

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO PLANNING A CAREER IN INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK

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We've all heard friends remark, "the world is getting smaller every day". We see evidence of this everywhere--from the global products on our supermarket shelves, to the "real time" telecommunications that occur daily from virtually every corner of the earth. One consequence of this globalization process for social workers is that the human services are taking on an increasingly more international focus, i.e., in the types of clients served and the range of problems addressed. Armed with these experiences, and with a real enthusiasm for exploring the larger world, many of today's social workers are searching for career opportunities in international social work. The majority of those seeking international positions--including recent graduates of social work programs--should be able to locate suitable positions in the international community. Careful pre-planning, though, is necessary in locating the international career opportunity that's "just right" for you.

This chapter outlines the *process* that graduates of professional programs have found helpful in locating international employment. The process involves four steps, each of which is a critical element in a more comprehensive career planning process:

Self-assessment

Background research

Bridging gaps in experience or skills

Finding a position

Completion of each of these steps is essential if applicants for international positions are to be successful in their search. Through a carefully conducted career planning process, social workers will be armed with the information and understanding that is needed to compete successfully for international positions. In combination with persistence and patience, career planning should enable most social workers to find the type of international employment they seek.

Step 1: SELF-ASSESSMENT

Self-assessment is the critical first step in any career planning effort. Self-assessment is especially important for those whose goal is to live and work abroad, i.e., where familiar personal and professional support systems may be non-existent. Readers interested in pursuing international employment should consider their answers to the following types of questions in assessing their *readiness* for international employment:

Why am I interested in an international social work career?

Am I interested in effecting change on a macro/global level?

Am I interested in working directly with clients from a variety of cultural backgrounds? Both?

Am I interested in the personal and professional development which result from the experience of living abroad, whatever the employment situation?

Does my commitment to an international career include being based abroad, or would I prefer to be based in my home country?

What skills do I have to offer in an international setting?

[These skills might include: "generic" social work abilities such as strengths in psycho-social assessment, supervision or program development; specific social work skills related to particular issues or clients, such as pre-natal services for adolescents, AIDS prevention programming, or working with clients who are substance abusers; and technical and linguistic skills which may be particularly useful in international settings, such as computer skills, health professions training, and of course language competencies].

What are my general and specific practice interests?

[These might include considerations of: macro vs. micro practice; administrative vs. case management positions; and work evolving from its setting, such as direct service in an agency base, research and teaching in a university setting, or advocacy work in a human rights organization].

What international/intercultural experience do I have?

[This might include personal background, work, travel or study abroad, or work with clients of diverse education].

What are my issues/preferences concerning lifestyle and adjusting to new settings? Would I feel comfortable with the living conditions in a developing country or do I need a more Westernized lifestyle? Have I tested my abilities to be flexible in adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings and cultures?

What is my geographic preference? Is it global in scope? Developed or developing country?

Finally, *what is my "dream job"?*

In planning a career, as opposed to searching for a particular position, it is crucial to have a sense of direction. Even should your anticipated direction change in six months of starting your first job, your preparatory process will serve as the impetus for more careful exploration and experimentation.

Step 2: BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Broadly based background research will help you obtain a better sense of the context in which international social welfare activities take place. (It has been noted that the best way to pass the United States Foreign Service Examination is to read a weekly news magazine from cover to

cover for a year) From whatever source you obtain your information about current world affairs, the possession of such knowledge is viewed as essential for work in the international community.

Specific knowledge of social welfare systems and their cultural contexts in specific regions and countries is also crucial. For example, Sweden, with its highly developed social welfare system, may prove more fruitful as a learning, rather than practice situation for American social workers. In contrast, social service providers interested in services to the elderly would find a challenging situation in Japan, where family-based care is the norm, but the social changes occurring due to increasing Westernization may necessitate development of new service programs in the future.

Sources of information useful for learning about the social welfare systems of other countries include all of the following.

