

Career Options for Human Service Professionals*

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It is important for human service professionals to market themselves based on a new way of perceiving their skills and accomplishments. A crucial factor may be to learn the language of the new career area (other than human services) and, where appropriate, to stop speaking the language of non-profit callings.

HUMAN service professionals are not a homogeneous group, and the same career options do not exist for all human service professionals. As is true for other occupational groups, our profession is made up of individuals with a wide range of skills, interests, personalities, aptitudes and values. The career options available to human service professionals are as broad and varied as the professionals themselves. It would be easy to give a list of the many careers that human service professionals can and have transferred into; but I could just as well refer to the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. The question which, I feel, must first be dealt with is "How does an individual go about re-evaluating his or her career goals and begin a career change process?"

Career Options

Given the current economic situation in this country, and recent cutbacks in human service funding, many professionals in human services have lost their jobs and others feel uncertain about the future security of their positions. Still others are experiencing the stress of

everchanging and uncertain program funding and the personal economic strain of salaries that do not keep up with inflation. As a result, many human service professionals are thinking about, or actively engaged in, trying to change careers. Career change, however, is a long and difficult process, often taking one, two or more years. In addition, many human service professionals do not have the skills or temperament to transfer to the private sector. If the impetus for change is purely economic the individual may find him- or her-self very unhappy in a new career which yields a higher salary but which creates strong values conflicts and does not provide the rewards or satisfaction of the career that was abandoned. Before leaving the field, one should first consider other options:

- A. Staying in human services by improving self-marketing skills.
- B. If an individual is unemployed and cannot find a position at his or her former level of responsibility he or she can seek a job on a lower level of responsibility.
- C. If the need is for additional income one can set up a part-time private practice or consulting service to supplement a regular salary.
- D. For those who wish to stay in the

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field but cannot find a job it may be possible to consider moving to another geographic area where job competition is less severe.

- E. Individuals can also seek a related position in the private sector.

The Role of Career Counseling

Career counseling can play a vital role in helping professionals through a career re-evaluation process, and to choose an option which is compatible with their personality and temperament. Many professionals seem to be in a great hurry to leave the field but don't have a clear idea of where they are going or how they will get there.

I would like to review the counseling process that we have developed at FECS to help individuals through a career re-evaluation or transition. I would also like to highlight some of the difficulties, or barriers, that many of our clients encounter.

The process begins with a program of self-assessment in which the client is helped to identify skills, interests, values, aptitudes, personality type and style of functioning. Some of the assessment instruments we utilize include:

1. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
2. The Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory
3. The Self-Directed Search
4. Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values
5. 16 PF Career Development Profile
6. Autobiographical and Skills Analysis Techniques

Testing and assessment data are integrated with interview information to help develop a profile of the client. It is crucial for the counselor to assess the client's readiness for career counseling. Assessment of readiness is based on an evaluation of several key dimensions,

including: motivation, commitment, frustration tolerance, flexibility, self-insight, security need (risk taking) and awareness of the realities of the job market. Special attention is paid to the internal barriers which often have to be dealt with first, before any career research or exploration can begin. Internal barriers can often prevent an individual from taking the action necessary to make a change. Some of the barriers which we commonly identify are:

1. Lack of confidence—self doubt
2. Fear of failure and perfectionism
3. Procrastination
4. Low anxiety tolerance
5. Indecision vs. indecisiveness
6. Depression
7. Immobilization
8. Values conflicts
9. Rigidity: unwillingness to compromise or to be flexible
10. Risk taking difficulties
11. Impatience
12. Motivation difficulties
13. Fear masquerading as laziness and/or resistance
14. Difficulty getting organized and feeling overwhelmed
15. Career confusion as symptomatic of self confusion

The assessment stage is often followed by a counseling program to help the clients to recognize and begin to deal with internal barriers. A referral for therapy may be in order at this point. While working on barriers, clients must be freed from feeling that a decision must be made and helped to explore themselves and career options freely. This becomes an information gathering or research phase. Resistance at this stage is usually symptomatic of anxiety and fear. Anxiety often causes "tunnel vision" or the inability to see options. The counselor can help clients to reduce their level of anxiety and gain a more expanded view of themselves so that they can become more flexible and can

open up to a variety of career alternatives.

The assessment phase is followed by a translation phase in which the client is helped to translate skills, interests, values, aptitudes and personality into compatible career options which can then be explored within the context of the current job market. This is the phase that many clients have difficulty with because they feel impatient and are seeking immediate, magical answers. This stage, however, cannot be cut short or bypassed. Exploration and research can be accomplished in two major ways, by reading and networking. Clients are encouraged to read professional journals, books and other material in the area they are exploring, in order to learn the language of that field. In addition, networking is also necessary. Clients are helped to develop a plan and to become skilled in making contacts with individuals who are in the field they are exploring in order to find out what it is like "on the inside". Utilizing contacts, attempting cold calling and attending seminars and conferences help the client begin to gather information and to deal with the question of "How do I fit in with others who are in this profession?"

