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## BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK: ISSUES, PROSPECTS, AND CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

*A career is an individual professional journey, achieved especially through such aspects as learning, mentoring and work experience, which is usually preceded by special training. Mentoring is an important component for all professions including social work. However, in Africa, social workers do not have many opportunities for mentoring. This is because the system to provide mentoring is not so developed. Mentoring provides upcoming social workers with direction but also builds their confidence by learning, listening to or observing experienced social workers. In this paper, the author, a Professor of Social Work, uses his experience as a social worker for many years to tackle the issue of career building for social workers. The paper examines issues, prospects and challenges based on a presentation the author made at a graduation ceremony at the University of Lisbon, in Portugal.*

**KEY TERMS:** career, social work, mentoring, challenges, Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

A career has been defined as an individual professional journey, achieved especially through such aspects as learning and work experience, which is usually preceded by special training. According to London (1998) people enter into careers for varied goals including to make a fortune, gain recognition and status, or do interesting and challenging work. Some have modest goals while others have ambitious expectations. He further says many people sacrifice time with family or friends for the sake of their careers, further noting that some delay starting a family in order to devote themselves fully to their profession. Once one has qualified, challenges occur at two levels: beginning a career and maintaining a career. According to O'Rourke, IV (2007:1), "Beginning your career search can be frightening, frustrating and a very stressful experience", further noting that, "Transforming yourself from an aspiring student with career ambitions to a full-time professional with an employer, a regular pay cheque, and some reasonable prospects for advancement isn't easy".

However even in situations when the individual has secured a job, they might still have to grapple with a number of barriers. It should therefore not be assumed however that careers are always a success; sometimes barriers do pop-up. Examples of barriers include handicap, change, conflicts, discrimination and unrealistic expectations. An important barrier is dissatisfaction with work. Holbeche (1997) for instance, reported one study in which 35% of employees had left employment due to dissatisfaction. She further explained that people tended to stay in a job where career prospects are good, meaning there are opportunities for job security, prospects for skills development and experience, personal growth, etc. Schein (1995: x) has recommended that, "Everyone should regularly evaluate their job to identify if career goals are in sync with the market-place and with long-range individual plans". London (1998) explains that career barriers make people hopeless and out of control. Causes may include institution down-sizes and accidents. The social work profession is no exception to these.

Opportunities for social work practice exist in a variety of fields and areas, including in central (national) and local governmental institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs), with development partners (e.g. UNICEF) and the private sector. Where ever social workers secure employment, it is pertinent to appreciate that there are several imperatives – what can be termed "10 commandments"- which must be adhered to if one is to build a successful career in the profession of social work. The following sections briefly consider each of these 10 imperatives or commandments for building a successful career in social work.

## TEN (10) IMPERATIVES OR COMMANDMENTS FOR BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

### 1. Know and efficiently employ the methods of social work

Social work practice operates at three key levels, namely, micro, mezzo and macro levels. While the micro level (or direct practice) relates essentially to service with individual clients (service users), the mezzo level essentially focuses on working with groups, while the macro level of practice concerns itself basically with working with communities (community work or community organisation). Currently, social work education and practice in many parts of the world has been moving in the direction of the 'integrated approach' which *inter alia*, emphasises banding together the various methods, with a view to tackling head-on a variety of social issues which include individual pathologies, mass poverty, unemployment, etc. There is some consensus that these complex challenges can only be addressed if social workers adopted a developmental (social work) approach which emphasises capacity building, empowerment, participation and social justice among others. Programmes based on such an approach consider multidisciplinary perspectives and cross country/continental traditions. The knowledge, skills and competencies developed in such programmes will, without doubt, provide the professional with a firm footing for practice.

### 2. Uphold the ethics, values and principles of the social work profession

Social work, like many other noble human service professions, operates on the basis of certain values, ethics, norms and principles. According to Compton and Galaway (1979:127), "Values can be thought of as beliefs which a profession holds about people and about appropriate ways of dealing with people". The two core values of social work across the world are: a) The belief in the *uniqueness and inherent dignity* of the individual, irrespective of their status, age, or station in society; and b) The *belief in client self-determination*, i.e. the freedom of individuals to make their own choices and decisions, which (freedom) is only limited by the client's capacity for positive and constructive decision-making.

