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THE TALENT DYNAMICS REPORT SERIES

# The next era of safety: from compliance to capability

Australian construction, capital projects and infrastructure  
workforce outlook 2026–2028



## Introduction

Australia's safety and compliance landscape is changing faster than at any point in the past two decades.

Major infrastructure builds, economic recovery, rapid renewable-energy expansion, and new environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosure obligations have merged to redefine what it means to lead in safety, and reshape how construction leaders manage risk on site and across supply chains.

This shift changes how project managers, engineers, operations teams, and health, safety, and environment (HSE) teams lead safe and productive workforces. Compliance remains essential, yet capability is quickly becoming the measure that separates high-performing organisations from those struggling to keep pace.

This eBook outlines the five forces reshaping the profession and introduces the 5C Model for the future of safety, a framework built on validated data from Safe Work Australia, the Australian Institute of Health and Safety (AIHS), and Manpower's proprietary analytics.

The message is simple: capability, not compliance, is now the defining measure of success.

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# State of the nation: key workforce metrics

Australia's safety workforce is undergoing a structural shift driven by construction sector growth, new legislative priorities, and evolving workplace health and safety expectations.

The data reveals both encouraging outcomes and emerging risks that require a broader definition of what it means to protect workers.

## Key findings include:

In 2024, 188 workers died from traumatic injuries at work in Australia; a fatality rate of approximately 1.3 deaths per 100,000 workers.<sup>1</sup>

Mental health conditions now account for approximately 10.5% of all serious workers' compensation claims, a 36.9% increase since 2017-18.<sup>2</sup>

Safety-related hiring trends continue to reflect a labour market under pressure, even as overall job vacancies moderate.<sup>3</sup>

Demand remains strongest in infrastructure, renewables, and manufacturing, though employers now expect new skill profiles: ESG integration, data literacy, and behavioural insight.

## The five forces reshaping safety work

Understanding what's driving change is critical to shaping future-ready safety functions. For decades, construction workplace health and safety has centred on regulatory compliance and incident response; however, as projects grow more complex and supply chain risk intensifies, safety models built solely on compliance are no longer sufficient.

Five macro forces are driving the change:



**ESG convergence:** safety, environmental and social governance are increasingly aligned through Australian Sustainability Reporting Standards, including AASB S2 Climate-related Disclosures, with mandatory reporting applying to relevant entities for periods.<sup>4</sup>



**Psychological safety as strategy:** trust, communication, and culture directly impact incident rates and retention in high-pressure project environments, especially for site supervisors and project teams facing labour shortage.



**Technology acceleration:** artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital twins are transforming how construction risks are identified, escalated, and mitigated.



**Workforce elasticity:** surge requirements on major builds increasingly rely on blended workforces where permanent safety leaders are supported by contract specialists, auditors, and field-based work, health, and safety (WHS) advisors.



**Antifragility:** organisations who adapt quickly to regulatory and operating pressures outperform those relying on outdated compliance-only approaches.

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/insights/key-whs-statistics-australia/latest-release>

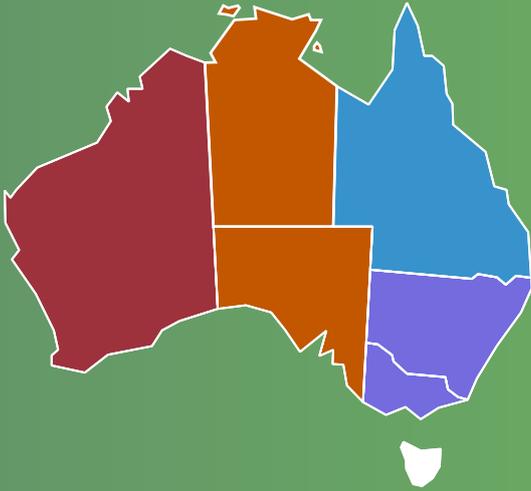
<sup>2</sup> <https://data.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/report/psychological-health-and-safety-workplace>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/labour-market-update-march-2025>

<sup>4</sup> <https://treasury.gov.au/consultation/c2024-466491> and <https://oia.pmc.gov.au/published-impact-analyses-and-reports/climate-risk-disclosure>

# Regional outlook

Regional differences matter, particularly for construction leaders managing multiple sites or national portfolios. State-based infrastructure projects, energy transitions, and industrial expansions are creating uneven competition for talent and skills.



### Western Australia:

mining and energy expansion is intensifying competition for ESG and process-safety professionals.

### South Australia/Northern Territory:

defence and clean-energy projects are creating hybrid safety-engineer roles that blend technical and ESG capability.

### Queensland:

infrastructure investment ahead of the 2032 Olympics is driving shortages of WHS advisors and coordinators.

### New South Wales/Victoria:

updated WHS regulations have shifted attention to psychosocial safety.