1. Resources available in libraries.

Library resources include: (1) directories of international organizations, professional associations, research centers, international chambers of commerce, and foundations (see appendix); (2) international publications such as foreign language newspapers and magazines and materials aimed at international audiences; and, (3) country specific materials, including the indispensable *Social Security Programs Throughout the World*, which succinctly outlines social welfare systems and provisions by country; computerized data bases; and the wide selection of general materials that exist, some of which are listed in our "resource materials" list.

2. Embassies and consulates

Employment-related services available through national embassies (usually located in capital cities) and consulates (branches offices of embassies) differ from country to country. Many embassies have printed material on employment regulations and programs in their country, and may also have a specialist departments, or even an educational attaché, from which employment-relevant information can be obtained.

3. International/foreign national faculty, students, alumni, friends of friends, etc.

Networking with people and institutions that can help you with your international job search can never begin too early. Discussions with persons from international backgrounds, either professionally or personally, can yield extremely useful information. Networks of expatriates in many countries tend to be small, so that you may find that your interviewee knows someone who knows someone who knows a social worker (or equivalent) back at home who may be willing to talk to or correspond with you. Try to get a sense of the wide range of cultural contexts in which social service provision occurs.

4. Internationally-focused organizations

The location of organizations of this type, can be identified through the library resources mentioned above. These organizations are quite varied in their mission and structure. They include: *educational organizations* such as the Council for International Educational Exchange

(CIEE), the Institute for International Education (IIE) and the International Society for Intercultural Training and Research; *foundations* such as the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations, whose annual reports reveal the types of international welfare programs which receive grant money; *World Affairs Councils* and International Visitors Centers; *international business networks*, for those interested in social work in corporate settings, such as in human resources or training and development; and *ethnic organizations* formed by recent or longer-term immigrants.

While these organizations are fruitful sources of information, there are many more organizations which may prove to be sources of employment.

Step 3: BRIDGING GAPS

Having assessed your skills, interests and abilities for international employment, and having determined the range of institutional settings in which you hope to find international work, you are now ready to go on to the next step, i.e., that of matching your resources and interests with those of specific employing organizations. If you find that the match is not yet possible because you need more of a certain kind of skill or experience, you will need to bridge those gaps, or possibly, even change directions.

Generally, to obtain a position outside the U.S. a candidate must have: *fluency in the language of the country of choice*, some *prior experience living abroad*, and some *social work experience in their home country*. A worker who has demonstrated an understanding of a foreign culture and who brings linguistic and professional expertise to the job market is clearly at a better advantage. Short-term programs abroad and working for several years in the United States before starting an international job search are effective ways of bridging these gaps.

There are other skills which, while not mandatory, contribute positively to a candidate's credentials. These vary by setting, but may include: *computer/technological expertise*; *agricultural knowledge*; *health professions training*; *ability/ experience/ willingness to teach*; and *social work experience with a particular group or issue of concern to a country* (such as the example mentioned above with Japan and its elderly). Many of these are not primary social work functions but, in settings in which support functions must sometimes be performed by professional personnel, the possession of secondary job skills may be crucial in carrying out one's primary professional functions.

Finally, you might also want to consider a variety of other factors of particular interest to you, e.g., issues of race and sexual discrimination in countries, health risks, the inconvenience of living in a developing country, life-style preferences, whether one will be working alone or with others, the host country's view of your own status as an American citizen, and so on. These far less tangible issues often play an important role in determining the level of satisfaction that a person can experience with her or his international work.

Step 4: FINDING A POSITION

There exist thousands of organizations worldwide that deal with international social work concerns; many more can provide long-term careers for social workers in international practice.

An initial question may be whether to commit to a job search/career planning process aimed at long-term rather than short-term positions. This question most easily answered by the issues of needing to bridge gaps in skills or experience, and of seeking an easier way into an international setting, i.e., getting the proverbial "foot in the door". Long-term positions--more than one or two years in length--generally are career related and, often, are difficult to secure. Obtaining these positions is extremely competitive, so that the candidate must be willing to conduct an intensive and lengthy search. Applicants must also be sure that their qualifications match those of other prospective employees. The rewards associated with long-term employment are, of course, connected to the comparative stability and professional development offered by such positions.

