The Alliance

THE NATIONAL INDIGENOUS
EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING ALLIANCE

FIRST NATIONS
EMPLOYMENT
INDEX 2025

RESEARCH
PARTNERS

murawin

Social
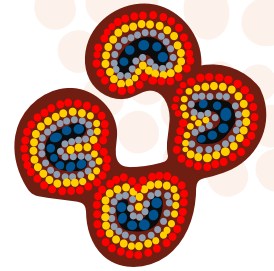Research
Centre

Acknowledgement of Country

Australia is made up of over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations that have a responsibility and connection to Country. For First Nations Peoples, sites and places are viewed in the context of Country.

Connections to memories of places are embedded in Country. Continued attempts have been made to overlook and silence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and history since colonisation. These strong and resilient cultures continue to thrive. First Nations stories are still told and their songs are still sung. First Nations Peoples have continuing connections to Country that are inclusive of lands, waters and skies.

The National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance, Murawin and the Social Research Centre would like to acknowledge Country and pay respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the many lands on which this research was conducted. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge all those who have contributed their stories and experiences of their workplaces and their connections to Country for this research. We understand that there is diversity in identities and the lived experiences of participants of this research project.
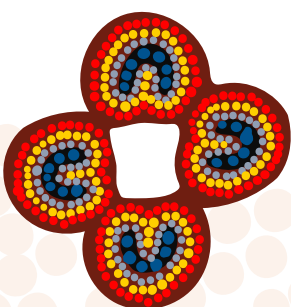
We would also like to acknowledge the cultural identities of all of the First Nations contributors to the research. We recognise the continuing living cultures of Indigenous Peoples across the globe. We recognise the contemporary stories of displacement and the cultural significance of Country in the continued journey of self-determination in Australia.

First Nations readers are advised that this report may include harmful content. This content may have the potential to retrigger First Nations Peoples due to vicarious trauma or experiences of cultural load throughout the findings. It also contains images of First Nations Peoples who have passed away.

# Contents

About the Artwork

The artwork used across Index 2025 is by Ena Oscar Majapula Nanaku (1957–2024).

Ena Oscar Majapula Nanaku was born in 1957 at Jinparrak (old Wave Hill Station) to Josephine Nyirtungali and John Jangayarri George. She is Gurindji and Mudburra. She follows her ngamayi (mother's) and jawiji (mother's father's) traditional Country, which is Yamarri (Cattle Creek outstation) and Warlujarrajarra (on Cattle Creek Station). Ena grew up at Jinparrak and worked in the kitchen as a young woman. She married Peter Limbunya Ngurriyila and they had two sons.

Ena and her husband worked on Cattle Creek Station and later moved to Daguragu where she lived with her five grandchildren. For a while, she worked at Kalkaringi school. Highly skilled in both Gurindji and English, Ena has worked as a translator on a number of Gurindji language and culture documentation projects with linguist Felicity Meakins.

Ena and her younger sister, Sarah, started painting at the Karungkarni Art and Culture Centre in Kalkaringi shortly after it opened in 2011. Her Dreaming is the wayit (pencil yam), which she paints. Her artwork also includes themes such as kinyuwarra (bush onion), kamara (black soil yam) and kalijpa (yellow kapok). In 2015, linguists Felicity Meakins and Erika Charola worked with Gurindji people and Karungkarni Art Centre to compile the history book, *Yijarni: True Stories from Gurindji Country*. Artists were invited to travel to a local waterhole, Warrijkuny (Sambo Rockhole) for an art camp so that they could record their versions of history through paintings. Here, Ena painted the story of her ngapuju ('nana') working for the white cattle station owners on Jinparrak (old Wave Hill Station).

The artwork is called *Ena's Ngapuju ['nana'] carrying toilet waste for kartiya at Jinparrak*. It was made in 2015 with synthetic polymer paint on canvas.
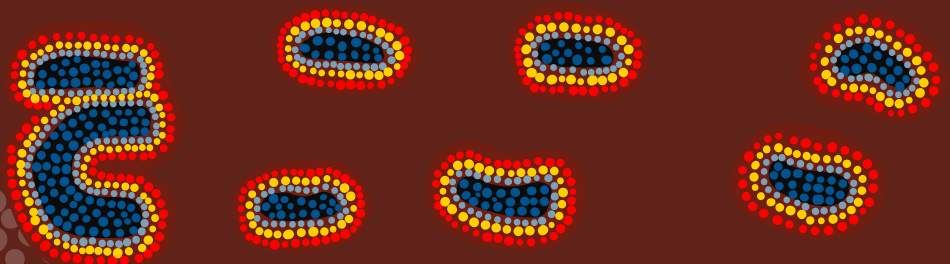
Ena Oscar Majapula Nanaku (1957–2024)
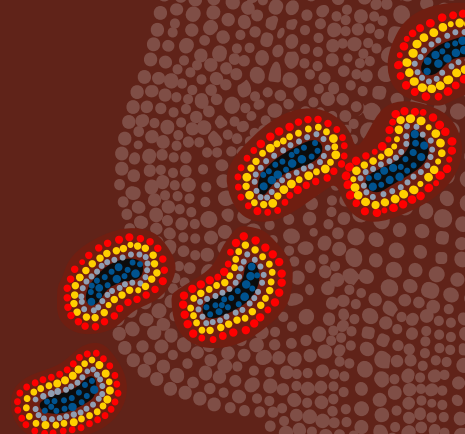
Ena's Ngapuju ['nana'] carrying toilet waste for kartiya at Jinparrak is a brave celebration of Gurindji Freedom Day – the day Gurindji people commemorate their walk away from slavery and inequality, deplorable working conditions and destitution. Ena was a young girl at the time of the Gurindji Wave Hill Walk-off on 23 August 1966. The painting celebrates that the kajirri (old women) no longer work in degrading roles such as those they endured while under the control of the Vestey Company and the kartyia (white men) who ruled their lives through force and terror. At first, Ena found it difficult to represent this story as she thought it might bring shame on her ngapuju but she then realised that theirs was a powerful story and she was proud to represent her ngapuju through this very graphic and public medium.

Ena Oscar Majapula Nanaku
speaks about her painting:

"The painting is about my ngapuju ('nana'), Judy Kutuwumpu, who used to carry a wooden yoke and buckets to get the dirty toilet waste from the kartyia, the white station people. One bucket was for soapy water and the other for dirty water. She used to take it right around, far from the main building to the jackaroos' quarters, to the manager's house, and then to the top and bottom quarters. She used to clean out the toilets and chuck it far away and wash the toilets, over and over again.

There were two of them working together. The other one was my other nana, Lena. They were both married to one husband, Butcher George. They used to take the buckets a long way to the west to the big creek, throw out the contents, and come back. One building used to be there – it is here in the painting – it is an outhouse. They used to put the clean buckets in there.

There's a jackaroo in the painting just as a symbol. That kartyia's got a hat in his hand. And the tree is a wanyarri (native bauhinia). Here on the left are the windbreaks, humpies made of branches and leaves, where people would sit by the fire in the cold season. The women and girls used to wait there for work. Every morning, they would come up from the camp and make a fire, have breakfast and stay there waiting for work. The footprints are where the two women, Judy and Lena, went all around.

I was happy doing this painting, but it made me feel sorry for the hard work they did for kartiya. You know they didn't used to get paid. They used to work for sugar and tea-leaf, flour. Every Friday they used to get rations."

We would like to extend heartfelt thanks to Karungkarni Art and Culture Aboriginal Corporation, and Ena Oscar Majapula Nanaku and her family, for this artwork and story.

Our Thanks

We extend thanks to all organisations who participated in Index 2025 for their invaluable contributions. We hope these insights will foster inclusive workplaces and advance meaningful employment outcomes for First Nations Peoples.

PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS

Advanced Personnel Management (APM Group)	Healius
Ampol	Jones Lang La Salle
ANZ	Laing O'Rourke
Atlassian	Lendlease Australia
Australia Post	NBN Co
Australian Red Cross	Northcott
Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese	NSW Public Service Commission
Clayton Utz	Origin Energy
Commonwealth Bank of Australia	Programmed Skilled Workforce
Compass Group (Australia) Pty Ltd	Rio Tinto
Culture Amp	Telstra Corp Ltd
Ernst & Young, Australia (EY)	Telstra Health
Essential Energy	Toll Group
Fortescue	Transport for NSW
GHD	Wilson Group
Goodstart Early Learning	Woolworths Group
Hays Specialist Recruitment	Worley

This heat map represents the location of participating organisations, spread right across the country.

TIMOR SEA

ARAFURA SEA

JOSEPH BONAPARTE GULF

GULF OF CARPENTARIA

CORAL SEA

INDIAN OCEAN

DARWIN— LARRAKIA: GARRAMILLA

NORTHERN TERRITORY

CAIRNS—GIMUY

ALICE SPRINGS—MPARNTWE

QUEENSLAND

PACIFIC OCEAN

SHARK BAY

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

BRISBANE—MEANJIN

PERTH—BOORLOO

GREAT AUSTRALIAN BIGHT

NEW SOUTH WALES

SYDNEY—WARRANE

ADELAIDE—TARTANYA WAMA

CANBERRA—NGAMBRI

TASMAN SEA

MELBOURNE—NAARM

SOUTHERN OCEAN

VICTORIA

HOBART—NIPALUNA

TASMANIA

RESEARCH PARTNERS

Murawin is an Indigenous-owned consulting agency, committed to driving change and creating impact for Indigenous Australians. Murawin led the research, conducting the qualitative component to bring the voices and experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees, as well as Indigenous-led businesses, to add deeper insights to the findings.

The Social Research Centre (SRC) collaborated with Murawin to develop the quantitative research. SRC provides innovative social research and evaluation services to Australian researchers, policymakers, academics and business leaders to support informed decision-making and advance our understanding of Australian society and our place in the world.

This research was conceptualised within the Minderoo Foundation and transferred to the National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance (The Alliance), supporting First Nations voices and Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.

The Index 2025 team have been instrumental in the development and production of Index 2025.

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ADVISORY PANEL

To our Advisory Panel (AP), it is with a deep sense of gratitude we thank you for your time, support and guidance as expert knowledge holders within the employment field and throughout the research process. Your generosity in sharing insights and lived experiences has been invaluable.

Adam Davids
Director, First Nations Equity Partners,
Board Member, Social Ventures Australia,
Board Member, Career Trackers

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Executive Director Policy and Advocacy,
Victoria Chamber of Commerce

Dr Craig Leon
Managing Director, Conscious Solutions

Matthew Clarke
Chief Executive Officer, Yilabara Solutions

Tiffanie Ireland
Founder and Director, Messenger Bird Collective

Melissa Riley
General Manager Research and Capability (Chair)

MINDEROO FOUNDATION

We also extend our thanks to the Minderoo Foundation for advancing the Index research. Their contribution has been instrumental in moving this project forward. Thank you for your collaboration and support.
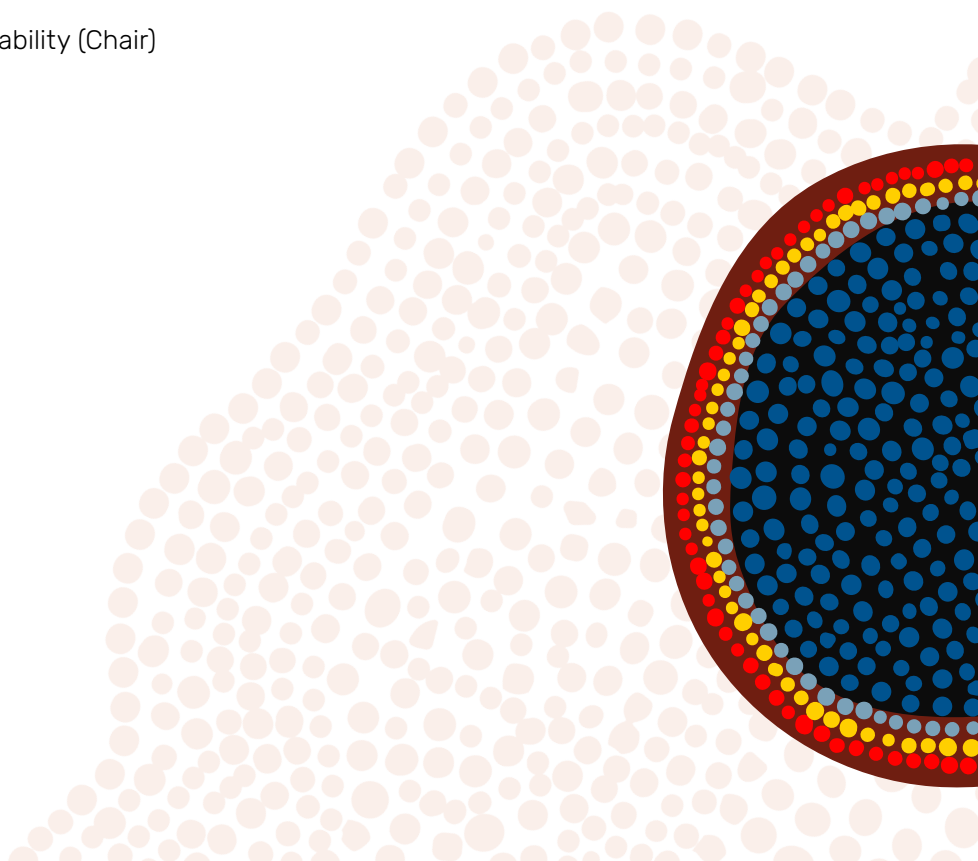
Terminology

FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

For Index 2025, we have chosen to use the term First Nations Peoples to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to reflect the national scale of this research.

