

Earth Science Technical Officer		Northern Territory
ASCO Code: 3122-13	January 2007	
Labour market rating	Shortage	
Comment: <i>Shortage is particularly for field technicians</i>		

Occupational demand

ABS Census data show that there were 103 earth science technical officers employed in the Northern Territory (NT) in 2001. Since 2001, ABS labour force survey data indicate that the number of science technical officers (which includes agriculture, chemistry and life science as well as earth science technical officers) declined over 2002 and 2003, before increasing again from 2004 onwards. Expenditure on mineral exploration (other than for petroleum) in the NT has more than doubled over the past three years (ABS 8412.0 – September quarter 2006), which indicates increased demand for earth science technical officers.

Occupational supply

There are no local training courses available for earth science technical officers. Businesses often resort to attracting people into trainee roles and getting them to study part time in addition to on the job training. Interstate transfers from within parent companies is another common way of sourcing technicians. Some employers are investigating sourcing technicians from overseas in order to cover their staffing needs.

Employer and industry comments/current labour market

There was a mixed response from employers who had advertised vacancies, with some having much greater difficulties filling vacancies than others. Some employers had to compromise on the skill and experience level of applicants they were willing to accept and as a result filled their vacancies by downgrading them and accepting people without qualifications or equivalent experience.

Employers commented that although demand is currently high for technical officers, this has been the case for the past couple of years and in the previous ten years demand had been weak. Therefore, over this period, there were few new entrants to the occupation and relatively high attrition of experienced people. Now that demand is strong, supply of experienced earth science technical officers is low. With increased demand some businesses have invested in equipment upgrades, however have had growth constrained due to difficulty securing additional experienced technicians. Current demand for assay work is such that a proportion is outsourced to interstate businesses.

Wastage (people leaving the occupation) is considered to be an issue for the occupation. For field officers this is typically due to the tough physical and travel requirements of the role causing people to look for alternative jobs as they approach middle age. For laboratory based roles, wastage is typically due to people leaving to study or take up a position in a related professional role (such as a geologist or geophysicist).

Increased demand and a shortage was also identified for similar soil technician roles (classified under the civil engineering technician occupation area) for the construction industry.

Labour market outlook

Employers commented that the mining boom was likely to continue and there would be strong demand for earth science technical officers for at least another two years. Attracting new supply is likely to remain difficult and so the occupation is likely to remain in shortage over the coming year.