

Report: Survey of Australian Council HR leaders – January 2021



TAVERNER
RESEARCH

Contents

Introduction & methodology	13
Survey participants	14
Research findings	17
Questionnaire	26

Introduction and methodology

Introduction

In late 2020, HRhub (a collaboration of CouncilJobs, Blackadder Associates and Leonards Advertising) commissioned Taverner Research to conduct a short online survey of Australian Council HR professionals.

The survey was designed to understand recruitment trends and challenges for Australian councils, and to provide useful strategic insights for council HR leaders. It will also provide baseline data for future benchmarking research,

The HRhub collaborators are all extensively experienced with the market for council recruitment & desired to see whether their theories on the current trends & challenges were correct.

Taverner Research - and its subsidiaries Jetty and IRIS Research - are market-leaders in local government research, and have worked on previous studies with HRhub partners. We were hence delighted to be invited to assist HRhub on this latest project.

Methodology

The survey questionnaire was designed collaboratively between HR Hub and Taverner Research, designed to achieve the project objectives while keeping average completion time below 10 minutes. See Appendix 1 for final questionnaire.

The survey was sent to 523 Councils in early December 2020, with a series of reminders sent through to completion deadline on February 1st 2021. In all 83 Councils took part in this inaugural survey, for a participation rate of 16%.

Random sampling error for a sample size of n=83 councils is +/- 9.9%. (This effectively means that if we were to conduct the same survey 20 times with different samples, results should be representative of all Councils to within +/- 9.9% in 19 of those 20 surveys.) Due to the relatively small sample size, caution should be taken in extrapolating results to all Australian councils.

Survey participants

There was a good spread of respondents by state, with one-third from NSW and one in five from Victoria. All states (and the NT) were represented. Above and below, Blue are Survey participants & green are all LGA's.

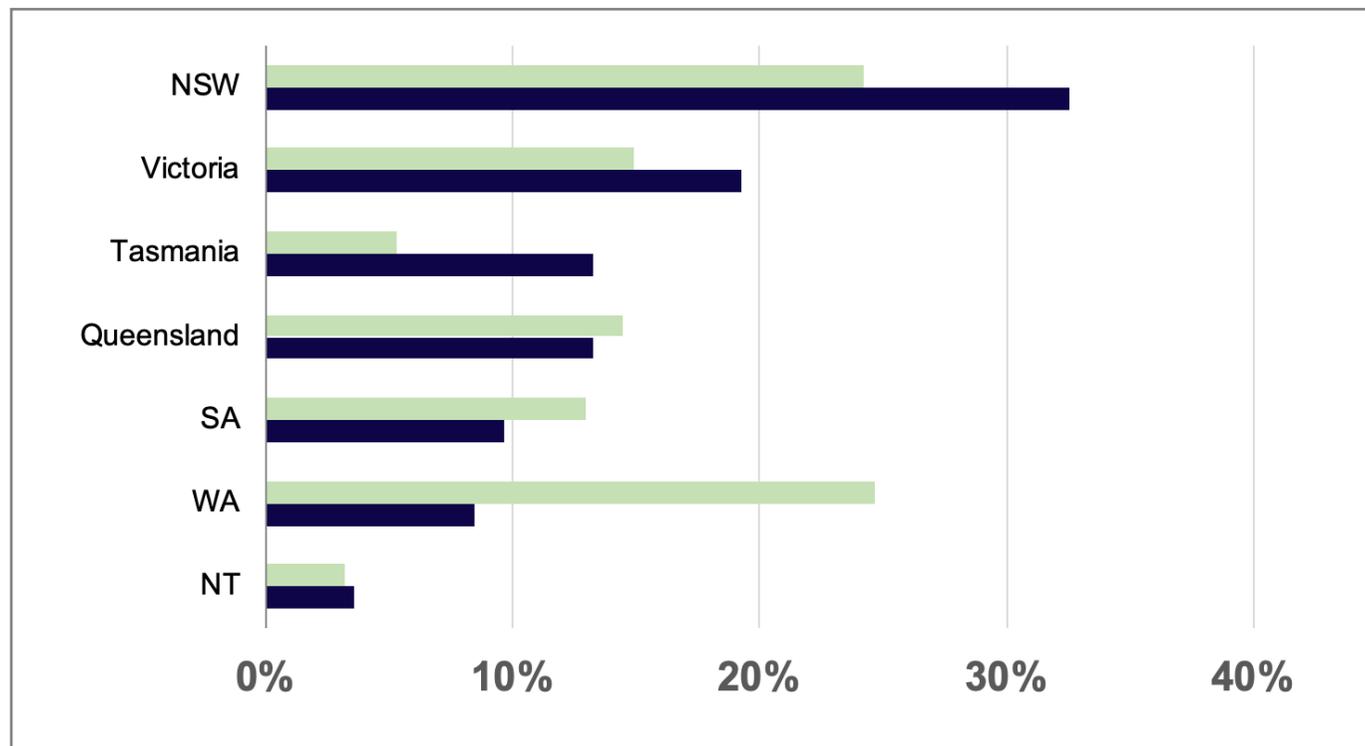


Figure 1: State of respondents

Survey participants

There was also a good spread by size of Council.

