The end of one workforce **Pg.07**
Aaron McEwan

The myth of doing more **Pg.10**
Dom Price

Mobility and the new workforce equation **Pg.29**
Jessica Farrell

Work Smart



Designing work for a more human economy

Scott Wharton, Managing Director and CEO, Smartgroup **Pg.05**

Smart

Contents

Designing work for a more human economy	05	**Scott Wharton** Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer **Smartgroup**
The end of one workforce	07	**Aaron McEwan** VP, Research and Advisory **Gartner**
The myth of doing more	10	**Dom Price** Partner and Work Futurist **Be Luminous**
When demand outpaces workforce capacity	15	**Charles Moore** Chief Executive Officer **BaptistCare**
Where workforce decisions meet patient outcomes	18	**Sean Curtain** Executive Director of People and Culture **Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre**
The new test for disability care	22	**Michael Kromwyk** Deputy Chief Executive Officer **Cara Inc**
Holding the human thread	25	**Catherine Stoddart** Chief Executive Officer **Brightwater**
Mobility and the new workforce equation	29	**Jessica Farrell** Chief Talent Officer, Australia **Publicis Groupe ANZ**
The next frontier in workforce strategy	32	**Marion Fulker AM** WA State Chair **Smartgroup** **Jane Jeffreys AM** SA State Chair **Smartgroup**

Contributors



Aaron McEwan
VP, Research and Advisory
Gartner



Catherine Stoddart
Chief Executive Officer
Brightwater



Charles Moore
Chief Executive Officer
BaptistCare



Dom Price
Partner and Work Futurist
Be Luminous



Jane Jeffreys AM
SA State Chair
Smartgroup



Jessica Farrell
Chief Talent Officer, Australia
Publicis Group ANZ



Marion Fulker AM
WA State Chair
Smartgroup



Michael Kromwyk
Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Cara Inc



Sean Curtain
Executive Director of
People and Culture
Peter MacCallum
Cancer Centre



Scott Wharton
Managing Director and
Chief Executive Officer
Smartgroup

Designing work for a more human economy

Across Australia, organisations are facing growing pressure. The cost of living continues to rise, while salary growth remains constrained. At the same time, employee expectations are increasing, forcing leaders to rethink how work is designed, value is delivered, and people are supported.

At Smart, we partner with more than 4,000 organisations across multiple sectors, providing a direct view of how these pressures are playing out. This reinforces the role employers can play in supporting their people, particularly by helping them take home more of their pay.

Financial wellbeing is becoming a core part of workforce strategy. Organisations are moving beyond traditional remuneration models and adopting practical, scalable solutions such as salary packaging and mobility to improve disposable income, strengthen their employee value proposition, and support workforce sustainability.

The perspectives in this inaugural edition of Work Smart go beyond commentary. They highlight how leaders across sectors are responding and the choices being made to redesign work in practice.

From workforce fragmentation and changing expectations to rethinking productivity and system design, the themes organisations face are consistent. Across aged care, healthcare, disability, government and the corporate sector, leaders are navigating complex workforce challenges while reinforcing the importance of trust, flexibility and sustainability.

What is clear is this: the systems surrounding work, including pay, benefits, mobility, flexibility and leadership, are now central to how organisations create value and sustain performance.

Technology, particularly AI, will accelerate this shift, but progress will depend on more than new tools. The organisations that lead will be those that apply innovation with clarity, trust and deliberate workforce design.

That is the focus of Work Smart, helping leaders turn changing expectations into practical workforce outcomes. It is also why Smart exists, to help organisations strengthen financial wellbeing, employee value and sustainable performance.



Scott Wharton
Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer
Smartgroup

The human dividend

The end of one workforce

Aaron McEwan
VP, Research and Advisory
Gartner



Work is becoming more individual, more fluid and harder to standardise. Psychologist and workplace futurist Aaron McEwan examines the forces driving workforce fragmentation, and what that means for how organisations reward employees and maximise value.

The idea of a single, unified employee experience is breaking down. Across industries, organisations are grappling with a workforce that no longer behaves as a cohesive whole, but as a collection of individuals with different expectations, constraints and definitions of value. This often manifests as complexity inside organisations, however it reflects a broader shift that is underway.

"The world is fragmenting," says Aaron McEwan, a psychologist, workplace futurist and one of Australia's most influential human resources voices.

"We're shifting away from a globalist order toward a much more fragmented and polarised environment - and that's reflected at work."

Within organisations, this is showing up as a more varied experience of work, shaped by individual needs, expectations and circumstances.

From employees to consumers

At the centre of this shift is a change in how people relate to work itself. "I think the most profound driver is a broader trend in consumer behaviour," McEwan says.

"If you think about the way consumers have been trained, it's toward a model which gives consumers a lot more choice." This mindset does not stop at the office door.

"To me, it's no surprise that employees don't leave their consumer mindset at home, not that they even work in an office, necessarily," says McEwan.

The result is a fundamental reframing of the employment relationship. Increasingly, employees are not just participants in an organisation, they are consumers of it.

"Work is a product," McEwan says. "And employees are customers of that product."

This shift changes the lens through which everything is viewed, from culture to flexibility to compensation, where the "job" now represents an entire experience that is evaluated, compared and ultimately chosen by employees.

The human shift

If consumer behaviour is one driver of workforce fragmentation, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated another: a more human-centred view of work.

"What I don't think businesses fully understand is that employees do not want to be seen as a segment," says McEwan.

"All employees want to be seen as a person."

"COVID brought about what I'd call a human-centric revolution. The pandemic was an existential event for people. It brought into question the fragility of our lives, our relationships, our health."

In response, employees began to see themselves differently, looking beyond their roles and functions to observe themselves as individuals with complex lives that extend far beyond work.

> Across industries organisations are grappling with a workforce that no longer behaves as a cohesive whole, but as a collection of individuals with different expectations, constraints and definitions of value.

“The biggest shift in the employee experience during that period was that employees saw themselves as humans – complex humans that require care and empathy,” McEwan says.

That shift has significantly expanded expectations of what work should provide. The employee experience is no longer confined to the workplace.

“The employee experience doesn’t end in the four walls of an office anymore. It’s fully integrated into our lives as humans, and therefore our perspective of the employee experience is that it’s a whole of life experience, not just an employee or an employment experience.”

Why one-size-fits-all is breaking

These forces are exposing the limits of traditional, standardised approaches to workforce design, particularly in areas such as compensation and benefits.

Gartner research shows compensation remains one of the top drivers of attraction and attrition globally, particularly in a cost-of-living environment. But the picture is more nuanced in Australia.

“In almost all parts of the world, compensation is the top driver for both attraction and retention. It’s not in Australia, and it hasn’t been for at least a decade,” McEwan says.

“Typically in Australia things like location, flexibility and manager quality tend to show up higher.”

He also notes that “location” in this example is not just geographical, it also includes hybrid and flexible working arrangements.

This reflects a shift in how employees define value. Salary remains important, but it is no longer sufficient on its own. Instead, value is increasingly shaped by a broader set of factors, such as flexibility, experiences and how work integrates with life.

Making benefits more meaningful

Many organisations have responded to shifting employee expectations by expanding their benefits offering. But more choice does not automatically translate into more value.

“At the moment, the employee experience resembles cable TV from the 2000s,” McEwan says.

“You have to buy the package… and you have to put up with a lot of filler to get to the good stuff.”

How benefits are structured is therefore crucial. When options are layered on without a clear design, they can become difficult to navigate – and harder for employees to connect to their own priorities.

