

Standards for a Changing Profession: The 2026 Professional Standards and the Deepening of Professional Identity

Career Industry Council of Australia

ABSTRACT

The 2026 fifth edition of the CICA Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners represents the most substantial revision of this foundational document since its inaugural publication in 2006.

Published by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), the peak body for the career development industry, in collaboration with its member associations, the updated Standards respond to transformative changes in the technological, social, and labour market contexts within which career development practitioners work. Most significantly, the 2026 edition fully integrates digital practice and Artificial Intelligence (AI), including Generative AI, as core elements of professional competence, moving these from peripheral concerns to central expectations of the profession.

This article examines the fifth edition through the dual lenses of professionalisation theory and competency development, arguing that the updated Standards constitute a meaningful advance in articulating professional identity for Australian career development practitioners. The article analyses the restructured Code of Ethics, the expanded competency framework, and the enhanced continuing professional development expectations, situating each within the broader literature on professionalisation and the specific challenges posed by technological disruption. It also considers the implications of the 2026 Standards for pre-service training, practitioner development, organisational governance, and public trust, and situates the Australian framework within international trends in career development professional standards.

The article concludes that the fifth edition strengthens the foundations of a profession that is increasingly called upon to guide individuals through a rapidly and unpredictably changing world of work.

Keywords: *professional standards, career development practitioners, professionalisation, Artificial Intelligence, digital literacy, Code of Ethics, competency framework, continuing professional development*

Introduction

Professional standards are among the most powerful instruments available to an occupational group seeking recognition as a profession. They define who belongs, what they must know and do, how they must behave, and how they must continue to grow. In doing so, they serve a dual function: they protect the public by establishing minimum expectations of competence and ethics, and they build the profession's credibility by demonstrating that its members are subject to systematic accountability.

The Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners have fulfilled this function since their inaugural publication in 2006. Revised in 2007, 2011, and 2019, they have been the central reference point for practitioner credentialing, pre-service training design, and professional conduct across Australia. Each revision has reflected the changing demands of the field. The 2026 fifth edition does so again, but with a scope and ambition that sets it apart from its predecessors.

This article examines the fifth edition in depth, attending to what has changed, why it matters, and what it means for the profession and those it serves. The analysis is grounded in professionalisation theory and informed by the specific features of the Australian career development context, including the three-framework quality assurance system developed by CICA. The article also draws on international comparisons to situate the Australian Standards within a global conversation about the future of career development as a profession.

The 2026 Professional Standards are not simply a scheduled update. They represent a deliberate repositioning of what it means to be a career development practitioner in an era of profound technological and social change.

Professionalisation and the Role of Standards

The sociology of professions offers a well-developed framework for understanding the significance of professional standards. Freidson's influential account distinguished professions from other occupational groups by their capacity for self-regulation: the ability to define, monitor, and discipline their own members according to internally generated standards, rather than being subject solely to market forces or external control. In this account, professional standards are not bureaucratic instruments but expressions of professional authority and collective identity.

Hughes and colleagues have observed that the professionalisation of career development has followed a distinctive trajectory in different national contexts, shaped by the strength of professional associations, the availability of specialist qualifications, and the degree of government recognition and investment. In Australia, CICA has played a central coordinating role, bringing together diverse member associations under a shared standards framework and maintaining the National Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners. The fifth edition of the Professional Standards extends this architecture in important ways, particularly in its explicit engagement with the digital transformation of practice.

What professionalisation theory also makes clear is that professional standards must evolve to remain credible. A standards document that fails to address the realities of contemporary practice risks becoming ceremonial rather than functional, a statement of aspiration disconnected from what practitioners actually do. The 2026 edition demonstrates that CICA is acutely aware of this risk, and has responded with a revision that is substantive, integrated, and forward-looking.

The Structure of the Fifth Edition

The 2026 Professional Standards retain the structural architecture of their predecessors. They define two levels of practitioner, Professional and Associate, with corresponding entry-level qualifications. They include a Code of Ethics, continuing professional development requirements, and a competency framework comprising core and specialised competencies. The minimum CPD requirement of 15 hours per year is maintained. CICA remains the national peak body, and its member associations retain responsibility for applying and monitoring the Standards within their memberships.

