

Chapter 1

Getting to Know the Human Service Organization

The vast majority of social workers are employed in organizations. The organizational base of social work practice is rooted in the history of the profession. Social policies, in the form of legislation at the federal, state, and local levels, funding patterns, and societal sanctions help explain why so much of the practice of social work is carried out through organizations.

Each organization is different. Differences relate to varying missions, demographics, location, physical environment, management style, levels of funding and financial conditions, staff size, informal culture, and whether the organization is public, nonprofit, or for-profit, among other factors. This first chapter introduces the organization as a work setting for social workers and other human service professionals. There are many types and sources of information that can help you get to know an organization and determine whether you want to work there and, once there, how you can work effectively within it. Applicable sections of the National Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (1999) are highlighted as they pertain to practice within the organizational setting.

The Work Setting

Most work in our society is carried out through organizations. There are many different types of organizations, ranging from big-business concerns that produce products and goods we need and want to service-oriented organizations that offer specialty services to meet individual, community, and societal needs.

Newspapers contain numerous reports of the work of organizations. In recent years, Microsoft, a publicly held corporation, has been prominently featured in the press, both for its enormous success and for the antitrust activity to which it has been subjected because of its monopoly within the computer industry. Government-initiated litigation against Microsoft caused ripple effects throughout the stock market and thus the American economy. The 2001 collapse of Enron, another giant corporation, highlights the potent force organizations have on American society not only from an economic standpoint but also in regard to consumer trust (or distrust) and public sentiments about how big business operates. The ups and downs of the stock market reflect the

2 Chapter 1

financial status of hundreds of organizations, the majority of which are business or proprietary concerns, such as IBM, AT&T, United Airlines, and Bristol Meyers. We tend to take the existence of these organizations for granted, without much thought as to how they affect our lives in both positive and negative ways.

Human service organizations are business concerns, too, only their business is to address the human condition rather than produce a product; they are in the business of providing programs of service to address the needs of individuals, groups, and communities. They do this through the planning, provision, and evaluation of a wide range of services to prevent or ameliorate personal, interpersonal, community, and social problems. Human service organizations take their purpose from societal needs and priorities as defined by the larger social environment at any given time. In many ways social work practice is defined, facilitated, and at the same time constrained by the purposes and operating modes of human service organizations. For this reason, they are of great importance and concern to the social welfare community.

The majority of social workers are employed by human service organizations, and the profession of social work is unique among the helping professions in its historic and traditional organizational base of practice. Some social workers work independently as private practitioners who provide therapeutic services independent of any organization. Other helping professionals, such as psychologists and psychiatrists, tend to work independently in larger proportion than do social workers. Social workers practice, for example, in hospitals, clinics, and schools—all of which are organizations.

Within these varied organizational settings, the practice of social work is approached in different ways. Some organizations focus on a specific set of services, such as mental health or child and family services. Others, such as schools, courts, and hospitals, have primary purposes other than the provision of human services yet nevertheless provide a human service because it is consistent with or facilitates the achievement of their major missions.

Human service organizations also operate under different auspices (non-profit, for-profit, government) and, depending on their mission, address different types of problems (e.g., marital discord, depression, poverty, unemployment), provide different services (e.g., marital therapy, case management, discharge planning) oriented to different treatment goals (e.g., prevention, problem resolution, symptom alleviation), and serve different client populations (e.g., the homeless, children with learning disabilities, people with chronic mental illness). They may also employ different modalities (e.g., social group work, case work, community organizing). What human service organizations share, however, is their orientation to the prevention, amelioration, or resolution of health, mental health, social, or environmental problems that afflict individuals, families, specific groups, or communities (Gibelman, 2004). Barker (1999) defines human services as those “programs and activities designed to enhance people’s development and well-being, including providing economic and social assistance for those unable to provide for their own needs” (p. 224).

Agency Roles for Social Workers

Direct service workers, including managers, clinicians, and other line-level social workers, are the core workforce of human service organizations. These levels of practice are typically distinguished by skill and experiential requirements. For example, those holding management positions tend to have several years of direct service or supervisory experience. Within administration, there may be middle managers who occupy program management positions and upper-level managers who carry overall responsibility for the operations of the agency.

Direct service workers, or clinicians, as they are sometimes called, are the core workforce of human service organizations. They are responsible for carrying out the range of professional activities with and on behalf of clients in which the specified goals of the people served are reached through personal contact with and the immediate influence of the social worker.

The role of the direct human service worker depends on many factors, including the organizational setting and context and the needs of the clients and communities being served. Social workers carry out functions that are defined by the organization, often in a job description. Each of these functions is composed of a set of distinctive tasks that relates to the position occupied (Gibelman, 2004). The function of the social worker is defined by a confluence of factors—his or her role and job description; the training, values, and skills of the social worker; and the evolving needs of the community.

