

# National Business WHS Survey

## October 2024

## Key Findings

ACCI's 2024 National Business WHS Survey report presents the perspectives and concerns of a broad cross-section of Australian businesses. It represents the views of small, medium and large businesses, from all Australian states and territories, and across industry sectors.

The survey was completed by 324 businesses and was in field from 21st August to 18th September 2024.

### Compliance and Guidance

This year, the sentiment from businesses regardless of size was that they are **overwhelmed with increasing regulation and constant changes**.

**Large businesses** noted the ongoing issue of **inconsistency across jurisdictions** and the need for clear information on psychosocial hazards, whilst **medium** emphasised the need for **more education, cost assistance** and **practical advice**. For **small businesses** the priority was 'making it easier to understand what to do and how to do it' with most either not knowing what Codes of Practice are or seeking guidance tailored to their industry and context.

Significantly, **34%** of **small business owners** were **diagnosed with a mental health condition** in the last 12 months highlighting the increasing pressure they feel running a business in the current operating climate.

### Psychosocial Hazards

The psychosocial hazards respondents were **least confident identifying and managing** were **traumatic events, poor support** and **conflict or poor workplace relationships**. This varied however depending on what industry you operated in and the size of your business, reinforcing the **need for highly contextualised psychosocial guidance**.

There is still a very **low level of awareness** of what **psychosocial risks** are **within smaller businesses** with a large proportion confusing general poor mental health with psychosocial risk.

### Chemical and Biological Hazards

Overall, **one in three** (31%) businesses had at least one category of **hazardous chemical or a biological hazard present at their workplace**. Most commonly *General chemicals* and *Nuisance dusts*.

**11%** of respondents said they undertook **air monitoring** at their workplace and **21%** undertook **health monitoring**.

All **large businesses** that indicated they had one or more of the hazardous chemicals in their workplace **conducted both air monitoring and health monitoring**. **47%** of **medium businesses** conducted **both** air and health monitoring, however only **24%** of **small businesses** conducted **air monitoring** and **33%** **health monitoring**.

### General WHS Risk Management

The **top three barriers** to good WHS practices were: **time constraints, cost implications** and **too many sources of information/conflicting information**.

**Small businesses** indicated they **sought information** on WHS predominately **from Industry Association / Chambers of Commerce** (29%) with **sole-traders** however more likely to turn to the **Internet** (47%) for WHS information. **Large businesses** are more likely to **rely on health and safety representatives** (19%).

**52%** of businesses surveyed indicated they **do not have a HSR in their workplace**.

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**The National Business WHS Survey report is an annual publication produced by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. This is the third year of data for core questions. Over time we intend to publish more trends data.**

#### **Contact**

Jennifer Low  
Director | Health, Safety, Resilience and Digital Policy  
jennifer.low@acci.com.au

Telephone 02 6270 8000 | Email [info@acci.com.au](mailto:info@acci.com.au) | Website [www.acci.com.au](http://www.acci.com.au)

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# Section 1: Compliance and Guidance

This year, the sentiment from businesses regardless of size was that they are **overwhelmed with increasing regulation** and **constant changes**.

“

*Less rules imposed by current Government. I feel the current government has no idea of all the red tape a business needs to deal with not to mention the cost.*

*'WHS compliance is becoming very complex and sometimes feels overwhelming for a small/medium business with limited resources.*

*WHS is the most significant part of our business, we need to get it right, but red tape and complexity makes it hard. Let's not rush and make things worse.*

”

“

*The WHS landscape is rapidly changing on many fronts. The current trend of implementing changes to WHS legislation with out considering the impact on workplaces to implement or comply has and will continue to cause undue financial burden.*

*There is an expectation that leaders, managers, can control all safety events and process, there must be recognition of what is actually achievable in the current industrial, safety and regulatory environment. Innovation and improvement is being abandoned for prescription, over regulation, biased review and inquiry.*

*'I'm all for safety, but understand the employee has a level of responsibility as well*

”

## Q: What is the one thing that would help you the most with Work Health & Safety compliance?

When asked what would assist with compliance, **large businesses** predominantly noted the ongoing issue of **inconsistency across jurisdictions** and the need for clear information on psychosocial hazards and injuries:

*Improved clarity on how WHS and IR legislation interacts around common issues such as psychosocial hazards, sexual harassment.”*

For **medium sized businesses**, the emphasis was on **more education opportunities**, assistance with costs and practical advice:

*“Education and seminars on topical issues from the regulator.*

*Practical advice and steps for compliance that is engaging and can be used for engaging staff.*

*Engaging, specific training resources tailored to high-risk work. Current materials are often too generic, lack relevance or are trying to be funny and miss the mark.”*

For **small businesses**, the priority was “*Making it easier to understand what to do and how to do it*” with several noting the need to **tailor information** to the size and industry of the reader:

*“Easier to understand language.*

*Clear, practical guidelines tailored to our industry would help the most.*

*Summary fact sheets for different categories of businesses to understand which regulations and codes of practice apply.*

*I would like online options, so maybe if there is new updated information, 10-15 min videos would be great.”*

Of concern was the perception by a significant portion of **sole-traders** that noted WHS compliance was “*not relevant*” to them.

## Q: How useful are Codes of Practice to you?

Codes of Practice are 'practical guides to achieving the standards of health and safety required under the model WHS Act and Regulations'. Courts may regard an approved code of practice as evidence of what is known about a hazard, risk or control and may rely on the relevant code to determine what is reasonably practicable in the circumstances.

Whilst **large businesses** (50+ workers) indicated a high use of Codes, **medium businesses** were more evenly split between finding Codes useful or not.

### Large Businesses

“

*Extremely useful - the NSW COP's and VIC Compliance Codes are key sources of information for development of P&P's*

*I refer to them regularly when drafting new company policies/procedures.*

*Codes of Practice are used to develop site standards and procedures. When written well they are a useful source of information.*

### Medium Businesses

“

*I look at it in conjunction with other information.*

*Code of practice are good for explaining issues. Sometimes are a little too generic.*

*I prefer to look at guides or other information*

”

A large proportion of **small businesses** did not understand what a WHS Code of Practice or Guide was, mistaking Codes and Guides as manufacturer guides “*we use guides provided by the manufacturer*”, industry standards or workplace policy guides.

