



Roads Australia 2024 Future Leaders' Forum

Outcomes Report

September 2024



About Roads Australia

Roads Australia is the peak body for roads within an integrated transport system.

Our 120+ member organisations include Australia's transport agencies, asset owners and operators, major contractors and consultants, material suppliers, service and technology providers.

Our role is to facilitate and curate important conversations, create opportunities for engagement and support a high-performing transport sector.

We are committed to being future focused, deeply in tune with what matters to our members and connected to global best practices and perspectives.

Alongside our members, we are passionate about supporting a high-performing, diverse and inclusive workforce.

This is one of our national policy priorities and a core outcome of the **Emerging Leaders Program** and its annual marquee event, the **Future Leaders' Forum**.

The Future Leaders' Forum is proudly sponsored by CPB Contractors.



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Gold Coast and QLD
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Associate, Highways
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The Future Leaders Committee works with Roads Australia to support the development of the next generation of leaders in Australia's roads and transport sector.

Comprised of a group of former Roads Australia Fellows, the Committee provides governance and strategic oversight over the Fellowship and Emerging Leaders Programs

Key activities of the Committee include:

- Planning and delivery of networking and professional development events for young professionals, future leaders and RA Fellowship Program Alumni.
- Working with RA to select Fellowship candidates and match them with senior industry mentors.
- Supporting implementation of RA's policy priorities around cultivating a diverse, inclusive and high-performing infrastructure workforce.
- Advising the RA Board on future opportunities to support the development of future transport leaders.

Cultivating the next generation of talent

Roads Australia is committed to cultivating the next generation of talent, including by consulting and engaging future leaders on how we can position infrastructure and transport as a sector of choice.

We value the voices of young professionals in helping us understand how to:

- Attract and retain talent
- Support diversity and inclusion
- Improve industry culture
- Address skills gaps and
- Foster workforce creativity and innovation.

In amplifying the voice of our future leaders, RA seeks to highlight how we as a sector can unlock the potential in our people and ensure that talented young professionals are given the opportunity to thrive in our sector.

Emerging Leaders Program

Roads Australia's Emerging Leaders Program is designed for high-performing young professionals who have fewer than 10 years of industry experience.

Acknowledging the importance of investing in emerging talent, the Program supports Roads Australia members in enabling the next generation of industry leaders to achieve their full potential.

The Program aims to develop leadership and networking skills that will help them progress to the next stage of their careers, while also broadening their knowledge and understanding of the sector.

Unlocking the potential in people

The case for action

Australia's infrastructure sector is tasked with delivering a major public infrastructure pipeline valued at \$230 billion over five years. To deliver this and future investment, we must unlock the potential in our workforce. This includes enhancing the availability of next generation talent.

A number of workforce challenges currently exist:

- Every economic sector is competing for skills, with Jobs and Skills Australia reporting workforce shortages across 36% of occupations nationally.
- Infrastructure Australia's *Infrastructure Market Capacity Report* shows the infrastructure sector is facing substantial skills shortage, particularly in highly skilled professions.
- Workforce inclusion, equality and diversity are major challenges across the sector, with women representing just 14% of both the construction and engineering workforces.
- According to BIS Oxford Economics, cultural issues in the construction sector are costing the Australian economy nearly \$8 billion annually due to workplace injuries, mental illness, suicide, long work hours and a lack of diversity.



2024 Future Leaders' Forum

The 2024 Future Leaders' Forum was held in Sydney on June 25. It brought together a highly engaged group of more than 100 young professionals and industry leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the future infrastructure workforce.

The day began with a keynote presentation from **Larry McGrath, General Manager – NSW & ACT at McConnell Dowell**, who shared his insights on career development and leadership.

A respected figure within the infrastructure and transport sectors, Larry has had a hand in some of the most transformational projects in Australia's recent history, including Sydney Light Rail and Sydney Metro.

Larry shared a wealth of practical advice with our future leaders, including the importance of understanding your own risk appetite, building personal resilience and bringing people on the journey with you when you're trying to drive change.

Sharing his personal career reflections with our future leaders, Larry's keynote set the scene for a wide-ranging discussion about how we can help the next generation of transport leaders thrive.

Centring the voice of young people

Workshop objectives

How must the transport sector evolve to build a sustainable, high-performing workforce? How do we foster inclusion, innovation and wellbeing to bring out the best in people and retain talent in the sector?