Why Do We Need to Know about Organizations?

People interact with organizations in all aspects of their lives. As children, we attend school; many of us go to a mosque, church, synagogue, or other religious institution; we go to the supermarket; our health care needs are met by a team of medical specialists who work for hospitals, clinics, or health maintenance organizations. The HMO may be a part of a nationwide network or a locally based medical group. Schools, religious institutions, supermarket chains, and hospitals are all forms of organizations. In April, we file our annual income tax returns with the federal, state, and local governments. These, too, are organizations, but under public auspices.

The fundamental interrelationship between people and organizations was summed up by Etzioni (1964) in his classic work on modern organizations:

Our society is an organizational society. We are born in organizations, educated by organizations, and most of us spend much of our lives working for organizations. We spend much of our leisure time paying, playing, and praying in organizations. Most of us will die in an organization, and when the time comes for burial, the largest organization of all—the state—must grant official permission. (P. 1)

Social work knowledge, skills, and values, along with organizational needs, norms, and culture, are dynamic forces that shape social work practice. Organizational contexts may be a particularly powerful shaping force and can have

4 Chapter 1

both positive and negative influences on social work practice. Positive attributes include the authority and mandate to provide services in the public interest. Negative attributes include sometimes burdensome paperwork and operating rules that may run counter to the provision of timely or effective service to clients. Organizations also are the funnel through which government and philanthropic dollars flow. The receipt of these dollars, in turn, obligates the organization to do certain things—serve particular groups rather than others, provide specific types of services for designated periods of time, prepare reports, and account for the outcomes of services. These attributes suggest the multidimensional environment of the organization. All human service organizations interact with the larger sociopolitical environment. Many of the policies and procedures of an organization are actually the byproducts of requirements imposed by funding bodies, legal authorities, regulatory agencies, community groups, and professional interest groups.

The organization is thus afforded both opportunities and constraints by its larger environment, a subject more fully explored in later chapters. The organization processes these opportunities and constraints into a mode of operating on a day-to-day basis. Understanding the larger context in which the organization operates and how the organization translates its mission and goals into roles and functions carried out by its employees also helps social workers understand why things are as they are. This understanding helps clarify what areas of organizational functioning can be changed to make them more responsive to the people served, those potentially in need of services, and the employees who provide the services. The more you know about how organizations work, the more possible it becomes for you to identify creative possibilities for programs, services, and practice that meet professional standards and are consistent with the best interests of the people served.

Human service organizations exert a powerful influence in shaping the nature of social work practice. The agency provides the legitimation and sanction for carrying out society's mandates in regard to the health and well-being of our citizens and controls the resources necessary to accomplish this work (Hanson, 1998). The organization defines and establishes the boundaries of social work practice.

It is common to hear social workers voice dissatisfaction with their employing organization, and typical career development patterns suggest that social workers switch jobs several times, particularly in the early days of their practice (Gibelman, 2004). There are practical reasons for this trend; social workers often earn promotions and raises when they move from one agency to another. This trend is probably also rooted in the conflict between what practitioners learn in their professional education and what they experience on the job. Organizations are dynamic and exciting, frustrating and challenging, and the way they function has enormous implications for what services are provided, to whom, for how long, and how well.

Most social workers practicing within an organization can describe in detail the organizational problems that influence their practice. These include lack

of time, large caseloads, poor communication, lack of supervision, burdensome administrative requirements, too much paperwork and not enough attention to client needs, and seemingly arbitrary rules that are subject to frequent change through new directives. Such workplace issues affect workers' attitudes toward their jobs, their clients, and their profession.

Although it is relatively easy to list the downside of organizationally based practice, it is more difficult for social workers to explain or even understand the organizational dynamics that are the basis for these problems (Resnick & Patti, 1980). Similarly, the benefits of organizationally based practice are often overlooked or not well considered. Each of the chapters in this book is intended to help human service professionals understand and work effectively within the employing organization.

Clarifying Terminology

All professions have their own language, and it is important to clarify how terms are used, particularly when more than one term is used to describe the same phenomenon.

Organizations have been defined as “formally structured arrangements of people, tools, and resources brought together to achieve predetermined objectives through institutionalized strategies” (Barker, 1999, p. 341). Within the human services, *organizations* are frequently referred to as *agencies*. These terms are used interchangeably in this book. Following are other commonly used terms:

- ◆ *Public agencies* are often referred to as *governmental agencies*.
- ◆ *Not-for-profit organizations* are also known as *nonprofit organizations* or *voluntary agencies*.
- ◆ *For-profit organizations* are also known as *proprietary organizations*. (In chapter 2, the distinctions between organizational types are discussed.)
- ◆ *Social workers* who perform direct service roles are sometimes called *workers*, *therapists*, *case managers*, or *clinicians*, depending on the nature of the job and traditions within particular organizations.
- ◆ The term *administrator* is often used synonymously with *manager*.
- ◆ The paid senior manager of the organization is called the *executive director*, *executive vice president*, or *chief executive officer (CEO)*.
- ◆ Paid employees of human service organizations are also referred to as *staff*, *personnel*, or *worker*.
- ◆ The term *human services* has been used synonymously with *social services* and *welfare services* but is considered to be more neutral and without the negative connotation associated with the term *welfare*. *Human services* became part of the professional vocabulary in 1979, when the former U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was renamed and replaced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Barker, 1999).

