Finding the perfect match: Pre-placement meetings in social work practice learning

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Abstract: Prior to the commencement of a practice placement, a social work student will usually be invited to meet formally with their practice educator, and sometimes other members of the team, in their work setting to discuss a range of issues about the forthcoming placement. In the absence of significant research about these pre-placement meetings, this small-scale study examined the understandings and experiences of social work students and practice educators regarding the role played by this meeting. Qualitative methods were employed to answer a range of questions related to how the pre-placement meeting was used to aid decision-making about the viability of the placement, participants' perceptions of the meeting, and concerns about the process that needed to be addressed. Findings indicate that there are a variety of ways in which the meeting is configured and organised, understood and used. The implications for the organisation of social work practice placements are discussed.

Keywords: pre-placement meetings; practice educators; social work

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Background

At the time of data collection, social work qualifying education in England and Wales required students to undertake two hundred days of supervised and assessed practice in different settings over the duration of their course of study (Department of Health, 2002). This practice placement component of the social work degree was of considerable significance and accounted for approximately fifty per cent of the time students spent on qualifying education. Universities configured the two hundred days of practice in different ways, often dividing the time in undergraduate programmes into two equal placements sited in the second and third years of study. The configuration of practice placements changed from September 2013 as qualifying programmes redeveloped to conform to new requirements (Social Work Reform Board, 2010). Practice, however, remains a core component of the new degree and pre-placement meetings continue to be a key feature of the placement process.

Central to the placement process is the practice educator, often an experienced practitioner who has received additional training for the role which includes supervision, support and assessment of students. Practice educators can either be a member of a team within an agency, often referred to as an 'on-site' practice educator, or they can be an independent 'off-site' practice educator. If the latter arrangement is in place, the practice educator and student will be supported by an on site supervisor who provides day-to-day management and oversight of the placement. Prior to the commencement of a placement, a student will usually be invited to formally meet with the practice educator, and sometimes other members of the team, in their work setting. Whilst these pre-placement meetings are common practice across university programmes there is limited knowledge about how they are configured and how agencies and individual practice educators choose to use them.

Given their widespread use and the potential significance of these meetings, the lack of research concerning their role and purpose is notable, although a number of studies allude to their importance as a means of establishing an effective and purposeful placement. For example, Barron (2004) argues that one of the principal purposes of the meeting is to clarify what work the student will undertake on placement, although his research indicates that students, especially in non-statutory social care settings, often remained unclear about their role until well into the placement. Similarly, Advocacy in Action et al. (2006) suggest that pre-placement meetings build

personal connections between key placement participants and enable the development of good working relationships. Whilst these studies highlight the potential usefulness of pre-placement meetings, Wilson et al. (2009) note the absence of pre-placement meetings in some Irish settings and how students subsequently felt that the lack of this building block adversely affected the success of their placement.

Given the lack of empirically based evidence about pre-placement meetings, the current research sought to understand the experiences of both students and practice educators of this meeting and to identify the purposes of the meeting. In particular, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are students' and practice educators' experiences of pre-placement meetings?
- What role did the pre-placement meeting take in deciding whether this was a suitable placement for the student?
- What are students' and practice educators' expectations of a pre-placement meeting?
- Do students or practice educators' report any concerns about the pre-placement meeting?

Methodology

This small-scale case study research was conducted at one post-'92 university. Data were collected from two focus groups, one with practice educators and one with students, which were convened prior to second year undergraduate social work students commencing their first practice placement. The focus groups used a semi-structured approach which encouraged dialogue and discussion rather than adhering to a rigid focus group schedule. The practice educator focus group comprised eight experienced practice educators, or organisers of practice learning, drawn from across a region. The group included representation from both the statutory and voluntary sectors, and independent practice educators. There was, however, a gender imbalance as only one participant was male. In addition, four practice educators who were unable to participate in the focus group subsequently provided a written account of their views and experiences of pre-placement meetings. The student focus group comprised

five female students, all of whom had recent experience of attending a pre-placement meeting. The format and content of their focus group was similar to that of the practice educator's focus group. It should be noted, however, that the student focus group discussion centred on their recent experience of participating in a pre-placement meeting prior to their first practice placement, whilst the practice educator data reflects views and experiences about pre-placement meetings more generally.