Another significant group of respondents noted “*Not useful at all. I don't even know what they are.*”

For those that did indicate an understanding and use of Codes and Guides, there was a preference for Guides as “*guides are easier to look at*”

### Small Businesses

“

*Not very useful because people can't be bothered to read them.*

*Not very useful. Too much information.*

*They are too long and too complicated*

”



## Q: What work health and safety issues keep you awake at night?



“

*The fact that I am responsible for the health and safety of so many people in so many variable situations. I do have to rely on competency and hope we have enough in place to control risk. The regulations place employers under enormous pressure.*

*Being stung by the regulator for things outside of our control.*

*Employees working on site alongside other businesses / trades that don't have good work practices.*

”

## Section 2: Psychosocial Hazards

This section was designed to enable the collection of data aligned with a key specified target area of the Australian Work Health and Safety (WHS) Strategy 2023–2033 - build the capability of PCBUs, regulators and workers to strengthen compliance with the duty to manage psychosocial risks at work.

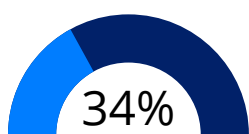
### Q: (Business leader) Medical diagnoses of a mental health condition

Based on feedback from our member network that poor mental health was increasingly mentioned by business leaders and managers themselves, this year we asked participants to indicate if - 'In the last 12 months have you been told by a doctor or a health professional that you have any of the following conditions?'

**30%** of all respondents had been told by a doctor or health professional that they had one of the following conditions:

- Anxiety: 19%
- Depression: 14%
- A stress related problem: 16%
- Any other mental health conditions: 3%

The most common condition **Owners** have been diagnosed with is **depression**, while **CEO/Executive Directors** are considerably more likely to have been diagnosed with a **stress related problem**.



of **small business** respondents were diagnosed with a mental health condition in the last 12 months.

This is **compared to 22%** in the 2022 Small Business and Mental Health [1] report and **21.5%** of Australians 16 – 85 in ABS data [2].

### Small business owners medically diagnosed with anxiety, depression and/or stress:



**23%**  
Anxiety

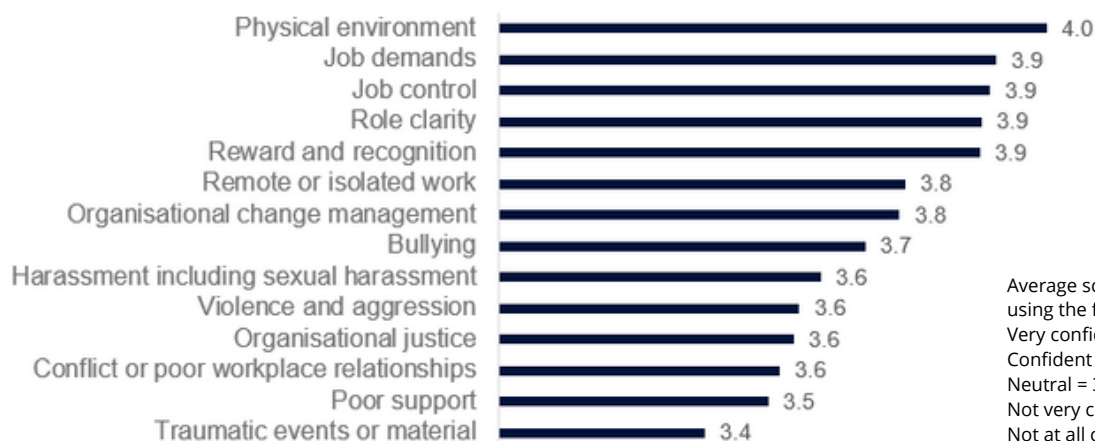


**17%**  
Depression



**15%**  
Stress-related

### Q: How confident are you, in identifying and managing the following psychosocial hazards?



Average score has been calculated using the following definitions;  
 Very confident = 5  
 Confident = 4  
 Neutral = 3  
 Not very confident = 2  
 Not at all confident = 1

[1] Commonwealth of Australia (2022). Small Business and Mental Health: Through the Pandemic.  
 [2] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020-2022), National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

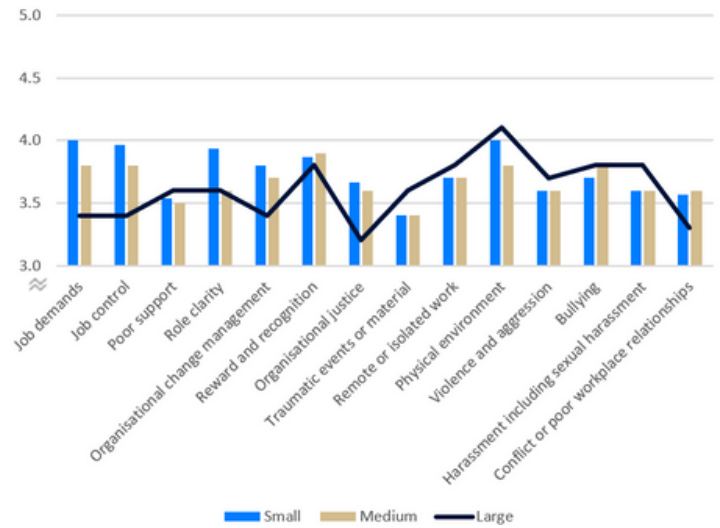
## Q: How confident are you, in identifying and managing the following psychosocial hazards?

Across all businesses, on average, confidence managing the physical environment, job demands and job control is highest, while many are less confident with managing traumatic events, poor support and conflict or poor relationships.

**CEO/Executive Directors** are often the **least confident** in managing psychosocial hazards

**Larger businesses** are **more likely to struggle** with **managing organisational justice, change management and conflict or poor workplace relationships** compared with smaller businesses.

**Small businesses** are more **confident** in managing **job demands, job control and role clarity** compared to medium and large organisations.