Ethical Guidelines

The practice of social work within an organizational setting is acknowledged in the profession's *Code of Ethics*. Many of the sections of the *Code* imply an organizational base of practice and address worker-supervisor relationships, maintenance of client records, staff development and training, conflicts of interest, relationships with colleagues, and workplace issues such as sexual harassment and labor-management disputes. One section of the *Code* deals specifically with the range of commitments to the employing organization. Section 3.09 of the *Code* (National Association of Social Workers, 1999) specifies that:

- (a) Social workers generally should adhere to commitments to employers and employing organizations.
- (b) Social workers should work to improve employing agencies' policies and procedures and the efficiency and effectiveness of their services.
- (c) Social workers should take reasonable steps to ensure that employers are aware of social workers' ethical obligations as set forth in the NASW *Code of Ethics* and of the implications of these obligations for social work practice.
- (d) Social workers should not allow an employing organization's policies, procedures, regulations, or administrative orders to interfere with their ethical practice of social work. Social workers should take reasonable steps to ensure that their employing organizations' practices are consistent with the NASW *Code of Ethics*.
- (e) Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate discrimination in the employing organization's work assignments and in its employment policies and practices.
- (f) Social workers should accept employment or arrange student field placements only in organizations that exercise fair personnel practices.
- (g) Social workers should be diligent stewards of the resources of their employing organizations, wisely conserving funds where appropriate and never misappropriating funds or using them for unintended purposes. (Pp. 21-22)

Several sections of the *Code* recognize that the organizational base of social work practice may produce conflicts between the professional and the agency. These points of conflict have long been recognized by the profession and continue to pose challenges to the conditions and nature of practice. These sections of the *Code* also recognize certain obligations on the part of social workers to the organizations that employ them, one of which is loyalty. The professional has a responsibility to ensure the organization's compliance with laws, professional standards, and ethical conduct. Finally, the professional is an agent of change, with responsibility to improve the organization in a manner consistent with the highest levels of professionalism and in the best interests of the people served.

However, ethical decision making is not always so easy. While the *Code of Ethics* does provide excellent guidance, ethical behavior is not nearly as simple as following principle *x* or principle *y*. This is because ethics are contextual. In his discussion of managed mental health care, Furman (2003) explores the contextual nature of ethics:

The ethics of an action cannot be decided outside of explicating the nature of the relationship between the two parties involved in a particular action. For example, an action that is ethical between two friends may not be ethical between a social work professional and her client. Therefore, we can say that ethical actions are the result of social work values in action within the context of the social worker-client relationship. (P. 40)

This is because different ethical mandates often clash. This is what is referred to as an ethical dilemma. According to Beckerman (1997), an ethical dilemma “is that situation in which an action is required that reflects only one of two values or principles that are in opposition to one another” (p. 6). Recognizing the competition that lies at the heart of ethical dilemmas is imperative. In consultation with their supervisors and with other social workers, social workers must often make difficult decisions to elevate one value over another. In this book, we will explore several situations in which social workers must make difficult choices between conflicting values. As you encounter these situations, ask yourself what you would do, and why. Developing the ability to reflect upon ethical dilemmas and make good, rational decisions is essential for all social workers and other human service professionals. Doing so is not easy; at times, you may feel overwhelmed and as if there is no correct decision. This is natural and is a part of what makes ethical dilemmas challenging. When you feel conflicted about your choices, it may be helpful, in addition to discussing your options with your supervisor, to contact your professional organization, such as the National Association of Social Workers. State licensure boards may also be of help in resolving these issues.

Social Work and Organizations: Historic Roots

An understanding of the dynamics of today’s human service organizations requires an appreciation of the context in which they developed (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2005). Since its inception, social work has been considered an organizationally based profession, with the majority of its workforce employed within formal organizations. At the end of the nineteenth century, social workers provided community-based services as part of the settlement house movement (Linn, 2000). Settlement houses were a way of serving the poor in urban areas; workers lived in the communities they sought to serve. Hull-House, founded by social work pioneer Jane Addams, was an early and influential settlement house in Chicago. Settlement houses provided direct services and political action, representing a true generalist practice (Payne, 2006). During the Great Depression, social workers further developed their institutional base as human service workers in New Deal programs, and later through child and family guidance clinics (Axinn & Stern, 2001). Lubove (1965) described this phenomenon: “Unlike other professions, social work was almost exclusively a corporate activity, with little opportunity for independent practice. To carve out a niche, the social worker had to attain hegemony within the agency” (p. 159). This interdepen-

8 Chapter 1

dence between practitioners and organizations is in contrast to many other professions, such as law and medicine, in which a large proportion of practitioners work independently or in small groups.

