

Adapting Career Advisory Services for Aspiring Freelance Adult Educators

Shifts in the Singapore Workforce

Jobs and workplaces in Singapore are changing. According to Lee (2018), it is expected that workers in Singapore may see employment shifting towards one that is characterised by multiple transitions in and out of employment and learning during adulthood. With more and more individuals constantly on the move across different organisations, sectors and types of employment; it is no surprise that more individuals may also consider venturing into the Training and Adult Education (TAE) Sector to become an Adult Educator (AE) at some point in their career.

This transition for some is an intentional career progression. For others, it may be to accommodate responsibilities in one's life stage or a forced decision due to becoming involuntarily unemployed. Many are looking at operating in a non-permanent work arrangement or on a freelance basis, with one or multiple clients. Work assignments or projects are paid on an hourly basis or upon completion of an assignment. This mirrors the observation made by Shorne (2008) in Jacques (2012) where freelance adult educators are typically industry experts who may not be as strong, pedagogically; those with caring responsibilities; those moving into retirement and/or sole proprietors offering customised training interventions for clients.

Perceptions when Entering the TAE Sector

With regard to entering the TAE sector, many in Singapore currently regard obtaining the Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment (ACTA) as a natural first step in attaining training-related skills. This is not surprising when we consider that

- a) ACTA is a qualifications requirement by SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) for AEs delivering training and conducting assessments for the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) accredited programmes;
- b) Although not mandatory, ACTA is also increasingly being regarded as a benchmarked "train-the-trainer (TTT)" programme by non-WSQ training providers as a recruitment selection criteria¹.
- c) Training and upgrading programmes, especially those offered under the SSG and WSQ are being heavily subsidised by government. This somehow creates the impression that such initiatives will translate into numerous work opportunities for AEs.

These developments when coupled with the open access nature of the WSQ training (thus easy accessibility of the ACTA programme to all) has been misconstrued by some entrants as a strong indicator of growing demand for AEs in the sector. As such, getting an ACTA qualification is perceived as the key that opens doors to training opportunities after graduation.

Unfortunately, this is not how things are in reality. ACTA graduates are often frustrated and perplexed when they are not able to land a training job or find training assignments after graduation. Unlike finding work in other sectors, work availability and projects are often not advertised or publicised. AEs may be invited to work on projects or are given opportunities based on their network, through personal referrals or word-of-mouth. Prospective AEs often regard the lack of the ACTA qualification as a major hurdle and are genuinely unaware of the greater challenge that lies in securing work assignments.

¹ This is evident from the full-time training position recruitment advertisements where ACTA is often mentioned as an added advantage.

Starting the Adult Education Career Advisory (AECA) Service

Following the centralisation of ACTA at the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) in 2016, the institution decided to improve its existing course advisory services by incorporating career advisory components for learners, graduates and the wider public who may be interested to learn more about becoming a freelance AE.

IAL approached a few of its experienced adult educators from the Adult Education Network (AEN) to take on the role of AE Career Advisors. It is important to highlight that the AECA service would operate using the approach “For the TAE community, by the TAE community”. This meant that AE Career Advisors were tasked to determine and shape the career services whilst IAL focused more on the course advisory role. In July 2016, the IAL Adult Education Career Advisory (AECA) was piloted with the aim to assist:

- Prospective freelance AEs to make informed decisions before joining the AE community;
- New freelance AEs to identify concrete actions to kick start their AE career; and
- Established AEs to explore new avenues to widen or deepen their craft.

At the start, it was generally unclear how prospective AEs will respond to the career service. To test the ground, the AE Career Advisors initially only offered the career guidance through emails with follow-up phone conversations. As they shared experiences and industry information to the best of their ability, they felt somewhat inadequate in bringing clients through a more insightful career conversation. This led to the group completing the WSQ Advanced Certificate in Career Development Facilitation (ACCDF) qualification. As a result, the group became more confident and started to experiment with different career service offerings. Over time, the AECA service evolved and adapted to the needs and demands of their AE clients as shown in Figure 1 below:

