



The Australian Career Development Workforce: Comparative analysis based on national workforce studies

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Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Australian career development industry based on two national workforce studies conducted by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) in 2020 and 2024.

The findings demonstrate how the profession has evolved over the past four years regarding workforce demographics, professional qualifications, working conditions, service delivery practices, performance evaluation, and digital integration.

The analysis reveals a resilient profession at a critical juncture, facing structural and technological challenges while displaying strong engagement, optimism, and appetite for innovation.

Key developments from 2020 to 2024 include:

- **Steady full-time workforce:** Full-time employment has remained constant at 62% in 2024 compared to 63% in 2020. This is up from 48% in 2014 and 2016, indicating greater recognition and integration of career services across education, employment, and community sectors.
- **An experienced but ageing workforce:** 72.9% of practitioners in 2024 are aged 45 or older, continuing the trend seen in 2020 and highlighting both the depth of expertise and the urgent need to prioritise succession planning and attract younger entrants into the field. In 2024, 27.1% of practitioners are under 45 years old, compared to 16% in 2020.
- **Continued gender imbalance:** The profession remains female dominated, with only 16% of practitioners identifying as male in 2024, reinforcing the need for targeted strategies to improve gender diversity, consistent with 2020 figures.
- **Professionalisation:** 66% of practitioners in 2024 hold a Graduate Certificate or higher, the same as in 2020. However, there is increasing demand for Master level qualifications, reflecting a sector striving for advanced professionalisation.
- **Continuation of role strain:** Reports of feeling overworked and unsupported remain high. In 2020, 46% identified stress and workload as challenges. In 2024, this concern persists, with 32% explicitly reporting feelings of being overworked and stressed. Despite this, practitioners continue to demonstrate strong professional commitment, with an average engagement rating of 8.1 out of 10.
- **Ongoing informal performance measurement:** In 2024, only 35% of practitioners report receiving structured performance reviews, a slight decline from 52% in 2020. While reflective and client-centred practices are common, the sector would benefit from more structured, data-informed evaluation approaches to strengthen service quality, guide professional growth, and support systemic improvement..
- **AI remains underused but in demand:** In 2024, 36% have never used AI for admin tasks, and 53% have never used it for client support, yet 70% identified AI training as the most urgent development area. This reflects both a capacity gap and a strong appetite for modernisation, with minimal data on AI from 2020 indicating its emergence as a new frontier.

- **Access barriers to professional development:** In 2020, 55% believed their quality of work would improve with more training. In 2024, barriers persist, particularly the lack of budget allocation and awareness of entitlements, despite continued professional engagement.
- **A more optimistic outlook:** Optimism in the sector has grown, with 53% of practitioners in 2024 expecting improvement in the next five years, up considerably from just 21% in 2020. While overall job satisfaction in 2024 sits at 64%, this rising optimism signals fertile ground for reform, investment, and cross-sector collaboration.

Methodology and Segmentation

The data presented in this report draws from two national surveys commissioned by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA):

The 2020 survey, titled Survey of those working in the career development industry, was conducted in the field from 10 March to 6 April 2020 and achieved a total sample size of n = 746 respondents.

The 2024 survey, titled National Survey of Career Development Practitioners, was conducted in the field from 28 October to 28 November 2024, with a total sample size of n = 734 respondents.

The 2024 survey was conducted using Survey Monkey and consisted of 47 questions grouped under the following headings:

- Demographics
- Qualifications
- Working in the Industry
- Career Development Activities
- Motivators and Barriers
- Quality and Value
- Measuring Performance
- Professional Development and Growth
- Artificial Intelligence and Career Development

The 2020 survey was conducted using Qualtrics Survey Software. It featured 43 questions aligned to similar thematic areas, with the exception of Artificial Intelligence and Career Development, which were introduced in the 2024 iteration to reflect sector evolution and the growing role of emerging technologies.

Both surveys were promoted through CICA Member Associations and on CICA's social media channels, ensuring broad national reach across practitioners in diverse employment contexts. Respondents represented a broad cross-section of the career development industry, including professionals working in education, employment services, community organisations, and private practice. The findings offer a robust evidence base for identifying trends, informing policy, and supporting strategic workforce planning.

