



Attracting a new generation of rail talent

Webinar highlights
June 2024



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Introduction

As part of the National Rail Action Plan, National Cabinet – a meeting of all Australia's first ministers and the Prime Minister – asked the National Transport Commission (NTC) to identify strategic initiatives that will deliver a sustainable workforce to advance interoperability and meet rail's future skills demand.

To inform this work, the NTC with the Australasian Railway Association (ARA) and its Young Leaders Advisory Board (Y-LAB) held a webinar specifically aimed at young rail workers. We wanted to hear directly from rail's younger cohort about:

- what drew them to rail
- what keeps them in the sector
- what can rail do to promote itself as a career of choice for the next generation
- how can organisations retain their younger workers.

On 21 June 2023, 62 rail workers representing diverse organisations and roles from across Australia gathered online for the webinar, *Attracting a new generation of rail talent*.

Y-LAB board members helped structure and run the event to ensure it 'spoke' to the younger audience. Mentimeter technology was used to capture the demographics of the audience, and breakout rooms to encourage greater participation.

This report reflects what we heard.

Australia's rail workforce environment

As background to the webinar, we provided an overview of Australia's current rail workforce environment.¹

- A \$150 billion, 10-15 year investment pipeline to expand and modernise the rail sector is exacerbating long-standing skills shortages.
- It's estimated that Australian rail will need 70,000 more people over the next decade in digital and traditional roles.
- The average rail worker is 45 years old. By 2035, 35% of today's workforce will be facing retirement, putting further pressure on the talent crunch.
- Australia has the tightest labour market in 50 years and is experiencing the second highest labour shortages among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.
- Rail skills shortages are being felt around the world as the sector competes for talent against other more popular industries such as aerospace, energy and communications.
- Demand for these skills is likely to increase as the rail industry transitions to greater use of automation, digitisation and the adoption of new technologies.
- Rail has a reputation for being old-fashioned, 'dirty' and male-dominated making it unattractive to women and younger job seekers.
- Historically, workers were recruited into rail through family connections. Today, the internet, technology and social media make it easy for job seekers to access information about careers and organisations in many different ways.
- Engineering graduates today may finish an engineering degree and not have one conversation around a rail case study or a rail unit in an undergraduate course.

¹ <https://www.railskillshub.gov.au/knowledge-centre/australias-workforce-gaps-10-year-forecast>
<https://www.railskillshub.gov.au/knowledge-centre/rail-workforce-analytical-overview-december-2023>
<https://www.railskillshub.gov.au/knowledge-centre/future-rail-skills-forum-highlights>
<https://www.railskillshub.gov.au/knowledge-centre/australian-rail-market-outlook>

Changing the narrative

The *Attracting a new generation of rail talent* webinar was structured to build on research conducted by the Australasian Railway Association (ARA) in 2019 to better understand the perceptions of the rail industry through the eyes of TAFE and university students.

The ARA's internal *Employment study to drive attraction, recruitment and retention of young people* found that while rail jobs "ticked the boxes" of what young people were looking for in a career, the industry had an image problem with many people still thinking of the sector as old-fashioned, 'dirty' and male-dominated.

The study found that when 'selling' rail as a career, organisations should highlight the:

- rewarding challenges the industry offers, including problem solving and interaction with high tech systems and technologies
- variety of job roles and opportunities to learn new skills and advance or pivot in a career
- opportunities to be part of large, meaningful projects
- diverse and collaborative work environment which embraces flexibility and invests in its people.

It found that university students responded to a focus on the:

- opportunity for technological innovation
- social purpose
- tangible, short-term impact of working on rail projects
- flexible working conditions and diverse teams.

For trade students, rail is attractive because of:

- its role as an essential service, keeping people safe and the economy running
- the opportunities to progress to higher order engineering roles
- the professional working conditions
- stability of the industry.

"Rail is well-positioned to change the narrative about our sector. We want to be in a position where young people don't just fall into rail but seek it out as a chosen career. It's about how we frame the message."

Natalie Currey, General Manager for Supply Chains at the Australasian Railway Association

The *Attracting a new generation of rail talent* webinar was run to identify: messages that resonate with young people; channels to reach them; and ways to keep them in rail, not just for a job but for their career.

Attracting a younger workforce

Our audience

The majority of webinar participants had worked in rail between one and five years and had heard about their job from family members, colleagues or online sources.

“My great grandfather worked in rail and my father worked in rail. So when I came out to Australia and someone said, ‘they’re advertising jobs in rail’, I knew it was something I wanted to do.”

What keeps you in rail?