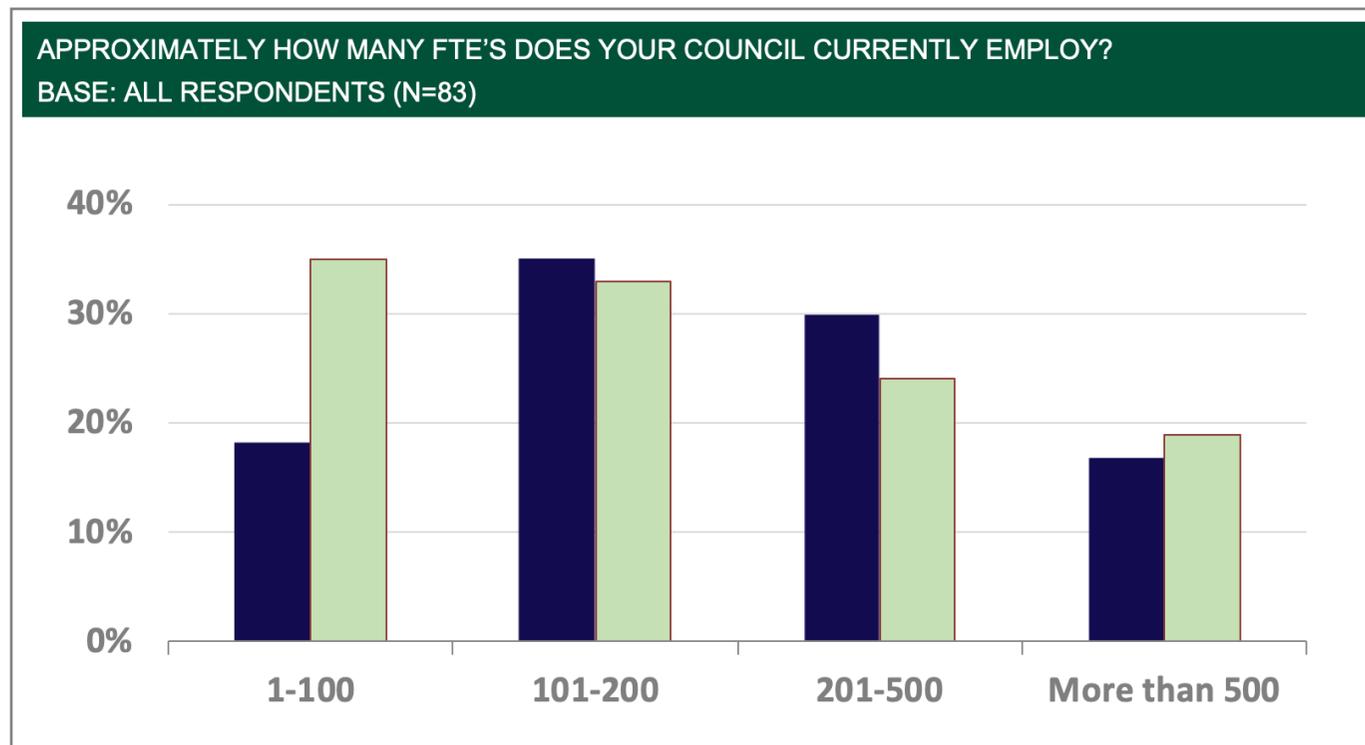


Figure 2: Size of Council (employees)

Survey participants

Just over half the Councils represented were rurally-based, with the remainder relatively evenly spread between metropolitan and regional city Councils.

