

Guide to success for organisations in achieving employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Kristine Giddy, Jessica Lopez, Anne Redman
Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia

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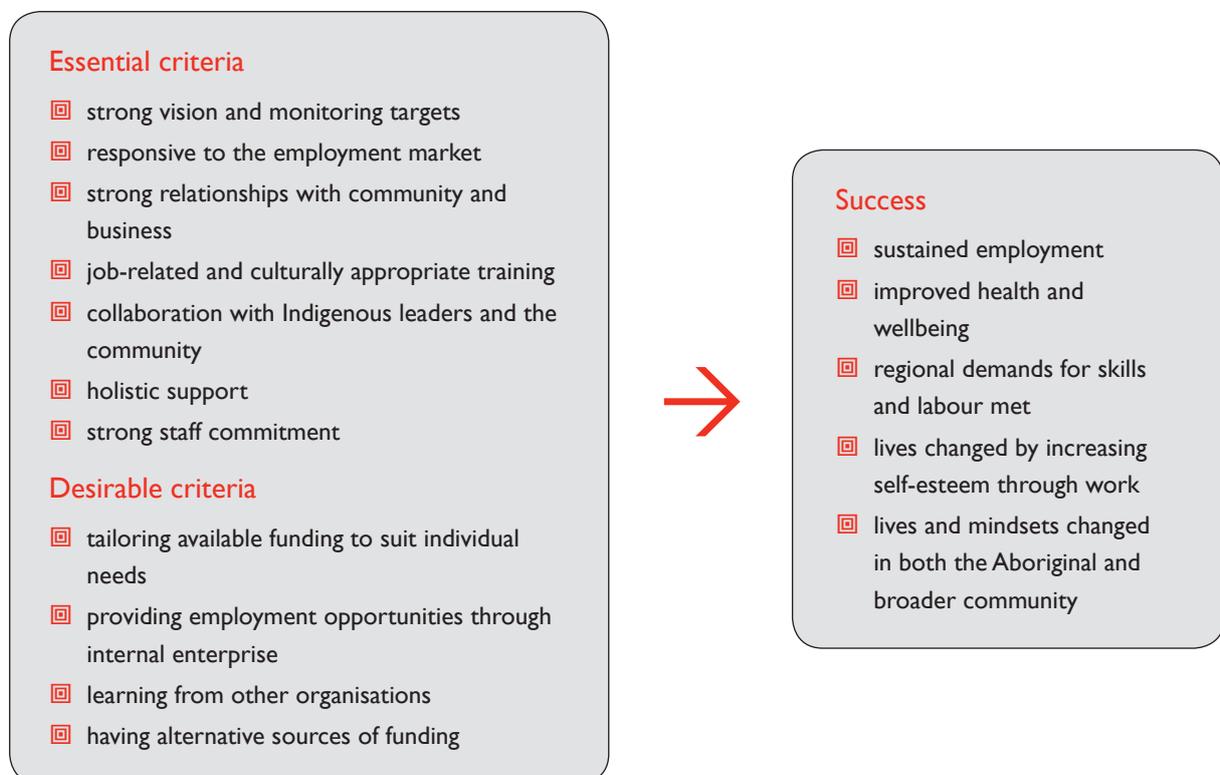
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INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to provide organisations working towards employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with information about the factors that have been shown to lead to success in this area. Improved employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been shown to improve social and economic wellbeing, while at the same time changing attitudes in the broader community.

This guide draws on interviews with the management and staff of nine organisations working towards delivering sustainable employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as interviews with a sample of job-seekers and employers who make use of their services.¹ By identifying the characteristics common to most of these organisations, the guide presents a set of factors that have been shown to lead to success (figure 1 provides an overview).

Figure 1 Guide to success for organisations working towards Indigenous employment



DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

The organisations we spoke to have different definitions of what constitutes 'success' in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, and these differences reflect their individual aims, structure and expertise, and how they operate within the job market. Across the board though, sustained employment is viewed as the ideal outcome. Some organisations defined sustained employment as *never being on Centrelink payments again*, while others define

¹ A full report detailing the research and findings can be found on the NCVET website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2127.html>>.

success more broadly, as improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. This may include increasing self-esteem, creating a work ethic, or developing role models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Other organisations define success in terms of being able to meet industry demands for labour and skills and changing attitudes by placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a wide range of non-typical employment areas. In practice, however, placing someone in a job for a minimum of 26 weeks is the most common measure of sustained employment, as policy regulations define this as the final outcome for organisations working in the job placement market.

