

Career Conversations Competency Framework

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Next scheduled review: 2028

About this framework

This framework defines the capability needed by people who have career conversations as part of a wider job they do, but who are not — and are not training to become — qualified careers or employability professionals.

It exists because there is a real and persistent gap in the system. Most of the conversations that shape someone's working life happen with friends, neighbours, relatives, colleagues, library staff, housing officers, tutors, work coaches, advice workers, social prescribers, and community volunteers. These conversations are constant, consequential, and largely uncoached. Some go well. Most are nobody's job.

The Career Conversations Competency Framework names what good practice looks like for non-specialists in this role. It is the foundation for the Career Ally credential issued by Stay Nimble through the Foundations in Career Conversations microcredential, and it is intended to support the development of further training and credentialing routes over time.

Who this framework is for

The framework is written for four audiences:

1. People considering or undertaking training mapped to this framework, who want to know what capability they are developing.
2. Organisations that train, employ, or support career conversations supporters, who need a reference for what the role involves and how competence is demonstrated.
3. Curriculum designers and training providers who want to build programmes that develop these competencies.
4. Funders, commissioners, and policymakers who want to understand what this layer of capability is and how it sits within the wider careers and employability landscape.

What this framework is and is not

This framework defines a tier of capability. It does not define a profession. A person who meets the competencies in this framework is a trained non-specialist whose career conversations are structured, ethical, and effective — not a careers adviser, employment adviser, or coach.

The framework is published openly so that other training providers, employers, and credentialing bodies may build curricula and programmes that map to it. Stay Nimble maintains the framework but does not seek to be the sole route to it.

Positioning relative to CDI and IEP

This framework is foundational. It defines a layer of capability that sits below qualified careers practice as recognised by the Career Development Institute (CDI), and below qualified employability practice as recognised by the Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP).

A career conversations supporter is not a career development professional. They are not an employability adviser. Their training does not confer either qualification, and the framework should not be read as a parallel route to professional practice.

For supporters who wish to develop further, the appropriate routes are:

CDI registration as a career development professional, through CDI-recognised qualifications and the Register of Career Development Professionals.

IEP membership and the IEP qualification pathway for those whose role is primarily in employability practice.

This framework supports those pathways by establishing a recognised foundation of capability that can sit beneath them. Supporters are not in competition with qualified professionals — they are part of how a wider workforce supports the people qualified professionals later work with.

02

The discipline of career conversations

A career conversation is any conversation in which someone is thinking aloud about their working life. It is not a careers interview, an employability assessment, or a coaching session. It is the everyday exchange in which a person clarifies, with the help of someone else, what they want, what is holding them back, and what they might do next.

These conversations are a discipline in their own right. They have observable structure, identifiable skill, recognisable failure modes, and demonstrable outcomes. The capability to have them well can be taught, practised, assessed, and maintained.

A foundational principle: Ask, don't tell

The defining principle of effective career conversations is that the person whose working life is being discussed should do most of the thinking. The role of the other person in the conversation is to help them think more clearly, not to think for them.

This principle separates a career conversations supporter from a well-meaning helper. A helper offers solutions, suggestions, websites, and advice. A supporter asks questions, listens, and helps the other person discover what they already know, what they actually

want, and what they could do next.

The principle is straightforward to state and difficult to practise. Helpers slip into telling because telling feels useful. Supporters are trained to notice when they are about to tell, and to ask instead.

Every competency in this framework rests on this principle.

The role of the career conversations supporter

This framework describes the competencies of a career conversations supporter: a trained non-specialist who has career conversations as part of a wider role. "Career Ally" is Stay Nimble's credential for this role, conferred through routes recognised by Stay Nimble. Other providers building programmes against this framework confer credentials under their own names.

A supporter is a person trained in this discipline who is not, and is not training to become, a qualified careers or employability professional. They have career conversations as part of a wider role — paid or voluntary, formal or informal — and they bring trained competence to those conversations rather than untrained good intentions.

