Organisational factors that can influence the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to flourish in the workplace

An initial scoping study

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Contents

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgments

Executive summary

An important goal for many contemporary Australian organisations is to improve the number, diversity, and seniority of their employees (employees are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people unless otherwise specified). One crucial factor in attracting, retaining, and promoting employees is the degree of social and emotional wellbeing that the workplace environment enables for those staff. This summary report presents the preliminary findings of a project that aimed to identify the key factors that can enable organisations to understand and improve the work-related social and emotional wellbeing of employees. A key organisational response to the desire to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been to commit to a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The RAP provides a framework and business planning tool for organisations to identify, commit to, and realise their vision for reconciliation. This preliminary project aimed to determine the kinds of outcomes for employees that employers expect to see from implementing a RAP; and some conceptual foundations for how outcomes might be measured.

The study focused on qualitative interviews with management level staff responsible for RAP processes and/or employee wellbeing across government, corporate, not-for-profit organisations. It did not seek the views of individual employees, although some managers interviewed self-identified. A total of 20 qualitative interviews were undertaken. Key factors with the potential to impact on the ability of employees to flourish in the workplace were used to analyse the data. These included location, leadership, expectations and resources (Table 1). A number of facilitators of, and barriers to, workplace wellbeing for employees were found to be consistent at the organisational level. Organisations with larger numbers of employees predominantly had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees at lower levels, in roles that specifically related to Indigenous communities, and/or present in certain locations. By contrast, organisations with smaller numbers of employees usually had high numbers of positions requiring professional expertise and qualifications, a higher-intensity work culture and higher concentrations of employees in urban areas. Such factors have implications for the degree to which the wellbeing of employees is influenced by the wellbeing of other employees and in turn influences and is influenced by the wellbeing of non-Indigenous employees.

Reflecting the success of RAP principles and processes, research participants reported significant achievements with respect to workplace culture and diversity, and with respect to recruitment, retention, and advancement. Recognition, reconciliation and respect were all important to employee wellbeing. Also important were activities that organisations undertook to promote reconciliation beyond the immediate workplace. Community activities, secondments, and other outreach activities played an important role in achieving RAP and employee wellbeing outcomes.

Participants also identified a range of barriers to success in understanding, achieving, and maintaining employee wellbeing. RAPs played an important role, but some participants noted that support for RAPs was often lost at middle management level, resulting in a disconnect between strong senior executive commitments and employees at lower levels. Key recruitment requirements, such as high-level qualifications, psychometric testing and background checks can hinder employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates in professional roles. Attempts to specifically support employees can raise equity issues with non-Indigenous employees. These in turn can influence how comfortable people feel in identifying in the workplace. Overcoming barriers and improving employee wellbeing requires a combination of improved awareness and specific actions targeted at workplace practices and policies.

Despite the challenges, organisations were positive about realised and potential outcomes. In order to achieve the visions identified in the potential outcomes reported by organisations, a further shift is required in Australian societal and workplace responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2013–2014) sets the template for Australia's current Indigenous Advancement Strategy reforms and includes programs that target the workplace. Understanding how the workplace environment, culture and opportunities impact employees on a daily basis has the potential to accelerate the process of reconciliation both within and outside organisational walls.

Table 1: Summary of key factors, identified by organisational representatives, which contribute to the wellbeing of employees, including achievements they had seen as well as the challenges they were facing. A number of facilitators and barriers were consistent at the organisational level.

Themes	What is working	Challenges
Location	Recognition and acknowledgement of the original landowners. Support for employees to move out of organisational locations (e.g. training, secondment).	Centrally located employees (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people) having less engagement and connection with regional employees.
Resources	Resources for implementation of RAP and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are clearly identifiable.	Resource allocation can be hard to identify for employee wellbeing. Dollar value of resource allocation may not cover all important factors.
Expectations	RAPs ensure a standard of quality that the company needs to meet. Clients requesting that companies have a RAP in order to work together. Employees can generate and refine expectations of RAPs.	Potential for low expectations of employees leading to unfair exceptions being made.
Leadership	Commitment of senior executives is crucial, as is support from across the organisation. Bringing business partners and clients together to discuss Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people issues and potential solutions.	Need to change focus from recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trainees to include support, development and retention of employees at all levels.
Success	Promotion of reconciliation, culture and respect from the organisation. Cross-cultural awareness training.	Difficulty in attracting, retaining and internal promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Organisation	**Facilitator**	**Barriers and challenges**
Government	Consistent support for RAP initiatives and the importance of employees at the higher executive level.	Implementation challenges at middle management and program levels. Potential lack of inter-departmental and inter-agency communication and knowledge transfer about RAP initiatives and implementation.
Corporate	Fostering inclusive, culturally safe and culturally competent workplaces, creating support mechanisms (employee networks), opportunities for personal development, particularly external training and secondments. Significant inter-organisational sharing. RAP activity, and employment, a component of wider business strategy, positioning, and planning.	Creating an environment in which employees feel comfortable self-identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a strongly merit-based workplace.
NGO, Not-for-profit	Offering core work focused on socially, culturally, and personally meaningful outcomes. Seeking higher rates of employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, creating culturally safe and culturally competent workplaces, and educating staff, clients, and supporters about reconciliation.	Fewer material resources with which to independently enact RAP and/or employee initiatives.