Short-term positions, on the other hand, tend to be plentiful. They are comparatively easy to obtain and, often, are often easier to arrange than long-term ones. Some of these are paid; many are voluntary. Voluntary programs are worth investigating, as they will often provide a living allowance, and possibly more directly related experience than paid programs such as teaching abroad. Generally, participation in one of the short-term programs means the social worker is assured of being issued proper visas, housing and a specific service-related position. Other advantages of the short-term program include the possibilities for bridging gaps in linguistic competency and international living experience, convenience in arranging logistics, and buying time in order to do further searches from an international base.

Study abroad opportunities can have similar benefits to the short-term paid programs, especially if one is able to establish contacts with the employing community of the host country. These programs can also ensure access to the right type of visa required to live in a country; possession of the visa, in turn, gains the candidate time and contacts to pursue further options. It may also add to a professional's credentials.

The Range of International Career Opportunities for Social Workers

International career opportunities for social workers are found in many types of settings. The following is a list of the nine categories of organizations and agencies that are known to employ social workers for international work. While not an exhaustive list of all possible types of international organizations for which social workers could work, this list should stimulate your thinking concerning the range of international career opportunities that are available to you.

Chart 28 contains examples of specific organizations and agencies associated with each of the major categories of international employment. Readers should also consult the following directories for complete descriptions of these organization--and nearly 1,000 others-- that engage in international activities related to social work:

--Burek, Deborah (Editor). 1991. *Encyclopedia of Associations: International Organizations*. 25th Edition (New York: Gale Research, Inc).

--Dresser, Peter and Karen Hill (Editors). 1990. *Research Centers Directory*. 14th Edition. (New York: Gale Research, Inc.).

--Gliozzo, Charles, Thomas Luten and Timothy Aldinger. 1990. *Directory of International Internships: A World of Opportunities*. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Career Development and Placement Services).

--International Chamber of Commerce. 1990. *Yearbook of International Organizations*. (Brussels: Union of International Associations).

Chart 28. Examples of U.S. and International Organizations That Employ Social Workers

Institutional Auspices	Examples of Potential Employers
United States-Based, Non-Governmental Organizations	American Friends Service Committee; CODEL; Direct Relief International; International Voluntary Services; InterAction (a coalition of 132 U.S. PVOs); Save the Children; World Vision
United States Government Organizations	Agency for International Development (USAID); US Information Agency (USIA); Peace Corps; U.S. State Department; U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services
International, Non-Governmental Organizations	Amnesty International; Ba'hai Foundation; Caritas Internationalis; International Rescue Committee; International Planned Parenthood Federation; International Red Cross; International Salvation Army; International Social Services; OXFAM; Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
International, Inter-Governmental Organizations	International Labor Organization; Intergovernmental Committee on Migration; United Nations Development Program (UNDP); UN Children's Fund (UNICEF); UN Centre on Human Settlements; UNESCO; UN Food and Agricultural Organization; UN High Commissioner for Refugees; World Health Organization
U.S.-Based Service Agencies, with an International Dimension	CARE; Federation of Jewish Agencies (resettlement); Habitat for Humanity; Proyecto Libertad; Sioux Indian YMCAs; World Affairs Councils
U.S. Foundations With Major International Commitments	Carnegie; Ford; Rockefeller; Social Science Research Council
Professional Organizations and Associations With Major International Commitments	Council for International Programs; Council for International Educational Exchange; Council for the International Exchange of Scholars; International Society for Intercultural Training and Research; National Association of Social Work; Society for International Development

1. International Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGOs)

The best known of the IGOs is the United Nations and its 12 specialized agencies (including the UN Development Program, World Health Organization, International Labour Office, the UN

High Commissioner for Refugees, etc.). In addition to the UN, there are many other service-oriented organizations that are connected to the governments of member states of the UN. Often employees of these organizations come from the ranks of senior members of national governments. Generally, positions in these inter-governmental organizations require extensive experience, linguistic abilities, and political contacts. Entry level positions often require a two-year application period! Careful planning will be required if this is your "dream job".