Ethics, on the other hand, are rules of conduct or standards of behaviour expected in a particular situation. These are based on the values and ideology of the society and the profession (Mupedziswa, 1993). The expectation is for professional social workers to uphold the international code of ethics, which urges social workers to create a conducive atmosphere for intervention. Social work principles, including those of confidentiality, self-

determination and human worth also ought to be adhered to. It is critically important to adhere to these values, ethics and principles, if you are to build a successful career in the social work profession.

### **3. Keep abreast of developments in your field of practice**

It is important to keep abreast of developments in the field of social work if you are to build a successful career in social work practice. You should not allow yourself to get 'rusty'. Ensuring that you do not get stale is only possible if you strive to maintain an open mind; consulting literature that is relevant to the field of social work, and trying to establish what new developments there may be for adopting best practices in the profession. There are, for instance, numerous journals that deal with social work practice issues some of which focus specific issues, e.g. children and family issues, which the practitioner can consult from time to time. Journals do carry loads of useful materials which can enhance your practice skills. Other than journals, it is also important to read other materials, including newspapers, etc. to keep abreast of events, both local and international.

Of course as you consult these (and related) materials, it is important to be cognisant of cultural differences that may emerge from serving in a particular community. In a typical African setting for example, Ubuntu values including respect, solidarity, peacefulness, reconciliation, forgiveness and generosity play a critical role (Spitzer et al (2014)). The mark of a good practitioner is to appreciate the cultural implications of any new 'practice products' that might appear on the professional 'market'. By products is meant any suggested new ways (best practices) of doing certain things. Another way of keeping abreast of developments in the field would be to be open to new ideas. When I was a student many years ago, I remember being once placed with an agency in which the field supervisor allocated to me had been practicing social work for 30-some years. I had arrived at the agency very enthusiastic and with loads of fresh ideas (which I had learnt in class) on how to handle particular cases. However, the field supervisor was not at all impressed when I tried to suggest new ways which he was not familiar with. He was not open to any new ideas at all which turned out to be a source of considerable frustration for me. As a result I did not benefit much from that field placement. Perhaps more importantly, this supervisor also probably lost an opportunity to learn new ideas from me, the intern. Such an attitude on the part of the supervisor should not be encouraged, as it stifles personal growth.

### **4. Keep abreast of crucial on-going debates**

In the case of Africa, for instance, social work was 'exported from' the Western world at the turn of the last century (early 1900s). When the profession first emerged, practitioners were being educated/trained abroad, as there were no local institutions for the purpose. With time some scholars correctly began to question the relevance and appropriateness of the remedial/residual approaches that were being lavishly employed. Things came to a head in the early 1980s when the then umbrella body for social work education in Africa (ASWEA, 1982: 11) issued a clarion call thus: "*African social work must proceed from remedial social work – foreign by nature and move to a more dynamic and more widespread preventive and rehabilitative action which identifies itself with African culture in particular and with the socioeconomic policies of Africa in general*".

Today a number of concepts associated with what is termed the social development (or developmental social work) approach have been thrown around, and these include indigenisation, authenticisation, contextualisation, radicalisation and reconceptualisation. The basic argument associated with these terms is essentially that to realise relevance and appropriateness, social work education and practice on the African continent ought to be rooted in local culture. The critics argue that persisting with the remedial approach (giving of handouts) especially when fighting mass poverty, will not realise any meaningful results. What is needed is to promote strategies that facilitate self-reliance. Some even give the analogy of the 'leaking tape', noting that the remedial approach has emphasised mopping of water from a leaking tape (i.e. giving of food handouts etc.) rather than focusing on fixing the source of the leak on the tape (empowering people for self-reliance). While you do not necessarily have to agree with the arguments put forward by these critics, it is pertinent that you are aware of the existence of this debate, do your own evaluation and arrive at your own conclusions. This is crucial if you are to build a successful career in the social work profession.

### **5. Appreciate and support the work of social work's regulatory bodies**

At country level, three key bodies are usually in place whose brief is to promote and advance the 'national' social work agenda; these are: A national council of social workers, often set up through an act of parliament, whose key role is that of custodian of standards, rules and regulations pertaining to the field of social work. Its tasks include registration of social workers for practice, handling disciplinary matters, monitoring of social work curricula in the given country, and conducting inspections of social work institutions as necessary. There is usually a registrar whose role is to deal with all issues pertaining to registration and regulating of practice.