Segmentation

Throughout this report, demographic segmentation has been applied to analyse responses and explore variations in experience and perspective across different groups. Key segmentation variables include age, gender, years of experience, qualification level, employment setting, and geographic location. This approach enables more detailed and nuanced insights, helping to identify specific workforce needs and inform targeted development strategies across the sector.

Workforce Composition and Experience

The profession remains firmly anchored in experience and maturity. In 2024, 45% of respondents reported over 10 years in the field, while 75% entered career development after building careers in other roles and sectors. This supports the understanding of career development as a second-career profession, enriched by multidisciplinary backgrounds and lived experience.

Such transitions from education, counselling, human resources, and vocational training reinforce the sector's depth, adaptability, and value across domains. However, it is essential that potential entrants to the field pursue professional career development qualifications, which are distinct from those held in related fields. These specialised qualifications ensure practitioners have the theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and ethical frameworks unique to effective career development practice.

However, the ageing profile of the workforce (72.9% aged 45+) poses strategic challenges. Compared to 78% in 2020, the shift is minor, indicating a slow pace of generational renewal. With only 6.8% of practitioners aged 25–34, there is an urgent need to attract early-career professionals through career marketing, supported pathways, and incentives for younger entrants.

The gender imbalance persists and deepens. Male representation decreased from 20% in 2020 to 16% in 2024. This trend raises questions about perceived role identity, career visibility, and structural barriers that may deter men from entering the profession. Targeted strategies—including outreach campaigns, male practitioner role models, and inclusive messaging—could help recalibrate the gender composition.

Employment Conditions

Full-time employment has remained constant at 62% in 2024 compared to 63% in 2020. This is up from 48% in 2014 and 2016. It suggests enhanced integration of career development into institutional settings such as schools, TAFEs, universities, and employment services. This integration is likely driven by greater awareness of career development's impact on educational and employment outcomes, as well as compliance with policies requiring qualified practitioners.

However, this is tempered by ongoing reports of occupational stress and limited leadership support. In 2024, this issue remains, with 32% explicitly stating they feel overworked and stressed. Nonetheless, practitioners continue to show strong professional commitment, boasting an average engagement rating of 8.1 out of 10.

Leadership support also continues to fall short; while 29% cited a lack of quality leadership in 2020, the 2024 data shows only 35% of practitioners receive structured performance reviews, and few report the use of CICA's Professional Standards in assessing their work.

These findings point to a profession in need of stronger systemic support, not just in job security but in sustainable and well-led practice. These stressors may stem from expanding responsibilities, increasing caseloads, and systemic under-resourcing. Practitioners often operate in complex environments where they are expected to serve diverse client groups, contribute to institutional planning, and demonstrate measurable outcomes, frequently without sufficient managerial guidance or resources.

Qualifications and Career Pathways

The 2024 data affirm the professionalism of the sector. In 2024, 66% of practitioners hold a Graduate Certificate or higher, the same percentage as in 2020. The Graduate Certificate remains the most common qualification. A further 15% have a Certificate IV in Career Development. This cohort often represents those with longer tenure in the sector or those working in non registered or para professional roles, including staff who do not provide front-line career guidance but contribute in support, administrative, or coordination capacities.

Interest in Master 's-level qualifications is high. 52% of all respondents expressed interest, and 70% of these already possess a Graduate Certificate. This finding underscores a strong aspiration for deeper knowledge, research engagement, and advanced standing within the profession. It also points to a potential market for new postgraduate qualifications that integrate theory, leadership, research, and applied practice.

Professional Services and Impact

Respondents ranked one-on-one career consultations as the most beneficial and impactful service in both 2020 and 2024, reaffirming the central role of personalised, relational support in quality career development. In 2020, 91% of practitioners identified helping clients understand their career options as a key area of impact. This trend continued in 2024, with one-on-one consultations again ranked first for both benefit (76%) and impact (70%), followed by connecting clients to education and training, which ranked second, identified as beneficial by 45% of practitioners and impactful by 59%.