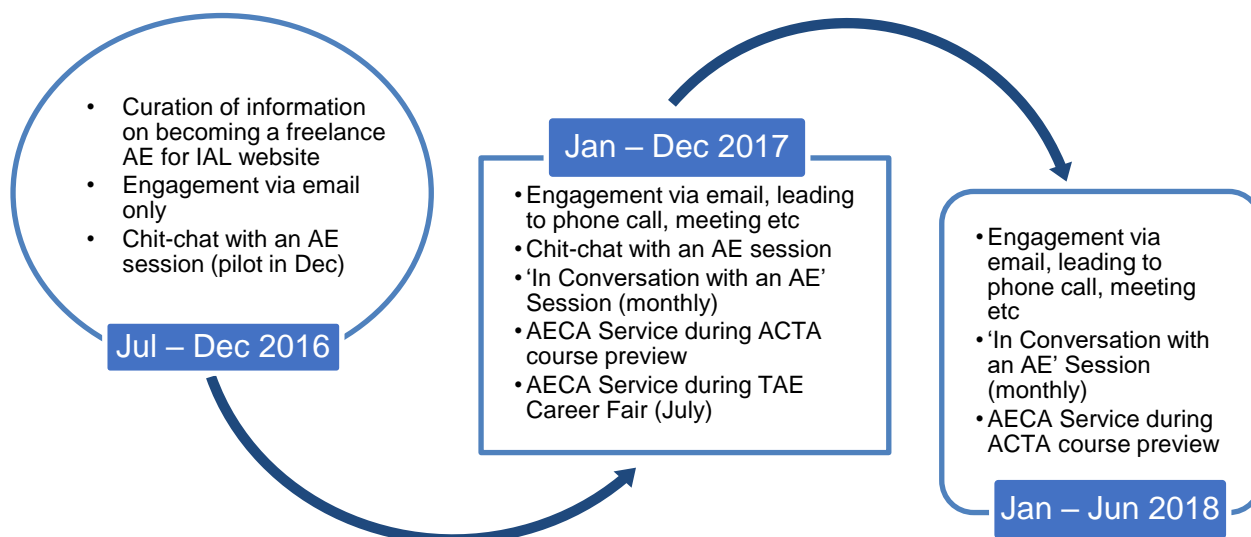


Figure 1: Adaption of the career services

Table 1 provides more details of the various AECA services offered.

Types of AE Career Services	Description	Current Status
AECA email enquiry	Prospective AEs write to the AE Career Advisors via email to address career queries on becoming an AE. Emails which are likely to become a career conversation are identified and assigned to a AE Career Advisors to follow up.	Ongoing
Chit-chat with an AE sessions	A one-on-one meeting of 30 – 45 minutes with an AE Career Advisor. The sessions are publicised in IAL about 2 - 3 weeks before the session. Prospective AEs who are interested to talk to an AE Career Advisor about their AE career are encouraged to walk-in and register for a session on the spot.	Discontinued
In Conversation with a Freelance AE session	A 2-hour AE career information session catered to address the questions prospective or new AEs may have about the AE career path. The sessions are publicised on the AEN website and participants register for the sessions online. The emphasis of these sessions is to share how key considerations in becoming a freelance Adult Educator (see Figure 2) impacted and shaped the careers of the AE Career Advisors facilitating the session.	Ongoing
AE Career Advisors supporting IAL ACTA Course Preview	<p>AE Career Advisors make a short 20-minute presentation during the IAL ACTA preview on what the career of an AE is like before communicating certain key considerations in becoming a freelance Adult Educator (see Figure 2).</p> <p>AE Career Advisors also address queries from potential ACTA participants to clarify their need to pursue ACTA and address any misconceptions about taking ACTA in order to become AEs.</p>	Ongoing
Role of AE Career Advisors during TAE Career Fair	AE Career Advisors provide one-to-one career advisory to TAE career fair attendees to help them develop clarity on their career as a freelance AE.	Ongoing

