Breaking Down Barriers: Voices

An empirical qualitative study on the Barriers to Indigenous employment

seek and you shall find

ETHICOLOGY

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and pay our respects to the Aboriginal Nations on whose unceded lands and waters this study took place on. We recognise and honour the enduring sovereignty, cultural authority, and sophisticated Knowledge Systems that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have and continue to cultivate. We extend our respect to their Elders past and present, and express our deep gratitude to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose cultural practices, wisdom, and care for Country continue to sustain communities and shape a just future.

Artwork courtesy of Dixon Patten Jnr
at Bayila Creative Gunnai, Gunditjmara,
Yorta Yorta & Dhudhuroa

About Jen Penny

Jen Penney is a Yuwibara descendant with Irish and Scottish heritage, Jen was raised up on the Bindal and Walgurukaba peoples Country — Thul Garrie Waja — in the Murri/Townsville region. Jen has 10 years' experience as a Policy, Research and Community Engagement practitioner. She is also a professionally qualified and registered Social Worker. Jen brings extensive experience and a trauma-informed approach into facilitation and learning spaces. Jen specialises in social policy analysis, qualitative and ethnographic research. Jen has developed and conducted a range of local and national level research projects. With her background in grass roots level qualitative research, social work and project management, Jen brings a unique perspective. Having developed both depth of experience and practice knowledge while working with government, corporate and not-for-profit enterprises Jen founded her own consultancy business: Ethicology.
ethicology.com.au

About Tiffanie Ireland

Tiffanie Ireland is a proud Kamilaroi woman with strong family connections to Barraba and Gunnedah in North-western NSW. With 16 years of experience in Indigenous engagement, project management, stakeholder management, and strategic communications across government, corporate, and community sectors, Tiffanie has become a respected operator in her field.

Prior to starting her consultancy firm, Messenger Firm Collective, Tiffanie held Senior Manager roles in Indigenous Engagement, Arts, and Community Partnerships at Qantas and Westpac, where she made a significant impact in promoting Indigenous inclusion and representation.

Tiffanie's academic background includes a Bachelor of Media and Communications with a major in Journalism and a minor in Aboriginal Studies from the University of Wollongong.
messengerbirdcollective.com.au

About SEEK

A leader in online employment marketplaces, SEEK has been helping people live more fulfilling and productive working lives and helping organisations succeed for more than 25 years.

Founded and headquartered in Melbourne, Australia, SEEK has grown into a multinational technology company with more than 3,300 employees and is listed on the Australian Securities Exchange.

SEEK's presence spans Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Additionally, SEEK has minority investments in employment marketplaces in China, South Korea and Bangladesh.

In 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, SEEK was recognised as one of Australia's Top Ten Places to Work in Technology in the AFR BOSS Best Places to Work awards.

Contents

About this study

The study aimed to elevate the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous people to explore barriers to employment, workplace experiences, and what supports culturally safe, flexible, and inclusive work environments. Participants shared their knowledge to inform how workplace structures and organisational cultures can better support meaningful participation, caring responsibilities, and career progression. The research also explored preferences for Aboriginal-led employers and how mainstream recruitment tools such as job boards are perceived and used. The study's findings inform of strategies grounded in the strengths, rights, and aspirations of Indigenous peoples.

Background and researchers

This qualitative Aboriginal-led study was conducted by Jen Penny and Tiffanie Ireland in collaboration with SEEK.

In 2021, SEEK partnered with Jen Penny and Tiffanie Ireland (formerly the agency Two Point Co.) to conduct research into the barriers to meaningful employment faced by Indigenous people. The intention was to identify barriers in order to develop solutions to removing or mitigating them. The result of that initial research is the quantitative literature review: "Understanding the Barriers to Employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Literature Review.

This research received ethical approval from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Ethics Committee.

Why this study was needed

In the review of both qualitative and quantitative literature, the researchers found that the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are largely missing. When they are included, these voices are often represented as a single, homogenous group—an essentialising approach that fails to reflect the diversity of experiences, identities, and needs within our communities.

Furthermore, the literature review findings affirmed that Indigenous people continue to experience both implicit and overt racism as a routine part of their working and personal lives—this occurs in plain sight yet is unseen by non-Indigenous people and organisations which is a reflection of the enduring 'normalisation' of ongoing colonisation processes. To address this gap, TPC undertook this second phase of the project, Breaking Down Barriers: Voices an empirical qualitative study.

This research is unique in that it includes the verbatim experiences of Indigenous people. When considered alongside the existing literature, these provide a fuller understanding of how SEEK, and other organisations, can take meaningful action to improve/transform the employment and job-search experience of First Nations people.

Indigenous:
In this document, Indigenous refers to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people.

Summary of findings

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants put forth a range of recommendations to address the employment disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

A common thread among Indigenous employees and job seekers was the desire to establish or maintain a connection to the labour market, and to work in roles that allow them to give back to their communities and stay connected to culture and Country.

> **Country:**
> **The lands, waterways and seas to which Indigenous peoples are connected.**

The study concludes that meaningful actions at the structural and organisational levels are urgently needed.

Such as:

- Providing appropriate recruiting processes
- Creating culturally safe workplaces
- Adopting a people-centred approach that prioritises cross-cultural communication
- Sustained engagement with Indigenous and Torres Strait Island communities
- Offering programs, activities, and conditions that promote Indigenous employment
- Creating formal policies that support accession and clear career paths
- Providing employment security and flexibility
- Reflecting and affirming Indigenous culture
- Respecting and being inclusive of Indigenous ways of doing, being, and knowing.

> **DOING, BEING AND KNOWING**
>
> **Cultural values, knowledge systems and actions, based on an interconnectedness with Country, community and spirituality.**

Methodology

An Aboriginal-led approach

The findings, insights and recommendations presented in this report originate from the lived experiences of our Indigenous research participants and prioritise the diverse experiences and perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They are based on grassroots-level data generated through yarning-style interviews and a yarning-style focus group involving Indigenous people, as well as input from non-Indigenous recruiters.

> YARNING:
> The cultural practice of sharing stories. It involves listening deeply and learning through connecting. Yarning methods provide a culturally appropriate way for Indigenous participants, groups and communities to communicate with researchers, respond, engage and participate within the broader research processes.

A qualitative study

As a qualitative study, the focus is on depth – rather than breadth – of data. A review of 23 peer-reviewed articles suggests that a group of 9–17 participants is sufficient to reach saturation, especially within homogenous populations. This qualitative study had 22 in total, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers and employees (n = 18) and non-Indigenous recruiters (n = 4).

Our participant group

Participants who have shared their knowledge with SEEK were drawn from city and regional centres from across Australia. Within the Indigenous participant group are subject matter experts who identified as Aboriginal cultural brokers (n = 4) and Aboriginal small and medium enterprise (ASME) owners. Knowledge was specifically sought from these groups as they have a nuanced understanding of what is required to work in culturally responsive and affirming ways with Indigenous job seekers and employees. The ages of the participant group ranged from 14 to 49.

18 job seekers and employers

10 women   **8 men**

Breakdown of participant roles

5 Employees

5 Job seekeers

4 ASME leaders

4 Cultural brokers

The employed study participants were undertaking either permanent ongoing, part-time ongoing, non-ongoing full-time, part-time or casual employment. Among the Indigenous participant group most Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were employed in full-time roles (n = 11: 61%). While this study did include job seekers, most (n = 3/5) were young people at an early stage of beginning their working life journey. Most participants identified they were actively building their careers, and many had achieved and were recognised as successful in their field by other Indigenous and non-Indigenous industry peers.

Aboriginal Cultural Broker:

A person, often an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person, who acts as a bridge between different cultures, facilitating understanding, communication, and cooperation.

Where our participants were located at the time of the interviews

The research group represents diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and nation groups. This group is predominantly living and working off Country and their current locations are also listed below.

- Sydney and surrounding suburbs, NSW: Eora nation, Dharawal and Dharug speaking peoples

- Port Macquarie, NSW: Birpai Nation: Warrimay and Guringay peoples

- Illawarra, NSW: Yuin nation, Dharawal speaking peoples, Wadi Wadi clan group

- Nambucca Heads, NSW: Gumbayngirr people

- Ayr, QLD: Birri Gubba Nation, Bindal and Jura peoples

- Brisbane, QLD: Yuggera and Turbal people

- Adelaide: SA: Kaurna peoples

- Carnarvon, WA: Yinggarda peoples
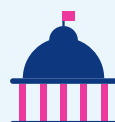
- Melbourne, VIC: Wurundjeri peoples

Sectors, industries and roles Indigenous study participants are employed or aspire to work in.

