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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

**A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK:  
GAINING THE SKILL SET AND LANDING THE JOB**

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## **A Student's Guide to International Social Work: Gaining the Skill Set and Landing the Job**

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Clearly one of the most important topics for Social Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the globalization of the profession. We believe there are several factors that account for increased interest in global social work practice. First, a social event such as increased world-wide immigration has changed the composition of the clients that many social workers serve. Second, developed, redeveloping and underdeveloped nations share many common problems. For example, the global economy which affects all nations or the impact of human trafficking that crosses national borders. Third, the information highway via the Internet, instant messaging, social networking tools such as Blogs, Wikis, Ning, SKYPE, Facebook, My Space, Twitter, document down loading capabilities and open access has dramatically increased our global interdependence. Finally, this increased information flow coupled with the above mentioned shared transnational problems has meant that an action of one country directly and indirectly affects us all. (Rodgers, M., 2005)

As one considers a career, a clear definition of what global social work is essential. It is also important to remember the historical context in that international social work has been discussed and practiced since the 1920's (Healy, 2008). Rodgers, J. (2008) quoting Qingiven Xu (2006) states that the "internationalization" of social work practice stems from our increased global interdependence such that the field of social work needs to globalize itself in order to address the complex social problems in the world. Rodgers further quotes Healy (1992) in defining "the term as internationally social related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice and international policy development and advocacy." In a recent editorial in the premier issue of the *Journal of Global Social Work Practice*, J. Rodgers (2008) defines global social work practice (GSWP) as

a field of practice within social work that seeks to ensure decent conditions for human growth and development, human rights, social justice and social action, to improve the social and overall well-being of people through sustainable development around the world, and is applied at all levels of practice, at all levels of government and across geopolitical borders and at all levels of social and economic organizations.

## **Professional Preparation of US Citizens for Careers in Global Social Work Practice**

Healy (1987) conducted a survey of international NGOs to discern the skill set necessary for a career in global agencies. She found that persons seeking these careers should have the following skills: cross-cultural understanding, comparative social policy analysis, or general worldview and concern with global problems, knowledge of the social work profession worldwide, prior international practice experience, intergovernmental social welfare experience, and a sense of collegiality. To this list, we would add the individual should have a high degree of flexibility and a good sense of humor. If one possesses the skill set necessary to practice abroad, social workers seeking employment will still face obstacles to their role. Such obstacles include: a lack of status for the profession, lack of resources, political oppression, lack of official government sanctions, service structures that limit assistance and an overall limited societal understanding of the role of social work. In addition, social workers working overseas should not “assume a common definition, understanding or credentialing of social workers” (Tice & Long, 2009)

Along with the above mentioned obstacles, little attention has been given to the needs of US social workers who are preparing for practice outside of the United States. US social work education when discussing multicultural competence focuses mainly on ethnic and minority groups in the United States. Yet, there are a growing number of social workers who will be practicing outside of the United States. Garland and Escobar (1988) have indicated that preparation for cross-cultural practice differs significantly from practice with US ethnic and minority groups. Further, effective cross-cultural practice requires not only an understanding of one’s home culture but also a shift in the social worker’s cultural identity to what scholars call multiculturalism.

Sometimes US social workers are surprised by the realities they encounter in global practice settings. These include intense poverty, widening inequality, increased conflict, overwhelming apathy, air pollution, lack of fresh water, destruction of natural resources, and the disappearance of biodiversity. Global social work practice can occur at the micro level if one is proficient at the intermediate level of language or if English is a second language of the country where one intends to practice social work. Practitioners need to remember that theories of psychological and social processes are culturally relative. Therefore, things like psychosocial development, grieving processes, kinship patterns and group process are culturally influenced. The micro practitioner must have a keen sense of the importance of non verbal communication that is culturally derived.

Global social work practice at the macro level requires some specific technical skills that are more often taught and experienced more in depth at the graduate level. Some of the required technical skills include: community organizing, administration, policy analysis, program development, education and training, planning, legislative advocacy, supervision, grant writing, conflict resolution, staff development, needs assessment, negotiation, group dynamics, marketing, accounting, networking and linkages and community informatics.