We recognise First Nations Peoples have different preferences regarding the use of the term. Many people may prefer to be known by their language group or Country name, or as Traditional Owners. The terminology used in this project reflects a considered and deliberate approach. We respect and acknowledge the diversity of First Nations communities and identities across Australia.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION	MEANING
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AP	Advisory Panel
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
EVP	Employee Value Proposition
HR	Human Resources
INDEX 2025	First Nations Employment Index 2025
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SRC	Social Research Centre
ToC	Theory of Change
WHO	World Health Organization
WHS	Work Health and Safety
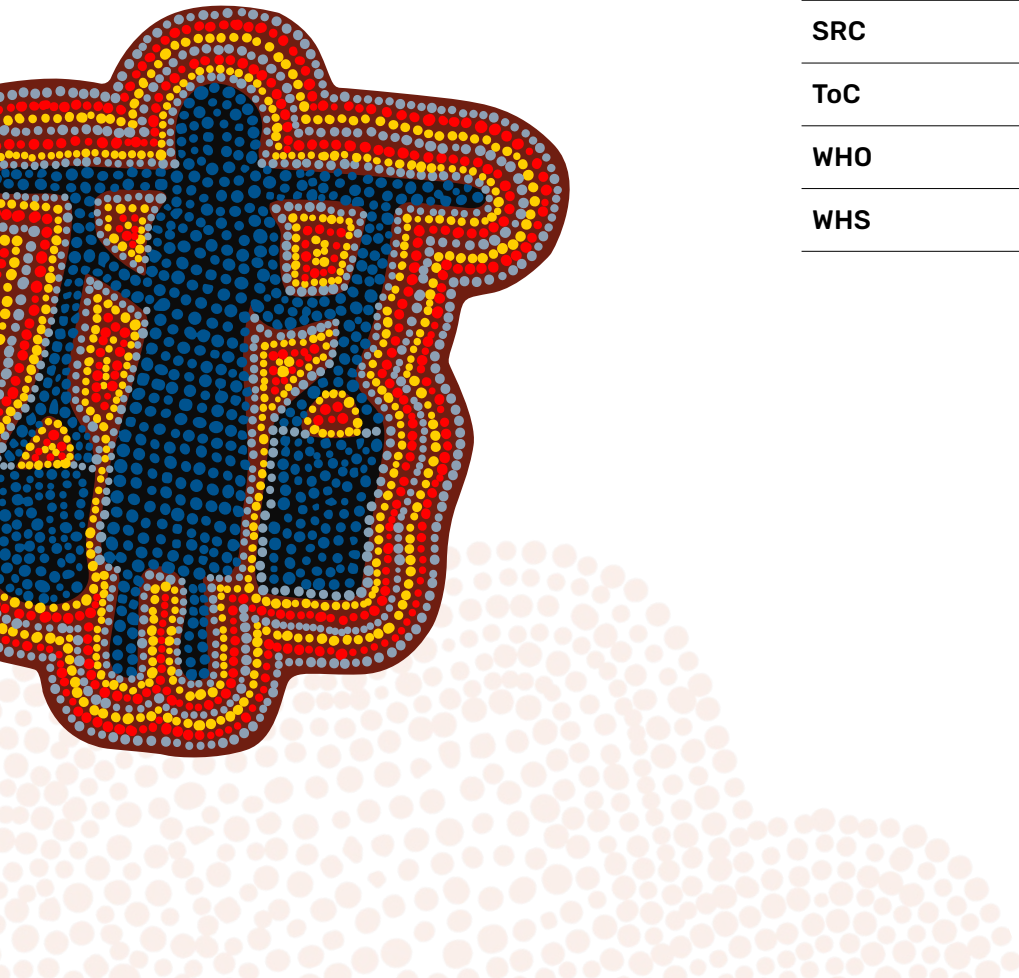
Message from the CEO
The Alliance

For over 60,000 years, Australia's First Nations Peoples have shaped and enriched the cultural, social and economic fabric of this country. Yet despite these contributions, Australia's contemporary labour markets continue to present significant barriers to the full participation and success of First Nations Peoples – barriers that perpetuate disparities in life outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations people.

At The Alliance, our vision is clear: to create a world where First Nations Peoples are self-reliant, valued and enjoy economic prosperity. Achieving this requires us to confront long-standing systems of inequity and reshape structures to foster genuine inclusion. We are committed to revolutionising the employment landscape – ensuring that First Nations voices are not only heard but empowered to drive meaningful and sustainable change.

Australia's largest employers have a unique opportunity and responsibility to drive this transformation forward. Workplaces are not just places of employment; they reflect our broader society. So, by challenging entrenched practices and building equitable workplaces where First Nations Peoples truly belong, we lay the foundation for stronger relationships, deeper cultural understanding and pathways to intergenerational prosperity.

Index 2025 is a direct reflection of this commitment. It offers crucial insights into the experiences of First Nations employees within some of Australia's most prominent organisations. The data, which brings First Nations Peoples narratives to the forefront, presents a powerful call to action for business leaders to listen deeply, engage and yarn honestly and take bold action to reform workplace systems. Index 2025 demonstrates that fostering social cohesion and creating belonging is not just good corporate citizenship but is essential to our collective success.

This report represents more than just a collection of data, it represents the lived experiences of First Nations Peoples who courageously shared their stories, vulnerabilities and hopes. We extend our gratitude to all First Nations participants for trusting us with their stories in the hope of creating lasting change. Their bravery, vulnerability and vision are at the heart of this work.

We also acknowledge the Australian organisations that have engaged in this important process. By committing to listen, yarn and act, they have taken a vital step toward creating workplaces where First Nations Peoples can thrive. This journey of learning and action will shape not only the future of work but strengthen the relationship between First Nations Peoples and non-First Nations people.

Our thanks go to the dedicated research teams at Murawin and the SRC for their exceptional work in gathering and analysing the data. Their expertise has been essential in creating this comprehensive Index.

We extend our appreciation to the Minderoo Foundation for their commitment to bringing this initiative to life and for stepping aside to ensure this work continues under First Nations custodianship with The Alliance.

Additionally, we are grateful to our Advisory Panel for their honesty, guidance and commitment to ensuring that Index 2025 remains aligned with the needs and aspirations of First Nations Peoples.

As a proud Wonnarua and Wiradjuri woman and the Chief Executive Officer of The Alliance, I am honoured to present the First Nations Employment Index 2025. This report represents far more than a collection of data points, it is a mirror reflecting the lived realities of First Nations Peoples navigating Australia's corporate spaces. It calls on business leaders to align their values with transformative action, challenging us all to move beyond reflection and into meaningful change.

The inaugural Index 2022, initiated by the Minderoo Foundation, filled a critical gap in the data available on First Nations employment experiences. We proudly take ownership of this work as it transitions under First Nations stewardship of The Alliance, ensuring that the future of this vital initiative remains guided by those it serves.

Our vision is not just a statement; it is a commitment to action. Our mission compels us to build an employment system that honours the strength and potential of First Nations Peoples, ensuring that the structures we reshape today create prosperity for generations to come.

The findings in this report emphasise a delicate balance: while First Nations voices must be amplified, the burden of driving change cannot rest solely on our shoulders. True allyship requires stepping up, not just stepping back. This means Australian business leaders must embrace discomfort, engage in reflection and take action with courage.

As you read through the findings of Index 2025, I urge you to consider the role you play in revolutionising the employment landscape for First Nations Peoples. The time for reflection is now; the time for action is long overdue. Together, we can build an employment system where all people are valued, where social cohesion flourishes and where First Nations Peoples' voices lead the way.

Kylie Penehoe
Wonnarua and Wiradjuri
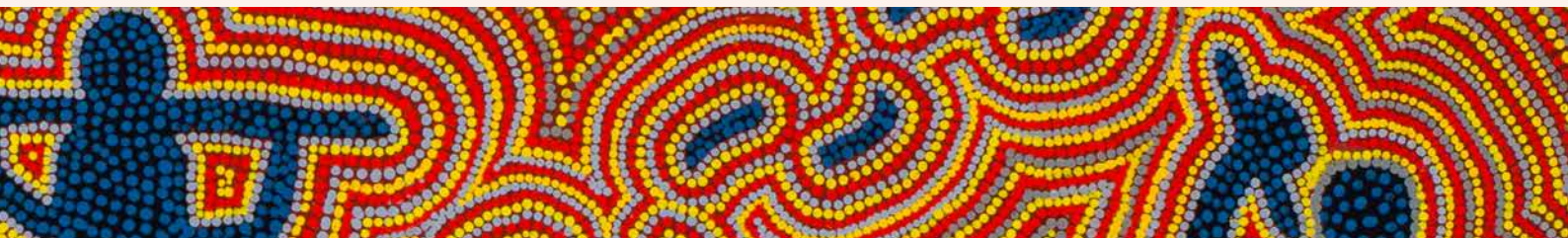
Message from the General Manager Research and Capability
The Alliance

Australia's First Nations Peoples hold one of the world's longest and most profound histories. As First Nations Peoples, our connection to Country, kinship and community deeply intertwines with our journeys in the Australian workforce.

While we are the world's oldest continuing culture, systemic barriers continue to limit our agency in achieving employment parity. Despite ongoing efforts to close the Indigenous employment gap, as highlighted by the Closing the Gap initiatives since 2008, progress remains slow. Without a data-driven approach that incorporates measurable, accountable targets in every Australian workplace, this gap will persist.

The 2022 Woort Kooliny Australian Indigenous Employment Index provided a foundational perspective on the employment experiences of First Nations Peoples. Combining qualitative and quantitative research, it elevated the voices of Indigenous employees, employers and the broader First Nations community. As planned, Index 2025 continues this work, shedding light on the lived experiences of First Nations Australians in the workforce as part of truth-telling and a step toward self-determination. Index 2025 enriches these insights with narratives shared by Mob, emphasising First Nations knowledge through learning, teaching and reciprocity.

This year, 34 organisations collaborated with research partners to contribute to Index 2025, demonstrating allyship and a commitment to best practices in First Nations employment. This represented 12% of all First Nations employees in Australia. Their participation reflects the courage needed to pursue a path of shared truth-telling, highlighting both achievements and challenges in the journey to employment parity.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to every participating organisation and to our research partners, Murawin and the SRC, for their invaluable support. I am also grateful to the Advisory Panel, whose expert guidance and commitment to cultural safety fostered an environment of respect and deep listening throughout this research. My deepest appreciation goes to the employees who shared their stories and experiences – your voices form the heart of this work and drive the vision for parity.

I must also recognise the role Minderoo Foundation has played in establishing this research and my valued colleagues, whose dedication made this research possible. Their commitment, respect and deep listening created a space of safety and cultural integrity in every interaction. Finally, I am thankful for the strong leaders who championed this work and have supported its transition into The Alliance.

The journey toward true employment parity requires a commitment to culturally safe workplaces, where everyone is respected, and dignity is a fundamental right. First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing bring a richness to workplaces that enhances corporate culture and strengthens inclusivity. For real change, employers must go beyond goodwill or compliance, to co-designing practices, policies and processes with First Nations Peoples as equal partners. These changes must be fluid, nuanced and deeply rooted in a genuine understanding of cultural safety.

Achieving parity also means addressing the long-standing tendency to hire for likeness, which limits diversity and stifles innovation. Are organisations prepared to move past the status quo, dismantling systemic barriers and cultivating environments that support and celebrate First Nations talent? This is a question of corporate responsibility and requires the engagement of the 97% non-First Nations population to create lasting change. First Nations professionals and corporate allies alike have shown a shared vision for equity, and now it is crucial that employers use their influence to continue to dismantle these systemic barriers.

A significant gap in data has left many organisations unsure of how to best support First Nations talent and measure progress. Index 2025 works to fill this critical void, offering essential data and insights that guide employers in creating sustainable, culturally inclusive and equitable workplaces. This work could not proceed without the strength, activism and wisdom of our Elders, past and present, whose experiences and advocacy have paved the way, shaping a legacy of resilience and knowledge that underpins all we strive to achieve.

Index 2025 provides the evidence base and guidance needed to turn intention into impactful action, helping organisations create workplaces that recognise and value the unique skills, perspectives and strengths First Nations Peoples bring. As we work toward employment parity, each organisation is called to commit to this journey, building genuinely inclusive workplaces where First Nations talent is respected, contributions are celebrated, and opportunities are accessible to all.

Melissa Riley
Wiradjuri

Executive Summary

Index 2025 reveals key findings and actionable insights, by providing a comprehensive analysis of employment trends, challenges and opportunities for Australian organisations and First Nations communities.