* In this Table, all 'employees' are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

1   Introduction

This summary report presents the preliminary findings of a project that aimed to identify the key factors that can enable organisations to understand and improve the work-related social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees (from herein, 'employees' are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people unless otherwise specified).

An important goal for many contemporary Australian organisations is to improve the number, diversity, and seniority of their employees. One crucial factor in attracting, retaining, and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent is the degree of social and emotional wellbeing that the workplace environment enables for those people. Workplaces are evolving rapidly, particularly in organisations that have formally committed to making progress with respect to employees and broader corporate and community reconciliation goals. As more organisations adopt employee targets, the demand for such employees will continue to grow, as will those employees' expectations for leadership that aligns with visions for reconciliation. This demand for employees spans organisational categories (corporate, government, and non-government), organisational sizes (from small to very large), and a diverse array of industries or sectors (mining, construction, health, environment, legal, etc.). The variations in workplace environment are important, and within each are key lessons about; career options; work attributes and conditions; and organisational policies, practices and initiatives that enable employees to flourish at work. This report provides the outcomes from preliminary comparative research by CSIRO to scope key trends and information needs in this area.

The role of Reconciliation Action Plans in facilitating workplace flourishing

In Australia, the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2013–2014), sets the template for Australia's current Indigenous Advancement Strategy (AIAS) reforms. A range of programs have been implemented to improve conditions for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including programs that target the workplace. Yet recent reports highlight that meeting these targets (including health and employment) continues to be a challenge[1]. Distance, health, education, training, work experience and caring responsibilities are some of the factors that may limit employment options and participation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders have also highlighted the need for work that is meaningful and that enables people to pursue the career opportunities and pathways on their own terms[2]. Measures of employment success and the design of career programs have often struggled to take on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's evaluations of what 'real' jobs entail and how meaningful work and careers can be assessed[3].

A key organisational response to the desire to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been to commit to a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The RAP provides a framework and business planning tool for organisations to identify, commit to, and realise their vision for reconciliation[4]. The overarching reconciliation agenda contains two primary objectives – to animate societal response to past injustice and to provide innovative attempts to restore and rebuild relationships[5]. RAPs focus attention on key areas of opportunity with respect to these objectives, notably creating employment opportunities, promoting financial inclusion and building an understanding of Indigenous culture and aspirations. Organisations progress through different kinds of RAPs as their efforts mature (Table 2).

Government agencies and companies have invested heavily in designing and delivering RAPs through creative initiatives such as leadership programs[6], training and employment initiatives[7], and as part of innovative ways to design and deliver offset agreements[1-3; 5; 7-15]. Some RAP activities are managed under companies' corporate social responsibility agenda. Internal Indigenous training and employment activities are usually managed within Diversity and Inclusion Units of human resources departments.

Table 2: Descriptions of the four levels of Reconciliation Action Plans[4].

RAP type	Description
Reflect	Reflect RAPs are for organisations just starting out on their reconciliation journey and who need to build the foundations for relationships, respect and opportunities.
Innovate	Innovate RAPs are for organisations that have developed relationships with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and are ready to develop or implement programs for cultural learning, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and supplier diversity.
Stretch	Stretch RAPs are for organisations ready to challenge themselves and give organisations the opportunity to focus on tried and tested strategies and programs and set clear and measurable targets to deepen the impact of the RAP.
Elevate	Elevate RAPs are for organisations with a long, successful history in the RAP Program, a current Stretch RAP and a willingness to significantly invest in reconciliation.

As an organisation, CSIRO itself is implementing an 'Innovate' RAP that has a range of outcomes including providing a supportive workforce environment and career opportunities for employees. CSIRO has also carved out an international reputation for innovative cross-cultural evaluation tools and approaches with Australia's Indigenous communities. This includes CSIRO e-health monitoring technologies that have been co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults to foster health autonomy in their efforts to improve their health and wellbeing[16; 17].

Work related social and emotional wellbeing

The interdependency between biophysical health and mental wellbeing has been long recognised, as demonstrated by the 1948 preamble to the constitution of the World Health Organisation:

> *Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing …. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.*

Regardless of ethnicity, employee wellbeing has received a significant amount of research interest as one of the primary social determinants of health[18; 19]. There are several reasons why the recognition of the impact of the individual's work experiences is important for organisational and health research. Firstly, work and personal lives are interlinked such that work experiences impact on non-work domains. Secondly, there is a risk to employee's health from dysfunctional workplace relations. Finally, there are negative consequences for employees that diminish contributions to the organisation[20]. There is a large body of organisational research that highlights how and why social and emotional wellbeing is an important predictor of employee and organisational productivity and work engagement, job satisfaction and psychological stress (for example, Wright et al.[21]).