Whether one is practicing in a micro or a macro setting the global social worker must understand that values present one of the most challenging areas for cross cultural practice since they differ across nations. For example, does your country of employment view issues from the individual viewpoint or the group level. Once discerned, this cultural value will direct the approach to practice that will produce the best outcome as well as indicates the level of the social workers cultural awareness.

### **Preparation, Process and Re-entry**

Once you understand the professional skills and challenges that are necessary for a career in international social work one needs to explore the preparation, the process and gain an understanding of re-entry issues. Personal preparation begins with the question, “Why are you interested in global social work practice?” It is important to clarify what a career in global social work involves. Individuals need to be aware of the following entry or preparation issues. The most difficult time is at the beginning when you are overwhelmed by adjustment issues. Often times, the strangeness of a new society bring anxiety and anxiety leads to stereotyping. To be successful one must have the personal skills that include a high level of self esteem, the ability to accept others, a level of assertiveness and initiation, a level of flexibility, an ability to solve conflicts, and a clear understanding of why you want to do international versus domestic social work.

Social workers need to be aware of the concepts of counter transference and cultural counter transference as it impacts their work internationally. One of the ways to prepare yourself is to develop your own consciousness about your own culture. The social worker needs to explore one’s own cultural background as well as their multigenerational cultural heritage. This introspection allows the individual to understand their unique abilities, aspirations, talents and limitations that might affect relationships in a different culture. Since professional practices and attitudes that have worked before may no longer are adequate in the new setting, one must create cultural distance from one’s own experiences.

In order to be successful as a global social worker, one must: have the freedom to relocate from the United States, be aware of the professional and personal demands, be willing to experience intercultural living, be globally minded and be altruistic. Also you need to be willing to invest the time into studying the language since it also produces insights into the culture that uses the language and sends a positive message to the individuals you will work with.

The social worker has to begin to expose themselves to the nuances that come with the digital divide and begin to open themselves up to new technological skills. These include but are not limited to social networking tools, blogs, SKYPE, wikis, use of national and university libraries, as well as gain an understanding of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) because many international NGOs do not have computer or Internet access or have it only periodically.

## Readiness

The next part of this process is to be personally and professionally ready to begin your career abroad. Our experience at Dominican University's globally focused MSW program has brought into sharper focus the importance of readiness. The MSW students we place abroad have extensive time spent in preparation. As part of the orientation and preparation in sending students to international field placements one of the authors is the International Student Advisor. In that role she became aware of the need for a "readiness interview." Although students were coming in with more international travel experience, issues regarding finances, levels of maturity, coping styles, ability to cope with loneliness, ethical issues, adjustment to culture and language, issues of health and safety, importance of self motivation regarding their field work experience, and issues of boundaries and professionalism needed to be investigated.

Other concerns included pedagogical readiness, that is, does the student have the social work skills to do well in this international field placement and psychological readiness. Psychologically, just as there are field placements in the US that students should not attempt because of issues of counter transference, the same is for field placements as well as employment internationally. Individuals need to avoid moving into cultural counter transference difficulties. For example, if someone has experienced child sexual abuse and has not fully recovered, one would not want to place that student in an agency focusing on sex trafficking. As students prepare for this experience, sometimes the newness and excitement and exhilaration and a false positivism seems to exude over a student. Students seem to go through a process while they prepare themselves emotionally, mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually for their international experience. Each person's readiness process is unique. Some individuals come into the process with so much zeal, that they do not understand the realities of what is expected of them professionally and personally.

Although the next example describes a student process, many of the same issues arise for those seeking full time employment internationally. The individual needs to evaluate the cost realistically as well as the proposed salary. For instance, if one is going to South Africa, transportation cost associated with using an automatic rental car is over \$3000 for 10 weeks. Individuals need to be sure of the cost of housing and the safety of the environment. You must also be aware of your goals and fears and begin to evaluate your readiness physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and professionally. Feelings of loneliness and "being so far away" are common. One has to develop healthy coping styles when dealing with the stressors while abroad. Some individuals reveal that they withdraw when stress increases and one will need to develop a plan for coping with these concerns.

