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Australian Public Service
Commission

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Australian Public Service Employee Census
Explanatory Guide 2021

2021 APS Employee Census explanatory guide

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Overview

The Australian Public Service (APS) Employee Census (the Census) is an annual employee perception survey of the APS workforce. All eligible personnel employed under the *Public Service Act 1999* are invited to participate.

In 2021, 142,493 employees from 101 APS agencies were invited to participate in the Census. A total of 109,537 responded, yielding a response rate of 77 per cent. This response rate is encouraging given the size of the APS workforce, the number of participating agencies and that the Census has been administered annually for some time. This response rate is also strong when compared with similar surveys in other jurisdictions:

- NSW People Matter Employee Survey (2021) – 44%
- QLD Working for Queensland Survey (2020) – 44%
- VIC People Matter Survey (2019) – 46%
- NT People Matter Survey (2021) – 46%
- WA Employee Perception Survey (2020) – 22%
- TAS State Service Employee Survey (2020) – 22%
- SA Your Voice Survey (2021) – 36%
- UK Civil Service People Survey (2020) – 66%
- Canada Public Service Employee Survey (2020) – 61%
- USA Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (2020) – 44%

Management and administration of the APS Employee Census

The Census is managed and coordinated by the Strategic Policy and Research Group within the Australian Public Service Commission (The Commission). The Commission contracts an external service provider to support survey administration and reporting activities. Engine was this service provider in 2021.

Timing

Each year, the Census is administered over a five week period, usually beginning the second week of May. Following the change in timing for the 2020 Census, the 2021 Census returned to the usual timing opening on 10 May 2021. The reasons for the timing of the survey are two-fold. Firstly, the survey is administered at the same time each year to enable long-term trends and comparability of data across years and secondly, to meet our timeframe commitments for the annual State of the Service Report. Results from the Census are a key input to the State of the Service Report and its production is carefully timed and managed to meet legislative requirements. Results from the Census are also used by agencies to inform planning, reform and other initiatives.

Questionnaire

All respondents to the Census are asked a standard set of questions. This approach is taken to generate APS level results and benchmarks for comparison purposes. While a standardised questionnaire is employed, agencies have the option of asking their employees a limited number of agency-specific questions.

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Data collection

The Census is primarily an online survey. Respondents are invited to participate by email and are provided with a unique link to access the survey. A limited number of agencies distribute a paper version of the Census to personnel who do not have regular access to a work email account.

Although participation is encouraged, the Census is a voluntary activity. If a respondent chooses to participate, only a limited number of demographic-type questions must be answered. The remaining questions do not require a response if the respondent chooses not to answer.

Information about how privacy is maintained can be found on the Commission's website:

[Privacy policy](#)



Participating agencies in 2021

- Aboriginal Hostels Limited
- Administrative Appeals Tribunal
- Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission
- Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency
- Attorney-General's Department
- Australian Building and Construction Commission
- Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
- Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission
- Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity
- Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care
- Australian Communications and Media Authority
- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
- Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission
- Australian Digital Health Agency
- Australian Electoral Commission
- Australian Financial Security Authority
- Australian Fisheries Management Authority
- Australian Human Rights Commission
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- Australian National Audit Office
- Australian National Maritime Museum
- Australian Office of Financial Management
- Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority
- Australian Public Service Commission
- Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency
- Australian Research Council
- Australian Skills Quality Authority
- Australian Taxation Office
- Australian Trade and Investment Commission
- Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre
- Australian Transport Safety Bureau
- Australian War Memorial
- Bureau of Meteorology
- Cancer Australia
- Clean Energy Regulator
- Climate Change Authority
- Comcare
- Commonwealth Grants Commission
- Defence Housing Australia
- Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
- Department of Defence
- Department of Education, Skills and Employment
- Department of Finance
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Department of Health
- Department of Home Affairs
- Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources
- Department of Infrastructure, Transport Regional Development and Communications
- Department of Social Services
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- Department of the Treasury
- Department of Veterans' Affairs
- Digital Transformation Agency
- Fair Work Commission
- Federal Court of Australia
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand
- Future Fund Management Agency
- Geoscience Australia
- Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
- Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority
- Infrastructure and Project Financing Agency
- IP Australia
- Murray-Darling Basin Authority
- Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House
- National Archives of Australia



