



# Information for employers of Aboriginal people

An employer's guide to improve retention through supporting cultural awareness and wellbeing in the workplace





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## Using this information

To be most effective it is recommended that organisations use this information to support cultural awareness and improve commitment to recruit, support, empower and retain Aboriginal employees.

## Nomenclature

The term 'Aboriginal' as used in this package is inclusive of Torres Strait Islander Australians.

## Additional resources

The Jobs and Skills Centres throughout metropolitan and regional areas aim to provide training and information for Aboriginal people (employees, job seekers and those transitioning to employment) to empower them to improve their sense of wellbeing and workplace performance.

Visit the Department of Training and Workforce Development Jobs and Skills WA website at [jobsandskills.wa.gov.au/aboriginal-services](http://jobsandskills.wa.gov.au/aboriginal-services) for additional information and resources.

# Introduction

Employers are finding that employing Aboriginal people makes good business sense. Developing workforce diversity better reflects their client or customer base, helps address skills shortages and builds a local workforce to sustain operations into our future.

It is important to understand that although they share a common Aboriginality, Aboriginal people differ in values, customs, beliefs and many other aspects of their identity, depending on where they are from. Aboriginal people come from various regions in Australia and their life experiences can be quite diverse.

Most Aboriginal employees fit easily into the workplace and establish successful careers. However some Aboriginal employees need additional support to settle in, succeed in their job and make the most of training and development opportunities.

As in the broader community, some Aboriginal people may be struggling with their social and emotional wellbeing. Understandably, employers are not always aware of the difficulties some Aboriginal employees may be facing and the impact on their wellbeing and workplace performance; or of the cultural obligations that Aboriginal employees have towards immediate and extended family.

The following information is provided to assist employers in supporting cultural awareness and creating a supportive workplace in which Aboriginal employees can prosper.



# Opportunities and challenges in the workplace

Aboriginal people have shown remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Over time, some Aboriginal people overcome disadvantages to access opportunities and through determination, ultimately build rich lives for themselves and their children.

There are many inspiring stories about the achievements of Aboriginal people across expanding fields of endeavour - ranging from academia; politics; aviation; professions like law, medicine, teaching and engineering; music, dance, film, literature; public services; and a wide range of businesses and trades. Many are establishing solid foundations for their children and contribute strongly to the workforce.

Factors that strengthen and protect Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing have been identified as connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community.

Challenges resulting in social and emotional problems include (but are not limited to) racism, discrimination, physical and mental health issues and limited literacy skills. These can have an impact at the individual and community level and if not addressed, can reduce productivity in the workplace.





## A way forward

Though many Aboriginal people enjoy a very high level of wellbeing, others find themselves having to deal with more challenges than they can cope with – effectively without support, understanding or acceptance.

Contemporary grief and loss and the continued racism and stereotyping that many Aboriginal people still endure can erode self-esteem and sense of identity.

Aboriginal people are exploring these issues through literature, art, films, plays and music; all of which are capturing the attention, sometimes the acclaim, of the general public due to the quality of what is being produced.

There is an increasing interest from the broader community in the issues being raised and the ways they are being expressed.

There are now various empowerment, healing and leadership programs provided by Aboriginal organisations and other agencies to assist Aboriginal people and their communities in the healing process so they can move on with their lives.

For a long period, Aboriginal people were excluded by law, and in a whole range of other ways, from basic services and rights. As a result of a long history of exclusion, disadvantage and maltreatment by government and other authorities, for some there remains a fear and distrust of mainstream services and institutions, such as schools, hospitals, police and workplaces.

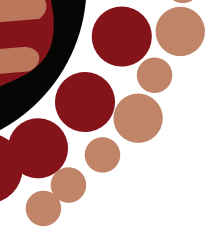
Aboriginal people often found it impossible, because of a range of barriers, to gain employment, and in some areas inter-generational unemployment remains.

Although the situation has improved over recent decades, some Aboriginal employees could be amongst the first in their families to get a job. As a consequence, they may lack the understanding within their circle of family and friends of the demands of the workplace that other families with long working histories take for granted.

While many Aboriginal people have established successful careers in the Western Australian workforce, some, through personal circumstances, need support to settle into the workplace, succeed in their job and make the most of training and development opportunities that might be available to them. Providing mentoring and additional support services for Aboriginal employees will have a positive impact and contribute to creating positive outcomes in the workplace.