The considerable literature about professionals and organizations, whether pertaining specifically to social work or to other helping professions, includes exploration of the conflicts and/or points of congruence between professionals and bureaucracies (see, for example, Blau & Scott, 1962; Etzioni, 1964, 1969; Hasenfeld & English, 1974; Scott, 1969; Simon, 1957; Weber, 1922/1994). A bureaucracy is a type of formal organization characterized by hierarchy predicated on firmly established patterns of superior-subordinate relationships, formal and rigid operating rules and regulations, specialization and expertise, and formal operations and communications (Simon, 1957).

This classic model of bureaucracy helps us understand some aspects of organizations, but pure types of bureaucracies are more myth than fact in the human services. The automobile assembly line is more likely to display the classic bureaucratic characteristics than is the neighborhood social service agency (Weber, 1922/1994). On the other hand, huge public agencies, such as public welfare departments and child welfare agencies, have historically been linked with the bureaucratic form of organization. These organizations have been criticized for their cumbersome processes and inefficient and ineffective services. In addition, bureaucratic organizations can often feel impersonal and dehumanizing to both clients and workers. Social workers should always remember to guard against treating clients in an overly impersonal manner. It is important for workers to continually remind themselves of the reasons why they chose the profession in the first place and to do their part in humanizing their workplace. For instance, developing an appreciation for the strengths of colleagues and clients can be a way of guarding against impersonal treatment. Also, continually striving to provide culturally competent services helps to individualize social work services and meet the needs of diverse groups of clients (Harper & Lantz, 2007).

Conflicts between Professionals and Organizations

Despite modern innovations in how organizations are managed, the fact remains that professional practice within an organizational context contains some anomalies that produce strain. Organizational theories, particularly the classic theory of bureaucracy (see Weber, 1922/1994), suggest that employees will identify with, and have unconditional loyalty to, the organization. They will show a high level of acceptance of the goals and activities of the organization, and their values and norms will be consistent with and accepting of those of the organization (Scott, 1969). However, professionals, by virtue of their training and ability to perform specialized tasks autonomously, could have different priorities and work styles than those demanded by the employing organization.

Professionals are socialized to look to the profession, rather than the employing organization, as their point of reference. The worker, on the other hand, is an “agent of the agency,” receives sanction and authority from the agency, and in turn is constrained by its limitations. On the other hand, the worker’s career aspirations are professional, not organizational. These differing orientations are outlined in box 1.1.

BOX 1.1 Major Points of Conflict between Professionals and Their Employing Organizations		
<i>Distinguishing Characteristics</i>	<i>Organizations</i>	<i>Professionals</i>
Ideological commitment	Organizational loyalty	Professional norms
Primary Frame of Reference	Internal—organization based	External—professional body
Knowledge base	Organizational training	Professional education
Status base	Internal—promotion	External—credential
Legitimacy	Rules	Knowledge
Context of practice	Organizational procedures	Professional standards
Role	Employee	Practitioner
Tasks	Technical	Skill Based
Performance measures	Efficiency	Effectiveness
Autonomy	Prescribed	Open ended
Accountability—to whom	Structure	Clients
Accountability—for what	Process	Outcome
Decision making	Autocratic	Democratic
Relationships among staff	Hierarchical	Collegial
Attitude toward authority	Compliant	Intractable
Management of conflict	Avoidance	Advocacy
Orientation to change	Reactive	Proactive
Orientation to future	Long-term commitment	Open-ended commitment
Orientation to organization	Career	Instrumental
Orientation to organizational goals	Ends	Means
Orientation to management	Subservient	Facilitative
Orientation to clients	People processing	People serving

One of the components of efficiency relates to the collection of the fees that help to maintain the organization and allow it to operate smoothly. Because of the division of labor between the business and professional activities of the organization, conflicts may arise about whose job it is to collect fees from clients and what procedures should govern nonpayment situations. The vignette in box 1.2 illustrates how the differing orientations may clash.

BOX 1.2

A Clash in Orientation and Attitudes

Rosemarie was new to her position as chief financial officer for a mental health clinic. She was highly experienced in financial operations, but her work in the past had been in for-profit organizations. When she assumed her new position, Rosemarie was told that one of the important components of her job was to ensure that billing for clinical services was handled appropriately. The clinic had been losing a lot of revenue because the prior finance person was not vigilant about collecting outstanding payables.

