

Beyond Survival

Small business development and growth in the post-pandemic world

A snapshot of three policy and program issues

It is clear to many observers that a revitalised small business sector will be a critical factor in Australia's ongoing economic recovery (Xero Small Business Insights, 2021).

Can this revitalisation process simply be a return to business as usual?

The answer to this question will vary, depending on the industries and market segments small businesses are operating in. However, while some industries are returning to something approaching pre-COVID operating conditions, it is evident that a significant percentage of small businesses will need to make big changes in order to survive and thrive in a re-structured economy.

(Buckley, J. 2021).

This document presents an overview of three important development factors that will enable Australian small businesses to reach their potential as building blocks for a revitalised Australian economy.

- 1. The ability of small businesses to continue to adapt and innovate to meet market conditions changed by COVID-19.**
- 2. The ability of small manufacturing businesses to identify and capitalise on new market opportunities.**
- 3. Governments assisting businesses to address recruitment difficulties and workforce skill shortages.**

1. Small Business Innovation and COVID-19

“Innovation pays, with innovating small businesses outperforming their non-innovating counterparts on every measure, including employment, profitability, and productivity”

(Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, 2020)

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic large numbers of small businesses faced dramatically changed market conditions. Many businesses were not able to operate as normal and had no choice but to change their business models, services, products and operating methods in efforts to meet different market opportunities.

This innovation process, created through necessity, generated new opportunities for a lot of small businesses. It was a revelation to some. Innovation also took different forms in each industry sector and in each business.

As many market segments now return to something approaching normal operation, the question is *how much of this innovation will fade away?*

What can be done to encourage and foster small businesses in all sectors to continue to innovate?

The Australian Government’s Research and Development (R & D) Tax Credit provides benefits for businesses that innovate, according to the following definition:

“...experimental activities:

- a. whose outcome cannot be known or determined in advance on the basis of current knowledge, information or experience, but can only be determined by applying a systematic progression of work that:
 - i. is based on principles of established science; and*
 - ii. proceeds from hypothesis to experiment, observation and evaluation, and leads to logical conclusions; and**
- b. that are conducted for the purpose of generating new knowledge (including new knowledge in the form of new or improved materials, products, devices, processes or services).”* (Australian Taxation Office, 2017)

But innovation is not just about structured research and development. Small Business WA defines business innovation as:

“...the development and application of ideas that improve the way things are done or what can be achieved. Innovation may result in new products or services, new or improved business processes, changes in the way your products are marketed or the introduction of new technology”. (Small Business Development Corporation, WA, 2021)

Government support for innovation in Australian businesses tends to focus strongly on technological innovation.

The Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources delivers several initiatives through the **Entrepreneurs Programme** that are aimed at supporting innovation in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). However only businesses in the following industry sectors are eligible:

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Food and Agribusiness
- Medical Technology and Pharmaceuticals
- Mining Equipment, Technology and Services
- Oil, Gas and Energy
- Enabling technologies and services of the sectors listed above.

The Australian government-funded **Industry Growth Centres** (<https://www.industry.gov.au/policies-and-initiatives/industry-growth-centres>) also focus on supporting innovation in a closely related, very specific set of industries:

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Cyber Security
- Food and Agribusiness
- Medical Technologies and Pharmaceuticals
- Mining Equipment, Technology and Services
- Oil Gas and Energy Resources

Government has decided that it is these industry sectors that provide Australia with the best opportunities to be internationally competitive. *These initiatives, while worthwhile, ignore the fact that **business innovation occurs in all industry sectors.***

In addition, only businesses with an ACN and turnovers in the following ranges are eligible for assistance under the Entrepreneurs Programme:

- Between \$1.5 million and \$100 million, or
- Between \$750,000 and \$100 million for applicants from remote Australia or northern Australia.

By their nature, the larger businesses that benefit from government innovation programs tend to be located in the big cities. It is likely that regional SMEs with innovation potential do not have the same level of supporting infrastructure or programs their big city counterparts benefit from (Vitartas, P. Kinnear, S. 2013).

“Small business in Australia does not get the credit it deserves when it comes to innovation, which can be defined as the development or introduction of new or significantly improved goods, services, processes or methods. Small business accounts

for 87.6% of all innovating businesses in Australia and 46.5% of small businesses with 5-19 employees were innovating ones in 2018-19. This is despite the fact that a

smaller percentage of small businesses receive government financial assistance to innovate compared to medium and large businesses” (Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, 2020).

Why is innovation in small business important?