Job-seekers defined success as *a life change, something you can take from here that you've learnt to benefit yourself and others in the future and getting a better job, becoming permanent.*

Factors of success—essential

Many of the factors listed here—which were common to all of the successful organisations—are interrelated and only in combination will achieve success.

Strong vision and monitoring targets

Successful organisations are guided by a clear vision and aims. They are determined to achieve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and therefore regularly take stock of their activities and assess whether they are living up to their goals. This involves:

- ▣ strong leadership
- ▣ vision that extends beyond employment outcomes
- ▣ the development of key performance indicators and milestones to monitor targets
- ▣ a re-assessment of the vision and aims of the organisation and making modifications where necessary.

The Aboriginal Employment Strategy (AES) is an employment service with seven offices in New South Wales and offices in Alice Springs, Perth and Townsville. Its primary aim is to place unemployed Aboriginal people into employment. The organisation acts as a vehicle that enables corporate Australia to engage with Aboriginal people and provides the link between business and the Aboriginal community. With this in mind, AES's vision is based on a job vacancy model, with jobs and employers a key focus. In particular, AES focuses on businesses with a national presence, including the regions, since their philosophy is for people to be able to remain and be employed in regional centres.

AES also has broad aims that extend beyond employment outcomes. A key goal is to build pride and passion in Aboriginal communities. AES also strives to change the mindset within Aboriginal communities to consider career pathways and to build *a life of higher achievement*. As well, cultural exchange is an important outcome, and AES sees itself as an *office of social change*.

AES has a strong commitment to monitoring its success, their main measure being the registration-to-placement ratio (the number registered to the number placed in employment). AES also conducts an internal staff survey, as well as a longitudinal study of clients, to measure its performance.

Responding to the employment market

Successful organisations know the employment market and constantly adapt their activities to take advantage of labour shortages and meet the needs of business. This involves:

- ☒ regularly identifying opportunities in the labour market
- ☒ understanding the needs of business and potential employers
- ☒ providing or linking people to training that is targeted to the market
- ☒ helping clients understand employers' expectations.

Quality Industry Training and Employment (QITE) provides employment and training services to employers and job-seekers on the Atherton Tablelands (Queensland). The organisation has responded to the expansion of the aged care sector and the corresponding skills shortage by providing training in aged care for their clients, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job-seekers. QITE had a 90 per cent completion rate for their Certificate II in Community Services course, with all of their students gaining placements in the industry, and with some already in paid work before completion.

QITE has also taken advantage of the building boom and provided certificate II training in both general construction and furniture. QITE has its own furniture-making community enterprise, giving clients 'hands on' experience. Employers in the industry have been *snapping up* their trainees. The Chief Executive Officer of QITE Mareeba feels that, when it comes to training, they *know where the jobs are and where people are having trouble filling them and we can respond to that.*

ITEC, a Job Network provider with 17 offices across the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia is aware that in one community where they operate a new retail centre is to be constructed. In anticipation of this, clients have undertaken a building and construction course. Part of ITEC's approach is to scan the media for tenders and local contracts in order to identify potential employment opportunities. Knowledge of upcoming projects that local contractors are involved in is also a source of information when identifying potential opportunities.

Strong relationships with community and business

Successful employment organisations dedicate time and effort to their relationships with employers and the community. They rely on honest dialogue with employers and they support them when they take on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Successful organisations seek community input and know that when they have good relationships with the community they can rely on support for their programs and their clients. This involves:

- ☒ developing trust with employers and the community
- ☒ being honest with employers about what they can expect

- ☒ forming solid partnerships
- ☒ maintaining regular contact with employers
- ☒ having understanding and local knowledge—knowing what employers need and understanding *where they are coming from*.

'Job related' and culturally appropriate training

Successful organisations target their training to take advantage of skills and labour shortages in the local and regional economy, thereby giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a real chance to gain employment on completion. They do not provide training for training's sake. The training they provide is 'hands on', support-intensive, and, in many cases, minimises the use of traditional classroom approaches. Successful training focuses on job readiness and building confidence, along with necessary industry-specific skills. It uses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainers or trainers who relate well to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

The Myuma Group, remotely located in north-west Queensland, negotiates potential job placements in the mining and construction industries before clients undertake their 13-week training program. Wherever possible, they seek to guarantee to trainees that they can and will get a job on successful completion of the program, either with an outside employer or with Myuma's own civil construction business. The training provides trainee wages, accommodation, all meals and cultural activities. Through their civil construction business and contacts with other businesses, they are able to provide hands-on training for which there is a job available. They are able to create a realistic working environment at the same time as 'cocooning' people and creating a supportive and forgiving program. CEO Colin Saltmere says, *When people come in they think this is just another government training program they have to do, that it doesn't lead to jobs. They come out changed people, confident and proud, like a snake that's changed its skin.*