## Healthcare and social assistance

### Construction



- Top 3 most confident
1. Reward and recognition
  2. Job demands
  3. Job control

- Top 3 least confident
1. Conflict or poor workplace relationships
  2. Harassment including sexual harassment
  3. Traumatic events or material



- Top 3 most confident
1. Physical environment
  2. Reward and recognition
  3. Job control

- Top 3 least confident
1. Traumatic events or material
  2. Poor support
  3. Conflict or poor workplace relationships

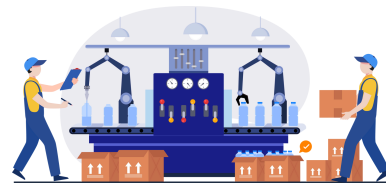


### Retail trade



- Top 3 most confident
1. Job demands
  2. Job control
  3. Reward and recognition

- Top 3 least confident
1. Violence and aggression
  2. Organisational justice
  3. Bullying



### Manufacturing

- Top 3 most confident
1. Job demands
  2. Job control
  3. Physical environment

- Top 3 least confident
1. Traumatic events or material
  2. Remote or isolated work
  3. Violence and aggression



### Professional/scientific and technical services



- Top 3 most confident
1. Physical environment
  2. Remote or isolated work
  3. Role clarity



- Top 3 least confident
1. Traumatic events or material
  2. Organisational justice
  3. Poor support



**Q: What systems does your business have in place, if any, to identify and manage psychosocial hazards and risks?**

**Large and medium business** respondents, with the exception of those in **mining**, tended to blend HR policies, WHS risk management and general wellbeing initiatives together:

**Large businesses:**

*We have systems, policies & documents in place for psychosocial hazards. Our organisation offers twice yearly massages, EAP, Health & Wellbeing Hub (online).*

*Respectful behaviours program launched with training at a boots on a ground level.*

*How to prevent psychological risks in the workplace procedure Psychosocial risk register.*

**Medium businesses:**

*We have a mental health policy and are actively engaged in R U OK? programs and literature.*

*Access to EAP, HR Management, policy.*

**Q: Are there any compliance issues or grey areas when trying to manage psychosocial risks in your business?**

**Large businesses:**

*Performance management discussions often turn into bullying and harassment claims.*

*Risk assessment is hard to do (costly, resource heavy, unknown process), with various proposed approaches from many different jurisdictions; many physical safety risk processes eg bowtie are difficult to apply to the psychosocial hazards due to interplay of hazards (its rarely just one)and the impact of individual factors and life events).*

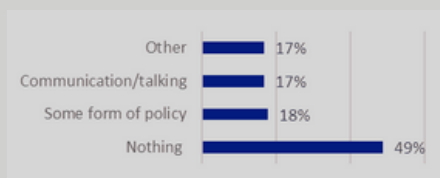
*Still remains confusion where WHS ends and HR/IR starts - has always been split, now WHS getting more involved in HR/IR matters, but HR/IR teams not stepping up, more hand over no longer our problem.*

**Medium businesses:**

*We are not trained professional psychologists so it is hard for us to determine if an employee has issues unless they bring it to our attention.*

*How to deal with psychosocial risks across both home and work. eg ability to deal with work demands while home life has significant stressors.*

**49%** of **small business** respondents indicated **no formal system** was in place in their business, with the **most common method** of identifying and managing psychosocial risk being through **'discussions and internal communication'**.



There is still a very **low-level awareness** of what psychosocial risks are within smaller businesses with a large proportion **confusing general poor mental health with psychosocial risk**.

**Q: Are there any compliance issues or grey areas when trying to manage psychosocial risks in your business?**

*Small businesses are created by people who are good at their trade or specialist skills. They are most often, not great at dealing with people's personal feelings.*

*We support anyone who is having mental difficulties.*

*Can't think of any and haven't had any psychosocial issues to date.*


*What is work related and what comes because of personal circumstances.*

*It's a combination of pressures that are hard to distinguish between.*

# Section 3: Chemical and Biological Hazards

This section aligns with the second key specified target area of the Australian Work Health and Safety (WHS) Strategy 2023–2033 - increasing the awareness of PCBUs about their duty to protect workers from exposure to harmful substances.

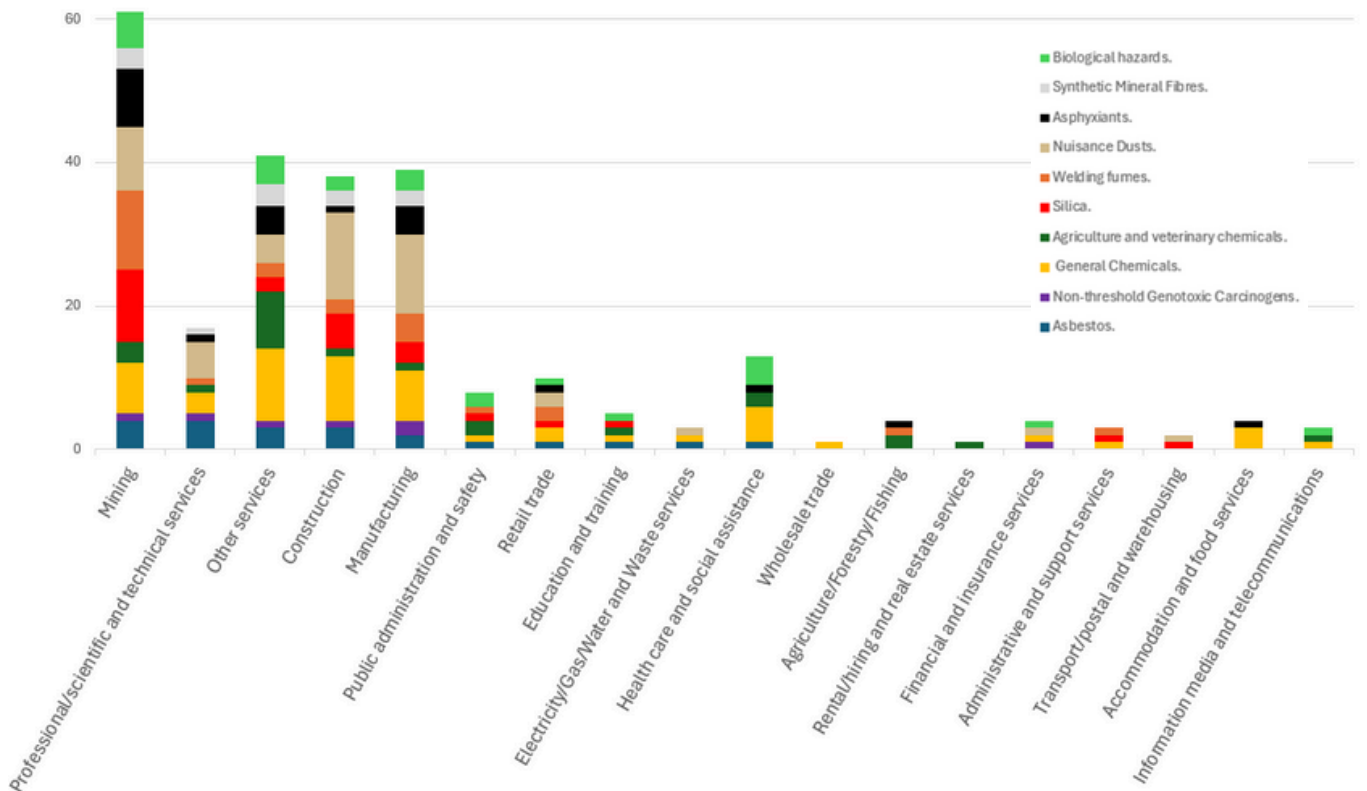
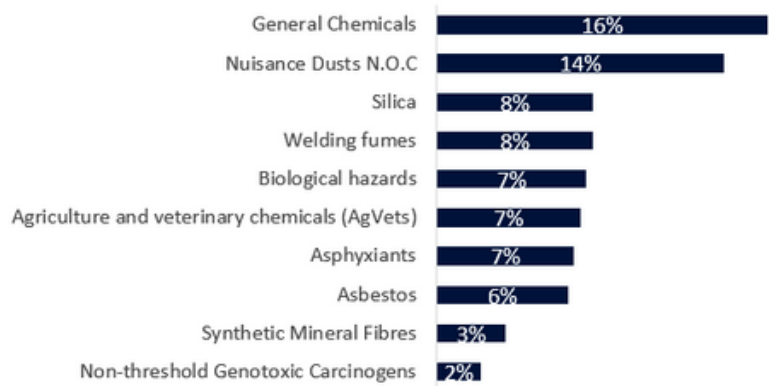
## Q: Do you manufacture or use *hazardous chemicals* in your workplace?