The work-related wellbeing research provides clear evidence of the importance of work related factors for all employees. However, in order to identify the key factors that can enable organisations to understand and improve the work-related social and emotional wellbeing of individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, this research needs to be supplemented and informed by studies focused on Indigenous populations.

Indigenous wellbeing studies

Reflecting longstanding international definitions, 'wellbeing' has been strongly evident in both earlier and more recent discussions of the general health of Indigenous people[22-27]. Frequently, this appears as an emphasis on 'holism' or a 'whole of life' view of health[9; 28]. Swan and Raphael[13] define it in this way:

> *Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing. This holistic concept does not merely refer to the 'whole body' but in fact is steeped in the harmonised interrelations which constitute cultural wellbeing. These inter-relating factors can be categorised as largely spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these interrelations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill-health will persist[13].*

The Australian Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy report reflects this definition and draws on statements from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia that emphasise that health is not just about the physical wellbeing of the individual but encompasses the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community and the country within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional estates. While there are similarities between Western and Indigenous understandings of wellbeing[29], what is often distinctive in Indigenous contexts is the higher priority placed on the connection between Indigenous wellbeing and the perceived health of landscapes and waterways[25; 28; 30-35].
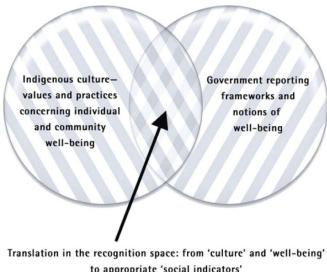
The emphasis on holism and interconnectedness in definitions of Indigenous health and wellbeing raises challenges for the identification of individual factors or influences, and in turn how those factors are measured and monitored. A comparison between two proposed frameworks shows some key potential differences in approach and their consequences. Both Trewin[36] and Cairney et al.[37] provide conceptual frameworks that aim to understand and measure social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Both operate with an holistic understanding of health as encompassing social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. However, there is a key difference in orientation, and this has practical consequences for any monitoring and evaluation derived from them.

Trewin's model[36], developed in 2006, focuses primarily on negative influences such as removal from family, psychological distress and anger, offset by 'positive wellbeing' and a 'cultural identification' factor that is also understood as positive. More recently, Cairney et al.[37] developed a framework, with direct participation of Indigenous communities, emphasising factors that positively support what they describe as 'interplay wellbeing' (Figure 1). These factors arise from a combination of priorities generated from within Indigenous communities (culture, community, empowerment) and from government (health, work, education).

Figure 1: Positive determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing[37].

The scope of this project does not include a full conceptual review and analysis of all of the existing frameworks in the research literature. Rather, its primary goal was to generate empirical data from Australian workplaces to understand how they are currently positioned with respect to employee wellbeing and associated reconciliation processes. This information can suggest practical pathways for improvements in employee wellbeing. It is an instance of what Taylor[14] identifies as 'translation in the recognition space' (Figure 2). This desire for translation arises because at an organisational or government policy level, there has been a burgeoning interest in developing frameworks for Indigenous wellbeing in part as a response to criticism that most policy measures fail to account for the particular needs and aspirations of Indigenous people[11]. Indigenous world views and pathways to achieve social wellbeing can defy easy interpretation, and indicators meaningful to Indigenous people are not always sensitive to government program logics or metrics. Consequently, such indicators frequently fail to be incorporated into frameworks that guide funding and policy decisions. Similar issues can arise for corporate and organisational recognition with respect to employee wellbeing – a framework that is comprehensible and usable from an organisational level may be less than adequate from an employee perspective.

Figure 2: Indigenous work-related social wellbeing[14].

Current scoping study objectives

This preliminary project aimed to determine the kinds of outcomes for employees that employers expect to see from implementing the RAP; and how those outcomes might be measured. Of primary interest was the contribution of diversity to workplace wellbeing and the key factors that have the potential to impact, positively or negatively, on the ability of employees to flourish. The nature of successes, challenges and outcomes were principally explored.

The scoping study operated at a comparative organisational level and so did not investigate individual employee views and responses to concepts used in wellbeing frameworks. This would need to be the basis of a further study, potentially adopting methods similar to those used by Cairney et al.[37]. Nonetheless, the key findings gleaned from the organisational perspective can form the basis of an understanding of practical pathways to workplace wellbeing. These can be further developed, refined and augmented in collaboration with employees through the next stage of the project.

2   Research approach and methods

A mixed methods approach was adopted that included the review of key features of 20 RAPs that are available on the public website[4], and convergent interviews with a representative sample of managers in organisations that are engaged in the RAP program. Questions asked in each interview included what the RAP meant to each organisation; resources that have been invested in RAP programs and efforts, what outcomes each organisation hoped to achieve from programs and initiatives established under each RAP and how were these outcomes being assessed. The role of individual leaders, facilitators and organisational culture were explored. Interviewees were also asked to reflect on the impact of the organisation and its RAP programs on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and also the impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees had on the workplace and the workforce in each organisation. The research project was approved by the CSIRO Human Research Ethics (095/16).