One trainee said of the training: *When I got a job I knew what to do because I had done it here. For an Indigenous person to learn from an Indigenous staff member, it has the ability for the information to sink in. They understand what you mean and they have more time for you. After knock-off time you can have a yarn to answer any questions.*

Maari Ma health service, located in Broken Hill in western New South Wales, is an example of an organisation that helps to provide workers with on-the-job training. For example, Maari Ma connects recently employed Aboriginal health workers with the Broken Hill Department of Rural Health (part of Sydney University) to undertake training. Training is only offered once an individual has commenced their employment and is tailored to fit with their working schedule. Participants train with other Aboriginal students and are provided with mentoring.

The Aboriginal Employment Strategy is also a registered group training organisation and has been providing school-based traineeships since 2004. In 2008 there were 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students Australia-wide undertaking this training. This targets students from the end of Year 10 and the beginning of Year 11 to undertake a traineeship while studying their Higher School Certificate, with the possibility of employment upon completion of high school. AES management stated that this program provides a 99 per cent guarantee of employment on completion of the traineeship.

Another approach the AES takes is to gain industry sponsors or to align the training with industry before training courses are conducted.

Collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and the community

Successful organisations seek direction and advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and community members through the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision-making positions—in management positions, on boards and advisory groups, as well as staff. They draw on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and expertise when working with clients. Organisations not owned or managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people similarly draw on the expertise of Indigenous people to ensure that they gain respect from the community and the knowledge of how to best design their services to meet the needs of their clients. As one organisation noted: *An Aboriginal person servicing another Aboriginal person is powerful, it is building a role model base, and a competition base—it says 'if I can do this, so can you'.*

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation is a community-based organisation working with Aboriginal families in remote central Australia. Waltja's agenda is driven by a management committee of traditional Aboriginal women, whose aim is to improve outcomes for families. The management of Waltja is a partnership between the management committee members, the executive and the manager, with the support of all other Waltja personnel. Every 12 months Waltja holds its annual general meeting, at which a management committee of no fewer than 22 people is elected from its membership. Members also elect office bearers (chairperson, vice chairperson, public officer, treasurer and vice treasurer) and these office bearers make up the executive committee. All management committee members are nominated by and live in their remote community. The management committee is responsible for setting the overall goals and objectives of Waltja and making decisions about policies and priorities, while the executive committee is responsible for setting direction and making decisions about projects and programs and therefore works more closely with the full range of Waltja's services and activities with agencies and remote communities. This was felt to be a unique and beneficial organisational structure, as the governing body represents the client group.

When Quality Industry Training and Employment took on the Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP) program they went through *a lot of soul searching* as the organisation is not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned or managed. While QITE has many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and 15 per cent of their staff is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, they originally felt it was not their place to run Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific services. However, when a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service folded, they could not afford to let the community lose its CDEP program. They gathered support from the community and clients by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory committee made up of an Indigenous school liaison officer, an occupational health and safety officer at one of the local mines and the manager of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health centre, amongst others. Despite some initial suspicion by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community towards this new arrangement, the outcomes they have achieved for their clients have brought increasingly strong support.

Holistic support

Successful organisations respond to the full range of issues that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and work with them to overcome barriers to employment. They view their goal as changing people's lives through empowerment, rather than simply finding employment. They provide intensive and practical support for their clients where needed, often going beyond career advice. Strategies include pre- and post-placement mentoring or case management, which provides personalised attention to clients and employers alike to overcome barriers and encourage successful employment. Some of the most significant factors include:

- ▣ having a thorough and individualised client assessment process, so that organisations do not *set people up to fail*. This includes sharing stories, history, and background, as well as identifying and addressing (where possible) potential barriers such as transport, clothes, caring options, accommodation, and alcohol and drug use
- ▣ establishing personalised and high-quality mentoring/case management for pre- and post-placement; mentoring is needed during training as well as during employment placement
- ▣ supporting employers to take on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees
- ▣ providing mediation between employees and employers when needed
- ▣ offering a friendly and respectful service that aims to build client confidence
- ▣ providing a wide range of services, such as support with résumés, applications, information and advice on training options, as well as updating clients about job opportunities.

Located in Kununurra in northern Western Australia, Wunan is a training and employment provider that offers holistic support to assist clients to reach their employment and personal goals. For example, Wunan provides temporary and longer-term accommodation to clients and employees to help them with transition to independent living. This is particularly useful for clients who have moved to Kununurra from other communities. Wunan also provides financial literacy training and money management courses as part of its training programs. Wunan staff provide post-placement support for both clients and employers to address problems experienced by either party.