Intersection of corporate and government and Indigenous business – Indigenous procurement

Tertiary Education – encouraging Indigenous applicants

Indigenous business – First Nations Strategies, RAPs, policy design research and evaluation

Human Resource Management – global enterprise

Manufacturing

Federal Government Agency – supporting education and training

Other (Securities, Creative, Building, Hospitality)

Language group/nation of participants

Gamilaroi
Whadjuk
Dharawal
Wiradjuri
Wonnarua/Kunja
Yuin/Wiradjuri
Bundjalung
Badu Island
Murri
Koori
YuinKulkalgal
Kabi KabiWakaya/Wombaya/ Waanyi
YidinjiArabana
Woopaburra
Kala Kagawa
Meriam/Wuthathi/Bindal Juru
Gumbaynggirr

How Sorry Business shaped the participant group

After obtaining ethics approval from AIATSIS, recruitment of interview participants commenced in August 2022. By the end of September, we witnessed a promising increase in expressions of interest to participate in the study. However, as we were actively engaging with and collecting data from participants in October, a heartbreaking incident occurred. The alleged racially motivated murder of Cassius Turvey in Perth left the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community deeply devastated and traumatised. Indigenous communities across the nation collectively united in a time of Sorry Business

In addition to ongoing consultation fatigue, this event had an immense impact on the Indigenous community, members of our research team, and the research process. Although we aimed to include 20 Indigenous participants in the study, it was unsurprising that we observed a decline in interested candidates registering to take part in the research. Of the pool of potential participants (n = 40) that submitted expressions of interest, the research team was only able to connect with less than 50 per cent (n = 18 Indigenous research participants).

Research aims

This study sought to learn about:

- Barriers to employment
- Work-life balance experiences
- Workplace conditions, practices and organisational cultures
- Access to workplace flexibility, security, and healthy and safe conditions
- What's needed/wanted to facilitate caring responsibilities, and greater participation, inclusion, and ascension in paid work
- Views, perceptions, and experiences surrounding use of online job boards
- Workplace differences between Indigenous and mainstream employers – and why this cohort typically prefers the former

Core research questions

- What do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say are the barriers to meaningful employment?
- What are the supportive factors that enable Indigenous peoples to achieve successful employment outcomes
- What factors create a culturally safe workplace setting?
- How can SEEK and its partners help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers and employees find meaningful employment?

Why this methodology?

Yarning-style interviews

Knowledge was specifically sought from Indigenous groups, as they can provide a nuanced understanding of what is required for employers to work in culturally responsive and affirming ways with Indigenous job seekers and employees.

By using Indigenous research methods and seeding, and through growing community support, a diverse participant group formed organically. The research process of yarning allowed participants to generously share their knowledge. Data gained from yarning was richly detailed and provided an in-depth contextualised understanding of the participants' perceptions, views and experiences. In this way, Aboriginal researchers from Two Point Co. (TPC) were privy to Indigenous peoples' own stories.

One limitation of traditional Western studies is that they often centre non-Indigenous worldviews and methods, which can marginalise Indigenous ways of knowing and being, using conventional methodologies is often exclusionary and has contributed to the 'colonisation' of research. To decolonise this Indigenous study the Aboriginal researchers followed Tuhiwai-Smith's (2021: 190) recommendations to "[take] notice of the language and discourse used by Indigenous communities to control their own messages… to identify what people are yearning for while they engage in work that requires intense individual and collective emotional labour and sacrifice".

ASMEs and Cultural Brokers

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that make ASMEs the employers of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this study adopted a multifaceted approach. The researchers not only learned from Indigenous job seekers and employees, but also actively sought input from Indigenous subject matter experts including ASMEs (n = 4) and Cultural Brokers (n = 4), all of whom possess extensive expertise in Indigenous recruitment and providing culturally responsive support to Indigenous employees across various employment sectors

By incorporating insights from these respected professionals, the study was able to capture the unique nuances and perspectives that contribute to the success of ASMEs as desirable employers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. The analysis of the interview data from these participants provided new insights about key elements that contribute to the success of comprehensive Indigenous employment strategies, culturally safe and inclusive workplaces, providing tailored support and development opportunities for Indigenous employees and the benefits of establishing reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous people, communities, and organisations.

Seeding:

The early, respectful, and relational groundwork laid by researchers — particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers — prior to any formal project activities. It involves spending time on Country, listening deeply, and building trust through informal yarning and presence, rather than approaching community with a pre-formed agenda. Even for Indigenous researchers, especially when working on lands that are not their own, seeding is essential to honour local protocols, demonstrate accountability, and support community-led engagement. This process ensures research is grounded in relationships, not extraction, and upholds the values of sovereignty, reciprocity, and cultural integrity.

Ethics Application

Ethics approval from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) was granted for this research, which involved deploying an Aboriginal-led Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) approach and Indigenised research methods. The study was carefully planned with a range of Indigenous organisations and people providing input to ensure that it was ethically developed and aligned with community aspirations and expectations.

Throughout the research development process, researchers placed paramount importance on being culturally responsive and trauma aware. They emphasised the significance of sharing power, fostering inclusive co-design practices, and establishing reciprocal partnerships.

In alignment with our objectives, researchers actively engaged and fostered enduring connections with a diverse array of Indigenous stakeholders. By cultivating these ongoing relationships, we aimed to forge meaningful partnerships that would contribute to our collective goals and strengthen our commitment to supporting Indigenous communities.

Note to employers: The methodology processes outlined in Ethics Application can assist SEEK and SEEK partners understand how to collaborate, engage and do research with Indigenous Australians. To enable benefit sharing, it is important for employers to understand how to conduct ethical Aboriginal-led research, and to learn from Indigenous people on how to engage with them in a way that upholds their rights. This approach enables Indigenous people and communities to enjoy their rights to Indigenous self-determination, which is inclusive of Indigenous data sovereignty rights and benefit sharing.

Research findings

Identifying the barriers

What makes work meaningful to Indigenous people:

"Doing something for community."

At the core of what renders work meaningful for Indigenous people lies a fundamental principle of giving back. All participants noted that it is important to be employed in work that allows them to give back and/or connect with the communities to which they belong.

This principle resonates with cultural obligations and values grounded in reciprocity, consistent with both Hampton and Toombs (2018) and Flood's (2018) claims that having a collectivist logic shapes the way Indigenous people connect to and work within their communities. It stands in contrast to Cooper (2017) claims that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to understanding what makes people view work as meaningful because it is "intensely personal and individual".

> *"For me, well if you pop onto [a potential employer's] website, you can see that they're doing something for the community, whether it's, you know, they're giving back, or they promote a charity, or they've got some sort of connection to the community. It would absolutely be important for me." – Aboriginal employee*

The above statement shows the importance that reciprocity plays in attracting Blak talent. Additionally, a participant who identified as being a Cultural Broker noted that being able to engage in employment that enables First Nations people to "relate to our own people" was key to attracting and retaining those employees.

Participants noted how they want to get involved by being employed in roles that allow them to sustain connections with their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community or that they aspire to work in roles and industries that generate co-benefits for their extended kinship networks.

These findings highlight a strong link between paid employment, connection to community and perceptions of culturally rewarding work.

TAKEAWAY:

When organisations incorporate and support Indigenous social justice initiatives that enable giving back to Indigenous communities, they bolster their ability to attract, retain and effectively engage Indigenous employees.

Barriers to employment

The participants in this study identified a range of factors that hinder participation in mainstream (non-Indigenous) organisations.

The participants' statements outlined in this section demonstrate that the ability to gain and remain in meaningful employment, outside of the Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) sector, is impacted by inequities encountered both in interpersonal and structural levels in the labour market.

Participants explained they had experienced and observed the damaging impact that barriers to employment can generate, and that encountering a range of barriers is "normal" in that it is usual and regularly experienced by this cohort.