Within this familiar structure, however, the content has been substantially reconceived. The most visible change is the comprehensive integration of digital practices and AI throughout the document. Rather than addressing technology in a standalone section or as an afterthought, the fifth edition treats digital competence and AI literacy as dimensions of every aspect of professional practice. This structural choice sends a clear signal: digital practice is not a specialisation but a baseline expectation for all practitioners.

A second significant structural change is the substantial expansion and reorganisation of the Code of Ethics. The 2026 Code is organised into seven clearly defined ethical domains, each with explicit obligations for practitioners. This organisation provides greater clarity and usability than earlier versions and reflects a more sophisticated understanding of the ethical terrain that contemporary career development practitioners must navigate.

The Restructured Code of Ethics: Clarity, Currency, and Accountability

The Code of Ethics is, in many respects, the moral heart of any professional standards document. It is where the profession articulates its fundamental commitments to clients, colleagues, and the public. The 2026 Code does this with greater precision and scope than its predecessors, organising ethical obligations into seven domains:

1. Professional Competence and Conduct
2. Practitioner-Client Relationships, Equity, Inclusion, and Cultural Responsiveness
3. Confidentiality, Privacy, and Informed Consent
4. Ethical Use of Digital Tools
5. Scope of Practice and Referrals
6. Professional Relationships and Workplace Integrity
7. Breaches of the Code of Ethics

The inclusion of a dedicated domain on the ethical use of digital tools is particularly significant. Domain 4 requires practitioners to critically assess and responsibly integrate digital tools and platforms, including AI-powered ones, into their practice. It requires that clients be informed of the ethical risks and benefits associated with digital tools, that professional judgment be maintained when using AI-generated outputs, and that practitioners avoid over-reliance on automation or tools that may compromise the quality, inclusivity, or ethical standards of their services.

This domain operationalises ethical obligations that were implicit in earlier versions of the Code but are now made explicit and actionable. For practitioners, it provides clear guidance on a set of questions that have become increasingly pressing: When is it appropriate to use an AI-generated career recommendation? What

must I tell a client about how a tool uses their data? How do I recognise and respond to bias in an automated assessment? The fifth edition does not leave these questions unanswered.

Domain 4 of the 2026 Code of Ethics, dedicated entirely to the ethical use of digital tools, represents the profession's formal acknowledgment that AI is not a neutral technology. It carries risks that practitioners must actively understand, disclose, and manage.

The strengthened emphasis on equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness in Domain 2 is also noteworthy. The updated Code explicitly requires practitioners to use inclusive and non-discriminatory language and resources across all media and delivery modes, and to honour the client's right to make informed, independent decisions. These obligations extend the profession's long-standing commitments to client-centred practice into the digital domain, where risks of marginalisation and exclusion are, if anything, more acute than in face-to-face service delivery.

The inclusion of a clear and practical process for addressing breaches of the Code in Domain 7 further strengthens accountability. By specifying that breaches may be reported to the relevant CICA member association, and that associations will follow established procedures, including educational responses, professional development requirements, and disciplinary action, the Code creates a visible enforcement pathway that enhances its credibility as a genuine accountability mechanism.

The Competency Framework: Digital Literacy as a Core Professional Requirement

The competency framework is the technical foundation of the Professional Standards. It defines what career development practitioners must know and be able to do to practise competently, and it guides the design of entry-level training and the identification of continuing professional development priorities. The 2026 framework retains seven core competencies and seven specialised competencies, but the scope and content of several key competencies have been substantially expanded.

Core Competency 6: Digital Literacy, Emerging Technologies, and Information Management

The most structurally significant change in the competency framework is the renaming and expansion of the sixth core competency, previously titled Technology, Information and Resources, to Digital Literacy, Emerging Technologies, and Information Management. This is not merely a cosmetic change. The 2026 competency articulates expectations across five sub-competencies, covering the application and evaluation of digital literacy and emerging technologies in career development practice, the collection and analysis of information, currency with emerging technologies, identification of support resources, and the maintenance of digital security.