Ethical approval was obtained to conduct the study and care was taken to advise respondents that their participation was voluntary. All respondents were provided with an information sheet about the project and all gave written consent regarding their participation. Both focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed and data analysis software (NVivo 8) was used to manage the data and to allow coding of the material by the research team members. This allowed for coding to be checked between the research team and therefore enhanced the trustworthiness of the coding and findings.

Findings

In this section we consider the research questions individually and explore themes which emerge from the data. A consistent theme throughout our discussion is that pre-placement meetings have a number of functions although the main purpose is to establish a good 'match' between student and placement. We analyse this assertion in greater detail in the discussion section of the article.

Experiences of pre-placement meetings

The data indicate that there is little consistency regarding the format of the pre-placement meeting and that experiences differed across the student cohort. For many students it represented an opportunity to receive information about the agency and nature of the work that they were to be involved in, to meet key members of staff and to gain an understanding of how the placement operates. From the perspective of the placement, it enabled the practice educator and their team to meet the student in person and crucially it helped them to decide if they were prepared to offer a placement to the student. There appears to be significant differences in

the format and structure of pre-placement meetings with some students experiencing a very informal one to one meeting which seemed to be no more than a 'rubber stamping' of the offer of a placement. One student indicated that the main conversation at her meeting centred on 'when (did) I want to start' and how the start date could be arranged around her own needs. Other practice educators seemed to be equally relaxed and viewed the meeting as

> *an opportunity to talk to them (students) informally about why they want to be a social worker and how they have arrived here and a bit about myself ... and then they meet the team (Practice educator – focus group).*

Other students, however, had very different experiences and received what amounted to a formal job interview sometimes featuring a written exercise or participation in a group.

> *I tell them for how long we are going to meet and I always ask them to do a five minute presentation about themselves and why they want to do social work (Practice educator – focus group).*

Whilst there may be differences in experience there were consistent views as to the purpose of the meeting, at least from practice educators. Typically, they used the pre-placement meeting as a means of deciding if the placement could meet student learning and support needs in terms of skills and knowledge development, learning styles and needs arising from students' personal circumstances. This process is informed by the screening, and sometimes rejection, of placement application forms and previous placement reports received from students.

> *I may have screened out at the first point because we had five forms through … one specifically only worked from 9-5 and our service is not 9-5 so I screened that out (Practice educator – focus group).*

> *Prior to the meeting I like to see the student's information and identified learning outcomes also to see PLO1 (first placement) recommendations. I can therefore assess whether I think the placement can meet the student's needs (Practice educator – written response).*

Practice educators typically took a holistic view of students' needs and

considered learning needs as well as issues relating to disability, childcare or family commitments.

> *… issues around care and disability are questions that I would always be asking at that meeting to make sure that it is absolutely clear what support is needed for them and what flexibility is required and so on (Practice educator – focus group).*

> *I have two students where English is not their first language and it has really been quite relevant as ... you know if English is their second language ... can they write it well? ... because again what support do they need? (Practice educator – focus group).*

> *One of the questions I ask, rightly or wrongly I don't know, but for me it feels helpful is to know what their overall average grades are academically because that gives you a certain insight (as) to how much support they might need for report writing and in the work place* (Practice educator – focus group).

One practice educator, however, cautioned against asking potentially intrusive questions about family and caring commitments, regarding this as potentially oppressive gendered practice:

> *I certainly don't want to get back to the 'bad old days' when women were asked about family commitments, which inevitably meant child care, and even at times asked about plans for future pregnancy etc. (Practice educator – written response).*

At the pre-placement meeting, students were seen as a valuable source of information about their own needs and aspirations, although practice educators varied in their approach to getting to know the students. The majority relied on informal conversation whilst sometimes more formal methods were used to engage with and to assess the student. Invariably, getting to know the student involved a two-way dialogue between the student and practice educator, with information being shared about the placement setting, the team and the background and professional interests of the practice educator. These initial exchanges of information were often viewed as being significant and as the start of the working collaboration between student and practice educator.

