

## Why FIFO expats are the least of our COVID worries

In the midst of Perth's latest lockdown, Western Australian premier Mark McGowan took aim at overseas FIFO workers, claiming that those going overseas should be "staying home" as "we have lots of opportunities for work for those people here.

"They basically go up to Indonesia, catch COVID, bring it back, go into a hotel, displace someone else and then potentially spread it," he said, referring to a specific case in Brisbane.

"It just strikes me as odd that lots of people are going overseas for work in the middle of a pandemic to pandemic-ridden countries while we have skills shortages here in Western Australia," he said.

Well, Premier, let me explain a couple of things that might make the situation many of these overseas FIFO workers and themselves in seem a little more straightforward.

Firstly, these people are travelling overseas for work because the roles available to them in overseas mine sites simply are not always available in Western Australia.

As an executive recruiter, my business placed 11 people into overseas roles in 2020 and so far in 2021, we've placed three, in countries including Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Mali, Guinea, Papua New Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Botswana and Indonesia.

These roles are not blue collar, they are management level positions and department head roles like general manager, operations manager, technical services manager and processing manager.

WA's mining industry is undoubtedly operating in a talent deficit, but the majority of the skills of the FIFO expats who hold positions overseas are not aligned with the jobs available and currently suffering from skills shortages in Australia.

Most shortages in WA are for technicians and trades workers, machinery operators and drivers. The bulk of our labour crisis is in the blue-collar space, created by shutdown work remaining unseasonably high in the short term, and in parallel, operational and construction work projected to grow strongly.

I have never seen demand like this, with a huge surge in businesses needing new hires. Research commissioned by the Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA released earlier this month confirms there is a significant shortage of workers now, with the potential for there to be a peak shortage of 33,000 workers by 2025.

Secondly, we need to consider that a huge portion of these FIFO workers are working for ASX listed mining companies. These businesses are dependent on the revenue generated by their overseas mining operations, mines dependent on Australian companies to operate them. They employ Australians and have Australian shareholders.

The expats in these roles are often a tiny percentage of the entire workforce on site, managing a national workforce in the hundreds to thousands. They are onsite to ultimately build up the capability of those around them before their position is nationalised.

Now, because of COVID, they operate on extended rotations, spending a minimum of 8-10 weeks away from home and endure quarantine every rotation as they enter each country. As a result, we have seen many leave their jobs and return home. If the "same" opportunities were abundantly available in Western Australia for all these expats, with equal opportunities and remuneration, it would be a no brainer for them to take a role in their home state.

The issue we face is not these workers travelling overseas, catching COVID and "bringing it back" as McGowan has said. The issue we should be focused on is the quarantine and vaccine systems in Australia.

While the rest of the world moves forward, we are taking steps backwards. While other countries move closer to the new normal, of reconnecting as a global community, we are being encouraged (and forced) to stay home and our vaccination rollout continues to be a shambles.

What we need is for our leaders to get us to a place where moving in and out of our country, and the operation of business in a global community, isn't so threatening.

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