The sub-competency on applying and evaluating digital literacy (6a) is particularly comprehensive. It requires practitioners to understand the role and potential of digital tools including AI and emerging technologies, to critically evaluate the relevance, reliability, inclusivity, accessibility, and ethical implications of digital platforms and AI tools before and during integration into practice, and to apply ethical

principles to technology use including safeguarding data privacy, addressing algorithmic bias, ensuring transparency, and obtaining informed consent.

The sub-competency on digital security (6e) is also new and reflects growing awareness of practitioners' responsibilities to protect client information across all technological platforms. It requires practitioners to adhere to legal, organisational, and ethical requirements for storing, handling, and transmitting client information, to use secure and encrypted platforms, and to remain alert to cybersecurity threats. These obligations position career development practitioners as responsible custodians of sensitive client data, a responsibility that has grown significantly as services have moved online.

The AI Thread Across All Competencies

Beyond Core Competency 6, AI considerations are woven throughout the competency framework, reflecting genuine integration rather than a superficial addition. In Core Competency 1 (Career Development Theory), sub-competency 1c requires practitioners to integrate AI-powered tools, digital platforms, and emerging technologies when applying career development theories to support diverse client needs and preferences. In Core Competency 2 (Labour Market Information), sub-competency 2c addresses the use of online and AI-driven labour market platforms to access and interpret current trends, forecasts, and skills demand, and 2d addresses understanding the impact of digital automation, AI, and technological disruption on various career paths and industries.

In Core Competency 4 (Ethical Practice), the new sub-competency 4d applies ethical principles to the use of digital tools, requiring practitioners to understand and apply ethical frameworks when using digital and AI-powered tools, to ensure informed client consent before using digital platforms or AI-generated content, and to recognise and address potential algorithmic bias when using AI-based systems for career matching, labour market analysis, or client profiling.

This cross-cutting integration of AI across all core competencies is one of the most significant features of the fifth edition. It reflects a recognition that AI does not constitute a separate domain of practice but permeates every aspect of contemporary career development service delivery. A practitioner who is not digitally and AI-literate is not a fully competent practitioner in 2026.

The 2026 Professional Standards make clear that digital and AI literacy is not a specialisation sitting alongside other competencies. It is woven throughout all seven core competencies and embedded in every domain of practice.

Diversity and Inclusion: Addressing the Digital Divide

Core Competency 5, Diversity and Inclusion, has been expanded to explicitly address digital exclusion and the digital divide. Sub-competency 5a now requires practitioners to recognise how limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, or digital literacy may affect clients' ability to engage with services and opportunities, to adjust communication and service delivery methods to ensure equitable access for clients impacted by digital exclusion, and to advocate for inclusive policies and practices that reduce barriers created by the digital divide, particularly for clients from regional, remote, or marginalised communities.

Sub-competency 5c extends this focus to the selection and use of digital resources, requiring practitioners to select and recommend digital tools that meet established accessibility standards, to review digital content for cultural diversity and freedom from stereotyping, and to provide alternative formats or support where clients face barriers to accessing or navigating digital platforms.

These additions reflect a sophisticated understanding of the equity risks created by digital service delivery. When career development services migrate online, the benefits are not equally distributed. Clients with limited digital literacy, those in regional and remote areas with unreliable connectivity, and clients from backgrounds where digital technology has been less accessible are at risk of being further disadvantaged by a service system that assumes digital participation. The fifth edition places a professional obligation on practitioners to recognise and actively address these risks.

Specialised Competencies: Digital Integration in Practice

The specialised competencies have also been updated to reflect the integration of digital and AI-enabled tools into specialist areas of practice. In Career Assessment (S1), practitioners are now required to identify digital and AI-enabled career assessment instruments, to evaluate the accessibility, inclusivity, and ethical implications of digital assessment tools before use, and to stay informed about emerging digital and AI-enabled assessment instruments. In Career Counselling (S2), practitioners are expected to adapt counselling strategies to include secure video conferencing, virtual platforms, and AI-assisted instruments where appropriate, and to evaluate and integrate emerging technologies that can enhance counselling sessions while maintaining professional judgment.