“If a menu is too big and too complex, it becomes unsettling,” he says.

“Most people orient towards a middle ground – where there’s a few options, but you’re limiting my choice in a way that makes me feel like I have choice, but it’s not an overwhelming suite of choices.”

This is where a more structured approach to benefits, including mechanisms such as salary packaging can play a role, helping employees

translate value into something tangible and relevant to their own circumstances.

A different lens

Moving forward, the forces driving fragmentation are unlikely to abate, particularly with the rise of AI disrupting the world of work.

“AI will accelerate all of the fragmentation we’re talking about,” says McEwan.

It will also enable new forms of personalisation, changing how employees engage with organisations and how work itself is structured. As AI systems become more capable of matching people to work, preferences and opportunities, McEwan believes employment relations may become increasingly flexible and tailored over time.

One potential outcome is a move toward flexible, even subscription-like employment models, where organisations maintain a smaller core workforce on traditional arrangements, alongside a broader network of workers who engage with employers in more fluid and variable ways depending on projects, skills, preferences or life stage.

“I can see the more capitalist, commercially-oriented countries moving to a subscription model. We could see a core group of employees on traditional benefits and arrangements, and then a whole group with a more subscription-based relationship,” he says.

At the same time, the nature of what organisations offer may continue to evolve.

“In the consumer world, we were in the business of selling products and services. And then we were in the business of selling experiences,” McEwan says.

“Now the shift that has occurred in that model is towards transformation. Now consumers are not just buying a product, service or experience. They are looking for a transformative experience. Does this product transform me? Does this company help to transform me?”

He says this shift may extend to work itself.

“There will be employers that emerge and that’s the product they offer. ‘Come and work for us and we will help transform your life’.”

“That could be, ‘I want to become the fittest I’ve ever been’, or ‘I want to be as mentally healthy and Zen and grounded as I can be’, or ‘I want to raise my children in the best way I possibly can’, or ‘I want to have a career that elevates my status and profile to the stratosphere,’” says McEwan.

“There will be companies [where] that’s the experience that they promise.”

The most important shift may therefore be how organisations and their leaders think about their workforce.



The myth of doing more

Dom Price
Partner and Work Futurist
Be Luminous



Teams are working harder than ever, yet output isn't improving. As productivity stalls and wage growth tightens, work futurist Dom Price argues that organisations are measuring the wrong things – and that improving productivity requires us to rethink the systems that shape how work gets done.

Australia's productivity slowdown is increasingly defining the limits of work, influencing wage growth, organisational capacity and how teams experience their day-to-day roles.

Over the past decade, productivity growth has weakened significantly. Labour productivity has averaged around 0.8 per cent over the long term, with even softer performance in recent years. Multi factor productivity (the measure that reflects how effectively labour and capital are combined) grew just 0.1 per cent in 2023–24. The data points to an economic system under pressure, where organisations are expanding effort without a corresponding lift in output.

For many workforce leaders, productivity has become a real operating constraint, with few obvious solutions in sight. Inside organisations, this pressure is presenting itself in familiar ways, with heavier workloads, full calendars and a growing sense of urgency – along with an intensifying pressure to do more with less.

However, the relationship between effort and outcome is becoming less clear.

"Productivity is broadly misunderstood," says Dom Price, a work futurist and partner at boutique advisory firm Be Luminous.

"We keep throwing tech at it and going, it doesn't look any better. What happened?"

> "The design of remuneration begins to carry more weight and pay is no longer experienced as a single number. It is a system shaped by tax, benefits, mobility support and flexibility, all of which determine how work interacts with real life.



The way Price thinks about productivity is also shaped by experience at scale. Prior to joining Be Luminous, where he works with major organisations navigating growth, disruption and workforce change, Price spent more than a decade at Atlassian.

At the tech giant, Price joined as employee 600 and grew the company to more than 16,000 workers, and saw exactly how systems determined performance.

Part of the tension lies in how productivity is framed, Price explains. Many organisations rely on definitions built for a different kind of work, which measured productivity by output per hour worked.

"There was a time when that was a useful measure," says Price.

But that time has passed.

This framing of productivity struggles to capture the reality of modern work, Price argues, where roles are less repetitive, decisions are less predictable and value is created through judgement, collaboration and adaptation.

"What we actually care about is the outcome someone delivers," he says.

"[Productivity] is not just about being efficient. It's actually about being effective."

The productivity paradox

A consistent pattern is emerging across organisations where employees feel increasingly busy, while productivity data remains subdued. This disconnect has become more pronounced with the rise of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI). At an individual level, tools such as AI can improve speed and efficiency. At a system level, the benefits are

> The organisations that succeed will be those that align systems, incentives and behaviour – not by adding more activity, but by creating the conditions for people to do the work that actually matters.

less visible. Price points to research showing that most employees using AI report personal productivity gains without any measurable improvement at a team or organisational level.

"Productivity theatre is alive and well," he says.

"Individuals… were feeling more productive. That wasn't resulting in any benefit for the organisation," Price says.

In practice, time saved is often absorbed into a new activity – additional meetings, reporting or coordination of work. The volume of work expands, while underlying systems remain unchanged.

A system under strain

Within many organisations, productivity challenges are inextricably linked to the design of work itself – how decisions are made, how time is structured and how responsibilities are distributed.

"I don't know many people that wake up and go, I'm going to be really unproductive," Price says.

Most employees arrive at work with the intent to contribute. But the outcomes are shaped by the environment they operate within.

"Our systems are archaic," Price says. "We need to upgrade our systems to be fit for purpose."

The system Price refers to includes the everyday mechanics of work, such as meetings, approvals, reporting lines and tools, as well as the less visible structures that influence behaviour, such as incentives, expectations and norms. Over time, these elements accumulate. Processes that were once useful remain in place long after their relevance has faded, keeping organisations stuck or lagging behind competitors.



"The older the organisation, the more barnacles they've got," Price says, with "barnacles" being outdated processes and tools.

The economic layer of the system

Less visible, but increasingly material, is another layer of the workforce operating system: the economic conditions employees are working within. As productivity growth slows, wage growth has also moderated. The Reserve Bank of Australia has been explicit that weak productivity limits the capacity for sustainable real wage increases, even as nominal wages rise. At the same time, unit labour costs have increased, reflecting a mismatch between wage growth and output.

For many organisations, this creates a structural tension. Labour remains the largest cost base, but productivity is not improving fast enough to support significant wage growth. The result is a tighter system, in which employers are managing margins while employees continue to face cost-of-living pressures.

In this environment, the design of remuneration begins to carry more weight and pay is no longer experienced as a single number. It is a system shaped by tax, benefits, mobility support and flexibility, all of which determine how work interacts with real life. For employees managing cost-of-living pressures, the system directly affects disposable income, commuting costs and financial resilience. For employers, the way pay is structured, including employee benefits, becomes one of the few levers available to improve outcomes without materially increasing fixed wage costs.

The bias toward addition

Today, organisations have access to an abundant, ever-expanding menu of productivity tools and processes.

The instinct to add more quick-fix, productivity-enabling mechanisms is something Price says many organisations experience as they feel the pressure to deliver on numbers every quarter.

"Humans are obsessed by addition," he says.

This tendency can increase complexity, rather than reduce it, with each layer introducing additional work even when the intention is to streamline.

"One of the biggest challenges in this system redesign is removal," he adds. "Who is going to take something away?"

Price explains that removing outdated processes can create capacity in different ways, such as freeing up time, reducing cognitive load and allowing teams to focus on higher-value work. This is where productivity begins to shift – not through intensity, but design.