The Myuma group uses a system of mentors to support people pre- and post-placement. Myuma draws mentors either from leaders in the community, Myuma's staff or the company with which the client is placed. Myuma's staff have regular, even daily, contact with the employers they work with in order to support the placements and increase the employer's understanding of any issues. Staff go the extra mile to support their clients, in the hope that those people will become the next mentors to others.

Myuma's holistic understanding of Aboriginal people and remote life has led them to set up a dry training camp that provides all accommodation and meals and drug and alcohol testing and support, along with life skills such as budgeting, traditional cultural activities, and responsibilities of employment. They believe in the need to break the welfare mentality, to encourage a work ethic—with incentives such as paid training—and to motivate workers to *lift their game* and join workers who have gone on to work in other companies. Motivation is aided by the increased prestige and higher pay in employment outside the camp.

One client said of the camp: *Here there's no chance to mess up, you are a long way from home and away from trouble. You can't get up to mischief. If you get caught drinking all night you are breathalysed and then down for the day without pay, same as at other mines.*

ITEC has recently placed young men from the Torres Strait Islands, Cape York and Western Australia into employment in an abattoir in Victoria. At the time of this research there were five young men moving to Victoria from the Torres Strait Islands. These men had approached ITEC about positions which they had heard about from others in Victoria. For these young men mentoring is critical. The mentor travels with them to Victoria, assists in purchasing clothes, organises housing, and attends the induction. The mentor also provides assistance with transport to work and preparing meals. As well, employers are able to contact the mentor for support and assistance.

An employer who works with ITEC also talked about the needs of employees, and noted that for success it is critical that there is someone who is able to offer support and *find out what's going on* when there are any problems with the employees. This, along with someone to maintain motivation, was highlighted as important from the perspective of employers. Mentors were viewed as critical as *they provide someone on the outside between the employer and employee*. Employment organisations that provide employers with mentor services are in high demand.

Narromine Community Skills Project Inc. is a Job Network provider based in Narromine in New South Wales. A client of Narromine Skills who is currently a trainee at a local real estate agent described the support that they received from the employment services agency very positively. The client listed a range of support that was provided, including regular updates on job opportunities, assistance with clothing and computer access, assistance in completing a résumé and completing the job application, approaching employers, seeking information on training courses, and organising job interviews.

They couldn't have helped me more, helping me with everything. They told me about the job, they put my résumé through, and organised the interview ... If you needed clothes, they wouldn't just give you clothes, they would tell you what you needed ... You can come in and use them [computers] whenever you want, can use them for jobs, and also for email, for anything ... They are friendly, you're not just another person, it felt as though you are somebody.

Strong staff commitment

The dedication and commitment of staff are important factors for success in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. Successful employment service organisations have staff who are determined to help people change their lives. They are 'hands on' and have a strong sense of commitment to and responsibility within their roles. They have personalised relationships with their clients and the employers they work with. This may involve:

- ▣ staff who 'go the extra mile' and 'genuinely care' (for example, getting up early to take clients to work, phoning Centrelink on behalf of clients, providing support for people undertaking literacy and numeracy exams)
- ▣ staff who are 'hands on'
- ▣ staff who stay with the organisation for a long time
- ▣ staff with good rapport and personalised relationships with clients and employers
- ▣ staff who focus on excellent service—*treating people how you would like to be treated, and doing what you say you'll do.*

The AES talked about the importance of internal training and development for staff as the key to the organisation's survival and growth, as staff retention is critical for success. There were also several reward programs in place, such as annual bonuses to reward and recognise staff, monthly rewards for staff (employment coordinator of the month receives a \$100 prize) and offices (office of the month receives a \$200 lunch), six-monthly performance management appraisals, and salary reviews every 12 months.

Central West Community College has a designated Aboriginal services team that works with clients across the range of services provided, including training, recruitment, tenancy and other community support services. The team's staff feel they *live their jobs* and see them as more than nine to five. They know it is vital to be approachable, empathetic and to develop trust with clients, taking the time to get to know them as people.