The Program Delivery competency (S3) now explicitly addresses the design and delivery of programs for online and blended environments, applying best practices in digital pedagogy, learner engagement, accessibility, and security. The Research Skills competency (S7) includes a new expectation that practitioners appropriately acknowledge the use of AI in reports, publications, and other professional outputs where necessary, reflecting emerging norms around AI transparency in professional and academic contexts.

Continuing Professional Development: From Compliance to Strategy

The fifth edition maintains the minimum CPD requirement of 15 hours per year for Professional and Associate members, but repositions CPD as a strategic and future-focused professional obligation rather than a compliance-based requirement. The updated CPD section sets out clear expectations for both CICA member associations and individual practitioners.

For member associations, the 2026 Standards require that CPD offerings address both core and specialised competencies, including emerging areas such as digital literacy, ethical AI use, and evolving labour market dynamics. Associations are expected to establish systems for members to record and validate their CPD

activities, including digital tracking and documentation tools. The invitation to collaborate with other associations to expand CPD opportunities and facilitate practitioner mobility reflects a recognition that the development needs of the profession now extend beyond what any single association can address alone.

For individual practitioners, the fifth edition emphasises the importance of choosing CPD activities that match individual learning needs, service context, and the evolving demands of the field. The requirement to maintain accurate records and confirm CPD compliance annually as part of membership renewal provides a structured accountability mechanism that strengthens the credibility of the CPD obligation.

The explicit inclusion of digital literacy and ethical AI use as CPD priorities is particularly significant. It signals that keeping up with technological change is not an optional interest but a professional obligation. This has immediate practical implications for the design of CPD programs, the curation of professional learning events, and the identification of learning resources that support practitioners in developing and maintaining the competencies defined in the fifth edition.

By naming digital literacy and ethical AI use as CPD priorities, the 2026 Standards send an unambiguous message: staying current with technology is not optional. It is part of what it means to be a professional.

The Three-Framework System: Coherence and Integration

The Professional Standards do not operate in isolation. They form one element of the three-framework quality assurance system developed by CICA, alongside the Australian Blueprint for Career Development and the Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products. The fifth edition deepens the coherence of this system in important ways.

The Professional Standards define what practitioners must know and do. The Australian Blueprint for Career Development specifies the competencies that individuals need to manage their own careers, providing the theoretical and practical foundations for service design. The Guiding Principles, published in their third edition in 2026, provide a practical quality improvement framework for evaluating the services, tools, and information products used with clients. Together, these three documents constitute a comprehensive and mutually reinforcing architecture for professional quality assurance.

The fifth edition of the Professional Standards strengthens this integration explicitly. The Code of Ethics references the Guiding Principles in its treatment of digital tool evaluation, and the competency framework's focus on evidence-informed practice and service evaluation reflects the quality improvement orientation of the Guiding Principles. The Blueprint's competency areas for career management provide the theoretical scaffolding within which practitioner competencies, as defined in the Professional Standards, are applied.

This systemic coherence is a significant asset for the Australian career development profession. It means that practitioners, educators, service managers, and policymakers can engage with a consistent and integrated framework, rather than navigating multiple, potentially contradictory documents. The 2026 revisions to both the Professional Standards and the Guiding Principles represent a coordinated strengthening of this system at

a moment when it is most needed.

International Benchmarking: Australia in Global Context

Australia's Professional Standards for Career Development Practitioners are recognised internationally as a well-developed example of competency-based professional standards. The fact that they were included in the literature review for Finland's recent national competency framework development process is a notable indicator of their standing. This section situates the fifth edition within the international landscape of career development professional standards.

The United Kingdom

The Career Development Institute in the UK has developed a professional framework for career development professionals that shares many structural features with Australia's approach, including a competency framework, ethical code, and CPD requirements. The UK framework has also begun to address digital and AI-related competencies, though this work is less advanced than the comprehensive integration achieved in the 2026 Australian Standards. The UK's Gatsby Benchmarks for school-based career guidance provide a complementary quality framework at the service level, analogous in some respects to Australia's Guiding Principles.