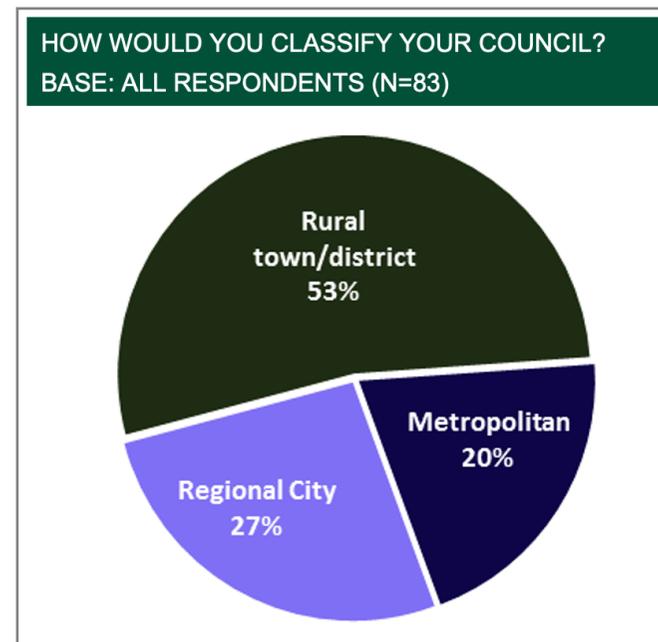


Figure 3: Type of Council

Research findings

The survey commenced with respondents asked to identify areas where they were currently experiencing skill shortages. The results are shown in Figure 4, below:

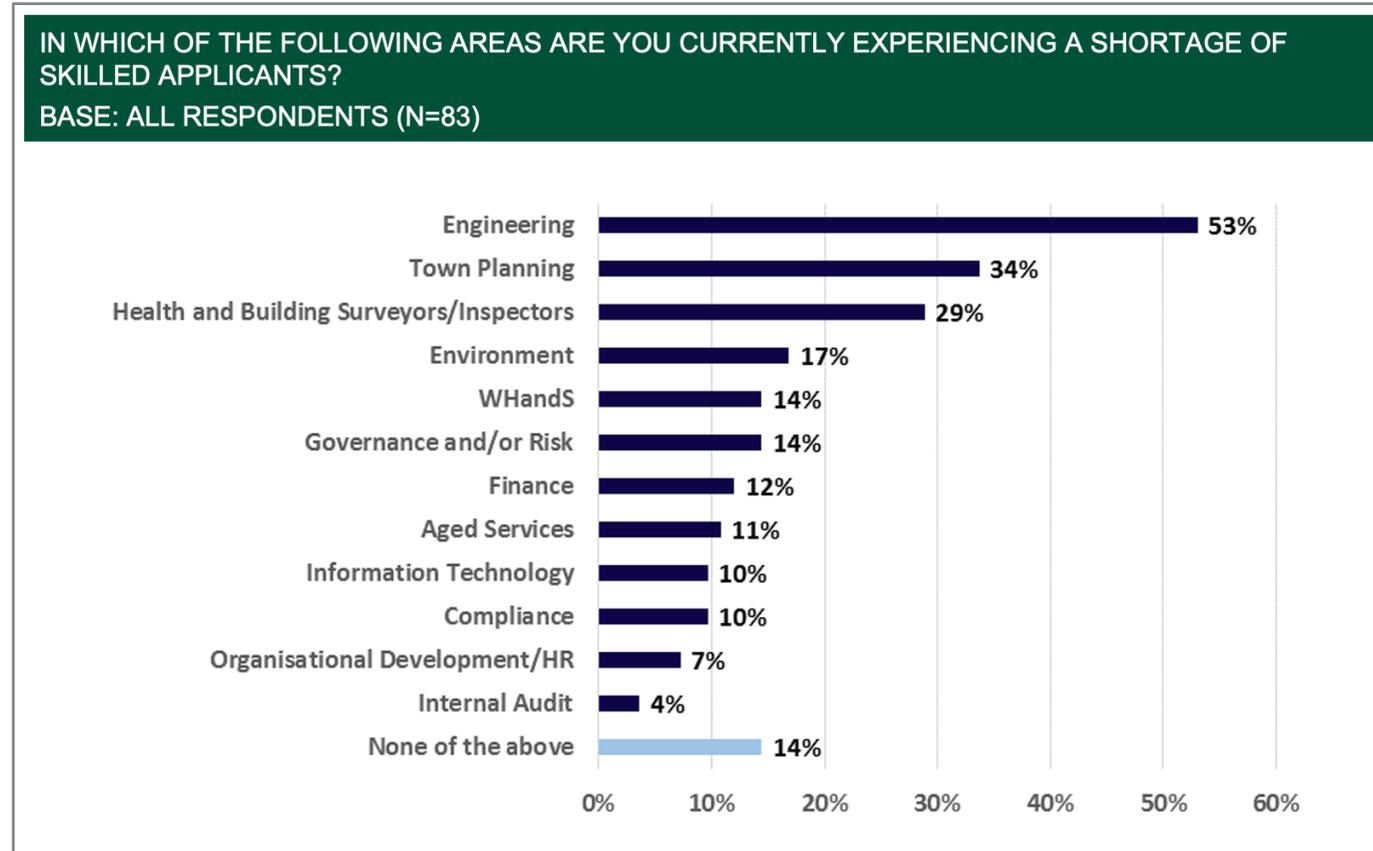


Figure 4: Summary of skill shortages

Research findings

Engineers were far and away the skillset in shortest supply – and this was even more pronounced in rural councils (at 61%). This shortage appeared particularly acute in NSW, Queensland and SA (mentioned by two-thirds-plus of respondents in each of those states.). Two-thirds of smaller councils (100-200 FTEs) noted a shortage of engineering staff.