The allocation equation

Even when organisations successfully improve efficiency, a second challenge emerges. That challenge relates to how the newly surfaced capacity is used.

"If we save 10 hours per week, what happens to those 10 hours?" Price asks.

In many cases, there is no clear answer. Without a deliberate plan, time is simply redistributed into existing patterns of work, rather than reinvested into more valuable activity. Some organisations that Price has advised are approaching this differently and treat efficiency gains as an opportunity to reinvest in new areas, from innovation to capability building.

Leadership and system design

Leadership behaviours play a central role in the design of work. Decisions about structure, process and priorities establish the conditions that teams operate within.

"The leaders create the system," Price says. "The system decides whether [employees] are productive or not."

Environments with low trust, or those operating under tight control, tend to introduce additional layers of oversight, slowing decision-making and increasing coordination costs. Planning is one area where this becomes particularly visible, where many organisations rely on long, detailed plans that assume a stable environment.

Price explains that planning in its more traditional form is not flexible enough to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

"We put this burden of proof on the plan – and the burden of proof is that the plan must be 100% accurate before it gets released. We've spent months and months working on the plan. By the time we're happy with it, the world has changed. We've missed so much opportunity."

More adaptive approaches are emerging. Shorter planning cycles, scenario-based thinking and ongoing iteration allow organisations to respond more effectively to change. Price says there is a silver lining, as a growing number of leaders are becoming more comfortable working with such ambiguity.

Productivity as workforce design

For workforce leaders, productivity is increasingly intertwined with workforce design. This includes the clarity of roles, the structure of teams and the systems that support how work is performed. It also extends to the broader workforce architecture employees experience, including time, attention and financial outcomes. This places attention and value on outcomes – the quality of work, the speed of learning and the ability to respond to changing conditions.

Australia's productivity challenge is likely to remain a defining issue for organisations over the next decade. At an organisational level, the opportunity lies in how work is designed, according to Price.

"The power now is how quickly you can adapt," he says.

"The businesses that are successful that I'm working with right now have high learning velocity. They see the insight and they adapt quickly. That learning velocity leads to productivity. But they're not focusing on the outputs. They're like, 'How do I create the conditions where my people can do the best work of their life?'"

That ability to learn, adjust and refine how work happens in response to changing conditions is becoming a defining advantage for organisations.

In that context, productivity is about designing work more effectively. The organisations that succeed will be those that align systems, incentives and behaviour – not by adding more activity, but by creating the conditions for people to do the work that actually matters.

Systems in transition

When demand outpaces workforce capacity

Charles Moore
Chief Executive Officer
BaptistCare



BaptistCare CEO Charles Moore is leading one of the largest consolidations in Australia's aged care sector at a time when demand is accelerating and workforce constraints are intensifying.

Twelve months into one of the most significant consolidations in Australia's care sector, BaptistCare CEO Charles Moore is clear on what hasn't changed: the pressure. Despite pandemic-era attention on aged care workforce shortages, Moore says the underlying strain never eased – it simply faded from public view.

"The workforce remains under incredible strain," he says.

"There's no silver bullet, no magic moment that resolves this."

What has changed is the scale at which those pressures now operate.

Following the merger of Baptcare in Victoria and Tasmania, Baptist Care South Australia and BaptistCare in New South Wales, the ACT and Western Australia, the organisation has become one of the largest integrated care providers in the country, supporting tens of thousands of customers across aged care, housing and community services.

The strategic intentions were clear: would scale improve care, strengthen the workforce experience and create financial stability? The resounding answer was yes, Moore says. But scale, it turns out, doesn't always remove constraints. It reveals them.

The constraint beneath the constraint

Workforce shortages dominate most conversations in care. Demand is accelerating, with Treasury projections showing the population aged over 85 will more than double in the next two decades. Meanwhile, funding remains structurally unresolved, and the sector is also confronting a parallel housing bottleneck. And not just for residents – for workers, too.

In regional Australia, the problem is acute. In metropolitan areas, it's simply disguised. Workers commute long distances because they cannot afford to live near care facilities. In some cases, providers are forced to fly in agency staff and cover accommodation costs just to maintain service delivery.

The result is a system where workforce availability, housing access and service delivery are tightly interlinked – and failure in one destabilises the others.

"I keep having this conversation with all levels of government, because housing is going to become increasingly interlinked to the employment barriers that we face," Moore says.

Why sector-wide growth alone doesn't fix it

Compared to other industries, aged care is still highly fragmented, and this structure is increasingly difficult to sustain. Australia has more than 1,000 providers – a structure that Moore believes is not sustainable.

> Rather than relying solely on wage growth, organisations are expanding the design of pay itself – incorporating mechanisms such as salary packaging and novated leasing to improve real take-home pay for workers without increasing wage costs.

"You either subscribe to the economies of scale, or you become very boutique and niche and do something incredibly well in a very lean fashion," he says.

The real danger is in the middle, he explains, where a provider is neither large enough to reap the benefits of the economy of scale, nor small enough to be nimble and frugal.

Scale brings many advantages, such as system integration, procurement efficiencies, workforce mobility and the ability to invest in technology and capability. At BaptistCare, those benefits are already being pursued. Multiple payroll, rostering and care systems are being unified, with an estimated $15–20 million in efficiencies expected to be redirected into front line care and workforce investment.

But Moore is careful not to overstate what scale can solve. It doesn't create workers, for example. And it doesn't fix planning delays that can stretch aged care developments to seven years from approval to completion. It also doesn't resolve the fundamental economics of care delivery. Instead, it creates the conditions to operate more effectively inside those constraints.

Designing a workforce that doesn't exist yet

The more complex challenge is forward-looking. The workforce required in 5 to 10 years will not resemble the workforce of today. It will be more flexible, more culturally diverse and more digitally capable – and more selective about how work fits into life, Moore observes. The sector is already adapting in fragments via permanent part-time work, flexible scheduling and increased reliance on migrant labour.

But Moore suggests incremental change won't be enough.

"Doing what we've [always] done won't cut it," he says.

Instead, workforce design is shifting from recruitment to retention. At its peak during the COVID-19 pandemic, workforce churn in the sector reached 30 per cent. While that has since improved, Moore still sees retention as the primary lever.

"Recruitment is a flow problem," he says.

"Retention is the real lever that needs to be fixed."

Which brings the conversation back to organisational culture.

The integration challenge no system can automate

Mergers are often framed in financial terms. In care, the harder integration is human. Each organisation entering the merger has brought its own identity, community and way of working. Aligning systems is complex, but aligning culture is harder.

"The most important thing you can do as an organisation is create that 'one team' mentality," Moore says.

That challenge sits behind the organisation's recent rebrand and identity relaunch – a process that involved thousands of employees contributing stories, experiences and "moments" of care to shape a shared narrative. The result is more than a visual refresh.

It is an attempt to codify what the organisation stands for at scale – a unified vision of "communities where everyone can live to their full potential," and a purpose centered on championing care for all.

In practical terms, it gives employees something to orient around during a period of sustained change, and a common language for what that change is meant to achieve. Because the risk, Moore acknowledges, is not just operational disruption, it's losing experienced staff at a time the sector can least afford it.

The economics of care

For all the emphasis on purpose, Moore is blunt about the underlying economics. Care work is underpaid relative to its responsibility. "Someone looking after your mum or dad, helping with medication, meals, personal care, is earning around $30 to $35 an hour," he says.