Canada and the United States

In Canada, the Standards and Guidelines for Career Development in Canada provide a nationally recognised framework that has been influential in international discussions. The Canadian Career Development Foundation has been an active contributor to comparative research on career development competencies. In the United States, the National Career Development Association (NCDA) maintains a competency framework that includes digital skills, though the decentralised nature of the US system means that uptake and implementation vary significantly across states and sectors.

A comparison with these North American frameworks highlights a distinctive feature of the Australian approach: the integration of equity, inclusion, and the digital divide as explicit components of core competencies. While equity concerns feature in North American frameworks, they are not as systematically connected to digital practice as they are in the 2026 Australian Standards.

New Zealand

New Zealand's career development sector has historically worked closely with Australia, and the two countries share many features of their professional standards frameworks. Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ) maintains membership and CPD requirements aligned with its professional framework. The trans-Tasman relationship offers opportunities for mutual learning and potential collaborative development of digital and AI literacy resources, particularly given the shared labour market context.

ICCDPP and the International Policy Context

The International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP) has consistently highlighted professional standards and practitioner competencies as key levers for improving the quality and reach of career guidance services. ICCDPP symposia have produced a series of action statements emphasising the importance of lifelong learning for career practitioners, the need for quality frameworks that keep pace with technological change, and the value of international benchmarking and knowledge exchange. The fifth edition of Australia's Professional Standards is well aligned with these international priorities, and positions Australia as a contributor to the global conversation about the future of career development practice.

Implications for the Profession

For Practitioners

The fifth edition has direct and substantive implications for individual career development practitioners. Most fundamentally, it establishes that digital and AI literacy is a core professional competency, not an optional extra. Practitioners who have not yet developed confidence and critical understanding in this area will need to prioritise it in their CPD planning. The competency framework provides a detailed map of what digital and AI literacy looks like in practice, from critically evaluating tools before using them with clients, to addressing algorithmic bias, to maintaining digital security.

The restructured Code of Ethics provides clearer guidance for ethical decision-making in technology-enabled practice. For practitioners who have been uncertain about their obligations when using AI-powered tools or online platforms, Domain 4 of the Code offers a framework for thinking through these questions systematically. The explicit inclusion of informed consent, transparency about tool limitations, and the avoidance of over-reliance on automation reflects the values-based foundation that distinguishes professional practice from merely competent task performance.

Practitioners will also need to attend to their equity obligations in digital service delivery. The fifth edition is clear that the shift to online and digital delivery does not diminish practitioners' responsibilities to ensure accessible, inclusive, and culturally appropriate services. If anything, digital delivery contexts create new equity risks that require active attention and creative responses.

For Training Providers and Educators

The fifth edition has significant implications for the design and delivery of CICA-endorsed training programs. The expanded competency framework, and particularly the substantially enhanced Core Competency 6, will require training providers to develop new curriculum content and assessment tasks addressing digital literacy, AI ethics, digital security, and the evaluation of technology tools. This is not a marginal adjustment but a substantive curriculum development challenge.

The integration of AI and digital practice across all seven core competencies means that training providers cannot address these areas in isolation. Digital and AI considerations need to be threaded through units on career development theory, labour market information, ethical practice, communication, and service delivery. This requires a level of cross-curriculum integration that may challenge existing program structures and the expertise of current teaching staff.

Educators will also need to consider how to develop graduates' capacity for critical evaluation of AI tools, which is a skill that requires ongoing updating as the technology landscape changes. The challenge of preparing graduates for a professional environment where the tools available will look quite different in five

years from what they look like today is a genuinely difficult pedagogical problem, one that will require creative approaches to curriculum design and ongoing collaboration between training providers and the profession.

For Service Managers and Organisations

For those responsible for managing career development services, the fifth edition provides both a planning framework and an accountability benchmark. The competency framework defines what qualified practitioners should be able to do, which has direct implications for workforce planning, role design, performance management, and professional development investment.

The digital security requirements in Core Competency 6e have particular implications for organisational systems and policies. Organisations that have not yet developed clear protocols for the secure storage, handling, and transmission of client data in digital environments will need to do so. This includes policies on the use of third-party platforms and AI tools, which may collect and process client data in ways that require careful governance.

