

leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

JULY 2012



networking: finding opportunities for career development

“Networking is consistently identified as the number one way to find a new job” (Riley, 2012).

The definition of networking is “the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically: the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2012).

Today, as social workers explore career possibilities, decide on career directions, or undertake job searches, they need to consider professional networks and contacts as a natural part of the process. The cultivation of relationships, over time, is seen as an important role in networking and one through which social workers can gain knowledge about career options, opportunities, and jobs. Interestingly, collecting information through conversations with people can occur at unpredictable times, such as on the subway, on a flight, at the grocery store, and at social functions. Maintaining and sustaining networks can be crucial to career advancement, because professional connections provide mutual benefits as well as being vital resources.

Consider:

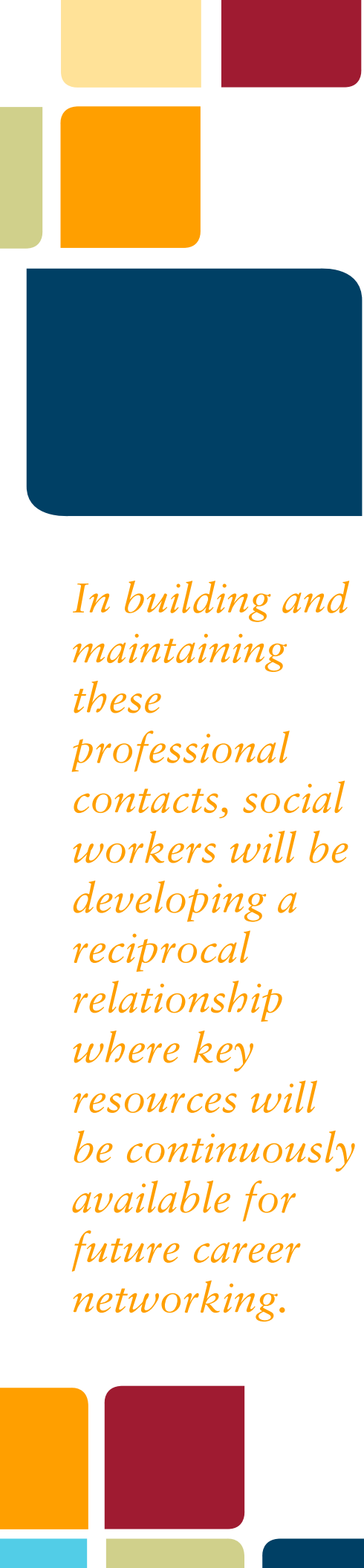
- › “70-80% of job seekers find their jobs through contacts. As few as 20% land their jobs through the traditional “reactive” job search method, namely, applying for posted positions on job boards or want ads” (Simmons, 2012).
- › “Nearly 80% of available jobs are never advertised. The more contacts you make, the more likely you are to tap into these hidden opportunities” (Simmons, 2012).

» HOW TO IDENTIFY NETWORKS:

A network can include social and professional organization contacts, former and current colleagues/supervisors, college faculty advisors, and teachers. Natural networks, such as family, friends and neighbors are also important and can often be overlooked. There are many people with resources within a professional or personal network who can assist in exploring career options or finding a job.



National Association of Social Workers
750 First Street NE, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241



In building and maintaining these professional contacts, social workers will be developing a reciprocal relationship where key resources will be continuously available for future career networking.

Remember, everyone and anyone can be a potential network contact.

Using various modes of networking outlets, such as job fairs, alumnae events/sites, community events, local job search groups, and social media, can increase visibility, and connect people for professional networking and recruitment.

» **INTRODUCING YOURSELF FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND JOB SEEKING**

Consider identifying contacts within a circle of friends, colleagues, acquaintances, employers, and professionals who may have information or know of someone who may have connections to an area of interest. Before contacting people, prepare a concise introduction that states your areas of interest and objectives.

Seek advice about your introduction from a few people in the field who are familiar with you and your job search. Seeking advice is a crucial component of networking and can provide a better understanding of the job market, help to devise methods to get a job, and ultimately lead to finding a job.

» **USING NETWORKING TO GET ADVICE, INFORMATION AND REFERRALS:**

One of the most valuable networking tools is the informational interview. The informational interview can be beneficial because it is an opportunity to learn about career choices, employers, or aspects of a particular job. It is an opportunity to have exploratory conversation with people in the social work profession network “who can give career advice and introduce you to others who can help you define your goals” (Cornell, 2012). It is important to be clear about the purpose and goals of informational interviewing. A. This interview is a 15 to 30 minutes meeting, with an individual, and is an opportunity to obtain specific information, career advice and referrals. The information interview is not a job interview, but rather is intended to expand professional contacts that may be helpful at a later time. Remember, as the initiator of this

meeting, there is planning that needs to take into consideration: identifying contacts, arranging the meeting, recognizing time constraints, preparing content for an agenda, preparing for dialogue, and follow up.

As a networking tool, the informational interview is one component to successful job finding and career development that requires special attention to follow up activities. Write a thank you note that identifies helpful suggestions obtained from the discussion. Follow up with the original contact if they have referred you to another person, and take time to reflect on what was learned, what information is still needed, and to develop a plan of action.

» **USING SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKING TO INCREASE VISIBILITY AND REACH:**

Social media is one of the fastest growing areas for finding a job and making contacts. In a recent 2011 survey by the leading recruiting platform, Jobvite Survey, reveals that 89 percent of U.S. companies plan to use social media for recruiting (Jobvite, 2012). One of the social media online professional networks, LinkedIn promotes connections to people for professional networking and recruitment. Even though there are other web sites such as Facebook and MySpace, LinkedIn caters to business and professional encounters. Primarily, LinkedIn is where people can develop contacts with others who have similar career interests.

The benefits of networking are long-lasting and continuous throughout one’s social work career. Whether through social media outlets or face to face meetings, networking provides opportunities to talk with people, exchange ideas, and gain knowledge about career options, opportunities and jobs. Subsequently, in building and maintaining these professional contacts, social workers will be developing a reciprocal relationship where key resources will be continuously available for future career networking.

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