Government funding, which accounts for more than 80 per cent of revenue in many cases, constrains what providers can pay. Recent wage increases have helped correct decades of underinvestment, Moore explains, but he describes them more as a reset, not a solution.

The system remains financially fragile, which is why he rejects the traditional "not-for-profit" framing. Baptist Care, he argues, operates as a "profit for purpose" organisation, one that must generate surplus to reinvest in care, workforce capability and community services.

"If we're not generating a surplus, how can we reinvest back into the organisation to deliver even higher quality care?" He says.

What success looks like from here

Looking ahead, Moore believes the organisations that will succeed share three characteristics. They have a clarity of purpose, which is translated into strategy, they have financial discipline and transparency, and have a deep investment in people and culture. While these aren't new ideas, what's changed is the environment in which they must operate, where demand is effectively guaranteed, but supply of services is not.

So, can the aged care sector meet future demand in its current state? Moore doesn't soften his answer. "No," he says.

Australia is experiencing shortages of thousands of aged care beds each year, with construction timelines, cost pressures and workforce shortages compounding the gap. Even home care, often positioned as a release valve, is under strain. The system, in other words, is falling behind.

For organisations like BaptistCare, scale is not a growth strategy in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a structural response to a system under pressure. Mergers like the one BaptistCare has undergone serve as an example of how consolidation can help create enough stability to keep delivering quality care when demand is rising faster than capacity.

There may be no simple solution to the workforce challenge – no "silver bullet" as Moore puts it. But there is a clearer sense of what the path forward requires, including not only more people but stronger workforce design and a more coordinated approach to how care is delivered at scale.

At BaptistCare, that work is already underway. For organisations willing to take on the challenge, this shift in workforce system design offers something more durable than a short-term fix – the ability to keep delivering quality care, even as the pressure continues to mount. Wages matter in care, but they are not enough on their own. As BaptistCare CEO Charles Moore points out, recent wage increases have helped address long-standing underpayment in the sector, but they have not resolved the underlying workforce challenge.

In a system where more than 80 per cent of funding comes from the government, there are limits to how far base pay can move

Pay is important to everybody. You've got to be able to put food on the table and look after your family," he says. "But it's not the only lever in terms of recruitment."

This context is shifting how organisations in the sector are thinking about remuneration. Rather than relying solely on wage growth, they are expanding the design of pay itself – incorporating mechanisms such as salary packaging and novated leasing to improve real take-home pay for workers without increasing wage costs.

Where workforce decisions meet patient outcomes

Sean Curtain
Executive Director of People and Culture
Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre



At Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, workforce decisions sit close to the point of care. Executive Director of People and Culture Sean Curtain explains how staffing, funding constraints and day-to-day operations intersect – and why an organisation's design and support of its workforce directly shapes patient outcomes.

At Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, most days begin with a clear sense of what's coming. Clinics are scheduled. Patient pathways are mapped. Unlike emergency-led hospitals, the work is largely planned – at least on paper.

"We have a reasonably good idea what tomorrow looks like," says Sean Curtain, Executive Director of People and Culture.

What sits behind that planning is less predictable.

"We are a specialist cancer hospital. Every single person who comes in is impacted by cancer," he says. "They've all got their own particular path."

That combination – structured care and individual journeys – shapes how the organisation operates, and the way its workforce is organised. Curtain oversees staffing, systems and workforce planning, but the effects of those decisions are felt in real time – and at present, against a backdrop of rising demand.

The pressures on public health are well understood. At Peter Mac, they are also deeply personal.

"We've definitely seen stress rates go up in the last couple of years," Curtain says.

This reflects both the workload and the nature of the work itself.

> "Curtain believes organisations that fail to manage workforce pressure effectively and prioritise wellbeing will increasingly struggle to retain people and sustain performance over time.



"Not every [patient] story may have a positive outcome," he says. Cancer journeys, diagnosis and treatments are all extremely complex and individual.

In response, Peter Mac has invested in internal support structures, including psychologists dedicated to staff.

The scale of its system is also significant. Peter Mac employs more than 4,000 staff and treats more than 47,000 patients each year, alongside more than 400,000 specialist outpatient appointments.

"We're seeing a sad increase in cancer diagnoses," Curtain says.

"We're seeing an ageing population that is going to have more wrong with them. You've got the wonderful benefit of early identification of cancer which is tremendously helpful, but that also means we are seeing more people come through the system. There's a bit of pressure on savings at the moment, and while rates of private health insurance are still remaining stable, public health is always going to be a place that a lot of people will go."

Why people stay

Tenure at Peter Mac is unusually long by broader labour market standards in the health sector. Around a quarter of employees have more than a decade of service, with hundreds reaching formal milestones each year. Part of that reflects the nature of the work.

"Public health is still a pretty noble profession," Curtain says.

Reputation also plays a role.

"We're probably in the top 15 cancer hospitals in the world. We're fairly lucky in that our brand and reputation means that we attract people," he adds. But retention is not explained by purpose alone, and pay remains a major constraint across the sector.

"Salaries are not nearly as [high] as people might expect," Curtain says.

Other parts of the employment offer, therefore, take on greater importance.

"Remuneration only goes so far, so benefits outside of pure salary are very helpful."

At Peter Mac, that includes salary packaging, additional leave, rostered days off and leave loading – conditions that affect what employees take home, not just their base salary. The uptake is high among its employees, Curtain explains.

"We've got over 90 per cent uptake in salary packaging," he says. For many employees, these settings factor into how they assess their overall pay.

Friction in the system

Some of the most persistent workforce issues are operational rather than strategic.

"Systems get in the way when they are barriers to people being successful," Curtain says.

These are often small, cumulative frustrations, such as paper-based processes, fragmented systems and administrative complexity.

"We've still got well over 2,000 people who fill in paper timesheets," Curtain says.

Addressing these can make a noticeable difference to how work gets done – changes to pay cycles and payroll processes, for example, reduced errors and simplified operations.

"Sounds simple, but it decreased errors quite dramatically," he says.

Hierarchy and voice

Healthcare workforce systems rely on hierarchy. Clinical decision-making requires clear lines of accountability, and expertise is not evenly distributed. But the effectiveness of those structures often depends on how information moves within them. At Peter Mac, that question is about whether people feel able to speak up when something doesn't look right.

"Someone emptying the bins might notice something about a patient," Curtain says.

The challenge is not identifying where these signals originate – insight can come from anywhere within the organisation, he explains. Instead, the challenge is whether the insights are raised in the first place and acted on. In many high-pressure environments, silence can be reinforced by hierarchy, time constraints or uncertainty about whether something is worth escalating.

Curtain frames it simply: "Do people feel safe to speak up?"

For leadership, that question carries operational weight. A system that filters out frontline observations risks missing early clinical, behavioural or systemic indicators. Curtain emphasises the importance of listening to employees.

Creating space for those voices does not require dismantling hierarchy altogether. It means ensuring it does not interrupt the flow of information, particularly in environments where small observations can have significant consequences.

Signals that matter

Amid the structural challenges of staffing, funding and demand, the daily relationship between employer and employee is often shaped by smaller signals.

Curtain points to something straightforward – recognition.

"It's so easy to reply with 'thank you'," he says.

At Peter Mac, that principle is built into daily routines. Operational huddles begin with acknowledgments called 'shout outs' – a deliberate, purposeful pause before the work of the day begins.

> "Staffing levels, systems, culture and leadership decisions all shape how care is delivered and experienced.

It's a small intervention, but one that shapes how work is experienced.

