

Career changers without formal credentials: how AELO Swiss Academy assesses your potential

Every week, a version of the same email lands in our inbox. "I've worked 15 years in logistics, but I never finished my formal qualification. Can I still apply?" Sometimes the sender apologises for even asking. Last spring it was a woman named Sandra, a retail branch manager from Aargau who had run a team of 14 people for a decade and was convinced that a missing diploma would end the conversation before it started.

It didn't. She's now halfway through her programme, and she's one of a large group we see every year: capable adults whose CVs took a scenic route. If you're standing at the edge of a career change and worried that a piece of paper from your twenties decides everything, this is for you. Here's how we actually look at potential at AELO Swiss Academy, what we weigh, what we don't, and where we'll be honest with you about the limits.

Why credentials are a starting point, not a gate

Switzerland has a long tradition of experience-based routes into skilled work. The apprenticeship culture means many people build deep competence on the job, and the education system has recognised pathways that value documented professional experience alongside formal certificates. That doesn't mean credentials are irrelevant. It means they're one signal among several, and for adult learners they're often the weakest one.

There's a practical reason for this. A diploma earned at 19 tells us what someone could do at 19. A person who has spent twelve years coordinating suppliers, training new hires, or calming down unhappy customers has evidence that no classroom can produce. The gap we care about is narrower than most applicants fear: it's usually specific knowledge and vocabulary, not ability. Knowledge can be taught in months. Judgment built over a decade can't be downloaded.

So when we assess career changers, we're not asking "does this person have the entry certificate?" We're asking "can this person do the work, learn the missing pieces, and finish the programme?" Those are very different questions, and they deserve a different kind of assessment.

What potential actually looks like

Before describing the process, it helps to know what we're listening for. Over the years, three things have proven far more predictive of success in our adult programmes than any single certificate.

The first is transferable skill. A warehouse team lead who has informally onboarded 30 seasonal workers already knows more about training design than many people with a training certificate. A hairdresser with 19 years of client conversations has the raw material of patient coordination: reading people, managing expectations, staying calm when the schedule collapses. Our job during assessment is partly excavation. Most applicants undervalue what they know because it never came with a title.

The second is learning agility. Career changers don't need to arrive knowing the subject. They need to show they've learned hard things before, recently, without being forced to. Sometimes that's a language learned at 40. Sometimes it's a side business, a certification picked up on weekends, or a messy Excel model someone built to solve a real problem at work. The scale doesn't matter. The pattern does.

The third is motivation with evidence. "I've always been interested in this" is a fine sentence, but it carries little weight on its own. "I've spent the last six months shadowing a colleague in this field twice a month" is a different sentence entirely. We don't expect sacrifices or grand gestures. We expect to see that your interest has already left footprints.

How the assessment works

Our process has four stages. None of them are designed to catch you out, and every stage produces feedback you can use either way. Most applicants go from first contact to a decision in three to five weeks, depending on scheduling.

The first conversation

It starts with a https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ structured call, usually 45 to 60 minutes. This is not a trick-question interview. We ask about your work history in plain terms: what you actually did all day, what you were responsible for, what went wrong once and how you handled it. We're mapping the shape of your experience, not auditing it.



Two pieces of practical advice from hundreds of these calls. First, speak concretely. "I was responsible for logistics" tells us almost nothing. "I planned deliveries for 40 stores across three cantons and rebuilt the returns process after a supplier change" gives us something to work with. Second, don't polish away the failures. A candid story about a mistake and what you changed afterwards is one of the strongest signals in the whole process.

Mapping what you already know

The second stage is a life and work mapping session, and it's the one people thank us for afterwards. You bring whatever you have: job descriptions, references, project notes, photos of work you're proud of, certificates from short courses you assumed were too minor to mention. Together we sort it into a structured picture of your competencies.

This borrows from recognition of prior learning, an approach used across adult education, but we run it in a deliberately informal way. You don't write an essay about your skills. You talk, we ask, and a picture emerges. Mehmet, the warehouse team lead I mentioned earlier, arrived convinced he had "nothing on paper". Ninety minutes later we had documented informal onboarding for 30 seasonal workers a year, responsibility for a small

inventory budget, and a self-taught scanning system that cut picking errors noticeably in his section. None of that was on his CV. All of it counted.

A small, real task

The third stage is a short situational task, and it's the part applicants dread most and then tell us was the easiest. Depending on the programme, it might be a 12-minute prioritisation exercise, a short written reply to a difficult client email, or a "teach us something" segment where you explain a process from your current or past work that you know better than anyone in the room.

The task is calibrated for career changers. We're not testing whether you already know the field's jargon. We're watching how you think when the situation is unfamiliar: whether you ask clarifying questions, how you structure an answer, whether you notice what's missing. Sandra's task involved a Monday morning pile of competing demands, not unlike the ones she'd handled for years. She later said the only difference was that nobody at the academy was shouting.

The fit interview

The final stage is a conversation about fit, run by someone from the teaching side rather than admissions. We want to know whether this specific programme, at this specific moment in your life, makes sense. Can you commit the hours alongside work and family? Do you understand what the day-to-day of the target profession actually looks like, including its less glamorous parts? What's your plan if a module gets hard?

We ask the unglamorous questions on purpose. The most common reason career changers struggle isn't ability. It's entering a field based on an imagined version of it. If your picture of the work is accurate and you still want in, that's a strong yes. If the task stage revealed a gap, this is also where we'll talk about bridging options rather than sending you home empty-handed.