Serious health issues, including significantly lower life expectancy rates, impact the Aboriginal community. These issues, together with obligations associated with the large, extended families that most Aboriginal people belong to, often require Aboriginal employees to care for and support sick relatives and friends. This can mean a demanding cycle of taking people to medical appointments, and making hospital and home visits. Aboriginal people generally need to attend more funerals than is the case amongst the wider community, and there are more demands on managing work and outside commitments.

Despite these pressures Aboriginal people are devising ways to achieve a work-life balance. Compromises are being made. For example, as in the wider community, many are working in the mining industry. Annual leave, leave without pay or juggling 'swings' are being used to attend funerals. The approach taken in many families is that it is acceptable for some members to attend funerals, but not a commitment for everyone.



# Good workplace practice guidelines

These guidelines have been compiled as suggestions only and are not to be considered compulsory.

They align with three core themes of Reconciliation Australia action plans and aim to assist employers by providing information on creating a supportive and culturally secure workplace for Aboriginal employees.

**The three core themes and corresponding guidelines are listed below:**

## 1. Relationships

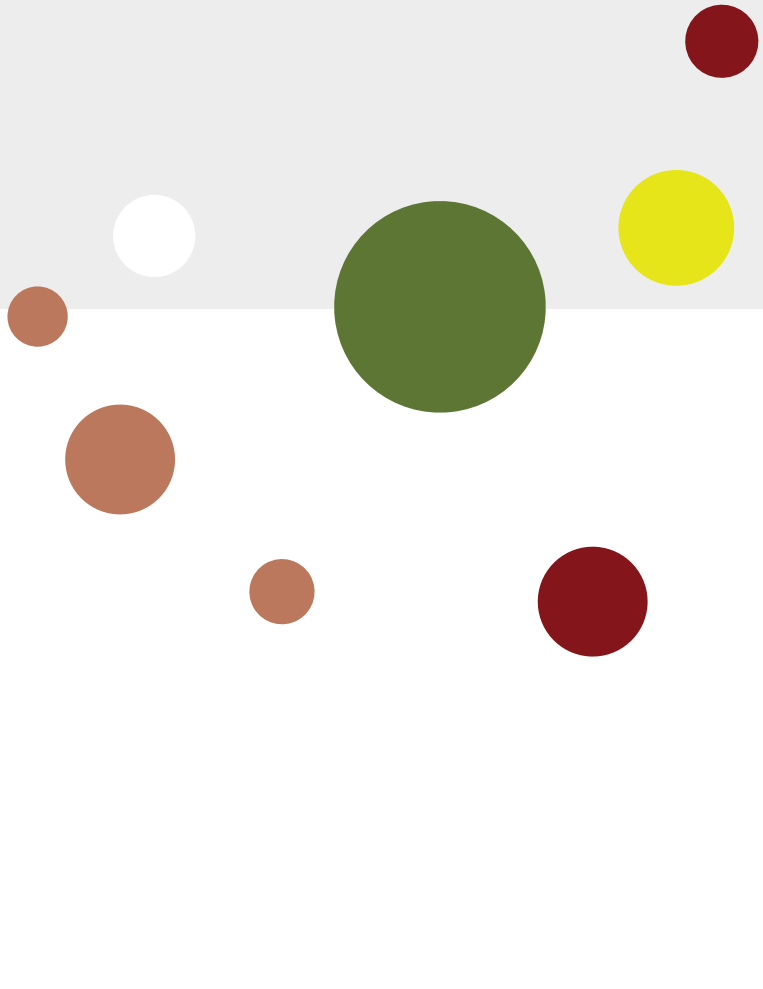
- Communication; and
- Feeling comfortable at work.

## 2. Respect

- Induction; and
- Managing leave.

## 3. Opportunities

- Empowerment; and
- What else can our organisation do?