Supporters work within clearly defined scope. They are not coaches, advisers, counsellors, or case workers. They have a particular kind of conversation, recognise when it has reached its limits, and know how to connect the person to appropriate further support.

03

The four domains

The framework is organised into four domains of competence. A supporter is expected to demonstrate competence across all four.

Career Conversation Practice — the core competency of structured, supportive conversation about someone's working life.

Recognising and Referring — judgement about the scope of one's own role, and the practice of connecting people to appropriate further support.

Professional Conduct — the ethical practice that makes a supporter trustworthy: confidentiality, inclusive practice, and appropriate boundaries.

Enabling Independent Capability — helping people build their own capability to navigate working life, including through the digital tools, information, and services available to them.

The domains are interdependent. A conversation that follows a good structure but breaches confidentiality is not competent practice. A confident referral made without a prior conversation is not competent practice. The framework expects all four domains to be present together.

04

Domain 1 – Career Conversation Practice

Definition

The competency to have structured, supportive conversations that help someone think more clearly about their working life. This is the core discipline of the supporter role.

Competencies

1.1

Structured listening

The supporter listens to understand, not to respond. They give the other person space to think and speak, notice what is said and what is left unsaid, and resist the impulse to fill silence with suggestions.

Indicators

- listens more than speaks
- allows pauses
- reflects back what is heard before responding
- notices when the helper is doing most of the talking and corrects

1.2

Supportive questioning

The supporter asks open questions that invite reflection and discovery, rather than closed questions that confirm assumptions or lead to predetermined answers.

Indicators

- asks questions that begin with "what", "how", and "tell me about"
- avoids questions that contain their own answer
- uses questions to explore before suggesting
- recognises and recovers from leading questions

1.3

Working with a structured model

The supporter uses a recognised conversational model to provide structure without rigidity. The model gives the conversation a beginning, a way of clarifying what matters, a way of identifying existing strengths, and a way of arriving at a concrete next step.

Indicators

- uses the model as a guide rather than a script
- adapts language and pacing to the person
- recognises which part of the model the conversation is in
- arrives at a clear, person-chosen next step

Note: The Foundations in Career Conversations microcredential teaches the 4-question model (What's happening for you? What would good look like? What's worked before? What feels like a good next step?). Other models may meet this competency provided they share the supportive-discovery structure.

1.4

Recovery from common pitfalls

The supporter recognises the common failure modes of career conversations — jumping to advice, making assumptions, taking on the other person's problems — and can recover the conversation when they occur.

Indicators

- notices when slipping into advice mode
- can return the conversation to questions
- does not take ownership of decisions that belong to the other person
- uses simple recovery phrases ("let me step back — what would good look like for you?")

1.5

Reflective practice

The supporter reflects on their own conversations, identifies what worked and what did not, and uses that reflection to improve.

Indicators

- uses self-check prompts during and after conversations
- participates in peer reflection through learning circles
- can articulate what they would do differently next time

05

Domain 2 – Recognising and Referring

Definition

The competency to recognise when a conversation has reached the limits of the supporter role, and to connect the person to appropriate further support without losing trust or momentum.

Competencies

2.1

Recognising scope

The supporter has a clear understanding of what their role does and does not cover, and can recognise in the moment when a conversation is moving beyond it.

Indicators

- can articulate the boundary between supporter-level help and qualified professional support
- recognises extended unsuccessful job search, significant career transitions, persistent uncertainty, and other situations that benefit from coaching
- recognises emotional, mental health, or safeguarding concerns that require specialist response

2.2

Making positive referrals

The supporter introduces further support as a strength of the system, not a limitation of the helper. Referrals are framed as what the person deserves rather than what the helper cannot offer.

Indicators

- refers after listening, not before
- uses language that names what the further support will offer
- addresses concerns about cost, time, and expectations honestly
- makes the next step as easy as possible to take

2.3

Maintaining continuity

The supporter remains part of the person's wider support network after a referral, rather than disappearing from the relationship at the point of handover.