National Blood Authority
National Capital Authority
National Disability Insurance Agency
National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission
National Drought and North Queensland Flood Response and Recovery Agency
National Film and Sound Archive of Australia
National Health and Medical Research Council
National Health Funding Body
National Indigenous Australians Agency
National Library of Australia
National Mental Health Commission
National Museum of Australia
National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority
National Portrait Gallery of Australia
Office of National Intelligence
Office of Parliamentary Counsel
Office of the Australian Information Commissioner
Office of the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions
Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman
Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman
Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security
Office of the Inspector-General of Taxation and Taxation Ombudsman
Organ and Tissue Authority
Productivity Commission

Professional Services Review
Royal Australian Mint
Safe Work Australia
Screen Australia
Services Australia
Sport Integrity Australia
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
Torres Strait Regional Authority
Workplace Gender Equality Agency

Note:

Two non-APS agency participated in the Census in 2021 – Parliamentary Budget Office and Civil Aviation Safety Authority.

Agencies can opt to invite non-APS employees to participate in the Census. Any responses from respondents who identify as not being an APS employee are excluded when calculating APS overall results. This includes responses from non-APS agencies.

The number of APS employees invited to participate in the Census differs from the size of the APS workforce officially reported in the APS Employment Data releases. These differences are for several reasons. It is up to agencies to set their own eligibility criteria, however typically:

- employees on leave for the entire period of the Census administration period are typically excluded from the survey population as it is assumed that they are not at work to complete a work activity
- employees who are very new to an agency prior to or during the administration period are typically excluded

from the survey population as it is assumed they have not had sufficient exposure to the new agency to develop opinions. This means that APS staff who have moved between APS agencies during this period may be excluded.

Additionally, some agencies specifically choose not to invite their non-APS, intermittent or irregular APS employees to participate in the Census.

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The Questionnaire

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Development

The 2021 Census questionnaire includes 137 individual questions grouped into 14 sections. Each section addresses a key aspect of working for an APS agency.

Each year the content of the Census questionnaire is reviewed to ensure that each question has value and meets a specific purpose. The Commission researches and consults broadly to develop and select questions for inclusion in the questionnaire. In 2021, the Commission:

- Consulted with subject matter experts from within the Commission and other APS agencies to seek their input to question design and information requirements for supporting APS-level policies and programs.
- Applied an underlying framework for questionnaire design and reporting based on an established theoretical model.
- Researched contemporary understanding of issues and options for questionnaire content.
- Provided participating agencies with an opportunity to provide feedback and input to questionnaire design.

The resultant questionnaire covers numerous themes and measures. Central to these are three indices addressing employee engagement, wellbeing and innovation.



Framework

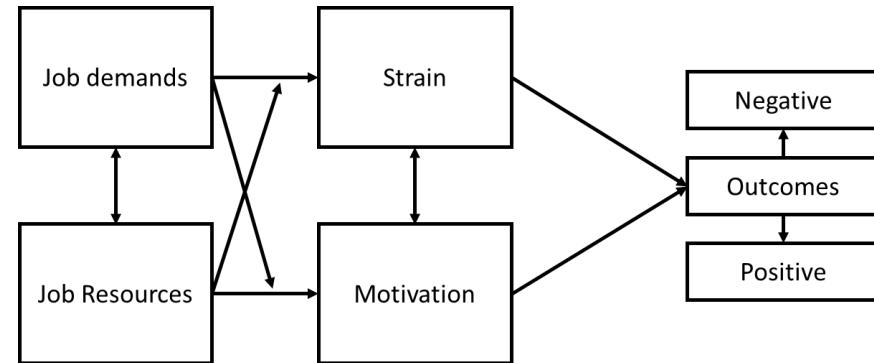
The Commission applied the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) as the underlying framework for the 2021 Census questionnaire.