What we weigh, and what we leave at the door

To make this concrete, here's the honest version of our internal weighting, the one we wish someone had shown us before we sat on the other side of the table.

| What carries real weight | What carries less than people assume |

| --- | --- |

| Documented responsibility in past roles | The prestige of your previous job title |

| Concrete examples of problem-solving | Certificates from short online courses, on their own |

| Evidence of recent, self-driven learning | Perfect, polished interview answers |

| Realistic picture of the target profession | Age, as long as the commitment is there |

| References who can speak to your work, not just your character | Gaps in the CV, explained or not |



That last row on the right surprises people. We see CV gaps caused by caregiving, illness, redundancy, or simply a bad year. They don't disqualify anyone. What matters is whether the years around them show capability and whether the path forward is credible.

Where a diploma still matters, honestly

We'd rather tell you this now than after you've invested a weekend in an application. There are cases where formal credentials are non-negotiable, and no amount of experience substitutes for them.

Regulated professions are the clearest example. Certain healthcare, financial, and technical roles carry legal qualification requirements, and neither we nor any other provider can wave those aside. Employer expectations can play a role too: some hiring managers filter on credentials regardless of what the law requires, and while that's slowly changing, it's a reality worth naming. For international applicants, visa and permit rules can also attach conditions that have nothing to do with our assessment and everything to do with residence law.

When we hit one of these walls, we say so in the first or second conversation. We'd much rather redirect someone towards a sensible alternative route than let them discover the ceiling two years in.

Getting ready without over-preparing

Applicants sometimes ask whether they should take a course first, or rewrite their CV five times, or rehearse answers. Mostly, no. The assessment is built to see you as you are, and over-preparation tends to sand off exactly the texture we're looking for. That said, a few things genuinely help.

- Gather raw material rather than polished stories: old job descriptions, a reference or two, notes from projects, anything that jogs your memory.
- Pick two or three work stories you can tell in detail, including one where something went wrong.
- Spend an hour with someone who does the job you're aiming for, and note what surprised you.
- Write down, in one honest paragraph, why now. Not why ever. Why now.
- Come with questions. The applicants who ask sharp questions almost always do well afterwards.

Notice that none of this requires money or a new certificate. It requires a few evenings and some honesty.

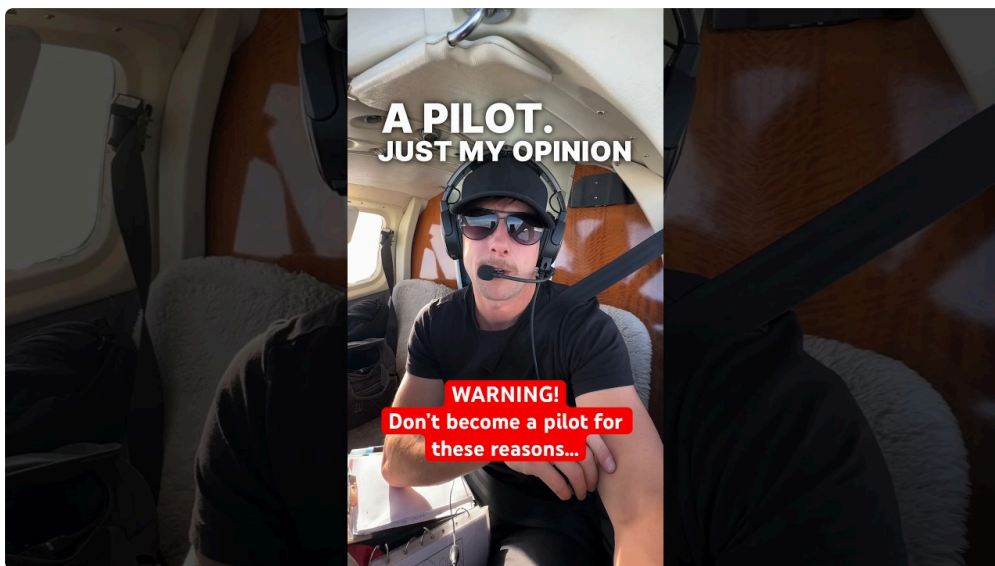
When the answer is "not yet"

Not everyone gets a yes on the first pass, and we don't pretend otherwise. Roughly speaking, a meaningful minority of career-changer applicants hear some version of "not yet" rather than "no". The distinction matters. "No" is for the rare cases where the direction itself doesn't fit. "Not yet" usually means one of three things: the evidence of capability is there but thin, the motivation is real but the timing is wrong, or there's a specific, nameable gap that a bridging step could close.

Those bridging steps are often small. A foundation module, a few months in an adjacent role, a structured self-study plan with a check-in. We've had applicants return twelve months later and sail through, and the feedback conversation they received the first time was the reason. If you do hear "not yet", ask for the specifics. Vague encouragement is useless. A named gap is a to-do list.

A word from the other side of the table

Here's the thing we wish more career changers knew. The people assessing you have, in many cases, changed careers themselves. We know what it's like to send an application with one hand half-covering our eyes. We know the specific fear of the question about qualifications.



Sandra, whose email opened this piece, told me something at her halfway mark that I now repeat often. She said the hardest part wasn't the coursework. It was believing, for about three weeks, that she belonged in the room. The assessment process can't install that belief. What it can do is give you an honest, structured answer about whether the ability is there, based on what you've actually done rather than what a form says you once completed.

If you've spent years building competence without collecting certificates, that competence is not invisible to us. Bring it in. Let's look at it together.