Organisations were approached to identify managers responsible for RAP facilitation and/or implementation. The consent form and interview questions (Appendix A) were sent to interviewees prior to the interview being conducted to provide the respondent with ample time to reflect, ask questions and provide informed consent to the interview process, and/or to obtain additional information from relevant staff who were unable to attend the interviews. The final interview sample included 21 participants in 20 organisations that represented diversity across key organisational categories (government, corporate and NGOs) and current RAP status (Table 3). In addition to having a representative from their RAP team participate in an interview, one large organisation had their Indigenous employment team respond in written form to relevant interview questions. Interviews typically took between 30–60 minutes and were facilitated by one or two members of the research team.

Table 3: Organisation sector and level of Reconciliation Action Plan.

RAP level	Government	Corporate	NGO	Total
Reflect	1	1	–	2
Innovate	1	3	3	7
Stretch	2	4	1	6
Elevate	2	2	–	4
Total	6	10	4	20

The resulting data were analysed in three ways. Firstly, the overall dataset was examined for key general findings across the participating organisations. Secondly, the data were grouped by category (government, corporate, NGO/Not-for-Profit) to identify consistencies within those organisational types. Thirdly, the data were grouped using key themes generated by the team in pre-interview scoping. These themes focused on initial conditions (Location, Resources, Expectations), key attributes (Leadership, Barriers), desired results (Success) and wider implications (Outcomes and Applicability) (Table 4). Organisational information from the interviews was assigned to the most appropriate category. This enabled analysis of individual organisational performance across categories, and preliminary analyses of different organisations across a single category. The qualitative nature of the data meant that variations in degree of fit within and between categories was expected. The implications of the diversity of the organisational data are discussed in the results section below.

Table 4: Key themes for analysing organisational data.

Theme	Discussion topics included
Location	How social and emotional wellbeing differs across organisation sites; how factors affecting wellbeing differ; how attitudes toward wellbeing differ
Resources	What sort of investments have been made in implementing the RAP
Expectations	Of the organisation; of employees; of the RAP
Leadership	For employees (including promotion prospects) and for organisations as role models
Barriers	To understanding, achieving, maintaining social and emotional wellbeing
Success	Concepts of success (what does success look like?); for employees, for the organisation, for the RAP
Outcomes and Applicability	For individuals, organisations, and Australian society as a whole

3   Results and discussion

Organisational participants were enthusiastic about discussing the concept of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people flourishing in the workplace. All reported that RAPs and associated activities have provided a productive means for thinking through their potential organisational contribution to reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians. They also reported that RAPs have provided a useful structure for the delivery and implementation of those potential contributions. An emerging theme was that greater organisational attention is now given to attracting, retaining, and promoting employees as a key component of reaching the overarching goal of reconciliation. Organisations are also seeking to embed reconciliation initiatives and practices across their operations, reflecting a guiding component of RAP activity.

How workplace diversity is associated with the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees

Organisations reported that their approaches and their capacities with respect to reconciliation in general, and employees in particular, had matured over time. The different types of RAPs enable organisational efforts to be divided into formal stages, and so RAPS both generate and reflect this temporal transition. Ongoing growth in capacity was consistently reported, but the rates of growth, and the current organisational stage at which that growth was occurring, was more variable. This temporal component was one aspect of wider organisational diversity. If diversity across organisations was simply a reflection of temporal differences – of current 'stages' in the reconciliation journey – then it would be expected that organisations would converge over time as more reach a mature stage of RAP development. However, alongside the temporal differences, there is significant diversity across organisations that is crucial to their ongoing role in reconciliation processes and associated employee outcomes. These differences encompass organisational scale, resourcing, and mission, proportion of Indigenous employees, and the level and geographic spread of Indigenous-occupied positions within the organisation. Such differences can affect:

- the willingness of employees to identify as Indigenous;
- key drivers of current Indigenous employee wellbeing (e.g. the relative contribution of the presence of other Indigenous employees);
- how wellbeing can be monitored and evaluated; and
- the impact of Indigenous employee wellbeing on the organisation and wider workforce.

In general terms, organisations with larger numbers of total employees usually have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees:

- disproportionately employed at lower levels;
- disproportionately situated in certain geographic and/or organisational locations; and/or
- employed in organisational roles that specifically relate to Indigenous communities.

By contrast, organisations in the participant sample with smaller numbers of total employees usually have:

- proportionally high numbers of positions requiring professional expertise and qualifications;
- higher-intensity work culture that is more assertively identified as merit-based; and/or
- higher concentrations of employees in urban areas.

The number, location and position of employees have direct implications for the degree to which the wellbeing of employees:

- is influenced by the wellbeing of other employees; and
- influences other non-Indigenous employees in the organisation.

