



Thinking about Tech and Innovation in new ways for a better Western Australia

2023



Executive Summary

Western Australia is far removed from the east coast, but the state often uses the tyranny of distance to their advantage. This is certainly the case when it comes to technology and innovation. To ensure that they stay ahead of the curve, the state government has recently released an Innovation Strategy and a Digital Strategy, each with significant funds behind them to ensure that these are not just documents, but are implementable strategic priorities for the benefit of the state.

The goal for WA, like for every jurisdiction, is to be citizen-centric and customer focused. Whilst they know they are not quite there yet, there are processes and services in place to get there, including the Service WA app. WA is also aiming to attract and retain tech workers, and much like the rest of the country, knows that they need to build the right kind of environment so that their jurisdiction is an attractive place for innovation.

For both employee attraction and customer centricity, collaboration is key. During the height of the pandemic, agencies were forced to work together. Now they need to do it not just in a temporary, ad hoc way, but in a strategic way for the betterment of their citizens.

Taken together, the strategies, funds and collaborative efforts will ultimately ensure that WA is as best placed as it can be to be a tech hub and to attract the workers it needs to ensure this is the case for many years to come.



A new strategic direction for Western Australia

Western Australia is sometimes considered by those on the east coast as the forgotten state. It is large, far away, in a different time zone, and in the minds of the majority of the population of the country, far removed from the federal government and from the priorities of the rest of the populace. In WA, they use these criticisms and constraints to their advantage, especially when it comes to positioning themselves as global leaders in fields such as technology and innovation.

As part of that, the WA Government released an Innovation Strategy¹ in December 2022, which is a ‘10-year plan to establish WA as a global hub of invention, investment, innovation and impact’. The strategy has five and ten year goals, as well as seven priority areas and a range of activities designed to elevate WA’s innovation sector. Speaking at PSN’s Innovate WA roadshow in February 2023, the Hon Stephen Noel Dawson MLC, the Minister for Innovation and ICT amongst other portfolios, said that this strategy is a “a bold plan for WA to inspire a new generation of innovators to solve our challenges and encourage the economy to move in exciting new directions. It is also designed to propel our local ecosystem into a new phase of growth.”

In many ways, this strategy is part of a suite of strategies, programs and proposals all within the tech and innovation sector that are all about reinvigorating the economy and creating jobs, because as the Minister said, “innovation is the key to diversifying

our economy and creating more jobs across WA.” This is as true in the public sector as it is in the private sector. Danielle Giles, an innovation facilitation team leader at Western Power, which is a state government owned corporation responsible for building, maintaining and operating the electricity network, says that especially in light of climate change, a push towards net zero and the pandemic, “the industry globally is facing an unprecedented requirement for innovation and innovators.” As part of that, more than 200 public servants were surveyed in February 2023, and were asked about what they see as the biggest challenge facing the public sector in WA. As **Figure 1** shows, though there are many legitimate challenges, the biggest one by far, with 59% of all responses, is workforce challenges, and specifically issues related to talent attraction and retention.

The Minister acknowledged that “creating jobs is not the problem, but getting people to fill those jobs is certainly a challenge that we’re all facing at the moment.” It is such a problem in fact, that in August 2022, the Tech Council of Australia, together with Accenture, released a pathway to get to 1.2 million tech jobs by 2030.² As the press release says, ‘these jobs are critical to Australia’s future’, and the WA government expects that a tenth of them will be in their state. In the meantime, WA is actively trying to get the right people into the right jobs by creating attractive circumstances and giving people appropriate opportunities for their skills.