The JD-R is a well-validated theory of occupational stress and engagement that has been applied across a broad range of fields (e.g. Christian et al., 2011¹; Demerouti et al., 2001²; Lesener et al., 2019³). The JD-R proposes that the interaction between two sets of work conditions (job demands and job resources) contribute to work outcomes.

Job demands refer to the organisational, social, and physical aspects of a job that require extended effort (mental or physical) to cope with.

Job resources are the aspects of a job that assist in achieving work goals, reducing job demands, and facilitating personal growth and development.

Job demands and resources interact in two ways. Strain and reduced employee wellbeing result when employees are required to cope with high job demands for extended periods and which exceeds their ability to adapt or cope.



Alternatively, greater employee motivation occurs when employees are provided with sufficient resources (e.g. support) and they are able to better engage with their work. Importantly, all these elements interact, resulting in positive and negative outcomes for the employee and organisation. An example of a positive outcome is high levels of work performance, while a negative outcome is employee turnover.

The Commission first piloted the JD-R in the 2020 Census. This framework was further expanded and applied to the 2021 questionnaire.

As an underlying framework, the JD-R informs the questions that are included within the Census questionnaire and how results are reported and interpreted.

¹ Christian, M. S., Garza, A. S., & Slaughter, J. E. (2011). Work engagement: A quantitative review and test of its relations with task and contextual performance. *Personnel Psychology, 64*, 89–136. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.2010.01203.x

² Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*, 499–512.

³ Lesener, T., Gusy, B., & Wolter, C. (2019). The job demands-resources model: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies. *Work & Stress, 33*, 76–103. doi:10.1080/02678373.2018.1529065



Employee engagement index

Employee engagement has been thoroughly researched over a number of decades. High levels of employee engagement is strongly associated with positive benefits such as increased performance and productivity.

Employee engagement is more than simply job satisfaction or commitment to an organisation. It is the extent to which employees are motivated, inspired and enabled to improve an organisation's outcomes. It is a two-way relationship that exists between an employee and their organisation.

The Commission employs a model of employee engagement developed by Engine. This model addresses three attributes associated with employee engagement and measures the emotional connection and commitment employees have to working for their organisation. In this model, an engaged employee will “say”, “stay” and “strive”:

- Say – the employee is a positive advocate of the organisation.
- Stay – the employee is committed to the organisation and wants to stay as an employee.
- Strive – the employee is willing to put in discretionary effort to excel in their job and help their organisation succeed.

The Say, Stay, Strive model of employee engagement is flexible and the Commission has tailored the questions for the APS context. The questions that address each attribute and contribute to the index score for employee engagement are presented to the right.



SAY

- I am proud to work in my agency
- I would recommend my agency as a good place to work
- Considering everything, I am satisfied with my job
- I believe strongly in the purpose and objectives of my agency



STAY

- I feel a strong personal attachment to my agency
- I feel committed to my agency's goals



STRIVE

- I suggest ideas to improve our way of doing things
- I am happy to go the 'extra mile' at work when required
- I work beyond what is required in my job to help my agency achieve its objectives
- My agency really inspires me to do my best work every day



Wellbeing index

The APS has long been focused on the wellbeing of its employees. As employers, APS agencies have obligations under Work Health and Safety legislation. Together with these obligations is an acknowledgement that high performance of employees and organisations cannot be sustained without adequate levels of employee wellbeing.

The wellbeing index included in the Census measures both the practical and cultural elements that allow for a sustainable and healthy working environment.

The questions that form the wellbeing index are:

- I am satisfied with the policies/practices in place to help me manage my health and wellbeing.
- My agency does a good job of communicating what it can offer me in terms of health and wellbeing.
- My agency does a good job of promoting health and wellbeing.
- I think my agency cares about my health and wellbeing.
- I believe my immediate supervisor cares about my health and wellbeing.



