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Fears of skilled talent setting sail

Years of industry experience vanishing as workers jump ship

TOURISM bosses fear losing an entire generation of experience as workers desert the industry for better job security.

The giant strides made in recent years to convince school leavers that tourism is a genuine career path are at risk of being wiped out as skilled workers ranging from dive masters to marine engineers contemplate career changes.

Tourism traditionally accounts for one in nine Queensland jobs and already, thousands of skilled tourism workers have been lost to the industry, with predictions that up to 25,000 more could lose their jobs in the fallout from the end of JobKeeper.

The flow-on effect is expected to further cripple tourism operators even when largescale travel numbers return, with a predicted severe shortfall of skilled workers to fill positions in the recovery effort.

Queensland Tourism Industry Council chief executive Daniel Gschwind said the loss of experienced workers was the "Achilles heel" for the sector.

"This skills migration out of our industry is exactly what we have been afraid of," he said.

"You're seeing out-of-work pilots driving buses. We are seriously concerned about losing the kind of people who are essentially irreplaceable.

"Already, since things started opening up again, there are over 1000 chef and kitchen jobs that are unfilled, not to mention the 250,000 backpackers who would normally be here on working holidays to fill thousands of positions across the industry in cities and regions right across Queensland."

Cairns is ground zero for the crisis. The iconic Skyrail cableway has been running only three to four days a week since emerging from lockdown last year and general manager Richard Berman-Hardman said keeping staff would be vital for the recovery.

"We've made a commitment to keep all our people on whatever they were on (before COVID hit), but it's hard to say 'don't go anywhere'," he said. "Tourism is not seen as a safe career option at the moment.

"And that is going to have consequences moving forward because, as one example, a position like a cableway operator takes six to eight months to train."

Tony Baker, the managing director of the Quicksilver Group of Reef and island excursions, said most staff were receiving some form of JobKeeper, and continued support was needed "to survive".

"If you've only got two diesel fitters, it's very hard to lose one and it's hard for your people to just sit around and wait for things to improve," he said.



"We've lost some wonderful people."

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