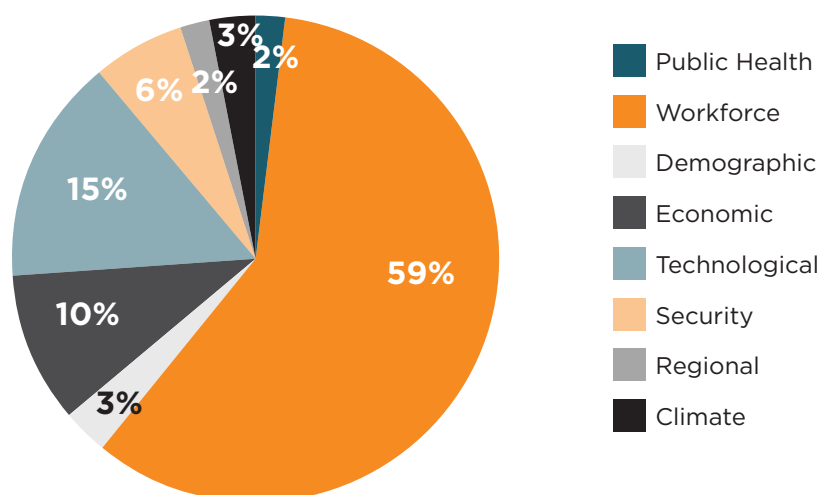


Figure 1: Challenges facing the public sector in WA

¹ <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/publications/western-australias-innovation-strategy>

² <https://techcouncil.com.au/newsroom/getting-to-1-2million/>

Creating a more human-centred government

As noted, the Innovation Strategy is but one of a suite of documents released in the last few years and designed to leverage the tech opportunities in WA. Another is the Digital Strategy 2021-2025³, which according to the tagline, is designed to deliver ‘convenient, smart, and secure services for all Western Australians’. Minister Dawson says this puts people at the centre of the government’s vision, and this is being achieved by the five priority areas outlined in the strategy, namely better services underpinned by informed decisions which are safe and secure, digitally inclusive and supported by digital foundations. But creating priorities is one thing; implementing and executing them is a much more complicated process. Greg Italiano, the Government’s Chief Information Officer, says they are achieving this by “publishing an annual view about the things that are being done to implement the strategy.” These annual roadmaps give flavour to the strategy and rather than simply say how many projects are being undertaken, they show how each of the priority areas is being implemented. The only problem however – which is a big one – is that as Greg Italiano points out, “they are real-world problems, but they are only internally important.” In other words, “they are not noticed by our customers, our community and our businesses. We have to get more customer focused.”

In the same survey in February 2023, more than 200 public servants were asked if they think WA is delivering truly citizen-centric services (**Figure 2**). Whilst most (63%) suggested that the services aren’t citizen-centric yet but agencies are working on that, others also believed that they should be citizen-centric, or that they already are, but only in certain areas or circumstances.

The government believes that whilst not all services are currently fully citizen-centric (however that is defined), they are certainly working towards that. The first step was realising how important having a digital identity is, and how much people use their phones and other devices for services. So with ‘better services’ as one of the priority areas of