The 2023 Voice Referendum's 'no' result has significantly influenced corporate and political engagement with First Nations affairs, highlighting the need for renewed approaches to reconciliation, truth-telling and economic inclusion initiatives. The Australian Government remains committed to advancing First Nations employment equity by 2030, urging organisations to increase First Nations workforce representation. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted strategy focused on cultural safety and inclusivity. This is not a linear process – nuanced and contextual approaches are required.

Improved First Nations employment practices benefit everyone. Creating a space where First Nations Peoples can thrive leads to better business outcomes, drives a more diverse talent pipeline and supports business innovation and growth.

Index 2025 highlights standout practices that employers should take note of. These practices are organised according to the employee journey – from the initial application, retention and culturally safe employment experience to support for First Nations Peoples who want to progress into leadership roles. It also outlines key practices for management in ensuring commitment, accountability and the development of effective strategic partnerships with First Nations communities.

These practices make up five key domains in which organisations can rethink and strengthen their approach to meaningful work for First Nations Peoples.

KEY FINDINGS

- Racism is pervasive and often subtle, requiring continuous awareness, education and action;

- First Nations Peoples' voices must lead change that impacts them;

- Boards and executives need to be accountable and promote change to ensure it is long-term, embedded at a systems level and sustainable;

- Decision-making and actions need to be informed by robust data and should be measurable and achievable to ensure accountability;

- Authentic relationships with community need to be reciprocal, trust-based and respectful;

- Cultural capability needs to be contextual to the organisation and within a framework of continuous learning; and

- Pipelines to leadership with tailored training, together with visible First Nations leaders, must be prioritised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Attraction and Recruitment

Organisations that are successfully improving First Nations attraction and recruitment focus on integrating First Nations perspectives within their Human Resources (HR) teams. This involves streamlining processes and creating meaningful employment opportunities:

1. Employers that value and include First Nations employees on their recruitment team allow First Nations applicants to feel more comfortable to apply and be successful in their application;

2. Employers who streamline and make their recruitment processes more flexible are more accessible and inclusive for First Nations candidates. By introducing job opportunities through informal networks or social media, they successfully break down barriers and open doors to new opportunities; and

3. Employers that publicly advocate for respect and inclusion for First Nations Peoples and their rights show future applicants that they promote respect and equity. This encourages more First Nations Peoples to apply, knowing the organisation is more likely to have an inclusive and supportive environment.

Retention, Professional Development and Leadership

Effective retention and leadership strategies are critical to ensure an inclusive and high-performing workplace. The following practices demonstrate how employers are successfully retaining First Nations employees and developing future leaders through targeted support, cultural training and visibility of leadership:

1. Line Managers who are empowered as change agents and provided with the tools, budget and training needed to support First Nations employees are more effective in retaining First Nations Peoples and developing future leaders within their teams;

2. Employers that have leadership programs specifically tailored for First Nations employees see higher completion and success rates. Tailored programs are more attractive, effective and relevant to the differing needs of First Nations employees; and

3. Employers that increase the visibility of First Nations leaders within the organisation help to boost retention rates and nurture the development of future leaders.

Workplace Culture and Inclusion

The following practices are instrumental in fostering a positive and inclusive workplace culture:

1. Organisations who seek to implement a cultural learning needs analysis and framework – to guide people in a way that is continually challenging but not overwhelming – ensure employees are supported throughout their employment journey;

2. Organisations who actively challenge discriminatory behaviours and attitudes create a culture where diversity is celebrated and everyone is treated with dignity and respect;

3. Line managers who have the skills to handle conflicts, grounded in cultural capability, ensure fair resolutions by using empathy and problem-solving techniques; and

4. Understanding of cultural load decreases the chance of First Nations employees burning out. Cultural load is the invisible but hefty workload placed on First Nations Peoples to provide cultural knowledge.

Commitment and Accountability

The practices below strengthen the commitment and accountability of organisations in delivering positive outcomes for First Nations employees:

1. Organisations with key performance indicators (KPIs) at executive and line manager levels are more accountable for reconciliation outcomes and have the requisite resources to achieve results;

2. Organisations with First Nations advisory boards enhance accountability, transparency, cultural safety and the long-term sustainability of reconciliation efforts;

3. Organisations that align and embed Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) or other First Nations policy actions within broader corporate strategies improve organisational bottom lines and reconciliation outcomes simultaneously; and

4. Organisations that align their strategic vision with social goals like the Closing the Gap Report drive more sustainable First Nations employment and reconciliation outcomes.
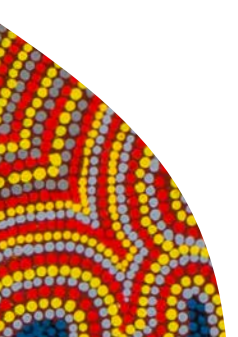
First Nations Community Engagement

The practices below enhance the effectiveness of partnerships between employers and First Nations communities:

1. Organisations who prioritise consultation, communication and collaboration in their partnerships enjoy mutual benefits through shared leadership, delivering long-term sustainable practices and reconciliation outcomes;

2. Organisations that align their partnerships to their corporate strategy create sustainable and impactful relationships with First Nations communities; and

3. Many organisations have transactional partnerships with First Nations communities. Reducing bureaucracy and simplifying compliance for First Nations suppliers helps to form more meaningful and mutually beneficial collaborations.

The push towards true parity in First Nations employment remains crucial. Despite external forces, there needs to be a vigilant focus to achieve this. Index 2025 outlines important domains that can operate as levers for change, with First Nations voices leading this change. Whilst entrenched challenges continue to exist, we must continue to respectfully measure and define progress. Cultural capability is a continuous journey of learning, which can grow relationships built on trust and authenticity. True change is systemic.

Just as a "fair go" stands for giving everyone a genuine shot at success, this is a call for inclusive actions that ensure fairness, equality and support for First Nations talent. Together, we can make the workplaces of today places where everyone truly has a chance to succeed.

The Index Explained

EMPLOYER ROADMAP

The employer roadmap, developed in Index 2022, guides employers in driving change through listening, yarning and acting – a concept that reflects a First Nations worldview. Index 2025 is structured in a way that provides employers with advice on who to listen to, how to open a yarn to discuss ideas, and how to act by putting in place the right initiatives. This model helps to address barriers to sustainable First Nations employment.

Figure 1

Employer Roadmap
Active Learning Cycle
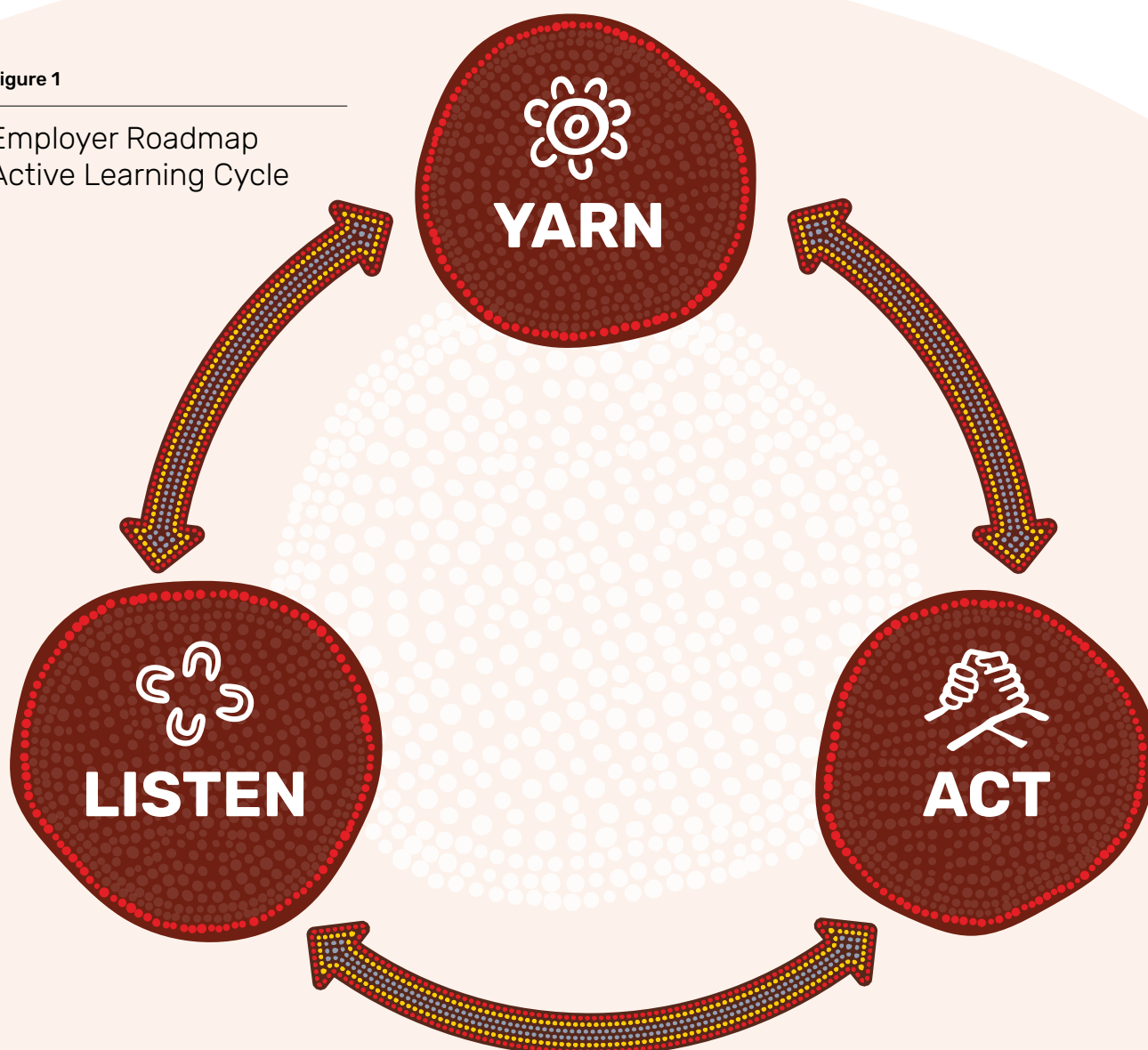
FIRST NATIONS EMPLOYMENT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Index 2025 builds on the employer roadmap with flexible strategies, maintaining the five interconnected domains from Index 2022. These domains, like threads in a weave, combine to create a stronger, more comprehensive approach to improving employment practices for First Nations employees. The domains represent levers employers have to drive change and meet the evolving needs of the First Nations workforce.

The domains are:

Domain 1:

Attraction and recruitment – First Nations recruitment processes and support, role availability, pipeline development and pre-employment support

Domain 2:

Retention, professional development and leadership – participation, retention and employee engagement, career pathways and promotion

Domain 3:

Workplace culture and inclusion – First Nations cultural awareness, cultural capability and cultural safety

Domain 4:

Commitment and accountability – policies, strategies, targets and accountability

Domain 5:

First Nations community engagement – strategy, partnerships and First Nations voices
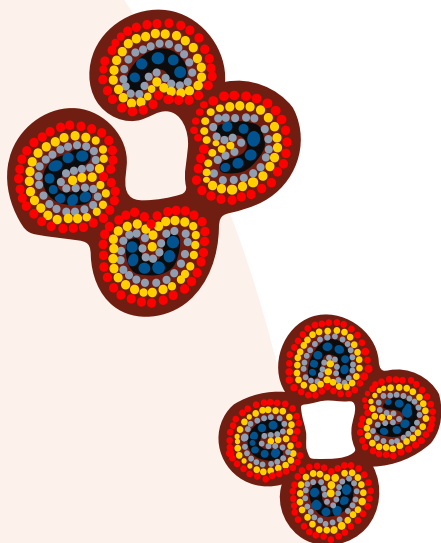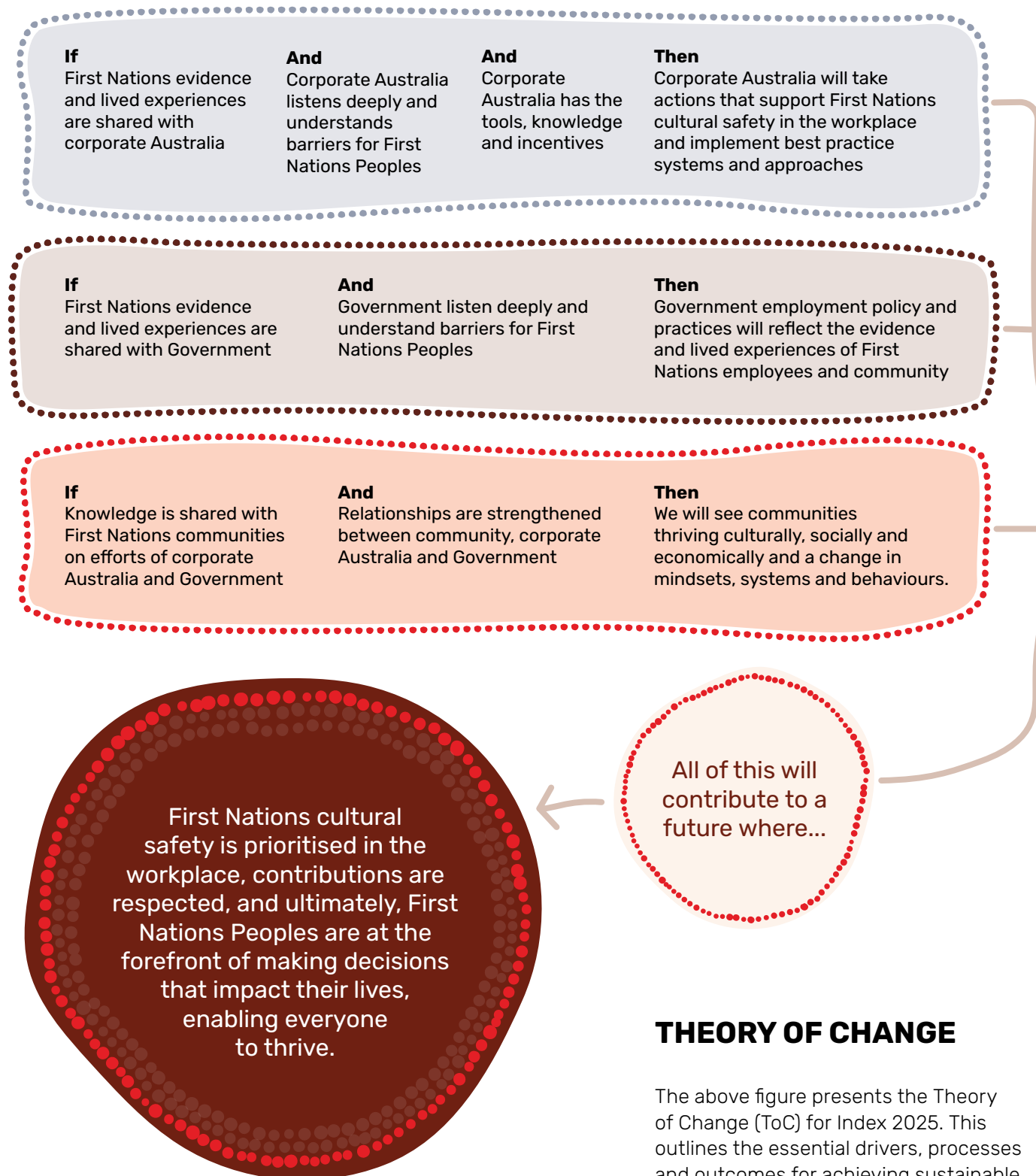
Figure 2