"That simple act makes my travel to work worthwhile," Curtain says of the employee perspective.

In an environment where much of the work is emotionally and cognitively demanding, these moments provide a counterweight. They do not change the underlying pressures, but they influence how these pressures are carried by individuals and, in turn, their teams.

Recognition also operates as a form of feedback. Patient responses – both positive and critical – are shared across the organisation, giving staff a direct line of sight to the impact of their work. Over time, these signals accumulate. They reinforce what matters day-to-day – what is acknowledged and what is shared.



What comes next

The pressures on the system are unlikely to ease. Demand continues to rise, workforce constraints persist and expectations continue to expand.

"We're going to be just as busy, if not busier," Curtain says.

Managing those pressures is now a primary focus for workforce leaders in the sector.

Curtain believes organisations that fail to manage workforce pressure effectively and prioritise wellbeing will increasingly struggle to retain people and sustain performance over time.

"I think organisations that don't make it their focus will see high turnover, loss of IP and brand destruction," he says.

Less visible, but no less significant, is disengagement – people remaining in roles, but stepping back from the work.

"The worst thing is organisations where people stay but are massively disengaged," he says.

At Peter Mac, the connection between workforce and care remains intact. Staffing levels, systems, culture and leadership decisions all shape how care is delivered and experienced.

"If you don't listen to your people," Curtain says, "don't be surprised by what happens."

The new test for disability care

Michael Kromwyk
Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Cara Inc



As the NDIS shifts toward tighter regulation and greater accountability, Cara Deputy CEO, Michael Kromwyk is focused on a deeper challenge: building a workforce and operating model that can deliver consistent, high-quality care – and sustain it over time.

The disability care sector is often understood through the lens of policy, including funding settings, eligibility rules and reform cycles. On the ground, it operates at a far more immediate level.

"It's a minute-by-minute activity that supports a person with disability to access the Australian life that we all know and love," says Michael Kromwyk, Deputy CEO of South Australian disability care provider Cara.

That framing matters, because the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is once again under review, with major proposed changes that will overhaul eligibility and tighten access criteria, lift regulatory expectations and place greater scrutiny on provider quality. For Cara, which has spent years rebuilding trust, the shift may favour providers able to demonstrate consistent, high-quality care.

The timing is significant. Cara itself has been navigating a period of internal transformation, following financial strain, alongside broader sector turbulence driven by rapid growth in NDIS participation, increased competition and uneven quality across providers. Kromwyk was brought in to help grow the organisation and translate its strategy into execution.

A system expanding beyond its design

The NDIS has grown far beyond its original expectations. Participation has surged, creating both opportunity and risk. On one hand, demand has expanded access and visibility. On the other, it has lowered barriers to entry, allowing under-prepared or opportunistic providers into the system.

"You've got high-quality organisations delivering well-trained support workers to provide support to vulnerable people, but anyone can do the work under the current scheme," he says. "That is what has caused an issue."

The federal government's proposed reforms, which include tighter regulation and a shift toward commissioning models, are intended to address this imbalance. For established providers, they are likely to shift the balance toward organisations with proven quality and capability, Kromwyk observes.

"There will be a flight back to quality providers," he says.

The shift is not just about market share. It is connected to trust, which is particularly relevant in a sector that supports some of the most vulnerable people in the community.

"We've got to make sure that we keep our most vulnerable people in our community safe, and some of them are in very unsafe environments today," Kromwyk says.

Workforce as the constraint

If policy defines the outer boundaries of the system, workforce determines what is actually deliverable within it. Across the sector, demand for services continues to outpace the availability of skilled support workers. Cara alone employs more than 600 support workers and is actively recruiting for dozens more roles.

> "In a tight labour market, base pay alone is rarely sufficient to attract and retain workers. Instead, organisations are increasingly relying on a combination of financial and structural supports.

"If you don't have the support workers, you can't provide the service," Kromwyk says.

The challenge is not just the volume of workers, but perception. Kromwyk has observed that care work, particularly in disability support, competes with broader societal expectations around career pathways, education and status.

"People aren't always aspiring to work in this sector," he says.

As a result, providers are drawing from a more diverse talent pool, including mid-career changers and new migrants, while simultaneously trying to elevate the role itself.

"What we're getting now are some pressures as we all fight for talent. That's definitely what's occurring," Kromwyk says.

"We're seeing this in pockets of our networks now and in regions. It can be extremely difficult, [because] we're fighting the same support workers that everybody else is. So we've got to be an employer of choice."

This is where employment and remuneration design becomes critical.

Designing for attraction and retention

In a tight labour market, base pay alone is rarely sufficient to attract and retain workers. Instead, organisations are increasingly relying on a combination of financial and structural supports. For not-for-profits like Cara, salary packaging plays a central role, allowing employees to increase their take-home pay through tax concessions unavailable to most for-profit employers.

"It puts us ahead of the for-profit organisations," Kromwyk says.

This reflects a broader shift in how employers think about remuneration. As wage growth stabilises, total reward design – including tax efficiencies, flexibility and development opportunities – is becoming a primary lever for workforce participation.

Financial incentives are only part of the equation. Cara is investing in workforce capability and accessibility. One initiative, enabled and funded by Smart, focuses on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse carers entering the workforce, including providing language training to improve communication with clients.

"We hire for values, cultural alignment to our organisation and care for people. If I can get those skills, I can train them on the communication elements."

Operational design also matters, Kromwyk explains. Minimising split shifts, reducing travel distances and aligning workers with clients based on shared interests all contribute to a more sustainable employment experience – all of which directly influences and enhances service quality.

At the centre of Cara's model is a focus on independence – supporting clients to participate in everyday life, rather than doing tasks for them. Delivering that consistently requires a level of workforce capability and alignment that must be designed into the system.

Rebuilding trust through performance

When Kromwyk joined Cara, the organisation was not only under financial strain, it was losing trust. Clients were leaving. Referrals were declining. The brand also carried a degree of negative sentiment, he explains.



> Cara is investing in workforce capability and accessibility. One initiative, enabled and funded by Smart, focuses on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse carers entering the workforce, including providing language training to improve communication with clients.

The turnaround strategy has focused on three areas: operational discipline, workforce alignment and external community. Internally, the organisation has undergone significant restructuring. Externally, it has invested in rebuilding its presence and reputation.

The work is starting to have a positive effect.

“We’re starting to hear people say Cara is a good organisation again,” Kromwyk says.

Client onboarding has increased while attrition has stabilised – all early indicators of regained confidence.

Trust in this context is measured in whether families are willing to place long-term care in the hands of an organisation.

“Imagine you’ve got a two-year-old child, and you’re now going to hand them over to a third party organisation that’s going to live with them for the rest of your life,” Kromwyk says.

“That’s how people with a disability feel. Even though they have an adult in their life, it’s giving up a child that you’ve cared for, loved, know everything about them until they’re maybe 30, 40 or 50. And now they’re going to have to go to someone else and you’re going to put trust in them. The question that people increasingly ask is ‘Will they be safe there?’ And you need to solve that question for people.”

A sector at an inflection point

The combination of regulatory reform, workforce pressure and financial constraints is pushing the disability sector toward a new operating model. Kromwyk is optimistic and clear about Cara’s direction.

“I’m excited about the changes to the NDIS. They’re talking about commissioning, and that means quality brands will be the only ones that people can choose from for certain types of services.

“That means you need to be marketing-led and have a good reputation, and people have got to know who your brand is, so when they get their list, they go, ‘I want to talk to them first.’ I think we’re in a very good position for that.”