Rosemarie took this charge seriously. In her past jobs, she learned the importance of adhering to the specifics of her job description and to performing the tasks expected of her. She was efficient and ran a “tight ship.” If collecting outstanding payments from clients was her charge, this is what she would do.

Rosemarie first set out to learn why clients were not paying their bills. She identified the receptionist, who collected fees, as part of the problem. June, the receptionist, had a big heart, and when clients indicated that they couldn’t pay or forgot to bring a checkbook, June let it go. The other problem Rosemarie identified was that the social workers didn’t deal with clients about financial issues. In informal discussions with a few of the staff social workers, Rosemarie learned that they were reluctant to bring up financial issues, particularly when a client had no insurance. The social workers knew that most of the clients served by the agency had marginal incomes and that pressing the issue of payment might either scare them away or create some tension in the client-worker relationship. They left it, by default, to the untrained receptionist.

Rosemarie asked June to notify her when a client with a “balance due” showed up for an appointment. Although reluctant, June saw no other option. It did not take long before a situation that June decided should be brought to Rosemarie’s attention arose.

Eric had been seen by his social worker for over six months and had a balance due with the agency of over \$500.00. With the payment schedule in hand, Rosemarie went to the reception area and asked Eric if she could speak with him for a minute. Rosemarie did not introduce herself until they were in her office, and she shut the door. She knew nothing about Eric other than his name, the length of time he had been a client, and his outstanding balance. Rosemarie waved the payment schedule at him as she said, “We have a serious problem, Eric. Your social worker will not be able to continue to see you until you take care of this outstanding bill. We don’t give away services here.”

Eric became visibly flustered and began to explain that he and his social worker had an understanding about paying this balance. Rosemarie interrupted and said that the social worker had been remiss about following the clinic’s rules; payment for services was to be made each time Eric was seen. Eric turned bright red, and instead of returning to the reception area to wait for his social worker, he left the clinic.

Rosemarie understood that part of her job was to make sure that payments for billable hours were received and that the backlog of outstanding accounts was cleared up as soon as possible. When Rosemarie was given this directive by the clinic director, she took her assignment seriously. She quickly got the im-

pression that the clinic staff, particularly the social workers, were not acting responsibly when they failed to discuss payments with their clients.

From Rosemarie's point of view, there was nothing wrong with her actions. However, she took action based on incomplete information. She acted as if the collection of fees was immutable law and of singular importance (Ezell, 2000). She knew nothing about Eric, his problems, or his financial situation. She did not first speak to the social worker to discuss how Eric might best be approached and by whom. She violated Eric's confidentiality, embarrassed him, and threatened his status as a client of the agency. The trust built up between Eric and his social worker was also jeopardized in this encounter. Due to her inability to understand the culture of the organization and adopt business practices to this culture, she may also have lost a client. And since reputation and the community's belief in the organization's friendliness are often human service programs' strongest marketing strategies, Rosemarie might have hurt the program from a business perspective.

In this instance, administrative goals took precedence over service goals. To the social worker, skill, knowledge, and service commitments are the primary principles in working with clients; for the organization, represented in this case by a fiscal administrator, organizational maintenance is the operating principle. The collection of fees was construed by Rosemarie as the most important goal; she viewed the aggressive pursuit of late payers as ensuring the organization's solvency. However, in this process she not only stepped on the toes of the social worker but may have caused emotional harm to the client.

Accommodations in Conflicting Orientations

The *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers, 1999) clearly states the professional's central point of reference: "Social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients" (p. 4). Certain limitations to this core responsibility are noted in the *Code*, such as social workers' responsibility to the larger society or to specific legal obligations. Performance criteria, decision-making prerogatives, and the exercise of discretionary judgment are, for the social worker, based on the special knowledge and skills of the profession. From the organization's point of view, such prerogatives may conflict with rules, regulations, and operating procedures in which individuality is deliberately overshadowed by standardized role prescriptions. There may be sanctions exercised against the social worker who fails to conform to the agency's ways of doing business. The result may be a high level of frustration, culminating in burnout.

Although the literature has emphasized the conflicts between organizations and professional practice, the relationship is not always dysfunctional. Blau and Scott (1962) and Vinter (1974), for example, noted several points of congruence, including ideology and standards related to affective neutrality or impersonality, derivation of agency goals and professional service aims from the

same humanitarian value system, and discharging professional functions through circumscribed roles that complement the organization's assignment of official duties.

Accommodation between professional practice and organizational operations is possible. This accommodation allows the professional to exercise functional autonomy within his or her area of specialization. The organization is dependent on its workforce to achieve its objectives and, accordingly, there must be some attention to the "human element" to motivate and maintain that workforce (Argyris, 1962; McGregor, 1960). The worker receives compensation in the form of wages, insurance, vacation, and sick leave. The organization also offers position, experience, and security. The worker, on the other hand, offers skill, energy, work, and commitment.

