



P21 Mag: Industry gathers for print's future

In recent months, the VMA, supported by Ricoh, convened a national series of Industry Leaders Lunches across Qld, NSW, Victoria, SA and WA, bringing together senior representatives from paper, print, packaging, signage, visual communications, mail and manufacturing businesses to openly discuss the realities shaping our industry.

What emerged was a clear and unified statement from industry leaders that Australian print and visual media manufacturing remains resilient, adaptive and essential. However, these discussions acknowledged that we now face a critical period requiring coordinated leadership, practical advocacy, and long-term strategic support.

Most importantly, these conversations demonstrated that businesses are seeking practical solutions, stronger representation, and clearer pathways for long-term sustainability.

Sovereign manufacturing

A consistent theme nationally was the growing concern around sovereign manufacturing and the continued offshoring of Australian print procurement.

Frustration was expressed that governments continue to speak positively about local manufacturing while substantial print, packaging and communications work moves offshore. Members reinforced that the print and visual media sector operates as a sophisticated, non-subsidised manufacturing industry supporting employment, supply chain security, regional economies, and critical communications.

Leaders identified the need for stronger government engagement across procurement, packaging reform, illegal logging, AusPost pricing, workforce policy, and manufacturing support frameworks.

There was strong alignment that advocacy must move beyond reactive submissions and toward proactive positioning of the sector as critical sovereign infrastructure. Businesses want greater recognition of the industry's contribution to employment, sustainability outcomes, communications security, and economic resilience.

The VMA's increased engagement with governments and regulators was positively acknowledged, with members calling for further expansion of this work.

Workforce, skills and succession challenges

Without question, workforce capability emerged as one of the most significant structural concerns.

Businesses identified an ageing workforce, declining apprenticeship participation, inconsistent training quality, and increasing difficulty attracting younger people into manufacturing careers.

SA and WA particularly highlighted concerns around training delivery and the lack of local specialist capability, while Qld and Victoria reinforced the need for stronger career pathways and modern industry representation.

Leaders consistently reinforced that the sector must reposition itself as modern, technology-driven, creative and sustainable to attract new talent. The perception of print as a declining industry no longer reflects operational reality, particularly given the growth of automation and AI, workflow integration, digital print technologies, and sophisticated manufacturing environments.

There was also growing concern regarding business succession and leadership transition. Many businesses are approaching generational change without clear succession strategies, creating uncertainty regarding long-term industry capability and ownership structures.

The VMA's workforce initiatives – including The Inkers program, mentoring initiatives, and engagement activities – were strongly supported and members called for further expansion, particularly in schools engagement, career promotion, and cross-sector partnerships.

HR, IR and regulatory complexity

Another dominant national concern centred around increasing industrial relations complexity and compliance pressure.

Businesses expressed growing frustration regarding overlapping awards, changing employment legislation, psychosocial hazard obligations, workplace compliance requirements, and the speed at which regulation is being introduced without practical implementation guidance.

This concern was particularly pronounced in WA and Victoria, where businesses identified confusion around award interpretation, workforce restructuring obligations, and WorkSafe compliance activity.

There was strong recognition that the VMA's HR and IR advisory role has become increasingly important as businesses attempt to navigate expanding regulatory obligations, while maintaining operational flexibility and workforce stability.

Members reinforced the need for practical, industry-specific guidance that reflects the operational realities, rather than broad legislative interpretation disconnected from business operations.

Stewardship and ESG alignment

Environmental compliance, sustainability reporting and ESG obligations were major themes.

While businesses strongly support sustainable manufacturing, there was widespread concern regarding duplication, inconsistency, and increasing cost burdens associated with overlapping certification and reporting frameworks.

The growing disconnect between sustainability rhetoric and actual procurement behaviour was highlighted. Customers and government buyers are increasingly demanding environmental credentials, while continuing to prioritise lowest-cost purchasing models, often favouring offshore production with reduced transparency and weaker environmental controls.

There was strong support for the VMA's Sustainable Green Print + Sign certification as a practical, industry-led solution capable of reducing duplication, while improving environmental outcomes.

The discussions reinforced the need for government and procurement systems to recognise credible industry certifications that align environmental responsibility with manufacturing practicality and measurable outcomes.

Commercial and operational pressures

Rising operational costs continue to place significant pressure on businesses nationally. Freight increases, fuel volatility, energy costs, supply chain disruption, interest rates and extended debtor cycles are impacting profitability and long-term confidence.

WA businesses particularly highlighted worsening payment terms and growing debtor management concerns, while eastern states reinforced the impact of freight instability and fuel surcharges linked to global geopolitical conditions.

At the same time, businesses are increasingly investing in automation, AI, workflow integration, and operational efficiency to maintain competitiveness and manage workforce shortages.

Importantly, leaders demonstrated a strong willingness to collaborate, modernise and evolve. There was broad recognition that future success will rely on diversification, technology adoption, stronger customer engagement, and integrated service delivery models.

Industry engagement and collaboration

A recurring message throughout all states was the importance of rebuilding stronger industry connection.

Businesses expressed a desire for more practical leadership forums, networking opportunities, knowledge sharing and collaborative engagement models that deliver tangible commercial and operational value, with traditional trade show formats were increasingly viewed as less effective.

The Industry Leaders Lunch series itself reinforced the value of candid, solutions-focused dialogue and demonstrated the importance of maintaining a unified national voice for the sector.

The VMA sincerely thanks Ricoh for its ongoing leadership and support in facilitating these important

discussions. Its commitment to industry engagement and long-term sector sustainability continues to provide an important platform for open dialogue, collaboration and practical leadership across the industry.

Most importantly, we thank every industry leader who contributed openly and constructively to these discussions. The future of Australian print and visual media manufacturing will be shaped not by silence or fragmentation, but by collaboration, advocacy and collective leadership.

The message from leaders is clear – our industry remains innovative, resilient and essential, and with the right support, policy alignment and strategic leadership, its future remains strong.