Index 2025 Theory of Change

If
First Nations evidence and lived experiences are shared with corporate Australia

And
Corporate Australia listens deeply and understands barriers for First Nations Peoples

And
Corporate Australia has the tools, knowledge and incentives

Then
Corporate Australia will take actions that support First Nations cultural safety in the workplace and implement best practice systems and approaches

If
First Nations evidence and lived experiences are shared with Government

And
Government listen deeply and understand barriers for First Nations Peoples

Then
Government employment policy and practices will reflect the evidence and lived experiences of First Nations employees and community

If
Knowledge is shared with First Nations communities on efforts of corporate Australia and Government

And
Relationships are strengthened between community, corporate Australia and Government

Then
We will see communities thriving culturally, socially and economically and a change in mindsets, systems and behaviours.

All of this will contribute to a future where...

First Nations cultural safety is prioritised in the workplace, contributions are respected, and ultimately, First Nations Peoples are at the forefront of making decisions that impact their lives, enabling everyone to thrive.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The above figure presents the Theory of Change (ToC) for Index 2025. This outlines the essential drivers, processes and outcomes for achieving sustainable, equitable and meaningful employment opportunities for First Nations Peoples.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objectives of Index 2025 are to:

- Elevate First Nations voices on the journey to true employment parity;

- Increase non-First Nations-led employers' capability and accountability for change; and

- Identify outcomes-based practices for First Nations employment.

PROJECT REACH

Index 2025 combines quantitative and qualitative data derived from 34 organisations which collectively represent:

- 1,118,999 employees. This is an increase of over 400,000 employees being represented by the Index in 2022;

- 29,935 First Nations employees, or approximately 12% of the First Nations workforce; and

- 143 interviewees and yarning circle participants (with 50% of these individuals identified as First Nations Peoples).

Murawin, the SRC and The Alliance collaborated on this research project. Murawin led the qualitative research, while the SRC with the Nahri Institute supported findings with quantitative research. This project was overseen by an Advisory Panel with a majority First Nations representation. Ethics approval from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) was granted for this research. While not fully representative, Index 2025 guides employers in improving employment outcomes and closing the gap.
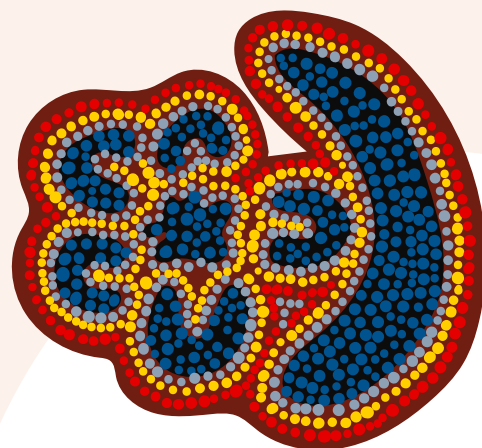
PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

In 2025, 34 organisations participated, including three not-for-profits, five public sector employers and 26 private sector companies. Employers spanned various industries, including healthcare, government, retail, construction, mining and finance.

EMPLOYEE INTERVIEWS AND YARNING CIRCLES

Interviews and yarning circles included 143 employees, made up of 68 First Nations employees, 42 line managers and 33 executives. Murawin used both deductive and inductive methods for analysis, with final insights reviewed by First Nations researchers.

EMPLOYER SURVEY

Thirty-four organisations completed surveys for Index 2025. Statistical methods included cross-tabulations, correlations, the Rasch model for employer patterns and the Random Forest model to analyse employment outcomes like retention, leadership growth and new hires.

QUOTES

The quotes throughout are verbatim to ensure authenticity of the participants voices.

MATURITY LEVELS

Organisations were assessed across four maturity levels, indicating the depth and effectiveness of their First Nations employment practices as determined by the employer survey:

- **Level 1: Foundational** – basic commitment to First Nations employment with practices in progress or showing early outcomes;

- **Level 2: Growth** – several practices implemented with visible employment outcomes;

- **Level 3: Integration** – wide range of practices embedded with strong results across domains, with employment becoming integral to the business; and

- **Level 4: Advocacy** – leading practices, strong outcomes in all domains, and publicly supporting other employers in their journey.

SAMPLE SIZE IDENTIFICATION

In research and data reporting, "n" represents the sample size, which refers to the number of participants or observations included in a particular analysis. In the context of this research, it most often refers to the number of employers who responded to this survey question. For example, 'n=13' indicates that the responses reflect the views of 13 employers. This sample size helps to contextualise the significance of the findings.

The research methodology for Index 2025 is described in more detail in the supplementary documentation www.nieta.org.au/index-2025.

NOTES ON PERCENTAGES IN DATA PRESENTATION

The following notes clarify discrepancies or variations in percentage totals presented in the graphs and tables:

- Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding;

- Percentages may exceed 100% as the survey question allows selection of multiple answers; and

- Percentages may not sum to 100% in cases where "Unsure" or "Don't know" responses have been excluded from the graph or table.

Key Insights Since 2022

In Index 2025, 20 out of the 23 participating organisations from 2022 shared their reflections from the previous Index. These reflections offer valuable insights into both the progress made and the continuing challenges faced in achieving First Nations employment goals.

Organisations identified the following factors as having a positive impact on their ability to meet their goals:

- The establishment of a dedicated training services division;

- First Nations Peoples feeling valued in the employment market; and

- The provision of hybrid employment opportunities.

These factors underscore the importance of the adaptability of organisations to support systemic change and create pathways to success for First Nations employees. For instance, having a training division tailored to the specific needs of First Nations employees enhances skill development and supports career progression. Similarly, feeling valued in the employment market fosters greater engagement and loyalty from First Nations employees.

Among these positive outcomes, challenges remain. Organisations reported facing key difficulties in meeting their First Nations employment objectives:

- Intense competition for First Nations talent, driven by the employment targets set out in RAPs;

- Issues surrounding recruitment and retention;

- Financial constraints, particularly salary competition;

- Limited access to career development opportunities; and

- The need to create culturally safe workplaces and improve cultural capability.

Organisations are experiencing challenges with cost increases, a competitive labour market and managing external influences, such as the 'no' response to the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum. Index 2025 shows many employers are articulating commitment through various policies that address the needs of First Nations employees. Organisations are displaying a better understanding of cultural safety, and there is a steady, albeit gradual, progression towards greater inclusion and representation of First Nations employees in the workplace.
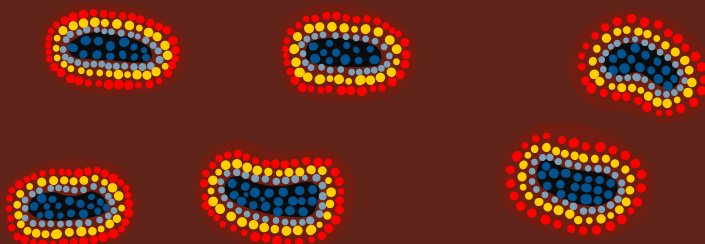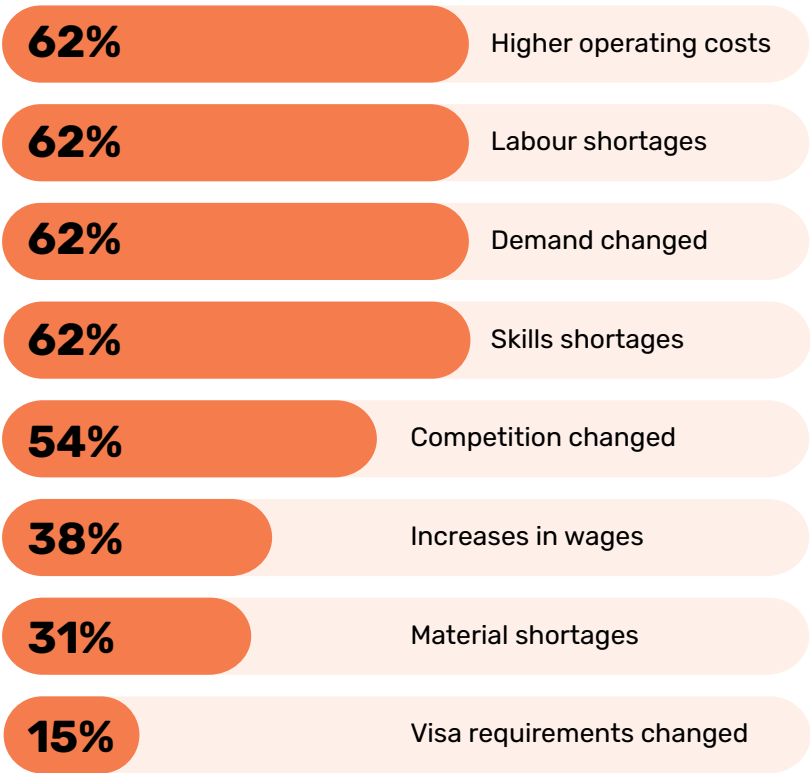
Table 1

What are the external factors that have impacted your First Nations employment goals?

62%	Higher operating costs
62%	Labour shortages
62%	Demand changed
62%	Skills shortages
54%	Competition changed
38%	Increases in wages
31%	Material shortages
15%	Visa requirements changed

n=13

Executive leaders, senior leaders, RAP working groups and First Nations employment strategy working groups were the main readers of Index 2022.

Fewer than half of the organisations shared the report with their CEO.

