DEVELOPING AS A PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Want advice on how to develop as a public health professional? This article offers pointers to those new in the field as well as to those with years of experience. It includes both a list of core competencies and descriptions of skills and attributes critical to continued advancement.

STARTING OUT

One of the first steps to take when thinking about professional development is to answer the question, Who am I? This includes, What experience do I bring? What are my skills? What is my formal education? What are my networks (e.g., Who do I know working in public health that I can draw on as a resource)? In short, what is my story?

When thinking on this, be creative. Do not just stick with formal training and paid experience but consider all relevant experience, including skills from other fields or activities. How might these experiences and skills be put to use when working in public health? (See the video “Career advice” on our Conversations page for comments on this topic from public health professionals and educators.)

Follow this exercise with the question, “What sort of work excites me?” Do you like working by yourself or as a member of a team? Do you want the security of a fixed position, or do you prefer the liberty of consulting and shorter-term projects? Does the thought of academic research make your heart race, or are you most alive doing direct service work or working with a grassroots group? Are you an epi and numbers person, or do you prefer crafting and working to implement policy? In 2008, USAID’s Global Health Fellows Program described the following areas as “hiring trends”: knowledge management/information technology in health promotion, avian influenza, gender health (women’s and men’s), monitoring and evaluation, surveillance and epidemiology, behavior change communication, reproductive health and family planning, capacity building, and health systems. That said, think about the role you wish to play.

The next step is to ask, “What values matter most to me?” Do you care about status as an intellectual or about knowledge, or both equally? Do you value
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independence or relationships, or again, both? Does profit or social justice take priority? Do you prefer a high-pressure, competitive setting to a more open, easy-going atmosphere? Would you prefer working in a small group with a greater range of assignments to finding a niche within a large organization, or vice versa? If you need help creating your list, NYU Wagner’s Career Services is one who offers a skills and values assessment tool.


Would you prefer to work on domestic issues or with an international focus? Remember that either addresses global health concerns. If your focus is international, do you want to work locally with an international agency or would you prefer to work in the field. What about in a low-resource setting? Would you be comfortable with few material comforts? Have you shown this to be the case through your life experience? (Again, think creatively. If your work experience abroad is limited, can you demonstrate it in other ways? Can you get that experience now?) What does your personal and family situation permit? The logistics of integrating work and personal life can influence your answers to these questions.

Next, take a look at the field of public health? What does it look like? Who are the key players? Look around at the web and at global public health job postings. (See our Resources pages and our Professional development resources). Who is doing what? How are they doing it? Where are they doing it? Look not just at job postings but at project and research descriptions on the websites of organizations whose work interests you. Talk with academics in the field. Attend professional events and seminars, and talk with others there.
CORE COMPETENCIES

The field of public health is becoming increasingly professionalized, which aside from any degrees, requires building a variety of hard and soft skills. The specific combination of skills and characteristics needed depends on the role you hope to fill. Below is a bit of a laundry list.

- Advocacy – the ability to use research and evidence to push for increased effectiveness in programs and policy
- Bi-lingual (at least)
- Communication skills – the ability to share ideas clearly with internal and external audiences in oral and written form
- Cultural competency (more below)
- Data analysis and statistical skills (whether using your own data or that of others)
- Flexibility
- Financial planning, management and budgeting skills (including the ability to analyze cost/benefit and cost/effectiveness of interventions)
- Humility
- Leadership skills (more below)
- Long-range view – the ability to work in a world where you may not live long enough to see the outcome of your efforts
- Management and project management skills – the ability to get people and things to work together to achieve a shared goal on time and within budget
- Negotiation and community outreach skills – the ability to build partnerships and relationships; the ability to develop
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common goals and support for those goals among key stakeholders

• Program development skills – the ability to craft feasible programmatic interventions from evidence of what works, or to create and test interventions to see if these work

• Public policy skills – the ability to recognize policy interventions that improve public health and to shape public policy toward these goals

• Qualitative research skills

• Quantitative research skills

• System analysis – the ability to see linkages within a system (or systems) and where changes in one area will have impact in another

• Writing skills – the ability to write persuasively and comprehensibly to public health professionals, and those who are not

Another way to learn what skills are important to public health work is to go onto public health job posting websites and the career pages and job postings on websites of organizations in the field. Look at what skills are required for job candidates.

See also the “Essential skills” and “Any advice?” videos on our Conversations page and the Association of Schools of Public Health's (ASPH) MPH Core Competency Model.

GETTING THERE

Building skills: What do you need to get where you want to go? Do you need a skill you do not yet have? If you are now a student, choose your courses to fill these gaps. Do you perhaps need another degree to become eligible for the role you hope to fill? Otherwise, stand alone courses and internships are good skill builders.
Networking: Do you need connections you do not yet have? How can you develop these? Attend seminars and conferences. Join professional organizations. Talk with the people you meet. Ask for an appointment to talk with other professionals about their organizations and work (informational interviews). Follow up on contacts made, and be generous with your resources. The value in a network of professional relationships is not so much about what you can get out of them but what you bring to them – using networks to help achieve social goals.

Field experience: Field experience matters. If you do not already have experience in the field and are having trouble finding someone willing to pay you for your first experience, use internships and volunteer positions to gain field experience specifically related to your goals.

Explaining it to others: Create a story – where you’ve been, where you want to go, what you’ve done to get there and why this is your choice. Develop longer and shorter versions. (By longer, we mean two minutes rather than 30 seconds.) Practice telling these stories to the mirror, to your friends and to colleagues. Be prepared for followup questions when offering your story to people you wish to integrate into your network or potential employers.