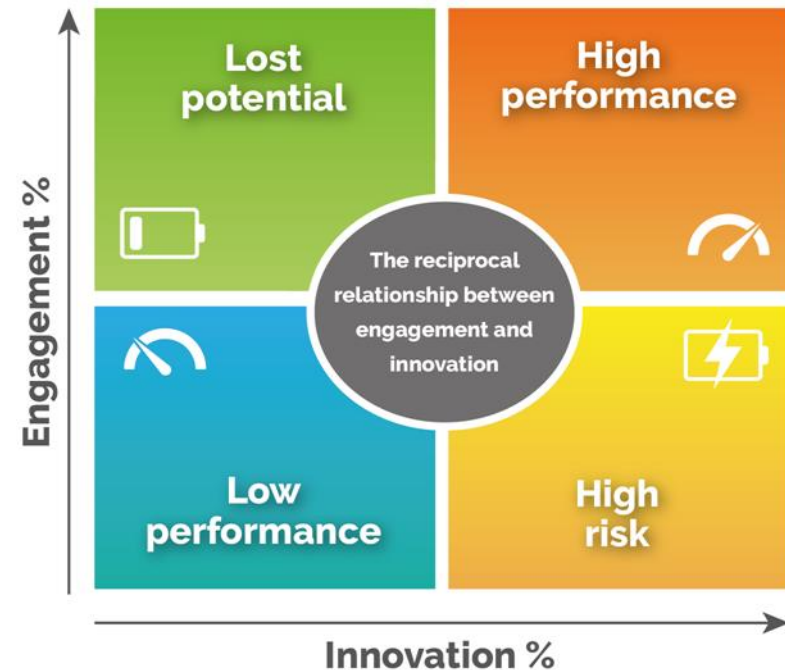
Innovation index

Innovation is a particular focus for the APS because it can drive improved performance, productivity and work outcomes. Innovation and employee engagement are also linked such that innovation can drive engagement, and innovation can flourish where employee engagement is high. Engine summarises the reciprocal relationship between employee engagement and innovation with the graphic to the right.

In part, the 2021 Census addresses innovation through a set of dedicated questions that contribute to an index score. This innovation index score assesses both whether employees feel willing and able to be innovative, and whether their agency has a culture which enables them to be so.

The questions that form the innovation index are:

- I believe that one of my responsibilities is to continually look for new ways to improve the way we work.
- My immediate supervisor encourages me to come up with new or better ways of doing things.
- People are recognised for coming up with new and innovative ways of working.
- My agency inspires me to come up with new or better ways of doing things.
- My agency recognises and supports the notion that failure is a part of innovation.





Calculating and interpreting index scores

The questions that comprise each index are asked on a five-point agreement scale. To calculate the index score, each respondent's answers to the set of questions are recoded to fall on a scale between 0 and 100 per cent. The recoded responses are then averaged across the five or more index questions to provide the index score for that respondent. An individual only receives an index score if they have responded to all questions which comprise that index.

Index scores for groups of respondents are calculated by averaging the respondent scores that comprise that group.

An index score on its own can provide information about the group to which it relates. Index scores, however, have the most utility when they are compared with scores over time or between work units, organisations and demographic groups.

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Other topic areas

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Other topics addressed in the APS Employee Census

The Census addresses a broad range of topic areas. These topic areas and the questions that relate to them can change between years depending on priorities and areas of focus for the APS.

Each of the major topic areas addressed in the Census is listed below.

Work-related demographics

As in previous years, the Census included several questions about demographics such as employment status, classification, and workplace location. These facilitate a greater understanding of workforce attitudes.

Diversity details

The Census captured a range of information to address the diversity and inclusion priorities of the APS, such as ongoing disability and identification as an Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Job family

The Census included a question asking respondents to choose an option that best describes the type of work they do. The response options presented at this question corresponded with the job families within the [APS job family model](#). A “digital” job type is also added to inform APS work on building digital capability.

General impressions: Current job

Respondents were asked their attitudes towards their current job and working conditions. Some questions within this section contribute to

measures of employee engagement. Most questions within this section have been included within the Census for a number of years and provide useful data for time series comparisons.

General impressions: Immediate workgroup

Respondents were asked a number of questions about the people they work with on a daily basis. Some of the questions within this section have been included within the Census for a number of years.