At the same time, organisations will also need to adopt a more commercial mindset.

“You’ve got to know your numbers… and make those key strategic decisions that you need to make,” Kromwyk says.

This includes investing in areas that are not always traditionally prioritised in not-for-profits, such as marketing and brand.

The challenge ahead

As the NDIS enters its next phase, the operating environment for disability care providers is becoming more structured. Tighter regulation and a shift toward commissioning are likely to reduce the number of providers operating in the system, while raising expectations on those that remain.

For organisations like Cara, that changes the nature of the challenge and task at hand. Demand is not the issue. The main constraint is whether there are enough trained, supported and stable workers to deliver care consistently, safely and at scale.

It also raises the bar on execution. Providers need to know their numbers, fill vacancies and support their workforce to maintain quality in every interaction. When those elements fall out of balance, the impact is immediate – not in a quarterly result, but in the daily experience of clients.

Cara’s focus on rebuilding trust, stabilising its workforce and improving its operational discipline reflects that reality. Progress is visible in stronger client onboarding and reduced attrition, but it is also measured more simply: whether clients are safe, supported and able to participate in everyday life.

In the end, this is not a system that runs in the background. It plays out in homes, in communities and in one-to-one relationships. The test for providers is simple: whether they can show up, every day, with the people, capability and consistency to deliver safe, high-quality care – and earn the trust that underpins it.



Holding the human thread

Catherine Stoddart
Chief Executive Officer
Brightwater



For Brightwater CEO Catherine Stoddart, the growing complexity of the support sector begins with understanding the people delivering it.

In the kitchen at one of Brightwater’s residential care facilities, there is a system for everything. Meals are coordinated carefully, temperatures are checked meticulously and compliance standards are followed with precision. But amid the logistics and regulation, one kitchen staff member remembers that a resident named Betty* likes her eggs soft, while another knows exactly who wants their toast without butter.

For Brightwater CEO Catherine Stoddart, those moments capture something essential about the modern support sector: care is not confined to clinical settings or frontline specialists. It also exists in the small, highly individual interactions that shape a person’s daily experience.

The foundational compliance pieces are vital frameworks for providing quality support, Stoddart says.

“But then being able to say, ‘Betty needs her eggs done this way’ – that’s the complex bit.”

As Australia’s support sector expands, the everyday mechanics of service delivery inside organisations like Brightwater are increasingly individual.

Brightwater, which this year marks 125 years of operation, provides services across aged care, disability support and rehabilitation in Western Australia. Its workforce supports people living with acquired brain injuries, neurological conditions, dementia and complex disabilities, often over long periods of time and significant change.

For Stoddart, the growing complexity of support services is inseparable from the growing complexity of people’s lives.

“Complex care really is a reflection of living longer and being able to diagnose some of the really difficult diseases,” she says. “You’ve got all those things wrapped up together.”

Conditions such as young onset dementia, acquired brain injuries and neurological disorders rarely affect one person alone. Families are frequently navigating emotional strain, financial pressures, changing family dynamics and fragmented support systems alongside the person receiving support.

“There’s a social element to it, too. It’s not like you go into hospital, you get a diagnosis, you get treated and you come out,” Stoddart says. “This is affecting a whole family, no matter whether it’s early years or late. For our teams, they’re managing family dynamics.”

Retention, trust and continuity

This complexity is changing the way providers think about workforce design – and few leaders speak about workforce dynamics as personally as Stoddart.

With a background in nursing, Stoddart has spent decades working across complex care and support environments, including in the Kimberley, the Northern Territory and overseas. Her leadership philosophy, she says, is grounded as much in lived experience as clinical training.

“I’m a nurse by background, so I think my value base comes from that,” she says. “It’s not altruism, but you get far more out of it than you ever give.”

Work Smart

This sense of purpose shapes the way Stoddart talks about workforce retention – as a question of stability, trust and dignity rather than an operational metric alone.

“We have to get the hygiene factors right to retain people. You’ve got to get your salary on time. If salary packaging is available, people need to be using it and benefiting from it, because people are trying to pay a mortgage and manage the rising cost of living,” she says.

“As leaders, you have to be empathetic. You need to be empathetic about clients and families and empathetic about what staff are going through, I think.”

The hidden role of financial certainty

Stoddart speaks about salary packaging differently from many executives in the sector. For her, the conversation sits alongside financial literacy, certainty and long-term workforce retention. She says salary packaging is both practical and closely tied to people’s sense of stability.

“Our staff come to us partly because we have salary packaging. It does give a bit of certainty, because you allocate funds for your mortgage or whatever it is – the big stuff,” she says.

“Then you can use that other money for the other things to live your life.”

She is particularly focused on helping women working in care to build financial capability.

“I’m really interested in women and the vulnerability of women and their ability to control their own destiny,” she says. “I think education about salary packaging is really important because people don’t realise what it means.”

Stoddart says those experiences have shaped her understanding of the importance of financial confidence and stability for frontline workers.

Building capability for specialised care

Brightwater’s workforce includes people who have spent decades inside the organisation. According to Stoddart, some employees have remained with the provider for more than 40 years. Training, career development and culture all play a role in that continuity.

The organisation has continued investing in leadership development and clinical education for its workforce as care environments become more specialised. Stoddart points to the challenge facing frontline clinicians stepping into management roles for the first time.

“That very first time a technical person, allied health or nursing for example, becomes a manager and has to manage all that complexity and coordination – that’s a really challenging piece for anyone. But in our environment where there’s less funding and less backup resources, [training] is really important.”

Brightwater has also embedded research capability into the organisation, with Stoddart describing it as one of only a small number of aged care providers nationally with an embedded research centre. The work spans areas including dementia, rehabilitation and behavioural support.

“It’s about providing the evidence base for the things we do,” she says.

Still, much of what defines quality support happens at a smaller, more immediate level. Stoddart refers to this as the “micro level” of culture – the interactions between managers, peers and frontline workers.

“It’s between a manager or a supervisor and their staff member or peer-to-peer colleagues being able to speak up when there’s something wrong,” she says. “Or recognising each other for a job well done. It happens at that micro level, but culture does need to be set at an organisational level.”

Creating time to care

That culture extends beyond clinical teams. Brightwater has more than 200 volunteers supporting its services, while executives and board members regularly spend time working alongside frontline staff.

During one recent shift in the kitchen, Stoddart watched staff manage compliance requirements, food standards and individual resident requests simultaneously.

“You can’t put a price on it,” she says of the attention kitchen staff put into their work.

As providers across the sector pursue greater efficiency, Stoddart believes technology and AI will also increasingly shape how services are delivered. But she sees the value less in reducing headcount than in creating more time for human connection.

“It won’t be about us reducing our staff,” she says. “It’ll be about freeing up time for the mundane tasks, so that they can care.

“We are always looking for those opportunities, and being very clear that you’re not going to compromise the quality of care, but you’re going to free up time. Sometimes there are efficiencies as a result, of course, but the focus is improving the quality of care, and the side effect is efficiency.”

If administrative work can be streamlined, she says, the question becomes what workers are then able to give back to residents and clients.

“Have you got time to have a cup of tea with your client, or ask them the extra question?” She says. “They’re the things we’ll be looking at.”

The operational pressure on care providers continues to intensify, particularly as funding models, workforce expectations and regulatory frameworks evolve. Stoddart describes the pace of change as constant, particularly for middle managers navigating rostering, workforce coordination and service delivery simultaneously.

“You can only move at the pace of trust,” Stoddart says.