While town planning was the second most noted area of shortage, this again varied from 59% of metropolitan councils down to 25% of rural LGAs. In this case larger councils appeared to be worst affected, with 62% of those employing more than 500 FTEs claiming a shortage.

The other skill to show a marked difference between urban and regional councils was environment: noted as a shortage by 47% of metro councils but only 11% of those in rural areas.

Areas of lowest skill shortage included IT, compliance, human resources, and internal audit – all 10% or lower.

One-third of Councils agreed they also had other shortage areas. Of these, multiple mentions were made of asset and property managers, labourers, plant operators, child care nurses, and pool staff/lifeguards.

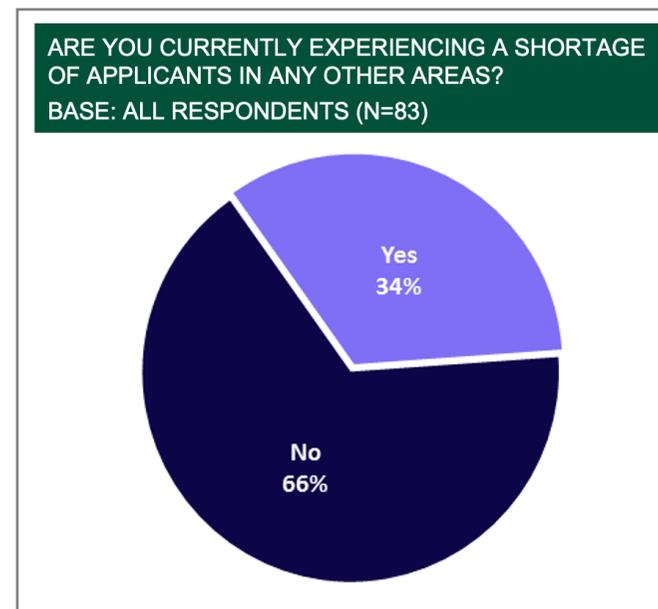


Figure 5: Other shortages?

Research findings

Two-thirds of respondents agreed that working for Council has become more attractive than it was 12 months ago (20% “a lot” and 48% “a little”). This was consistent across all states except WA (at 29%) and by type of Council. Larger councils were most likely to agree with this statement (at 92% “yes”).