The productivity of small businesses is an important factor in the overall productivity of the Australian economy. The Productivity Commission has emphasised the importance of government developing an environment for Australian SMEs which “encourages entrepreneurial and innovative activity” which is “conducive to productivity, investment and market competition for all businesses” (Productivity Commission, 2015).

Those small businesses which not only survive the COVID-19 period, but successfully innovate and adapt to capitalise on changed market conditions, will be a vital element of Australia’s future economic prosperity.

Recommendations:

- COSBOA recommends the development of pilot projects to test the effectiveness of place-based innovation and growth programs in regional business communities.

It is COSBOA’s view that, rather than being delivered as high-cost, highly centralised schemes, these innovation programs are best run under the auspices of local business communities, supported by industry associations, with services delivered by private industry (rather than by government organisations).

The *Economic Gardening* (EG) program is a good example of such innovation and growth programs. This important place-based strategy is widely used in the USA and has been adapted for implementation in Australia. Successful programs have been run over many years in the Illawarra region, Ballarat, Capricornia and Port Macquarie. Considerable knowledge and experience have been built up in Australia to run successful EG programs.

Regional business accelerator programs such as the Exmouth Business Accelerator are excellent examples of place-based business innovation strategies. [Exmouth Business Accelerator Program - Exmouth Chamber \(exmouthchamberofcommerce.com.au\)](https://www.exmouthchamberofcommerce.com.au)

- The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) has also proposed that COSBOA join in a collaborative research project under the Intergovernmental Shared Inquiry Program to address the question “*What are the most effective ways of fostering an innovation culture in regional small businesses?*”.

2. Small Businesses in Manufacturing

Why is COSBOA speaking about manufacturing?

Small businesses represent more than 80% of Australian manufacturing businesses. However, small businesses in all industries will suffer if the decline in Australia's manufacturing sector continues.

In the long term a vibrant manufacturing sector is essential to a maintaining a modern, prosperous economy (Mazzarol, T. 2020). A declining manufacturing sector leads to structural change in the economy - a 'hollowing out' which negatively affects a range of industry sectors and business types, including small business (Hayes, A. 2020).

COSBOA contributed to the Australian Government's 2020 *Modern Manufacturing Strategy*, which acknowledges the importance of manufacturing to the Australian economy and society. This important policy document is set against the backdrop of a long-term decline in Australian manufacturing.

This decline needs to be reversed.

"One industry hit hardest over the past 10-15 years is the manufacturing sector, which was once a vibrant, prosperous sector employing thousands of Australians, and is now reduced to a shadow of its former self. Indeed, almost every year, the manufacturing sector loses companies across a range of industries, with the motor vehicle and associated manufacturing industries being most notable in recent years. Arguably, if a more focused, well-funded innovation and training policy is implemented as a matter of top priority, future collapses of Australian businesses, along with thousands of lost jobs, could be avoided". (Institute of Public Accountants, 2018.)

There is broad agreement that Australia must re-build and grow its manufacturing capability and capacity following a long period of decline.

This is not a simple concept, nor can its importance and urgency be underestimated. If Australia cannot re-vitalise its manufacturing base for the 21st century our economy will suffer, along with our resilience as a society. Manufacturing is a major contributor to the complexity of a nation's economic base.

"There is a growing view that an economy's 'complexity' has a considerable influence on its relative economic positioning, performance and hence its current and future prosperity. At least one measure of complexity, the Economic Complexity Index (ECI), has Australia's multi-decade complexity ranking dropping precipitously..."
(NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer, 2020).

Small business in the manufacturing sector

Small businesses must play a key role in the revival of Australian manufacturing. Australia depends on SMEs for much of its complex manufacturing capability, although this

complex manufacturing is, in many cases, reduced to specialised, niche segments such as the small semiconductor industry.

Small businesses are a very significant part of the manufacturing sector in Australia but are, arguably, overlooked because of the attention given to larger businesses in the sector.

An example of this is the common belief that motor vehicle manufacturing ceased in Australia with the closure of GMH, Ford, Toyota and Mitsubishi. However, specialised vehicle manufacturing continues in Australia and this industry segment is now dominated by SMEs. Manufacturing is now largely focused on trucks, buses, specialised mining, military and off-road vehicles, modified/re-manufactured imported vehicles, caravans/RVs/campers, and high-performance vehicle components.

The proportion of small employing firms is relatively high in the manufacturing sector. More than four out of five of all manufacturing businesses are SMEs (Institute of Public Accountants, 2018).

