

Section four

Selecting and recruiting Aboriginal staff

Information Pack:
Aboriginal
Culturally
Responsive
Recruitment in
Early Education

How can we simplify the application and screening process to better support Aboriginal applicants?

To better support Aboriginal applicants, simplifying the application and screening process means removing unnecessary complexity, ensuring cultural safety, and making the process more accessible, strengths-based and human-centered.

This supports equity by recognising that many Aboriginal applicants bring valuable lived and cultural knowledge, even if they haven't followed conventional career pathways. Recognise that not all Aboriginal applicants will have access to fast internet or be confident with online systems.

Make the process simple and supportive, minimising unnecessary paperwork. Always offer help to applicants during the application process, this may include:

- An option for In-person lodgement providing hardcopy application forms that can be mailed or collected in person, or phone applications and interviews.
- Focusing on applicants' strengths, motivation, soft skills, and Community knowledge, rather than filtering out candidates based solely on formal qualifications or perceived gaps.
- Allowing applications or interviews to be completed over the phone for those who prefer verbal communication.

What are strengths-based and empowering approaches in recruitment?

Strengths-based and empowering approaches to recruitment recognise that Aboriginal peoples bring a wealth of skills, knowledge, and lived experience that are valuable assets to any workplace. Rather than focusing on perceived gaps, deficits, or disadvantages, these approaches emphasise the strengths, resilience, and capabilities individuals already possess.

This shift challenges outdated stereotypes and promotes a positive, respectful way of engaging with Aboriginal candidates, honouring their cultural identity and unique contributions. Recruitment frameworks based on strengths focus on identifying what candidates can offer, such as Community knowledge, leadership skills, cultural insight, and practical experience.

Key principles of strengths-based and empowering recruitment

- Recognising Aboriginal people as skilled, capable, and culturally knowledgeable contributors.
- Designing recruitment processes that focus on candidates' strengths and potential, not deficits.
- Supporting career pathways that respect individual aspirations, cultural identity, and Community connections.
- Challenging deficit-based stereotypes and valuing Aboriginal leadership, innovation, and expertise.
- Creating workplaces that nurture pride, dignity, and self-determination for Aboriginal employees.

What does equity in recruitment and advancement involve?

Equity in recruitment and advancement means ensuring Aboriginal peoples have fair and genuine opportunities to enter, stay, and progress within an organisation. This requires actively removing systemic and structural barriers that have historically limited access to employment and promotion for Aboriginal candidates.

Equity is about more than treating everyone the same, it involves recognising different starting points and providing targeted support to level the playing field, so Aboriginal employees can succeed on their own terms.

To achieve equity, organisations often implement affirmative measures such as Aboriginal-identified roles and culturally relevant career pathways. These initiatives are designed to provide clear, supported routes into employment and leadership, reflecting the unique cultural strengths and needs of Aboriginal peoples.

Equity also means creating a workplace culture where Aboriginal employees feel valued, respected, and able to thrive professionally and personally.

Access to leadership and executive roles is a critical component of equity. Aboriginal employees should be encouraged and supported to pursue senior positions through tailored development programs, mentoring, and leadership opportunities.

Key elements of equity in recruitment and advancement include:

- Removing systemic and structural barriers to employment and promotion for Aboriginal peoples.
- Using affirmative action measures and Aboriginal-identified roles to provide equitable access.
- Developing culturally relevant career pathways that align with Community values and strengths.

- Offering tailored mentoring, professional development, and leadership opportunities for Aboriginal staff.
- Embedding policies and practices that support cultural safety, inclusion, and ongoing accountability.

Tips for recruitment pathways

- These can be tailored to people at different stages, such as high school, TAFE, university, or those seeking a career change.
- Examples include:
 - Cadetships such as the Indigenous Cadetship Support Program, which combines academic study with hands-on work.
 - Traineeships focusing on performance-based learning, often offered in public sector, legal, education and environmental roles.
 - Pre-employment or 'job readiness' training programs, designed in partnership with Aboriginal organisations and Traditional Owner groups, that include real-life experience and soft skills, cultural identity, mentoring, and wraparound support.
 - Aboriginal Talent Pools and guaranteed interview schemes (e.g. Aboriginal assessment centres).

The [Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations \(ORIC\)](#) has developed a series of guides for recruitment processes.

Case study: [Boosting First Nations Employment: Boosting First Nations Employment | Australian Public Service Commission](#)

What changes should we make to our selection process?

To make your selection process more inclusive and supportive of Aboriginal applicants, it's important to move away from rigid, one-size-fits-all models and towards culturally safe, strengths-based and flexible approaches.



These changes help level the playing field and demonstrate a genuine commitment to equity and inclusion. Consider applying a culturally responsive approach by:

- Using conversational interviews with plain English, rather than an interrogation style interview avoiding overly formal structures or physical barriers.
- Sharing interview questions in advance and allowing support people at interviews.
- Including Aboriginal representation on selection panels.
- Using situational questions and practical tasks, not just behavioural interviews.

Tips for selection panels

Utilise an Aboriginal person, or a culturally appropriate person, on selection panels. That is, someone who has a firm understanding of what is required by Aboriginal employees in their professional capacity, and also of the kind of challenges that Aboriginal employees may face in their Communities and workplaces. Consider:

- Where possible, match panel members to the applicant's gender for identified roles.
- Don't rely on one person as the sole cultural voice, everyone involved should understand the importance of cultural safety.
- Engage with Aboriginal Employee Networks or Community members to find suitable panel representatives.
- Give your potential workers and panel members reasonable notice about when, where and what will happen.
- Check if the applicant needs anything to help them participate in the interview.
- Brief your panel on what they need to do and how you will rate or score the potential workers.
- Ensure panel members have completed Aboriginal Cultural Safety Training, and/or unconscious bias training.