Successful reconciliation outcomes could aid the attraction and retention of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous staff seeking an organisation that reflects key personal values and offers personal growth opportunities. This retention in turn can have flow on effects for employee wellbeing and for Indigenous clients of the organisation.

Key findings consistent across organisational categories

The participants in the research included employees of government, corporate, and non-government organisations. As noted above, considerable diversity of organisational context and approach exists between organisations in each category. Nevertheless, there were some consistent findings at the level of organisational category.

Government organisations — (Federal). Demonstrated some of the patterns identified above, in that organisations with a larger rural/regional Australian staff footprint tended to have higher numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Government sector staff reported consistent support for RAP initiatives and the importance of Indigenous employees at the higher executive level, but noted implementation challenges at middle management and program levels. This affected the retention and promotion of employees, with consequent impacts on ongoing employee numbers despite sometimes high intakes of lower level Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Corporate sector — including firms offering professional services, engineering and construction, retail and private health insurers. These organisations were driven primarily by a profit motive (i.e. without an overt social mission). They noted that they could encourage employee retention and wellbeing by fostering inclusive, culturally safe and culturally competent workplaces, creating support mechanisms such as internal employee networks, and offering opportunities for personal development, particularly external training and secondments. One ongoing challenge particularly noted by corporate participants was creating an environment in which employees felt comfortable self-identifying in a strongly merit-based workplace.

The degree of inter-organisational sharing with respect to RAP activities, initiatives, and learnings, and the explicitly altruistic rationale for that sharing, was a notable feature of the corporate sector interviews. In the medium to long term, sector-wide RAP employment targets may further increase demand for skilled corporate employees in ways that make such cooperation harder to sustain, as corporations compete for scarce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent.

Organisations with quite mature RAP efforts and processes that had now embedded the initiative across the business were refocusing their efforts on what they did best. They were in effect recognising that the nature of their core business enabled them to make a particular contribution to the wider societal process of reconciliation to which an increasingly large array of organisations are contributing. From this perspective, RAP activity, and the potential to generate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and wellbeing, is a component of wider business strategy, positioning, and planning.

Non-government/not-for-profit organisations — variously focused on human rights, aid and poverty prevention, lobbying for social services, and health care). Organisations with a defined social mission frequently had fewer material resources with which to independently enact RAP and/or employee initiatives, and noted that this constrained the level of activity they could sustain. However, understanding the core work of their organisations as contributing to reconciliation improved their ability to meet key criteria and targets. The ability to offer core work focused on socially, culturally, and personally meaningful outcomes was also an important means for such organisations to generate employee wellbeing.

These organisations were consistent in seeking higher rates of Indigenous employment, in creating culturally safe and culturally competent workplaces, and in educating their staff, clients, and supporters about reconciliation. For some NGOs, one additional consequence of having primary organisational goals that directly and/or indirectly contribute to reconciliation is the expectation that RAP and employee targets are a normal aspect of the organisation. This can make it harder for such organisations to receive attention for the specific RAP-oriented efforts that they do make and it may be more effective for such organisations to promote RAP activities and employment initiatives as part of their wider organisational agenda.

Organisational factors that can contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee wellbeing

Organisational factors that can contribute to employee wellbeing were identified within themes of interest determined prior to conducting interviews (Table 4). The analytical categories were not intended to be comprehensive, but rather enable rapid, scoping-phase classification of key elements across diverse interview data. Broadly, relevant factors perceived to contribute to Indigenous wellbeing fall into three groups.

- Concrete circumstances and starting conditions (Location, Resources, Expectations).
- Key attributes impacting on organisational activities (Leadership).
- The organisational RAP results achieved (Success) and their implications (Outcomes and Applicability).

Characteristics of the physical space that impact wellbeing

Characteristics of location that were considered to contribute to workplace wellbeing encompassed the land on which the organisation was built, the physical space created within that site and the connectivity between sites.

Acknowledging Traditional Owners and their Country — organisations recognised the importance of workplace activities that acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owners of the land on which workplace buildings and activities are located.

Actions that alter physical space in ways that assist employees to feel comfortable and welcome — for example, holding organisational events that celebrate Indigenous culture and displaying Indigenous art. Actions like these enabled all staff to "*talk about and practice reconciliation in our workplace*".

Connecting people across business units, levels and localities — the organisational location of employees can impact on the role they can play in fostering Indigenous social wellbeing. Those located in central or corporate functions need to maintain their awareness and their capacity to enable regional employees (including non-Indigenous) who often have more frequent direct engagement with employees and Indigenous clients. Supporting all employees to move out of organisational locations (for example, through secondments and training programs) was identified as a positive strategy to foster Indigenous wellbeing.

Resources and investments to implement reconciliation processes

The resources for the employment of employees and/or for the implementation of RAP processes overall are usually more clearly identifiable than those going specifically to employee wellbeing. Often resourcing is identified in terms of time or contracts.

Organisational and staff time — which often remains formally un-costed but can be used to generate a dollar figure.