 21% Yes **Larger businesses** and those in **mining** are significantly more likely to manufacture or use hazardous chemicals in their workplace.

## Q: Are any of the following *hazardous chemicals* or *biological hazards* present at your workplace?

**1 in 3** (31%) had at least one of the hazardous chemicals or biological hazards present at their workplace. Most commonly **General chemicals** and **Nuisance Dusts**.

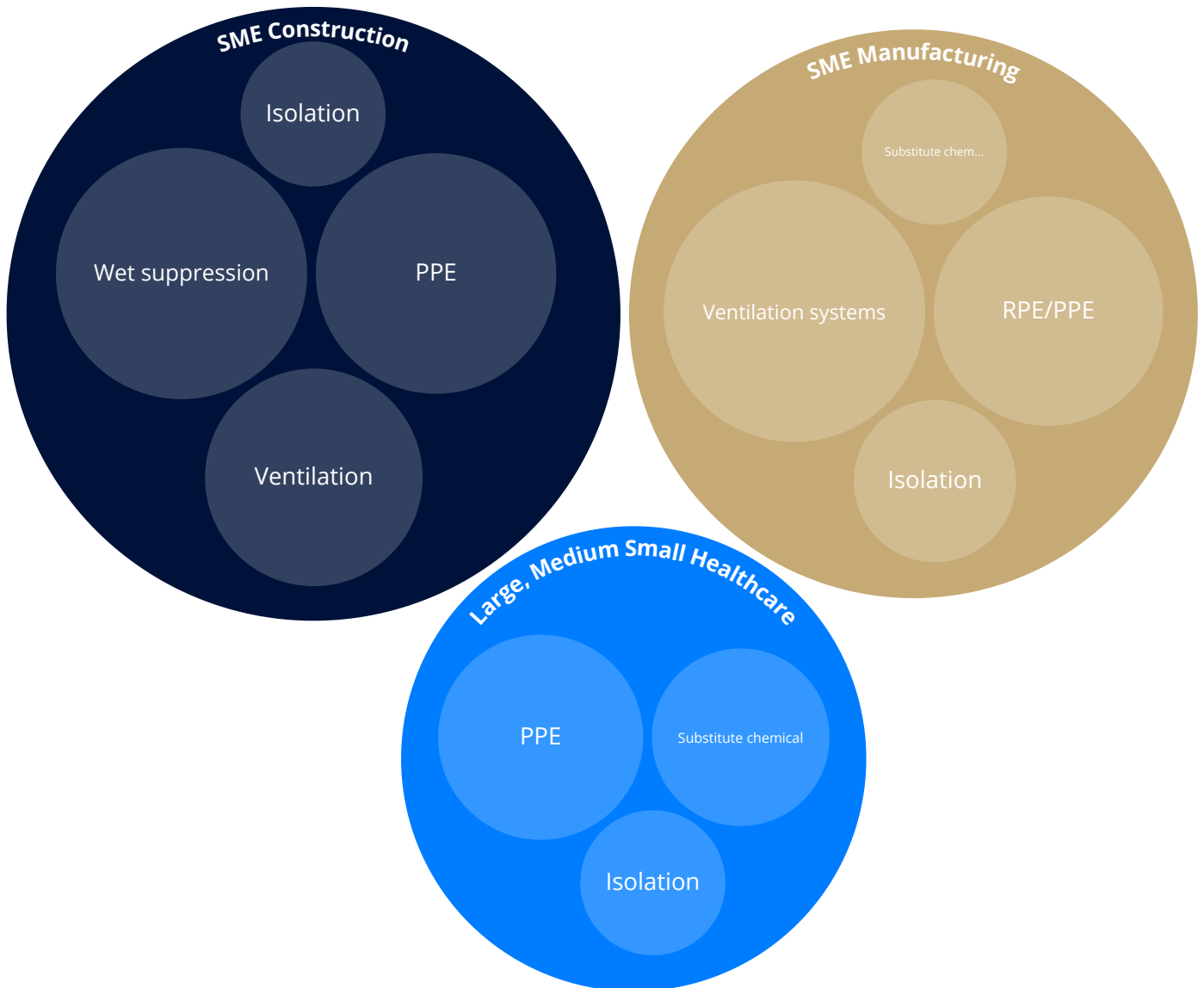
Businesses located in the **Northern Territory (71%)**, **Tasmania (56%)** and **South Australia (50%)** were more likely to have these in their workplace.



**Mining** had the highest count of chemicals and biological hazards followed by **Other Services**, **Manufacturing** and **Construction**.