Human service organizations must constantly adapt to their larger environment—to changes in laws, budget allocations, contractual arrangements, and societal attitudes about people in need and the appropriate responses to such needs. The functions of the organization are thus not constant, and who gets served, with what kinds of services, and for what length of time are influenced by legal mandates and fiscal allotments decided by authorities outside the organization. On the other hand, the professionals working within these same organizations are consistent in their allegiance to professional norms and a commitment to service. The consistency of purpose of the professional workforce is a mediating factor in the cycles of organizational change.

Changing Conceptions of Organizations

Today, attitudes toward how organizations should be run differ substantially from the classic bureaucracy described by earlier theorists. Efficiency has ceased to have its appeal as the most important goal or characteristic of organizations. The work environment itself is seen as a critical variable in how much and how well organizations function to achieve their purposes.

New schools of thought emphasize the importance of the human element in organizational dynamics, as well as noneconomic social rewards and informal communication and leadership structures (Etzioni, 1964). Conceptualizations of the modern organization also include attention to values, norms, beliefs, symbols, and rituals that provide meaning and direction for individual and collective behavior within the context of the work environment (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Organizations are now perceived to be open systems, linked integrally to their environments (Hanson, 1998; Scott, 1992).

In today's view, organizations are dynamic, evolving and changing in interaction with external stimuli. Alliances within and between organizations form and re-form among employees, key stakeholders, and interest groups as each seeks to enhance its own interests. Within this context, each organization develops a unique culture that affects how it operates and how well (Hanson, 1998).

As social work has become increasingly legitimized and respected as a profession, social workers have been able to exert more influence on the climate and operating modes of human service organizations. They have done this, in part, by becoming the managers of these organizations. Social work managers are likely to evidence an openness to community, professional, and client input, to adopt a more collaborative management style, to respect and encourage a substantial degree of autonomy in regard to professional practice, and to focus on the outcomes achieved rather than just the process of the work conducted by the organization.

Social workers in management positions have found alternative ways of viewing organizations. It is important to remember that the purpose of human service organizations is to serve clients. Toward this end, organizations should never forget the needs of those who work directly with clients—human service workers (Rapp & Poertner, 1992). Saleebey (2002) describes the strengths perspective in the following way:

Practicing from a strength orientation means that everything you do as a social worker will be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit clients' strengths and resources in assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings. (P. 3)

Leaders who operate from the strengths perspective seek to point out the strengths of those they supervise. They understand that drawing attention to and helping staff maximize their strengths facilitates the achievement of organizational goals (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2008). They seek to promote organizational structures and practices that encourage workers to develop their skills as workers and as human beings while providing services to clients. This approach is congruent with new collaborative and participatory styles of management that have become increasingly important in the business and health care arenas (Nissan, Merrigan, & Kradt, 2005).

Sources of Information about Organizations

There are times in a social worker's career when learning about an organization is critical. One obvious time is during the job search process, when one must make decisions about the fit between oneself and a job. The newly employed social worker will need to learn quickly about how the organization functions. A thorough look at the organization may also be useful to the more seasoned employee, particularly at such times when he or she wants to change certain aspects of the organization's operations that are seen as having a negative impact on work performance and/or client services.

Like people, organizations are complex. Each, for example, has a personality, a style, and strengths and weaknesses. We make decisions about the features we like about organizations based on our own personal preferences and styles.

We do this as part of the job search process. We also do this once on the job, when we evaluate for ourselves the fit between what we want to be doing as professionals and the opportunities afforded by the agency. We do this, too, when we engage in a process of deciding to change jobs.

Individuals have their own criteria when judging what a good working environment is. Factors in personal decision making include the nature of the job itself—the problem situations presented by clients, the program of services designed to meet client needs, the types of intervention used, and so on. In addition, every organization has its own climate and unique environmental features. It is important to learn as much about the agency's culture as possible and to assess how compatible this environment is with one's own preferences and work style. Two agencies may have positions with a similar title involving the same client population, but the work may be quite different depending on the agency context. The critical difference, in fact, may lie within the organization—its type, its management, and its culture.

There's a lot more involved in getting to know an organization than can be found in a job description, a position title, or a salary figure. It's important for social workers to look at the culture of the organization and determine whether they would really enjoy doing that job in that particular environment (Joyce, 2000).

Your thoughts when you interview for a job or begin to wonder if where you work is a good match with what you want to be doing may be similar to those expressed in box 1.3.