Lack of inclusive language and images in marketing or job ads

Biased perceptions, tokenistic recruitment, and employers who end support once you enter the workplace

Casual/implicit, overt, and institutional racism

Undervaluing Indigenous knowledge, ways of doing, being and knowing

Insecure or short-term workplace conditions and/or being under-employed

Cultural Load in the workplace: being a 'go to' person for cultural knowledge and being expected to address all things Indigenous within the workplace

Digital access and literacy skills needed for employment applications

A lack of inclusive images and messages on websites and in job ads

Participants highlighted that the ability to interact with Indigenous cultural representations in the virtual space is a strong indicator of whether an organisation, its physical location, and its cultural environment are culturally safe, welcoming, and supportive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

When Indigenous people observe a lack of culturally appropriate content in online job advertisements, they are likely to perceive that an organisation is reinforcing rather than rejecting practices that disenfranchise Indigenous people in the labour market.

Without clear observable evidence of Indigenised content, skilled Indigenous candidates are quick to the view that the role and the organisation is unsuitable for Indigenous people. They assert their own personal agency and reject the organisation as they perceive it as an unsafe enterprise to work within.

> *"Blaken up the website. Yep. Get rid of useless words. Yep. Make jobs attainable. Yes. If I could keep it simple. Simplify things. I've got a number of advanced diplomas, and I'm educated and there are some job ads that I know I'm qualified to do that I would not apply because of the way they're written." – Aboriginal Cultural Broker*

TAKEAWAY:

Employers can make official websites and job ads more attractive to Indigenous Australians by circulating "hopeful, positive and culturally responsible content." Carlson and Frazer (2020) More inclusive visual branding and messaging can encourage connections and networks of trust rather than reinforcing the status quo.

Culturally safe:
An environment where people from Indigenous cultures feel valued, respected, and free from discrimination.

Blak:
A term used by some Indigenous people as a reclamation of the word 'Black', used to challenge stereotypical notions of Blackness.

Biased perceptions

Race-based biases are often embedded in organisational cultures, policies and processes, which create barriers for Indigenous people. Participants explained how race-based biases shape not only online spaces but also interpersonal communication and can leave Indigenous people feeling deeply unsatisfied and more likely to leave the organisation.

This aligns with earlier findings from Genevieve et al's (2018) and Young et al's (2013) research findings which highlight how disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees exist, and how overt and explicit bias in workplaces and across a range of sectors and professions contributes to high levels of attrition, absenteeism, and disengagement.

"So often people come in with their biases; they have their own view on how things are run... I was told once at case management 'that's not what we do' [use Indigenous knowledge]." – Aboriginal Cultural Broker

"What I've found has been a level of surprise almost, that as an Aboriginal woman, [people say] 'Oh, wow, you're a bit smart.' 'Oh wow, you actually do a good job' or you know, they think they're giving you a compliment, but it's a really underhanded 'I can't believe you could be smart and you're Aboriginal' type of thing." – Aboriginal employee

"I think everyone is sick of being the token Blak that just gets, you know, everything 'Black Fella' kind of dumped on them." – Aboriginal employee

Tokenistic employment

Surface-level allyship does not attend to the structural barriers that exist for this cohort. Thus, some allies do not create the substantive changes that are needed to promote enduring successful outcomes for Indigenous people.

This participant's statement highlights the frustration that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel about allyship that does not adopt an anti-racist, action-orientated approach that brings about substantive change.

"Let's just call it the social justice or the social responsibility [policy approach]. You know, it is the new measuring stick. When you're engaging in employment in that way within general mainstream society, they're playing the same game, so what you will find is that both actors in that transaction and arrangement are playing each other.

"Because the minute that you impose a deficit discourse upon Aboriginal people that have throughout the entirety of their life scenarios to that point that they meet an organisation, have already had to identify, and navigate the deficit discourses perpetuated throughout just living in general society, end up stuck in a deficit [discourse] around being Blak.

You can make your workplace more sensitive to me if you do X, Y, And, here's all the sensitivities that we need to engage in because I'm armoured with a vocabulary and a degree and you need me to tick the boxes over here [so you can publicly say how good your policies are]. And this is the entire farce that's occurring, because the only reason why those [Aboriginal] people become eligible for those roles is because they've had exposure to these f***ing White systems intergenerationally through their families [to be able to be educated and gain official confirmation of Aboriginality]". – Aboriginal employee

Deficit discourse:
"A mode of thinking that frames and represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and failure." (Fforde et al. 2013)
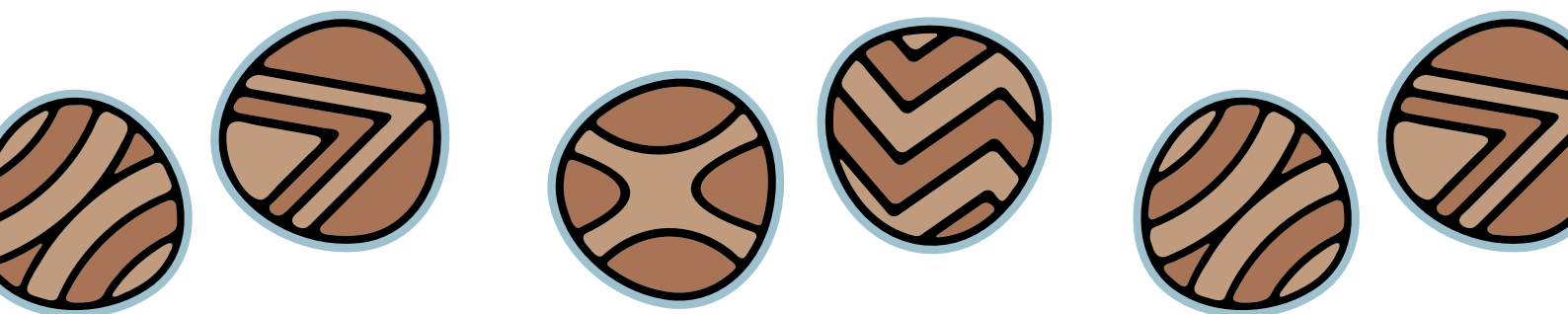
Lack of equity for Indigenous job seekers

Well-meaning non-Indigenous organisations and people are trying to assist some Indigenous job seekers and employees. However, these efforts do not go far enough to promote distributive justice to ensure that all people in this social cohort have access and equity to participants in employment opportunities.

Social justice policies sometimes unintentionally reinforce long-standing, institutionalised race inequality. The same participant went on to share how they take issue with structural and cultural failures that currently exist. They chose to share details of their own story to convey the gravity of structural race-based inequality and implicit racism in the education and employment sectors, noting:

> *"Both my parents didn't have that [access to White systems], so there was no work. Both my parents didn't finish school. I feed the stereotype at the other end of your f***ing deficit discourse of 'Closing the Gap'. So, I become ostracised, right? Because by the time I get to the organisation that's willing to hire, I can't jump through the hoops in the same way as everybody else can, because I can't even get to an interview. Right. Because I can't submit the résumé and the responses to your selection criteria because I've never had exposure. I've never had any of these sorts of things. Right? So, I might get picked up in some other form of, you know, community advancement projects or programs or through a school counsellor or, you know, a school, whatever they call them, careers advisor or whatever it might be. And they probably don't even recognise [the deficit discourse]. So yes, you've got a game occurring that possibly employers and management don't even realise [they are reinforcing]." – Aboriginal employee*

Mainstream policies in generalist employment and educational organisations are flawed because they have a series of white-approved criteria that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must first meet before they can engage and connect with the supportive programs and policies that aim to include this cohort.

The participant points out the social reality of exclusion: many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are simply unable to fulfil the mainstream prequalifying criteria necessary to engage mainstream organisations. These criteria are a form of bureaucratic violence because they require

Indigenous people to abide by Western terms rather than changing the terms of engagement the inequalities in the education and employment systems are continuously reproducing.

TAKEAWAY:

Many initiatives designed to help Indigenous employees and job seekers are inherently biased and perpetuate discrimination. Employers must do more to create genuinely secure, inclusive, and culturally safe workplaces for Indigenous employees.