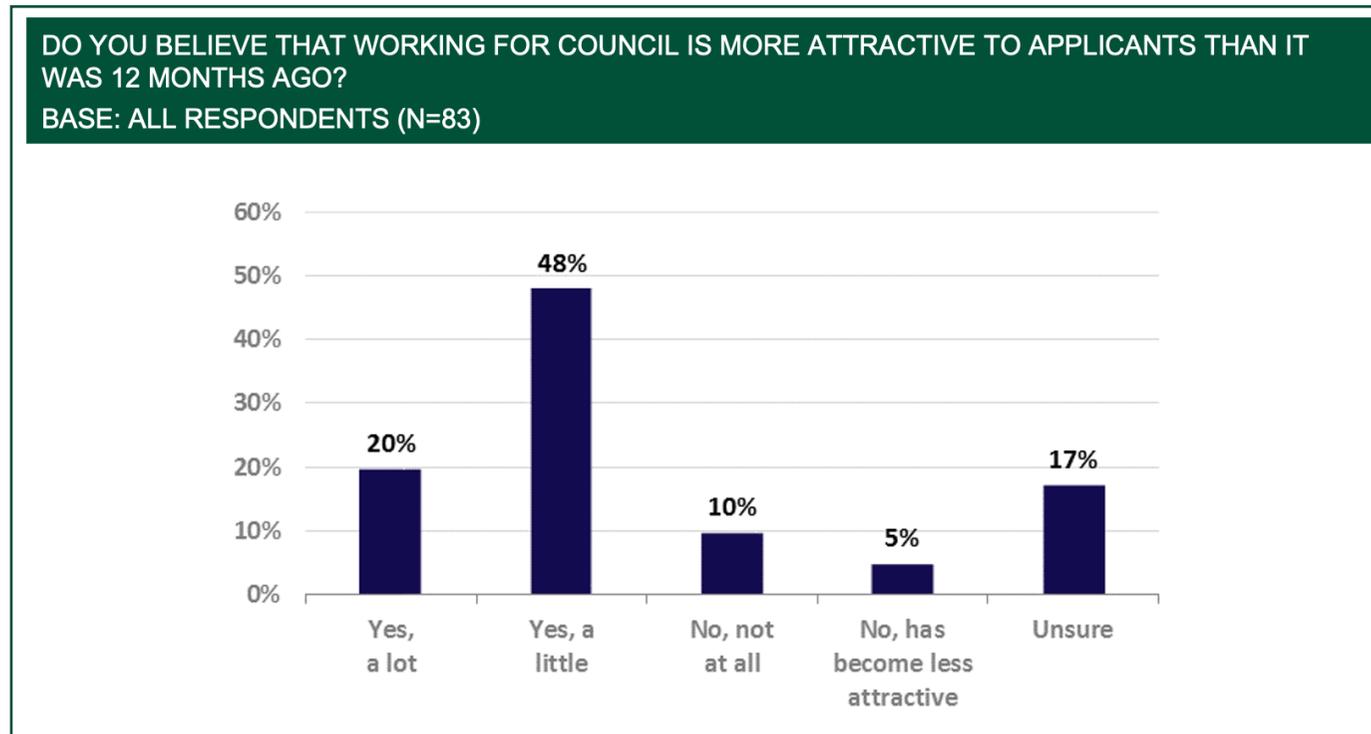


Figure 6: Attractiveness of working for Council

Research findings

There were three dominant themes behind this perceived trend. Number one (by a long margin) was increased job security:

- “I think there may be the perception of job security in the Local Government sector given the unsettling times faced globally in 2020.”
- “Secure employment through local government seems to be attractive in the COVID/post COVID world.”
- “Greater emphasis on security of council employment to private sector underlined during COVID-19 crisis.”

Job stability and greater flexibility were also popular choices :

- “We are a stable employer and continued to find work for even our casuals during the COVID 19 restrictions.”
- “All employees kept their positions during the 2020 year of COVID. Some employees were deployed to other areas of council but all remained gainfully employed.”
- “More flexible work environment. Increase in project work.”

A number of respondents also believed councils are seen as more dynamic organisations than in the past .

Only one in five respondents agreed that good applicants are prepared to work for less than they were 12 months ago. (However this included 40% of those based in Victoria, and 62% of Councils employing more than 500 FTEs.)

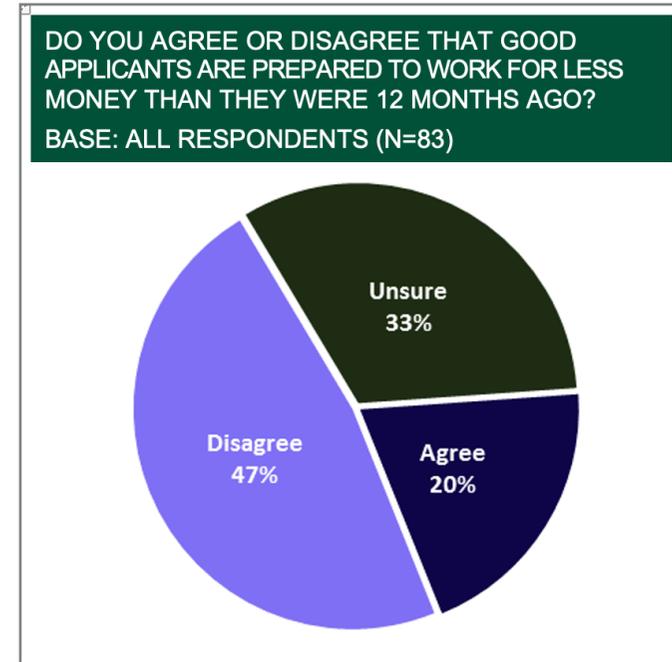


Figure 7: Changes in salary expectations

Research findings

Almost half of the managers agreeing that good applicants are prepared to work for less than they were 12 months ago believed this also applied to senior managerial roles. (However due to the small sample size for this question of n=16, results should be treated with extreme caution.)

Respondents were next asked to rank their level of agreement/disagreement with ten statements relating to applicants and employment trends. The results are shown in Figure 9, next page, with “strongly agree” in dark blue and “agree” in sky blue.