Decision-making and pre-placement meetings

However the meeting was configured or experienced, the primary function, particularly for practice educators, was to establish if the student would be suitable for the placement on offer. Establishing a 'match' between the placement and the student was emphasised by practice educators who frequently spoke about trying to establish that the student and the placement were 'right' or 'suitable' for each other;

> *We always make it clear that it is about whether this placement is right not just for them ... but for us as well* (Practice educator – focus group).

> *... really to just to see whether the student is going to be suitable in the placement (Practice educator – focus group).*

The data suggest that ensuring a match between student and placement can be conceptualised as two inter-related processes; assessing if the placement can meet the student's identified needs and conversely, assessing whether the student can meet the requirements of the placement. For example, practice educators tried to assess the ability of students to cope with the pressures of the placement, particularly in respect to the demanding nature of the work they would be undertaking. Practice educators took time to discuss the type of work undertaken in their setting and to describe some of the challenging situations that students might face in order to provide them with both an insight into the placement and to establish if they would be able to manage such pressures. Additionally, practice educators were also looking for students to be 'open' to the type of work undertaken by the placement and to demonstrate various characteristics or personal qualities such as commitment, flexibility, determination and enthusiasm that would sustain them through the placement. Whilst not explicitly mentioned, practice educators seemed to be gauging whether students could demonstrate a level of resilience that would ensure success in testing situations:

> *… whether they have the potential competence to meet the requirements of being in a YOT (Youth Offending Team). This may sound negative, it isn't, the pace and learning within this work place is fast and complex (Practice educator – written response).*

As part of this discourse, practice educators often provided students with

a realistic 'warts and all' overview of the placement which often reflected the reality of on-going organisational upheaval and the impact of budgetary uncertainty. In doing so, they were trying to ensure that students made an informed decision about accepting the placement, based on an account that accurately reflected the challenges of day-to-day social work practice, including the often unsettled and fluid nature of organisations.

> *… we have had to be particularly open about the organisation and about our organisational difficulties and what was subject to our recent OFSTED inspection … and I think that it is quite important because you know it is the real world of social work (Practice educator – focus group).*

Students confirmed that they had been provided with honest accounts about the state of flux in some organisations, although they did not always understand the subtleties expressed in these messages. These discussions could also generate anxiety at what the placement might be like upon arrival.

> *… she was explaining that they're currently moving in conjunction with another organisation so everything was kind of up in the air at the moment. She was, like, 'So hopefully when you start your placement here it will all have settled down,' so I was just like, 'Oh God' (Student – focus group).*

> *She said that they had hired a lot of new staff so they were all just settling in so not everyone was really friendly and comfortable around each other yet, but she was like, 'But still hopefully that'll change by the time you get here,' and I was just like, 'God,' daunting (Student – focus group).*

Whilst these negative portrayals and the feelings they evoked in students could be viewed as an obstacle to the success of the placement it should be noted that students were not put off by this honesty and that all of them received an offer of a placement. Sometimes the confirmation of an offer of a placement to a student took several days as practice educators considered the student, discussed the offer with colleagues, or simply became too busy to inform the student. Understandably, this created anxiety for students, although this was soon forgotten once an offer was received.

Expectations of pre-placement meetings

Practice educators had a number of expectations of the placement which were reflected in the pre-placement meeting. For example, the provision of placements was often regarded by practice educators as a team responsibility and they were conscious of the demands a student could place on colleagues in terms of collaborative working, supporting learning and contributions to the student's assessment.

> *I would not want to disrupt what was going on with colleagues because … it is quite close ... but also ... the impact of them coming in and having five or six months with young people who you know ... who have got to try and build some form of belief and trust in them (Practice educator – focus group).*

> *... before the pre-placement meeting, when I was first asked to take them, I would sort of involve the whole team and what did they think and what could they offer to the student and what support could they offer to me in supporting the student … you know when we do our walk around... the student meets with all of us, and not just with me (Practice educator – focus group).*

Whilst students reported meeting other members of the team, they mostly did not detect a sense of a wider ownership of the placement as espoused by the practice educators. Meetings with the team were sometimes not overly productive as students did not meet a representative mix of team members or people who knew who the student was.