BOX 1.3
The Right Fit

You've just received your MSW. It's spring, and there are many job listings. You send out ten resumes on the first round to test the water. You are called in for four interviews. All involve work with people with chronic mental illness. Two are neighborhood centers that provide day treatment. One is large, the other much smaller. One interview is with a residential facility in the suburbs. It's a rather lengthy commute, but the place is beautiful. The final interview is with the city's Department of Mental Health.

It's not so simple to decide which job may be best for you. You need to ask more questions, look things over more carefully, even analyze your own personality before you say yes to a job.

You need to ask yourself: Do I want to work in a small agency or a large one? Do I want a formal environment where I wear a suit or a more relaxed atmosphere? Do I want to be surrounded by low-sided cubicles that give me easy access to conversation, or do I work better alone? Will I get along with my supervisor? With my colleagues? What's most important to me—how much I get paid or how large my caseload will be? These issues can ultimately determine your level of job satisfaction.

(continued on next page)

We all know that the people interviewing us are sizing us up. Do we have the necessary qualifications? How good are our skills? Will we get along with coworkers? We wonder about whether we made the proper impression. It's human nature to feel as though the job interview is the test of our attractiveness as a prospective employee. However, interviews should be two sided. This is the time to ask questions.

Many people don't interview very well, because they interview for the job but not for the organization or career. Selecting a job—and being selected by the agency—is about a mutual fit.

You probably have some idea of what you want from a job, a career, and a workplace. Looking for that right fit involves forethought about what these personal and professional wants are. As you interview, as you walk around the agency and talk to staff, are you seeing the type of environment in which you want to work?

The City Department of Mental Health offers a lot more money than the other three agencies with which you interviewed. It is a huge agency, employing hundreds of people. The atmosphere gives modern-day credence to Max Weber's (1922) description of a classic bureaucracy: large, impersonal, rule-oriented, and procedurally rigid. You think back to those textbook descriptions. You need to know more. And you need different perspectives—not just those of the supervisor or manager with whom you are interviewing but also those of the staff. Ask staff members about what a typical workday is like. What are the real work hours as opposed to those posted?

There is no perfect agency size; it depends on individual preference. It's worthwhile to visit and experience agencies of different types and sizes. You can learn a lot about an agency by observing what's going on. How do people interact? What's the feel of the place?

A substantial amount of homework is required in advance of a job interview. The first consideration is knowing what background information you need. A review of written materials before the interview will help you to ask the right questions.

What to Request

For students whose first introduction to human service organizations is their field placement, the foundation practice class provides the opportunity to learn about what questions to ask and what documents to request. The field instructor, in conjunction with the classroom teacher, will assist you in obtaining the documents and responding to questions.

For the graduating student who is job hunting, how to access such documents that describe the organization may be less clear. Some people may be concerned that asking for too much information will be viewed negatively by the potential employer. This is seldom the case. Managers tend to view it as a plus when potential employees do their homework in advance and can speak knowledgeably about the organization and their fit within it. The same holds true for the more experienced practitioner who is interested in exploring new job opportunities.

Box 1.4 provides examples of the broad range of questions you can ask about specific human service organizations. Because social workers spend a large proportion, if not all, of their careers in the organizational setting, picking the right agency in which to work is as important as decisions about the functions they want to perform and the populations with whom they wish to work. Many organizations now have their own Web site. In other instances, colleagues may be able to provide important information about actual experiences in working with the organization. The informal network works well in providing the real scoop about a workplace.

Most organizations have information sheets or pamphlets available to the public about their services. These public information documents typically define the services the organization provides, eligibility requirements for service, and specific target groups or populations for which the organization's services are designed. Sometimes these documents include information about fees. In bilingual communities, such information is often available in the languages spoken.

Many organizations prepare an annual report. Public agencies are often required by law to issue a yearly statement about their progress toward achieve-

BOX 1.4

What You Want to Know about an Organization

- ◆ Under what auspices does the organization operate (for-profit, nonprofit, or public)?
- ◆ What are the stated purposes of the organization?
- ◆ If it is a voluntary organization, who serves on the board of directors?
- ◆ How are the programs and services financed?
- ◆ Who's the boss?
- ◆ How many professional employees are there?
- ◆ What is the organization's orientation to service?
- ◆ What type of supervision is available and how often?
- ◆ Does the organization have a clearly delineated target population?
- ◆ What's the atmosphere like?
- ◆ How long do professional employees, on average, stay on the job?
- ◆ Are there promotional opportunities from within the organization?
- ◆ How fiscally sound is the organization?
- ◆ What do people in the community know and think about the organization?
- ◆ What do employees say about the organization?
- ◆ What kinds of continuing education opportunities are available through the organization?
- ◆ Does the organization pay for and provide time off from work for participation in continuing professional education programs offered outside the organization?
- ◆ Are professional employees unionized?

ment of their goals. Nonprofit agencies may prepare an attractive annual report to help in their fund-raising and public education efforts. This report usually includes statements by the president of the board of directors and the executive director in the form of a review of the past year's accomplishments, a description of the programs offered, demographics of the client population, financial reports, and future plans.