General impressions: Immediate supervisor

Respondents were asked for their views of their immediate supervisor. Some questions within this section have been included in the Census for a number of years. Others are relatively new and reflect contemporary skills and attributes of APS managers.



General impressions: Senior Executive Service

Respondents were asked for their views of their immediate Senior Executive Service (SES) manager as well as their thoughts on the SES cohort within their agency. For the purposes of the Census, an immediate SES manager is a Line/Branch/Group manager or equivalent.

General impressions: Agency and APS

Respondents were asked for their attitudes towards their current agency and working in the APS. Several questions within this set contribute to measures of employee engagement, while others evaluate APS workforce strategies and the impacts of crises on working in the APS.

Productivity and Ways of Working

This section asks respondents for their views on their productivity and their workgroup's performance.

Developing capability

Questions assessing the ways that supervisors and individuals develop employee capability were created in 2018 in consultation with subject matter experts within the Commission. These have been included to assess skills or capability gaps within the immediate workgroup.

Work-life balance

The question asking respondents to indicate their satisfaction with the work-life balance of their current job has been included within the Census since 2012.

Flexible working

The question addressing flexible working was revised in 2021 to ensure options presented to respondents were current.

Sources of stress at work

The United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive (UK HSE) identified six [Management Standards](#) that represent the primary sources of stress at work. The HSE Management Standards Indicator tool contains 35 questions to assess work stress, and as in previous years, the Census uses seven of these questions.

Wellbeing

Respondents were asked a series of questions that assessed organisational support for employees' health and wellbeing. Responses to most of these questions were used to calculate the wellbeing index score. Respondents were asked if there have been changes in their general health and wellbeing, if their work is emotionally demanding and if they feel burned out by their work.

Recruitment and retention

The Census asked respondents about their reasons for staying in the APS.



Mobility

Following on from 2020, which was a challenging year with crises including bushfires and COVID-19, the APS is working in different ways and staff have been mobilised to work in surge workforce teams, taskforces and across teams. Questions have been included to better understand the mobility of employees.

APS Values and unacceptable behaviours

This section includes questions regarding APS Values, and perceived experiences of discrimination, harassment or bullying in the previous 12 months.

Corruption

Consistent with previous years, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had witnessed corruption in their workplace and to describe the behaviour they had seen, as well as whether or not they reported this behaviour.

Free-text questions

At the very end of the Census, respondents were asked to provide comments to two questions: what the agency was doing well and the most important issue that the agency needed to address. Comments have been analysed and themes have been applied by the Engine text analyst experts. They are multi-themed, meaning they may be attributed to more than one theme. This has been applied using an application called Polyanalyst.

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Maintaining privacy

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Reporting rules

The Commission employs specific rules around how results are reported. Such rules protect the privacy of respondents and individual agencies' results.

De-identification of data is undertaken in accordance with guidance provided by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner.

The Commission and Engine report Census results and make these available to agencies and other parties. Results are reported for groups of respondents. Groups can be formed by a combination of demographic information (such as age group, gender or classification level) and/or where the respondent works within an agency.

The Commission may provide agencies and external parties with de-identified Census datasets. As outlined in the Commission's Privacy Policy, responses within these datasets will not be reasonably attributable to any specific individual.

Agencies may publicly release reports of their Census results. These reports will be at the whole-of-agency level.

De-identified datasets are uploaded to data.gov.au in accordance with the Australian Government Public Data Policy.

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Using the results

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Using the results

Interpreting survey results

Most items in the Census ask respondents to rate the level of agreement regarding, or satisfaction with, workplace issues on a five-point, ordinal scale. The scales are generally balanced, allowing respondents to express one of two extremes in view (for example, satisfaction and dissatisfaction) and with a midpoint that allows respondents to enter a 'neutral' response. When reporting, the five points can be collapsed into three: agree/satisfied, neutral, and disagree/dissatisfied. Therefore the neutral category refers to responses that reflect a 'neither agree nor disagree' sentiment.

When interpreting item responses, it is important to realise there is an ordinal relationship between points in a scale. The strength of opinion to shift a respondent from 'neutral' to 'satisfied' may be much smaller (or larger) than the strength required to shift a respondent from 'satisfied' to 'very satisfied'.