Assessing personal potential for substance abuse should also be a part of the readiness process since there is a high level of stress and uncertainty as well as often the lack of easy access to drinkable water. Discussion of setting appropriate boundaries at the new work place is encouraged. Social workers can experience and anticipate a level of homesickness, but may not be exactly sure what to do about it. Experience indicates

that this generally sets in around the fifth week, and the person needs to set up support systems in anticipation of this feeling. One way to counter homesickness is to establish blogs and use social networking tools such as SKYPE and your three-band cell phone.

Personal security is a very important concern and you must know how to deal with situations such as being accosted, robbed, or harmed and be prepared for these experiences at least mentally along with having a plan before leaving the country. For instance, if your passport is stolen you need to go to the US Consulate or Embassy as well as have a copy of your documents in a different location than with your passport. Also, it is important to contact someone you can trust as well as someone like a family member back home before contacting local officials. Government corruption is something US social workers need to be aware of. Also explore your greatest fears; it is amazing to hear what the fears are: from getting bit by a mosquito, to being raped- to just being lonely and homesick. Another, area to investigate is your supervision while practicing abroad especially since many nations have underdeveloped or non existent supervision.

### **Re-entry**

Once you have completed your global social work professional practice experience, you will in most cases return to the United States. Christians have learned from the many missionaries that have worked abroad and returned that there are also issues for returning social workers related to re-entry that must be dealt with in order to aid in the successful process of adjustment. Some questions you may want to ask yourself include:

- Impact of the international job has on your values, expectations and assumptions?
- What were the facilitating factors and or barriers to your engagement with the host country?
- How has your view of problems changed since experiencing your international position?
- To what degree has your level of cultural competence increased?
- How did you deal with language barriers?
- What cultural barriers did you experience?
- What did you wish you would have learned more about during your experience?
- What difficulties did you experience in transitioning back to the US?

Answering to these questions as well as realizing that most people may not want to know the details of your experience will aid you in adjusting to personal and professional adjustment back into the United States. Also be aware that once you share your experience one time, most will not want to hear about it again.

## **Acquiring the International Position**

According to the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, the field of social work is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2016. (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos060.htm>) A percentage of US MSW graduates are now choosing to take the knowledge, values and skills learned in their social work programs and experience them in countries that are in need of valuable social work skills and techniques in order to adapt and utilize them in their society. In order for an aspiring international social worker to successfully find an international social work position they must: 1) have a clear purpose of why they want to work in an international setting; 2) thoroughly research the country, organization(s) and position(s) they are applying to; 3) prepare themselves for the job search by developing a personal marketing package consisting of cover letter, resume/CV and other supporting documentation (passport, work visa) needed to secure a social work position and prepare for several interviews via the telephone or SKYPE.

### **Purpose**

There are thousands of international agencies in the world that serve various types of populations and these agencies are in search for passionate, talented social workers to aid in providing their clients and client systems with exceptional care and services. One of the keys to having a successful social work career either internationally or domestically is to have a purpose and passion for the population that you want to serve. Those pursuing an international social work position should be dedicated to the tedious process of seeking international employment as well as dedicated to the tremendous work that lies ahead as an international social worker. The ultimate goal is to determine how international employment will fit in your overall long term career goals.

Before embarking on an international career, you should ask yourself the following questions: Do I really need to go abroad to serve this population or can I serve the needs of this country and population by working at an agency domestically? Do I possess the appropriate skill set and language proficiency to work in a particular country? Will I stay abroad long term or short term? Do I have an exit strategy that will enable me to successfully transition back to the US in case the international position is terminated or I decide to continue my social work career in the US? Do I have the financial and family support as well as emotional stability to work internationally?

Once these questions have been fully evaluated and a decision has been made to pursue international social work employment then the research of the country, organization and position should immediately follow.

### **Research**

The research process is one of the most critical stages of international job seeking process. In order to make a well informed decision, international job seekers should educate themselves about the country and position before making a commitment to pursue and secure an international position. In order to conduct a thorough research of a

particular country it's important to incorporate several approaches consisting of using the internet to access country data and international job opportunities; contacting a local consulate in your state that represents your country of choice as well as reach out to personal networks comprised of individuals or organizations that are familiar with your selected country and prospective employer.

***Internet to access country data and international job opportunities***

The following will provide you with a partial listing of governmental and non-governmental agencies that provide country data and access to international job opportunities.