Clients at Narromine Skills discussed the commitment of staff and acknowledged the extra lengths they go to provide assistance and support. One client said: *They do a lot for me [I am] so very grateful. I wouldn't ask them to do more. They bend over backwards to help. [The staff member] helped me a lot with the résumé because I had no idea. I brought in information on being a volunteer at the zoo, and she bent over backwards to help me. She found out about a course in Sydney on reptiles, and approved all the travel to Sydney. For another course she printed information for me on flexible delivery, on distance education. She emailed people at the zoo and followed up with phone calls and they were very helpful. I feel very nervous with people so I was happy for her to do it. The room is decorated really nice—fish tanks, photos of her kids and cats. Reminds you they are human, it's personal.*

Factors for success—desirable

The factors identified here were illustrated by some but not all of the organisations included in the research. Although not common to all, it was clear that, where these factors were demonstrated, they played a key part in the organisation's success.

Tailoring available funding to suit individual needs

Successful organisations know how to combine and tailor funding arrangements to best suit the needs of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. Funding arrangements do not dictate the vision and approach of the organisation, but rather are seen as a way of assisting the organisation to deliver what their clients and business partners need. This includes:

- ▣ combining funding arrangements to suit individual needs
- ▣ funding not dictating the organisation's vision
- ▣ seeking additional funding opportunities.

Narromine Community Skills Project Inc. works closely with the local CDEP to develop incentive packages for employers. Despite the sensitivities and competition in the area, this relationship is seen as important as it enables the organisations to draw on all available funding. Examples include having job-seekers with a CDEP host employer for two days per week, which is at no cost to the employer, and then offering incentives to these employers to employ these people for the remaining three days per week. For these three days the employer pays 80 per cent of the wage based on Structured Training and Employment Projects Employment and Related Services (STEPERS) funding. Narromine Skills refers to this approach as a *fine balancing act*, where they look at all services available for the clients (STEP, STEPERS, New Careers for Aboriginal People) and then arrange these [to ensure maximum] appeal to the clients and employers, and sell this to employers.

Providing employment opportunities through internal enterprise

Successful organisations may employ clients in the operations and businesses owned by the organisation. This may include offering traineeships within the enterprise. This gives clients the experience of real workplace expectations and requirements in a supportive environment, bringing clients closer to employment. It also gives the organisation

a 'hands on' understanding of their clients' skills and needs. Operating an enterprise also gives the organisation a greater empathy with other employers, as they understand expectations with regard to employees and develop a businesslike attitude when working with employers.

Quality Industry Training and Employment runs several community enterprises, including a furniture-making business which sells kitchens and bathrooms direct to the public, a harvest labour service, a lawn-mowing business and a catering company with plans to start a café. Trainees benefit from learning in a work environment and can work through any potential issues 'in house'.

Learning from other organisations

Successful organisations may actively explore approaches used by similar organisations, including sharing ideas, while at the same time promoting their own activities. This may be done informally through networks or through conferences and research. Successful organisations strive to remain a cut above the rest. This may involve the following:

- ▣ keeping an ear out for innovative ideas
- ▣ learning from other successful examples
- ▣ sharing ideas
- ▣ promoting success.

Maari Ma dedicates resources to learning from other organisations working in the field of Aboriginal health. This has been achieved by enabling board members to visit other regions across Australia to meet with other health services and consult with management and staff. These consultations have meant that Maari Ma board members have been able to share ideas with and trial or adopt successful practices being used by other organisations.

Having alternative sources of funding

Many successful organisations have sources of income other than government funding; for example, from their own business, from charity or from other revenue-raising endeavours. This allows them the flexibility to try different initiatives when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. Having alternative sources of funding also enables organisations to take risks, safe in the knowledge that they are protected by these funds.

While Central West Community College receives government funding, it also generates income from its customised business training and fee-paying courses, such as leisure and recreation courses. The college's corporate structure allows it to staff a dedicated Aboriginal Services team to cut across their many services, including training, recruitment and tenancy advice, so that clients are not referred from one organisation to the next. This flexibility allows the team to provide intense mentoring and to transfer clients from one type of funding to the other in order to meet their individual needs.

One employer (aged care) working with Narromine Skills gave an example where they had employed someone for six months, but after this time the employer no longer had the funds to sustain further employment. The organisation they were working with was able to cover the wages for a longer time period (through the use of their own funds), and after several months the employer was able to offer a permanent position.

CONCLUSION

Although environmental factors such as local employment opportunities and employers' commitment to employing Aboriginal employees exert a significant impact on organisations' ability to place job-seekers, this guide illustrates a series of factors that are critical to organisations in delivering employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job-seekers. Based on research conducted with organisations which have been successful in this area, this guide has the potential to assist both Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment services organisations to achieve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job-seekers. It also has the potential to shape the design of employment programs.

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Level 11, 33 King William Street, Adelaide SA 5000
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

ph +61 8 8230 8400 fax +61 8 8212 3436
email ncver@ncver.edu.au
<<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>