# Communication

## Create a more supportive workplace for Aboriginal people by keeping in touch

### Building trust, respect and good relationships in the workplace


- Recognise individuality. Although Aboriginal employees share a common Aboriginality, Aboriginal people will differ in values, customs, beliefs and many other aspects of their identity depending on where they are from.
- Aboriginal culture is built on relationships. Building a sharing relationship with Aboriginal employees is based on two way trust. Establishing a trust relationship cannot be rushed or assumed.
- Listen. Make time to regularly catch up for a chat or 'yarn'.
- Over time, get to know your Aboriginal employees and learn about their families. This may help you to understand issues that could be worrying them at work or causing them to take unplanned leave.
- Be perceptive about picking up cues from employees that a co-worker may be struggling with personal problems. It may be appropriate for you or another concerned colleague to have a discussion with them.
- Have 'face to face' conversations when possible, preferably with no barriers such as desks in between. Depending on individual circumstances, this is generally better than written communication.
- Avoid interrupting employees while they are speaking, 'talking over the top' of them, or disregarding their responses.
- Try to maintain consistency in the way people and problems are treated.
- Allocate reasonable amounts of time to work through any issues in a mutually beneficial way. The time allowed for discussions will vary according to the issue at hand and the individual. Take time to broach issues sensitively – don't be too abrupt. Sometimes it works better to discuss issues away from your office or immediate workplace.
- In particular circumstances, some workplaces have found it useful to have an appropriate family member, or other significant person, sit in on discussions to help communication.



# Feeling comfortable at work

## Create a supportive workplace for Aboriginal people so they feel culturally safe

### Consider how a workplace environment could be created to enable Aboriginal staff to feel welcome, supported and respected

- Be inclusive. Display Aboriginal flags or paintings and posters with Aboriginal themes.
  - Be mindful. Probation is a time for all employees to learn within a supportive environment.
  - Be tactful. Avoid putting Aboriginal employees on the spot by questioning them about Aboriginal issues as they come up in the press or the public arena.
  - Find a private place to have conversations about personal matters. Aboriginal people can be particularly sensitive to being 'shamed' when personal matters are discussed in public.
  - Be aware of significant events that Aboriginal people observe throughout the year and consider how your organisation might be involved in some of them.
    - > *Survival Day (26 January)*: A national day of celebration in recognition of the survival and resilience of Aboriginal Australians. This day is celebrated as Australia Day by other Australians.
    - > *The Apology (13 February)*: A national day of celebration commemorating the formal Apology to Australia's Aboriginal Peoples by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008.
    - > *Sorry Day (26 May)*: A national day of commemoration to honour the generations of Aboriginal children (the Stolen Generations) who were taken from their families under forced removal policies that continued until the early 1980s. The day is marked by memorial services, commemorative meetings, survival celebrations and community gatherings.
    - > *National Reconciliation Week (27 May – 3 June)*: A national week of celebrations to build on the respectful relationships of Aboriginal people and other Australians. Visit [reconciliation.org.au](https://reconciliation.org.au) for details.
    - > *NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) Week (the first full week in July)*: A national week of events to celebrate achievements by Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal community. Visit [naidocperth.org.au](https://naidocperth.org.au) for details of celebrations in Perth.
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# Induction

## Create a supportive workplace for Aboriginal people – be upfront and honest

### A good introduction is important – first impressions are critical

- Let other employees know when a new person is starting and ensure they are prepared to make their new colleague welcome. Introduce the new person to their colleagues gradually – introducing too many work mates at once can be confusing.
- Have fair and realistic expectations of Aboriginal employees and discuss these expectations with them. All employees need to know where they stand.
- Explain the ground rules at the outset to avoid misunderstandings later on. This might include rules around working hours (start and finish times) and who to contact if they need to take a day off work due to sickness or an emergency.
- Gradually talk through policies and procedures relating to matters such as:
  - > wages and conditions of employment;
  - > leave entitlements and processes for applying for leave;
  - > occupational health and safety;
  - > career pathways; and
  - > training and career development opportunities.

This information is sometimes included in an induction kit, along with an overview of the organisation and a description of its structure and vision. Too much information at one time can be overwhelming, so consider carefully how you introduce organisational policies and procedures.