*Understanding these regional variations is critical for workforce planning, succession management, and ESG alignment across national operations.*

## Emerging roles through 2028

Infrastructure employers aren't recruiting solely for compliance management. Instead, they are seeking professionals who can interpret insights, anticipate risks, and embed safety into organisational strategy.

Key findings include:



**Safety systems analyst:** builds predictive-risk models and real-time dashboards to inform site-based decision making.



**ESG and safety integration lead:** aligns safety, sustainability, and compliance frameworks from tender to project execution.



**Human factors lead:** incorporates design principles to minimise fatigue, cognitive load, and high-risk interactions.



**Psychosocial risk lead:** manages psychosocial risk and workforce mental health.



**Safety and data integration manager:** connects safety, human resources, and ESG reporting in unified analytics.

*These roles support not only safer work, but stronger project assurance, workforce stability and delivery outcomes across complex capital programs.*

## Strategic imperatives for employers

Organisations cannot address these changes through hiring alone. They must embed capability development across site teams, subcontractors, and project leadership to build resilient and future-fit safety functions.

Key focus areas include:



**Integrate ESG and safety strategy:** align board reporting and cultural metrics.



**Compress hiring timelines:** in-demand WHS professionals often receive multiple offers, and delays in recruitment processes commonly reduce acceptance rates..



**Strengthen employee value proposition in WHS roles:** demonstrate authentic leadership commitment, psychological safety, and wellbeing investment.



**Develop data capability:** equip WHS teams with the ability to interpret and communicate analytics to project managers and site supervisors.

*These imperatives define where to invest, how to attract the right talent, and what leadership behaviours will sustain performance through the next decade.*



# Proprietary insight: the changing face of Australia's safety profession

Public and proprietary workforce data now tell a consistent story: safety roles in construction now demand broader influence, digital fluency, and stronger integration with project delivery. The insights below synthesise key findings from national research bodies, professional associations, and Manpower's market analytics.

Publicly available data shows a clear evolution in professional capability:

**Broader scope.** Safe Work Australia Research Summit 2025 highlighted psychosocial and technology-related risks expanding the boundaries of WHS.

**ESG and psychosocial expertise mainstreamed.** National Safe Work Month 2025 underscored integration between WHS and broader sustainability goals.

**Growing data and systems capability.** The AIHS National Health and Safety Conference 2024 identified demand for analytics and digital reporting skills as a major trend.

*Traditional compliance expertise remains essential; however, it is not sufficient on its own. Safety careers are evolving from compliance-based expertise to capability-based.*

## The 5C Model for the future of safety

The 5C Model is a data-backed framework that defines how organisations can evolve from compliance-driven operations to capability-led performance.

- 1 Culture:** the foundation of psychological safety and trust that drives retention and engagement.  
*The behaviours that drive speaking up, learning and trust on site and across teams.*
- 2 Capability:** depth of ESG literacy, data fluency, and risk acumen across teams.  
*The practical skill to anticipate risk, adapt controls and make decisions under pressure.*
- 3 Connection:** seamless integration between permanent staff and contingent specialists.  
*Integration between permanent teams and contingent specialists so standards hold under surge.*
- 4 Credibility:** transparent, evidence-based communication that builds confidence with stakeholders.  
*Evidence-based communication that builds confidence with leaders, workers, clients and regulators.*
- 5 Continuity:** succession strength and workforce agility that sustain compliance during change.  
*Succession strength and workforce agility that sustain performance through change.*

*Together, these pillars define how resilient and future-ready an organisation's safety culture truly is.*

# The 2028 horizon: where safety becomes strategic intelligence

By 2028, construction safety functions will operate as data-informed centres of strategic intelligence, supporting project certainty and commercial performance.

The following projections outline what that future looks like and how employers can prepare today.

## Expected shifts include:

Safety leaders influencing board-level decisions across risk, ESG, and operational performance

Greater integration of real-time analytics, AI-enabled monitoring, and behavioural insights

Increased client expectations for transparent, verifiable WHS and ESG governance

Organisations that align safety, sustainability, and data early will outpace the market in talent, reputation, and performance.

## For employers, the path forward is clear:

- 1 Invest in capability before compliance becomes crisis.
- 2 Modernise reporting systems to make safety measurable and comparable.
- 3 Redefine safety leadership to include ESG fluency, digital literacy, and cross-functional influence.

Capability, not compliance, will define leadership by 2028. Those who invest now will secure stronger project outcomes and shape Australia's next era of safe, sustainable workforce growth.

Manpower ESG, Safety and Compliance is partnering with leading organisations across infrastructure, energy, and advanced manufacturing to build these frameworks. For more information on how Manpower ESG, Safety and Compliance can help your business prepare, [contact the team today](#).

Contact Manpower to transform your workforce and safety capability strategy.

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