It’s a principle that has become increasingly important as organisations introduce new systems and technologies into already stretched care environments. Stoddart recalls recently halting the rollout of an IT system, as staff lost confidence in the platform.

In environments where relationships shape the quality of support and care, she believes implementation is rarely about the technology alone. It depends on whether staff understand how change affects them individually, whether communication is consistent and whether teams feel heard during periods of operational disruption.

For Stoddart, the future of the sector will depend on whether organisations can preserve those human foundations while adapting to rising operational and clinical complexity. The systems around care may continue to evolve through new technologies, workforce models and regulatory change, but she believes the core attraction of the sector remains fundamentally human.

“People want to be in it,” she says. “We have people moving from other sectors because they are seeking purpose.”

That sense of purpose, she believes, is becoming more visible as the social care sector expands.

“It’s a more interesting space than it’s ever been,” she says.

*Name changed for privacy.



“

We have to get the hygiene factors right to retain people. You’ve got to get your salary on time. If salary packaging is available, people need to be using it and benefiting from it, because people are trying to pay a mortgage and manage the rising cost of living.

“

Brightwater’s workforce includes people who have spent decades inside the organisation. Some employees have remained with the provider for more than 40 years. Training, career development and culture all play a role in that continuity.



EVs and mobility

Mobility and the new workforce equation

Jessica Farrell
Chief Talent Officer, Australia
Publicis Groupe ANZ



Few people see the changing relationship between work, mobility and employee expectations as closely as Jessica Farrell, Chief Talent Officer, Australia at Publicis Groupe ANZ. For Farrell, mobility has become a practical workforce issue shaped by rising cost-of-living pressures, evolving employee expectations and growing ESG commitments.

The rules of where, when and why we work are being rewritten. At Publicis Groupe ANZ – part of one of the world's largest communications networks – that shift is changing the design of its workforce.

No longer a passive by-product of where people live, commuting and travel are being redefined as both a workforce and ESG lever. It comes at a time when these activities are now active workforce design choices, shaping not just how work happens, but how organisations deliver on sustainability commitments in practice.

For Chief Talent Officer Australia Jessica Farrell, mobility now sits at the intersection of workforce expectations, cost-of-living pressures and ESG ambitions. In an environment where employees are increasingly weighing the time, cost and purpose of every commute, organisations are being forced to rethink how movement fits into the broader employee value proposition. That includes not only where people work, but how they get there – and what support systems make those choices viable.

It's also where new partnerships and policy settings are beginning to matter. Publicis Groupe ANZ is one organisation leading the charge in leasing electric vehicles (EVs) and e-bikes, representing part of a wider shift toward embedding sustainable mobility options into everyday work.

In this conversation, Farrell outlines how Publicis Groupe ANZ is responding, structuring work so time in the office is meaningful, expanding global mobility and treating workforce movement as a lever for both performance and sustainability.

The way people travel for work has shifted significantly. What changes are you seeing in how your workforce approaches commuting and mobility?

Mobility has become far more intentional. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, commuting was often treated as a fixed part of work. Today, our people think about mobility in terms of how work fits into their wider lives with time, affordability, sustainability and flexibility all mattering more.

At Publicis Groupe ANZ, along with many other workplaces, hybrid work has fundamentally reshaped commuting patterns. As part of a creative industry, we believe in-person collaboration is important. However, our people want to know that their time in the office will be meaningful. Whether that is through collaboration, learning, time with their teams, creativity workshops or client connection. As a result, mobility has shifted from being a background consideration to a deliberate workforce design question.

How has hybrid work changed expectations around where and how people are willing to travel for work?

Hybrid work has widened the radius of where people are willing to live but narrowed their appetite for inefficient travel. The workforce is more open to living further from city centres, provided they have a clear purpose for commuting.

Work Smart

That shift has important implications for how organisations think about office attendance, team days and client meetings, as well as the support structures that sit around that.

In industries like advertising and media, how are you balancing flexibility with the need for in-person connection?

Advertising, at its heart, is a people-driven industry. Creative energy, problem solving and client partnerships benefit enormously from people being together.

At Publicis Groupe ANZ, we approach this through our Publicis Liberté philosophy. It's not a rigid policy, but a set of seven behaviours that guide how we work, grounded in trust, accountability and outcomes.

We've been very intentional about focusing on purposeful presence. When our people come together, it's for collaboration, connection or learning. We ensure our agencies have anchor days where the whole organisation or key teams are present. This creates the balance between in-office working and flexibility.

Are you seeing differences across workforce segments in how they think about commuting and location?

Yes, and it's less about seniority and more about life stage. Needs vary depending on what's happening in someone's life, not just their role.

At Publicis Groupe ANZ, this is why we focus on recognising the life experience of our people, not just their employee experience. Our people offering is designed to provide support at different moments in life, including through tailored benefits like flexible public holiday leave, fertility treatment leave and menopause leave.

Across all ages, the consistent theme is choice. People want work to adapt to their lives, and organisations that reflect that are seeing stronger engagement and retention.

Cost of living pressures are reshaping decisions about work. How much does the cost and practicality of getting to work factor into attraction and retention?

It's definitely a factor, and it's also an opportunity for organisations to respond in more creative and meaningful ways. People are looking at the full equation now: not just salary, but the cost, time and experience of getting to work, and how that fits with their lifestyle and values.

At Publicis Groupe ANZ, we've leaned into this by rethinking the way we work beyond the traditional hybrid model. Initiatives like Work Your World allow our people to work from any country with one of our offices for up to six weeks a year. This gives them the freedom to be more targeted in how they use their leave, spend time with family overseas or simply design a travel and working experience that works better for them.

In a competitive talent market, particularly across creative and digital roles, these kinds of choices matter as it's what ultimately drives both attraction and retention.

> “Mobility is a tangible way to bring ESG commitments to life. It moves sustainability from abstract ambition into everyday decision-making. Our role as people and culture leaders is to design frameworks that make sustainable choices easier, more affordable and more inclusive.



EVs and mobility

Have you seen mobility become a more explicit part of the employee value proposition?

Yes, mobility has shifted from something implicit to a much more visible and valued part of the employee value proposition. It now sits alongside flexibility, wellbeing and purpose as a core expectation.

At Publicis Groupe ANZ, we think about mobility in a broader way. It's not just about getting to and from the office. It's about enabling our people to build careers and lives that aren't constrained by geography. Alongside initiatives like Work Your World, our Publicis Moves APAC mobility program supports employees who want to explore job opportunities across markets, whether that's a short-term experience or a longer-term relocation.

This reflects how people want to work today – seeking growth, adventure and agency, without having to compromise their career trajectory.

Ultimately, organisations that make mobility tangible and accessible are seeing a real advantage. It strengthens attraction by opening up global possibilities, and it builds retention by showing people they don't need to leave the business to experience something new.

In urban environments, are you seeing employees consider alternatives like EVs or e-bikes? How are you responding?

We are certainly seeing increased interest in city environments where traffic, parking and sustainability are front of mind. EVs and e-bikes are becoming viable and attractive options for many employees, especially when supported through novated leasing arrangements.

At Publicis ANZ, we see initiatives like EV and e-bike uptake as part of behavioural change at scale. When systems, incentives and payroll structures support more sustainable choices, people act on them. That's where people and culture teams and policy design can have real impact beyond statements.

How are you thinking about mobility in the context of sustainability, decarbonisation and ESG commitments?

Mobility is a tangible way to bring ESG commitments to life. It moves sustainability from abstract ambition into everyday decision-making.