> *Mind you, to be fair, a lot of the staff were out working, so I only got to meet one of his staff and she's leaving so it wasn't really that helpful but he did show me round and, yeah, showed me the area and everything despite there being nobody there (Student – focus group).*

> *Yeah, because the way I saw it, like I briefly said hello to everybody but no one really looked that happy to see me (Student – focus group).*

> *When I was waiting there was a girl sat at her desk and she was trying to make really awkward conversation with me because she didn't know what to say. She didn't really know who I was (Student – focus group).*

As part of this wider assessment process, practice educators expected

students to demonstrate that they were motivated to work with the service user group served by the agency. For example, practice educators expected that students would undertake preparatory work for the meeting, specifically research about the placement setting or the type of work undertaken:

> *... sometimes it is quite nice if they have really, not researched, that sounds a bit in-depth, but they have made a bit on an effort … and you think 'oh they really do want this placement' … or you know they are really keen to learn about this sort of area (Practice educator – focus group).*

Students demonstrated awareness of this expectation and often had undertaken preparatory work in advance of the pre-placement meeting, although they were sometimes disappointed that this was not discussed in more depth:

> *I'd prepared myself, I'd done tons of research, thought I'd get everything set out and know it all, didn't get asked one question, not one, so I was over-prepared but I'm glad that I did it (Student – focus group).*

Similarly, practice educators expected that students would have prepared questions about the placement. Several students had also anticipated this requirement, although their questions were often aimed at seeking re-assurance about their role within the proposed placement as opposed to questions about the placement setting or service user issues.

Concerns about the pre-placement meeting

The research did not find evidence that students or practice educators found pre-placement meetings to be unhelpful or unproductive. On the contrary, it appeared that practice educators had over the years developed their own style and format with which they were comfortable. In terms of professional behaviour, however, practice educators did highlight a number of concerns about students and their attendance at pre-placement meetings. For example, at a very basic level, practice educators commented that they expected students to at least attend the pre-placement meeting.

> *...what I was disappointed about this year is that we invited four people along and*

only two people bothered to turn up … as it worked out, we got two really good people ... but I think for the other two not even to come back to us I thought that was very, very poor (Practice educator – focus group).

Beyond expectations of attendance, practice educators also required students to communicate with them if any issues arose that prevented punctual attendance at the pre-placement meeting, readily demonstrating respectful practice as well as interpersonal and communication skills:

...you know if they are running late or whatever they have got all our information so all it is like 'oh I am sorry, I am so sorry I can't find it', which we all do. I am the worst at directions, but it is just having that professionalism, especially if they are final year students … but it is just so rude not to say anything (Practice educator – focus group).

Students were aware of these modest requirements and some described how they had contacted the placement when their attendance was delayed.

I got lost on the way to mine and I felt so silly because I drove up from away and it was covered by a load of trees and I was on the phone, I was, like, 'I'm in the car, I'm lost, I don't know where it is'. They were, like, 'Turn round, it's a massive orange building in front of you' (Laughing). I turned up outside and was just like, 'I feel stupid before I've even walked in there' (Student – focus group).

Additionally, student presentation during the meeting is important to practice educators and it was clear that even the most basic professional behaviours could not be guaranteed or taken for granted:

That professional bit is key isn't it? ... not from this university but from a previous life, I had a student turn up absolutely smelling of alcohol for a pre-placement meeting and then thinking that they are a professional person (Practice educator – focus group).

Other aspects of student presentation during the meeting were noted by practice educators, for example, there was an assumption that students would dress in a professional manner although again, this did not always occur:

… that is something that we always tell them at interviews, as that always gives you a good idea of how people come dressed for an interview really and that has been an issue in the past (Practice educator – focus group).

Ironically, some of the students commented on how they had 'overdressed' for the pre-placement meeting, based either on how they thought a professional social worker should dress or in an attempt to reflect the significance of the meeting. In fact, issues of dress and presentation dominated the student focus group as they reviewed their attempts to prepare for the pre-placement meeting and the ensuing placement:

> *How I perceive a social worker is always quite prim and proper and posh and, you know, smartly dressed, but obviously not (Student – focus group).*

Whilst practice educators expected professional behaviour from the visiting student paradoxically, students themselves reported processes and behaviours that did not model best practice. For example, a lack of private space in which to hold the meeting, compounded by interruptions which would have deterred students from disclosing confidential information about themselves, and meetings that did not start on time:

> *… other members of the staff kept coming in and out all the time asking the supervisor questions and I didn't feel really comfortable about that because the way I saw it was I could have been disclosing something really confidential about myself, especially talking about disability, if somebody bust straight in. I didn't really appreciate that at all, I felt really uncomfortable about that (Student – focus group).*

> *I had to wait 20 minutes for the lady because she'd gone out to get some lunch so I was sat there in the office on a chair like ... (laughs. And then she came back, she was just like, 'Oh let me just put my lunch down then come over to my office,' and there was, like, seven or eight desks and a few people and phones were ringing while we were having our interview and it kind of like put me off a bit (Student – focus group).*

Despite these concerns and the sometimes time consuming nature of pre-placement meetings the overall view from both practice educators and students was that pre-placement meetings were worthwhile, even enjoyable. Some students who had initially been anxious about the meeting received a range of affirming comments such as the team being 'really impressed with my CV' or their enthusiasm being noted. Practice educators enjoyed meeting students, hearing about their experiences and thinking how they could contribute to their service.

Discussion

In this section of the article we use an analysis of one of the main functions of the pre-placement meeting identified by our respondents as a means of discussing our main themes. That is, the pre-placement meeting enables participants, especially practice educators, to make a decision about the suitability of the placement on offer.

It is interesting that a number of practice educators used phrases such as 'getting the right person' or 'try and make sure that we match the right person to the right place', but were unable to explicitly explain what factors informed this highly subjective assessment of student suitability. One practice educator spoke about 'gaining an understanding' of the student at the pre-placement meeting whilst another wanted her student to be 'transparent' at their first encounter. Whilst this level of analysis may be expected from insightful and experienced practitioners it is unclear how practice educators filtered or interpreted the information they received or how this information was used to inform their decision-making. Dove and Skinner (2010) in their study of placement breakdowns indicate that practice educators identified a range of characteristics such as immaturity, inexperience and unprofessional behaviour as being significant factors in failing students. It is perhaps not surprising then that experienced practice educators should seek to elicit and take note of similar 'warning signs' at the commencement of the placement process. For example, the presentation of the student, their punctuality, appearance, attitude and their level of interest all seem to be of importance at the pre-placement meeting - although it has to be recognised that many of these factors are open to interpretation by the practice educator.

Dove and Skinner (2010) additionally report that just under a third of breakdowns that occurred early in the placement were caused by a lack of 'suitability'. Whilst this is admittedly a broad term which incorporates failings within the placement it also indicates that the suitability of the student is a consistent factor in the assessment of the practice educator. It is also known that some practice educators want students to imitate or replicate the practice they see modelled by their assessor on the basis that this is best practice and should be emulated (Develin and Mathews, 2008). Whilst our study does not strongly support this view there are indications that practice educators sought to discover if student values and preferred ways of working matched, or even mirrored, those of the practice educator and their team. There is no indication that practice educators welcomed

students from a radically different background, regardless of how able they were, or readily accepted students who would challenge accepted practice or team philosophies. On the contrary, practice educators seemed to want to recruit students who would not cause a disturbance to their team or unnecessary work for their colleagues. Whilst this may be an understandable approach, given the significant pressures that many social care teams and agencies routinely face, there is a danger that this attitude may disadvantage certain students, or groups of students, in gaining the offer of a placement. For example, consistent concerns have been raised regarding the difficulties faced by many Black African students in gaining and negotiating practice placements (Bartoli et al., 2008; Tedam, 2012). Thomas et al. (2010/11:51) further suggest that placements which are offered to students from a Black Minority Ethnic background 'should be carefully chosen' and need to show 'cohesiveness, commitment, and (a) demonstrable awareness of diversity issues' in order to combat the institutional and structural racism that many Black students experience. It would be unfair and unjustifiable to suggest that the practice educators in our study were unaware of these wider issues, but the desire to offer placements to students who would 'fit in' may implicitly support the argument that some students are disadvantaged within practice learning.