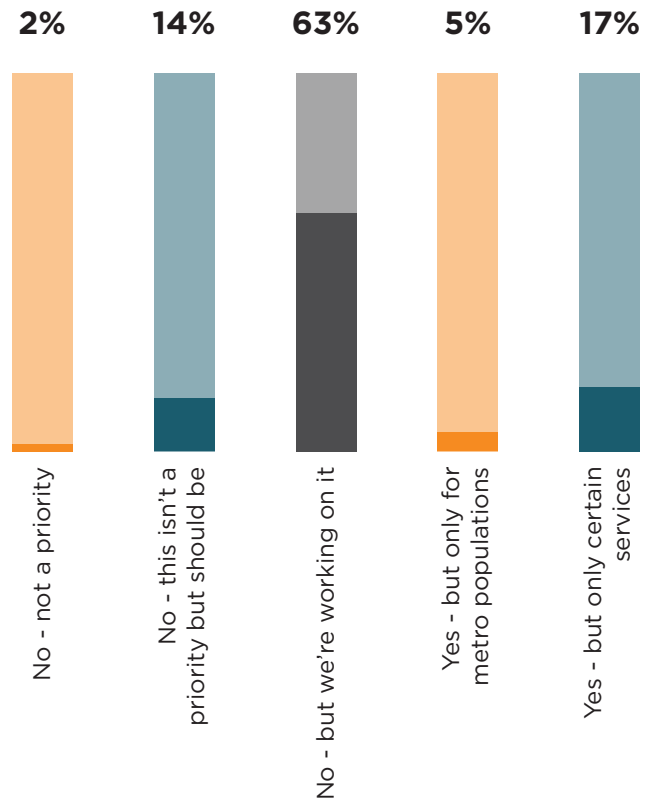


Figure 2: WA's citizen-centric services

the digital strategy, the government launched the Service WA app⁴ in early 2022, initially to assist with the COVID-19 response, but it has now morphed into an inclusive and citizen focused platform. This shows agility and forethought in its design.



The Service WA app is a significant first step in allowing Western Australians to connect with government services in one safe, secure and convenient place”

Hon. Stephen Noel Dawson MLC, *WA Minister for Innovation and ICT*

It also allows easier interaction with government services in the same way people do with banks and airlines. Greg Italiano says that “we are entirely conscious that we want to get much higher value propositions into the app and we are working very hard to do that.” And because it is an app, “we can do some of that work relatively quickly.” As such, the app now has real-time, innovative and very specific services such as FuelWatch, SharkSmart, Weather Stations, an

³ <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/office-of-digital-government/digital-strategy-the-western-australian-government-2021-2025>

⁴ <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/multi-step-guides/servicewa-app-support>



Unclaimed Money Register, and Emergency WA – an Australian first for bushfire warning notifications. Minister Dawson says these are just the first services that have come on board in the first year, and “in the next 12 months, we’ll be adding additional services that will further streamline interactions with government.” These are also the kinds of services people want or need and thus there have been more than 1.4 million downloads of the app, and over 942,000 active registered users in just one year.

The app alone though will not make the government as citizen-centric as it would like to be. At Western Power for instance, they are employing design thinking and using human-centred design toolkits to come up with new innovations. But as Danielle Giles says, the key to the success of these processes is that people have to realise that “innovation is a process.”



“Innovation is a rigorous process with clear stages and a clear purpose for each stage, with tools, activities and outcomes.”

Danielle Giles, *Innovation Facilitation Delivery Team Leader*, Western Power

But it nonetheless follows a clear though not always a linear path. This empowers people to be involved, come up with ideas and make decisions. However, for any idea to formulate and for the design process to take place, “you have to get comfortable with ambiguity. You’ve got to park your biases and ego perception ideas at the door when you start the journey.”

Investing in innovation

The WA government has introduced a number of programs to encourage innovation within the state. The Challenge⁵ for example, is an opportunity for to reimagine the delivery of remote and regional healthcare with global competition and a \$5 million prize. Beyond that, the Digital Strategy is not just a document or a set of priorities for agencies to implement on their own. It comes with a significant financial investment from government, mostly in the form of the Digital Capability Fund⁶. This is designed ‘to drive more strategic and targeted investment in digital transformation across the public sector’, but also to ‘provide the capacity to upgrade legacy ICT systems’. It was launched in 2021 with \$500 million, but such was its need and uptake that a further \$400 million was added to the fund in 2022. For a state with the population of WA, this is a significant amount of money, because the equivalent Digital Restart Fund in NSW has \$1.2 billion – only \$300 million more. Of the total \$900 million, over \$580 million has already been allocated to 44 projects across 21 agencies. To ensure the money is being used for the right kinds of purposes, there are yearly reviews, in line with the priorities of the strategy.