Surface-level Indigenous policy

Carlson and Frazer (2021: 226) claim that if an ally has nothing at stake, Indigenous people have nothing to gain. Our participant shared similar views:

> *"HR generally get themselves caught up in spirals. And what you find with most organisations is that they're just engaging in busy work. We need them to do something, so let's create a new f***ing policy or let's create a new ribbon and a new day that we need to f***ing celebrate and let's have another morning tea. Right?*

> *"So, it's all busy f***ing work... what you've got now is the recognition that a RAP [Reconciliation Action Plan] will give you a certain positionality in the hierarchy amongst your peers of organisations that are doing things. It will afford you the privilege to display your Aboriginal sensitivities or whatever that might be. I guess my fear is that the majority of organisations engaging in this activity will not even recognise that this is the game that they're playing. They'll actually believe somewhere in their heart of hearts that they have a pure intent and they're just doing their best to help the Aborigines [sic], right?*

"Because the dominant construct does not afford them the time nor the education to be able to reflect upon themselves individually and remove themselves from the transactional nature of these day-to-day activities. They'll engage in their relationships at work, but they will not necessarily move each of those categories [between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people], be that the nature of work or a societal set of values.

"What we see, when we speak about Aboriginal employment in this game, is that it perpetuates an assimilationist engagement in the ways in which you translate and transition knowledge for the individual that's coming into those roles. And I'm not saying that [mainstream employers] all have to be in a space where they're trying to save the Aboriginals [sic]. Well, that's obviously the deficit discourse; that's not what we're asking." – Aboriginal employee

TAKEAWAY:

What is needed is substantive allyship underpinned by anti-racist approaches to attend to inequality. Merely employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people does not equate to successful allyship: in the workplace, proactive hiring processes that target Indigenous people do not shield Indigenous people from racism or racial violence.
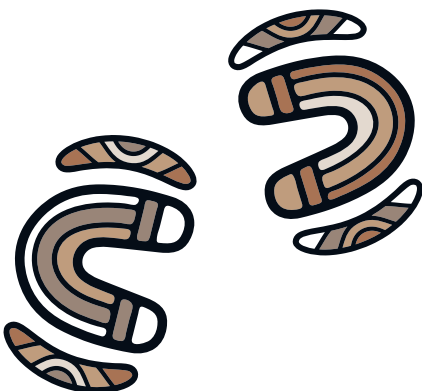
Intersectionality and lack of inclusivity

In many ways, race relations are simply being carried over from mainstream society into employment policy. One participant acknowledged that well-meaning non-Indigenous organisations and people are trying to assist Indigenous job seekers and employees.

While many of the study's participants enjoy being able to be employed in a profession of their choice – a privilege their parents and grandparents were not afforded – broadly, most participants discussed how success in their career does not make them immune to racial bias or discrimination.

Many participants shared that racism, intergenerational trauma, poverty, and gender biases had affected them. The effect that the dominance of Western ways and the exclusion and devaluing of Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being has had on them was also shared.

"I've been put up on this amazing pedestal from what I've been able to achieve. And then, you know, on the other hand, absolutely denigrated for, you know, daring to have a view or take a position on something, when somebody else's Aboriginality is seen as more valid than my own... it's a really interesting conundrum, and you see this in a lot of organisations and a lot of individuals, they'll go, they'll pick their pet right? Their little Blak pet and they'll go well this is the one that I like. This one's palatable for me." – Aboriginal employee

Participants highlighted that non-Indigenous people are predominantly unaware of the how their "normal" Western ways of doing business create difficulties, how the barriers Indigenous candidates and employees face remain unrecognised and that these issues are not being addressed and continue to occur.

According to Fowkes (2016), when Eurocentric policy and programs are imposed on Indigenous people, this cohort's economic, social and health outcomes are at risk or detrimentally impacted, as it deprives Indigenous people of choice and fair conditions.

Willis (2006) highlights that micro-aggressions in the workplace are common as Indigenous people experience culturally inappropriate encounters with non-Indigenous colleagues because culturally unsafe workplace conditions are prevalent.

Lack of workplace inclusion and advancement barriers

Indigenous employees and job seekers consistently reported that when they or individuals from similar backgrounds found themselves as the sole representatives within their organisation or unable to advance their career their likelihood of remaining in that environment diminished significantly.

This highlights a concerning trend where the absence of holistic policy, a supportive network or a limited sense of Indigenous inclusion and belonging can contribute to higher attrition rates among this cohort.

"I don't like saying this, but this seems to be a perception of Indigenous people [that is often held in mainstream workplaces] they are only good enough for entry-level jobs and that's where they'll only ever stay. So, 'We'll only ever bring you in as entry level, and that's where you stay because you know, because you'll probably leave. You're not going to stay. Your attendance is going to be poor.' Um, you know, I think there's already that preconception, but, you know, 'Look at us! We've brought someone [Aboriginal] in and filled that role!'" – Cultural Broker

"We've got 30,000 Indigenous employees, but they're all casual, do you know, they're all casual in entry level jobs. So, what are you doing to advance these people? Like what are you doing for their advancement? They should be progressing [Indigenous employees] through the business by now, not sitting on a checkout. Unless that's what they want to do. Those opportunities need to be provided to be able to retain as well." – Cultural Broker

"I think that there's definitely more to be done within that space, to support people whilst they're in the role and ramping up in their role." – Aboriginal employee

"I need to work in a workplace that values me as an Aboriginal woman… that supports my journey in terms of giving me opportunities… so like upskilling in the workplace… I feel like as soon as I felt, if I felt stagnant in a role, I'd leave." – Aboriginal employee

"I think I want to be sure that I am in a job where they are not just like employing an Aboriginal to just employ me for that. I don't want to be the [only] one there. I want to be there working with people like me." – Aboriginal job seeker

TAKEAWAY:

Recognising the importance of creating inclusive and diverse workplaces becomes imperative to foster an environment where Indigenous employees feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

No collaboration with Indigenous people in policy making

Another barrier to meaningful employment for Indigenous Australians is the rejection of non-Western values and ways of being, doing and knowing in mainstream organisations.

Genevieve et al (2018) note that poorly designed and implemented programs are frequently rolled out, and while these aim to improve conditions, given they have not been developed in collaboration with the Indigenous people they impact, there are key elements missing that hinder their effectiveness.

For instance, Cultural Safety and the ability to integrate work, life, and care responsibilities within the communities in which they work and live can be negatively affected due to lack of effective support from management and lack of appropriate training, supervision, and mentoring. These are elements identified as workplace barriers by both Willis (2006) and Genevieve et al (2018).

Surface-level rather than integrated participatory approaches can cause harm by isolating or stigmatising Indigenous employees with 'set and forget' targeted policy initiatives.

"There's also a lot of questions around, you know, starting to create these new policies, that just sort of isolate and are specific for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people... some organisations would benefit from starting to look at things from more of a diverse and inclusive perspective rather than continuing to create standalone things." – ASME Manager

Similarly, the Productivity Commission (2020), Carlson and Frazer (2021) and Daly et al (2013) note there have been varying degrees of success achieved by new policy initiatives; they caution that well-meaning efforts can do harm when policy and programs that impact on this cohort are not developed, evaluated and refined in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

TAKEAWAY:

By recognising and addressing this exclusionary dynamic, we can work towards fostering greater inclusivity and understanding, ultimately enabling Indigenous individuals to thrive within diverse organisational contexts.

SECTION 4

What employers can do

How to remedy disparities in Indigenous employment outcomes

Indigenous participants shared that they look for **culturally affirming** employment opportunities and will remain working within **culturally safe spaces** that enable them to be able to bring their whole cultural self to work.

Participants are attracted to working within organisations that demonstrate a **genuine commitment to Indigenous employment** and partnership opportunities.

Indigenous people who have established themselves as leaders in their field, explained that they are attracted to working within mainstream organisations that have **Indigenous mentors** and **employee networks that support people in the post-onboarding phase.**

When participants observe this in mainstream organisations, they are inclined to adopt the view that being employed in such a setting promotes sustained engagement in employment.

> *"For me, well if you pop onto [a potential employer's] website, you can see that they're doing something for the community, whether it's, you know, they're giving back, or they promote a charity, or they've got some sort of connection to the community. It would absolutely be important for me." – Aboriginal employee*

43% of participants said that standalone Indigenous recruiting measures did not go far enough to break down barriers.