Voluntary or pro bono time — particularly corporate entities which can make substantial commitments in terms of over $1 million per annum. Clearly this kind of contribution is impossible for smaller and/or less wealthy organisations. In these circumstances, a proportion or percentage of total resources may be a useful way to proceed and to provide comparison across organisations.

Procurement contracts to Indigenous enterprises — a number of participants noted how organisations had responded to government requirements and incentives. Others identified the drive provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and RAP requirements in tenders generated by the private sector.

The role of resourcing focuses attention on the degree of correlation between high levels of resourcing and employee wellbeing. Resourcing is clearly important, but there may be factors (for example, senior executive commitment and endorsement) that are highly influential on the cultural competency and safety of the workplace independent of the specific dollar value of a RAP resource allocation.

Expectations of all stakeholders

Understanding expectations, assessing them as realistic, and then identifying the actions needed to realise them is a crucial foundation for fostering reconciliation and Indigenous wellbeing. Organisations are aware that RAPs are public documents that effectively generate expectations for which they are then accountable. These expectations span employees, business partners/clients and the general community.

The value of RAPs for agreeing on employer–employee expectations — organisations reported that, for employees, RAPs were a way of formulating and agreeing on initial expectations, and for revisiting and refining them. Indigenous student cadetships and traineeships were viewed as particularly valuable in achieving more grounded and more accurate expectations, both from employers and employees. They enabled both parties to better understand what was required and what was possible. Exposure to early-career employee talent also had a potentially transformative effect on wider workplaces. One participant commented that "*I fully expect that some of the kids we are looking at now will be future social justice commissioners in 10–20 years*". Yet not all organisational representatives interviewed felt that enough was being done in terms of supporting employees throughout the organisation. One commented that their biggest intake was still Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees, and that while there is currently a focus on increasing numbers of employees, it was also important for that focus to broaden to supporting, developing and retaining those employees. Many participants noted that managing such expectations requires a careful balance: "*we don't want to make exceptions because low expectations* [of employees] *are part of the problem. But the situation is complex*". In essence, participants noted that expectations needed to be challenging enough to encourage performance, but also fair and appreciative of individual and collective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisational circumstances.

The value of RAPs for increasing influence on expectations and relationships between organisations — one participant described how expectations about a RAP became vital to securing future business. "*Clients we work for had started to tell us that they didn't want to do work with us unless we had a RAP. We had to then put this into our business planning.*" The expectation of substantial progress in reconciliation activity was increasingly important to successful tenders. The same participant went on to note that the client requirement *"… also prompted the question 'why are clients asking this when they haven't asked this before?'"* They were increasingly aware of a broader process going on across the sector and across the wider society.

Leadership within and by the organisation

Leadership by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, and by non-Indigenous advocates for reconciliation, has been crucial to RAP progress and the associated improvements in employee status achieved thus far.

Commitment from senior executives to RAP processes — clearly this is a crucial pre-requisite for organisations that are making progress. One participant noted that in order to achieve this progress "*Leaders had to go through their own education – many of our staff have not had much exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, people and culture".* This had required external leadership as it was "*Key for the person facilitating this to be trusted and respected – you have to take the organisation with you to be part of the journey – senior leaders too*".

Enabling leaders to experience aspects of Indigenous culture and history — this is key to provide what one interviewee aptly described as a "*culturally healthy workplace".* Having embarked on that journey, senior leaders could provide crucial support and resources for implementation of reconciliation and employee initiatives.

Leadership across the organisation — organisations achieving best practice have embedded RAP leadership traits across their employees so that the reconciliation agenda was led from below as well as above. This was particularly important for organisations that are geographically dispersed – where senior management are not normally 'on site'. On a practical level, mentors assigned to help employees with day-to-day working life were also identified as a practical and effective strategy for fostering employee

wellbeing. It was beneficial if those mentors were also employees, but most crucial was that they used effective and appropriate models of leadership to foster career development and enhance cultural safety.

Organisations were also identifying how they could be leaders with respect to reconciliation. One participant noted that a crucial basis for leadership was that they brought groups of powerful existing clients together on Indigenous issues, enabling new conversations and new solutions. Another provided leadership through a strong focus on entrepreneurship. A third encouraged their employees to be leaders in wider community contexts and to be carriers of a progressive organisational culture with respect to Indigenous issues – to "*be the person who would counter casual racism or ignorance at a BBQ with positive stories*" gained from their work context.

What success looks like for employees and for the organisation

Some organisations viewed success as meeting employment targets or providing training and advancement opportunities, while others had a longer term vision, viewing success as related to younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people completing Year 12, or undertaking tertiary study. Other key success factors identified included:

- attracting, retaining, and internally promoting Indigenous talent;
- managing Indigenous wellbeing; and
- providing targeted skills and career options.

One emergent theme raised by almost half the organisational representatives was that success was intricately linked with raising cultural awareness for the benefit of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous employees. This concept was variously described as:

- valuing cultural competence and inclusiveness;
- enabling the unique qualities employees bring to the organisation; and
- creating a culturally safe workplace.