The Digital Capability Fund however was created to support the Digital Strategy. Separate to that, the government is interested in retention and attraction across all industries, so as part of an overall \$100 million commitment, \$16.7 million has been allocated over four years to the New Industries Fund⁷, to ‘support the acceleration of new and emerging businesses in Western Australia, to diversify the economy and create new jobs and industries’. With this money, the government can confidently predict that a tenth of all Australian tech jobs over the next decade will come to WA. Minister Dawson says this fund “has allowed us to roll out booster grants which support local innovators and a mentoring programs, as well as establishing innovation hubs to nurture our growing innovation ecosystems.” On top of that, there are also Innovation Booster Grants⁸ of up to \$40,000 from the New Industries Fund to allow innovators to create their initial start-up projects, as well as Guidelines for Temporary



⁵ <https://thechallenge.health.wa.gov.au/>

⁶ <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/office-of-digital-government/the-digital-capability-fund>

⁷ <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-jobs-tourism-science-and-innovation/new-industries-fund>

⁸ <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-jobs-tourism-science-and-innovation/new-industries-fund-innovation-booster-grant>

Regional Attraction and Retention Incentives⁹.

All of these grants, funds and monies are seen as an investment in talent, but as **Figure 3** correctly shows from the survey of public servants in February 2023, financial investment is just one of a number of factors that are and should be priorities going forward.

Interestingly, the equivalent survey a year earlier identified quite different priorities. Whilst ‘transforming and automating processes’ received 17% of responses in 2023, **Figure 4** shows that it received the highest number of responses in 2022 with 29%. However, ‘investing in new technology and digital services’ stayed at around the same mark – 18% in 2023 and 20% in 2022, showing that funds and investments are important, but only when mixed with other things, which is exactly as it should be.

In 2023, the government however is making these investments at this time because Minister Dawson says “there’s a lot of money around at the moment and we’ve got to use it and use it to our best advantage.” Though as pointed out earlier, investment is just one lever for innovation.

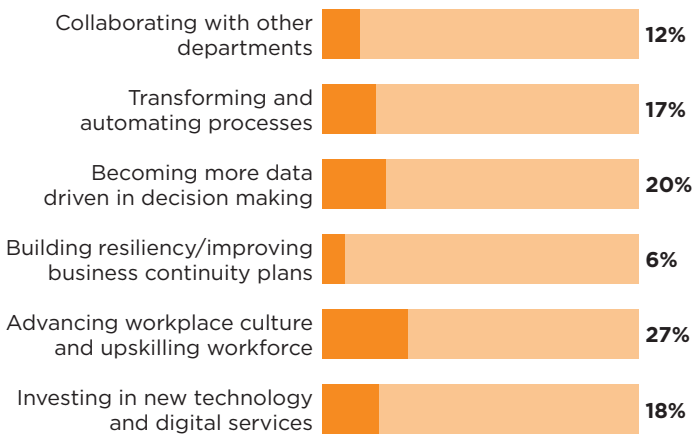


Figure 3: Priorities over the next 12-24 months

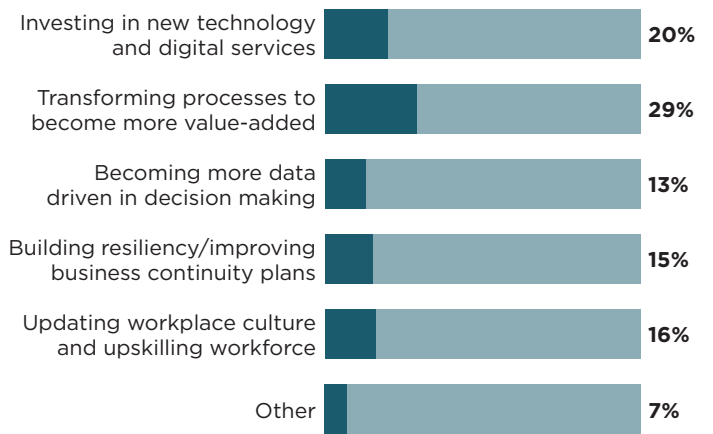


Figure 4: Priorities over the next 12-24 months (2022)

⁹ <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/publications/guidelines-temporary-regional-attraction-and-retention-incentives>

A collaborative future

The most important factor for innovation is and has always been collaboration. **Figure 5** shows that when asked what respondents see as WA’s greatest strength, a whopping 46% identified collaboration – with a focus on whole-of government co-operation and breaking down silos – as the greatest of the strengths, far beyond any of the others.

