

# Big players dominate jobs market

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– Natasha Di Ciano

Natasha Di Ciano has welcomed the federal government's \$900 million investment to reduce red tape.  
Photo: Michael O'Brien



Mining, government and supermarkets continue to dominate WA's jobs figures despite upheaval in some sectors.

WESTERN Australia's economy has performed strongly in recent years, with CommSec's most recent State of the States report ranking it the nation's best across a range of metrics.

Healthcare and social services remain the largest sector in the state's economy, accounting for 13.6 per cent of total jobs in the state, the report found.

Retail trade (8.77 per cent) and education (8.75 per cent) are the next biggest employers.

The numbers for those three sectors are similar to figures returned nationally.

One industry where WA splits markedly from other states is mining and resources, which accounts for 7.51 per cent of total jobs in the west compared with 1.78 per cent nationally.

## Resources

Despite headwinds in its nickel business, mining giant BHP remained the largest employer in the state with 24,000 staff.

The company closed its Nickel West operations in July, citing around 3,000 job losses at the time.

At the time, BHP Australia president Geraldine Slattery said every frontline worker would be offered another role within the business, and that 700 workers had already been redeployed.

Adding to the pain at Australia's largest listed company was a restructure in October that cut 100 WA-based IT and technology roles.

It's understood half the people in those roles were redeployed internally, with the other half being made redundant.

Nickel's troubles affected a range of businesses, with the world's largest lithium producer, Albemarle, cutting 300 jobs after its decision to halt production and expansion at its \$2 billion lithium hydroxide plant in the state's South West.

Rio Tinto, the state's second largest private sector employer, narrowed the gap between itself and BHP on Data & Insights biggest employers list after adding 1,600 jobs to its 2023 numbers to hit 18,600 staff in the state.

Fortescue's numbers in WA were down, from 12,586 last year to 12,300 in Data & Insights' latest survey.

Those figures included Fortescue's global 700-person layoff in July, which the company said was needed to ensure it remained "lean, impactful and agile".

Despite the headwinds for their largest competitors, Gina Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting bucked the trend and delivered positive news on the employment front, up from 4,195 last year to 4,525.

Elsewhere, smaller operators such as Mineral Resources have reduced numbers significantly.

In early August, the Chris Ellison-led miner shed around 100 jobs after closing its Yilgarn iron ore mine.

In October, MinRes said it would cut 570 jobs and slow construction at its Mount Marion lithium project in an effort to repair its debt-heavy balance sheet.

#### JOBS LOST AFTER ALCOA KWINANA REFINERY SHUT

Then, in early November, the company said low spodumene prices were behind its decision to cut the 300-strong team at its Bald Hill lithium mine to a skeleton crew of just 10 as the mine went into care and maintenance.

The company didn't respond to a request by Business News for total staff numbers, but they were expected to be significantly down on last year's 6,300 people.

Earlier in the year, US-based industrial giant Alcoa revealed it had completed the shutdown of its Kwinana alumina refinery on schedule, with 550 jobs lost.

The company told Business News total staff numbers for WA had fallen from 4,400 to 4,070 after the June closure.

"This included a reduction of 550 roles due to the Kwinana refinery curtailment," an Alcoa spokesperson said.

"Over the same period, about 230 positions became available at our other WA refineries and mine sites, and about 170 of these were filled by employees redeployed from Kwinana refinery."

In all, 124,871 full-time-equivalent workers are employed in WA's resources sector.

Employee numbers among the state's mineral exploration players were down for the second consecutive year, according to Department of Mines figures, to 4,163 from its record of 4,700 in FY21-22.

WA's mineral exploration expenditure was \$2.58 billion in 2023-24, an increase from 2022-23 but down on the record \$2.6 billion spend in 2023.

Combining that with the reduction of metres drilled and exploration employment, it may look like the peak of exploration activity in WA during the current cycle has passed.

In oil and gas, petroleum exploration expenditure in WA continued to recover and was valued at \$569 million in FY23-24; its highest level in five years.

And while that upswing was largely due to a drilling program by INPEX in the Browse Basin, the strength in the sector was reflected in the employment figures of most companies.

WA staff numbers at Woodside Energy rose by more than 200 to hit 3,550; a similar increase to Chevron, which was up from 1,716 to 1,998.

Outside of mining and resources companies, the contractors supplying services to them also experienced significant growth in staff numbers.

Monadelphous reported it had hired 81 staff through the year, taking its total staff to 4,581, while Perenti was up from 2,900 to 4,155.

NRW Holdings grew its staff numbers by more than 500, to 4,560, while Mader group remained consistent with 1,800 employees.

## **Supermarkets**

Outside of mining, Australia's supermarket duopoly accounted for the other two spots in the top five private employers.

Figures for Coles remained relatively stable in the WA market, with 160 jobs added to last year's tally.

According to Data & Insights, Coles employs 13,160 Western Australians.

That figure came after a strong FY23-24 during which the supermarket giant reported a 30 per cent uptick in online supermarket sales; an offering it had previously touted as a job creator, given the labour-intensive pick-and-pack process of online shopping.

Coles is expected to add further staff in the near term, following the approval in March of its \$29 million Ravenswood shopping precinct.

In the adjoining supermarket aisle, Woolworths Group's total numbers rose from 15,700 in 2023 to 16,140 this year, largely due to its December 2023 move to acquire a controlling stake (55 per cent) of pet store giant Petstock.