One organisation had seen a seven-fold increase in Indigenous recruitment in 18 months, and felt that success entailed having "*a larger number of employees that love working for the firm, feel empowered, feel they have had opportunities, to actively support communities through their work as well, they can walk in two worlds – that their culture is respected in the workplace*".

Other organisations also felt that success would be demonstrated through willing participation by employees, to be an organisation for which employees wanted to work. This was partly due to the stated fact that the best way to attract and retain employees was through word of mouth. "*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most amazing networkers on the planet. Tell other people to come here and there will be a positive impact on the environment.*" Mature organisations expect their workforce to be reflective of Australian society – not just represent Indigenous culture but embody it. This was particularly important to organisations that that play a role in representing Australia to the world.

Many of the outcomes reported by organisations reiterated demonstrations of success that were essentially around building cultural capability within the organisation by incorporating Indigenous perspectives. For some organisations, outcomes were also intricately linked with their business model, and a new way of looking at how the RAP is "*aligned to*", "*embedded in*" or a "*core part*" of their business, and how their business can contribute to "*creating opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that would have otherwise not been there".* Some of these opportunities were at a business level, such as increasing Indigenous business in the supply chain, or developing the capacity of Indigenous providers to offer international services. For others it was at a personal level, seeing employees becoming leaders in the organisation, or demonstrating a higher commitment to other staff and the organisation as a whole, or developing connections that continue long after employees have left.

For many organisations some of these outcomes were already realised, and participants were generally positive that reported potential outcomes were achievable through efforts aligned with the RAP process.

Challenges in achieving and maintaining workplace wellbeing

Participants identified a range of barriers to success in understanding, achieving, and maintaining social and economic wellbeing of employees. These barriers were identified at systemic, organisational, and individual levels.

Systemic level challenges — some barriers "*aren't quick wins, these are embedded systemic issues*" that ultimately would require a wider societal response. One organisation identified a need to reframe the conversation, as one societal barrier was the perception that "*…Aboriginal people are desperately in need of help from non-Indigenous people",* where in fact "*There is lots that we could learn from Aboriginal people".*

Organisational level challenges — a range of issues were identified. Typically participants noted a pattern where "*RAP traction was lost at middle management level*", such that there was an organisational gap between strong senior executive commitment and those managing staff at lower levels (where higher concentrations of employees were generally found). Operationalising RAP commitments was particularly challenging for organisations where the workforce had a high degree of professionalisation. Participants reported a "*tight talent market for skilled Aboriginal staff*" and that this was one factor in the smaller number of employees. There were formal barriers to entry, such as psychometric testing, which could be particularly confronting for employees, leading to significant numbers of applications being withdrawn. Another barrier is formal background checks, which are harder for employees to pass given the high Indigenous criminal conviction and incarceration rates. Intrusive questions about personal wellbeing and/or family and social connections may be organisational requirements, but they intersect with higher level systemic and societal patterns.

Individual level challenges — the requirement for high-level qualifications and related testing barriers for entry for employees often intersected with a 'high octane' and high pressure work environment. This created challenges for all employees, but particular challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Stress, anxiety, and depression are significant mental health issues for organisations. One participant stated that "*we try and provide an informal support network in case they are feeling additional pressure over and above that standard level in a normal corporate lawyer working environment. Tougher for us is when the number gets bigger when you can't have a high touch model*". One non-Indigenous interviewee reflected that "*there can be so many challenging issues going on at home for Indigenous staff … it can be hard to know how to appropriately handle this as a manager at work*". In turn, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participant identified that it could be "*a huge leap to be in a corporate place*" and that there was significant hurt and damage from past institutionalism. Consequently, employees "*need to be emotionally healthy and emotionally strong*" in order to function effectively in institutional workplaces.

Even the standard entry requirements, such as response to selection criteria, were seen as more challenging for employees, and the waiving or softening of these requirements raised challenges in terms of equity across all candidates. Visible attempts to support existing employees can also raise challenges for the management of other employees. One participant identified that non-Indigenous people who are unhappy at work can misappropriate that through feeling as though "*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff receive additional benefit and privilege – 'they got a scholarship to come here, now they are complaining about the role'*". This can be compounded by a lack of understanding of contemporary Aboriginality, that "*there are lots of light skinned Aboriginal people who don't 'look' Aboriginal and people struggle with that".*

One complex equity issue raised was in regard to promotion, and the perception by an employee that they were unsuccessful because they identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The participant, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee themselves, maintained this was not the case, that there had been a more suitable candidate. None-the-less, while there is inequality in the workplace, there will always be the perception that identifying could impact management decisions. One organisation actively undertook "*work on leadership, progression, and promotion to ensure that there is no unconscious bias in the way we recognise and promote".* Until this behaviour is widely adopted, cultural safety and racism remains an issue, and does arise across organisations.

