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Skills-First: What Does It Mean for Me?

Roundtable Insights

2

Key Insights

The Office for Skills-First Practices (OSP), under the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), has launched a six-part working paper series to spark dialogue, surface fresh perspectives, and co-create practical solutions for building a skills-first ecosystem in Singapore.

The second paper in the series, "Skills-First: What Does it Mean for Me?", focuses on individuals' agency by delving into the potential barriers that hinder individuals from managing their career planning and upskilling to thrive at rapidly transforming workplaces. To deepen the conversation, a roundtable session was convened on **7 August 2025**, bringing together 15 local and international experts as panellists, 60 in-person attendees, and 170 online attendees. The session served as a platform to reflect on the paper, share experiences, co-create solutions, and identify pathways for collaboration.

The session had three segments: first, a recap of the barriers individuals face and a discussion of the desired behaviours for individuals to overcome the barriers; second, a breakout session where participants were divided into four different groups to co-create interventions to enable and sustain the desired behaviours; and third, a final segment where groups reported the main points from the discussion. During the second segment, an online platform was provided for virtual participants to submit their ideas on ways to sustain and enable desired behaviours of individuals.

The roundtable discussion centred on two focus areas:

1   **Reviewing the Desired Behaviours of Individuals**

2   **Co-Creating Interventions to Enable and Sustain the Desired Behaviours of Individuals**

This executive summary distils the key insights from the roundtable discussion.

1. Reviewing the Desired Behaviours of Individuals

The roundtable began by recapping the four barriers, described in Working Paper 2 "Skills-First: What Does It Mean for Me?", that individuals face in managing their career planning and upskilling, i.e. situational, informational, psychological and societal challenges. In unpacking what it takes for individuals to manage their career, skills and learning, a list of desired behaviours were proposed for discussion, where the behaviours serve to guide individuals in developing career self-management capacity:

1. Engage with my employers/HR on my career-skills-learning needs

2. Engage with a career coach/mentor on my career-skills-learning needs

3. Update my digital skills records (e.g. Careers & Skills Passport, LinkedIn)

4. Develop and execute my career-skills-learning plan

5. Identify the skills I need for work

6. Upskill and reskill

7. Learn and apply knowledge and skills effectively in performance

8. Demonstrate my skills and capability to prospective employers

Initial reactions to the list included the importance of examining these behaviours through both **personal mindset and systemic perspectives**. From a personal mindset perspective, panellists emphasised the need for individuals to remain open-minded and confident, and to be supported by an enabling ecosystem that fosters the right emotional and psychological state for career explorations. Resilience was seen as the overarching outcome, enabling individuals to recover quickly from setbacks and adapt to change. However, anxiety and fear of "what's next" often deter people from engaging in skills development or planning their next career move, particularly among those in vulnerable situations who may still be focused on "just surviving". Some individuals, due to personal or work circumstances, may not yet be ready to act on these behaviours.

From a systemic perspective, building awareness of skills gaps and positioning career guidance as a proactive, mainstream service, as well as ensuring training leads to recognised skills and meaningful job outcomes, are essential. Achieving this will require a **shared skills language** between employers and jobseekers, robust employment facilitation, and accessible infrastructure. **Labour market intelligence and common taxonomies** are critical for both career guidance and job matching. One of the panellists emphasised supporting individuals' career aspirations, considering their stage of life and psychological needs.

Building **self-awareness**, which involves knowing one's current position, potential, and gaps, was seen as foundational. It was also noted that conversations about skills gaps often default to perceptions of failure rather than potential, which can reinforce reluctance to engage in such conversations.

Individuals tend to make a cost–benefit estimate before embarking on career-skills-learning development, weighing the potential gains against the perceived risks. Collective efforts in lowering these risks, and linking skills development to meaningful career outcomes, will be key. Ultimately, empowering individuals to take ownership of their career paths will create a more adaptive and future-ready workforce.