Table 1: Examples of AECA services piloted

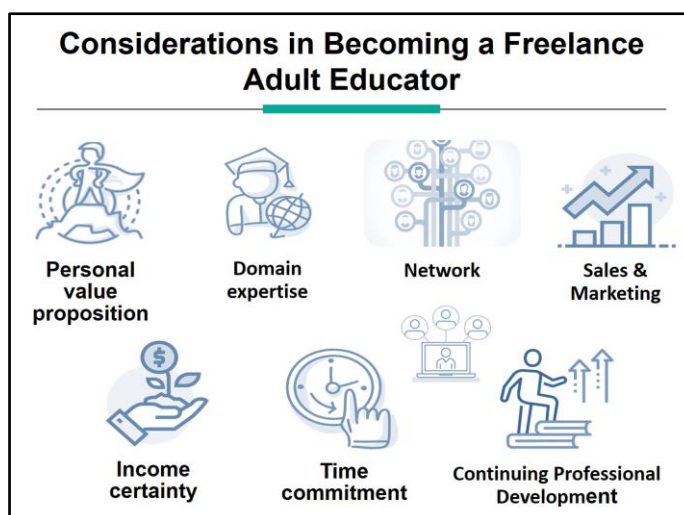


Figure 2: The considerations in becoming a freelance Adult Educator

In line with the perspective that becoming a successful freelance AE requires developing resilience and the ability to generate work assignments, a main tenet of the AECA is not to provide any matching of training assignment or link-up with any training providers. Instead, the objective of the career guidance is to provide the prospective AE with greater clarity and relevant market information so that they are able to make their own independent career decisions. The AECA approach is as follows:

Activity	IAL AE Career Advisory
Getting connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email
Assessment Tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘What Does It Take to be a Freelance Adult Educator?’ Assessment
Duration per session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60 - 120 mins
Mode of connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email • Phone call • Face-to-face meeting
Connecting with a career coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign to 1 AE Career Advisor
Career Development Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schlossberg’s 4S model
Services provided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist individual to seek clarity in career transition/ choices • Provide industry information
Workshops and Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-Conversation with a Freelance AE • AEN Courses and initiatives (e.g. AE mentors)

Table 2: The AECA Approach

Description of the AECA Client and Career Conversation

To outline what the AECA client is like, data from the AECA email enquiry service² was analysed. From June 2016 till June 2018, out of the 153 enquiries received, 96 of them had further interaction with the AECA team.

Period	Number of initial enquiries	Number of complete cases
Jul – Dec 2016	66	36
Jan – Jun 2017	41	26
Jul – Dec 2017	23	16
Jan – Jun 2018	23	18
Total	153	96

Table 3: Number of AECA Inquiries from Jul 2016 – Jun 2018

Gender wise, the data suggests that the freelance adult educator profession appealed to both male and female clients. The slight difference in the percentage is largely consistent with the overall Singapore labour market profile where 55% are males and 45% are females.

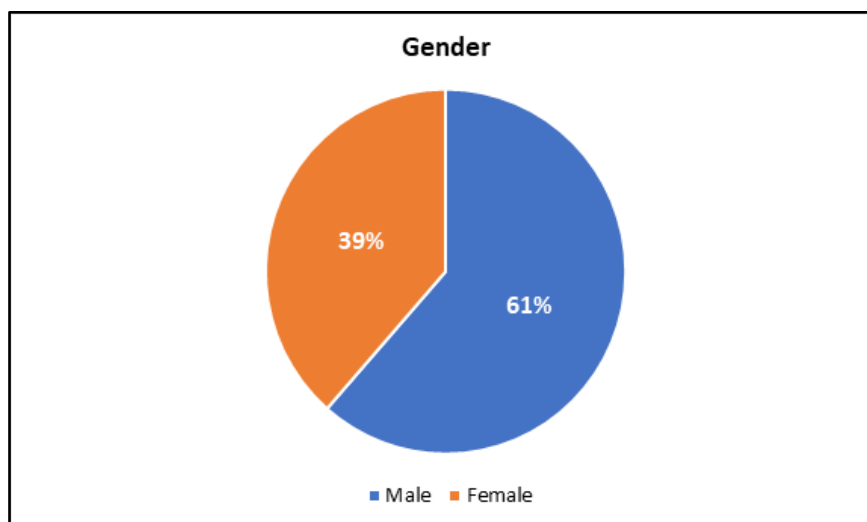


Figure 3: Gender distribution of AECA client

While the clients were from a wide variety of occupational groups, more were from Information Technology (IT), Finance/Accounting and Human Resources profession as shown in Figure 4.

² This is largely because more in-depth career conversations are more likely to result after the initial email enquiry compared to the other services.