This in turn affected the degree to which employees felt able to identify in the workplace, and the level of support that could be provided to them. One participant noted that when they first began their RAP journey that only one person amongst 1800 staff felt comfortable about identifying. The limited numbers affected the ability of the organisation to provide a supportive environment: "*the feedback I got from meeting with one of our interns is 'it's as good as it can be at the moment without a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on staff'. But it's not ok that you don't have a significant number of staff.*" The low number of employees can also lead to "*isolation and loneliness or the Indigenous 'poster child' routine that can come in*". In some cases, organisations have recognised the challenges in recruiting large numbers of qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at this time and have concentrated their efforts on supporting other organisations to build pathways to employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

The pressures on organisations can also act as indirect barriers to employee wellbeing. One participant found that human resource policy requirements were becoming increasingly complex and another stated that "*it was a challenge to find air space to keep the Indigenous issues at the forefront in the diversity space. This wasn't the case 3–4 years ago.*" A government sector participant identified that the challenges for departments facing pressures such as institutional churn and tight deadlines were around the gulf between expectation and reality. "*It was hard to sustain initial hopes and expectations. We have lots of institutional fragmentation – we don't learn from other government agencies also doing RAPs.*"

People's daily lives can make functioning in the workplace difficult. RAPs may not solve that but building a more knowledgeable workforce that understands broader impacts of what happens in the world makes people work together better and be more supportive of each other. Overcoming these barriers and improving employee wellbeing requires a combination of improved general awareness and specific actions.

Towards employee workplace wellbeing

The data obtained from the 20 participant organisations forms a starting point for understanding the kinds of metrics that can be used to assess and monitor workplace wellbeing. Development of such measures would require involvement of a greater number of organisations, particularly those with demonstrated successes in reconciliation visions and values. Of greatest import, would be the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates, both employed and unemployed, and non-Indigenous employees who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

The findings from this initial scoping study have informed the inclusion of a number of inter related components that are recognised by organisations as having the potential to impact on the wellbeing of employees in the workplace. These include:

Recognition of culture — mutual respect, cultural safety, willingness to identify, cultural competence, cross-cultural awareness, flow backs to community.

Understanding the physical space — acknowledging Traditional Owners, sense of place, impact of location.

Clear career trajectories — participation and productivity, access to professional development, potential for promotion, effective leadership.

Workplace relationships — access to support networks, engagement and connection with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, relationships with non-Indigenous employees.

Future focus — alignment with vision for reconciliation, willingness to recommend, opportunities for future generations.

Indigenous employee wellbeing monitoring and evaluation will need to be attuned to the organisational context, and to the relative contribution of specific drivers of wellbeing in that context.

Further development of practical pathways to workplace wellbeing forms the basis of the next stage of this project.

4   Summary and conclusion

This scoping project generated a significant amount of rich data in what is a complex and multifaceted status quo facing the Australian workforce in its efforts toward reconciliation. Data analysis revealed key factors related to location, leadership, expectations and resources that had the potential to impact on the ability of employees to flourish in the workplace. These included recognition of Traditional Owners of the land on which organisations were located, availability of resources to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment targets, and a high standard of work ethic set by organisations with RAPs, supported by the commitment of senior executives. Together these factors are having a positive impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workplace wellbeing through promotion of cross-cultural awareness, mutual respect and a clear vision for reconciliation.

There are, however, still key barriers to employee flourishing. Barriers at the entry level hinder employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates. Once employed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees tend to have roles at lower levels, or in those that specifically relate to Indigenous communities, and/or be present in certain locations. Even in organisations with high level commitment to RAPs, implementation can be challenging for middle management and resources for wellbeing even more difficult to allocate. These factors have implications for the degree to which the wellbeing of employees is influenced by the wellbeing of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and in turn influences and is influenced by the wellbeing of non-Indigenous employees.

Many respondents who have engaged in a RAP who were involved in this scoping study emphasised the importance of assessing Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff wellbeing to facilitate attraction, retention, and promotion of employees within the workforce. There was a strong interest in mechanisms for feedback, monitoring and evaluation of Indigenous staff wellbeing. However, some noted that development of metrics for Indigenous wellbeing have the potential to contribute to further ostracism in the workplace. Therefore, measures should be for improvements in flourishing for all employees, but sensitive to cultural values so as to specifically address issues facing Indigenous Australians.

In order to achieve the visions identified in the potential outcomes reported by organisations, a shift is required in Australian societal and workplace responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Understanding how the workplace environment, culture and opportunities impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees on a daily basis has the potential to accelerate the process of reconciliation both within and outside organisational walls.

Appendix A Interview Questions

What does the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) mean to you (key components)?

What resources have you invested in it ($, FTE, Materials, etc)?

What do you hope to see for your employees who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (outcomes)?

How will you know you have achieved this?

How do see yourself facilitating that as an individual? As an organisation?

How important is social and emotional wellbeing of staff who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to you? to the organisation?

How important do you think it is to them?

Do you think social and emotional wellbeing of staff who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander impacts the workplace, and if so, how

What else would like to tell us about what RAP means to you and the implications for your workplace and its employees?

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