- If you employ a number of Aboriginal employees, consider running group induction sessions to ensure understanding of the workplace culture and their rights and responsibilities.
  - A workplace ‘buddy’ or mentor can be very helpful, particularly for the first six to twelve months. This can really help people to settle in and provide them with ongoing support through probationary periods.
  - Encourage Aboriginal employees to talk with their supervisor, workplace buddy or mentor to discuss and resolve any personal or work related issues that may arise.
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# Managing leave

## Create a more supportive workplace for Aboriginal people

### Establish a flexible and family friendly environment

- Ensure that all employees have a clear understanding of their leave entitlements and the types of leave that are available under their Industrial Award or Agreement. Include reference to any 'cultural' or 'ceremonial' leave entitlements (paid or unpaid).
- Ensure all employees are aware and understand the rules governing the use of leave. This will include processes involved in applying for leave or taking leave at short notice.
- Manage leave within the context of leave entitlements and any flexible and family friendly working arrangements that may be in place.
- Take requests for short or emergency leave at face value. There will be times when employees need time off work to look after a sick child or to accompany family members to medical appointments.
- Accept that Aboriginal employees might need to attend more funerals (or 'sorry business') than other members of the workforce. Aboriginal people have large extended families and networks. Attending funerals and taking part in the mourning process is a personal, community and cultural obligation.
- Discuss and negotiate the amount of leave the employee needs to participate in a cultural or ceremonial event or to attend a funeral. The objective is to reach a balance which allows the employee to meet their obligations and work commitments. If leave entitlements have been exhausted, leave without pay may be an option.
- Consider implementing cultural awareness training in the workplace. The training will increase knowledge and develop understanding of Aboriginal culture and why Aboriginal people are required to participate in cultural and ceremonial events.



# Empowerment

## Create a supportive workplace for Aboriginal employees

### Establish partnerships

- Take time to get an Aboriginal employee's perspective on their current work situation through informal chats. At the same time, give them feedback on their performance.
- Discuss training and development opportunities that might be available. You could also discuss options for promotion and progression within your organisation and possible career pathways.
- Ensure training is practical and relevant to the job. This could include enhancing personal development in areas such as work ethics, communication and presentation.
- Be fair when assigning significant responsibilities or applying appropriate standards of accountability to Aboriginal employees. Provide clear instructions to complete the task and ongoing support if required.
- Show interest in the work and give praise for a job well done. Regular incidental positive feedback is appreciated by all employees.
- Consider ways that significant individual and team successes can be celebrated, taking into account the particular individual, team or workplace.
- Consider nominating a senior person to mentor a junior colleague to help them develop their skills and progress within the organisation.
- Provide a workplace 'buddy' or mentor, particularly for the first six to twelve months. Appropriate people who get on well with the employee can be invaluable in helping the employee to grow and develop within the organisation.






# What else can our organisation do?

## Create a more supportive workplace for Aboriginal people – maintain partnerships

### Cultural awareness

- Provide cultural awareness training for all staff and particularly those in supervisory and management positions. Ensure Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees attend training together when possible. This will give everyone a better understanding of cultural differences and similarities and help to build good working relationships.
- Making contact with local Aboriginal community groups and organisations can be helpful in developing better understanding and relationships with Aboriginal people.
- On the Jobs and Skills WA website the 'Workplace of Choice' page offers advice on how to retain and maintain a better workplace for Aboriginal employees: [jobsandskills.wa.gov.au/aboriginal-services/employers/workplace-choice](https://jobsandskills.wa.gov.au/aboriginal-services/employers/workplace-choice) 

### Mentoring

- Provide mentors for Aboriginal employees, particularly for the first six to twelve months.

### Aboriginal employment strategy

- Develop an Aboriginal Employment Strategy which includes a culturally appropriate recruitment strategy. Regardless of the size of your organisation or the number of Aboriginal people you are able to employ, there will be value in developing a strategy that identifies the action you are taking (or intend to take) to attract, recruit and retain Aboriginal employees.

### Yokai Aboriginal Employment Forum

- Attend 'Yokai', an Aboriginal Employment Forum organised by Reconciliation WA that meets six times a year in Perth. The networking meetings bring together over 140 organisations interested in enhancing outcomes across Aboriginal workforce recruitment and retention; supply and procurement. Reconciliation WA is an organisation that promotes strong and positive relationships between our First Peoples and the wider WA community.
- To find out how to get involved, send an email to [projects@recwa.org.au](mailto:projects@recwa.org.au)

### Reconciliation action plan

- Develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to formalise and enhance your organisation's commitment to reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. [Reconciliation Australia](https://reconciliation.org.au)  endorse RAPs developed by Australian corporations, government and community organisations.
- To find out how to develop a RAP visit [reconciliation.org.au](https://reconciliation.org.au) 