However, simplifying labour market information, which 70% of practitioners saw as part of their core work in 2020, was rated significantly lower in 2024—only 31% saw it as beneficial and 18% as impactful, suggesting a potential gap in how this information is delivered or perceived.

Meanwhile, virtual career fairs consistently ranked among the least effective services in both years, underscoring the limits of large-scale, generic formats. These findings point to a clear message: while digital tools offer potential, effective service delivery must remain rooted in person-centred, context-specific design.

Performance and Evaluation

Only 35% of practitioners receive formal performance reviews, while informal feedback and self-assessment are the primary methods of evaluation. Additionally, while 97% of practitioners are aware of CICA's Professional Standards, only half report using them in evaluation. This highlights a disconnect between awareness and operational application.

The lack of formalised review structures can undermine practitioner confidence, limit opportunities for targeted development, and weaken alignment with best practice. Embedding professional standards into performance management and appraisal systems could significantly improve service quality, professional accountability, and workforce consistency.

Use of Technology and AI

Despite the growing relevance of digital technologies, AI adoption in the career development sector remains limited. In 2020, artificial intelligence was not yet a visible feature of practice, reflecting its emergent status across most service sectors. By contrast, in 2024, the rapid advancement of AI has reshaped expectations for workforce transformation, yet 36% of career practitioners report never using AI for administrative tasks, and 53% have never used it for client support.

This signals not just a technical skills gap but a significant shift in the nature of the profession. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in education and employment systems, career development practice must evolve in tandem. Building confidence and competence in AI is not simply an upskilling task; it is essential to ensuring the profession remains future-relevant and responsive to client needs. 70% identified AI training as a top development priority.

This points to a readiness to embrace innovation, tempered by a lack of exposure, training, and strategic leadership. The profession is currently under-equipped to leverage AI's potential to personalise services, reduce administrative burdens, and enhance data-informed guidance. Investment in capacity building and ethical guidelines will be essential to integrate AI responsibly into practice.

Professional Development

More than half of practitioners in 2024 continue to engage in professional development (PD) for at least one day per month, demonstrating a strong and sustained commitment to reflective practice and continuous learning. At 53%, this figure is only slightly down from 56% in 2020, suggesting a plateau in participation. While encouraging, this trend may reflect structural limitations rather than waning interest, particularly as workload demands and limited support remain pressing concerns.

In-person delivery remains the most preferred mode for professional development (50%), underscoring practitioners' continued importance of peer connection, shared learning, and real-time collaboration. Despite the rise of digital platforms, these findings suggest that human interaction remains a core component of effective professional development in the sector.

However, barriers to equitable access persist. In 2024, 25% of practitioners reported having no allocated professional development budget, and 21% were unsure of their entitlements. These figures remain largely unchanged from 2020, when 27% reported a budget under \$1,000 and 27% were uncertain, indicating minimal systemic progress over the past four years. This ongoing resourcing gap is particularly concerning given the profession's evolving demands, including the need to upskill in areas such as AI, digital tools, and person-centred innovation.

The data paints a clear picture: while the will to engage in professional development is strong, the means to do so remains unevenly distributed. Career development practitioners will remain constrained in their ability to keep pace with change without targeted interventions, such as clearer funding guidelines, employer-endorsed CPD entitlements, and nationally coordinated investment in quality-assured PD frameworks.

Confidence and Competencies

Practitioners continue to express strong confidence in core interpersonal and ethical competencies, with the top self-rated areas in 2024 including commitment to professionalism (#1),

respect for diversity (#2), lifelong learning (#3), effective communication (#4), and rapport-building (#5). These results closely mirror the 2020 data, highlighting a consistent strength in social and relational skills.

This enduring capability underscores the profession's foundation in trust, empowerment, and personalised support. The sustained emphasis on values-based, client-centred practice reinforces it as a defining feature of the career development profession.

However, 2024 self-assessment data reveal a persistent confidence gap in technical competencies. The lowest-rated competencies included:

- Evaluating the service provided to clients (#17 of 18)
- Applying career development frameworks to practice (#18 of 18)
- Conducting needs assessments (#15 of 18)
- Using enterprise skills (#16 of 18)

These findings highlight ongoing challenges in areas critical to evidence-based practice, program evaluation, and strategic innovation. While practitioners feel confident engaging with clients, fewer feel equipped to systematically assess their impact or contribute to organisational learning and development.