Although it can be a valuable resource and evidence base, it should be remembered that the Census is an employee perception survey. Respondents are asked to provide their opinions and perceived experiences.

As with any survey, the Census can involve error, both predictable and unpredictable. For example, respondents may provide a socially acceptable answer rather than their true attitudes.

Additionally, although all APS employees are invited to participate, not everyone chooses to do so. Even with a strong response rate at the APS-overall level, there is a chance that non-respondents are different from those who completed the Census. At the APS-level, four demographics are checked to ensure respondents are representative of the broader APS workforce. These demographics are age, gender, state/territory, and current classification. While each year there are no considerable differences in demographics among those who did and did not respond to the survey, some caution may be required when interpreting results from groups with lower response rates.

Differences between employee perception survey results and data from human resources information systems

Responses to the Census as an employee perception survey may differ to data held within human resources information systems. This is particularly true for demographic and diversity-related information.

There are numerous reasons for these differences. Some characteristics are not always permanent and impact an employee for a certain period of time (e.g. disability). Some employees also may not want to officially disclose and record some information on their agency's human resources systems.



Comparisons and internal benchmarks

Time series comparisons

Results for the Census are compared with those from previous years wherever possible. This provides a source for trend comparisons and a benchmark for assessing whether results have changed.

The questions included within the Census can change between years. While most questions are retained without change, new questions are added, others removed and some are reworded. Results are typically only compared between years if the same question wording was used in each year. Changes in wording can alter the meaning of a question and change how it would be answered by respondents.

Internal APS benchmarks

Reporting of agencies' Census results primarily focus on comparisons with internal APS benchmarks.

Where an agency has opted to include an organisational hierarchy within the Employee Census and have results reported for individual work units, comparisons between work units can be another source of benchmarks/information.

Results for the APS overall provide the most common comparator for individual agencies' results. Agencies are further grouped by size and function to provide other benchmark scores for comparisons.

Differences in function and size

There may be variability in results across the size of agencies, as well as the functions that agencies perform (e.g., regulatory, specialist, operational). Therefore any comparison across agencies should also take into consideration other factors, such as size and functional cluster. More information about functional cluster and size can be found on the Commission's [website](#). Agencies were asked to confirm their functional cluster this year, which may have resulted in changes from 2020.



Comparisons with external benchmarks

When comparing results to external benchmark scores, it is important to consider how well the Census and benchmarked questions match. While it is usually preferred that questions being compared have identical wording, it is sometimes reasonable to compare questions that are worded differently.

When comparing the results for questions with different wording, it is important to consider whether the questions measure the same thing in the same context. Differences can certainly be accommodated, but likely weaken any direct comparisons between the results.

For instance, these two questions are similar, but are not directly comparable:

- Overall, I am satisfied with my job.
- I like the work I do in my current position.

While both questions appear to address how much a respondent likes their job, the first addresses general job satisfaction, while the second focuses more on how much the person likes the work they are asked to do in their job. Both concepts are similar, but not the same. Depending on the reasons why external benchmarks are required, it may still be appropriate to compare the results for these questions.

Engine collect and make available a range of external benchmarks drawn from their activities in numerous sectors around the world. These

benchmarks can be viewed via the online portal and interactive tools that agencies can access to analyse their Census results.



Rounding





Rounding

Results for the Census are typically reported as whole numbers for ease of reading. Values from x.00 to x.49 are rounded down, while values from x.50 to x.99 are rounded up. Any rounding is performed at the last stage of calculation to maximise accuracy of the reported results.

In some instances, results may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Rounding may also mean that reported figures may not be identical to those calculated manually. Any differences, however, would not be more than one percentage point.

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Further information

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Further information

To access further information regarding the Census and reported results, please go to the Commission's [website](#).

State of the Service Reports can be found on the Commission's [website](#).

To access Census de-identified datasets, please go to data.gov.au.

To request further information about the Census please contact the Census team from the Commission at APSSurveys@apsc.gov.au or on 1800 464 926.