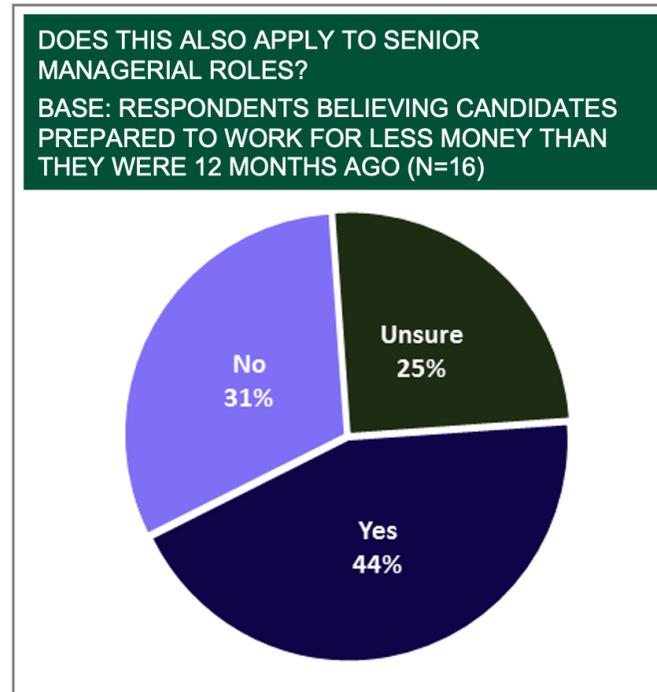


Figure 8: Changes in salary expectations for senior managers

Research findings

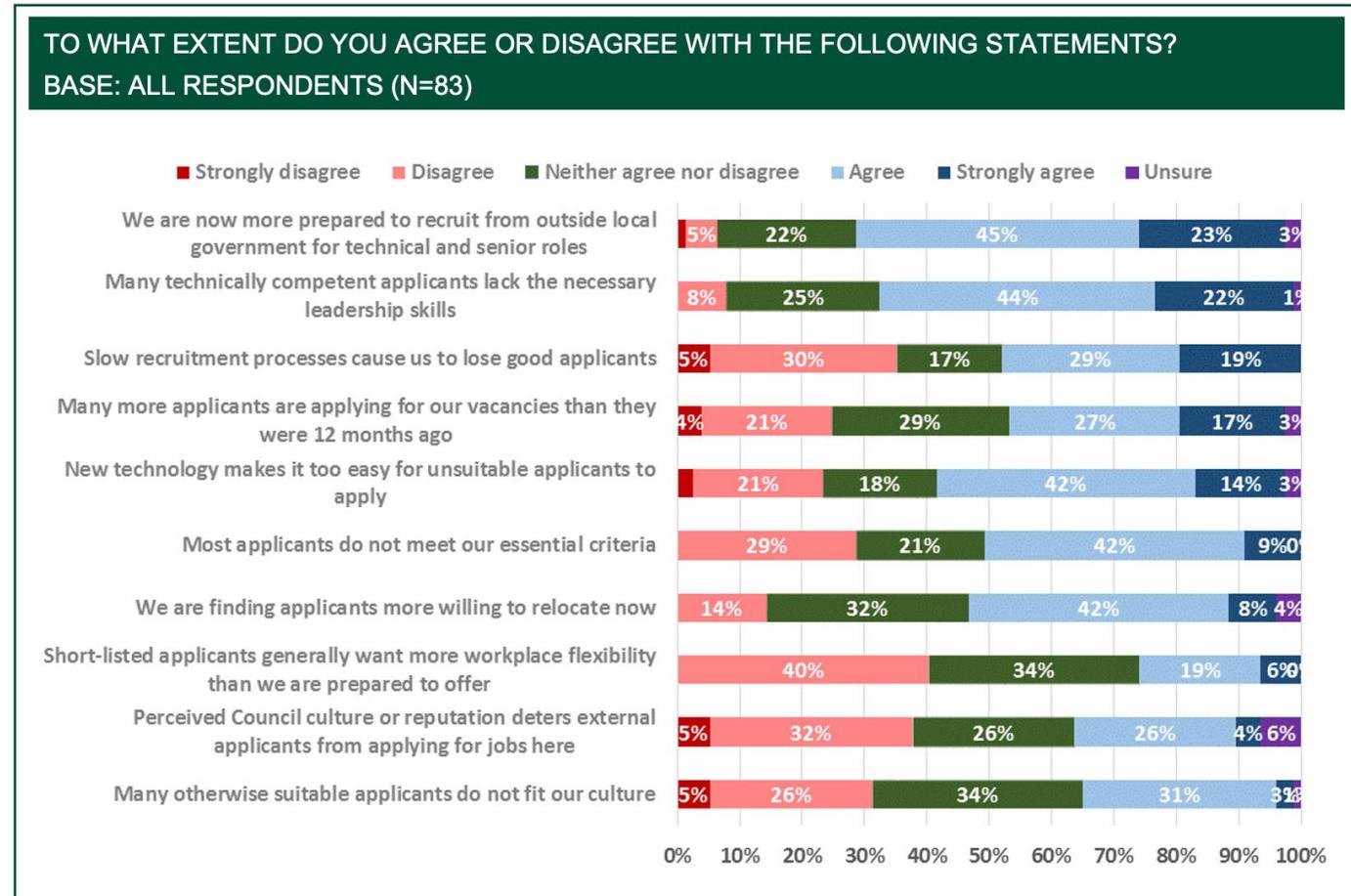


Figure 9: Agree/disagree statements

This indicates strongest agreement came with the statements “We are now more prepared to recruit from outside local government for technical and senior roles” (68% agree), “Many technically competent applicants lack the necessary leadership skills” (66%), and “new technology makes it too easy for unsuitable applicants to apply” (56%).