2. International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Like their IG counterparts, NGOs are international in their membership and scope but, unlike the IGOs, they are comparatively free of governmental restrictions; as a result, NGOs are comparatively free to focus on specialized issues, or take particular political or philosophical stances. NGOs vary widely in size and organizational structure; most tend to be less bureaucratized than IGOs. NGOs also tend to utilize more volunteer help than do the IGOs. In general, NGOs are a good place for less experienced social workers to look for international positions. Prior experience in living abroad, work experience, and language skills are highly preferred by NGOs for persons under consideration for professional positions. Many persons may want to begin their careers with NGOs in a volunteer capacity and, thereby, build up their credibility for the more desirable paid positions.

3. United States Government Agencies

The U.S. government, like all other governments, maintains offices in at least the capitals of every other country; government offices are also staffed in secondary cities of most foreign countries. Many of these offices perform services to Americans visiting abroad, as well as to the local populace (depending on the precise nature of an office's particular mandate). As a result, there may be many government agencies in which social workers can develop international careers.

Obtaining these positions, as in other sectors of international employment, will require careful planning. The right combination of skills, experience, and "being in the right place at the right time" are usually essential ingredients for landing one of these positions. Also, individuals will need to determine their "degree of comfort" in serving as an official representative of U.S. government foreign and domestic policies--a role that some persons find troublesome. Persons who are not comfortable with this aspect of a government job should look elsewhere for employment.

4. U.S.-Based Non-Governmental Agencies

U.S.-based non-governmental organizations and agencies may offer some of the most fruitful opportunities for international careers for social workers. Like internationally-based NGOs, these organizations are more likely to have volunteer programs, or entry level positions, for persons without experience. The location of these U.S.-based international NGOs in the United States makes networking and informational interviewing quite easy.

Many persons will find it helpful to volunteer for, and otherwise make contact with, a variety of these organizations while still a student.

5. Country-Based Service Agencies

Country-based service agencies refer to those service organizations that are not specifically international in focus, but which are located abroad, and, thus, can serve as the foundation for an international social work career. These foreign social agencies, just as those that exist in the U.S., offer a broad spectrum of social services to their citizens (e.g., case management, public health education, development projects, etc.).

The difficulty in applying for employment to organizations such as these is that, without prior connections (and demonstrated linguistic skills), most are reluctant to hire persons "sight unseen" however qualified they may appear to be on paper. Therefore, if employment in these types of settings appeals to you, it might be a good idea to look into a short-term employment in a local agency after you arrive in the country of destination. More permanent arrangements can then be made after you and the receiving country authority get to know each other better.

6. University-Based Programs

Universities in many countries have active research and service connections to their surrounding communities, especially if they offer social work degrees. Social workers may be able to get connected to them; (2) applying for fellowships to be part of ongoing research efforts; (3) or even developing new projects in conjunction with members of the local faculty. Social workers who are considering pursuing doctoral study, or who already hold doctoral degrees, may also wish to consider applying for either short- or long-term faculty or research positions in universities and research centers located in other countries.

7. Foundation Programs

Larger foundations may employ substantial numbers of professional staff. Those foundations engaged in international projects of a human service nature employ social workers as consultants, field representatives, and as country directors for programs that the foundation supports. Many of these positions are of a very senior nature and, like governmental positions at the same level, require prior international experience and foreign language skills.

In general, the best approach to obtaining an entry level position in a major international grant-giving foundation is to work either as part of a project implementation team or, when possible, to work as a member of the foundation's core professional staff (especially in program development, proposal processing, research and evaluation, and support services to recipients).

8. Religious Organizations

Religious groups and organizations sponsor thousands of human service programs around the world. The majority of these programs are located in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Most are targeted to the poor, to women, or to children. Comparatively few seek to use the programs as a way of recruiting new faithful into their membership.

Consequently, professional positions in the international human service programs of religious organizations tend to be numerous (if not well paid). Rarely, is the religious preference of the

professional considered in the employment of persons with these programs. Hence, international employment in the human service programs of largest of these organizations probably offers such of the most fertile opportunities for comparatively inexperienced persons.

9. Social Work in Corporate Settings

International positions in corporate settings are numerous, especially for social workers with the right mix of qualifications and interests. In the main, these positions involve providing support services to local personnel, or to a company's national personnel assigned abroad for various lengths of time. Problems of relocation, adjustment to new countries, as well as the myriad needs of families of senior personnel are all of concern to social workers employed by multi-national corporations.