These are the questions we asked our young professionals to consider as they took part in a moderated workshop aimed at understanding their goals and vision for the industry moving forward.

Attendees were asked to consider potential policy responses and examples of best practice, as well as barriers to implementation. They were then asked to **vote on recommended policy solutions** to establish a consensus view on areas for action.

The recommendations shared in this report reflect the views of young professionals that attended the Future Leaders' Forum and will be considered in development of future Roads Australia policy.



Workshop findings



How do we create a supportive culture in the transport and infrastructure sector?

The ambition

- People are empowered to bring their whole selves to work as part of a supportive workplace culture, which actively encourages horizontal and vertical collaboration.

The issue

- The infrastructure sector is working hard to address historic cultural challenges, including low levels of female participation and an unwavering focus on output to the detriment of the workforce.
- In response to this issue, bodies like the *Construction Industry Culture Taskforce* and *Wellness in Infrastructure* are working to support the long-term sustainability of the workforce.
- Young professionals cited high levels of burnout, driven by long hours, stress and a lack of support across the industry as pressing issues.
- Attendees observed that corporate culture is often very different from the culture on construction sites and project offices, where historical issues and behaviours still persist.

What can we do?

- Young professionals would like to see an increased commitment from senior leaders to driving culture change.
- This includes support for the whole person through teaching life skills like personal health and wellbeing management and greater support for early career professionals.
- Cultural safety and inclusion values should be enshrined in everyday work and life.

Actions recommended by young professionals

1. Increase support for early career professionals

- Provide the appropriate time for training and onboarding for early career professionals, with regular feedback and check ins to identify challenges early.
- Establish a safe space for individuals to grow within organisations.
- Foster a culture of casual mentorship within organisations.

2. Invest in defining and understanding workforce issues

- Regularly survey the sector, including young professionals, to understand and define the challenges facing the workforce.
- Commit to identifying the root cause of burnout and staff attrition rates, by examining the impact of stress, workload and culture.

3. Shift to a four day work week to encourage work/life balance

- Acknowledging that long working days are the norm for many young professionals, shifting to a four-day work week would promote work/life balance and aid in stress management.
- Recognise that flexibility means different things to different people, and encourage ways of working that allow people to bring their best selves to work.

How do we develop the skills we need to deliver future transport infrastructure?

The ambition

- A highly-skilled workforce that can deliver a sustainable infrastructure future for Australia.

The issue

- According to Infrastructure Australia, there is currently a shortfall of 229,000 public infrastructure workers with shortages of highly-skilled roles such as engineers and scientists being particularly acute.
- With historic levels of construction activity in housing, energy and defence, access to skilled workers across the economy is constrained.
- A sustainable, highly-skilled future workforce is critical to deliver planned infrastructure investment, and is key to decarbonisation, safety and productivity improvement across the sector.

What can we do?

- Young professionals wish to see industry move away from rigid roles that require specific training and create more opportunities for new workforce entrants to develop skills on the job.
- Provide easier and more affordable access to training opportunities to enable people to upskill.
- Consider the financial and personal barriers to achieving additional technical qualifications and how they can be addressed, particularly for underrepresented groups in the sector.

Actions recommended by young professionals

1. Facilitate cross-organisational knowledge exchange

- Support greater industry exposure for young professionals by facilitating a cross-organisational exchange program.
- Develop a confidentiality agreement/rules of engagement to promote knowledge and skills sharing and prevent talent from being poached.
- Develop a post-exchange information sharing session to share best practice.

2. Increase time and budget for skills development

- Ensure project and infrastructure funding includes specific allowances for training including mentoring, skills transfer and recognition of skills achieved.

3. Consider role of procurement in supporting a diverse skills mix

- Remove restrictive contract requirements to provide room for a more diverse mix of professional backgrounds and perspectives on projects.



How do we cultivate innovative workplaces?

The ambition

- A sector that leverage and embraces technology and skillsets to drive innovation and productivity.

The issue

- Rapid advances in technology including artificial intelligence are being utilised across the broader economy to boost productivity, however the infrastructure sector has been slow to embrace innovation.
- Australia ranks 16th in the OECD for productivity - its lowest in 60 years.
- Construction is among the least digitised industries globally, while Australia recently slipped from 14th to 16th in the World Digital Competitiveness Ranking.

What can we do?

- Young professionals support greater uptake of technology, within a workplace culture that rewards creativity and encourages innovative thinking.
- Promote cross collaboration between disciplines and information sharing to foster new ideas.
- Evolve specifications and standards to support innovation, noting that relying on existing specifications can halt creativity.