Serendipity: Many years ago, Louis Pasteur cautioned, “in the fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind.” Speak with any long-term public health professional, and they will inevitably talk of the role of serendipity in the journey to their current work. Thus, in addition to actively pursuing your goals, be open to unexpected opportunities that may not seem directly related to your current goals. For some, pursuing these serendipitous opportunities permanently changed their direction; for others, it fed into their goals in unexpected ways.

“Always actively engage with and critique with your own experiences, rather than passively moving through the steps in your training. What are you learning from your classes, from your reading, from your internships, from your conversations? Not just so that you can optimally package everything you’ve done during an interview but so that you can identify what you’ve enjoyed, what the gaps are, and what you need to do next.”—Vandana Trapathi
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Our Professional development resources page has links to the websites of professional organizations and to job searching tools. Putting internships to work offers advice on how to find and use internship positions.

CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT

Keep learning: Keep your knowledge current. Be aware of new research findings and their implications for policy and programs. Join listserves that focus on your issue areas. Attend seminars and conferences. Read and contribute to reputable blogs. (See our Reference, Research, and Advocacy Materials and Public Health Topics, Programs and Projects pages for organizations of potential interest.)

Build cultural competence: Develop an awareness of your own perceptions and worldviews, and of how others see you. Understand the influence of your gender, your national and ethnic heritage, your cultural and religious (or lack thereof) upbringing, and the like. Know that your ethics and values, in short, your worldview is shaped by your experience and cultural heritage. This means that your definitions for right and wrong may not be universal. For example, punctuality may be a virtue in your culture, but not everywhere. Socially acceptable reasons for marrying, who to marry, or whether to have children vary from culture to culture. Proper address of elders differs as well. This list could be endless. The point is to remember that your view of right and wrong is influenced by your heritage and may be different from the values of others.

Listen carefully to the words of others. What matters to them? Carefully observe behaviors. What is revealed in these that is not easily observed in the words? What do the words and behavior reveal about social order and values? Remember that what you see is only the tip of the iceberg. Spoken words and observable behaviors are built on a vast repository of beliefs and knowledge – both explicit and implicit. Look beneath the surface. Develop knowledge of the culture in which you find yourself. Learn the local language, dialect or vernacular. When you find yourself frustrated, ask yourself, is their way wrong or just different from mine?
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Make explicit that which is implicit – first in your own mind and then in your conversations with others. If you hope to have a real impact on the welfare of others, understanding their world and your relationship to it is an imperative first step.

(See also the videos “Lessons from the field” and “Wisdom from experience” on our Conversations page for comments on the need for cultural competence in public health work and the impact of cultural difference on research and research findings.)

**Develop leadership skills:** Our definition of leadership does not center on control but on setting goals and inspiring others to achieve them. It is about building skills in others, including their ability to lead. It includes getting others the resources and authority that permit them to contribute. Leadership is about building a common sense of mission through collaboration with others, drawing on their skills to achieve shared goals. It involves wisdom, insight, compassion and respect.

That said, the study of leadership and how to build leaders is beyond the scope of this presentation. Therefore, we list a few resources known for their work in this area at the end of this article and offer these few thoughts:

Learn how to build consensus and support through a participatory process of goal development – whether these are program, policy or internal team goals. Identify key stakeholders (including those traditionally excluded), build on shared goals, and negotiate a solution when goals conflict. Look for solutions (options) that allow everyone to win. Solicit ideas from all. Remember that approaches to conflict resolution and negotiation (and comfort with these approaches) vary considerably from person to person and across cultures. Look, listen and observe all participants. Ensure that all are included, drawing in the reticent.

Develop your voice as a leader in the field. Present at conferences and seminars. Write for journals. Speak out through blogs and op-ed pieces.

Get a mentor, and then, be one to others. Identify your ethical standards and their value to you and your community. Teach these to others.
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**Stay networked:** There is an old joke about a young man who stopped an old woman on the street in New York City and asked, “how do you get to Carnegie Hall” (a renowned musical performance space)? Although the young man was looking for directions, the old woman replied, “Practice, my boy, practice.” Getting things done when working in nonprofit organizations and government requires an adaptation of this maxim: Network, my boy, network. Keep going to seminars and presentations, or giving them. Look for opportunities to share information and knowledge with your colleagues. Remain available to others as a resource.

**RESOURCES**

**Career guidance**

[Putting internships to work.](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html)

[Professional development resources.](http://idealist.org)

[The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers.](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html)

[The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for Sector Switchers.](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html)

[G. Richard Shell. *“Bargaining Style Assessment Tool”* (available online in Negotiate Like the Pros by K.L. Shropshire).](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html)

[Global Health Education Consortium (GHEC). *Global Health: Career Options & Specialization*](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html) (This site provides a list of the major job options, commentary on job availability, and expectations of prior training and experience.)

**Skills and core competencies**

[Public Health Foundation’s Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals.](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html)

[InterAction’s Monday Developments](http://www.nyu.edu/mph/discover/professional_development_article.html) February 2007 magazine focused on “Career development and other human resources challenges.”
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**Cultural competence**

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada’s Center for Intercultural Learning offers electronic copies of their publications *A Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person* and *Cross-Cultural Effectiveness – A Study of Canadian Technical Advisors Overseas* and a print copy *Cross-Cultural Collaborations - Making North-South Cooperation More Effective*. They are not available for download but may be requested at no cost.


Georgetown University’s National Center for Cultural Competence


U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Cultural Competence Resources.

**Leadership**

Research Center for Leadership in Action, housed in Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University.

The Center for Creative Leadership.

Leadership Learning Community.

Rockwood Leadership Institute.

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