Second the national association of social workers. This is a national body of social workers which serves as a voice for the social work profession in each given country. Social workers at times do agitate for the introduction of certain pieces of legislation, or changes to existing pieces of legislation. They also channel their grievances and celebrate events through their national association. While in many countries registration to the national council of social workers may be compulsory, membership of the national association of social workers, on the other hand, is usually voluntary. South Africa has the National Association of Social Workers, while Botswana has the Botswana National Association of Social Workers, and Zimbabwe, the National Association of Social Workers of Zimbabwe, which are bodies that bring social workers together.

The third aspect is that Schools/departments of social work may come together to form a national association of their own. South Africa, for instance has the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) which represents the interests of all the 17 or so institutions in that country offering social work education and training. The purpose of such an association of institutions is essentially to help the institutions to standardise social work education and training in the given country. Activities by such bodies need the support of all social work practitioners in the given country. A practitioner wishing to build a successful career in the field of social work, has to know what is going on both in the field and in education circles. They have to be an active member of an association, be registered and support the work of the schools of social work.

## 6. Appreciate that in social work ‘client is king’

A professional social worker wishing to build a successful career in social work ought to appreciate the fact that the client is king. The client might be illiterate, unsophisticated, inarticulate, or extremely poor, but remember they constitute your very reason for being in that office. The client, therefore, ought to be handled with utmost care, dignity and worth. Be prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of your client, especially in the name of social justice. A clip I adapted from a passage whose source is unknown but which focused on a ‘customer in business’. titled “A client in social work”, makes interesting reading.

*A client is the most important person ever in an office – in person or letter or phone.*

*A client is not dependent on us – we are dependent on him or her.*

*A client is not an interruption of our work, he/she is the purpose of it.*

*We are not doing him/her a favour by serving him/her*

*He/she is doing us a favour by giving us the opportunity to do so.*

*A client is not a cold statistic*

*He/she is a flesh and blood human being*

*With feelings and emotions like our own (Mupedziswa, 1993: 162).*

Indeed the client ought to be handled with care. Yet in many instances we find social work professionals adopting a domineering attitude, ordering the client to do this and that, in the process throwing the principle of self-determination out of the window. You cannot build a successful career in social work if you behave that way.

## 7. Do not allow yourself to get ‘rusty’

Many professionals occupying position at the workplace have tended to adopt an “I have arrived” type of attitude once they attained a qualification such as a Diploma or Bachelor’s degree. At that point they abandoned any thought of further studies. Such an attitude can be dangerous because the world is changing fast and hence it is important for the professional to continue to upgrade themselves either academically or professionally, where convenient. Other than always gunning for a higher degree in the same discipline, it is also possible to diversify or specialise in an aspect of social work. Or one might even opt for an administrative qualification, or something in a cognate field. It is crucial to keep your mind busy. That will help you to be more efficient and effective in your practice. I am aware of a young man who while qualified as a social work professional, took a post-graduate certificate/diploma in family law, and another who took a post-graduate diploma in public health. These are just examples of relevant diversifications. First price of course is to consolidate your social work practice by earning a higher qualification in social work (itself). What is critical is to appreciate that ‘learning does not end’.

## 8. Participate in social work activities on the international arena

Participation in international, as well as regional and local conferences is crucial. Such events provide an opportunity to share ideas and compare notes. Three key international bodies superintendent social work education and practice across the world, viz: the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) (for administrators/employers), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (for social work educators), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (for field practitioners). A couple of the bodies enjoy observer/consultative status at the United Nations, which indicates their eminent status and how highly they are regarded in the world of social development.

The IFSW and IASSW both subscribe to a universal definition of social work, hence they deal with issues from the same standpoint. The IFSW and the IASSW usually hold joint biennial conferences which are usually attended by over 2 000 delegates who sit together all for the advancement of the profession of social work. The International Consortium on Social Development (ICSD) holds separate meetings, also once every two years. Any social worker wishing to build a successful career in this profession ought to actively participate in these gatherings through timeously responding to 'calls for papers', submitting abstracts and then full papers and ensuring attendance at the gatherings. A limited number of scholarships are usually made available particularly for participants from the developing world who may face financial constraints. The competition is heavy, and usually it is the early bird that catches the worm. Participation is crucial for those wishing to build a successful career in social work.