Actions recommended by young professionals

1. Establish a contract framework that encourages innovation

- Establish buy in through incentivised contractual agreement with clients and subcontractors.
- Enshrine innovation by making it a KPI integrated into contracts.

2. Increase focus on learning and development specific to skillsets

- Embrace new technologies and design processes that are easier to use and coordinate, such as new approaches to 3D building,

3. Create a culture of learning and information sharing

- Create safe spaces to 'fail and fail quickly' while learning on the job, accepting that failing is part of the process.
- Share knowledge to ensure it is not siloed by project or team.



How do we create a diverse and inclusive transport and infrastructure workforce?

The ambition

- A transport and infrastructure sector that attracts and retains the best talent as part of a diverse workforce.

The issue

- Australia's construction sector has the lowest female representation within its workforce of any employment industry.
- According to Engineers Australia, women make up just 14 per cent of Australia's engineering workforce.
- Research from AECOM shows that organisational diversity and inclusion programs enhance loyalty and advocacy towards an employer, increase employees' commitment to their jobs and increases overall productivity amongst infrastructure sector workers.
- McKinsey and Company research indicates that corporations that embrace gender diversity on their executive teams are 21% more likely to experience above average profitability.

What can we do?

- Create environments where diversity is actively sought, recognised and acknowledged.
- Promote the link between diversity, innovation and performance, noting that increasing diversity in the transport and infrastructure workforce brings a broader range of perspectives when approaching challenges and opportunities.
- Be proactive in improving workplace culture, providing equitable opportunities and visual representation of underrepresented groups.

Actions recommended by young professionals

1. Foster inclusive social connection opportunities

- Invest in a range of different workplace and industry events that bring people together.
- Proactively ensure events are culturally safe with the space for everyone to feel included.

2. Encourage diverse employment at the hiring stage

- Removing formal qualifications for job advertisements in favour of skill sets to encourage people from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences to enter the sector.
- Ensure application process are accessible and welcoming for people with disability and neurodiversity.
- Remove unconscious bias from recruitment processes, including through language used in job advertisements and application and interview requirements.

3. Develop male allies through education and mentoring opportunities

- Establish reverse mentoring opportunities for male leaders to enable them to better understand inherent workplace biases.





**PROMISE
PASSION
PURSUIT**

2024 Award Winner - William Phillips

Undergraduate construction advisor, BMD Group

Following the Future Leaders' Forum, Roads Australia held a gala dinner where William Phillips was announced as the 2024 **Promise, Passion and Pursuit Award Winner**.

Awarded annually to an emerging transport leader, the recipient of the Promise, Passion and Pursuit Award receives access to a range of invaluable leadership and mentoring opportunities over 12 months.

With the support of Roads Australia and its Future Leaders Committee, the recipient also completes an industry transformation program to advance one of Roads Australia's national policy priorities.

As the 2024 recipient, William will conduct research project aimed at supporting and empowering young professionals in the civil construction industry.

He will also pilot a mentoring program to support young professionals in the civil construction sector, with a focus on cultivating technical and leadership skills as well as mental health and wellbeing.

Building on his experience as a member of BMD Group's Working Inclusivity Group Victoria, William hopes to contribute to a more diverse and sustainable workforce by enhancing the support and development opportunities available to young professionals.

In winning the 2024 Promise, Passion and Pursuit Award, William was commended for his commitment to creating a program that provides young professionals like himself with the support they need to thrive in the workforce



Next steps

The workshop discussion at the 2024 Future Leaders' Forum showed that young professionals are deeply invested in industry reform.

Young professionals indicated that they want to see:

- Action to address workplace culture as well as diversity and inclusion.
- Greater flexibility around recruitment to attract people with broader skill sets.
- More opportunities for mentorship and coaching early in their careers.

Roads Australia is committed to listening and acting on the voices of young people. The outcomes from the 2024 Future Leaders' Forum will be incorporated into our ongoing policy work program, which includes a specific focus on attracting and retaining talent in the transport and infrastructure sector.

We will continue to provide opportunities for young professionals to share their insights, while supporting their career development through our Emerging Leaders Program.

Acknowledgements

Roads Australia thanks the attendees of the 2024 Future Leaders' Forum for sharing their experiences and insights.

Thank you to the industry leaders, including our Future Leaders Committee and former RA Fellows, who volunteered their time to support this year's event.

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