Though numerous, obtaining one of these positions does require careful planning. This is especially so since most multi-national corporations prefer to base their personnel in their home country for extended time periods before considering them for international assignments. Therefore, work experience, language skills, and good inter-personal skills are important qualifications for these jobs.

Common Elements of the International Job Search

The process of pursuing opportunities with international organizations is similar to that of job seeking in the United States, but of course includes some additional challenges.

First, *you should have all the appropriate documents ready*. These include a generic cover letter describing yourself and your accomplishments which can later be targeted to include your specific interests in particular practice areas and organizations; a resume, reviewed by several people (if possible one of them a native of your country of interest); transcripts and copies of your degrees; and recommendation letters.

Next, *develop a list of organizations of interest to you*. You may do this through any one of the research methods described above; the most important is the best way of investigating possibilities on the "hidden" job market, or, those positions which are never advertised.

"Networking" involves *telling EVERYONE you know that you are looking* for a certain type of position, then following up on every lead you get, including those that seem remote. You may send a letter of introduction and a resume, or call the person and ask for an informational interview, which is a brief meeting where you can ask specific questions about the person's field and career path (have the questions prepared in advance!). You can also use these information interviews as a means for getting additional names of people to contact. If you follow this strategy diligently, the network grows, and eventually you will hear of positions for which you are qualified. Obviously, if you are interested in working in a particular country, it is best, if you can afford it, to spend some time there and network on site. Face to face contact is always more effective than written contact.

Even if your networking does not yield any contacts in an organization of interest to you, you should still find out the name of the person involved in the programs of interest to you and write to them directly. You may also want to pursue other less traditional sources of jobs leads, including international recruiting fairs, international job placement services, advertisements in foreign newspapers or professional journals, etc. Professional organizations can be an excellent source for contacts abroad, information about possible programs, and even job listings and mentoring programs.

A Cautionary Note

Remember, too, that *the job search is a two-way street*, and that you do not want to have a disastrous experience after the considerable investment you are making to go abroad. Consider all of the following before making your final decisions about what to pursue:

the political and religious affiliations of the organization

the philosophy of their programs (do they seek to convert and influence local populations, or to work cooperatively with them?)

the sources of funding, and possible biases inherent in that funding (governmental, religious, etc.)

Are they connected with their local or national governments?

Do they conduct their operations openly or covertly?

If the organization is multi-national, in which countries do they have programs and why?

What are the terms of employees' contracts? Will there be orientation programs? Adequate health insurance? Housing? Assistance with immigration paperwork?

Can you speak with former program participants or employees?

As social workers we have all learned how to "read between the lines." This is a skill that will serve you well in your search for an international position. Check out perceptions with a native of your country of interest can be very useful, but remember they, too, have their own biases!

Finally, you may wish to explore possibilities of working on international and intercultural issues in United States settings. Through their mission of service to immigrants, many of our social agencies can provide American professionals and students with truly international "experiences." For example, you may wish to provide direct services to populations groups with specific backgrounds--i.e., refugees, recent immigrants, foreign students, international corporate employees, or American-born persons of color. Alternatively, you could work on global issues by doing policy analysis and research in a globally-focused "think tank." Often, though, the same kinds of linguistic skills and experience are required for these kinds of positions as for those based abroad, but the possibilities for networking and volunteering, so as to have a "foot in the door", are far superior.

CONCLUSION

A catch phrase for the nineties has become "Think globally, act locally". With an international social work career, it is possible to have the best of both worlds--that of acting on major international social issues, either at home or abroad, and wherever one chooses to work to be engaged in solving social problems of worldwide dimensions. As the social context of the human services becomes increasingly more internationalized, it is crucial that social workers broaden their world view; the personal and professional rewards for doing so can be immense.

INTERNATIONAL JOB SEARCH RESOURCE MATERIALS

Aitken, D.J. and A. Taylor (Editors). 1990. *International Handbook of Universities*. (New York: Stockton Press).

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