What makes an interview culturally safe?

A culturally safe interview for Aboriginal applicants is one where the environment, process, and people involved create a sense of respect, trust, and inclusion, allowing the applicant to be themselves and speak freely without fear of judgement, discrimination or misunderstanding.

Cultural safety goes beyond simply avoiding racism, it's about actively valuing Aboriginal identity, ways of communicating, cultural knowledge, and recognising the power imbalance that often exists in mainstream recruitment processes.

Tips for interview panels

- Start with a yarning-style (small talk, get to know you conversation) introduction to build rapport.
- Consider a Yarning Circle (where you interview in a circle, rather than across a table).
- Avoid legalistic or bureaucratic language.
- Aboriginal peoples are highly Community focused and will often answer in storytelling and communal responses ("we" not just "I")
- Respect indirect communication and silence.
- Allow applicants to bring a support person or family member.
- Give interview questions in advance, so applicants have time to prepare.
- Conduct a pre-interview information session and introduce panel members.
- Use conversational style interviews where possible and avoid highly formal settings.
- Create a relaxed environment for interviews.
- Avoid conducting interviews in small, closed rooms and placing physical objects between panel and applicant.

Communication and language

- Keep language simple, clear and free of jargon or legalese.
- Tailor style and pace of questioning according to candidate's comfort level.
- Understand different communication styles:
 - Some applicants may take longer pauses to think.
 - Eye contact may be avoided as a sign of respect.
 - "Shame" can mean feeling embarrassed or self-conscious.
 - Some may say "yes" out of politeness rather than agreement.
 - Many speak about "we" instead of "I" because of the importance of Community.
 - Don't mistake Aboriginal English for poor language skills, it is a legitimate and rich form of expression.

Types of questions

- Situational questions over behavioural ones. Ask what the applicant would do when faced with the problem, rather than what they have done, especially for entry-level roles.
- Explore how candidates manage cultural obligations, such as time off for Sorry Business or Community responsibilities.
- Include questions about values, interests and motivation, not just technical capability.

Example:

“Tell us about a time when you needed to build and maintain a strong connection with a person. How did you engage them, and what did you do to build this relationship?”

- The use of open-ended questions can be effective in finding out information in regard to the applicants work skills and life experiences, job expectations and career expectations.

Sample interview questions: [Recruitment & Retention Strategy](#)

How to use practical tasks and activities

- Practical activities are often more effective than formal interviews. These might include teamwork tasks, safety exercises, or other job-related simulations.
- Involve Aboriginal peoples in the design to ensure cultural relevance.
- Avoid tasks that require high reading or writing levels, but are more focused on verbal communication and conversations.
- Present instructions in different formats to suit various learning styles.
- For group activities, be aware of cultural dynamics like avoidance relationships. Let candidates choose who speaks for the group.



Can we use assessment centres?

Yes, you can use assessment centres when recruiting Aboriginal applicants, but only if they are thoughtfully designed to be culturally safe, inclusive, and supportive.

- Assessment centres can work well for entry-level roles and offer a well-rounded view of a candidate's strengths.
- Use multiple methods like interviews, group work, hands-on tasks, and short exercises.
- Provide clear information before the assessment centre about what to expect, what to wear, and how the day will run.
- Start with a casual “meet and greet” session and include a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country.
- Encourage informal interactions during breaks to ease nerves and build rapport.
- Choose culturally responsive venues, local Community centres, or rooms decorated with Aboriginal flags and artwork.
- Involve Aboriginal assessors and ensure all assessors are trained in both assessment practices and culturally responsive practice.
- Provide information about the role and organisation, inform candidates what it is like to work for the organisation, the type of support available and present the ‘Reconciliation Action Plan,’ if available.

Here are some useful tips

- Be cautious using cognitive ability tests for entry-level roles. These tests are often less predictive of job performance for Aboriginal candidates, because they have typically not been developed with Aboriginal peoples specifically in mind.
- Psychometric tools developed from a Western perspective can create barriers and may not accurately reflect a candidate's potential.
- If using these tools, ensure they're only part of a broader assessment and not used to rule someone out without further consideration.
- Always offer support and context.

Can we use alternative assessments?

- Yes, use role-specific tasks, group activities, or visual demonstrations instead of heavily written exercises.
- Present information in multiple formats (e.g. visual, verbal).
- Involve Aboriginal representatives in co-designing culturally appropriate assessments.

How do we communicate the interview outcomes?

Communicating interview outcomes in a culturally respectful and transparent way is a vital part of a culturally safe recruitment process, especially when working with Aboriginal applicants. It's not just about ticking a box; it's about maintaining trust, building relationships, and supporting long-term inclusion and equity.

- Always notify candidates of the outcome via phone or in person, not email.
- Offer feedback and explain why they were or weren't selected.
- Provide advice on future opportunities and what they could improve.
- Allow the presence of a support person or family member during feedback sessions if the candidate chooses.



Read more about: [Culturally responsive selection and recruitment.](#)

- [Recruiting and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees-A guide for Community legal centres.pdf](#)
- [A guide to promote supportive working environments in health and human services: For Organisations and Managers](#)
- [Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural capability toolkit - VPSC](#)