CWR CARRINGTON WORKFORCE RISK

The Workforce Risk Briefing

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A regulator result and a wage decision that both point the same way. What each one means and what I would check.

> I read the industrial decisions so you do not have to. These two are recent, they are real and they each carry a lesson you can act on this week. The citations are there if you want the full detail.

ENFORCEMENT · ALL SECTORS

The regulator is now naming the award system's own complexity as a cause of underpayment.

The result. Fair Work Ombudsman 2025-26 compliance and enforcement outcomes, released 14 September 2026.

WHAT HAPPENED

The FWO recovered $453m for more than 181,000 workers in 2025-26. That is up 27% on the $358m recovered the year before. Large corporate employers accounted for $217.3m of the total across more than 110,000 workers. Proactive investigations rose 86% to 2,680. Ombudsman Anna Booth described a continuum running from deliberate wage theft through to genuine error and named the complexity of the award system itself as a cause even where there is no intent to underpay.

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

A compliance program does not put you outside that error bucket. An award like construction's can carry close to eight classification levels, each with its own overtime and penalty structure layered on top. A design mistake made once at classification stage repeats on every pay run that follows it. The FWO used to lead these results with deliberate wage theft. This one leads with the structure instead.

> THE ONE THING TO CHECK
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> Pull the classification for every role that sits near an award boundary and test it against the award's own wording, not last year's job description. That is where the drift usually starts.

JUNIOR RATES · RETAIL, FAST FOOD, PHARMACY

Junior pay in three awards starts moving to the adult rate from December.

The decision. Junior rates application AM2024/24, Fair Work Commission Full Bench **[2026] FWCFB 75**.

WHAT HAPPENED

The Full Bench decided that junior employees aged 18 to 20 move to 100% of the adult rate after six months' experience, up from the reduced age-based percentage they are paid now. Employees with less than six months' experience keep the current percentage and there is no change for anyone under 18. The change phases in from 1 December 2026 through to 2029 and applies to the General Retail Industry Award, the Fast Food Industry Award and the Pharmacy Industry Award. Hospitality is not covered.

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

Retail and fast food run on a high proportion of junior casuals so this touches the base rate every penalty and loading is calculated from. Get the six-month clock wrong for even a handful of staff and the gap compounds through casual loading, weekend penalties and overtime for as long as it runs.

THE ONE THING TO CHECK

List every junior employee by award and by exact start date now. Track the six-month trigger from day one rather than discovering it at the first pay audit after December.

ON THE SITE

If you run a smaller retail operation, **a new plain-language page on the site** walks through getting retail pay right, including this junior-rates change.

Where this leaves you

If you award contractor work or run a medium to large workforce, the Critical Path Screen reads your structure for exactly this kind of design-time risk before it compounds. Send me what you are working with and I will tell you what I would look at first. That first read is free.

If you employ award staff, the award tools place a role and show its real cost, live from the Fair Work database. The rate lookup is free and needs no signup.

Either way the point is the same. The industrial risk is easier to read before you commit than after.

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