This is a transcript of Andrew Auerbach and Cath Carver speaking at the the NAB Business Summit in Melbourne on Monday 24 August 2026.

For more information, please contact Mikkayla Mossop.

Business Banking in Focus

Andrew Auerbach | Group Executive, Business & Private Banking - NAB
Cath Carver | Group Executive, Corporate & Institutional Banking - NAB
Deborah Knight | Journalist & News Presenter - Nine Network

Deborah Knight (DK):
We've talked about the tough environment Australian businesses are facing, but NAB's customer insights show there's much more to the story than the headlines suggest.
Across the country, businesses are adapting, investing in resilience and finding new opportunities for growth. I'd like to explore what you're seeing on the ground.
Andrew, if I can come to you first. We're hearing a lot about confidence and difficult conditions, but when you sit down with customers every day, what's the reality? What are they telling you?

Andrew Auerbach (AA):
First of all, let me extend my warm welcome on behalf of my colleagues. We look forward to this annual summit and we're delighted to have all of you here.
As you've already heard from our presenters this morning, sometimes you need to look beneath the headlines. Yes, the global environment has shifted significantly, and Australia is not immune to that. But when you look at what's actually happening on the ground, Australian businesses are getting on with it.
Business owners continue to demonstrate resilience and grit. As someone who came to Australia from Canada, that's one of the characteristics that has stood out most clearly to me as I've travelled around the country.
NAB has around 150 banking centres and thousands of bankers nationwide, giving us a broad view of what's happening. The experience is certainly uneven by state. We were in Perth last week, where the economy is booming in many respects and businesses are looking through the short-term uncertainty. Here in Melbourne, while the headlines often paint a more challenging picture, that's not necessarily what we're hearing from customers.
Most business owners aren't running their businesses on a six or 12-month horizon. They're thinking much further ahead.
A month ago, we hosted a number of analysts and had the opportunity to discuss what we're hearing from customers. Interestingly, the numbers tell a slightly different story from some of the headlines. Growth rates are not dramatically different to what they were a year ago. Despite the changing environment, businesses are continuing to invest and move forward.

DK:
Cath, is that what you're seeing as well?

Cath Carver (CC):
I think the picture is mixed. Some sectors are doing quite well, while others are facing significant challenges. What I find myself discussing with clients across many industries is flexibility. That's really another word for options. Businesses are asking themselves: what strategic options do we have, what operational options do we have, and how do we create more flexibility in uncertain conditions?
That might mean considering different funding sources, balancing bank funding with capital markets, reviewing working capital arrangements, or reassessing hedging strategies.

What I'm seeing, even in sectors under pressure, is businesses spending far more time considering their options. That includes looking at productivity, whether through AI or other initiatives, and asking how they can improve efficiency and reduce their cost to serve.
Compared with where we were 12 months ago, there's a much stronger focus on resilience. Businesses are constantly running "what if" scenarios. They're asking: What if tariffs increase? What if costs rise further? Can we absorb those costs, or do we need to pass them on?
That type of contingency planning is now becoming the norm, regardless of whether you're a medium-sized business or a large corporate. Frankly, we're doing the same thing within our own business.

DK:
And Andrew, are you seeing similar shifts over the past 12 months?

AA:
Absolutely.
The businesses we support, particularly small businesses and SMEs, have been dealing with significant increases in input costs. Ultimately, business owners only have a few choices. They can absorb those costs within their margins, or they can pass them on to customers.
A lot of the short-term focus has been around working capital and managing cost pressures. What I find particularly encouraging, though, is the level of innovation we're seeing as businesses adapt.
I recently met a customer in Melbourne who shifted from luxury home construction into affordable housing. They made a substantial strategic pivot in response to changing market conditions.
We're also seeing some truly impressive applications of AI. One of the messages I hope people take away from today's discussion is that there isn't an industry or sector that can't benefit from AI in some way.
The opportunity is enormous, but many business owners are still trying to understand what practical use cases look like. AI can certainly help write emails or summarise information, but that's not where the real productivity gains will come from.
The real question is: how can AI be applied to your specific industry, your specific business and your specific challenges? That's where we're seeing meaningful results.

CC:
It's interesting, just on the use-case point.
One of the things we're seeing is a real willingness from organisations to share knowledge and learn from one another.
Recently, we worked with a state government and brought together CFOs from a range of government agencies. We shared some of the AI use cases we are exploring within NAB and discussed how those ideas might translate to their organisations.
That exchange was incredibly valuable. It helped them identify priorities, but it also gave us a much deeper understanding of the challenges those agencies face. It wasn't just about technology. It was also about governance, implementation and practical execution.

