



FOCUS ON RECRUITMENT AND THE WORKPLACE: INTERVIEW WITH JENNI

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QUESTION 1: Please tell me about yourself and your career journey

Hi, I am Jenni. I'm autistic and a social worker. It was a very arduous journey to achieve my professional role however I got there!

I was always told I was bright but didn't apply myself in school. School was not my safe place and I avoided it as much as possible if I could, especially in high school. I left aged 16 to begin a Youth Training Scheme (showing my age!).

I didn't know I was autistic at this point. I was considered "difficult" (understatement!). I had a social worker in my teens, for various reasons, and this was where I first started seeing how social work could make a difference to people like me experiencing trauma. They inspired me, empowered me to see my own self-worth and I now seek to emulate that in my work with other people.

I am Scottish and now live and work in England. During my career to date I have worked in a variety of jobs from collecting soil samples from farms, to various support work roles in a variety of contexts such as domestic abuse refuge, early years centres and family support before becoming a social worker.

Since qualifying as a social worker, I have worked in both the charity and local authority contexts regarding children and families. I was a team manager in the local authority before moving to my current role where I am a Principal Practice Tutor on a social work Master's programme. I manage a regional team in the South of England with responsibility for designing and delivering aspects of the programme to social work students.

I also advocate and write independently as an autistic social worker to raise the profile of autism in social work. I am the lead for the student subgroup of the BASW Neurodiversity Special Interests Group for neurodivergent social workers

QUESTION 2: Do you have any general advice for those who are about to graduate, or who have recently graduated, and who are looking to enter the world of work?

Learn your strengths and shout about them! You are essentially promoting yourself to people you want to work for so you need to let them know why you would be the best person for the job. This can be really hard when you have any doubts about your own abilities and a lot of neurodivergent people may experience this especially if they have been told they are not achieving or 'need to do better' in their lives.

Everyone has strengths, whether they are in exploring data or a particular topic, curiosity and interest in problem solving, analysis of information, or making connections between information or experiences etc. These can all be autistic strengths for example, so see if you can find them in any aspect of what you have been doing in your higher education programme. Own them. Then you will feel more confident about stating these to potential employers

QUESTION 3: Where would you recommend graduates look for jobs, and what would you recommend they look for in an advert?

Look for jobs in publications that relate to your area of interest as well as more general sites such as LinkedIn. The Guardian also has jobs pages that include social work type roles in a variety of different organisations.

Local Authorities will also advertise on their own websites so work out where you want to work, and sign up for updates on their job pages.

QUESTION 4: Do you have any advice regarding what a good graduate CV and cover letter look like?

Your cover letter will often be the hook your prospective employer may need to pay attention to what you are trying to say in your CV. Make it clear, concise and relevant to the job you are going for.

Add examples to add context to the knowledge, skills and experience you are offering

Don't make it too long. Prospective employers often have a lot to filter through and may not read the whole thing if it is several pages long.

Make sure your CV has skills included as well as any qualifications or experience.

QUESTION 5: What would you generally look for in a candidate when you are looking to hire a new employee?

Someone who has taken time to research the organisation and the role they are applying for. If it's social work, look at the local policies and service structure. Learn where your role would fit in the wider system.

Look at any local reports such as Ofsted reports or other reviews or investigations and they key findings (positive and otherwise)

I would also look for someone who is not only prepared for the interview but shows a passion for the job. Enthusiasm alongside the level of qualification and experience is a key feature of a successful application.

QUESTION 6: What general interview advice would you give, and what does a good interview look like to you?

Take your time to process the question. How you answer is important. Consider all the aspects being asked and be clear how your answer relates to them.

Use examples.

Don't forget about any transferable skills e.g., research skills, report writing, information analysis - these are all important skills for social work!

Avoid the 'fluff'. Stay on topic and try and avoid 'padding out' your answer with anything that hasn't been asked for. That doesn't mean short answers, but keep them relevant.

If you are worried that you may 'overshare' or move off-topic, use your own written prompts. These can be useful to help you prepare for an interview. write them down beforehand and pre-empt what you may be asked (e.g. skills, experience, knowledge).

Often, interviewers may ask about any learning you have had from making a mistake. This question shows you can learn from something going wrong, adapt and use that to enhance your practice. People often stumble with questions like these so have an example ready as part of your preparation!