Indicators

- makes clear that the referral is an addition, not a replacement
- offers continued support with digital tools, signposting, or follow-up conversation where appropriate

- closes the conversation in a way that invites the person to return

2.4

Emergency escalation

The supporter recognises situations that require immediate specialist response — domestic abuse and coercive control, suicidal ideation and self-harm, child protection concerns — and follows established safeguarding procedures rather than attempting to handle them alone.

Indicators

- knows the safeguarding lead and procedures of the venue or organisation where they work before they begin practice
 - never promises confidentiality for safety concerns
 - escalates in case of doubt
 - provides specialist contact information where appropriate
 - understands their legal duties around child protection
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06

Domain 3 – Professional Conduct

Definition

The competency to practise in a way that earns and maintains the trust of the people the supporter works with, the organisations they work within, and the wider community of practice.

Competencies

3.1

Confidentiality in practice

The supporter maintains the confidentiality of the people they work with, while being clear about the limits of that confidentiality and the situations in which information must be shared.

Indicators

- explains the limits of confidentiality at the start of a conversation if asked
- shares information on a need-to-know basis
- can share aggregated and anonymised information for legitimate organisational purposes without identifying individuals
- never promises confidentiality for safeguarding concerns
- protects information in shared physical and digital spaces

3.2

Inclusive practice

The supporter communicates in a way that respects the diversity of the people they work with, makes fewer assumptions, asks more questions, and offers options.

Indicators

- avoids assumptions based on age, gender, family structure, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, language background, or economic circumstance
- offers information in multiple formats where helpful
- adapts pace to the person
- notices and corrects their own assumption-making

3.3

Professional boundaries

The supporter maintains appropriate boundaries between their supporter role and other relationships, both with the people they support and with colleagues.

Indicators

- acknowledges personal disclosures without taking them on
- redirects conversations that exceed the role
- maintains professional rather than personal relationships on social media
- recognises when a recurring conversation indicates a referral is needed

3.4

Ethical reflection

The supporter treats ethics as ongoing practice rather than a one-off training topic, and seeks guidance when uncertain.

Indicators

- recognises ethical dilemmas as they arise
- consults colleagues, supervisors, or safeguarding leads when uncertain
- brings ethical questions to learning circles
- updates their own practice in response to reflection and feedback

Domain 4 – Enabling Independent Capability

Definition

The competency to help people build their own capability to navigate working life, using the digital tools, information, resources, and services available to them. The supporter extends the conversation beyond the time the two of them spend together, without taking over the person's own work.

Competencies

4.1

Confident demonstration of digital tools

The supporter can confidently demonstrate the digital tools available to support working life decisions — including platforms, AI-based assistants, and other resources — in a way that builds the person's independent capability rather than creating dependency on the supporter.

Indicators

- sits alongside rather than taking over
- explains as they demonstrate
- lets the person try
- troubleshoots common issues without making the person feel inadequate
- knows when to step in if the person becomes stuck or frustrated

Note: The Foundations in Career Conversations microcredential develops this competency through the Stay Nimble platform and Ask.Nim. Other implementations may meet this competency through different tools provided the underlying capability — confident, person-centred demonstration that builds independence — is the same.

4.2

Practical support with everyday career tasks

The supporter can offer practical, immediately useful support with the everyday tasks that come up in career conversations: CVs, job applications, interview preparation, and similar.

Indicators

- offers practical guidance that the person can act on immediately
- recognises the limits of their own knowledge and points to better sources where needed
- treats practical tasks as opportunities for the person to develop their own capability rather than tasks to be done for them

4.3

Local and online signposting

The supporter knows the local and online resources available to the people they support, and can signpost appropriately to training providers, voluntary opportunities, specialist services, and other support.

