

# Airports - skilled, ready and supported

## Member Workforce Report



**AUSTRALIAN AIRPORTS  
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# INTRODUCTION



The Australian Airports Association (AAA) is the national voice that represents the interests of more than 340 airports and aerodromes Australia wide, from the local country community landing strip to major international gateway airports - our airport members represent vital infrastructure crucial to the communities in which they operate and for the overall national economy.

The Australian airport sector, like many other industries worldwide, has undergone a seismic transformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic). While the aviation industry has always been susceptible to economic fluctuations and external shocks, the global pandemic presented a unique set of challenges, forcing airports to adapt rapidly and make strategic decisions to survive and thrive in a post-pandemic world. One of the most pressing issues currently facing the Australian airport sector is the workforce constraints resulting from the pandemic's aftermath.

With some 2.3 million aviation jobs lost globally – the Australian airport sector was not immune. International border closures, domestic travel restrictions, and a sharp decline in passenger numbers resulted in a considerable downturn in airport operations. In response to these unprecedented challenges, airports had no choice but to implement tough measures, including staff reductions, stand downs, salary reductions, and a thorough reassessment of operational strategies. Consequently, the previously thriving airport workforce continues to find itself in a state of uncertainty and transformation.







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The airport sector in Australia was, prior to the pandemic, a significant contributor to the nation's economy, providing employment to thousands of individuals and supporting various auxiliary services, from airlines and hospitality to security and maintenance. Just, as the pandemic disrupted global travel, the demand for airport services drastically decreased. Airlines grounded fleets, and airports became eerily quiet, with many staff members either furloughed or seeking employment in other industries.

While the worst of the pandemic may be behind us, the ripple effects continue to impact the Australian airport workforce in profound ways. While passenger numbers have climbed back to pre-pandemic numbers domestically, airports find themselves grappling with workforce and skills shortages that must be addressed to ensure future growth and stability.



# BACKGROUND

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In late 2022, the AAA recognised the need for the association to provide enhanced support to our membership. The airport sector, renowned for its resilience and efficiency, was subjected to challenges stemming from international border closures, domestic travel restrictions, plummeting passenger numbers, and severe financial constraints. In this context, the AAA recognised its responsibility in facilitating the adaptation and recovery of the sector's workforce.

The association embraced an approach that was not only responsive but also anticipatory, aiming to address the immediate and evolving needs of the airport sector workforce – the AAA's shift marked a commitment to helping airports plan for both short and long term workforce needs.

As part of this approach, the AAA committed to better understand the airport sector's workforce data and demographics at a membership level, as well as:

- undertake research and analysis of the airport workforce capabilities and constraints of our members;
- promote current and emerging airport workforce policy positions;
- engage and drive internal AAA programs, such as the Emerging Airport Leaders and Women in Airports Committees;
- highlight and address airport workforce challenges in policy and advocacy discussions;
- explore opportunities for the airport workforce, including upskilling and training courses, networking, and mentoring information; and
- produce an airport member workforce findings report.



# THE PLAN – AAA WORKFORCE WORKSHOPS

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## Listening and learning

The AAA's commitment to understanding workforce demographics at a membership level included facilitation of AAA member workforce workshops at all state and territory division meetings in early 2023. These workshops were used to undertake research and analysis at a grass roots level, allowing in-depth understanding of the airport workforce capabilities and constraints faced by members.

Workforce workshops were designed to serve as collaborative platforms where airport professionals, experts, and other stakeholders could share insights, challenges, and best practices. By convening these workshops, the AAA facilitated peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange, empowering members to navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic workforce landscape as a sector.

The workshops covered a range of topics and members were guided to discuss pre-prepared questions, including strategies for workforce planning, upskilling initiatives, and technology adoption. They were crafted to address the immediate and long-term challenges that airport employees faced, encouraging the adoption of innovative solutions, and fostering a supportive community among airport professionals.

The workshops were fundamental for the AAA to understand the unique workforce capabilities and constraints of member airports and were an essential part of tailoring effective support. The workforce workshops allowed extensive research and analysis of more than 186 unique sets of membership data and insights related to the airport sector workforce - gaining valuable insights into the skill sets, experiences, trends, and evolving workforce roles, as well as to form a vision of emerging workforce needs.



# WHAT MEMBERS TOLD US

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After engaging with 186 members across six facilitated workshops, the AAA collated and analysed our learnings, discovering four key themes across all state divisions and membership categories:

## Workforce Retention

At the outset of the pandemic, many airports had to implement drastic measures to cut costs. As most council-owned and mid-sized airports were not eligible for JobKeeper, this included the decision to let go of a significant portion of their workforce. As airports began to rebound and recover, the requirement for skilled personnel in areas such as airside operations, customer service, security, and ground operations was (and remains) a significant constraint.