Other documents helpful to understanding the organization are the bylaws and the constitution. Although these documents may be written in legalistic terms, they provide information about the governance structure, mission, and goals of the organization.

It is essential that social workers understand the philosophical base of their organization. Although this information is sometimes available in written form, as illustrated in box 1.5, it may best be gleaned from conversations with staff. Such conversations also allow the social worker to judge the extent to which a written philosophical statement is consistent with actual practice. How committed is the agency to serving underserved populations? What happens if the client can't pay? Is there a sliding fee scale? Will fees be waived? How does the agency feel about the use of staff time for case-and-cause advocacy? Is this part of the expectations or are social workers expected to advocate on their own time? How receptive is the organization to program expansion to meet the changing needs of the community? In this same vein, what does the organization do to tap the pulse of the community to determine service needs?

You will want to know the auspices of the organization. Is it for-profit? If so, what does this mean in terms of the types of clients served and eligibility for service? If the organization is nonprofit, who are the members of the board of

BOX 1.5
One Organization's Philosophy

Our services are guided by a philosophy that emphasizes understanding the unique qualities and experience of each child as influenced by the complex interaction of personality, emotional and cognitive development, family situation, and social environment.

We view psychotherapy with children as a dynamic, interactive assessment and treatment process that examines problems while building on strengths, and believe our intervention is most effective when parenting figures are actively involved.

We are committed to making our services accessible to all children and families in the community who can safely and productively participate in outpatient mental health treatment, while offering referral and advocacy for those who may require a more restrictive and structured environment.

Source: Adapted from Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut (1999) p. 1.

directors? From where does the agency raise its money? Does the agency have assets? Does the organization routinely monitor and evaluate the services it provides? Are there systems for involving consumers and staff in planning, designing, modifying, and making other important decisions about its operations that affect the quality of care?

The remaining chapters of this book focus on the distinguishing characteristics of human service organizations and how their features and operating modes affect the day-to-day practice of social work within them. Because organizations are so diverse, it is not possible to touch on all the factors that influence the organizational base of practice. The areas selected for discussion in the following chapters show the range of factors that influence the organization, both internally and externally. Internal factors have to do with decisions largely (but not exclusively) made within the organization about how it will carry out its business, for example, organizational structure and management style. External factors include social welfare laws and regulations, judicial decisions, funding allocations, and the level of competition among similar agencies in the community. These and other factors establish the parameters in which the organization functions and set the boundaries for social work practice within them.

Key Points

- ◆ Organizations affect every aspect of our personal and professional lives.
- ◆ Human service organizations are one type of organization; their specific focus is the broad arena of human well-being.
- ◆ The NASW *Code of Ethics* acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between the social worker and the organization.
- ◆ The mission statement, program goals, objectives, and operating modes define the nature of professional practice within the organization.
- ◆ Since its inception, social work has been considered an organizationally based profession, with the majority of its workforce employed within formal organizations.
- ◆ Conflicts between organizations and their professional workforce are rooted in differing orientations, including those of work style, priorities, and loyalties.
- ◆ Despite the emphasis on conflict between organizations and professionals, there are points of congruence, including objectivity, neutrality, and humanitarian values.
- ◆ Today's organization is seen as an open system, dynamic, evolving, and changing in interaction with its employees, key stakeholders, interest groups, and the larger community.
- ◆ The organizational context has both positive and negative influences on professional practice.

- ◆ Much of the information a social worker wants to know about an organization is a matter of public record. Knowing what to ask for is the key.

Suggested Learning Activities and Discussion Questions

1. Section 3.09 of the NASW *Code of Ethics* points out the ethical obligations of the social worker within his or her employing agency. Is the obligation one sided? Read over the *Code* to see whether there are provisions that apply to the obligations of the agency to its employees. Is there anything missing from the *Code* that you think should be there in regard to the obligations of the agency?
2. Identify two points of conflict between professionals and organizations that seem particularly applicable to your field placement agency or current work environment. Provide specific examples of these conflicts and discuss how they play out in day-to-day work. How have these conflicts been addressed?
3. Put yourself in the role of Eric's social worker. Eric was the client whom Rosemarie, the chief financial officer, confronted about fees he owed to the agency. How would you address this situation in regard to your supervisor, Rosemarie, Eric, and perhaps others in the agency?
4. Make a list of the five most important things you would want to know about an organization before you would consider working for it. Then devise a plan for how you would get answers to these questions before an interview.
5. Suppose that you have your pick of jobs. How would you make a decision? What would be most important to you in deciding between two or three different agencies?

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20 Chapter 1

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