

# Transitioning from IT to counseling private practice

**A**aron Engel is a licensed professional counselor (LPC) who owns a private practice in the Columbus, Ohio, metro area. He specializes in couples counseling, individual counseling for depression and anxiety, and career counseling. Learn more about him and his services at [cardinalpointcounseling.com](http://cardinalpointcounseling.com).

**Danielle Irving-Johnson:** Tell us about yourself and what led to your interest in the counseling profession.

**Aaron Engel:** After 20 years in a stable, financially rewarding career, I couldn't help but feel that something was missing. I took some online career aptitude and interest assessments. They all told me I belonged in counseling, social work or some related profession. I explored the situation more in career counseling and learned that while my aptitude is almost identical for a technical career or social services career, my interests are much stronger for a career like counseling.

**DIJ:** You used to work in the information technology (IT) field before becoming a counselor. How did you adjust to this transition?

**AE:** When I tell people I used to work in IT and am now in counseling, the typical reaction is "Whoa, that's different" or "Why did you do that?" There is some validity to those questions, but the reality is I don't think the two professions are as different *for me* as they might seem.

I fell into IT due to the high demand and excellent stability and pay. It turned out that I loved it at first. I loved developing things that could help others. What excited me about IT was empathizing with the customers and meeting their needs while coaching and leading more junior workers. Eventually, my job focused more on corporate politics. It moved away from what I initially enjoyed in working with customers and technology to solve problems and improve lives.

My life as an IT consultant gave me experience with transitions, as change is a constant. I didn't really feel a big shift but was excited to start a new chapter. The most significant change was going from an experienced expert to a less experienced learner. As I've learned more about counseling and gotten experience, I have moved closer to that expert role.

**DIJ:** Are there any certifications or licenses that have been beneficial in providing additional training beyond your degree in clinical mental health counseling?

**AE:** I think any counselor can benefit from coach training. Coaches often get a bad rap, especially from the counseling



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profession. I learned a lot about conducting person-centered interviews and gained real-world experience from the reputable International Coaching Federation coaches training. This training helped complement my schooling.

I also recommend the first two levels of Gottman [method couples therapy] training for anyone interested in couples therapy. CounselingWise offers training for private practitioners who want to create a website. I can testify to their high-quality counseling website builder course. I also took a tremendous private practice course from the Legacy Wellness Lounge, and a local counseling association put on a quality private practice continuing education event.

**DIJ:** Is there a therapeutic treatment modality that you closely follow with your clients?

**AE:** I would say I am eclectic. I have yet to find a modality that works for everyone. In my experience, even the most evidence-based practices [such as] cognitive behavior therapy can fail or barely help large populations or some individuals. I take pieces and parts of various modalities and personalize them to fit my diverse clients. I take pride in individualizing treatment to each and every client.

**DIJ:** You recently started your own business. Tell us about your private practice and the services you provide.

**AE:** I specialize in working with couples and with individuals with anxiety, depression and career concerns. As a business owner, my job is not just a job but a passion and a calling. I don't always get there, but I strive for excellence in everything related to the practice. My goal is that every client walks away thinking and feeling that they received unquestionable value for their time and money.

**DIJ:** What would you say is the key to establishing a successful private practice?

**AE:** Oh, I think there are so many, and they aren't the same for everyone. I would say that private practice is not the best fit for everyone, just like some other practice types are probably not the best fit for me. It takes a certain intestinal fortitude to handle the risks, but there can be increased rewards if you do well.

Marketing and networking are key. The work is never really done, so the ability to take a break and maintain self-care is paramount. I think one needs to enjoy variety. It helps to enjoy doing business and counseling tasks or at least tolerate or hire out other certain aspects of running a practice. One needs to be self-motivated and productive without externally imposed deadlines or a boss telling you what to do.

**DIJ:** What has been the most challenging experience in starting your private practice?

**AE:** The most challenging experience was coping with a slow start. It takes a while to build connections and become known in your community. At the same time, there is never a shortage of marketing, continuing education and other activities one can partake in while waiting for things to ramp up. Of course, if you have a large client list and you are allowed to take them with you, there may be significantly fewer challenges.

**DIJ:** What are some of the benefits and rewards you've experienced while having your own practice?

**AE:** The freedom to set your own schedule and work your own hours is a plus. I had a break and took a nap on my couch a few days ago, which is something I would have been fired for at most of my former jobs. A bonus is making quick decisions about the business direction and executing on them without jumping through hoops or obtaining approval.

It feels good when all client revenue goes into my business account, but the downside is that all expenses come out of the same account. I like working when I want to work, where I want to work and how I want to work, within legal and ethical guidelines.

**DIJ:** What changes and policies have you had to implement to adjust to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

**AE:** So far, not many. I offer telehealth, which many clients prefer for convenience and safety. If my clients wear a mask, I wear a mask. At this point, my office location isn't requiring any restrictions or changes, so I don't either. I expect that may change in the future, but I support precautions if things do change.

**DIJ:** What advice would you give to counseling professionals who are considering starting their own private practice?

**AE:** Ensure that you can handle uncertainty as far as the amount of work starting out and going forward. There is not a fixed salary, and you pay for any benefits. Make sure you can afford to go for a period where you may break even or perhaps lose money. Take a training or course on running a private practice, and be sure you understand your ideal client and know how to market to them.

Look for opportunities to stay connected to the counseling community. Counseling associations, consultation groups, mentors, supervisors and other connections can help you grow as you work more alone than in some alternative environments. As an LPC, I work under supervision even though I have my own practice, which provides me with a great opportunity to get feedback and direction. There is so much more, but those are the highlights.

**DIJ:** Is there anything else you wish to share with American Counseling Association members about you or your work?

**AE:** Mainly that there is a need for counseling in all types of avenues. I don't see one type of practice, agency or environment as better or worse than the other. We need counselors in community mental health agencies, private practices, group practices, prisons and many other settings. Do what works best for you or try different avenues throughout your career.

I love my work — it doesn't really feel like work when you enjoy it — and try to put my whole self into it while I am there. Being my best typically requires leaving work at work, which is more challenging in private practice than some other avenues, and making plenty of time for friends, hobbies and family. ☺

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