**Introduction**

**INCLUDE VIDEO – HOW TO USE EMPLOYER GUIDE - ANIMATION**

**Purpose of the Guide:**

This guide is for employers, supervisors, and business owners in the furnishing and cabinet making industries who will employ apprentices and want to get the best results for not only their business but their team, and the next generation of tradespeople within the industry.

The guide will provide straightforward, practical information on how to:

* Recruit and support apprentices
* Build a positive, safe, and inclusive workplace
* Strengthen the supervision, communication, and mentoring for apprentices
* Work effectively with RTOs and other training organisations
* Keep apprentices engaged and motivated through to completion of their training

The aim of this guide is to make it easier for employers to understand what is expected of them, what good work practice looks like, and how to build a long-lasting team.

**Context:**

Apprenticeships are at the heart of Australia’s furnishing industry. They provide a direct link between learning and work - allowing individuals to gain the skills they need while contributing to a productive business.

However, employing an apprentice does come with many challenges. Many employers report that supervision, communication, and balancing productivity with training an apprentice can be difficult.

At the same time, completion rates across trades have unfortunately been falling, as many apprentices leave their apprenticeship within the first 12 months.

This guide was created to help employers overcome these challenges by sharing some proven strategies from across the industry.

It can also help employers understand their role within the vocational education and training (VET) sector and how to work effectively with Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), the Apprenticeship Connect Australia Providers, and State Training Authorities.

**The Furnishing Industry - Snapshot**

The Furnishing Industry is a key part of Australia’s manufacturing sector covering the following sectors:

* Cabinet Making
* Furniture Making
* Glass and Glazing
* Upholstery and Soft Furnishing
* Flooring
* Wood Machining

**Industry Overview (2024–2025):**

* The Furnishing Training Package (MSF) supported over 28,000 apprentices and trainees nationally in 2024: including cabinet makers, furniture finishers, glass and glaziers and designers.
* The industry is made up mostly of small to medium-sized businesses, many of which employ fewer than 20 people.
* Demand for skilled tradespeople remains strong and urgent, particularly in cabinet making, furniture making, and kitchen installation.
* With the growth and use of technology and design tools such as CAD (Computer Aided Drafting) software and CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machinery are reshaping the skills needed within the trade workforce.
* An ageing workforce and the ongoing national housing and infrastructure boom are intensifying this skills shortage, which is projected to continue. As a result, the return on investment for training and supporting apprentices is very high.
* The need for stronger supervision, mentoring, and communication to improve apprentice engagement, satisfaction, and retention rates.

Major demographic challenges due to an ageing workforce - many experienced cabinet makers, upholsterers, and wood machinists are nearing retirement, taking with them decades of unwritten institutional knowledge and advanced trade skills.*\*NCVER “in training” 2024 data*

# **Furnishing Industry Snapshot 2025**

## **Overview**

Over 28,000 apprentices and trainees are currently in training (MSF Furnishing Training Package).  
About 80% of businesses employ fewer than 20 people, making it a skilled small-business sector.

**Main Sectors in the Furnishing Industry**

* Cabinet Making and Joinery
* Furniture Making and Finishing
* Upholstery and Soft Furnishings
* Furniture Design and Product Development
* Picture Framing and Restoration
* Kitchen, Bathroom, and Commercial Fitouts

**Current Challenges**

* Declining apprenticeship commencements (down 20% since 2021).
* Completion rates averaging around 50%.
* Attracting women and diverse apprentices into trades.
* Need for stronger supervision, mentoring, and communication.

**Opportunities Ahead**

* Strong demand for skilled tradespeople.
* Growth in digital design, CAD, and CNC technologies.
* Focus on sustainable materials and manufacturing.
* Industry collaboration through ACFA and Skills Insight.

**Data Sources**

Skills Insight (2024), NCVER (2024), ABS (2024), DEWR (2025), ACFA Member Data.

(Data above in a snapshot)

Furnishing Industry Snapshot 2025 Overview Around 35,000 people work in the Australian furnishing and cabinet making sectors.

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* Industry collaboration through Skills Insight. Data Sources: Skills Insight (2024), NCVER (2024), ABS (2024), DEWR (2025), ACFA Member Data.

