

# Optimism returns

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Frank Seeley, founder and executive chairman of Seeley International, is planning for growth. Picture: Emma Brasier

BUSINESS confidence in South Australia rebounded in the June quarter from a historical low, with leaders like Seeley International founder Frank Seeley defying economic uncertainty around COVID-19 to plan for future

growth and sustainability.

The results from the Business SA-William Buck Survey of Business Expectations offer a glimmer of hope for the state's economic recovery as confidence rose 26 points to 67 points, up from a "historic rock bottom" of 41 points.

"The tide has turned in the June quarter with the business community much more positive about the road ahead than first (March quarter) forecast," said Business SA chief executive Martin Haese.

"With the majority of businesses still impacted by trading restrictions during the quarter, the increase, the largest in 13 years, is significant and signals a hint of optimism in the air."

However, confidence levels are still down 17.4 points from this time last year. Business conditions performed better than expected in the June quarter, up 0.1 points to 66.9 points, where 100 is neutral. And despite the ongoing challenges of COVID-19 nationally, conditions here are expected to jump in the September quarter. Revenues were still affected, with 22 per cent of respondents seeing a drop of more than 50 per cent.

The worst were in the accommodation and food, retail and tourism sectors with revenues down 80 per cent and 94.5 per cent, respectively.

The introduction of Job-Keeper in March was a saving grace, Mr Haese said.

"According to the survey, 65 per cent of respondents are receiving the wage subsidy while 60.2 per cent of those on the scheme said it had allowed them to maintain pre-COVID-19 staffing levels, which underscores the critical importance for it to continue," he said.

Lonsdale-based Seeley International, which makes energy-efficient cooling and heating products, did not qualify for JobKeeper, with its revenue down about 25 per cent rather than the 30 per cent threshold required.

The business, chaired by Mr Seeley stood by its 300 staff in SA and 200 at Albury, with everyone taking a pay cut.

“Things could have looked very different for us if not for the support of our staff,” said Mr Seeley.

The business, set up in 1972, sells up to 60,000 systems annually through a 350-strong national dealership network and exports to 120 countries.

“From the top down, everyone pulled together. We didn’t want to lose any more jobs than we absolutely had to and left it up to the staff,” he said. Strong demand in the June quarter helped, boosted by people working from home.

Seeley also wants to bring more manufacturing back to Australia.

“The advantage of making motors offshore is there but with some funding support from government, we can make it all here with the benefit of creating more jobs and economic returns,” said Mr Seeley, 79.