Agency	Information Provided	Website
U.S. Dept of State Diplomacy of Action	Passport, Visas, Travel Warnings, Emergency Services, Countries and Regions, Foreign Per Diem Rate, Preparing for a trip abroad, Document requirements	<a href="http://www.state.gov/countries">http://www.state.gov/countries</a>
Library of Congress	Country Studies, List of Countries/Continents, Country Profile, Links to electronic resources from around the world	<a href="http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cs_home.html">http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cs_home.html</a>
Goinglobal.com	Country specific career and employment information: Job resources, employment trends, financial consideration, resumes/CV, interviewing and cultural advice, work permits	<a href="http://www.goinglobal.com/">http://www.goinglobal.com/</a>
UK Pro	UK Pro is an international social services placement company, UK Pro has been linking American Social Workers to international jobs in England. This opportunity is available for candidates with a degree in Social Work.	<a href="http://www.uk-pro.net/">http://www.uk-pro.net/</a>
Overseasjobs.com	Search jobs, employer profile, tools/tips, articles/advice	<a href="http://www.overseasjobs.com">http://www.overseasjobs.com</a>

Landing an international position should not be viewed as an easy feat. You should ask yourself, why would an employer want to hire a recent social work graduate from the United States over an individual of their own country? Why would they want to invest the time and resources to indoctrinate you into their culture? You have to market yourself as a unique product (individual) that can bring new ideas and perspectives to their organization as well as demonstrate your understanding of their culture and how your skills will support and add to their organization. A better way to illustrate this is through basic marketing principles--the 4 P's of Marketing (Excerpt from Working Your Degree, *The Sentinel*, October 2009 issue)

**Product.** From a marketing perspective, you have to view yourself as a product that a consumer, or, in other words, employer will invest in. In this case, you are the product and the employer is consuming your services as a means to add value to their organization. Keep in mind that you are not defined by your degree. You can have five degrees and still not get the job or even do well in a job. You're viewed as a combination of your undergraduate and graduate education, employment, field placements, volunteer experiences, skills and value base. Through highlighting your features (i.e., international education, work experience, international field placements, community service) and benefits (i.e., assisted social workers in an international agency abroad), you have to communicate how you, as the product, will add value and complement an internationally

based organization. If your features don't quite fit what the employer is looking for, you should be prepared to communicate how the skills that you have can be transferred to the position you're being considered for.

You must tailor your resume/CV for the particular country and job. For example, in India, an employer will take all forms of resumes/CV which are often very long with a great deal of detailed information whereas in the United Kingdom a resume/CV designed for the UK market should be two pages long. (<http://www.goinglobal.com/countries/>)

**Place and Price.** The price (i.e. salary) that you are willing to accept could potentially determine the country you will work and reside in. For example, according to [goinglobal.com](http://www.goinglobal.com/):

India's purchasing power compared to the baseline United States is 4.66 to 1, meaning that one's earnings in India should go 4.66 times further than in the United States. On the other hand, the United Kingdom, and London in particular, is an expensive place for a US job seeker to live if they are accustomed to a lower cost of living. (<http://www.goinglobal.com/countries/>)

International job seekers should be realistic in their salary expectations and be willing to compromise. If all else fails and you are not able to secure your international position abroad you could volunteer or secure a position at an international focused agency based in your home state or other part of the United States. Securing a domestic placement that services international clients will still provide you the opportunity to use your skills while awaiting the opportunity to later practice abroad. You should embrace this as an opportunity to get your foot in the door, continue to strengthen your skills and share your talents with others.

**Promotion.** You have to promote yourself. Viewing self promotion from a strengths based perspective will allow you to recognize the gifts and talents that you will bring to an international social work position. If you're seeking employment abroad you have to let the employer know what you can do for them and how your practical (field placements, international volunteer service) and theoretical knowledge, value and skills base will benefit the mission of their organization.

## **Conclusion**

More and more American social workers are seeking careers in global social work. This article has focused on the reasons for this increased interest as well as stressed the importance of developing the important professional and personal skills necessary for a successful international career. Once prepared professionally and personally, the article highlighted the approaches needed for successfully acquiring that desired international job.

Social workers from the US have much to offer and learn from colleagues and clients abroad especially if they increase their multicultural awareness and practice and decrease the practice of colonialism or professional imperialism.

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## Bios

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