62%

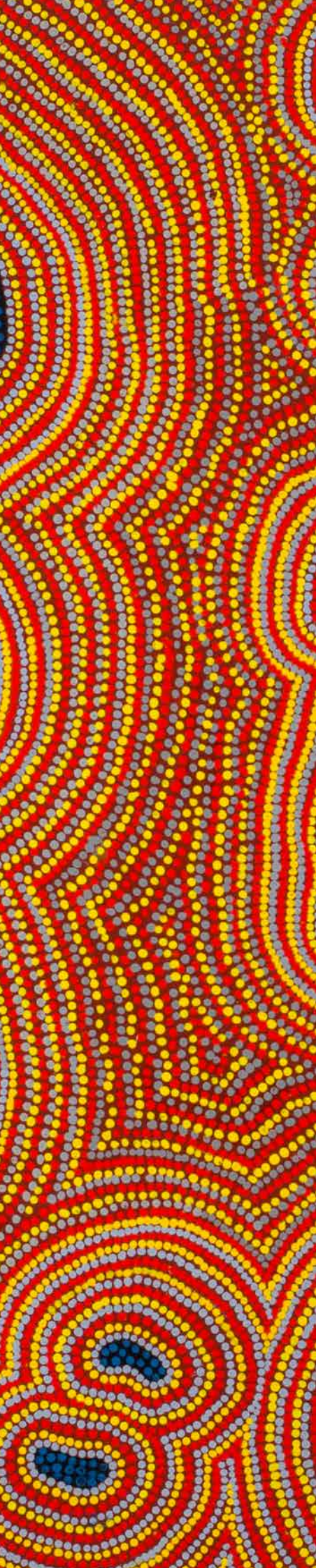RAP working groups in particular took responsibility for implementing the recommendations, with 62% leading these efforts.
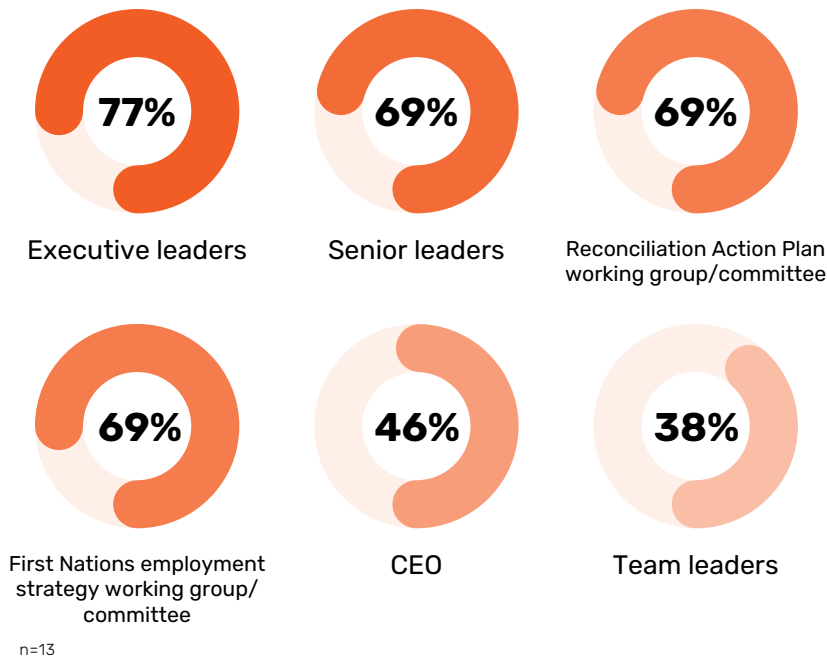
Figure 3

Who did you share the 2022 report with?

77% Executive leaders

69% Senior leaders

69% Reconciliation Action Plan working group/committee

69% First Nations employment strategy working group/committee

46% CEO

38% Team leaders

n=13

Table 2

Who took carriage of addressing recommendations in the 2022 report?

62%	Reconciliation Action Plan working group/committee
54%	First Nations employment strategy working group/committee
46%	Executive leaders
46%	Senior leaders
23%	Team leaders
15%	CEO

n=13

Feedback on the 2022 Employer Benchmark reports was generally positive, with employers indicating that they found the recommendations somewhat helpful (46%) or very helpful (54%).

Qualitative feedback highlighted that the report:

- Provided clear, comprehensive and actionable recommendations;

- Offered an overview of the organisation's status on its reconciliation journey;

- Increased organisational focus on cultural safety; and

- Identified gaps and areas for improvement.

One employer reflected on the positive benefits of the report:

"Practical, process-oriented ways to improve our systems (ways of working) for improved experience of our First Nations team members or increasing participation (recruitment) of First Nations team members. The report provided comprehensive suggestions, examples, and a best practice framework for a highly successful Indigenous employment program"

– Employer

These reflections illustrated the importance of continued focus on retention, cultural safety and career development. By addressing these key areas, employers can build stronger, more inclusive workplaces that support the long-term success of First Nations employees and the overall success of the organisation.
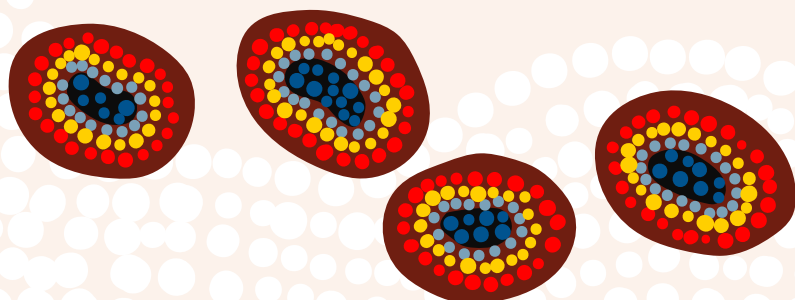
Key Insights for 2025

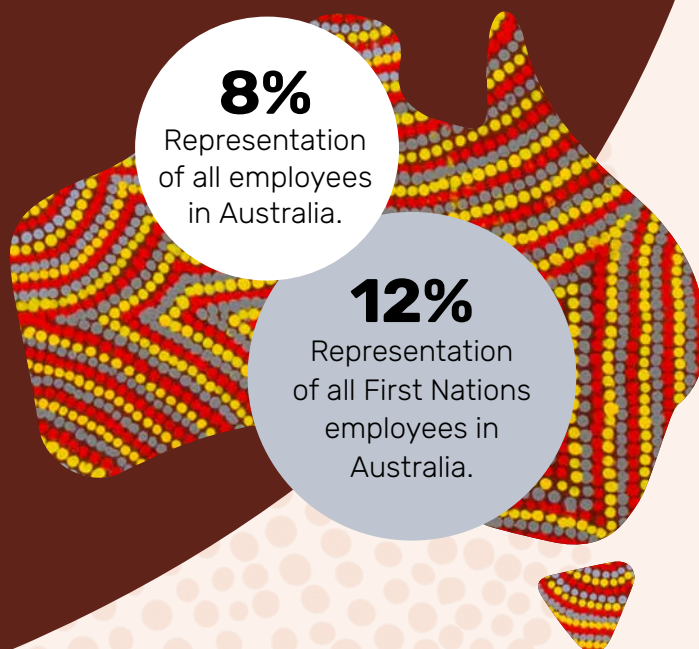Total employees represented
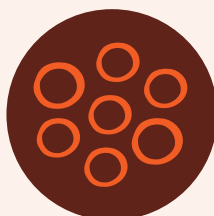
1,118,999

Increase of representation since 2022

~400,000

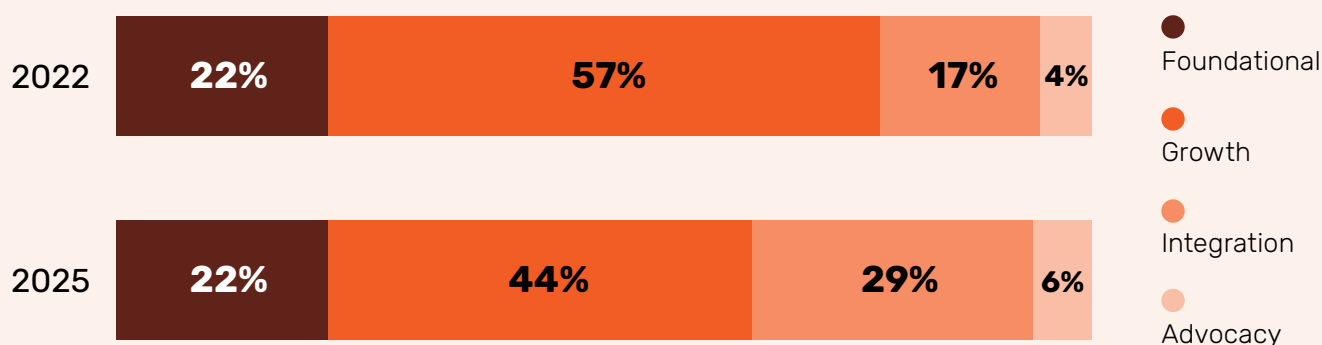Total First Nations employees represented

29,935

8%
Representation of all employees in Australia.

12%
Representation of all First Nations employees in Australia.

34
participating organisations

143
participants

48%
First Nations voices

Participating employer maturity levels*

2022	22%	57%	17%	4%

2025	22%	44%	29%	6%

● Foundational

● Growth

● Integration

● Advocacy
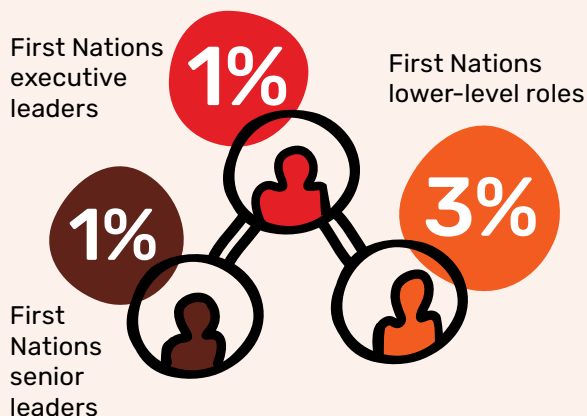
Comparison of repeating employers (n=23).

Many First Nations employees were unable to name a First Nations leader within their organisation. This lack of leadership inhibits attraction, recruitment and retention of First Nations employees.

First Nations executive leaders

1%

First Nations lower-level roles

1%

3%

First Nations senior leaders

"I don't have exact figures, but we are working on better tracking and understanding retention rates for First Nations employees"

– Line Manager

Data collection is imperative to gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that influence First Nations employee retention.

"First Nations people are progressing slowly. There's a need for more senior roles and better support for career advancement"

– First Nations Employee

"We ... [set] targets regularly and ensure accountability among senior management ... to track progress"

– Executive

Authentic relationships with community need to be reciprocal, trust-based and respectful.

"Racism is often covert and not addressed effectively, leading to a lack of cultural safety."

"There's potential for positive change [due to our partnership] but it requires more consistent and genuine effort"

– First Nations Employee

More than a third

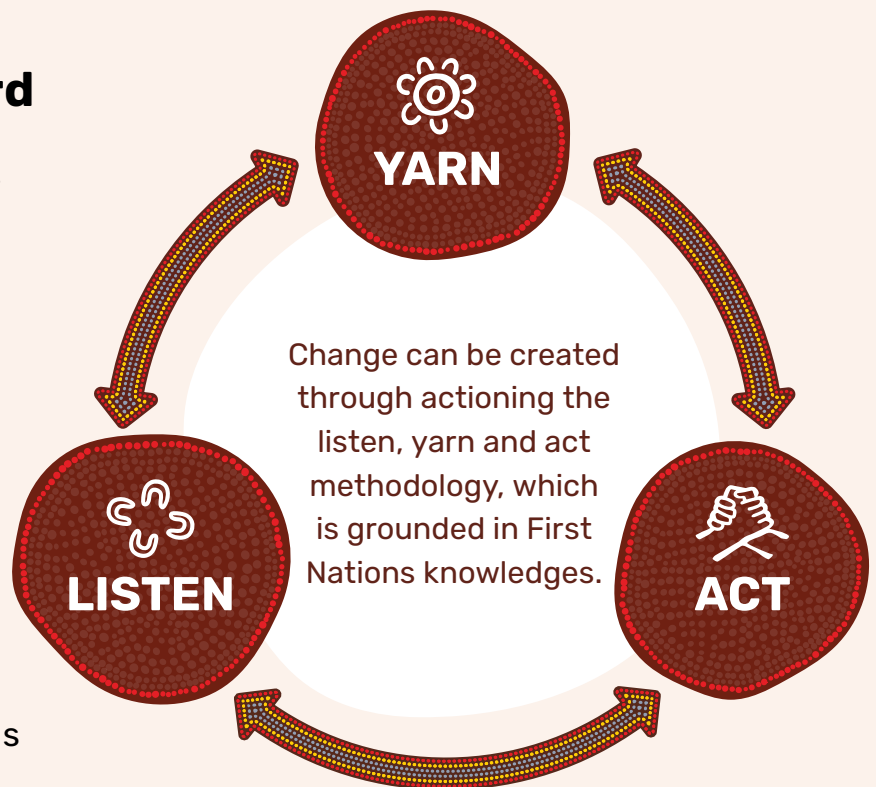(38%) of organisations, had First Nations employment KPIs for executive leaders.

28%

Only a quarter (28%) had First Nations KPIs for senior leaders.

21%

Even fewer had First Nations KPIs for mid-level managers (21%).

YARN

Change can be created through actioning the listen, yarn and act methodology, which is grounded in First Nations knowledges.

LISTEN

ACT

97%

Almost all surveyed organisations have a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Strategy (97%).
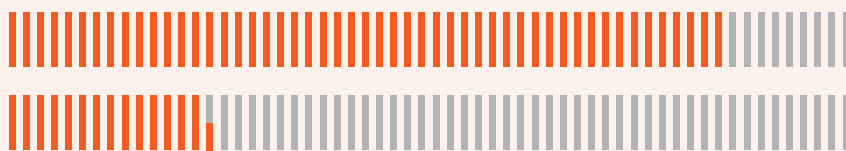
30%

30% were published externally.

56%

Over half (56%) of the organisations surveyed are either developing or considering a cultural learning needs analysis or framework.
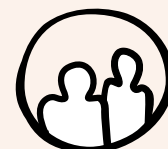
82% **29%**

Index 2025 reveals that organisations are making strong commitments to First Nations Peoples, with 82% using the RAP framework.

However, only 29% of employees said the RAP was very effective.

0%

Yet none have successfully implemented one.

Context

Despite significant progress over the past decades toward First Nations employment parity, a stark 22% gap remains (Productivity Commission, n.d.). In 2021, only 56% of First Nations Peoples aged 25-64 were employed, compared to 78% of non-First Nations people. Australia's Closing the Gap initiative, established in 2008, is a national commitment to address disparities in life outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations people, including critical areas such as health, education and employment. A key employment target within Closing the Gap aims to halve this employment gap in a decade. While the gap is narrowing, progress towards true parity remains slow.