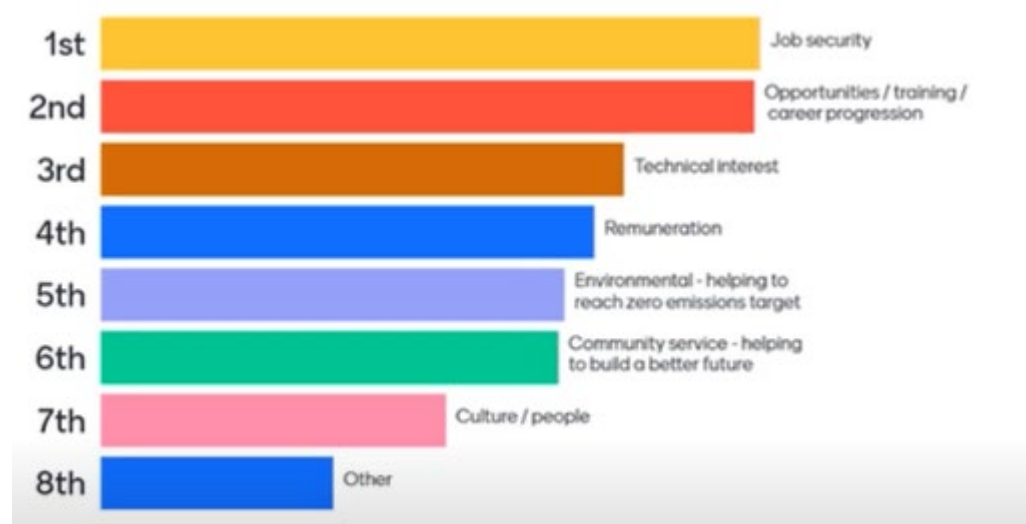
When asked what kept them in rail, job security and opportunities for training and career progression were the standout responses. The opportunity to work with advanced technologies and on projects that improved society also ranked highly, followed by the lure of good remuneration.

“I love rail because of the interesting work ... You really get to see meaningful projects come to life.”

“There’s a great work life balance. And it offers great opportunities for women.”

“You meet fantastic people and get lots of opportunities to move across jobs and states.”

What keeps you in rail?



How can rail better promote itself?

Webinar participants confirmed that when young people think about their career options, rail is often overlooked or seen as old-fashioned, un-exciting with limited opportunities outside of tracks and trains.

Improving rail's reputation requires an industry-wide focus. We asked web participants what organisations can do to as individuals and as a sector. This was their response:

- **Change focus**

Rail can update its image by promoting the high tech and innovative culture within the sector and the diversity of the workforce.

Focus on big projects and promote the social impact – note how they will benefit everyone's day-to-day lives.

"We're competing with Google and start-ups. Compared to these companies we're not seen as being very cool. We've got to be seen as being more exciting. We need to take lessons from data companies ... and find a way to show that we're industry leading."

"People don't see above the tracks and trains - creating advertisements that focus on other aspects of rail is important."

- **Rethink how you talk to a young audience**

Rail organisations need to think about how they talk to young people. Consider greater use of social media, particularly popular channels such as Instagram and Tiktok.

Participants suggested adopting campaigns which have worked well in other sectors, such as 'A day in the life' case studies featuring young people showing the good and the ugly moments of their work life.

Organisations were urged to encourage their young employees to share their own experiences regularly.

"We need more visibility on social media. To show the opportunities to travel and work around the world with the skills you get."

- **Create more work experience opportunities and graduate and trainee programs**

Providing work experience in the rail sector will deepen young people's interest and get people talking about rail. The power of word of mouth can't be underestimated.

- **Increase focus in regional Australia**

Creating and promoting rail roles and training opportunities to young people outside metropolitan areas will provide the rail sector with access to a new cohort of workers.

"We need to look more closely at regional areas and piggy-back on what other companies are doing in this space."

- **Attend networking events outside of expensive conferences**

"Access to rail experts needs to be more accessible and affordable."

- **Provide clearer pathways and access to information**

Organisations wanting to attract and keep young workers need to offer clear career pathways and help young people visualise their progression.

As an industry, the sector should have information readily available. It's important to be clear and show young people the steps they can take to enter and progress a career in rail.

- **Highlight transferrable skillsets**

There are many skillsets used in other industries that are readily transferrable to rail.

Highlighting these will encourage young workers in other sectors to rethink their career and consider a move across to rail. Conversely, the idea that skills learnt in rail can be applied in a range of industries will make it more attractive to people starting their career.

- **Visit schools and career fairs**

Visiting schools and universities will spark young people's interest in rail from an early age. By attending job expos and career fairs, rail organisations can highlight rail opportunities to young jobseekers and the people who influence them, including teachers, parents and career advisers.

"A much greater presence is needed on careers fairs. I'm surprised by the number of graduates who finish university and have no idea about opportunities in rail."

What can organisations do to convince young people to stay?

- Offer more stability on project-based jobs.
- Faster implementation of new technologies
- Provide progression opportunities – and clear mapping of training pathways and competencies.
- Provide more access to training.
- Consider more employment benefits - such as free public transport.
- Offer more flexible work opportunities for a better work life balance. This could include hybrid working arrangements, flexible hours or job sharing.
- Offer better parental leave for men and women.
- Provide and promote opportunities to work in regional areas.
- Maintain a welcoming and inclusive culture. And improve inclusion of minority groups.

"Rail would be more attractive if it offered more work from home."

"Work life balance in rail has improved a lot. Maybe this shift hasn't been communicated well enough."

"Job-sharing opportunities would help to keep all employees, not just young people and women."