In terms of the total number of businesses, small businesses represent more than 80% of manufacturing businesses and account for 20% of industry value add in the Australian manufacturing sector. (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, 2012).

Small business employs almost a third of all people in manufacturing jobs in Australia and more than 60% of apprentices employed in the sector (Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, 2020). This makes small business a vital contributor to the training of skilled manufacturing workers. Apprentices in small manufacturing businesses are increasingly engaged in the use of advanced technology.

Collectively, small businesses spend more than \$500 million per annum on research and development in manufacturing. While significant, this represents only 11% of R & D in the Australian manufacturing sector.

Are small businesses in the manufacturing sector well represented by peak bodies?

The Australian Industry Group (Ai Group) claims the manufacturing sector as its territory. Ai Group claims that *“Together with partner organisations we represent the interests of more than 60,000 businesses employing more than 1 million staff. Our members are small and large businesses in sectors including manufacturing, construction, engineering, transport & logistics, labour hire, mining services, the defence industry, civil airlines and ICT”*.

However, it is not easy to find data about the percentage of Ai Group members that are small businesses. While the Ai Group membership no doubt includes many small businesses, it is arguable that the organisation’s major advocacy efforts are focused on the interests of big business. This was evident during the 2020-21 Industrial Relations Reform consultations, during which Ai Group joined ACCI and other employer organisations to argue against reforms that would have benefited small business (McKay, R. 2021).

The rival for Ai Group in the manufacturing sector is the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) which also claims to be “*the voice of Australian business, representing enterprises big and small across all industries*”. Again, it is quite evident that ACCI advocacy is primarily driven primarily by big business agendas.

Small business associations in the manufacturing sector:

There are numerous industry-specific peak organisations in the Australian manufacturing sector, some of which are excellent representative organisations. The following few examples demonstrate the diversity of Australian manufacturing:

- Australian Automotive Aftermarket Association (AAAA)
- Australian Fashion Council, incorporating Textile & Fashion Industries of Australia.
- Australian Glass and Window Association (AGWA)
- Australian Meat Industry Council (AMIC)
- Australian Society of Cosmetic Chemists (ASCC)
- Australian Steel Institute
- Chemistry Australia - formerly the Plastics and Chemicals Industries Association
- Commercial Vehicle Industry Association Australia (CVIAA)
- Frame & Truss Manufacturers Association of Australia Ltd (FTMA)
- National Baking Industry Association (NBIA)
- Print & Visual Communications Association (PVCA) – formerly Printing Industries Association of Australia.
- Recreational Vehicle Manufacturers Association of Australia (RVMAA)

Many of these associations represent a cross-section of small, medium and sometimes large businesses, but all of them have significant small business memberships.

Recommendations:

COSBOA contributed to the Australian Government’s *Modern Manufacturing Strategy* launched in October 2020. As the recognised peak body for small business COSBOA can play an increasingly important role in advocating on behalf small businesses in the manufacturing sector.

It is proposed that COSBOA follows on from its contribution to the Modern Manufacturing Strategy by advocating specifically in support of *small* manufacturing businesses whenever suitable opportunities arise.

COSBOA is likely to have regular opportunities to acknowledge the vital contributions and economic potential of small manufacturing businesses, and to highlight the work of

industry associations in the manufacturing sector. This would emphasise the importance of representation not being compromised by financial dependence on big business. This advocacy would include the following points:

The Australian Innovation System

- Manufacturing is *alive* in Australia, especially in the small and medium business segment.
- There are many small manufacturing companies in Australia doing great, innovative things.
- BUT they need to be supported by consistent, sustained government policy and programs.
- The Australian innovation system needs to have a stronger focus on small business. While universities and other research institutions prefer to collaborate with larger businesses that can offer faster and more lucrative commercialisation outcomes, this tendency results in missed opportunities for small businesses.
- Australia's regional economic development policies (at federal and state levels) should better recognise the importance of small manufacturing businesses.
- Government programs aimed at strengthening manufacturing sector should be designed in ways which recognise the needs of small manufacturing businesses in the regions. The Advanced Manufacturing Growth Centre (AMGC) states that "Every Australian manufacturer has the potential to be advanced" (Advanced Manufacturing Growth Centre, 2020). But how, in reality, do small regional manufacturers access services provided by organisations such as AMGC?

Smart regulation

Manufacturing industries in Australia are impacted significantly, and sometimes hindered by regulatory burdens.

Smart regulation is not about more or less legislation, it is about delivering results in the least burdensome way.