Following the initial discussion, participants were invited to vote on the eight desired behaviours to identify which were perceived to be the most important yet hardest to tackle. The voting exercise surfaced the following four behaviours as the top priorities for deeper exploration:

1   Identify the skills I need for work

2   Develop and execute my career-skills-learning plan

3   Engage with my employers/HR on my career-skills-learning needs

4   Demonstrate my skills and capability to prospective employers

2. Co-Creating Interventions to Enable and Sustain the Desired Behaviours of Individuals

The following are suggested interventions co-created by participants during the breakout sessions:

Desired Behaviours	Suggested Interventions to Engage and Sustain the Behaviours
Identify the skills I need for work	• Build self-awareness and confidence • Provide mind space to explore interests and career goals (self-determined learning) • Develop mindset celebrating the joy of learning • Normalise failure • Change culture to accept 'fail fast, fail safe" • Empower senior and line management to "walk the talk" • Engage in NTUC ecosystem of career coaches, career mentors and virtual/AI coaches • Build community of strength and innovation
Develop and execute my career-skills-learning plan	• Support individuals' ownership • Employers offer structured support for personalised career-skills-learning planning • Enable cultural paradigm shift in career self-management • Educate all stakeholders in an inclusive manner • HR influential but not the only driver

Desired Behaviours	Suggested Interventions to Engage and Sustain the Behaviours
Engage with my employers/HR on my career-skills-learning needs	• Create learning culture that is person-centric not just organisation centric • Set up in-house skills office with fractional or volunteer career coaches • Provide playbooks and space for career conversations • Create time for learning • Help employees find the language and channels to demonstrate their value-add to employers • Design real-life projects as part of learning through work • Identify and address skills needs • Leverage tech (e.g., AI) for career coach • Cultivate skills-literacy upstream for T-shaped skill development • Coordinate sharing between NTUC Company Training Committees (CTCs) across sectors
Demonstrate my skills and capability to prospective employers	• Adopt common skills language • Provide required infrastructure, e.g. Careers & Skills Passport, skills profiling, job adjacency analysis, etc. • Develop reflexive practice • Help individuals weave a narrative/story of their skills • Provide internships/joint projects • Employers articulate clearly skills needs • Go upstream and start skills-career awareness in schools

Taken together, these interventions highlight the shift needed from isolated training efforts towards an **integrated ecosystem of shared responsibility**—where individuals, employers, and wider communities collectively enable sustained career development. A skills-first approach begins with **clear, shared frameworks and tools for articulating skills**, enabling employees and employers to align on priorities, track progress, and embed continuous upskilling into daily work. Building on this foundation, fostering communities of peers who can share experiences and support one another helps normalise development conversations and strengthen mutual encouragement. Employers play a crucial role in creating a **person-centric learning culture** where development is tailored to individual's aspirations and potential, making career growth proactive, collaborative, and grounded in demonstrable capabilities, supported by leaders, HR teams, and both human and AI-enabled coaches who are equipped to guide constructive, future-focused career discussions.

Equipping HR professionals, line managers, and leaders with **career development and vocational psychology skills** is essential to facilitate such conversations. Organisations can also create in-house skills offices or engage fractional career coaches to provide targeted and flexible development support, ensuring individuals at different stages and roles receive career guidance that is both timely and relevant.

Panellists suggested providing workers with clear labour market insights and pathways to evaluate options, assess progress and identify skills gaps, offering a structured reference for the competencies, behaviours, and mindsets expected at each stage. When implemented within a **culture of psychological safety**, these pathways can guide honest self-assessment and career planning without fear of negative repercussions. This requires building trust through a strong social compact between employers and employees, ensuring that disclosures about skills gaps are met with support rather than penalisation, and that both sides remain accountable for follow-through. They enable individuals to see tangible pathways for advancement, prioritise development actions that align with organisational needs and future skills demand, and engage in constructive career conversations grounded in mutual trust and shared accountability.

Within this environment, individuals can adopt a growth-oriented mindset, seeing development areas not as signs of failure but as opportunities for potential and future readiness. Strengthening individual agency to redefine and recreate their career identities is critical, so that people see themselves as active owners of their career journeys rather than passive recipients of opportunities.

Development should extend beyond formal training into non-formal learning, e.g. **structured on-the-job learning**, such as stretch assignments that challenge individuals to expand their capabilities. Flexible work models, including assignment-based resourcing, can make skills more visible, create targeted opportunities for skills application, and help organisations respond dynamically to change. Starting early by cultivating skills literacy in schools can strengthen adaptability and interdisciplinary thinking from the outset of a longevity career.