Employment lies at the heart of – and is fundamentally central to – socioeconomic opportunity (Biddle, 2013). It provides direct economic benefits to individuals and families, including financial security, increased social mobility and access to higher standards of living. Employment is associated with benefits to physical and mental health, social inclusion and improved developmental outcomes for the children of employed persons (Biddle, 2013; Gray et al., 2014; WHO, 2016). Index 2025 is a continuation of the foundations laid out in Index 2022. This combination of economic stability, health benefits and social engagement highlights the multifaceted role employment plays in building stronger and more resilient communities (WHO, 2016).

There was unprecedented backing from organisations across Australia, particularly senior leaders, in support of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum. The Directors for the Voice movement saw a united front of over 460 directors from some of Australia's largest companies advocating for the Voice (Racovolis, 2023). This level of corporate leadership support signifies the growing recognition of the need for First Nations representation in decision-making to reinforce an environment of inclusion and respect (Racovolis, 2023).

The 'no' result has seen calls from First Nations leaders to refocus corporate commitment to reconciliation through truth-telling. The Uluru Statement from the Heart has Makarrata – truth-telling and agreement-making – at its core, and this continues to resonate in corporate contexts (Reconciliation Australia, n.d.).

First Nations employment parity extends beyond achieving a 3% workforce participation rate. Genuine parity encompasses more than this single measure of representation. True success will be realised when the economic and social disparities faced by First Nations Peoples are eliminated; when First Nations employees are present and included across all levels of the workforce; when employers recognise and value First Nations Peoples' unique perspectives and knowledge systems; and when First Nations Peoples lead organisations and influence key business decisions.

WHAT IS PARITY?

The definition of First Nations employment parity continues to evolve from a percentage-based participation rate (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). True 'parity' should go beyond numerical representation, acknowledging a more holistic approach to meaningful employment. This research calls for parity to be viewed through the following lens:

- Increasing workforce participation across industries;

- Addressing geographical barriers;

- Supporting culturally appropriate, flexible work arrangements;

- Increasing First Nations leadership, executive and board representation;

- Enhancing job security and quality of employment; and

- Participation in career-advancing training and development activities.

An ongoing challenge to achieving employment parity is the limited data and reporting on First Nations employment. Without data, organisations cannot make informed decisions to close the employment gap. To help overcome this challenge, the first Australian Indigenous Employment Index was launched in 2022. This Index was a comprehensive assessment of First Nations employment practices across major Australian organisations. It provided the first large-scale integration of qualitative and quantitative data into what works for recruiting, retaining and supporting First Nations employees.

Index 2025 builds upon the existing understanding of employer practices and policies but delves deeper into the employment journey of First Nations employees. It positions First Nations voices at the centre of the narrative, ensuring employees' experiences and perspectives shape the overall findings.

Domain 1

ATTRACTION AND RECRUITMENT

To stand out, organisations need to develop more strategic, culturally sensitive and holistic approaches to recruitment that go beyond meeting quotas. Organisations must understand the impact of their reputation and demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and cultural safety.

Attraction and recruitment			
Foundational	**Growth**	**Integration**	**Advocacy**
29%	29%	38%	3%

Table 3 – Maturity of the employers against the attraction and recruitment domain

Index 2025 revealed 65% of organisations had a First Nations attraction and recruitment strategy or plan that included targets for employment.

However, without accountability, there is no drive to change the status of underemployment of First Nations Peoples.

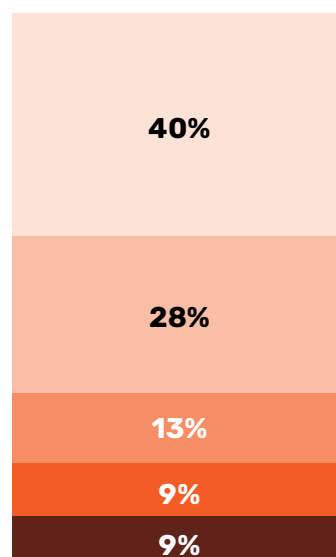## Key drivers that contributed to an increase in new First Nations hires

40% — The time an employer had a First Nations employment strategy

28% — The effectiveness of that strategy

The model explained a substantial proportion of variance R² = 0.55.

Key drivers for attraction and recruitment of First Nations hires

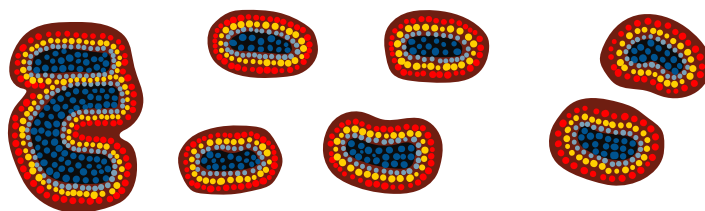|	
40%	Duration organisation had a First Nations Employment Strategy
28%	Effectiveness of First Nations employment strategy
13%	Executive sponsorship for First Nations employment strategy
9%	First Nations attraction and recruitment priority level in an organisation
9%	First Nations Peoples lead employment strategy

IDENTIFIED POSITIONS AND JOB SECURITY

Identified positions – roles specifically designated for First Nations candidates to promote equal employment opportunities – are widely promoted to increase First Nations employment numbers. One employer said:

> *"Currently, we encourage First Nations peoples to apply for roles at our organisation and have targeted a handful of roles. Work has also begun in identifying First Nations recruitment agencies to work with as part of our Innovate RAP"*
>
> *– Employer*

Yet many First Nations employees reported feeling stigmatised as a result of occupying identified roles. This stigma arises from the perception that these roles exist only to fulfil diversity targets rather than to recognise the skills and contributions of the employees. As a result, some viewed identified roles as less meaningful and mere box-ticking exercises to meet employment quotas. Participants said:

> *"It was very much a box ticking activity. I didn't realise that at the time, but yeah, very much so"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

An Executive stated:

> *"Many years ago, we had an agreement to place 5000 First Nations employees, but it became a box ticking exercise"*
>
> *– Executive*

This perception of box-ticking is not limited to identified positions. Targeted recruitment strategies, which aim to attract First Nations employees through apprenticeships, traineeships, undergraduate and casual roles, can be limited in their scope. These roles are often short-term and lower-paying, and lack the security and growth potential many job seekers desire. Offering full-time, permanent roles rather than relying on casual or temporary employment pools significantly enhances the attractiveness of a position to First Nations Peoples.

The response from First Nations employees highlighted both positives and negatives about their workplace experiences:

> *"I feel stagnant and stuck. There's no opportunity for growth in my role"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

> *"I don't feel like First Nations people are progressing up the ladder. Identified roles are often in hands on programs, making it hard to advance"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

OUTWARD PERCEPTIONS

"It's just a job that pays the bills. I'm leaving soon to find a role with better growth opportunities"

   – First Nations Employee

"I am not fully satisfied, my skill set isn't utilised to its full potential, but I stay due to my responsibility to mob and community"

   – First Nations Employee

"Job security and the opportunity to work with great clients keep me here"

   – First Nations Employee

The outward-facing appearance of an employer is important to a First Nations job seeker. This appearance is shaped by its branding, communication and commitment to social responsibility (Reconciliation Australia, 2020). The Index 2025 findings indicate that when an employer's principles and objectives align with First Nations Peoples' values, it is more likely to attract First Nations candidates. One way to ensure this is for employers to demonstrate the alignment of their purpose with community impact and culturally significant work, and to communicate this externally. For example, a First Nations employee said:

"The idea of being able to help make a change to those who need it the most, attracted me"

   – First Nations Employee

An executive seconded this viewpoint, stating:

"I'd rather know that we as a business have a positive impact on the First Nations community"

   – Executive

An Employee Value Proposition (EVP) in this context refers to the unique set of benefits and values that an employer offers to its employees. EVPs should reflect both individual career growth and meaningful contributions to the community. To support a successful First Nations employment strategy, employers need to look at the EVP from an individual and community lens. One First Nations employee said:

> *"Absolutely I would refer people to work here. I was just having this conversation this week, telling mob about the opportunities here"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

While almost all the surveyed organisations have a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategy (97%), only 30% were published externally. Ultimately, building a genuine connection between organisational goals and First Nations values fosters trust and engagement, making the organisation more appealing. This is a missed opportunity to show commitment to First Nations Peoples. One executive confirmed this, stating:

> *"We make a conscious effort to promote our commitment to diversity and inclusion, which has been effective in attracting First Nations candidates"*
>
> *– Executive*

Figure 4

Outward–facing tools utilised by employers

74%
Attending career/job fairs

71%
Offering traineeships, cadetships,internships and apprenticeships

68%
Engaging First Nations recruitment agencies

65%
Being involved in First Nations community programs

56%
Using general recruitment agencies

56%
Offering general pathway programs

53%
Using social media sites

CULTURALLY SAFE RECRUITMENT

Culturally safe recruitment practices create an environment where individuals feel respected, valued and understood in the context of their cultural identity (Chamberlain, Mohamed, Priest & Stacey, 2024). Index 2025 found that some existing recruitment practices – for example, those involving bureaucratic administrative processes – presented challenges or were ineffective in recruiting First Nations Peoples. Other practices, such as word-of-mouth recruitment, were supportive and better aligned with culturally safe principles.

Conducting a cultural audit can assess an organisation's commitment to embedding cultural safety in recruitment practices. This focuses on racism, historical and social-cultural context, and being an ally (Chamberlain et al., 2024). It requires a self-assessment of practices, ideas and actions. It could be a one-off assessment or conducted annually (Chamberlain et al., 2024).

Index 2025 highlights that current recruitment practices often involve complex application processes and lengthy administrative tasks, which present significant barriers for First Nations candidates. Technology-based processes can add complexity, such as online applications that require a strong internet connection and access to equipment to scan and upload documents. This process can be difficult for a job seeker who is operating from a mobile phone. One First Nations employee said of their recruitment experience:

> *"I can remember my recruitment experience. It was three months. It was a flipping nightmare. The actual process was poorly coordinated. The communication was really poor ... I'd had an initial interview and then not heard anything for six weeks"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

This sentiment was echoed by other First Nations employees, who pointed to a lack of responsiveness and bureaucratic processes leaving candidates feeling frustrated and disconnected. First Nations respondents said:

> *"I had an interview and then it was easily more than a month before I heard anything back from anyone"*
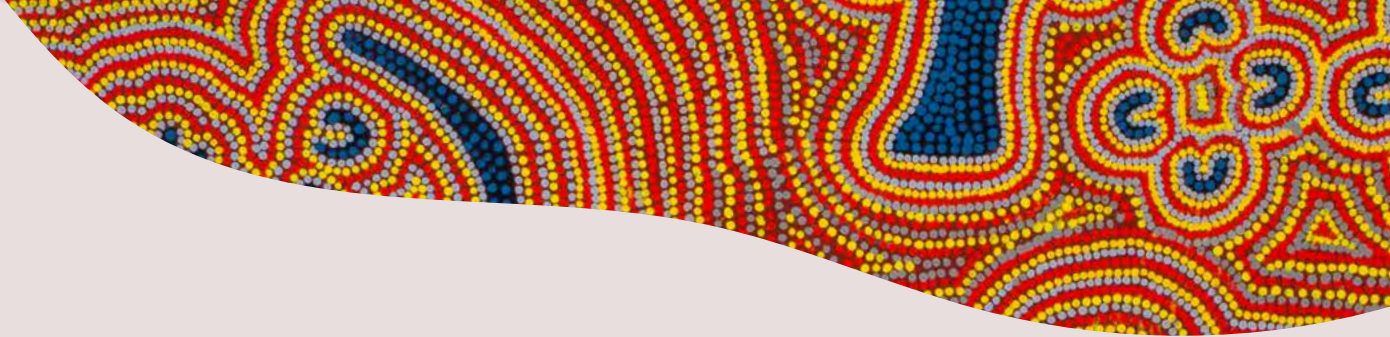>
> *– First Nations Employee*

> *"The recruitment process was pretty daunting and annoying, with a lot of document uploading and profile creation"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

Rigid and prescriptive recruitment processes were also viewed as unwelcoming to First Nations candidates, often preventing them from progressing through to the onboarding stage:

> *"I initially got rejected at the first screening, but a mate who was mob reached out to HR, and they gave me an interview. That was really helpful for a little foot in the door"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

This demonstrates how informal networks and community connections often play a crucial role in overcoming institutional barriers within formal recruitment strategies.