As an interviewer, I am also looking to find out more about you as a person. I want to see elements of your personality rather than someone just responding with 'stock' answers or phrases. In social work, these could be generic phrases about 'social justice' or 'anti-oppressive practice' or 'relational practice'. Tell me what you mean by these, in your own words.

I am looking to see if you will be a good fit for the team or align with the organisational or team values. For me, someone who can display a sense of curiosity, cultural humility, respect, approachability and honesty is a person I would be interested in employing.

QUESTION 7: What reasonable adjustments can be made for neurodiverse candidates during the application and interview process?

Face to face interviews - lights shouldn't be too bright in the room and any communication needs should be addressed. If these are potential issues for you, ask about how they can be addressed when you are invited for an interview. Does the room have a Loop system if you need it? Ask the organisation to send details of how to get to the building and details of how to navigate to the actual place the interview will take place. You can also ask who will be there and what the process will entail if this hasn't been specified.

Virtual - I will also write the question in the chat function if the interview is virtual so you have a visual written version available.

As an interviewer, I don't mind being asked to say the question again. I also am fine with people taking notes or writing down the question themselves if that helps.

Let me know at the beginning if you need time to process. You don't need to say why but it helps me know that this is something that will be helpful for you and enable you to demonstrate your best self in that context.

QUESTION 8: What general advice would you give to employed graduates who are hoping to thrive at work?

A trusted relationship with a key person at work is invaluable. Ideally this should be your line manager as they will likely offer your supervision and space for you to reflect not just on your work but your own needs and progress. Supervision in social work is an essential element and if this is not available to you, it needs to be raised as a matter of urgency.

Your needs and any adjustments to support these is not an optional aspect to be considered by your employer. It is your right. If you are experiencing any barriers to inclusion in your work, consider speaking about this with your line manager in the first instance (if you can). If not, seek out other people who can promote your rights such as your HR department, trade union rep and any relevant employee group in your organisation (such as an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion working group).

Does your organisation have a neurodivergent staff group? These are great for informal peer support and connection but also can be a safe space to discuss any concerns you may have within your organisational environment. If your organisation doesn't have one,

is it something you can look at putting together? Your trade union, or EDI working group (local authorities should have one) could help with this if you don't know where to start.

QUESTION 9: What do you consider to be potential barriers to career progression for autistic graduates?

People do not understand autism. We still have a long way to go in that respect and that definitely includes in the social work profession. As a result, stigma and bias still persists in organisations and as autistic social workers, we often have to work harder for less gain. This is something I am actively seeking to change!

Whether or not you have disclosed your autistic identity, often supports for hidden disabilities are a struggle to achieve. and microaggressions are often experienced around small changes that could have a bigger impact for an autistic person, and on their sense of self-efficacy. We can often feel promotion or progression is something that doesn't relate to us.

For me, it is these barriers that are the reasons a lot of autistic social workers may struggle to progress in their careers and until this is recognised at all systemic levels it's a hard one to overcome on your own.

However, there are things we can do individually in terms of our own career progression. Similarly to applying for jobs, you need to show how you have exceeded your current role and remit, for example, through specific knowledge on a subject or area of social work. You may have used initiative and set up an approach or project to address an organisation or community need e.g. a parents' group or a reflexive staff group.

Look at where you have demonstrated leadership. That doesn't mean leading from the front, but in other ways such as influencing the learning of others through your own knowledge base in team meetings or development days. It could be supporting and mentoring others. It may be excellent practice you have demonstrated with the people you work with.

QUESTION 10: What are the pros and cons of being in social work?

Social work is an amazing career and shares some values often important to autistic communities such as social justice, anti-oppression and empowerment. It is involved across the human lifespan and is focused around supporting change in people's lives to enable them to be safe and to thrive.

Social work is often a misunderstood profession with lots of assumptions and biases that often don't relate to the experience of being a social worker or being part of the lives of others.

Social work is an underfunded, under-resourced profession that deals with issues that society in general does not want to think about or acknowledge, but also doesn't want to feel responsible to change either.

You will not be described by the media as a 'hero' or 'angel'. You will not be afforded high pay or recognition beyond the social work field for the work that you do.

But, if you practise relationally, and respectfully, you will make a difference that potentially has positive life-long implications for someone. You can make that difference between surviving and thriving for a child or adult. You can help open the door for next steps (whatever that may relate to) and enable someone to feel they are worth something, they can do it (whatever 'it' is) and they are important.

I am and always will be honored to be a part of someone's life in that way. To me, that is invaluable.