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# Economy on the chopping block

**Paul  
Nicolaou**



**A** Sydney butcher's failed attempt to fill a \$130,000 job vacancy – locally or internationally – was a cruel cut, but also far from isolated.

Business owners across Sydney would have been nodding their heads in familiar "been there done that" resignation.

Tradies have become an all too rare species and it's having a big impact on our economy.

The shortage is a warning sign. A city built on skilled trades, from plumbers and electricians to butchers and builders, is gasping for workers.

This crisis has been building for years, with employers facing wage increases, higher superannuation and escalating energy and insurance charges.

Add to the mix a skills shortage and you reach a point where even six-figure salaries can't attract applicants.

The system is broken. When too few workers are in the toolshed, projects stall, costs blow out and business confidence suffers.

As my colleague, Business NSW chief executive Daniel Hunter, observed: "Businesses are crying out for tradies, often advertising roles multiple times with little to no success.

"It's a pattern that cuts across industries and suburbs. Whether you're in Parramatta, Penrith or the Northern Beaches, the shortage is biting hard."

Three things must happen – train more young people, support older tradies to return and streamline skilled migration.

Let's stop undervaluing the trades as a second-tier option to university. Trades are essential, well-paying and future-proof careers.

Stronger incentives, clearer education pathways and industry partnerships to make apprenticeships more accessible and attractive are needed.

Welcome back older tradies who left prematurely due to injury, family commitments or a lack of flexibility.

Incentivise their return, remove age-related barriers and modernise work environments to better suit their needs.

Trades should be prioritised and recognition of qualifications streamlined so skilled migrants can hit the ground running.

So, if we want to build the homes, infrastructure and services of tomorrow, we need skilled hands today. Let's not leave our future half-built.

**Paul Nicolaou is executive director of Business Sydney**