Recruitment practices that were more flexible and tailored opened the door for First Nations candidates. First Nations employees approached through word-of-mouth reported feeling more comfortable and safer during the recruitment process, particularly when it comes from their own community networks. This typically meant the screening and interview process was less formal, resembling a casual yarn about the role, evolving into a two-way conversation about the workplace. First Nations employees said:

"I was in the middle of the desert telling stories around a campfire when I met someone from [my employer]. They invited me to apply, and I ended up getting the job after a casual chat"

  – First Nations Employee

"I received the opportunity through my current boss. He knew that I was unhappy with my previous job, so he thought I'd be a good fit for his team. The recruitment process was seamless"

  – First Nations Employee

"The recruitment experience for me was interesting because they'd reached out to a friend of mine on LinkedIn, and she referred me. We hit it off during the interview"

  – First Nations Employee

These sentiments align with similar reports from participating organisations with around a third conducting conversational or informal interviews. Often, a First Nations employee was present during the recruitment process (59%). Employers described their approach to recruitment:

"We appointed an identified position for talent acquisition and saw a 22% increase"

  – Executive

"Rewording adverts to remove some of the often overwhelming, corporate jargon. Having a First Nations person in the recruitment team that potential employees can talk with throughout the process. Keeping interviews more informal and more like a yarn. Having a First Nations person from the business at the interview panel"

  – Employer

Using First Nations recruiters, employment providers and partnering with specialised recruitment agencies was also seen as an effective strategy for attracting First Nations candidates. These agencies have a deep understanding of cultural sensitivities and the unique challenges faced by First Nations Peoples. These specialised recruitment agencies were regularly referred to as a safe entry to employment, for example:

> *"I was connected through career trackers, which provides undergrad experience to university students. The recruitment experience was really good"*
>
> – First Nations Employee

Organisations offered additional forms of support to First Nations applicants during the recruitment process to help overcome barriers. This included paying for National Police Clearances or Working with Children's Checks (59%) and having a First Nations employee or support person present during interviews (59%). Additional support measures included interview coaching (38%), paying for medical assessments (38%), and résumé assistance (35%).
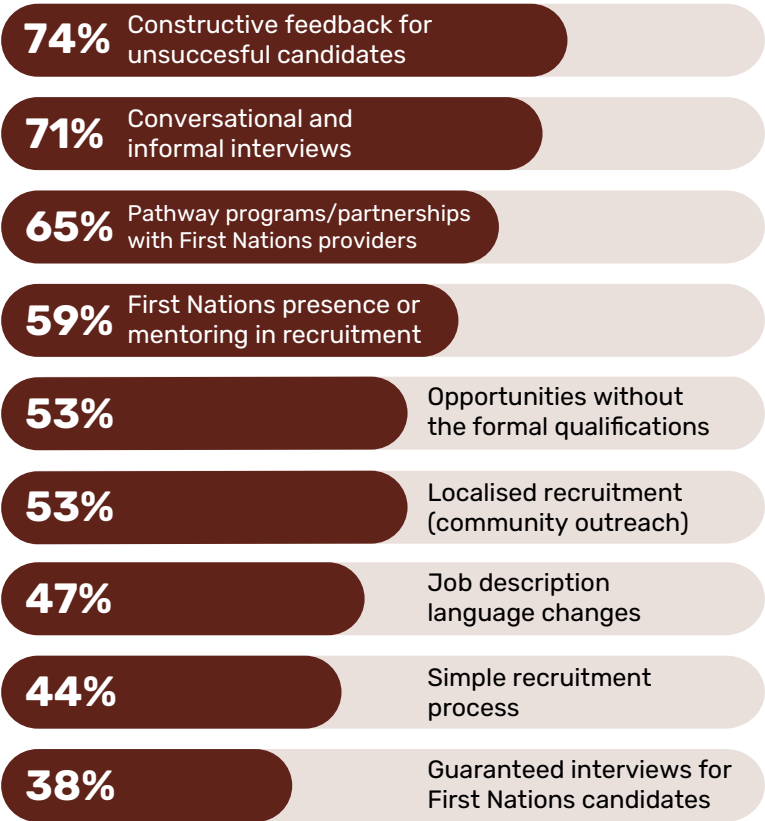
Table 4

Which is the most effective in achieving First Nations attraction and recruitment?

41%	A dedicated First Nations employee or team
36%	All recruitment processes are equally effective
9%	The general recruitment/talent acquisition team
5%	External third-party provider
5%	First Nations external third-party provider

n=22

Table 5

Which of the following practices does your organisation adopt for First Nations recruitment?

74%	Constructive feedback for unsuccessful candidates
71%	Conversational and informal interviews
65%	Pathway programs/partnerships with First Nations providers
59%	First Nations presence or mentoring in recruitment
53%	Opportunities without the formal qualifications
53%	Localised recruitment (community outreach)
47%	Job description language changes
44%	Simple recruitment process
38%	Guaranteed interviews for First Nations candidates

n=34

PERSONA

As a First Nations person I have unique cultural and family responsibilities. Family is my priority and having a good job to support them helps me be a role model for the younger ones.

When looking for a position and employer I am drawn to employers that openly support First Nations Peoples and value diversity and inclusion. I want to work somewhere that understands our culture and history, and demonstrates this through their actions.

When I hear other First Nations employees speak positively about their experience of their employer, to reassure me that it's a safe and supportive place to be. I want to be a part of that. It's important for me to feel that my heritage won't be judged or misunderstood, which has happened before.

Speaking to First Nations Peoples involved in the recruitment process gives me a sense of safety. Hearing their stories about being mentored and supported shows me there are pathways for growth. Knowing that I could be mentored if I choose gives me confidence that this is the right place for me.

Personas are fictional characters created from the research in Index 2025 to highlight the effectiveness of the concepts discussed in each domain.

Domain 1
Employer Roadmap

The framework of listen, yarn and act offers suggested tangible approaches, but it is non-linear, allowing for repeated cycles between listening and yarning before action is taken.

LISTEN TO

First Nations employees and candidates;

First Nations recruitment specialists and employment providers;

First Nations cultural and business expertise, including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Land Councils and prescribed body corporates where they may intersect with the employer's operations;

First Nations employee peer groups;

HR leaders and hiring managers;

DEI teams;

Employee resource groups;

Marketing and communications teams; and

Technology teams (for changes involving recruitment platforms or digital tools, consulting with IT teams ensures the tools are well-integrated, user-friendly and secure).

YARN PROMPTS

- Do we have First Nations Peoples on our recruitment panel?

- Do we have an executive sponsor responsible and accountable for increasing the recruitment of First Nations Peoples?

- Can we partner with a First Nations employment agency?

- How are we reaching First Nations Peoples to join our organisation?

- Are we offering a position that is meaningful and attractive?

- Have we thought about the future of this position, including long-term security and progression pathways?

- Have we addressed what has not worked in the past?

- Have we conducted a cultural audit on the area we are recruiting to?

- What are our social media profiles saying?

- Do we understand the state of our community reputation, and what are we doing to strengthen it?

- What is the community experience of our recruitment managers?

- How can we increase the knowledge and skills of our hiring managers?

- How do we give relevant feedback to First Nations applicants to support their growth?

- How current and relevant are our policies? Some recruitment and retention policies to consider:

  » Cultural leave and flexible working arrangements;

  » Media, communications and marketing strategies;

  » First Nations employment strategy;

  » First Nations engagement framework; and

  » Discrimination, harassment and bullying policy.

ACT

- Ensure First Nations Peoples are integral members of the recruitment team;

- Value First Nations perspectives and experiences to advance a diverse and inclusive workplace;

- Revamp recruitment process to be streamlined, flexible, accessible and inclusive for First Nations candidates;

- Introduce jobs through informal networks and social media to break down barriers and open doors to opportunities;

- Unequivocally affirm and champion the inherent rights, dignity and worth of First Nations Peoples and stand firm in promoting mutual understanding, respect and belief in the equality of all people;

- Drive impactful, transformative change with bold and decisive actions;

- Promote employer brand to First Nations Peoples and communities to create awareness;

- Leverage the power of word-of-mouth processes;

- Simplify the recruitment process wherever possible;

- Create safe pathways for growth;

- Set measurable targets; and

- Engage in meaningful community outreach.
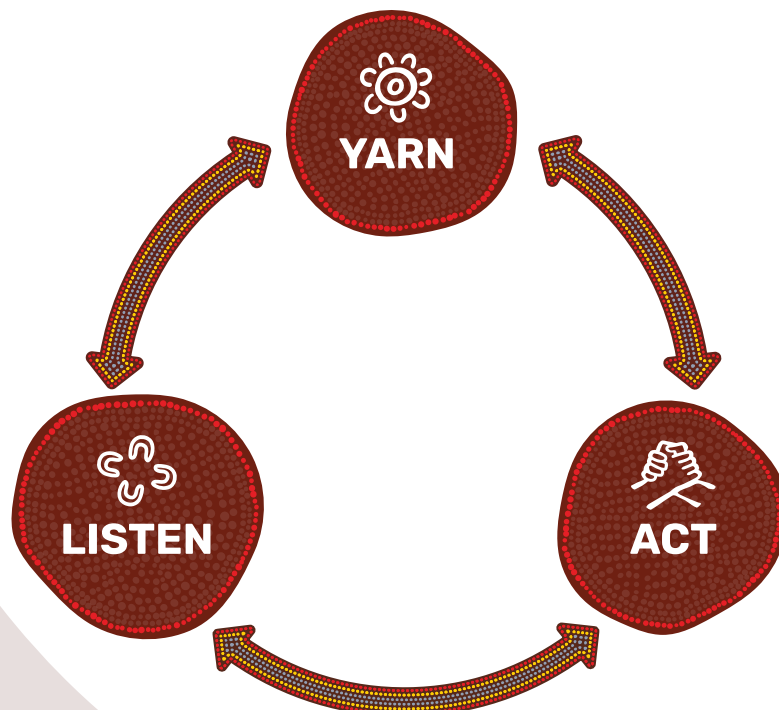
> *Using Indigenous executive recruiters ensures a culturally informed and respectful approach to recruitment, where relationships and community connections are at the heart of the process. With deep understanding of First Nations' values and leadership styles, Indigenous recruiters can access untapped talent, build trust, and create opportunities that drive real change and representation in executive roles.*

> **– Rachelle Towart OAM**
> Wonnarura
> Managing Director, Pipeline Recruitment

Domain 2

RETENTION, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Improving the retention, professional development and leadership of First Nations employees involves creating meaningful career pathways. It also requires fostering environments where First Nations employees can thrive, both personally and professionally. Retention requires a commitment to a broader organisational strategy for career development.

Retention, professional development and leadership domain			
Foundational	**Growth**	**Integration**	**Advocacy**
26%	35%	26%	12%

Table 6 – Maturity of the organisations against the retention, professional development and leadership domain

RETENTION OF FIRST NATIONS EMPLOYEES

Retention remains a critical issue for First Nations employment. Index 2022 showed that 62% of organisations reported lower retention rates for First Nations employees than the overall workforce. The quantitative data in Index 2025 shows a potential improvement in retention and/or data collection, with 29% reporting that retention is lower for First Nations employees and 26% stating they did not know.

This is reaffirmed through the qualitative research, showing that retention is a key element in increasing the number of First Nations employees and building organisational leaders. Providing equitable career growth opportunities that acknowledge the specific needs of First Nations employees leads to long-term engagement. Leaders said:

> *"Retention is challenging; career development opportunities are a common reason for leaving. We conduct exit interviews and surveys to understand and address retention issues"*
>
> *– Executive*
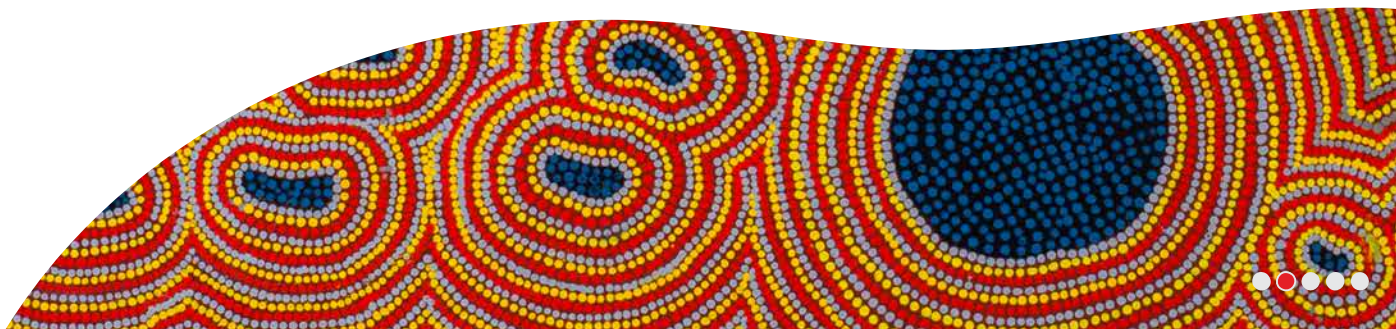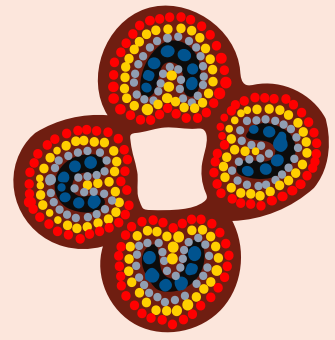
> *"We need more targeted support and specific programs tailored to First Nations employees' unique needs"*
>
> *– Line Manager*

Data collection is imperative to gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that influence First Nations employee retention. Organisations must develop robust tracking and measurement systems to gain valuable insights into retention rates, but also for capturing the broader, interconnected factors that influence the experience of First Nations employees. Beyond basic metrics, organisations must collect data that reflects intersectionality – considering how overlapping identities such as gender, socio-economic background and geography impact employee retention. Accurate data collection allows for targeted strategies to ensure retention is both measurable and accountable within the organisation. One line manager said:

> *"I don't have exact figures, but we are working on better tracking and understanding retention rates for First Nations employees"*
>
> *– Line Manager*

Such tracking systems must evolve into comprehensive tools that analyse trends, identify risks and celebrate successes. Without such data, organisations risk implementing ineffective strategies, making it crucial to establish systems that not only track, but analyse trends to drive meaningful change.