The equity obligations in Core Competency 5 should prompt service managers to audit their digital service delivery for accessibility and inclusivity. This includes reviewing the digital tools used with clients, examining whether alternative delivery modes are available for clients with limited digital literacy or access, and developing protocols for supporting clients who face digital barriers.

For Policymakers and Funders

The fifth edition of the Professional Standards provides policymakers and funders with a clear articulation of what constitutes qualified, competent, and ethical career development practice. For governments considering investment in career development services, the Standards offer a benchmark against which service providers can be assessed and against which quality assurance conditions can be set.

The explicit focus on digital equity in the updated Standards is directly relevant to policy debates about digital inclusion and the risk that digitally delivered public services may disadvantage already marginalised groups. Career development practitioners, equipped with the competencies defined in the fifth edition, are well-placed to identify and respond to these risks in their own practice. But policy settings, funding arrangements, and service design decisions also need to support practitioners in doing so.

The Standards also make a clear case for investment in practitioner professional development. If digital and AI literacy is a core professional competency, then practitioners need access to quality CPD opportunities that develop these competencies. Governments and employers who fund career development services have a stake in ensuring that this development occurs, and the fifth edition provides the framework for making the case.

Looking Forward: The Fifth Edition as a Foundation

The 2026 Professional Standards are best understood not as a destination but as a foundation. The technology landscape will continue to evolve, and the standards will need to evolve with it. The integration of digital and AI considerations across the competency framework positions the profession well for this ongoing development, but it also creates a responsibility to maintain currency that will require sustained attention.

Several areas warrant particular attention as the fifth edition is implemented. The first is the question of how practitioners will develop the AI-specific competencies now embedded in the Standards. While CPD

providers and training programs will need to respond to this challenge, the profession also needs to develop shared resources, assessment tools, and learning communities that support practitioners in building these skills in authentic practice contexts.

The second area is the ongoing challenge of equity in digital service delivery. The Standards establish clear obligations in this area, but translating those obligations into practice requires ongoing investment in understanding what digital exclusion looks like in different client groups, what interventions are effective, and how service systems can be designed to reduce rather than amplify existing disadvantages.

The third area is the governance of AI tools in career development settings. As AI-powered platforms are adopted more widely across schools, employment services, and community programs, the profession will need mechanisms for evaluating, endorsing, and monitoring these tools at a collective level, not just at the individual practitioner level. The Professional Standards establish the individual obligations, but complementary collective governance mechanisms, including the Guiding Principles for Career Information Products, also play an essential role.

Finally, the fifth edition creates an opportunity to deepen the alignment between the Professional Standards, the Guiding Principles, and the Australian Blueprint for Career Development. The Professional Standards and the Guiding Principles have been updated in 2026, and the Australian Blueprint for Career Development in 2024; there is a unique moment to ensure that their combined operation provides a coherent, comprehensive, and navigable system for practitioners, educators, managers, and policymakers.

Conclusion

The 2026 fifth edition of the Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners is a significant document. It does not change the purpose of career development practice: to support individuals in managing their life, learning, and work across the lifespan. But it does substantially update and strengthen the framework within which that purpose is pursued.

The comprehensive integration of digital practice and AI literacy, the restructured and expanded Code of Ethics, the strengthened competency framework, and the repositioned CPD expectations together constitute a meaningful advance in the articulation of professional identity for Australian career development practitioners. They signal, clearly and unambiguously, that this is a profession that takes its obligations seriously: to clients, to the public, and to the standards of ethical, competent, and evidence-informed practice.

The fifth edition also positions Australia well in international terms. The Australian Professional Standards have been recognised as a reference point for professional standards development in other jurisdictions, and the 2026 revision reinforces that standing. In its systematic treatment of AI ethics, digital equity, and the integration of emerging technologies across a comprehensive competency framework, the Australian approach offers lessons that other national systems can usefully consider.

For practitioners, the fifth edition is an invitation to engage with the full scope of professional practice in the digital age, not to be overwhelmed by it. The competency framework provides a map; the Code of Ethics provides a compass; and the CPD framework provides the expectation of ongoing development. Together they support practitioners in doing what they have always done: helping people find their way.

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The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) is the national peak body for the career development industry. CICA leads policy, standards development, professional learning, and advocacy for the career development profession across Australia.