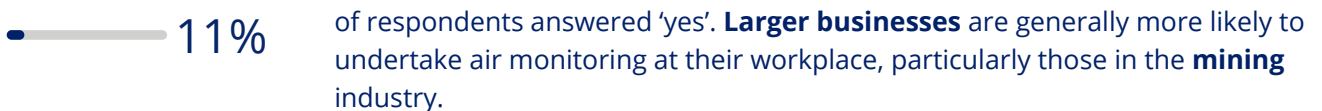
**Q: What controls does your workplace use for any chemicals (including silica dust) or biological hazards in your workplace?**



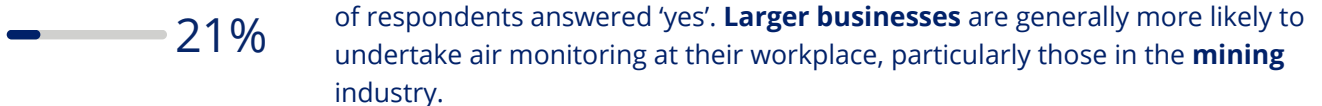
The chart above depicts the top three or four most frequent controls mentioned in each of the three sectors. The type and amount of controls used was fairly consistent across business sizes with the strongest influences on controls that of the industry they worked in and the particular hazards present.

## Air and Health Monitoring

**Q: Do you undertake/ or have you undertaken air monitoring at your workplace?**



**Q: Do you undertake/ or have you undertaken health monitoring at your workplace?**



**Silica** 64% of those who indicated they worked with silica conduct **air** monitoring.

**Welding fumes** 64% of those who indicated they worked with welding fumes conduct **air** monitoring.

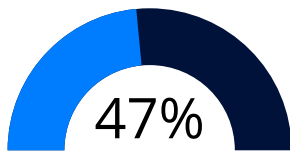
**General Chemicals** 30% of those who indicated they worked with general chemicals conduct **air** monitoring.

**Silica** 72% of those who indicated they worked with silica conduct **health** monitoring.

**Welding fumes** 68% of those who indicated they worked with welding fumes conduct **health** monitoring.

**General Chemicals** 35% of those who indicated they worked with AgVet chemicals conduct **health** monitoring.

All **large businesses** that indicated they had one or more of the hazardous chemicals in their workplaces conducted air monitoring and health monitoring.



of **medium sized businesses** conducted both air and health monitoring if they indicated they worked with one or more hazardous chemicals in their workplace.

For **medium sized businesses**, the main reasons for not conducting air or health monitoring were:



**Air**

*Open air ventilation is sufficient.*

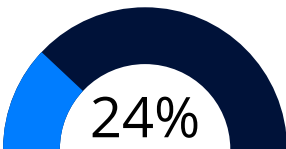
*We have extraction fans located throughout the premises so there is a constant flow of clean air.*

**Health**

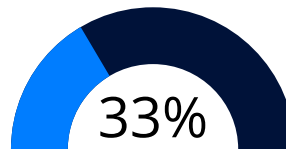
*Have not assessed it as required.  
Haven't seen the need to do it yet.*



In contrast, the majority of **small business** respondents indicated they **did not do air monitoring** and were either **unaware of any requirement** to do air monitoring or referenced a **lack of resources**.



of **small businesses** conducted **air monitoring** if working with one or more hazardous chemicals.



of **small businesses** conducted **health monitoring** if working with one or more hazardous chemicals.

The reasons provided as to why they did not undertake **air** monitoring included:



*It is all outside so not necessary – Micro construction company.*

*It would be the job of the principal builder not ours as subbies – Micro construction company.*

*Living on a farm in a remote area it wasn't a priority – Micro business in agriculture.*

*Not sure what that is – Small Professional business (pesticides/other chemicals).*

*Not my responsibility – Sole-trader in construction.*



The reasons provided as to why they did not undertake **health** monitoring included: cost, privacy, working outdoors, it is too complicated and not my responsibility.

Although these businesses indicated they did not conduct air monitoring, the majority **did use multiple controls**:



*Signage, PPE including masks and gloves, specified areas for storage and use – Micro business in agriculture.*

*We use substitution, isolation, and engineering controls like ventilation and wet suppression – Small construction business.*

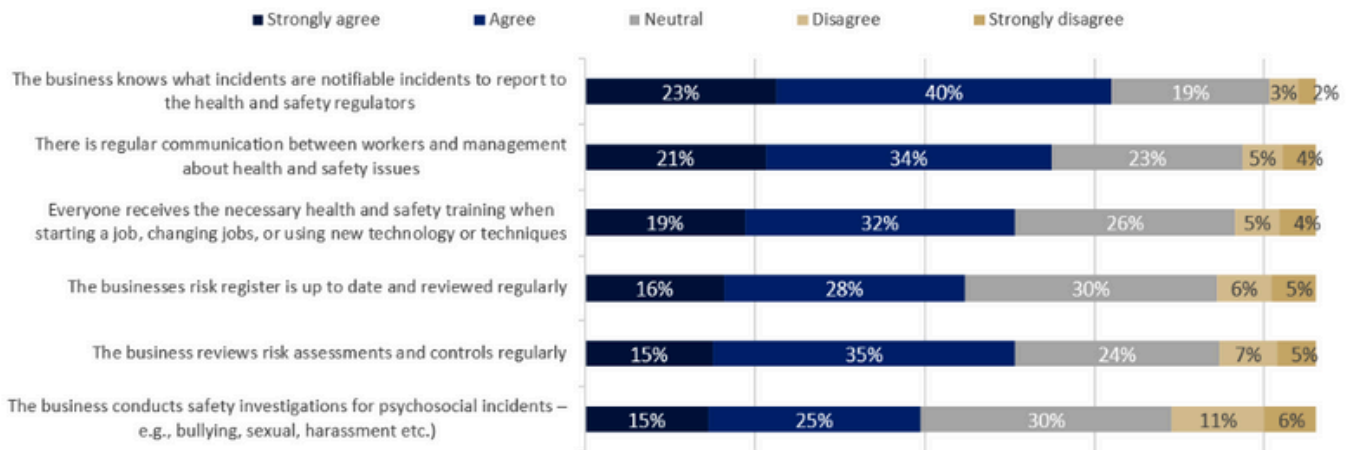
*We supply and use PPE such as dust masks, gloves etc. We have multiple dust extraction systems. What is more difficult than providing adequate control measures and PPE is getting staff to comply – Small Manufacturing business.*



# Section 4: General WHS Risk Management

The majority of businesses generally 'agreed' to knowing: *when to report notifiable incidents to health and safety regulators* and that there was *regular communication between workers and management about WHS issues*. Responses drifted more towards 'neutral' and 'disagree' however for: *keeping up to date risk registers, reviewing risk assessments and controls regularly and conducting safety investigations for psychosocial incidents*.