Practical demonstration of skills remains critical. Applied-based learning provides evidence of capability in real-world contexts, while labour market intelligence and harmonised skills taxonomies enhance guidance, matching, and decision-making for both jobseekers and employers. Empowering individuals to craft and communicate **compelling narratives** about their capabilities, experiences, and achievements ensures they can clearly convey their value to employers and stakeholders, turning skills development into a productive asset for career advancement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an additional desired behaviour **is for individuals to take stock of their career aspirations at key intervals**. Periodic reflection creates intentional mind-space for individuals to evaluate whether their current trajectory continues to align with their evolving goals, values, and life circumstances. By embedding regular checkpoints—through structured career conversations, guided self-assessment tools, and the use of a common language of skills—individuals can avoid drifting passively and instead make conscious adjustments that keep their development purposeful.

For employers, supporting these intervals with accessible frameworks, coaching, or reflection opportunities demonstrates a genuine commitment to employee growth.

Collectively, these interventions signal a move towards an integrated ecosystem of shared responsibility, grounded in a common language of skills that enables individuals, employers, and communities to sustain career development together (see figure 1).

Common Language

Community & Peer Support

Employer/ Organisational Culture

Individual Mindset, Career Development, & Storytelling

Figure 1: An Integrated Ecosystem to Empower Individuals to Take Greater Ownership of Personal Career Choices

Online Contributions

The online engagement during the roundtable also surfaced a rich set of intervention ideas to enable and sustain desired behaviours that empower individuals to take greater ownership of their personal career choices. Many of the ideas have been covered above and will not be repeated in this section. One distinctive theme emerging from the online contribution was the focus on "self-awareness and reflection". Comments such as "knowing oneself" and "self-reflection" highlight the importance for individuals to develop a clear understanding of their strengths, interests, and aspirations before embarking on career-skills-learning planning.

Online attendees were able to vote for the intervention they thought would help individuals sustain the desired behaviours. The top three ideas voted were: "Introduce the employees to the skills framework, so they can look up the critical core skills and soft skills recommended for their job roles", "An AI-tool that can help employers predict skills needed by keying new development plan that can be published to employees who can then upgrade or upskill accordingly", and "Offer opportunity for person-centric career-skills-learning planning".
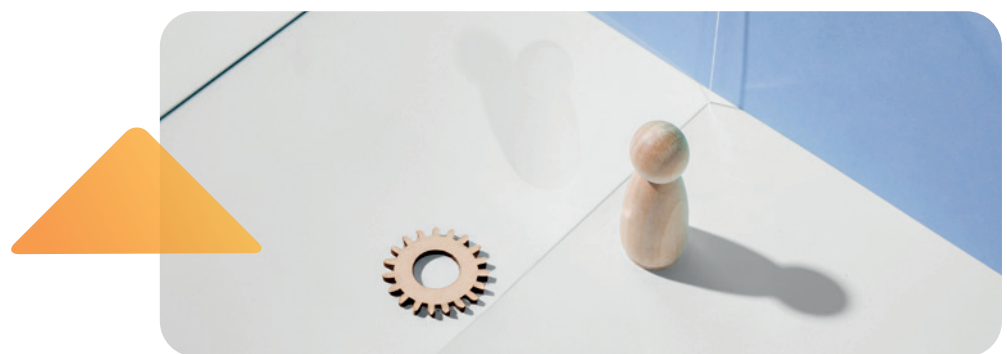
Additional Insights

Beyond the core themes discussed above, the roundtable also surfaced additional insights related to trade-skilled workers. Empowering individuals for career-skills-learning planning requires recognising the distinct realities of such workers, who often face time, energy, and financial constraints that make traditional "career" narratives less relevant. A skills-first approach should focus on personal relevance by clearly answering "What's in it for me?", framing growth as "mastery" rather than abstract career progression, and providing visible, respected skill pathways that align with workers' intrinsic pride in their craft. This should be supported by systemic change—shifting societal perceptions to value trade roles as professional, addressing structural industry pressures that limit wage growth and progression, and ensuring market and procurement systems reward employers who invest in skills and quality, thereby creating genuine motivation and opportunity for workers to plan and advance their capabilities.

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To view the full working paper, please visit **https://www.ial.edu.sg/about-ial/osp/paper-2**