43%
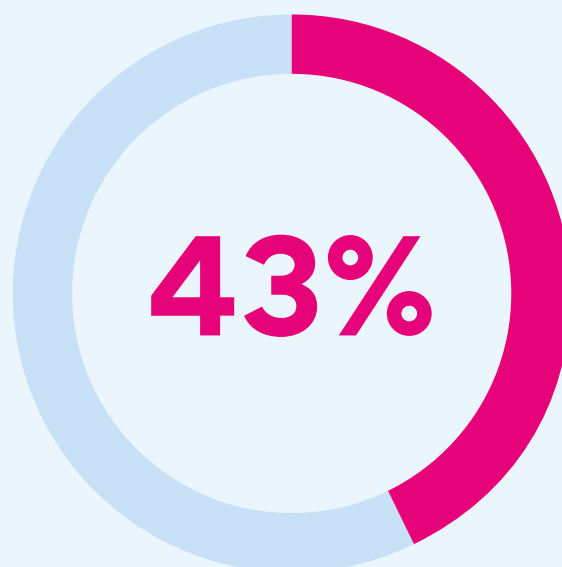
Create an inclusive and culturally safe workplace, with ongoing support measures for Indigenous employees

Participants were unequivocal in calling for authentic progressive workplace measures and stressed how workplaces need to invest in supporting Indigenous employees with meaningful measures that promote retention and professional growth.

Indigenous talent, people who have refined and established themselves as leaders in their field, explained that they are attracted to working within mainstream organisations that have Indigenous mentors and employee networks that support people in the post-onboarding phase.

"It's a good thing I think if you know that other Mob are working there or if they've been there for a long time. It's always a plus if people showcase culture onsite at a workplace or have opportunities for secondments and volunteering opportunities – those sorts of things where people can actually put their hand up and get involved in bringing their experience." – Aboriginal employee

"I think that to help Mob feel a lot more comfortable and confident going through the application processes for a particular job, you could also look at testimonials... like a video testimonial. Reading written testimonials, I don't really know if that's a true testimonial. I don't know if a company has just written that and said that it's from a First Nations staff member. I would actually like to visually see somebody speak to their experiences." – Aboriginal employee

"What needs to be done to support young ones coming in and not just coming in, staying in and growing in their roles [is] just to be able to be themselves – to be Blak, to use their ways of knowing, doing and being that we do always do anyway." – Aboriginal employee

"Aboriginal people will stay working for an organisation where they feel like they're culturally safe, that there is genuine commitment, and genuine commitment could mean there's no tokenism, things are done in a genuine way, like the celebration of key events like NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week. But it's not just contained to those weeks, you're seeing an appreciation for culture and history throughout the year." – ASME Manager

"Having strong mentoring programs can also be appealing so someone feels like they are coming into a workforce where they have got that little bit of support as well. From my observations, there's a massive drive to actually recruit Aboriginal people on a project. They have mentoring that supports them through that in those beginning stages. And then as soon as that's finished, they step away, there's no ongoing mentoring through someone's entire employment, it's just for a moment in time." – Aboriginal employee

Engage Cultural Brokers to improve cross-cultural communication and develop sustained connections with the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Indigenous participants expressed the need for support from other Indigenous colleagues. Non-Indigenous colleagues tended to lack the lived experiences and nuanced cross-cultural understandings required to adequately support Indigenous employees.

ASMEs and Cultural Brokers conveyed advice to generalist organisations which was found to align with earlier recommendations from Australian scholars and researchers (Moss, et al 2013; VPSC, 2019; ASPC, 2021; Hunter, Markey, and Barnes, 2021). In their own words Cultural Brokers and Indigenous entrepreneurs who are breaking new ground as leaders in the private and community-controlled sectors shared recommendations to support and bolster Indigenous employment, Cultural Safety, and accession in mainstream organisations.

"[Non-Indigenous workers] don't have the relationships; they don't have the social capital. I think it's about having that lived experience, [especially in] small communities. People have those relationships with those Indigenous workers, not just on a professional level, but actually on a personal level. So, I believe that Indigenous people have more influence and leverage than a non-Indigenous person. We have a better understanding of the barriers that are keeping us from employment. You know...this is about knowing your culture, knowing your community."
– Indigenous participant

This research finding is consistent with claims by Maru and Davis (2011) and Willis' (2006) studies which found that Indigenous brokers can support people to onboard at work and to navigate cross-cultural communication difficulties in the workplace. Aboriginal Cultural Brokerage is successfully delivered when local Indigenous people work in organisations within their own communities, as these are trusted and known people who have specialised knowledge (Willis, 2006) who can extend support in appropriate ways to other Indigenous people.

However, the efficacy of Aboriginal Cultural Brokerage is reduced when organisations adopt portability practices and view that Aboriginal Cultural Brokers' social capital can be easily transferred into and across settings. Young et al (2013) and Flood (2019) advise that Indigenous knowledge cannot be collapsed into a whole; it is a diverse, living knowledge and practices are context specific. In simple terms: evidence-based best practice approaches indicate that **Cultural Brokers need to be from the communities the Indigenous employees they support live and work within.**

Willis' (2006) findings mirrors the approach recommended by this study's Cultural Brokers' insights: non-Indigenous people need to recognise that Aboriginal people cannot just enter into a community in which they do not belong, they too have to observe and respect Aboriginal community protocols – something that also applies to non-Indigenous people who wish to engage and form partnerships with Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Adopt Indigenous ways of doing, being and knowing in the workplace

The relevance of mainstream organisations embedding Indigenous ways of doing, being and knowing in the workplace was also raised by this participant group. The importance of cultural awareness and inclusivity at work was noted as a factor that will attract and support the retention of Indigenous talent and a key element to promote this is supporting the (re)production and representations of Indigenous culture in the workplace.

The participants noted this is a gap that could be addressed with non-Indigenous people being up-skilled and committed to improving cross-cultural communication. This would generate improvements in workplace culture as there would be a better intercultural understanding.

This highlights the importance of **ongoing respectful engagement and the development of meaningful cross-cultural connections with Indigenous peoples, organisations, and communities.**

The participants emphasise the need for reciprocal relationships and stress the interconnection between knowing, doing, and being. It is crucial to continuously cultivate respectful relationships in order to achieve substantive allyship, which can lead to meaningful changes addressing Indigenous social justice issues and promoting diversity and inclusion.

The findings of this study align with and support Carlson and Frazer's (2021) research, which argues that allyship is not a noun or a passive state but requires active engagement. Organisations often initiate engagement but fail to maintain relationships with Indigenous stakeholders; or develop policies and tools that claim to promote Indigenous social and economic justice but fail to follow through with meaningful action.

Therefore, the study emphasises the need for non-Indigenous individuals and organisations to go beyond being allies and actively become anti-racist actors. It is not enough to have knowledge or good intentions; meaningful action aligned with Indigenous aspirations is essential for respectful cross-cultural communication and connection.

> **" Allyship is not a noun or a passive state but requires active engagement.**

Stand in the Aboriginal person's shoes with a people-centred approach. Look at recruiting, workplace environment, and organisational policy from an Indigenous perspective.

Participant Cultural Brokers and Indigenous entrepreneurs shared recommendations with us for supporting and bolstering Indigenous employment, Cultural Safety, and accession in mainstream organisations. In the spirit of reconciliation and as part of their cultural and social obligation and responsibility to care for others in their community, they shared that:

> *"It's about creating the environment first... You can't even get to [Indigenous] recruitment unless you've considered attraction." – ASME Manager*

> *"There's a point before recruitment [where you need to be] actually trying to look through the lens of an Aboriginal person and go what would actually make our place of business somewhere that they would feel like is a good place to work." – ASME Manager*

These statements align with recommendations that the Productivity Commission (2020) that state continuous improvement measures involving Aboriginal stakeholders in the evaluation of Aboriginal policy and program initiatives help to engage and build stronger partnerships between organisations, and non-Indigenous and Indigenous stakeholders. However, Moss et al (2013) like some participants in this study recommended that a strategic approach is also necessary, such as considering:

> *"What does your online appearance say to Aboriginal people and communities? What do you take a stand on publicly? What images and types of language do you use on your website or any of your external facing documentation?" – ASME Manager*

> *"Leadership can make or break an organisation. [For] attainment of staff, employees need great leaders. Anyone can tick a box for diversity but if they don't have proper inclusion, creating safe spaces, having the right kind of policies that offer fair and equitable rights to people, it will not work out." – ASME Manager*

Moss et al (2013) state that leaders should champion cultural diversity and inclusive recruitment and employment programs for Indigenous people. Leading by providing resources, support and putting forward written statements of commitment encourages all employees to embrace inclusive and progressive socially responsible practices. These declarations are likely to signal that there is a values alignment that will attract Indigenous candidates.