## **Construction**

WA's construction sector has been under a microscope this year with the challenges faced by Nicheliving, among other businesses.

However, those who remain – particularly in the business of prefabricated homes – will be buoyed by a recent \$900 million federal government fund to reduce red tape.

The \$900 million will be offered to states to streamline building approvals and expedite pro-productivity reforms.

One local company hoping to benefit from the government largesse is NXT TEC, which promises to go from slab pour to lockup in just four days with its innovative approach to precast homes.

NXT TEC chair and managing director Natasha Di Ciano said the measures would help boost jobs and innovation while calming the housing crisis.

"We obviously have a major housing crisis, so any reforms to speed up approvals and drive investment are welcome," Ms Di Ciano told Business News.

"But I think beyond just addressing the housing crisis, these reforms – and the work they're going to really kickstart – will be a boost for jobs in the industry.

"In prefab and modular construction, the workforce roles are slightly different. There are lowerskilled roles and less of a reliance on traditional trades, which are already hard to find."

Ms Di Ciano said the reforms would also encourage innovation in a sector that often stuck with the status quo.

"All of this relies much more on manufacturing as opposed to construction," she said.

“So, I think it’ll offer broader employment opportunities and a chance to create career opportunities, especially for construction workers looking to pivot into manufacturing.

“It will boost innovation and encourage investment in new technologies and supply chains, which is the future.”



Alcoa completed shutdown of its Kwinana alumina refinery on schedule in June. Photo: David Henry

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The company’s NXT Building Systems Technology incorporates 11 different patented technologies to manufacture homes quickly and without waste. Its workbook at Anketell, in the City of Kwinana, already has 400 homes, and that figure could rise with the new red tape legislation.

NXT TEC recently signed a partnership with M2i, a US-based firm that will work to license NXT’s technology to builders in the US.

It wasn’t a great year for some of the state’s biggest construction businesses, however, including BGC Australia, where total employment figures dropped by more than 400, to 1,400 as it sold off parts of its business. Tertiary

The University of Western Australia remains the largest tertiary employer, adding around 100 jobs to its books to grow to 3,795 staff. It was followed by Curtin University, where full-time equivalent numbers sit at 3,376. Murdoch University added more than 300 jobs to its books to go past 3,000 employees, while Edith Cowan University remained relatively stable at 1,923 staff.

TAFE numbers also remained stable, with the combined total of 4,468 staff at the five TAFE colleges across more than 50 campuses.

## Professional services

Professional services firms in WA have fared better than their national counterparts, but significant cuts were a feature at the top end of town, nonetheless. 100

### WA-BASED IT ROLES CUT BY BHP IN OCTOBER



BHP closed its Nickel West operations in July.

The largest player in the state's professional services sector, Deloitte, had a contraction in total staff numbers, down 116 people to 1,023 total staff in the state.

The 2023 tax scandal continued to hurt PwC, which experienced a significant drop in staff, largely due to the sale of its government consultancy.

And while the figure isn't public, it's understood the firm lost more than 200 staff since 2022 when it last participated in the Data & Insights survey.

EY said its total staff figure remains at 858, although that figure has remained constant for the past three years.

KPMG was more forthcoming with total WA staff figures, adding seven staff to its books to now employ 610 people in WA.

## Public sector

Despite mining companies often dominating jobs rhetoric, the WA government still far outstrips the employment numbers of any non-government entity. The Department of Education remains one of the largest employers in the state, with its 61,713 employees up from 59,760 in 2023.

Add to that the 64,000-plus employees across WA Health's eight different services, and the two departments combined account for just shy of 10 per cent of WA's total employed workforce.

On top of that, the Department of Justice, combined with WA Police, employs 16,000 total staff.

State government employment figures total about 172,000, which is 13 per cent of the total number of people employed in WA.

And that's before you consider other arms of government; the largest local government in WA the City of Stirling, employs 1,099 people.

Stirling was followed by the City of Canning, which employed 856 people, and the City of Rockingham with its 789 staff.

## **Hospitals**

WA's health workforce continues to grow, with almost all hospitals experiencing an uptick in staff numbers.

North Metropolitan Health Service remained the largest employer in health this year, employing 800 extra staff to hit 14,124.

Fiona Stanley Hospital and the South Metropolitan Health Service both reported around 13,000 staff, while the WA Country Health Service – which covers all health outside of Perth – added 1,700 staff to its figures to total 12,700.

While growth was the case for most public health services, it wasn't the same story for private hospitals, many of which experienced job losses.

Hollywood Hospital lost dozens of jobs to fall to 2,508 employees, while jobs losses were also observed at St John of God Mount Lawley and Glengarry Private Hospital.

At St John of God Midland, Murdoch and Subiaco, however, job numbers were up.

## **Charities, non-profits**

With a mixed bag of jobs growth across its sites, St John of God Healthcare's overall staff across increased by almost 300 to remain (by far) the largest not for profit in the state with 10,300 staff.

Previously the second largest non-profit group in the state, St John WA slipped to third after cutting 300 jobs (to 2,818 total staff). It was surpassed by Silverchain, which reported 3,140 staff in the state.

It was followed by aged care providers Brightwater Care Group with 2,581 staff, Bethanie with 2,422 and Amana Living at 2,134.