Whilst practice educators seem to hold a considerable amount of power concerning the decision to offer a placement, or not, students were viewed as being experts on their own situation and were expected to contribute information about themselves, their learning needs, past experience and current requirements to the pre-placement meeting. This recognition and valuing of personal expertise corresponds with well- established ways of working in social work practice where service users are viewed as being 'experts by experience' and are actively encouraged to contribute to any assessment of their lives (Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 2001). Significantly, however, practice educators viewed this expertise as being only one source of information amongst many. Whilst the views and insights of students were taken into account, other sources of information such as university documentation, past placement reports, the placement application and the views of the wider team were seen as being equally, if not more, valid. This approach again parallels the experiences of many service users who find that whilst their views and insights are valued by practitioners, too often other sources of information take precedence when decisions about their lives are being made (Wilson et al., 2011). Interestingly, the views of team or agency managers are not mentioned

as being of importance when making a decision about the suitability of a student. This absence corresponds with previous research indicating that often managers play an ambivalent role in encouraging social work staff to become practice educators or to offer placements (Develin and Mathews, 2008).

A number of practice educators indicated that they took time to reflect on the performance and presentation of the student at the pre-placement meeting before deciding whether to offer them a placement. Sometimes this would be overnight or more exceptionally it could be over a number of days. Given that the majority of practice educators in our study had rarely, or never, refused to offer a placement it is clear that students present themselves well and that other sources of information available to practice educators assist them to make a positive decision. It is notable that the practice educator's first impressions seem to be influenced by characteristics such as the personality, presentation and attitude of the student. As Milner and O'Byrne (2002) have suggested, initial impressions formed by a practice educator of a student are of considerable significance even to the extent that evidence which may conflict with their view is then often ignored. In this respect, practice educators can be viewed as being 'gatekeepers' on behalf of their team as they were aware that a failing or 'difficult' student can cause additional pressures and work for a range of people.

One of the greatest fears of practice educators is that they will introduce a student to their team who is damaging to team morale, time consuming and dangerous in practice (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011). Practice educators equally reported that they also considered the potential impact that an 'unsuitable' student might have on vulnerable service users they would be working with. As Barlow and Coleman (2003) have suggested practice educators view themselves as protectors of the profession, whilst some have argued further that the responsibility of gate-keeping has increasingly been handed over by academics to practice assessors making the practice placement the crucial context for assessment (Younes, 1998; Crisp and Green Lister, 2002). Consequently, it is not surprising that practice educators in our study took their time before confirming the offer of a placement.

This research provides a valuable insight into the role of the pre-placement meeting and how universities may prepare their students for meeting with practice educators. In particular, the findings highlight the dual roles and identities of 'student' and 'practitioner in training', (McSweeney, 2012) that social work students must manage as they reach the crucial stage of 'going

on placement' and working with vulnerable service users. It is clear that practice educators have expectations that students will demonstrate an understanding of professionalism, be aware of the needs of the placement organisation and have the ability to work collaboratively with team members; all aspects that emphasise the 'practitioner in training' identity. Therefore, from the outset of their education, understanding professional requirements and expectations needs to be explicit, with students being made aware that these factors will potentially form part of the practice educator's assessment at the pre-placement meeting. Social work text books on practice learning (e.g. Parker et al., 2006; Lomax et al., 2010; Williams and Rutter, 2010) often emphasise the process and procedure of the pre-placement meeting, but do not discuss how the demonstration of emerging professional aspects of the task can actively influence decision making. Whilst the diversity of approaches adopted by practice educators to pre-placement meetings makes preparing students difficult, as there is no typical pre-placement process, students need to be aware that practice educators use this meeting as a gauge of whether the student is fit to practise. It could be argued that there is a need for standardisation across placement providers with a more transparent process being adopted for pre-placement meetings that incorporates the introduction of explicit decision-making criteria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, and in light of the limited available evidence about pre-placement meetings, this qualitative, case study research provides a valuable insight into student and practice educators' expectations and experiences of a process which is a vital component of practice placements. This research has highlighted a lack of uniformity of experience which makes preparing students for pre-placement meetings difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, expectations of the meeting from both students and practice educators often seemed to be met and no concerns were raised about the process of the meeting. On the contrary, the meetings seemed to be both enjoyable and successful with placements being confirmed and initial positive working relationships developing. Furthermore, this study has identified the different strands considered by practice educators in their assessment of students at the meeting. As has been discussed, several of

these components (dress, presentation, aptitude, and so forth) are open to subjective interpretation. A further piece of research analysing and exploring these interpretations would be welcome as they may increase our understanding of how practice educators 'find the perfect match.'

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