> *"I think that's what sets us apart: I think we care more about people as humans and how we relate and how we're connected to them. Western contexts, it's about title, job description and hierarchy... [but]... we allow people to bring their whole self to work and that's people focused." – ASME Manager*

These recommendations are consistent with long standing calls made by McPhee et al (1992) and Mor Barak and Daya (2013) who note that inclusive workplace structures and groups that are specifically established to assist Aboriginal people in the workplace are effective because they create socially supportive environments and are able to breakdown the sense of social isolation that this cohort feel when working within generalist organisations.

The participants' statements above consider how attraction and retention are closely linked to maintaining ongoing formal and informal social connections and ensuring "proper inclusion", which from an Indigenous standpoint involves deeper understanding from the perspective of Indigenous people: learning from this cohort about how to generate safe spaces is the first step is offering fair conditions and being able to making reasonable adjustments that will respond to people's needs.

Be clear on what you can offer in your EVP to Indigenous employees

Mainstream organisations have a significant opportunity to unlock a host of benefits by cultivating and honing Indigenous EVPs.

By prioritising inclusivity, diversity, and flexibility, these organisations can foster an environment that nurtures innovation and problem-solving capabilities. In doing so, they not only enhance their connectivity with Indigenous communities but also bolster their reputation as ethical and socially responsible enterprises that prioritise their people. This mutually beneficial approach allows organisations to leverage and build capacity while reaping the rewards of enhanced engagement, loyalty, and a positive brand image.

"What are your current Aboriginal employment numbers? Do you have a RAP? You're not going to attract anybody if you haven't actually self-assessed and looked at all of these things and go: 'Have we actually got it right?'" – ASME Manager

"You need to actively promote access to professional development because Indigenous employees want to work for organisations that value and recognise them." – Cultural Broker

"I think when Blakfellas are looking at an organisation, they want to look from the outside and go, hey, these people have taken a stand publicly about Indigenous affairs... [because] we want to see a [shared] values alignment." – Cultural Broker

Harness the power of Indigenous social and community networks. Maintain genuine ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities

The findings from this research show Indigenous peoples rely heavily on their own Indigenous social and community networks when seeking employment opportunities. Participants expressed that when mainstream organisations are at the start of their journey into attracting Indigenous talent the Indigenous community would initially be cautious and would need to understand what is driving the new approach.

"When you have got organisations going into the space [of Indigenous recruitment], it's always met with scepticism from Mob going, 'What's your real motivation here?' It's a real thing that [organisations] need to tackle." – ASME Manager

How best to communicate opportunities about work was the most common theme discussed by participants in this study. The analysis of the data indicates that this theme was raised on over 140 occasions during the yarning sessions.

The researchers found that **communicating employment opportunities is a social practice that has become Indigenised, embedded with collectivist cultural obligations**, and is characterised by protective measures that have developed to limit the risk associated with exclusion and institutional racism that this cohort experience.

"Being used as a Blakepedia, there's all these problems that are associated with that. So yeah, you have to be careful." – Aboriginal Employee

If a company is known to be culturally safe and inclusive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, Indigenous social networks are likely to on-refer. Conversely, employees will be warned against employment opportunities within companies that have a poor reputation for cultural safety and inclusivity. In these circumstances there is a deep reluctance to engage.

> *"You know, the Blak telegraph is real. Everyone knows, you know, everyone knows it [if it's a good place to work]." – Cultural Broker*

> *"You hear about [employment] opportunities... If there's a good opportunity, you're happy to share it with people." – Aboriginal Employee*

A Cultural Broker discussed the efficacy of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' social networks, and provided a fuller understanding of how employment information is shared within and across communities, explaining that:

> *"[In the] Indigenous space... so it's just an email for them [to Indigenous people who are well known within the community], they send it out and it goes to all these people. And they're just, you know, the Blakfella grape vine, and just, just branches out from there." – Cultural Broker*

These findings concur with AIHW (2012), Gray and Hunter (2005) and Maru and Davis (2011) who found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples utilise their Indigenous social connections to learn about employment opportunities. AIHW (2012) research identified that 71 per cent of unemployed Indigenous candidates depended on the inter-personal social connections with family and friends when obtaining information about employment opportunities.
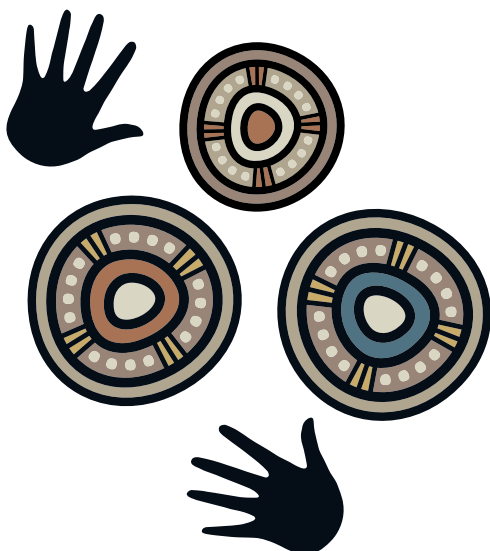
Use culturally appropriate language and images in job advertisements and on company websites

The importance of being able to access relevant opportunities identifiable by culturally appropriate language and content being included online was raised by participants as being an important factor. When using online platforms to search for employment, the language and images used in the advertisements and on company websites are crucial in conveying the Cultural Safety and inclusivity of a role and a company.

Those companies that use inclusive language and images are more likely to be considered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Conversely, advertisements and position descriptions that fail to use inclusive language and images are often avoided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

> *"It's just the language, like sometimes you just look at some of the job ads and you go, Oh, God, here we go." – Aboriginal Employee*

> *When considering an advertised role online, an Aboriginal Manager stated for a role to be enticing, companies should be: "Blakening up the website." – Cultural Broker*

> *An Aboriginal Manager suggested that companies needed to firstly assess: "What images and types of language [they] use... on [their] website or any of [their] external facing documentation?" – ASME Manager*

> *An Aboriginal Employee discussed the use of inclusive language and images in promoting companies and employment opportunities to Indigenous candidates, noting that: "It's even just kind of acknowledging the area that, you know, it is going to be based, and what land it's on. Those sorts of things. It just kind of sets the tone, I suppose, for what sort of organisation it's going to be. It" going to be quite welcoming, quite open, and it just makes people feel more comfortable." – Aboriginal employee*

> *"Say at the very bottom, of [the advertisement] 'we're an equal opportunity employer... and we welcome all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applications'." – Aboriginal Employee*

Summary of learnings

Key actions employers can take

Create a culturally safe environment for Indigenous people

Stand in an Aboriginal person's shoes: take an empathetic, people-centred approach

Be clear in your EVP for Indigenous employees

Ensure there is equal and equitable access to professional development opportunities and leadership growth for Indigenous employees

Inclusive leadership

Genuine ongoing commitment and support

Harness the power of Indigenous social and community networks

Maintain genuine ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities

Use culturally appropriate language and images in job advertisements and on company websites

Building new connections and bolstering engagement

How SEEK can improve job searching for Indigenous people

An overview of Indigenous peoples' experiences with, and perceptions of, SEEK

All of the respondents in this study self-identified that they had digital competency skills. While some people stressed that the digital divide is an issue within the Indigenous community, and that for some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in their family and the communities to which they belong literacy skill difficulties may hinder or prevent online job seeking activity, these are not issues that this cohort identified as being a barrier for them personally.

Among the participant group the level of engagement to respond to SEEK job advertisements and the confidence in being able to navigate the SEEK job advertisements varies. This is a surprising finding as this cohort is a group who indicate that they had both sound digital competency skills and a strong inclination to maintain and grow long-term careers in the employment market.

Most respondents (n = 12/14) discussed how they are aware of the SEEK job board advertisements and have engaged with the SEEK online platform in the past. Among the participant group only five participants had yet to engage with the SEEK website or any of SEEK's resources.