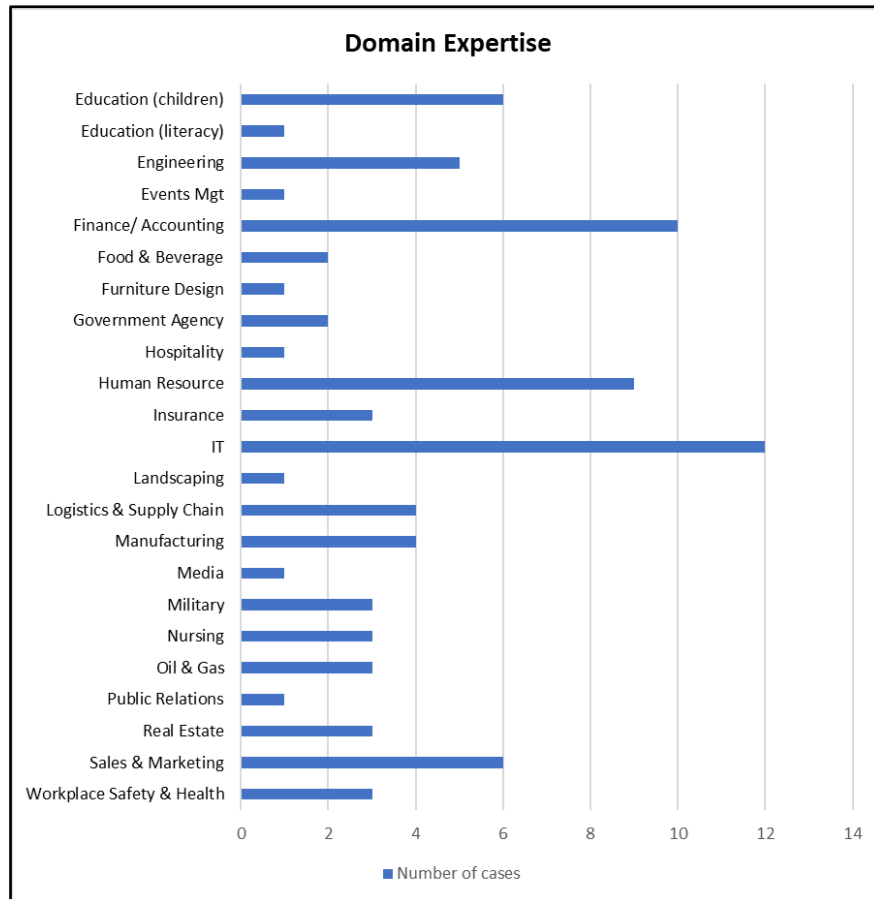


Figure 4: Occupational distribution of AECA client

In terms of age, it is noted that majority of the AECA clients are in the 30 - 59 age range. From the case notes, it appears that the career conversations with those in their 30s are more explorative in nature. In addition to becoming an AE, clients in this age group may be contemplating other career options such as moving up the career ladder; deepening their skills in a specialised discipline or becoming an entrepreneur. The career conversations with those in the 40s are somewhat more intentional as most are considering a mid-career switch to become an AE through leveraging their industry experiences. The clients in the 50 - 59 age group are potentially making plans for semi-retirement. These are more interested to create a source of income stream based on a part-time work arrangement as an AE.