Reassembling and upskilling an airport workforce is not a straightforward task. Pandemic-induced job losses led many skilled workers to seek employment in other industries and the attraction and retention of top talent in the midst of ongoing global labour shortages is a puzzle airports are trying to solve to ensure they have the people power and expertise required to meet the resurging demands of the aviation sector.

## Skills Gap

The Australian airport industry requires highly specialised skills, from Aerodrome Reporting Officers to Aviation Security Screeners. The pandemic's far-reaching effects disrupted training and succession programs, creating voids in developing new talent pipelines. This interruption in the standard progression of training and skill acquisition has given rise to notable skill gaps within the airport workforce. As the pandemic unfolded, experienced staff either faced furloughs or, seeking greater stability, ventured into alternative job markets. This exodus of experienced employees created a skills loss the sector has never seen before.

It was further highlighted by members feedback that high level of vacancies and attrition in parts of the airport workforce ecosystem outside those directly employed by airport operator's (i.e. security screeners and ground handlers) continued to have negative effects for airports in meeting operational and regulatory outcomes.

Airports are taking proactive measures to reinvest in training and professional development programs, bridging the skill gaps. Additionally, incentivising experienced workers to return to the airport sector and share their expertise is seen as a crucial element for stimulating future airport workforce capabilities.







## Labour Market Dynamics

Attracting and retaining qualified and experienced personnel in the airport sector has become a complex challenge for our membership, as skilled individuals may be hesitant to return to an industry that suffered profound disruptions during the pandemic. The task is further complicated by competition with other industries, such as the onshore resource sector, and local government pay constraints that can make the recruitment of skilled workers difficult in the competitive job market.

AAA members continually highlighted the lack of understanding in the broader community on the range of career paths and job roles an airport can offer – more than 150 individual members commented that there was a need for the airport sector to delineate themselves from the airline sector to increase our competitiveness for talent.

To deal with this challenge, airports are implementing innovative strategies such as offering competitive compensation, professional development opportunities, increasing airport visibility in the community and enhanced workplace benefits to entice skilled employees to return (or begin their airport career) – essentially positioning themselves as employers of choice in the job market.

The Australian airport sector is working hard to rebuild trust and confidence, emphasising the importance of the sector and its stability, while highlighting opportunities for personal and professional growth.

## Technological Adaptation

The pandemic has underscored the importance of technological advancement in streamlining airport operations, such as touchless check-in systems, automated baggage handling, and enhanced security measures. These advancements, though advantageous, reduce the demand for certain manual roles. In response, airports are starting to focus on workforce development, providing opportunities for current employees to acquire the skills necessary to navigate the evolving technological landscape. Simultaneously, airports need to recalibrate hiring strategies to accommodate specialised roles related to technology and automation.





# WHAT SURPRISED US?

The AAA were surprised to see that while many key workforce constraints were the same across the country, regional, mid-sized, and major airports, reflected distinct challenges rooted in their respective environments. Regional airports grapple with the impact of remote locations, often experiencing difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled personnel due to limited housing availability and higher living costs. Regional airports were also competing with local industries that had higher compensation packages, such as the onshore resource sector. Regional airport members spoke of the allure of urban amenities in larger cities further compounding the struggle to attract and retain qualified staff.

Mid-sized airports find themselves caught in a balancing act, facing both urban sprawl and regional disparities. The cost-of-living pressures persist, particularly in areas witnessing rapid growth. This coupled with the limiting salary structure of local council awards and compensation ceilings the most significant constraints to attracting and retaining a competent workforce.

Major airports, while enjoying the benefits of urban infrastructure, contend with their own set of challenges. The high cost of living in metropolitan areas often results in staff commuting from distant locales, impacting retention rates. Additionally, the sheer scale of operations imposes demanding work expectations, contributing to turnover as employees seek a better work-life balance. In essence, Australia's airports, regardless of size, grapple with a complex interplay of economic and geographical factors that shape their workforce dynamics.

## WORKFORCE WORKSHOPS

### KEY FINDINGS



# WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Through the AAA facilitated workforce workshops, members were able to convey four key areas where the AAA could focus their strategic efforts to effectively support the membership through current and future workforce challenges:

1. Highlight airport careers as separate from airline careers.
2. Publicly amplify the breadth of airport career pathways.
3. Showcase airports as employers of choice.
4. Promote the dynamic nature of airport careers.



These four key points of focus from members allowed the AAA to circle back to our original commitments to our membership, ensuring alignment on workforce policy and advocacy, as well as fit-for-purpose deliverables.

The major associated project to come out of the AAA workforce workshops was the creation of a careers campaign and the design and development of a static website to both amplify the narrative of working within the airport ecosystem to a range of community audiences, as well as a member resource for recruitment and job fair activities - now known as [myairportcareer.com.au](https://myairportcareer.com.au)







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