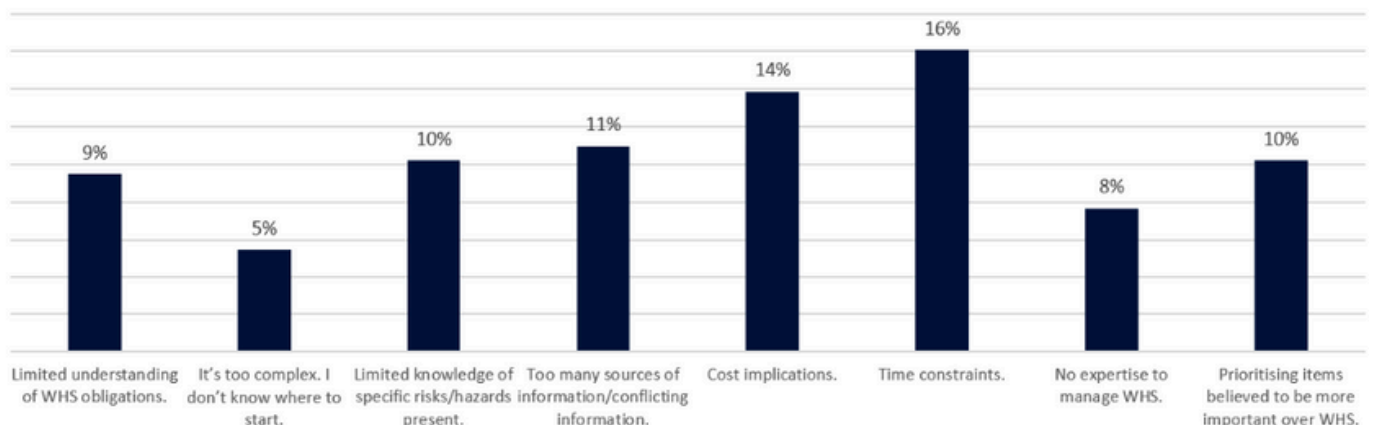
## 'Agree' ratings for WHS risk management practices



Unsurprisingly, **large businesses** scored **higher across all risk management practices except for** when providing necessary health and safety **training** for which medium businesses scored the highest.

When distinguishing between sole-trader, micro (1-4) and small businesses (5-19), **micro businesses** typically had **higher confidence compared to sole-trader and small businesses** in relation to risk management practices. The most significant differences in confidence were between sole-traders and all other business sizes.

## Q: What stands in the way of good WHS practice at your workplace?



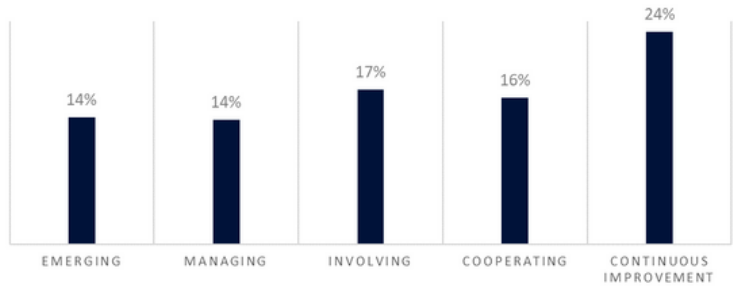
The **top three barriers** to good WHS practice were once again: **time constraints, cost implications** and **too many sources of information/conflicting information**. This year however there was a higher proportion that indicated I don't know (19%) and other (20%), with the majority of other indicating no barriers to good WHS practices at their workplace.

For **small businesses**, the top barrier was **time constraints** followed by **cost implications**.

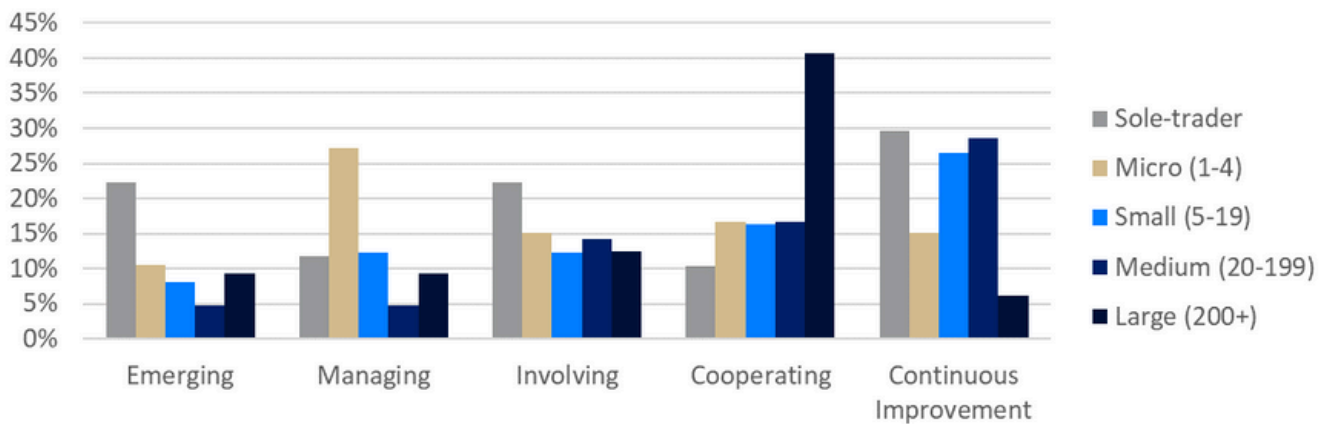
# Safety Culture

Safety culture is broadly understood as the shared and deeply held beliefs and behaviours people have regarding where and how WHS 'fits' for their business. The more mature the organisation's approach to WHS, the more likely management are to understand their WHS risk profile and to set appropriate expectations, and responses to, WHS priorities.

## Q: How would you rate your safety culture?



276 respondents answered this question with **most business** respondents indicating they were at the *continuous improvement* (24%) level of safety maturity. This year however, there were more businesses across the *emerging* and *managing* categories as compared to last year.