Importantly, these lower self-ratings may not always indicate a lack of capability. Many practitioners are likely already engaging with these competencies implicitly but may not recognise or label their work using the terminology of the Professional Standards. This disconnect between practice and professional language may be contributing to underconfidence. Addressing this gap—through reflective tools, supervision, and clearer mapping of day-to-day tasks to competencies—could significantly improve practitioner confidence and strengthen professional identity.

This pattern also reflects broader systemic challenges. Technical competencies may receive less emphasis in initial training or continuing professional development (CPD), especially when they are not directly tied to applied practice. Many practitioners report limited access to structured supervision or performance feedback, while unclear employer expectations around evaluation, data, or innovation may further marginalise these areas.

The implications are important. As the profession seeks to remain responsive amid technological disruption, labour market change, and education reform, technical competence must complement relational skill. Practitioners must be equipped to not only engage clients but also to demonstrate the impact of their services, apply theoretical models effectively, and contribute to evidence-based policy and program development.

Addressing these gaps will require sustained effort, including:

- Targeted training and upskilling in underdeveloped competencies
- Stronger organisational support for performance feedback, supervision, and innovation

While the profession's interpersonal strengths provide a solid foundation, building technical capability is essential to ensuring that the career development sector is future-ready, evidence-informed, and strategically aligned with national priorities.

Optimism and Outlook

The outlook for the sector remains hopeful. Over half of all respondents (53%) believe the profession will improve over the next five years. This optimism is remarkable given the pressures practitioners face and reflects the intrinsic motivation and shared purpose of the workforce.

If appropriately supported, this optimism can fuel innovation, reform, and collaboration. Harnessing practitioner insights and energy can help to co-design solutions—whether in AI adoption, qualification reform, national strategy development, or systemic advocacy.

Conclusion

The 2024 data portray a mature, engaged, and essential workforce at a pivotal moment. While important strides have been made in professionalisation and qualifications, most notably with two-thirds of practitioners holding a Graduate Certificate or higher, challenges remain that demand targeted national attention.

The profession remains defined by its strong interpersonal and ethical core. Practitioners demonstrate high confidence in their ability to build rapport, communicate effectively, respect diversity, and uphold professionalism. These relational strengths are foundational to client-centred practice and central to the sector's enduring value. However, technical competencies such as needs assessment, program evaluation, and applying frameworks are consistently rated lower. This suggests a gap in practitioner confidence and capability that must be addressed through professional development, reflective supervision, and more substantial alignment between daily work and the language of professional standards.

Workforce demographics further highlight structural risks. An ageing workforce, nearly 73% are aged 45 or older, combined with limited gender diversity and declining male representation, underscores the need for succession planning, career awareness strategies for younger people, and more inclusive pathways into the profession. Employment remains stable, with 62% of workers employed full-time; however, feelings of being overworked and under-supported persist. Only 35% of practitioners report receiving structured performance reviews, and few workplaces integrate the CICA Professional Standards into evaluation practices, leaving many without meaningful feedback or development opportunities.

The integration of technology, particularly artificial intelligence, marks a significant turning point. While most practitioners have yet to incorporate AI into their services, there is overwhelming demand for upskilling in this area. This points to a profession ready to modernise but lacking the systems and support to do so effectively.

Despite these pressures, the outlook is optimistic. Over half of practitioners expect improvement in the profession over the next five years. This growing optimism, coupled with the profession's commitment to learning, innovation, and client impact, presents a significant opportunity.

Coordinated national action is required to secure the future of the career development profession in Australia. This includes strengthening performance frameworks, developing leadership pipelines, supporting AI integration through ethical and practice-informed training, promoting accessible postgraduate education pathways, and embedding career development within broader workforce and education strategies.

Career development is a public good, essential to educational attainment, workforce participation, and social equity. Investing in the profession today will yield long-term dividends for individuals, communities, and the national economy. The data affirms a sector that is capable, committed, and vital to Australia's future, provided it is adequately supported.