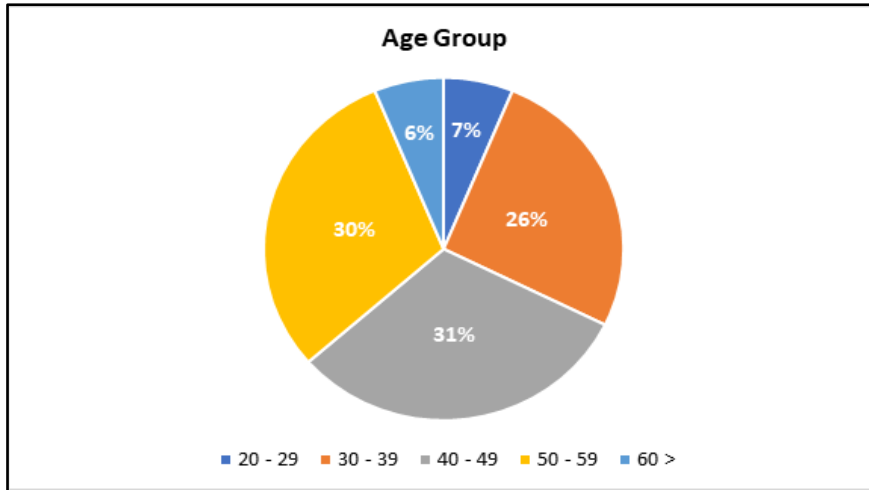


Figure 5: Age profile of the AECA client

In general, the AE Career Advisors dealt predominantly with individuals who are still economically engaged (71%) with 54% of the clients still in full-time employment. The second largest group are those who are unemployed (28%). Conversations with the former group typically show that they were just doing research on the TAE sector before leaving full-time employment. For those in the unemployed group, the conversations centred around the need to build a network and seeking opportunities as these seemed more pressing issues. Conversations with the unemployed client may be more emotional especially if they left their permanent job involuntarily.

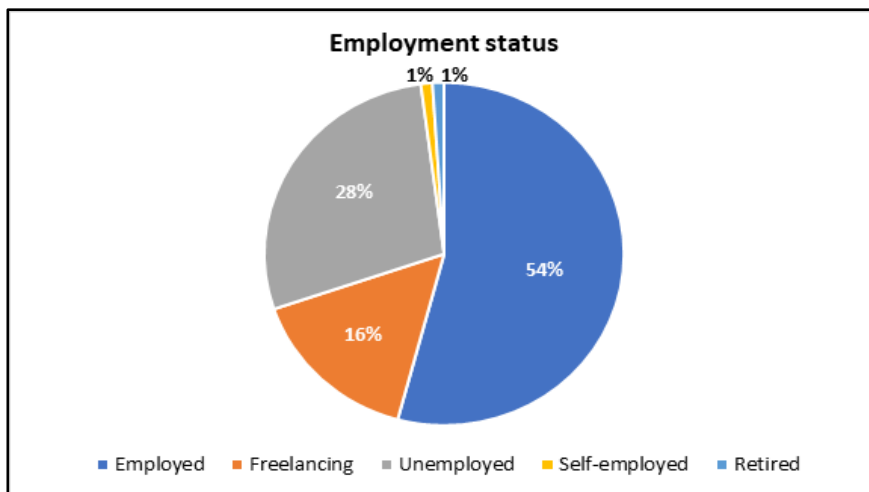


Figure 6: Employment status of the AECA client

Using a modified version³ of the categorisation in Karmel, Bound and Sadik (2015), AECA also classified their clients into one of the following:

- **Purposeful:** Client intentionally chooses to pursue the non-permanent AE work arrangement to develop and dedicate time to the craft and develop professional identity;
- **Opportunistic:** Client moves into the role of the freelance AE due to problems navigating the permanent job market or are recruited by friends or family; and
- **Life-stage:** Client chooses the AE career so as to give time to priorities that lie with non-work circumstances such as caring responsibilities, retirement, and travel

From the data, 72% of the clients are reported to be intentional in exploring the freelance adult educator profession as shown.