The majority of **large businesses** self-reported being at the *cooperating* stage. **Small businesses** were more likely to self-report at the *continuous improvement* stage however curiously, **micro businesses** were more likely to self-report at the *managing* stage with **sole-traders** split between *emerging*, *involving* and *continuous improvement*.

### The five stages of safety culture maturity

**Emerging:** Safety is defined in terms of technical and procedural solutions and compliance with regulations. Safety is not seen as a key business risk.

**Managing:** you have an average incident rate for your sector you compare to. Safety is a business risk and some effort is put into accident prevention. Safety is adherence to rules and regulation.

**Involving:** your incident rates are relatively low. The business understands that frontline employees are critical to good health and safety, if future improvements are going to be achieved. Safety is actively monitored.

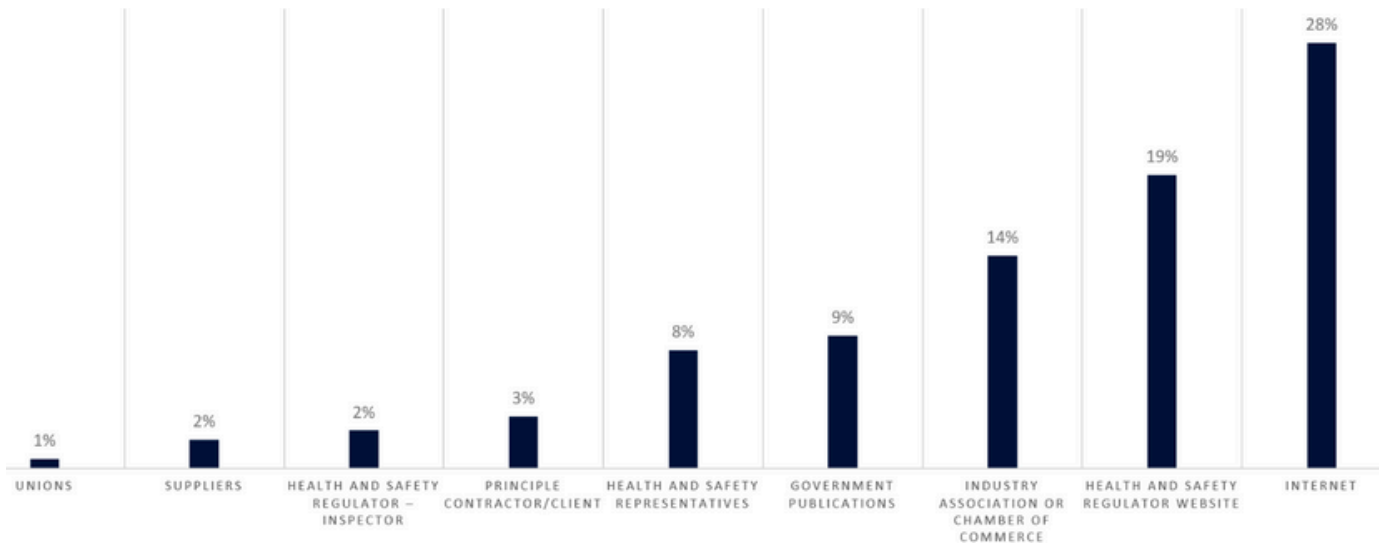
**Cooperating:** majority of staff in the organisation are convinced that health and safety is important. Significant effort made in proactive measures to prevent incidents. Safety is a shared responsibility. Healthy lifestyles are promoted.

**Continuous Improvement:** prevention of injuries or harm to employees is a core company value. Sustained period (years) without a recordable incident but no feeling of complacency. Actively monitors performance and all workers share belief that health and safety is critical to their job and a priority for the business. Healthy lifestyles are promoted.

**Professional/scientific and technical services** had the highest self-report scores with 25% indicating at *continuous improvement* stage, **Healthcare and social assistance** had more at the *involving* stage along with **manufacturing** and **construction** was a fairly even spread across all stages.

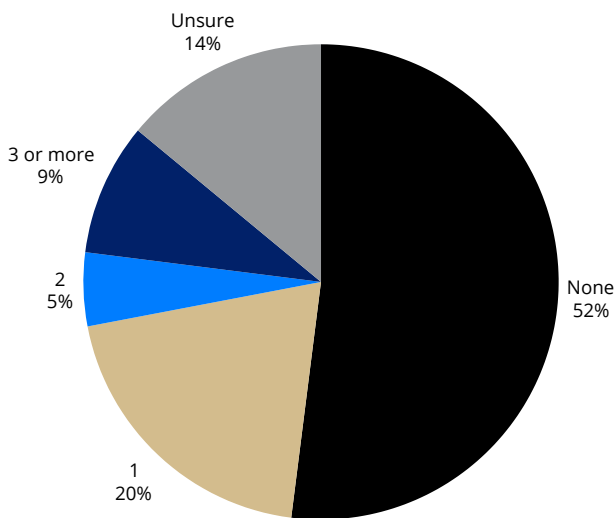
“ More prescription is not helpful for mature business, they should continue to apply a risk based approach, fully embed their controls and be held accountable if required. For less mature businesses, provide the specific tools they need and stop sheep dipping everyone! ”

**Q: Where does your main source of Work Health & Safety information come from?**



**Sole-traders** are significantly more likely to turn to the *Internet* (47%) for WHS information, while **larger organisations** are more likely to rely on *health and safety representatives* (19%). **Small businesses** were most likely to turn to an *industry association or Chamber of Commerce* (29%). **Health care and social assistance** businesses are significantly more likely to turn to *Health and Safety Regulator websites* for information vs. businesses in other industries.

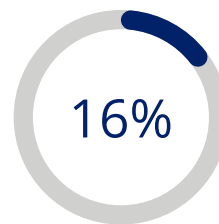
**Q: How many elected Health and Safety Representative(s) do you have in your workplace?**



of businesses surveyed indicated they do not have a HSR in their workplace

**Mining** and **Health care** were more likely to have *three or more HSRs* and **Education and Training** were more likely than other industries, after mining, to *have more than one HSR*.

**Q: Have you had a work health & safety inspector attend your workplace in the last five years?**



of business survey respondents reported an inspector attending their workplace in the last five years

**Medium** (33%) and **large** (47%) organisations were significantly more likely to have reported a visit from a WHS inspector than **small businesses** (11%).