## 9. Document and publish your experiences

Many in the field of social work practice tend to think publishing is a preserve of those in the education and training sector alone. Granted, those who may pursue a career in academia, will come face to face with the mantra, 'publish or perish', which compels them to publish. In other words, the mark of a true academic is thus contributing to existing knowledge through publishing. However, you do not have to be in academia in order to publish. While it is true that theory (the classroom) informs practice (the field), it is equally a truism that practice does inform theory. There are many good lessons, including case studies, taken from the field into the classroom. This suggests cross-fertilisation, meaning those in practice are obliged to document their experiences (if only) for use in the classroom, and beyond. It is therefore important that field-based workers document their experiences and even publish them in reputable journals for public consumption. Such is bound to enrich the profession.

Medicine is one field where this is happening successfully and consistently, and to some extent the law profession as well. Medical doctors publish their findings in such journals as *Lancet* among other reputable outlets. Many judges will base their judgements on precedent cases, and this is made possible by the fact that they document their judgements, and then make them available for public scrutiny. There is therefore need for the social workers to go beyond mere recording, to actually producing academic papers, complete with a theoretical or conceptual framework, a literature review, etc. This will enhance your status in the profession.

## 10. Appreciate the importance of the 5 Cs

There are 5 Cs which are crucial for effective practice in the field of social work: – commitment, communication, consultation, cooperation, and coordination of effort. Let us briefly consider the essence of each of the five concepts which all begin with the letter 'C'.

**Commitment** – According to the Oxford dictionary, commitment relates to the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause, activity, etc. In the context of social work practice, it is important to be devoted to your work, to show that you are dedicated to the course. Social work is a calling, a volition and hence it is crucial that you be committed to your work and that way you will build a successful career in social work profession.

**Communication** – has to do with the imparting or exchanging of information or news: either verbal or non-verbal. In social work, communication is very crucial for efficiency and effectiveness, particularly given that social workers do not operate in isolation – they work with both fellow social workers and professionals from other fields. Often communication is incomplete, especially when there is no proper feedback.

**Consultation** – This relates to the action or process of formally discussing an issue with all concerned, before action is taken. Dialoguing is crucial to ensure you carry all stakeholders on board; it facilitates consensus especially over contentious matters. Consultation provides people with an opportunity to air their views. Debate and dialogue are crucial to facilitate an informed decision. But ensure that the consultation is restricted to only relevant persons and issues and it should not be over-done, lest some people begin to lose confidence in your own abilities.

**Cooperation** – relates to the process of working together towards the same goal. It has to do with promotion of teamwork to facilitate combined effort. Social work practice is about cooperating with other professionals. As noted, these may be fellow social workers or other human service personnel such as psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, doctors, lawyers, etc. The common denominator, the glue that binds the team together, is the client.

**Coordination** - This relates to the process of organizing people or groups so that they work together properly and well for the common goal. In the field of social work the ability to bring people of different persuasions together so that they work together for the benefit of the client, is a crucial skill. It is important for human service professionals to coordinate their efforts when dealing with clients. It is the role of the social worker to ensure intervention efforts and strategies for practice are well coordinated.

## CHALLENGES THAT POTENTIALLY CAN BLOCK SUCCESSFUL CAREER PROSPECTS

How fast you rise will depend on various factors, including previous work experience (if any), assertiveness, competence and commitment to your work. If you have not practiced before, then it is advisable to be patient as you start at the bottom of the ladder. Accept this since this will enable you to learn the ropes from experience. Often, textbook knowledge alone, though valuable, is not sufficient for meaningful practice; it is not the same as hands-on experience. Patience is a virtue when it comes to building a successful career in social work. Remember real success in the field of social work goes beyond mere monetary gains. Challenges to building a successful career in social work practice, are many and varied but they basically fall into two broad categories – those that have to do with you as an individual and those related to the environment in which practice will take place.

### *Challenges relating to the individual*

- *Lack of personal growth*

Some individuals enter the field of social work practice only to stagnate there. Without personal professional growth, the prospects of building a successful career in the field of social work are virtually zero. It is important to constantly improve yourself.