This is very much in line with another question in the survey that asked respondents to list one or two words (**Figure 6**) that describe the biggest goal or aspiration for public sector services. Again, collaboration was listed more times than any other word, followed very closely by ‘data sharing’, which is part of the same concept.

Greg Italiano agrees entirely with these assessments and says that collaboration is, or should be, the lifeblood of government services. “In government, we certainly want to get all the benefits we can from the knowledge and the expertise that exists within the sector.” This is even more true in the last few years, largely as a result of the pandemic.



“That spirit of collaboration in the work that we do is greater and better than it ever has been, and it needs to stay that way.”

Greg Italiano, *Government Chief Information Officer, Department of the Premier and Cabinet (WA)*

But at the same time, there needs to be some more direction on occasion from government. For instance, in the area of cybersecurity, agencies collaborate, but without a “strong mandate from government, the same kind of progress would not have occurred on its own, even with agencies working together.” Also in the areas of digital inclusion, closing the digital divide and modernising government systems, there needs to be a more centralised approach, and slowly there is.

According to Danielle Giles, the truth is that anyone who is an innovator is a collaborator once they share their idea with someone else. “Innovators are genuine collaborators at heart

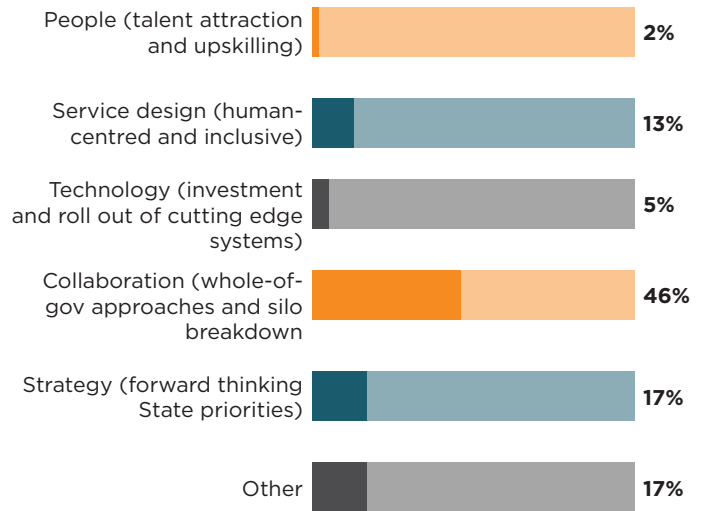


Figure 5: WA’s greatest strength



Figure 6: Biggest goal or aspiration for public sector

and committed to community impact,” and at Western Power they created an internal space within their headquarters in Perth dubbed ‘The Hive’, which is a physical space to facilitate and inspire innovation. It is designed to help the organisation think differently, but more importantly, to partner with SMEs and other businesses to solve the problems facing the industry as a whole.

Conclusion

Western Australia is far from the east coast and sometimes neglected, but it has the knowhow, expertise and intent to weave its own path and succeed on its own. Over the last few years in particular, the WA government has released strategies and provided funding to ensure that digital technology remains as innovative as it can be, both for now and for the future. With innovation an even more necessary part of modern life than before, and with ever increasing technological advancements, every jurisdiction needs to be innovative and creative to keep up with the pace of change, and to attract and retain the workers who can ensure that the innovations remain innovative and relevant. WA is working hard to achieve that in a collaborative and cross-agency manner, and is also working smarter for the benefits of its citizens, but it is up to each agency to be part of the ecosystem.

Featured Speakers



Hon. Stephen Noel Dawson MLC

Minister for Emergency Services; Innovation and ICT; Medical Research; Volunteering



Greg Italiano

Government Chief Information Officer

Office of Digital Government, Department of the Premier and Cabinet



Danielle Giles

Innovation Facilitation Delivery Team Leader

Western Power



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