The regulatory environment for Australian businesses is complex. COSBOA believes that Australian regulators must continue to strive to simplify, streamline and better align regulation between jurisdictions.

COSBOA supports Government's efforts to increase transparency of regulatory processes and improve regulator behaviour. We do not argue for a drastic deregulation process that could result in perverse outcomes for communities, the environment *and* businesses. We believe there are good reasons for many aspects of business to be regulated.

COSBOA argues that a great deal of guidance has already been provided to regulators to impress on them the urgency and importance of improving their performance. COSBOA

continues to support a strong emphasis on reducing compliance costs for business and the principle that all regulators should be capable of achieving the objectives of regulation without imposing unnecessary costs on business.

- COSBOA supports a ‘Smart Regulation’ approach. These are less interventionist regulatory measures which reduce the burden on small businesses by simplifying and streamlining how business engage with regulators and government. The Productivity Commission observed back in 2017 that *“digital technologies can provide new and better ways of regulating.....Regulators can adopt digital solutions to streamline communication that will lower the cost of engagement, develop lower cost compliance monitoring tools (RegTech)”*.
- COSBOA wishes to strongly emphasise the *importance of education of regulators on the needs of small business*. COSBOA observes that one of the main negative influences on regulation and regulator behaviour is that many regulatory bodies believe they understand small business (where in reality they do *not*).
- COSBOA supports a role for National Cabinet in driving the cross-jurisdictional regulatory reform agenda.
- COSBOA argues for a much smarter, more cohesive regulatory environment. Governments must strive to achieve regulatory best practice, including implementing fully a digitalised, streamlined regulatory environment for business, which actively coordinates regulation (and access points) across jurisdictions.

3. Australia's small business workforce after COVID-19

A new focus on employability, productivity and skills in demand

For many years Australia's outsourced public employment services and programs (funded by the Australian taxpayer) have failed in the task of re-engaging large numbers of long-term unemployed people in productive paid employment.

Australia cannot afford to have more than 5 percent of its domestic labour force disengaged, especially in the context of a COVID-19 economic recovery. This situation must be urgently rectified to enable small businesses to access the productive workforces they need.

- According to the reserve Bank of Australia, *"In the.....decade, leading up to the pandemic, the long-term unemployment rate increased, and the average duration of unemployment also rose to be close to one year. Currently around one in every 5 unemployed people have been unemployed for more than a year, an increase from around one in every 8 a decade ago. The share of very long-term unemployed people increased over this period: around 10 per cent of unemployed people have been unemployed for 2 or more years. The increase in the average duration of unemployment over the 2010s reflects a slowing in the rate at which unemployed people either gain employment or leave the labour force. Average duration has fallen in 2020 because many people lost their jobs when the pandemic first broke out"* (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2020)
- It is evident that the outsourced public employment services (and related programs) have failed in design and implementation to achieve their stated objectives (Parliament of Australia, 2019).
- In December 2020 COSBOA made a submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment in response to the Next Generation of Employment Services discussion paper. Among other things, this submission proposed the replacement of *Work for the Dole* (WfD) with a program that is much more productive in terms of genuine work preparation for unemployed people.
- In the early months of 2021 COSBOA began to receive reports from organisations across a range of industries that small and medium-sized businesses were experiencing difficulties in recruiting new employees.
- On 23 March 2021 COSBOA launched *The Small Business Perspective* report, a review of the events, responses and impacts of COVID-19. <https://www.cosboa.org.au/post/cosboa-releases-report-on-lessons-learned-from-the-time-of-covid>. The research undertaken to complete this report included small business survey data about employment and recruitment issues.

- On 32 March 2021 COSBOA held a Roundtable event which sought detailed feedback about small business recruitment problems in the context of COVID-19.

Recruitment problems for small business

The COSBOA *Small Business Perspective* report and follow-up information gathered from COSBOA member organisations has indicated that businesses in many sectors are having real problems finding people to fill job vacancies.

These problems are likely to be caused by a combination of factors:

- **Increasing reliance on visa holders in recent years**

In the relatively high migration environment prior to the COVID pandemic, large numbers of small businesses in sectors such as diverse as tourism, hospitality, retail, personal services, construction and horticulture had become increasingly reliant on overseas students and working visa holders to fill their job vacancies. The greatly reduced availability of visa holders has resulted in a much lower availability of candidates for job vacancies (ABC News, June 2020).