- *Attitude*

A poor attitude towards your work and your clients in particular, can easily derail your career. Frustration tends to stifle the zeal and personal ambition to advance. If for instance, you are not personally convinced that social work is indeed your career of choice, your chances of succeeding and advancing will tend to diminish. Some people get into this profession as a last resort. Of this number, while some will eventually embrace the profession, others will continue to sit on the fence and rue the choice they made, which is unfortunate. The latter group cannot expect to build a successful career in social work.

- *Behaviour*

Sometimes it is the behaviour of the individual social worker that will militate against their advancement in the field of social work. For instance a social worker who becomes an alcoholic cannot expect to build a successful career in the field, as he or she might end up becoming a client him/herself. Instead of being part of the solution, such an individual will become part of the clientele of the profession.

### *Challenges relating to the operating environment*

- *Textbook versus reality*

Bear in mind that some of the cases depicted in the textbooks may not be culturally sensitive or appropriate to the environment in which you will practice. Or some theories may just not be practicable on the ground, in a particular place. Hence hands-on experience is the greater teacher. It is important to appreciate that experience does not jump; it is an ongoing process of accumulating knowledge, and this calls for much patience.

- *The work-space environment may be suffocating*

For those practicing in the developing world in particular, it is important to appreciate that resources are often at a premium. Office space, telephone, transport, stationery may all be in short supply. Where for instance, the textbook says in order to establish rapport with a client you need to make a couple of home visits, it is important to remember that in reality such visits may turn out to be virtually impossible due to lack of transport, for instance, or because of the huge numbers of cases at your disposal. With inadequate office space, a key principle of social

work - confidentiality - is often compromised. With no working telephone, activities such as facilitating of referrals, become a tall order. You have to be strong and innovative in such situations.

- *Lack of support*

At times you may find there is only limited support from colleagues you had banked on. This is particularly true in the early period of your employment. This may be due to inefficiency on their part, or simply a function of resentment. Support is vital, and so is teamwork, both among fellow social work professionals, and across disciplines. However, often times you may find some colleagues are not cooperative, making your work untenable. You just have to be strong and focused.

- *The political environment*

In some cases the political environment may be such that you will find there is considerable interference where your work is concerned. For instance, you may endeavour to promote social justice, and discover in the process that the (local) political environment is excruciatingly suffocating, and hostile and you are at loggerheads with the powers-that-be. Or you may find that while you are religiously trying to follow the rules (e.g. means testing), enormous pressure is brought to bear by forces which want you to flout the standing rules and regulations. Often they want this done for their personal political aggrandisement. You have to remain calm and collected.

- *Socio-cultural environment*

In some instances, the socio-cultural environment is extremely suffocating so as to induce cultural shock in you. Different cultures react differently to different situations, and hence it is crucial to be alert to this possibility. How do you react if you as a social worker are requested by a client to participate in local rituals which you do not believe in? You have to decide whether or not to sacrifice your principles in order to accommodate the wishes of the client. What is crucial is to be always alert and prepared for such surprises.

## CONCLUSION

Social work practice is a noble calling, a vocation that really is rewarding in many ways. Being a social work practitioner is however often a thankless job. But that should not deter you. To be able to make it in this noble profession, you ought to develop a thick skin, especially where you might be called upon to engage in social action and advocacy. They do not call social work a profession of many faces for nothing. In the developing world in particular, many other professionals or other people in high places erroneously view social work as a profession which simply 'consumes' resources but does not have any 'tangible products' to show for its efforts. This is unfortunate, but reality.

The profession is hardly counted among the productive professional 'sectors', and is often viewed with suspicion. What the critics fail to appreciate is that an employee in industry for instance, who is consumed in the quagmire of psychosocial challenges will cease to be efficient or productive at the workplace. The fact is, as a human service professional, the social worker may not find it easy to quantify their contribution to the well-being of society, but the reality is the profession plays a critical role in ensuring normal societal functioning. In order to build a successful career in social work, it is important for the social work practitioner to appreciate both the prospects and the potential challenges and pitfalls associated with this profession as they soldier on. As the adage goes: '*Forward ever and backward never*', ought to be the battle cry and mantra. The trick is for those in the profession to rally together and support each other, as the profession struggles to take up its rightful place on the world stage. This calls for the 'real social workers to please stand up!!'

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