**Some Key Workforce Challenges:**

* A decline in apprenticeship commencements – the national data indicates a decline of about 20% since 2021, contributing to ongoing skill shortages.
* Apprenticeship completion rates average between 45–50% across most trade sectors, however in Furnishing sector – there is a completion rate of between 20-25% over the past 5 years.
* The need for stronger supervision, mentoring, and communication will improve apprentice engagement and retention rates.
* High apprenticeship non-completion rates, averaging between 45-50% across most trade sectors, further reducing the pool of qualified tradespeople

**What causes high dropout / attrition rates**

Research identifies several major reasons why apprentices don’t complete their training:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Category | Key Issues |
| **Workplace / Employer-related** | * Poor supervision or mentoring * Lack of structured support * Unsafe or unpleasant work environment * Interpersonal conflicts * Being treated badly * Employers not providing enough variety or exposure to skills * Poor relationships with employer or colleagues |
| **Employment Conditions** | * Low pay / wages * Delayed or unpaid periods * Not released from workplace to attend off-job training * Being laid off or made redundant * Changes in business conditions (e.g. downturns) * Employer not rotating apprentice through different tasks or areas of work, so they gain full exposure to all parts of the qualification * Not providing reasonable time during work hours for completing training and study, or assessment activities |
| **Personal & Learner Factors** | * Change of career goals * Learner’s health or life circumstances (family, transport, relocation etc.) * Academic or skill deficiencies * Low confidence * Lack of matching of expectations vs reality |
| **Training & RTO-related** | * Poor coordination between employer and RTO * Training content not aligned with job * Lack of feedback * Off-job training that isn’t engaging or that conflicts with job demands * Training not stimulating enough for student |
| **External / Structural Factors** | * Economic changes * Employer capacity * Policy or funding issues * Geographic isolation; cost of living etc |

**Opportunities:**

The furnishing industry continues to offer strong and steady career opportunities.  
Unlike many other industries being reshaped by automation, furnishing and cabinet making will always need skilled hands, creative thinking, and craftsmanship.

Technology may change the way work can be done, with more digital design, CNC machinery, and precision tools but it can never replace the people with the skills and know how to build, problem-solve, and bring designs to life.

**A Skilled and Stable Workforce:**

The furnishing sector has proven to be one of the most reliable and long-term trades in Australia.  
There will always be demand for homes, kitchens, furniture, and commercial fit outs. Those projects will always require skilled people to make, fit, and finish them properly.

Employers who invest in apprentices today will be securing the next generation of skilled tradespeople who will keep the industry thriving for decades.

**Opportunities for Growth:**

Even as the industry evolves, opportunities are strong for businesses that:

* Embrace new tools and equipment- learning digital design and automated processes to increase accuracy and efficiency.
* Invest in people - mentoring apprentices while creating workplaces that attract and keep good staff in the workplace.
* Focus on quality and good company reputation - customers value the craftsmanship and Australian-made work.
* Think sustainably - always choose materials and methods that reduce waste and appeal to environmentally aware clients.
* Build a workplace where apprentices thrive and choose to stay

***The goal is simple: stronger apprentices, better business equals a thriving furnishing industry.***

**PLACEHOLDER: IMAGE/Infographic on industry growth – Future of the industy**

**The Role of Employers:**

Employers are the backbone of the apprenticeship system.  
  
You provide the working environment where skills are learned, values are built, and future tradespeople are developed.

The success of an apprentice depends on more than just the formal training they receive from the Registered Training Organisation (RTO).

It relies heavily on:

* The quality of mentorship, supervision, and daily guidance.
* Immediate, practical experience with modern machinery (CNC, CAD/CAM).
* A positive and supportive workplace culture.
* Your active role in knowledge transfer from experienced and retiring experts.

**This guide can help you:**

* Understand your responsibilities and get practical support
* Learn from real examples and best practice approaches

**References:**

**National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2024)** - Apprentices and Trainees 2024: March Quarter - showing current national commencement and completion trends.

**Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2024)** - Labour Force, Australia: Detailed - providing employment and demographic data across manufacturing and furnishing-related trades.

**Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) (2025)** - Jobs and Skills Australia Priority Occupation List - identifying cabinet makers, furniture makers, and upholsterers as priority trades due to ongoing skills shortages.

**Australian Cabinet and Furniture Association (ACFA) (2025)** - internal industry consultation data from member surveys and apprenticeship engagement feedback