

Section one

# Approaches to culturally safe Aboriginal employment

Information Pack:  
Aboriginal  
Culturally  
Responsive  
Recruitment in  
Early Education



## Why is it important to respect Aboriginal cultures and support self-determination in employment?

Respecting Aboriginal cultures and supporting self-determination in employment is vital for building workplaces that are inclusive, culturally safe, and genuinely responsive to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples.



### What is self-determination?

Self-determination means enabling Aboriginal peoples to lead and make decisions about matters that affect their lives, careers, and Communities.

### Key principles of self-determination

- Aboriginal peoples must have the power to influence decisions that affect their careers and workplace experiences.
- Valuing cultural knowledge, Community ties, and lived experiences as assets in the workplace.
- Truth-telling, acknowledgment of colonisation and systemic racism, and respect for Aboriginal knowledge are foundational to genuine inclusion.
- Respecting the right of Aboriginal peoples to lead in matters that affect their Communities and employment outcomes.
- Embedding Aboriginal voices and leadership in decision-making, policies, and strategies.
- Aboriginal peoples should be represented across all levels of an organisation, with clear pathways for career progression and opportunities to build leadership capabilities.
- There should be space to develop and implement culturally relevant models of working, ensuring that Aboriginal people's voices are heard and influence decision-making processes.
- Organisations are encouraged to put in place formal cultural governance structures that are properly resourced, supported by leadership, and integrated into core business operations.

## What does Aboriginal cultural safety mean in the workplace?

Aboriginal cultural safety in the workplace means creating an environment where Aboriginal employees feel respected, valued, and able to be their full selves without fear of discrimination, bias, or cultural harm. It involves actively identifying and addressing power imbalances, systemic racism, and unconscious bias across all stages of the employment journey—from recruitment and onboarding to professional development and leadership pathways.


Aboriginal cultural safety is not a one-off training session; it is an ongoing commitment to learning, listening, and adapting workplace practices to ensure inclusion and respect for Aboriginal cultures and experiences.

- Every step in employment—from job advertising to onboarding and leadership development—must be culturally safe for Aboriginal peoples and free from racism and bias.
- Aboriginal cultural safety is defined by the people receiving the experience, not those providing it.
- Safe environments are maintained through ongoing reflection, learning, accountability, and cultural competency at all organisational levels.

### Here are some ideas

- Work in a way that acknowledges and upholds Aboriginal cultural practices and values, including the principle of self-determination—doing things our way, on our terms.

- Engage meaningfully with Aboriginal Communities to ensure that the organisation's work aligns with Community-identified priorities and needs.
- Ensure Aboriginal staff are meaningfully represented in leadership roles and included in key decision-making processes.
- Embed cultural protocols into the everyday life of the organisation, such as incorporating Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of Country, and smoking ceremonies at events and meetings. Reflect on how all staff are involved. Are Aboriginal staff carrying too much of this responsibility? Are non-Aboriginal staff stepping up to support and take initiative where appropriate?
- Actively support and participate in Aboriginal cultural events such as NAIDOC Week, the National Apology anniversary, and Reconciliation Week. Encourage all staff to attend, learn and engage.
- Show respect for the cultural responsibilities held by Aboriginal staff, including kinship ties, cultural commitments, Community roles, and obligations related to those Communities.
- Establish clear processes for responding to any breaches of cultural safety—whether they involve staff, clients, or external partners—and ensure these are taken seriously and addressed in a culturally responsive manner.

 Read more about:  
[Aboriginal self-determination](#)

 Read more about:  
[What is cultural safety?](#)

## How can organisations genuinely engage Aboriginal Communities in employment programs?

Building relationships with the Community plays a key role in recruitment efforts. Often, for people in the local area to consider working with your organisation or government department, they first need to know who you are and have a positive perception of you. Genuine engagement with Aboriginal Communities in employment programs requires more than consultation—it demands true partnership, shared decision-making, and long-term relationship building.

Aboriginal peoples, Communities, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) must be directly involved in shaping recruitment strategies, designing culturally appropriate roles, and delivering programs that reflect Community priorities. Engagement should be based on trust, respect, and a willingness to listen and act on Community input.

### Effective engagement in employment programs

- Involving Aboriginal Communities and ACCOs in designing jobs, recruitment processes, and program delivery from the outset.
- Building long-term, respectful relationships with local Aboriginal Communities to foster trust and improve program success.
- Prioritising co-design to ensure career pathways are culturally responsive, sustainable, and Community driven.
- Recognising the role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as key partners in employment initiatives.
- Allocating time and resources for meaningful engagement, ongoing dialogue, and shared ownership of employment outcomes.

## Who is responsible for Aboriginal employment outcomes in an organisation?

Responsibility for Aboriginal employment outcomes lies with the entire organisation, not just Aboriginal staff or the human resources team. A whole-of-organisation approach ensures that every team, department, and level of leadership actively contributes to creating culturally safe, inclusive, and equitable employment opportunities. Aboriginal employment must be a shared priority that is embedded in strategic plans, day-to-day operations, and performance expectations.

