one’s calendar.

- Create a list of favorite online job sites, organized so that it is easy to access and revise as needed.
- Develop a list of relevant professional associations, alumni groups, and social or professional groups that the job seeker belongs to or could join.
- Create a written list of professional accomplishments and then customize based on job description and employer. While most job seekers focus on their education and experience, research indicates that it is equally if not more important to highlight one's professional accomplishments. Consider the following examples for clarification:
 - ✓ Example of Expertise: Clinical Social Worker in Gerontology (NASW Certificate)
 - ✓ Example of Experience: Case manager in adult protective services for five years with Marin County.
 - ✓ Examples of Special Skills: Speak, read, and write Spanish. Advanced computer skills including Microsoft Office, Excel, and PowerPoint.
 - ✓ Examples of Professional Accomplishments:
 - Invited to be the keynote speaker at the 2010 American Society on Aging Annual Conference.
 - Promoted to section supervisor after six months on the job for demonstrated leadership skills.
 - Created an innovative orientation and training program for new employees, which was highly rated by management.
 - Recognized as the most valuable employee and given agency's annual award.
 - Wrote a grant that garnered the agency more than \$100,000 a year for three years.
- Learn the pros and cons of utilizing social media in job search.

Job seekers are encouraged to do research on the best strategies (as well as the dos and don'ts) for using social media *before* doing so. While sites such as Twitter and LinkedIn can be used to one's advantage, there are endless stories about how these sites have been used to job seekers' disadvantage. So, heed the warnings, explore the best options and how to use them, and follow the guidelines. A few of the available resources include these:

- www.job-hunt.org/guides/Job-Hunt-LinkedInEbook.pdf
- www.job-hunt.org/guides/Tweet-Sheet.pdf
- www.job-hunt.org/social-networking/social-media.shtml

Example of a Job Search Plan

Job Seeker: 24-year-old recent MSW graduate living in Oakland
 Job Goal: Case manager with children or adolescents

Experience: Two years of professional experience and two years of internships
 Desired Location: A 25-mile radius of San Francisco City
 Currently Volunteering: 20 hours per week with high-risk youth at community center
 Hours per week: 20 per week dedicated to job search activities

Measurable outcomes:

- Expand list of websites, newspapers, and other job listings
- Customize cover letters and resumes for at least two positions per week
- Plan networking activities detailing specific strategies and deadlines
- Make at least eight networking calls per week
- Attend EDD job search “club” or support group twice a month
- Become a member of NASW and one other professional association
- Regularly network at local NASW region or unit meetings and events
- Research social work salaries in San Francisco County
- Read one book on salary negotiation within 30 days of implementing job search
- At least once a week, meet with a friend or colleague for lunch (minimize isolation)
- Apply to at least one social work staffing agency within first 30 days of job search

Example of Weekly Job Search Activities

Monday	2pm-6pm	Check job listings and create one cover letter and resume
Tuesday	2pm-6pm	Prep for interview, and follow up with 8 networking contacts
Wednesday	9am-11am	Film mock interview and assess with friend, Mary
Thursday	11am-2pm	1:30pm interview. Write handwritten thank you note and call to prepare three selected references
Friday	8pm-10pm	Read book on negotiating skills
Saturday	8am-10am	Set goals for next week, plan one networking activity, and attend support group
Sunday	Day off	

Example of Networking Activities

Job Seeker: 39-year-old female living in San Diego County
 Experience: MSW, 10 years as a case manager and 2 years in a clinic
 Job Goal: Social work case manager within a medical facility
 Desired Location: 30-mile radius of San Diego County

- **Sending a note**

Hello Patricia,

As you may have heard, I recently received my master's in social work. I'm excited about finding a position as a case manager within a hospital or clinic here in San Diego. My recent MSW degree and the two years I spent as a case manager make me the perfect candidate for the right employer. I very much appreciate any ideas or potential contacts you might be able to provide me.

Name, phone number, and email address

- **Attending or volunteering at events**

Attend the monthly NASW Region E (San Diego and Imperial Counties) meetings and events, or the state conference. At each event, make it a goal to meet a minimum of five new professionals and give them a business card highlighting the desired position, experience, and contact information. For details, visit www.naswca.org and click on the "Networking" navigation link to view a regional map and find contact information for the local leaders. There are also several NASW-CA councils that bring together social workers around special interests, such as school social work, healthcare, and disaster relief.

Another excellent networking activity is volunteering within a setting that is aligned with the specific job search goal. The right volunteer situation can be very helpful in building networking connections, especially if one is new to the area or a recent graduate. The key is to choose the right organization and volunteer role so as to expand professional skills while taking advantage of opportunities to build on references and contacts.

- **Creating a "Business Card" for Networking Activities**

Business cards can be easily created and printed. Job seekers can usually get the first 250 printed for free through several online services. It is always a good idea to have someone else look at the card before printing it, because, more often than one might suspect, job seekers hand out cards with errors or missing information. Just as with every other marketing tool, the card must be professional, concise, and informative. A sample card is presented here.