Out of those workplaces visited, the top 3 industries were – **Mining** (67%), **Manufacturing** (26%) and **Construction** (21%),

**Q: Has a union representative used a right of entry permit to gain access to your workplace in the last 5 years?**



of respondents reported a union representative using a right of entry permit to gain access to their workplace over the last 5 years

Respondents from **larger** organisations (22%) were significantly **more likely** to note having a **union representative use a right of entry** permit to gain access to their workplace, as were those who worked in **QLD based organisations** or those in **mining** or **manufacturing**.

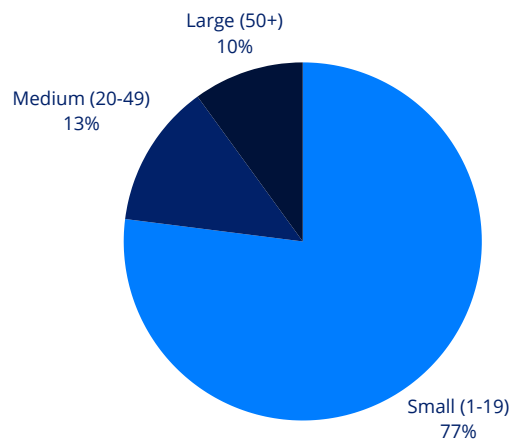
# Methodology and Demographics

ACCI circulated the survey through our member network and on social media, inviting feedback from business owners, executives and senior management. Additional responses were obtained via Quantum Market Research (an independent market research company), who ran the survey on an online panel to obtain additional responses. Respondents represent the views of small, medium and large businesses, from all Australian states and territories.

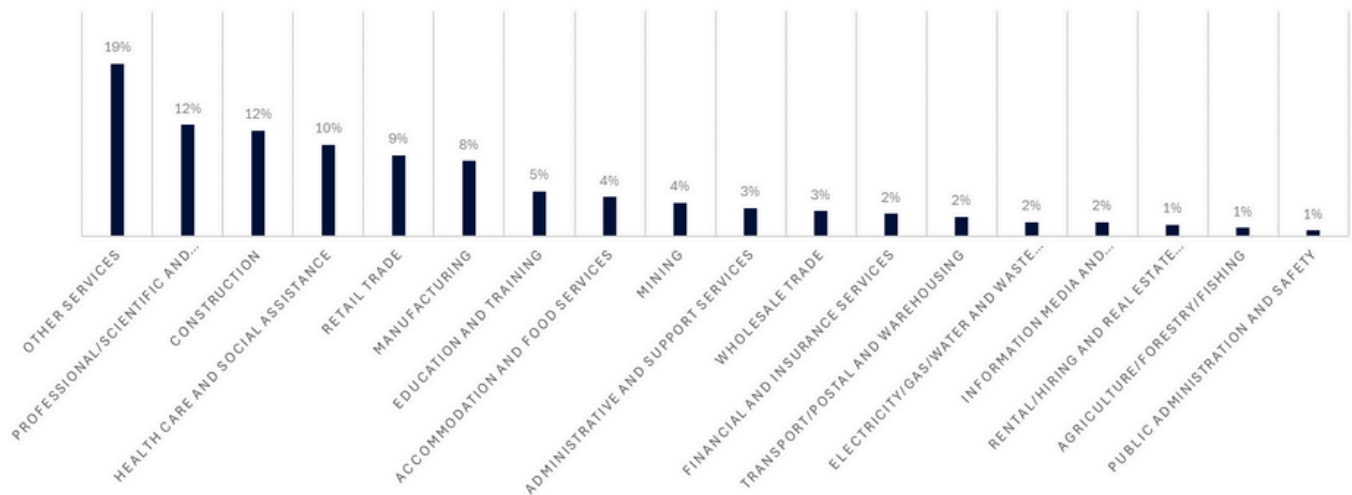
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The survey was in field from 21st August to 18th September 2024.

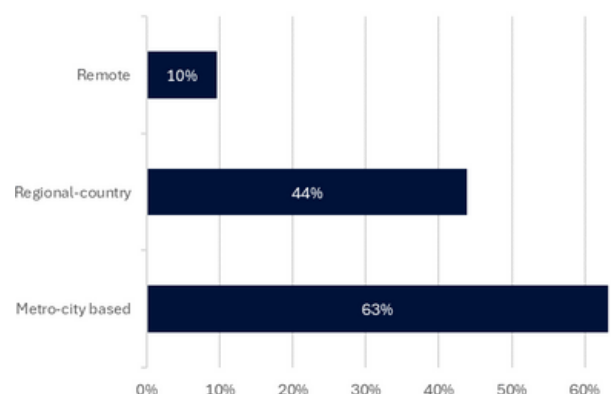
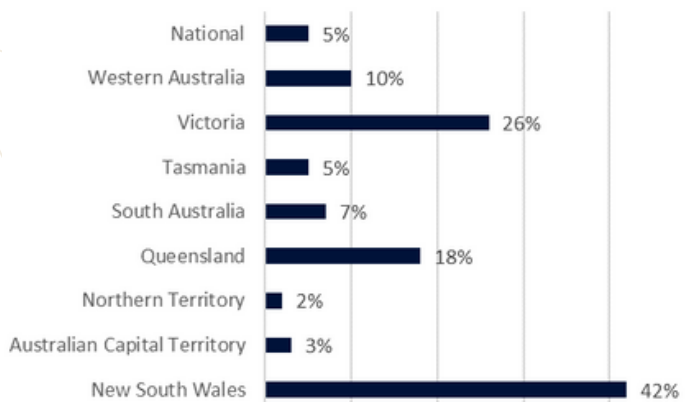
## Company size by number of employees



## Industry Sectors

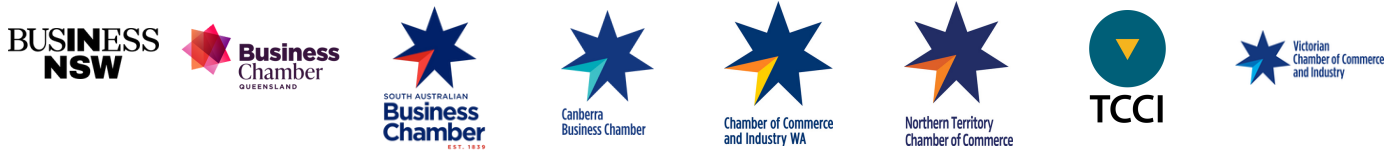


## Geographical representation



# ACCI Members

## State and Territory Chambers



## Industry Associations