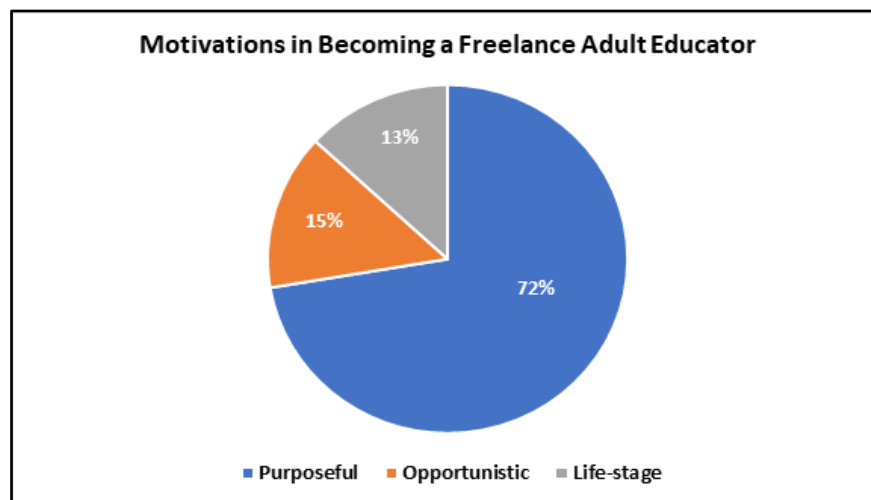


Figure 7: Motivation for Choosing the freelance AE Career

In terms of expectations of the AECA service, the majority of clients have broadly-defined goals and are seeking more information about the sector. During the career development conversation, they are guided to assess the other considerations of the AE career (see Figure 2) along with the Schlossberg's 4 S factors (i.e. situation, self, support, and strategies) of their transition to becoming a freelance AE. This provides a rather holistic framing on what is required for a successful career transition and reinforces the idea that becoming an AE requires more than obtaining an ACTA qualification. With those who are more targeted at seeking training opportunities or finding the next step after obtaining ACTA, the AE Career Advisors need to manage their expectations when conveying the AECA's approach of not doing any assignment matching or job placement. In such cases, the AE Career Advisors also need to facilitate the conversation more skilfully to bring these clients to a space of career development, exploration and planning.

³ The 4th motivation which is that of a Lifestyle worker defined as one with a preference for work with low responsibility and/or daily pay. This category is not very applicable to the freelance AE as the work done is often that with high responsibilities and accountability and the pay is not daily in nature.

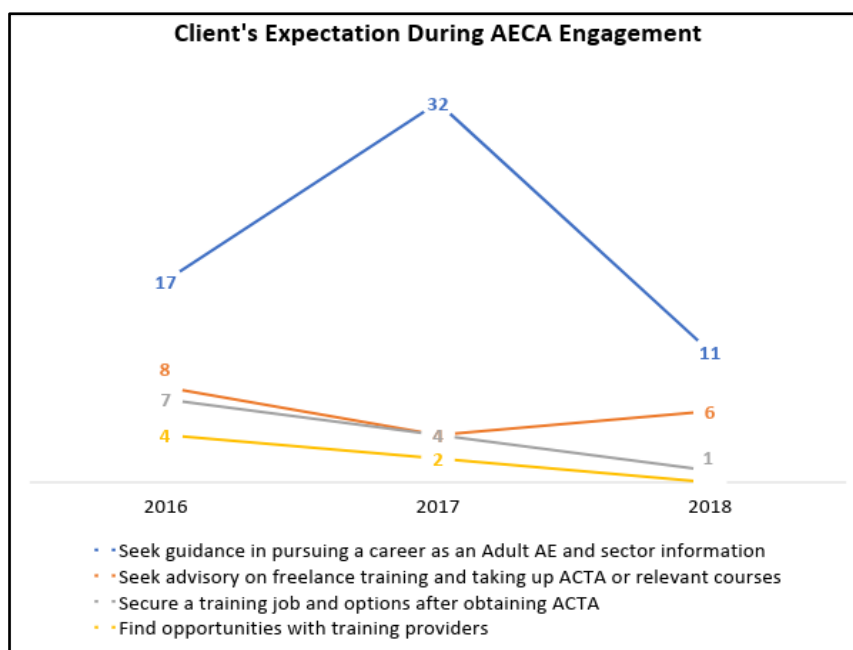


Figure 8: Client's expectation during AECA engagement

Preliminary Insights for Practice

a) Decline in Number of Email Cases

The decline in the email cases are potentially a result of the efficacy of the one-to-many career events such as the bi-monthly ACTA course preview and 'In Conversation with a freelance AE' sessions. Generally speaking, the clients may find group formats less intimidating, 'safer' and 'more comfortable' psychologically. In such sessions, similar questions and concerns are often raised by various unidentified participants which creates anonymity. Besides hearing perspectives and life experiences of the various AE Career Advisors directly, participants are encouraged to share their starting journey and challenges. The approach seems to address the concerns and provide sufficient clarity in exploring the freelance adult educator career option.