DK:
And with business investment as well, Cath, what are some of the smart adjustments you're seeing customers make?

CC:
It's super interesting.
Andrew mentioned affordable housing, and that's one area where we've seen genuine collaboration emerge between government, industry super funds, developers and the banking sector.
Because the challenge is so significant, governments are increasingly willing to have new conversations and explore new approaches.
We've seen strong examples of that in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland. In housing affordability, there have been some genuinely impressive outcomes driven by those partnerships.
Another area is capability building. The National Reconstruction Fund is a good example. We've worked with manufacturing and defence businesses where government participation helps form part of the capital stack, enabling businesses to invest, expand, create jobs and build capability.
For some organisations, raising that capital exclusively through private markets isn't feasible at their stage of growth, so these partnerships are playing an increasingly important role.

DK:
You're nodding there, Andrew. Are we seeing partnership, hand-holding, or perhaps even some obstruction?

AA:
I think we're seeing a little bit of everything.
What stands out to me is how effectively businesses are adapting to a changing environment. They are navigating short-term challenges while maintaining conviction about their long-term direction.
The level of innovation I see travelling around the country is remarkable.
What I particularly enjoyed about the presentations this morning was the reminder that Australia has tremendous advantages. We have abundant resources, strong entrepreneurial spirit and highly diversified trade relationships.
Coming from Canada, that's something I notice immediately. Canada has a very concentrated trade relationship with the United States. Australia's trade profile is much more diversified.
Only last week, I met a customer trading with 30 countries around the world, actively adjusting their trade patterns as conditions evolve.
We're also seeing incredible innovation in regional Australia. I often meet agribusiness customers who are effectively running significant parts of their operations through technology and automation.
Whether it's autonomous equipment, irrigation systems or data-driven decision-making, they're managing much of it through their phones. The pace of innovation is extraordinary.

DK:
Cath, are there particular sectors that are surprising you by outperforming expectations?

CC:
My home state is Western Australia, and it never ceases to amaze me.
We're seeing gold mines reopening, major urea projects being developed and significant investment flowing into industries that strengthen Australia's economic resilience.
Queensland is another standout example. While the Olympics provide momentum, the state is using that opportunity to accelerate approvals, infrastructure development and broader economic growth.
The AI ecosystem is also fascinating, particularly around data centres and supporting infrastructure. The ripple effects extend across utilities, transmission networks and the broader energy transition.
We're also seeing extraordinary innovation in renewable energy projects, particularly in Western Australia.
And then there are businesses such as Vitex, a long-standing NAB customer based in Western Sydney. They manufacture vitamin supplements and export globally. They've recently opened another facility and continue investing heavily in productivity improvements.
They're focused on reducing their cost to serve and competing at world-class standards, much like Australia's leading iron ore producers. It's incredibly impressive.

DK:
Fantastic. And Andrew, what's the biggest opportunity businesses should be paying attention to?

AA:
We designed today's agenda around what we believe is one of the defining opportunities of our time: artificial intelligence.
As we've discussed throughout the day, AI represents a profound societal shift. With that shift comes disruption, but it also creates significant opportunity.
Australia is well positioned to benefit, but every business needs to consider what that means for them.
Businesses need to think about how they operate today, how they can embrace these tools and how they intend to compete in the future.
The opportunity isn't getting smaller. It's growing rapidly.
Sessions like this are designed to help business owners think through those opportunities and support their longer-term planning.

DK:
And finally, if there was one thing business owners should focus on over the next six months to give themselves the best chance of success, what would it be?

Andrew?

AA:
This may sound self-serving, but my advice would be to talk to your banker.
Many businesses are experiencing pressure in the short term, and a good banking relationship can help you navigate those challenges. We can provide ideas, perspectives and practical support to help businesses adjust and position themselves for growth.

CC:
I'd piggyback off Andrew's comment and say productivity.
Australia has received a wake-up call on productivity, and it's something we can control.
Every business, including our own, needs to focus on how it can work smarter, improve efficiency and create value. It's not easy, particularly when many business owners already feel they're working harder than ever. But productivity is the lever we have the greatest ability to influence, and it will be critical to Australia's future success.

DK:
Food for thought for all of us.
Please join me in thanking Cath Carver and Andrew Auerbach.

[Applause]