Research findings

Agreement was lowest with regard to the statements “Short-listed applicants generally want more workplace flexibility than we are prepared to offer” (25% agreement), “Perceived Council culture or reputation deters external applicants from applying here” (30%) and “Many otherwise suitable applicants do not fit our culture” (34%).

Across the board, results were generally consistent between location and type and size of Council, see Table 1, below.

Statement	Total	Q9 Where is your Council located?							Q11 Type of Council		
		NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	Metro	Regional City	Rural + Remote
Many otherwise suitable applicants do not fit our culture	3.00	3.08	3.07	2.78	3.13	3.00	3.00	2.33	3.13	3.00	2.95
Many technically competent applicants lack the necessary leadership skills	3.82	3.96	3.73	3.67	4.13	4.00	3.27	4.33	3.94	3.95	3.70
Many more applicants are applying for our vacancies than they were 12 months ago	3.33	3.54	3.86	3.44	3.13	2.20	2.90	2.67	3.88	3.24	3.16
Most applicants do not meet our essential criteria	3.31	3.38	2.87	3.00	3.63	3.40	3.55	4.00	3.25	3.48	3.25
We are finding applicants more willing to relocate now	3.45	3.28	3.77	3.33	3.25	2.60	3.91	4.00	3.40	3.57	3.39
Short-listed applicants generally want more workplace flexibility than we are prepared to offer	2.92	2.92	2.40	3.56	3.50	2.60	2.91	2.67	2.81	3.14	2.85
Slow recruitment processes cause us to lose good applicants	3.27	3.42	3.80	3.56	3.00	3.20	2.45	2.33	3.50	3.33	3.15
New technology makes it too easy for unsuitable applicants to apply	3.45	3.50	3.40	3.67	3.71	3.60	3.30	2.33	3.33	3.00	3.74
Perceived Council culture or reputation deters external applicants from applying for jobs here	2.90	3.00	2.50	3.33	2.63	3.80	2.90	2.00	2.88	2.76	3.00
We are now more prepared to recruit from outside local government for technical and senior roles	3.87	3.96	3.93	3.89	3.88	3.20	4.00	3.33	4.00	3.90	3.79

Table 1: Agreement statements by state and type of Council

Research findings

Councils were invited to add examples or anecdotes to their scores. Among the more interesting or insightful comments:

“Rural living impacts ability to attract candidates; additionally people relocating typically stay employed less long than local candidates. However we need the external skills/ knowledge and qualifications which comes largely outside of the community.” 

“While prepared (from necessity) to recruit from outside local government this is to councils’ detriment - as a complete lack of understanding of Local Government regulations in HR creates significant rework and error correction for bad (non-compliant) decision making.” 

“I think poor screening processes makes it too easy for unsuitable applicants to apply.” 

“Re flexibility, we are intending to move to a blended model workforce so we see a greater likelihood that people can live much further away, and not need to relocate for some roles, traditionally office-based.” 

“Although diversity is good, there are far too many under skilled applicants being placed in vital roles (particularly in remote/regional locations), such as finance and engineering. They tend to have no idea how small councils work, waste a load of resources and make less than average decisions leaving the council to pick up their mess years down the track. They seem to come in without skills or knowledge for a quick dollar and make very unethical/unreasonable decisions those small councils have to remedy down the track wasting precious resources.” 

“Agree slow recruitment loses great candidates, but our process is very efficient combatting this.” 

Research findings

Meanwhile over two-thirds agreed that there was at least some truth to the statement “We now have little difficulty attracting suitable applicants for our vacancies”. However this hides a stark difference between metropolitan councils (94% saying true to “some roles” or “across the board”) against 52% of rural and remote councils (with regional city councils roughly in the middle). Likewise, some 64% of those councils with less than 100 FTEs said this statement was untrue.