Indicators

- maintains current knowledge of relevant local services
- signposts with specificity rather than generality
- knows the difference between resources that complement supporter-level help and those that require referral
- updates their knowledge over time

4.4

Building independent capability over time

The supporter works in a way that increases the person's capability to manage their own working life decisions in the future, rather than creating dependency on the supporter relationship.

Indicators

- gives the person tools and frameworks they can use themselves
 - encourages independent use of digital resources between conversations
 - recognises when a recurring conversation suggests dependency rather than progress
 - refers on where appropriate
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08

Demonstration, certification, and progression

How competence is demonstrated

Competence against this framework is demonstrated through a recognised training programme that includes:

Structured learning across the four domains, with assessment against the competencies in each.

A live practice session in which the Career Conversation Practice competencies are observed by a facilitator who is a career development professional registered with the Career Development Institute (CDI). This requirement applies to the assessment of Domain 1; the design and delivery of self-paced learning materials covering the other domains is not subject to the same requirement.

Integrated self-assessment and reflective practice.

A defined credential issued by a recognised body, mapped to this framework.

Continuing development through participation in a community of practice (see Continuing Development below).

Recognised routes

At publication, the only training programme recognised as conferring Career Ally status against this framework is the Foundations in Career Conversations microcredential, issued by Stay Nimble and CPD-certified by the CPD Certification Service. The microcredential covers all four domains and meets all the framework's demonstration requirements.

Career Ally is a designation conferred only through routes recognised by Stay Nimble. The competencies are open to all; the credential is awarded only by a recognised route. See the licensing statement at the end of this document regarding use of the Career Ally marks.

The framework is published openly to support the development of additional recognised routes. Training providers and credentialing bodies may build programmes that map to this framework; Stay Nimble welcomes contact from providers wishing to do so, and will publish recognition criteria and a process for review in a future version.

Progression beyond the supporter role

This framework defines the foundational tier of career conversation capability.

Supporters who wish to develop further may pursue:

CDI registration as a career development professional, via CDI-recognised qualifications and the Register of Career Development Professionals.

IEP membership and qualification pathways for those whose primary role is employability practice.

Other vocational qualifications relevant to their setting (advice and guidance, community development, social work, and related fields).

This framework supports those routes by providing a recognised foundation of practice on which further qualification can build.

09

Continuing development

Competence against this framework is not a one-off achievement. Career conversations are a discipline, and disciplines require continuing practice.

Supporters maintain their credential by:

Participating in at least four learning circles per year — structured peer-development sessions facilitated by qualified coaches, in which supporters share experience, work through difficult situations, and continue developing across the four domains.

Completing an annual refresher to update on changes to the framework, the wider system, and emerging good practice.

Renewing the credential at the intervals set by the issuing body.

Continuing development is a competency expectation within this framework, not an optional extra. Supporters who do not maintain their development cease to hold a current credential.

10

Governance and review

This framework is maintained by Stay Nimble.

The next scheduled review is in 2028. Between reviews, Stay Nimble welcomes contributions, comments, and corrections at info@staynimble.co.uk.

The framework will be reviewed earlier than scheduled if:

Significant changes occur in the wider careers, employability, or public-services landscape that affect the framework's positioning.

Additional training providers seek recognition against the framework, requiring the publication of recognition criteria.

Feedback from the community of practice indicates that the framework requires substantive revision.

Material changes between versions will be summarised in a change log.

Change log

v1.0.1, July 2026. Clarifications to licensing and role terminology; no changes to competencies. The role defined by the framework is now described generically as "career conversations supporter", with "Career Ally" identified as Stay Nimble's credential name for the role. A licensing note clarifies that the Career Ally marks are not licensed under the framework's CC BY 4.0 licence.

v1.0, May 2026. First publication.

Acknowledgements

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Jennifer Harper, Stay Nimble's Head of Coaching and a CDI-registered career development professional, has led the design and delivery of the practice underpinning this framework. Further named contributors will be acknowledged in future versions as the framework grows.

It is published in the spirit of an open standard, in the hope that career conversation capability becomes as ordinary in this country as basic first aid.

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