### What does a whole-of-organisation approach mean?

- Embedding Aboriginal employment responsibilities across leadership, management, HR, and operational teams.
- Developing and maintaining cultural safety organisation-wide through regular training and reflective practice.
- Holding leaders and managers accountable for Aboriginal employment outcomes through KPIs and reporting mechanisms.
- Measuring success by outcomes such as leadership representation, workplace culture, and the influence of Aboriginal voices, not just employment numbers.
- Ensuring ongoing support, mentorship, and career progression opportunities for Aboriginal staff.



Read more about:  
[Whole of organisation approach](#)

## What are common barriers to recruiting Aboriginal staff?

For many Aboriginal peoples, the journey into employment is shaped by a complex interplay of barriers and enablers. Historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination, cultural misunderstandings, and systemic bias often make job processes feel unwelcoming or exclusionary. Some barriers include:

- Systemic racism and discrimination
- Complex, inflexible job processes
- Lack of trust or connection to organisations
- Poor health and education outcomes
- Cultural load.

### What is systemic racism and discrimination?

Systemic racism and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples in Australia refers to the ways in which laws, policies, institutions, and societal structures have historically disadvantaged, and continue to disadvantage them across many aspects of life.

This form of racism isn't always overt or intentional; it is embedded in systems and practices that produce unequal outcomes.

### What are complex, inflexible job processes?

When thinking about complex and inflexible job processes in relation to Aboriginal recruitment, it is referring to systems and procedures that make it harder for Aboriginal peoples to apply for, get shortlisted for, and succeed in getting jobs, especially in government or mainstream organisations.

These processes are often designed without Aboriginal cultural contexts, lived experiences, or systemic disadvantage in mind.

### Why is there a lack of trust or connection to organisations?

The lack of trust or connection to organisations by Aboriginal peoples, especially in the context of recruitment, stems from both historical and contemporary experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and cultural disconnection due to the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma.

### What is meant by poor health and education outcomes?

When referring to poor health and education outcomes for Aboriginal peoples, it's referring to the fact that, on average, Aboriginal peoples experience significantly worse outcomes in both areas compared to non-Aboriginal Australians.

These are not just individual challenges, but are the result of systemic inequality, racism, intergenerational trauma, and a lack of culturally safe services for Aboriginal peoples to engage with.

## What is cultural load?

Cultural load refers to the weight or burden an individual or Community carries as a result of the lasting impacts of colonisation and systemic disadvantage on Aboriginal peoples cultural identity. For Aboriginal peoples, cultural load can stem from:

- intergenerational trauma
- the dispossession of land, language and culture
- ongoing experiences of discrimination and marginalisation since colonisation.

In the workplace, cultural load often describes the extra pressures placed on Aboriginal employees, especially when often they are the only Aboriginal person, or one of very few, within a team or organisation. These additional responsibilities may include:

- being expected to educate non-Aboriginal colleagues about Aboriginal culture, history or racism
- being asked to speak on behalf of all Aboriginal peoples
- being called on to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country, coordinate cultural events, or engage with Community, even when these tasks aren't formally part of their role.

These and other factors can contribute significantly to cultural load, isolation, burnout and a feeling of disconnection. These include:

- Not knowing the pathways
- Poorly defined roles and responsibilities
- Inflexible HR policies
- Unsupportive management and lack of cultural responsiveness
- Lack of understanding or respect for cultural values, practices and traditions from leadership and colleagues
- Lack of representation
- Limited access to resources
- Historical trauma
- Work-life balance challenges due to Community obligations.

 Read more about:  
**Cultural load**



## What are common enablers to recruiting Aboriginal staff?

Common enablers to recruiting Aboriginal staff are the actions, strategies, and conditions that support Aboriginal peoples to engage with and succeed in recruitment processes and employment.

These enablers help create culturally safe, accessible, and empowering pathways into work, especially within organisations that have historically been seen as unwelcoming or disconnected. Some factors that can enable successful recruitment include:

- Flexible, culturally safe recruitment processes, offering help with applications, letting candidates bring support people to interviews, or using plain English when asking questions will assist in breaking down communication barriers.
- Removing unnecessary requirements such as driver's licences if the staff member is not required to drive as part of their role, psychometric testing as they typically have not been developed with cultural safety in mind.
- Strong relationships with local Community help to build your organisation's reputation and credibility within the Community.
- Recognition of cultural roles and valuing cultural identity within your organisation can help Aboriginal peoples feel culturally safe. Making space for Aboriginal English, cultural knowledge, or storytelling as valid ways to show capability.
- Including an Aboriginal person on the interview panel is a simple way of supporting visible role models and mentors within the recruitment process and the workplace itself.
- Ongoing support, like buddy systems, Aboriginal staff networks, or trauma-aware supervision, helps staff stay strong.