Our role as people and culture leaders is to design frameworks that make sustainable choices easier, more affordable and more inclusive. Whether that's supporting EV adoption, enabling alternative transport options, or aligning benefits with decarbonisation goals, mobility has become a practical lever for credibility in the ESG space.

The next frontier in workforce strategy

Marion Fulker AM
WA State Chair
Smartgroup



Jane Jeffreys AM
SA State Chair
Smartgroup



As organisations confront ongoing workforce and economic pressure, attention is shifting beyond headline salary to the broader systems shaping employment experience. Marion Fulker AM and Jane Jeffreys AM argue that workforce benefits are emerging as a strategic lever.

For Australian organisations, workforce attraction, retention and engagement remain perennial strategic challenges shaping workforce systems and organisational capability.

Yet many are still overlooking one of the most practical tools available to them.

Too often, employee benefits such as salary packaging and novated leasing are treated primarily as administrative functions, rather than part of broader workforce strategy. Organisations are beginning to recognise the strategic role these systems can play in attraction, retention and employee wellbeing.

In a labour market shaped by cost-of-living pressure, skills shortages and rising expectations from employees, organisations need to think more carefully about the real economics of work. Not just headline salary, but what people actually take home each pay cycle and how employment fits into their lives in practical terms.

For many employees, particularly in health, education, government and community services, the focus is shifting to what working at a particular organisation actually enables them to do in practical and financial terms.

Across Australia, employers are competing for increasingly scarce talent while operating within tight wage constraints. In sectors such as defence, health and aged care, the challenge is becoming even more acute. In South Australia and Western Australia, the defence industry is expected to require more than 10,000 additional workers over the coming decades as major defence and infrastructure projects expand.

At the same time, employees are navigating mortgage stress, rising fuel costs and ongoing financial uncertainty. Against this backdrop, organisations are looking beyond salary alone to support workforce attraction, retention and financial wellbeing.

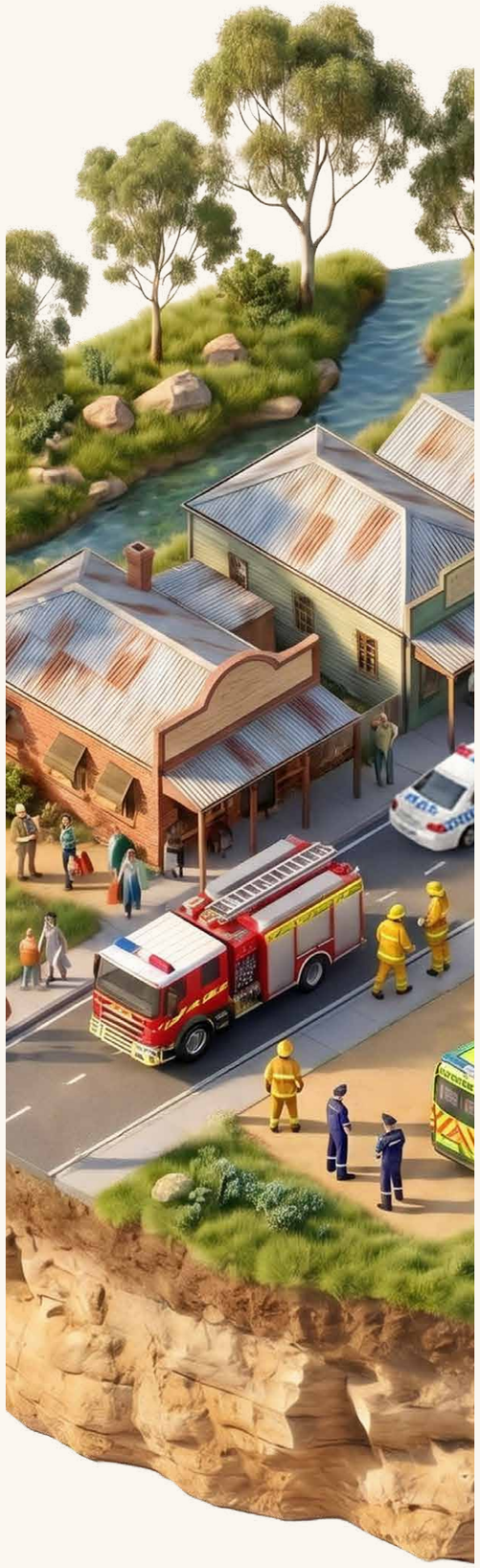
But they can think differently about workforce design.

Salary packaging and novated leasing are already embedded within Australia's employment framework. However, in many organisations, awareness, communication and leadership remain significant barriers to uptake.

Historically, these benefits have often been associated with specific workforce groups or senior roles, rather than positioned as part of the broader employment experience. As organisations place greater emphasis on workforce participation, retention and financial wellbeing, there is growing opportunity to make these systems more visible, accessible and better understood across workforces.

We believe organisations have an opportunity to think about these benefits as part of the operating system of work itself.

That means embedding these conversations across leadership, HR, payroll, finance and governance, rather than keeping them isolated in each department.



> "In regional Australia, for example, novated leasing and salary packaging can materially affect whether workers remain in essential frontline roles.

Leading organisations are examining whether their workforce systems genuinely support attraction, retention and employee wellbeing. They are looking more closely at participation data, communication effectiveness and how benefits are experienced across different workforce groups. These conversations are extending beyond HR into broader leadership and governance discussions.

Finance teams, operational leaders and executives all have a role to play. Workforce participation and retention are enterprise-wide issues, not departmental ones.

The organisations seeing the strongest engagement with salary packaging and novated leasing are those that are integrating these conversations into onboarding, workforce planning and business-as-usual leadership communication.

We have seen a growing number of organisations successfully position these benefits not as complicated financial products, but as part of how they support their people and their wellbeing. In regional Australia, for example, novated leasing and salary packaging can materially affect whether workers remain in essential frontline roles. In sectors facing persistent labour shortages, these mechanisms can become a genuine differentiator.

Importantly, this is not simply about attraction. It is also about trust.

Employees want to know that organisations are paying attention to how work functions in practice, not just what appears in an employment contract. They want clarity, accessibility and support, rather than complexity and corporate jargon.

That requires organisations to communicate differently.

Too often, benefits are introduced through policy documents or transactional onboarding processes that assume employees already understand the system.

Many do not. Others are understandably cautious, particularly workers from culturally diverse backgrounds or employees unfamiliar with Australia's salary packaging arrangements.

Organisations therefore need a more human and integrated approach – one that explains not only what is available, but why it matters and how it can genuinely improve financial wellbeing.

This is particularly important as work becomes more personalised and employees now compare organisations not only on salary, but on the broader quality and flexibility of the employment experience.

This also requires a shift in mindset – one that reinforces that benefits are an integral part of workforce strategy.

And in sectors facing persistent workforce pressure, organisations that fail to recognise that risk leaving talent and value on the table.

Employee value is shifting

Workforce challenges continue to evolve, but so do the opportunities to create greater value for employees and organisations alike. The insights shared throughout this edition of Work Smart are intended to help HR leaders move from strategy to action.

Whether you're looking to strengthen your employee value proposition, improve financial wellbeing outcomes or better support a diverse workforce, Smart can help you deliver meaningful benefits that make a tangible difference to your people.

Thank you to our contributors for sharing their expertise and helping bring this edition to life.

Discover more at smart.com.au/employers

Smart

Australia's leading salary packaging and novated leasing provider.



0 12642 97482 1