It is highly likely that the two one-to-many initiatives will become the main AECA service offering. Although the one-on-one service has fallen in demand, it will still be retained to address those who would like to have a more personalised conversation.

b) Clients are purposeful but vague

Regardless of industry experience, age and employment status, 72% of the clients who engaged the AECA are purposeful in exploring the freelance AE career. While most of them expressed their desire to become an AE, many found it challenging to translate these aspirations into more specific actionable steps. Based on the experiences of the AE Career Advisors, it appears that many prefer clear directives on how to establish themselves upon graduation from the ACTA programme as they have little knowledge on how they are positioned in the overall training services marketplace.

Thus, the AECA conversations will need to help the prospective AE think more like an entrepreneur than an educator. With the majority of the clients likely to be in full-time employment, the mindset of an employee may work insidiously against that of being an

entrepreneur. AE Career Advisors may consider using the integrated model found in Karmel, Bound and Sadik (2015) shown in Figure 9 to help the prospective AE explore what it means to develop their entrepreneurialism and how invested they are toward making this personal change.

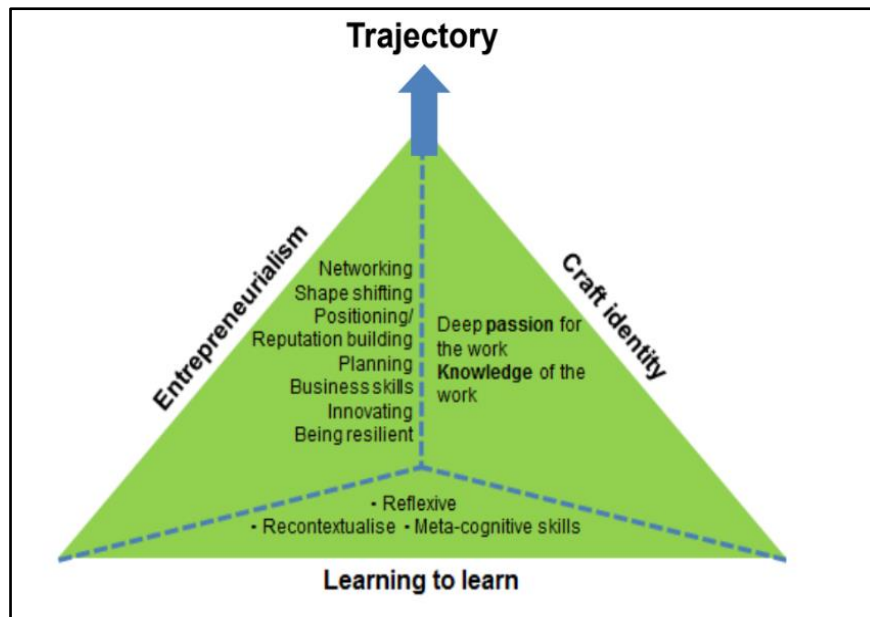


Figure 9: Integrated Practice of Learning and Developing of non-permanent workers

c) More clients from Information Technology, Finance and Human Resource occupations

With more clients seeking to become AEs from the fields of Information Technology, Finance and Human Resource, it is useful for the AE Career Advisors to be more informed with the workforce trends and developments pertaining to these occupations. While this will help the AE Career Advisors better relate to the clients from these 3 occupations, knowledge on skills in demand in these occupations can be used to help prospective AEs from these sectors size up their target market. Such advice is especially pertinent to the prospective AEs who are considering leveraging their years of industry experience and subject matter expertise which may face obsolescence from technological disruptions. In such cases, AE Career Advisors may also need to assist such clients in thinking more creatively and being more open to considering other industry domains or even other forms of freelance work.

Conclusion

As the TAE sector is moving toward leveraging more technology for effective learning, delivering learning that meets business outcomes, and embracing learning at and through work, the work of the AE will change in tandem. For the AE Career Advisors to continue offering relevant and authentic career advice, it is important that they find opportunities to experience these newer emerging practices as well. This will go a long way in enabling AE Career Advisors to develop empathy for their clients who may wish to also take similar career journeys. As role models in embracing the changes in the TAE sector, the AE Career Advisors reflect what the practitioners in the industry are going through.

In the larger scheme of things, perhaps the different career advisory services provided by training organisations, industries and/or associations could gather and form a community of practice. This will

allow sharing of up-to-date career practices and information while fostering collaboration to help individuals better transit into their chosen careers.

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