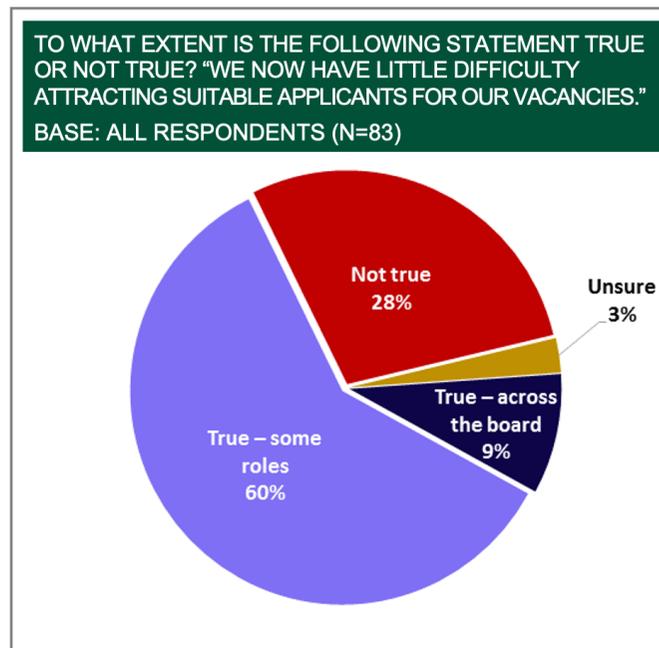


Figure 10: ????

Questionnaire

This short (5-7 minute) survey, sponsored by HRhub*, has been designed to help Council HR leaders understand recruitment trends and challenges in 2021 and beyond. Its success depends on the involvement of all Council HR leaders across Australia, so your participation will be very much appreciated.

While responses will be anonymous, all those completing a survey have the option to receive the final report. If you wish, you will also go into the draw to win one of 100 free job placements (valued at \$270 each), courtesy of CouncilJobs.

* HRhub is a collaboration of three leading Australian Council recruitment providers: Blackadder Associates, CouncilJobs and Leonards Advertising.

Q	Question type	Question	Answer options
1	Prompted	In which of the following areas are you currently experiencing a shortage of skilled applicants? (Please tick any that apply or None of the Above) Engineering Town Planning Health and Building Surveyors/Inspectors Finance Governance and/or Risk Environment WH and S Internal Audit Compliance Aged Services Information Technology Organisational Development/Human Resources	Tick boxes
2	Prompted	Are you currently experiencing a shortage of applicants in any other areas?	No Yes (Please specify)
3	Prompted	Do you believe that working for Council is more attractive to applicants than it was 12 months ago?	Yes, a lot Yes, a little No, not at all No, has become less attractive Unsure

Questionnaire

Q	Question type	Question	Answer options
4	Unprompted	(Optional) Can you expand or provide any examples on this issue?	Open answer
5	Prompted	Do you agree or disagree that good applicants are prepared to work for less money than they were 12 months ago?	Agree Disagree Unsure
6	Prompted	(If Q5 = agree) Does this also apply to senior managerial roles?	Yes No Unsure
7	Prompted – Rotate order	<p>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</p> <p>Many otherwise suitable applicants do not fit our culture</p> <p>Many technically competent applicants lack the necessary leadership skills</p> <p>Many more applicants are applying for our vacancies than they were 12 months ago</p> <p>Most applicants do not meet our essential criteria</p> <p>We are finding applicants more willing to relocate now</p> <p>Short-listed applicants generally want more workplace flexibility than we are prepared to offer</p> <p>Slow recruitment processes cause us to lose good applicants</p> <p>New technology makes it too easy for unsuitable applicants to apply</p> <p>Perceived Council culture or reputation deters external applicants from applying for jobs here</p> <p>We are now more prepared to recruit from outside local government for technical and senior roles</p>	Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree Unsure

Questionnaire

Q	Question type	Question	Answer options
7a	Unprompted	(Optional) Feel free to add any comments or anecdotes to explain any of your answers to the previous question.	Open ended
8	Prompted	To what extent is the following statement true or not true? "We now have little difficulty attracting suitable applicants for our vacancies."	True – across the board True – some roles Not true Unsure
9	Prompted	Where is your Council located?	NSW Victoria Queensland SA WA Tasmania NT
10	Prompted	Approximately how many FTE staff does your Council currently employ?	1-100 101-200 201-500 More than 500
11	Prompted	How would you class your LGA?	Metropolitan Regional City Rural town/district Remote village/community
12	Prompted	And finally, how long have you been working in local government	Three years or less 4-6 years 7-10 years More than 10 years

Questionnaire

Q	Question type	Question	Answer options
13	Prompted	<p>If you would like to receive the final report, and go into the prize draw*, please provide your name and email address. (Note this information will be separated from your other answers prior to any data being analysed, to protect the confidentiality of your responses.)</p> <p>* Prizes comprise 100 complimentary ad placements with CouncilJobs, valued at \$270 each.</p>	<p>Tick box:</p> <p>Name</p> <p>Email address</p> <p>Prefer not to enter draw</p>

Thanks so much, that's the end of the survey. HRhub greatly appreciates your feedback.