Choosing To Stay In The Field

The research phase may lead clients to realize that they really would rather deal with the realities of their present profession than with the effort and anxiety of entering a new field. If this is the case, they can be helped to improve their self-marketing skills which often are very weak. The clients may be helped to move into a new area of human service which is more in keeping with their personality style, temperament and functional skills. Many human service professionals have difficulty marketing themselves effectively and

often need a great deal of structure and emotional support during this phase. Many professionals were originally drawn to human services, because of strong humanistic and, in Jewish communal service, Jewish values. They often have a very strong professional identification and a sense of commitment and loyalty to their particular service. For such professionals a career change is probably not advisable, but rather help is needed in dealing with the current job market. At FECS we have begun to develop job search support groups for professionals in transition, to help clients through the emotional rollercoaster of the job search process. We have also developed special programs to help clients deal with procrastination and confusion. Clients are also assisted in creating a self-development plan which includes plans for further education or in-service training in order to expand their repertoire of skills and to gain expertise and/or additional credentials in one or more areas. Such technical competence can often help to reduce burn-out and to increase marketability in a highly competitive job market.

Clients who wish to stay in the field, but who need additional income, can be helped to develop a part-time private practice. If the individual lacks the entrepreneurial qualities to do this alone, he or she may be encouraged to team up with another professional and develop a private practice together. Often, just a few private clients a year are sufficient to provide the additional income which is desired.

Changing Careers

Those clients who feel that a career change is the answer must then begin to organize an action-oriented targeted job search. As mentioned earlier, this process can often take a year or more. Much

perseverance and tenacity are needed to succeed in changing careers. It is crucial for most individuals to have some kind of support systems to sustain them during the job search phase. Networking is one of the most effective ways to discover the so called "hidden job market" and to find a new position. It is important for human service professionals to market themselves based on a new way of perceiving their skills and accomplishments. A crucial factor may be to learn the language of the new career area and, where appropriate, to stop speaking the language of non-profit callings. Transferrable skills must be expressed in the language of the new career area that has been targeted. Jobs usually go to those with the best job search skills, and not necessarily to those with the best professional skills!

Career Management Skills

Every human service professional should have at all times a career development plan which includes contingency planning and a plan for self-development. At FECS we strongly advocate pro-active career planning, a process commonly taught today in many graduate business programs. The time to focus on career planning is not during a career crisis, but rather, at a time when anxiety and pressure are lower. The keys to successful career management are:

1. *Self-Awareness*—one needs knowledge of resources and barriers.
2. *Goal Clarity*—one needs to have an idea of where he or she wants to be three, five, ten and more years from now.
3. *Career Research and Networking*—one must not be isolated but keep in contact with people who are in the chosen field and always be aware of who might have informa-

tion or contacts which would be helpful.

4. *Self Marketing Skills*—one should know why someone should hire him or her, become able to translate one's background effectively and to articulate skills and accomplishments in relation to the requirements of whatever position being sought. It is necessary to develop good interviewing and negotiating skills and have a resume which is up-to-date. Often several versions of a resume are needed for different kinds of positions.

What Human Service Agencies and Graduate Programs Can Do

Since there are many human service professionals who want to stay in this career area, it is important to talk about what the non-profit agencies themselves can do to generate additional income and reduce dependence on foundation grants or government funding. Non-profit agencies have services that the corporate sector needs. Agencies can develop contracts with the private sector and offer those services at rates which help bring in additional income. In N.Y.C., FECS has been actively developing a Corporate Service Division, and a local family and children's agency has done so as well. Some areas of service we can offer to business and industry include the following:

1. Employee assistance programs-counseling
2. Outplacement counseling
3. Daycare
4. Pre-retirement counseling
5. Stress management
6. Rehabilitation—returning disabled employees to work
7. Management Development and Career Development Counseling

For those about to enter the field, graduate school can do much more to help students with career planning and self marketing. It is essential that schools begin teaching students the skills needed to compete successfully in a limited and difficult job market. Another issue to consider is the possibility of limiting the number of applicants in certain areas such as casework.

Conclusion

For human service professionals looking for career options, there are no simple answers, and career changes are usually not easy or speedily effected. The main point I would like to emphasize is that everyone must develop a career plan based on a complete self-evaluation. Often the help of a professional career counselor is needed in order to go through this process. One must be aware of the options and of the risks involved in making a career change. Decisions must then be made

based on a realistic evaluation of existing trade-offs. Whether the choice is to stay in the field or to change careers, self-knowledge and self-marketing skills are essential factors for career success.

It is vital that the necessary time is taken to evaluate one's self and to decide in what direction he or she would like the career to go. It is important not to feel trapped, boxed in, or like a victim of the job market. If one fails to plan carefully then he or she becomes forced to make decisions at points of career crisis when anxiety is extremely high. Such pressure can lead to impulsive decisions or to the inability to decide. It is equally essential to know what career anchors are needed and how one's style of functioning affects job performance and career satisfaction.

With careful planning and proper guidance we can all get through this period of professional stress and uncertainty. There are usually more options than one realizes. The future is not bleak—difficult, but not bleak.