While most participants noted that they are, or had been in the past, attracted to look at SEEK job advertisements, this study found that among this

cohort the use of SEEK tools was underutilised. Some participants shared that when they had engaged with the SEEK platform, they found that the content was useful to help them to understand industry trends in the broader employment market.

SEEK is a tool that some participants draw on to assess if they are being remunerated fairly in their current role commensurate with their skills and experience.

There were some participants who strongly endorsed the SEEK platform.

> *"I love the search. Like the functionality to be able to search in different areas and things like that."*
> *– ASME Manager*

> *"I've used SEEK to recruit for jobs, myself. And it's been a very straightforward process."*
> *– ASME Manager*

> *"SEEK is my go-to if I was looking for work."*
> *– Aboriginal Employee*

A Cultural Broker who self-identified as a SEEK champion and current SEEK user explained that they felt there are benefits to using mainstream online job board platforms to connect to organisations that are recruiting.

> *"SEEK's brilliant... at my level and the roles that I would be looking for, definitely SEEK [is what I use]."*
> *– Cultural Broker*

Another Cultural Broker and SEEK proponent who is very strategic in their career planning explained that they use SEEK tools to benefit other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the community and to grow access to career opportunities for themself:

> *"I use it all the time. I've actually set – it's a habit that I got into when I was working in employment [placement] – I set alerts for words for key phrases like 'Indigenous', 'First Nations', 'Aboriginal'. So that I get alerted [to] all the jobs that are out there...with those things in their title... I know what's going on in the market. [But] I don't know if I set [the parameters correctly]. I didn't know what the parameters were that I set at the time... in terms of like level of seniority or whatever it might be. I think I've just kept [them] quite broad so that I also find out about movements in the market as well.*
>
> *"It's really good. Particularly, you know, when you're trying to keep your pulse on organisations in the market or what's shifting in the space. Like where are they actually investing in, in terms of their RAP or whatever? Because you'll see these roles pop up which are like their new first identified whatever thing [an organisation might be now driving to promote Indigenous employment]."*
> *– Cultural Broker*

Often participants in this study conveyed they had been past users of SEEK services:

> *"I don't really [use SEEK] that much anymore. But yeah, I would always use SEEK. SEEK is how I got my first job. Yeah, I recall when I've used them, they were fairly user friendly. I mean, being able to use the filters was helpful in terms of location and salary expectations." – Aboriginal Employee*

While these are encouraging findings, it is important to recognise and explore why the SEEK resources are not being utilised to their fullest potential among this group.

Issues deterring Indigenous people from using SEEK

Understanding and addressing current gaps in the SEEK offering has the potential to engage and better serve this cohort in the community and break down barriers to Indigenous employment.

Despite people being aware of SEEK, and most participants having used the platform to search for job opportunities, only two participants indicated that they had used SEEK tools for purposes other than job seeking.

Interestingly, while there is a strong understanding that SEEK is a resource that could help people to connect to employment opportunities and further their career, most people indicated they do not consistently apply to the jobs SEEK and their partners are advertising.

Also, while many participants indicated that they had used SEEK previously (n = 9/14), most qualified that they choose not to use SEEK regularly or refer people to roles SEEK is advertising. Rather, this cohort has chosen to favour applying for roles or on-referring people to employment roles that they know are culturally suitable and safe. The importance of being able to easily identify and access opportunities in organisations that are known and verified as culturally safe workplaces was raised by participants.

Furthermore, the employed participants were inclined to express that they feel comfortable finding jobs in the field and geographical area they are interested in working in, yet among young job seekers, this is not the case. Young job seekers – people who are digitally capable and have used the SEEK tools – noted that when they did use the SEEK platform, they had difficulty narrowing down a search to return relevant advertisements.

The table below conveys factors that drive low levels of engagement and use of SEEK tools and resources among the participants.

Deterrents to using SEEK

Navigating and narrowing job advertisements on SEEK is not easy for everyone.

Job advertisements and/or position descriptions are not culturally affirming

Job advertisements are not consistently designed with nor conveying content that will attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as they lack cultural images, and appropriate and relevant language, and art is mostly omitted from job advertisements

As SEEK does not measure or rate the degree of Cultural Safety capability that their partners have achieved, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people cannot differentiate which organisations are or are not culturally safe spaces. This cohort will avoid engaging with organisations if they are not known to be culturally safe spaces/places.

Recommendations for SEEK from the yarnings

The points below reflect suggestions that emerged during the yarning sessions, regarding actions SEEK can take to demonstrate respect for Indigenous cultures, acknowledgement of First Nations peoples deep connection to Country, and to enhance online job advertisements and position descriptions to attract Blak talent.

The following statements convey recommendations put forward by the Managers/Owner Operators of ASMEs within the participant group. These initial vignettes and those that follow note some of the difficulties that are encountered by young job seekers and by gainfully employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when using SEEK:

"They [SEEK] could enhance features so that you could identify yourself as an Indigenous business recruiting or identify yourself as an Indigenous applicant." – ASME Manager

"[SEEK could] provide extra services to an Indigenous business to make it easier, like support to help write an ad, support to help write job descriptions." – ASME Manager

"To be able to type the word Aboriginal and then have to filter through a lot of things that would be like, you know, that would simplify the process a lot so that when people were popping their job opportunities up there, they could actually select that. So yeah, that would be more attractive." – ASME Manager

"People might be able to select Country [Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander] or something like that when they're actually applying for roles or looking for jobs." – ASME Manager

One participant indicated that SEEK could be an innovator and address this gap by having their partners rated and ranked against a Cultural Safety framework. This would allow potential Indigenous applicants to see the level that workplaces demonstrate the capability to provide a Culturally Safe workplace environment. As discussed in the vignette below by a Manager/Owner Operator of an ASME having a cultural safety rating system could attract Indigenous talent and drive businesses that partner with SEEK to build capacity for cultural safety so they could gain the right to display a tick of approval if they met best practice Cultural Safety standards:

"SEEK could probably do some groundbreaking stuff in trying to, you know, assist other organisations with Cultural Safety... you wouldn't want someone going to an organisation when they weren't culturally safe, but there might be other things in the background that people might be able to select, I don't know, around Cultural Safety. You know, 'Has your organisation or does your organisation undertake cultural awareness?' and give them like a little, you know, like on a LinkedIn profile, an Instagram profile when you get the little blue tick or something like that, like maybe that could be some sort of [verification]. Yeah. You know, and that might make people feel a little bit more comfortable to be applying." – ASME Manager

SEEK recommendations distilled from the study

The following recommendations have been developed for SEEK and its partners. They are intended to be used as a guide for building capacity for effective Indigenous partnerships and substantive allyship to promote Indigenous social justice initiatives.

The content in this section is empirically and analytically informed: it is based on the insights shared by participants and evidence-based practice strategies recommended by practitioners and scholars who specialise in Indigenous recruitment, employment, engagement, and community development.

Invest in ongoing development of organisational and individual cultural competency

It is important that individuals and organisations understand that cultural humility is cultivated through ongoing learning across the lifespan. Learning though "doing" builds knowledge for practice and is a key element of respectful Indigenous engagement. Being in sustained meaningful and respectful relationships with Indigenous people, organisations and communities promotes capacity development at an organisational level and cross-cultural practice wisdom among non-Indigenous people.

By becoming a leader and promoting Indigenous employment, businesses are better able to attract, retain and grow a pool of talented Indigenous professionals. Increasing Indigenous employment is likely to return positive economic impacts as it will contribute to economic development within Indigenous communities.

Include non-Western approaches and values such as Indigenised ways of knowing, doing and being

By committing to decolonising processes, businesses can help reduce socio-economic disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. this indicates more inclusivity and equity and demonstrates an acknowledgement of why it is important to do business in a socially responsible way. This approach shows commitment to being anti-oppressive and upholding safe work practices and cultures that support a diverse workplace. Organisations that incorporate Indigenous ways of doing, being and knowing are more likely to attract and retain this cohort.

Create an inclusive and diverse workplace that offers culturally responsive and affirming support

This will enhance employee satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty. Having a diverse talent pool within an enterprise promotes innovation as diverse perspectives and experiences among culturally cognisant professionals encourages creative and critical thinking, effective problem solving and decision-making processes. Collectively these factors are likely to drive improvements in business outcomes.