- **Unintended consequences of JobKeeper and JobSeeker Coronavirus Supplement**

COSBOA has been very supportive of the Australian government's interventions through the JobKeeper payments and JobSeeker Coronavirus Supplement. These initiatives have been instrumental in Australia's successful response to the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic.

However, many COSBOA members have reported unintended consequences relating to the comparatively high levels of income support many people were receiving through these schemes. Members have stated that these consequences have been in the form of a reluctance of some unemployed people to apply for jobs or accept offers of employment.

- **Lack of job brokerage assistance for small business**

Despite the positive intervention of the Australian government through the *JobKeeper* scheme, large numbers of small businesses have been severely disrupted and many employers have lost productive workers. There has been little evidence during this time that the *jobactive* network has been able (or empowered) to adapt, and to broker new relationships between employers and job seekers. The reliance on online services to assist employers and recently unemployed job seekers has not been a success for the small business sector.

As an example, the very low take-up of the *JobMaker Hiring Credit* scheme has, arguably resulted (in part) from the lack of brokerage assistance for SMEs. COSBOA has previously advised the Treasury team responsible for developing the Hiring Credit that this was one of the flaws in the scheme. The reliance on

online-only access to the scheme is problematic, especially given the complex eligibility confirmation requirements.

- **A changed labour market**

During the pandemic the Australian labour market was uncertain and volatile, and this continues to be the case for a significant percentage of unemployed and underemployed people, particularly for those with insecure employment. While some traditional occupations have proved to be resilient, others have not (National Skills Commission, 2019).

Many workers need to change direction and consider different types of work. However, this is not always a quick process and often involves the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. The Australian government has recognised this through the creation of the *JobTrainer Fund*. While the headline unemployment rate in March 2021 was lower than expected, the labour force remains uncertain for many people and this is impacting on the small business recruitment process.

- **Complex and unresponsive vocation education and training (VET) sector**

Labour shortages and skill shortages are often closely related problems. A VET system that is not sufficiently responsive the workforce skill needs of Australian industry over many years has exacerbated the current situation.

The convoluted structure and funding arrangements for vocational education and training are a major frustration to employers. There are funding system inconsistencies between States and Territories, between States, Territories and the Commonwealth, and between the VET and higher education sectors. These have created unnecessary complexity and inequity (Joyce, S. 2019).

Recommendations:

In relation to relating labour and skill shortages, COSBOA recommends a strongly renewed focus on engagement with small business on the following issues:

Employment services and labour market programs

- COSBOA proposes that an urgent review of all Australian government employment and labour market programs be undertaken for the purpose of ensuring that each program is optimally effective in preparing job seekers for work. Each program must demonstrate that its highest priority is to ensure that unemployed people are being directly assisted to commence paid employment.
- Australian government employment programs should be structured and managed in a way that ensures effective engagement with employers, including small businesses. Preparing and matching suitable job seekers with job vacancies should be the primary objective. Other program objectives must be secondary.

Skill shortages and the VET system

The Australian Government's Skills Reform discussion paper observes that:

"The VET system is a key part of Australia's ability to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic and will underpin Australia's economic recovery....."

Industry engagement is a core principle of Australia's VET system....."

Increased responsiveness of the VET system is essential in meeting industry skills needs and driving economic growth. An efficient and effective system is required to better drive and understand emerging skills needs, qualification development and training delivery" (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).

The Discussion Paper acknowledges that small, medium and large business needs to be engaged in the process of VET reform. However, it is not yet clear how ongoing engagement will occur *specifically with small business* in the VET reform and management process. While the Discussion Paper observes that, *"To be fit for the future, employers need to have a greater role across all areas of VET.....To drive outcomes, there needs to be a strong and coordinated voice for employers in VET"*, there is not yet a clear articulation of practical methods for small business voices to be sought and heard.

- COSBOA supports the development of a continuing planned approach to engagement between the federal government Department of Education, Skills and Employment and small business in relation to VET.
- This approach should not only continue to include specific industry engagement with small business – as distinct from big business - but should allow for *place-based* representation. The workforce skill needs of small business communities in different locations vary widely, even within the same industry. Local VET infrastructure, capability and capacity also varies significantly.
- An increasingly effective VET system must be informed of these important differences and be equipped to respond to them.

Conclusion

In this document COSBOA has sought to provide a snapshot of three of the most pressing issues that relate to the role of small businesses in helping to re-shape the Australian economy. This paper acknowledges that there are numerous challenges facing small businesses as they strive to overcome the effects of COVID-19. However, we have sought to identify 'make-or-break' issues for the long-term health of the economy.

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