Become known as a genuine ally

This bolsters business reach as it is a positive driver of fostering a positive reputation in the market, this adds value to a business' brand and their market position as it builds brand loyalty.

Work with subject matter experts to develop culturally appropriate and affirming content for the online space

When using online platforms to search for employment, the language and images used in the advertisements and on company websites are crucial in conveying the Cultural Safety and inclusivity of a role and a company.

Roll out Cultural Competency Training

Record how it is promoted and circulated within the organisation to encourage staff to reflect on past and present treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Tracking educational material promotes commitment and transparency about how organisations are encouraging employees to have honest conversations about situational conditions that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the state of disparity that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Evaluating this material and how it is distributed will provide insight into the strength of commitment to promoting Indigenous social justice initiatives.

Develop a cultural engagement framework (CEF)

Work with Indigenous Cultural Brokers to create organisational policy on mechanism to ensure vision, priorities and processes recognise and reflect diversity.

Assess the CEF with stakeholder engagement mapping tools

Measure and evaluate if a full representation of Indigenous stakeholders is being engaged with during consultation processes to account for if there has been a full inclusion of a diversity of Indigenous community voices. Assess if engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities is expanding or contracting over time.

Develop an understanding of Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing

Create these through engagement, consultation and training, and embed them within SEEK BAU. Encourage partners to do the same.

Ask Indigenous stakeholders how best to communicate with them

Commission feedback from Indigenous stakeholders about their experience of engaging with SEEK to develop an in-depth understanding of what is and is not working well. By actively generating feedback, SEEK and its partners can learn from Indigenous stakeholders if they feel their cultural preferences and values are upheld when they interact, engage, or do business with them.

Develop thought leadership content for SEEK partners

To provide insights into opportunities to create more accessible and culturally safe workplaces, informed by the Literature Review and the findings of this study.

Audit/analyse existing recruitment practices

Highlight areas that Euro-Western views may negatively impact on Indigenous job seekers (combination of unconscious bias and cultural competency training).

Develop a style guide for Aboriginal-identified opportunities

To consistently particularise recruitment wording to allow Aboriginal-identified opportunities to be easily identified and tracked.

Implement and record who delivers the Acknowledgement of Country (AOC) message on meeting minutes

It is a sign of respect to First Nations people. Special event itineraries should make a record of the Traditional Owners who performed Welcome to Country during significant Aboriginal events. A 'comply or explain why' system would provide insight into how to address the omission of culturally appropriate practices being a BAU process.

Do not contribute to Cultural Load

Ensure that the organisation of significant Aboriginal events within the workplace is not placed solely on Aboriginal staff as it contributes to Cultural Load. It is important that non-Indigenous people respect and partner with Aboriginal people to promote and celebrate Indigenous culture within their organisation and the community.

Explore Cultural Brokerage in appropriate communities

Note this takes time and effort to cultivate relationships with key community members who have influence in community. Cultivate meaningful and reciprocal relationships with communities local to where the organisation operates.

Implement flexible employment conditions

Enable WFH to facilitate working On Country if/when required, provide flexible working arrangements to allow for caring and community responsibilities.

Provide access to driver training

And support job seekers to gain a license, if needed.

Explore how SEEK might support digital inclusion for job seekers

Whether through enhanced search functions, inclusive language or other measures.

Implement cultural supervision and mentoring for Hirers/HR leads

Also for those who would be managing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.

Advocate for the implementation of spaces/groups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Offer spaces where Indigenous employees and stakeholders can engage with each other and develop networks in the workplace (e.g. employee resource or action groups). And allow opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to self-identify within the workplace.

Make a public commitment to implementing diversity and inclusion measures within the workplace

(e.g. Indigenous employment and procurement targets, and leadership programs). Consider making public commitments to support/endorse/advocate for key Indigenous issues and the Closing the Gap initiatives.

Engage with Indigenous-owned businesses

Endeavour to understand how Indigenous organisations create and ensure culturally safe workplaces.

Implement symbolic representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture throughout the organisation

For instance, through AOC plaques, artwork, AOCs on website and email signatures, displays of significant artefacts/documents. Including culturally appropriate Indigenous images, art and language supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural reclamation processes and contributes to an unsettling of Western workplaces which have a long history of excluding Indigenous peoples and their diverse cultures. Inclusive workspaces endorse cultural equity: including Indigenous imagery and language furthers the cross-cultural learning and connection processes, supports a sense of belonging and pride among Indigenous stakeholders and reciprocal understanding that Indigenous people are welcome in the workplace.

Note: always ensure you undertake the appropriate consultations to seek approvals to use language etc.

Study limitations and potential for further research

This study included the views and experiences of Indigenous people from across Australia. The researchers had aimed to connect with Indigenous people from each state and territory, however this was not realised. Although the participant group was diverse, due to the time limitations we were unable to achieve this goal. It is recommended that ongoing Indigenous led consultation processes and ethically approved research conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continues to occur.

We highlight the opportunity that learning from self-identified Cultural Brokers presents. SEEK and its partners should collaborate with Aboriginal Cultural Brokers and continue to learn from them. Aboriginal Cultural Brokers have in-depth place-based knowledge that can provide nuanced cultural understanding and support cultural sensitivity, help build relationships and trust, support retention efforts and ongoing productive relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Working with this group, either during consultation and/ or research and/or during ongoing evaluation processes would allow SEEK and its partners to measure the extent of positive effects any new practices, policies, interventions, or change making initiatives may have. It has been well documented that to achieve effective and sustainable change making processes and to develop a deeper understanding of the place-based needs emerging in differing Indigenous communities, non-Indigenous people and organisations must first partner and work with Indigenous people.

It is through ongoing partnerships and working together that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can work towards reconciliation, achieving common

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APPENDIX: Methodology

The findings, insights and recommendations presented in this report have originated from the lived experiences of participants: (n = 18) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers and employees, (n = 4) non-Indigenous recruiters from generalist organisations that currently have a relationship with SEEK and which aim to attract Indigenous candidates, and a survey of worklife balance studies. Importantly, within the Indigenous participant group insights from subject matter experts who identified as Aboriginal Cultural Brokers (n = 4) and Aboriginal Small and Medium Enterprise (ASME) owners were generated. Knowledge was specifically sought from these groups as they have a nuanced understanding of what is required to work in culturally responsive and affirming ways with Indigenous job seekers and employees.

This research involved applying an Aboriginal-led Indigenous Participatory Action Research (IPAR) approach and utilised Indigenised research methods. The study was carefully planned with a range of Indigenous organisations and people providing input to ensure that it was ethically developed and aligned with community aspirations and expectations.

The methodology processes outlined in Ethics Application can assist SEEK and its partners to understand how to collaborate, consult and do research with this cohort to learn from Indigenous people in the future in a way that upholds Indigenous rights to self-determination and Indigenous data sovereignty. We highlight here that yarning-style interview and focus group methods were used in this study with Indigenous participants. Deploying yarning methods involved the processes of listening deeply and learning through connecting (Bin et al, 2021; Walker et al, 2018). Yarning modalities are underpinned by Indigenous values, ethics and relational practices (Walker et al, 2014: 1218). Applying yarning methods aligns with culturally affirming grass roots level research approaches as they involve sharing power and providing opportunities for Indigenous participants, groups and communities to communicate with the researchers, respond, engage and participate within the broader research processes as they see fit.

By using Indigenous research methods and seeding, and growing community support a diverse participant group was formed organically and the research processes supported participants to generously share their knowledge throughout the study. Data gained from yarning modalities was richly detailed and provided an in-depth contextualised understanding of the participants' perceptions, views and experiences. In this way TPC's Aboriginal researchers were privy to Indigenous peoples' own stories. TPC followed Tuhiwai-Smith's (2021: 190) recommendations that to further decolonise Indigenous research we must begin by learning and respond with open minds and critical engagement by "taking notice of the language and discourse used by Indigenous communities to control their own messages... to identify what people are yearning for while they engage in work that requires intense individual and collective emotional labour and sacrifice". In this way TPC were able to learn and share how the barriers to employment and the solutions that Indigenous people foresee to remedy the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous economic participation can be actively and meaningfully addressed. Accordingly, this research was able to achieve the following aims.

Aboriginal led Indigenous participatory action research