CREATING CAREER PATHWAYS ASSISTS WITH RETENTION

Listening and yarning to First Nations Peoples is an important part of creating career pathways that retain employees. This requires time for First Nations employees to reflect on how broader life experiences shape personal narratives, which intersect with the working experience. This process enables the identification of meaningful career paths (McMahon, Watson & Patton, 2015). Culturally appropriate support for line managers and employers is imperative. One executive said:

> *"Listening to our First Nations team members and offering meaningful career paths are crucial. Cultural safety and support beyond tokenistic measures are essential to becoming an employer of choice"*
>
> *– Executive*

Index 2025 highlights that retention also often stems from a variety of factors, including job satisfaction, career development opportunities and the chance to work close to home. As an employee said:

> *"The money was nice, but I was also motivated by the chance to work in a progressive environment with experienced people"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

LEADERSHIP

Developing strong leadership opportunities for First Nations employees requires a focus on providing mentoring, addressing the scarcity of First Nations leaders, and implementing strategies to increase First Nations representation in senior roles.

Many First Nations employees were unable to name a First Nations leader within their organisation. Enhancing the visibility of First Nations leaders can inspire and motivate other First Nations employees, helping to improve retention rates and the development of future leaders. Some line managers are aware of this and are actively trying to improve the training options available for First Nations employees:

> *"We have mentorship programs and leadership training tailored for First Nations employees, which have been quite successful in developing future leaders"*
>
> *– Line Manager*

It remains challenging to retain First Nations employees, particularly when there is little career progression available into potential leadership positions. The skills First Nations Peoples bring to workplaces are often undervalued, making the process towards leadership even more difficult. A First Nations employee said:

> *"Being a good listener is a skill that I bring to the table, even though I often feel it's not valued enough"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

There are currently few executive leadership positions for First Nations Peoples who aspire to take on leadership roles. Organisations must develop talent pipelines and pathways to ensure First Nations Peoples are represented at top levels. First Nations employees said:

> *"First Nations people are progressing slowly. There's a need for more senior roles and better support for career advancement"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

> *"I don't feel like First Nations people are progressing up the ladder ... identified roles are often in hands on programs, making it hard to advance"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

Organisations can offer other benefits that will contribute to higher retention rates beyond leadership opportunities.

> *"The flexibility and understanding of cultural responsibilities make me stay"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*
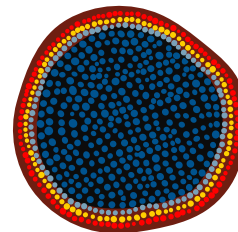
Index 2025 identified a range of leadership development opportunities offered to First Nations employees. The most common are informal mentoring (59%), formal mentoring (50%), secondments (50%) and study leave (50%).

It was positive to see some organisations are embracing these strategies:

> *"We use targeted programs and mentoring to develop First Nations staff for leadership roles"*
>
> – Line Manager

> *"Mentorship is providing visible career paths [and] are crucial for developing leaders"*
>
> – Executive

Index 2025 highlights several strategies that contributed to an increase in the number of First Nations leaders in the workforce. The top three are: the longer an employer has had a First Nations employment strategy in place (31%), then the strategy becomes more effective (20%), and whether First Nations Peoples are prioritised within the organisation's DEI plan (18%). The overall model explains a substantial portion of the variance ($R^2 = 0.11$).
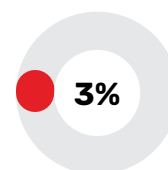
Figure 5

Lack of First Nations leadership inhibits the hiring of mob and impacts First Nations employee attraction
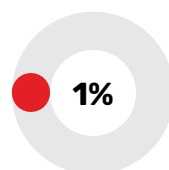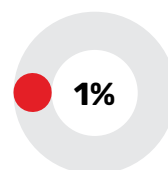
1%	1%	3%
First Nations executive leaders	First Nations senior leaders	First Nations lower-level roles

TAILORED LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Index 2025 illustrates that organisations are not providing enough targeted leadership training for First Nations employees. This directly limits career progression and hinders the cultivation of future leaders within the organisation. Flexible leadership training aligned with First Nations values can help employees reach their full career potential.

Few organisations participating in Index 2025 incorporated First Nations perspectives, content or speakers into their existing leadership development programs (22%). Thirteen percent suggested they often incorporated First Nations perspectives and content, while 31% sometimes did. Tailoring leadership training programs makes them more attractive, effective and relevant. A First Nations employee said:

"We have centralised professional development opportunities and have recently partnered with an Indigenous lead leadership program"

– First Nations Employee

One First Nations employee suggested that while the ability to progress in their organisation was evident, it was a standard process for everyone:

"There's a lot of opportunity within [this organisation] to move up the grades, but it's not specific for Aboriginal staff"

– Line Manager

Some organisations have understood the gap in leadership training, evidenced by the following statement:

"First Nations employees now have priority in leadership programs"

– First Nations Employee

BUILDING IMPACTFUL LINE MANAGERS

Career development for First Nations employees is often heavily reliant on the support and actions of line management. This can create significant opportunities or barriers to advancement, depending on the individual managers. First Nations employees reported access to development opportunities being hindered at the line management level:

> *"Professional development opportunities depend a lot on the direct manager"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

> *"There are opportunities, but they're hard to find and get approved due to capacity and resource issues"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

Strengthening line managers as agents of change is essential. Creating impactful line managers requires organisations to invest in their growth. Organisations who grant line managers the necessary time, agency, resources and budget for developing First Nations employees will see improved retention rates, stronger leadership and a more skilled First Nations workforce.

Executive oversight supports this by establishing clear objectives and accountability for First Nations employment practices and outcomes. As one executive said:

> *"Our internal promotion policies prioritise diversity and inclusion, providing ample opportunities for First Nations employees"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

When these policies are implemented, they must also be measurable. A First Nations HR team member said:

> *"We report on how many First Nations people are in managerial roles and [we] keep an eye on their progression"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*
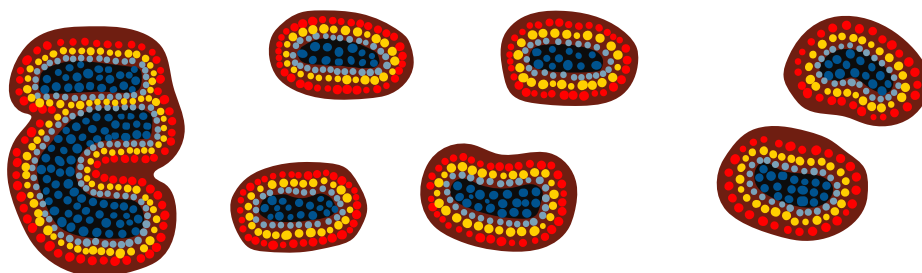
PERSONA

I've stayed with my current organisation because they saw my potential and actively supported my professional growth. Before this, I worked several short-term jobs with no stability, so I always felt the need to look elsewhere for security. But here, it's different. I've grown into a leader, both personally and professionally. My co-workers often seek my advice.

My line manager set a clear path for my development, focusing on my technical skills and natural abilities like empathy and resilience. Her guidance has built my confidence and helped me become a better decision-maker. She also made sure my professional development was offered in a culturally appropriate way, which kept me engaged. The face-to-face training combined with on-the-job learning have been invaluable.

Knowing I have a mentor who understands my cultural responsibilities and values my input makes me want to stay. I see a future here where I can continue to grow and succeed.

Personas are fictional characters created from the research in Index 2025 to highlight the effectiveness of the concepts discussed in each domain.

Domain 2
Employer Roadmap

The framework of listen, yarn and act offers suggested tangible approaches, but it is non-linear, allowing for repeated cycles between listening and yarning before action is taken.

LISTEN TO

First Nations employees;

First Nations Registered Training Organisations (RTOs);

Line managers;

First Nations peak bodies;

First Nations cultural and business expertise, including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Land Councils and prescribed body corporates where they may intersect with the employer's operations; and

Internal learning and development specialists.

YARN PROMPTS

- Do we prioritise First Nations employees in our DEI strategy?

- Do we have a First Nations employment strategy?

- What proportion of First Nations employees are accessing the existing professional/leadership development opportunities available within our organisation?

- What is the budget for professional development for First Nations employees?

- How can we support line managers to build employees into leaders?

- What resources are needed for line managers to be advocates?

- Are we measuring the retention rate of First Nations employees?

- Do we have culturally safe exit interviews that we track to understand issues?

- Can we set up a boomerang program for First Nations candidates? (A boomerang program in HR encourages former employees to return to the company, leveraging their organisational understanding and new skills gained elsewhere)

- Are executives and line managers responsible and accountable for the retention and leadership of First Nations employees?

- Have we included First Nations Peoples in the professional review processes of other First Nations employees?

- Have we reviewed the current professional development opportunities to ensure they are suitable for First Nations Peoples?

- Have we reviewed our learning education and development policy?

- After a First Nations person completes leadership training, how are we creating opportunities for them to implement their learnings and growth?

- How can we create sponsorship opportunities for high-potential First Nations talent with executives?

- Are we creating mentoring opportunities?

YARN

LISTEN

ACT

ACT

- Empower line managers as change agents by equipping them with the necessary tools, resources and budget;

- Provide line managers with specialised training to effectively retain First Nations employees and nurture leadership potential within their teams;

- Invest and tailor leadership training programs specifically for First Nations employees, making them more culturally relevant, engaging and effective to ensure higher completion rates and greater success in career progression;

- Increase the visibility of First Nations leaders across the organisation;

- Boost retention rates and inspire the development of future leaders through role-modelling sponsorship and mentorship;

- Ensure executives and line managers are directly accountable for retention and leadership development; and

- Set measurable targets, allocating dedicated resources and implementing tailored leadership programs.
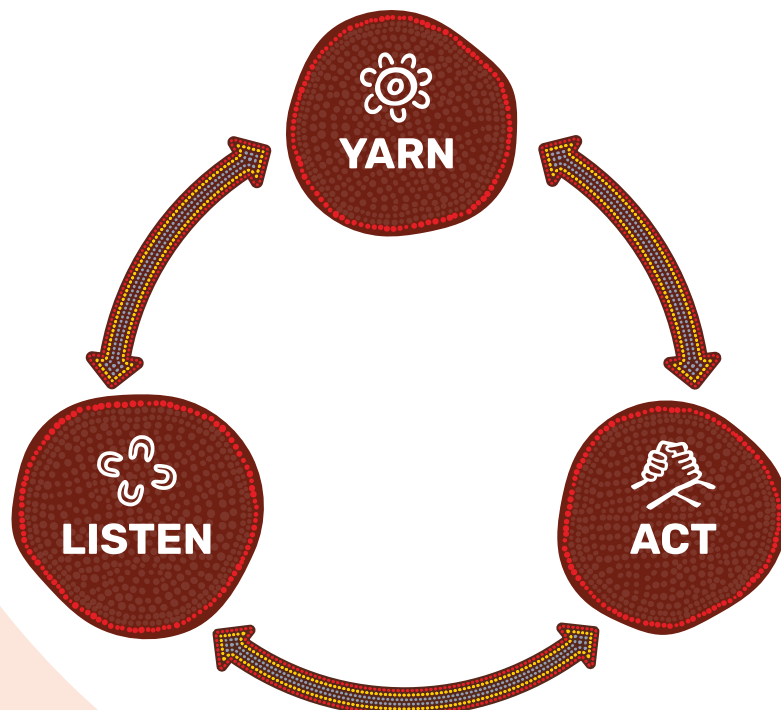
> *Our young ones can only be what they can see. Emerging leaders provide hope and aspiration and educate on new perspectives. They provide new connections where there may be gaps and absolutely need to be supported and nurtured, to stay focussed and strong over the longer term.*
>
> **– Fiona Jose**
> KuKu Yalanji and Torres Strait Islander
> CEO, Cape York Partnerships

Domain 3

WORKPLACE CULTURE AND INCLUSION

Organisational culture is pivotal to an inclusive, supportive and respectful workplace for First Nations employees. Organisations must become culturally responsive and move towards proactively embedding First Nations perspectives in their policies and practices. This should embrace First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing as strengths so employees can safely express their identity without fear of discrimination or ridicule.

Workplace culture and inclusion domain			
Foundational	Growth	**Integration**	**Advocacy**
15%	79%	3%	3%

Table 7 – Maturity of the employers against the workplace culture and inclusion domain

KEY DEFINITIONS

To create a common understanding and vocabulary in Domain 3, it is important to articulate several key terms. This ensures clarity, as some terms can have various meanings and thus be interpreted in different ways.

Cultural capability encompasses behaviours that extend beyond specific knowledge and skills. The Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Framework (Queensland Health, 2010) defines cultural capability as "skills, knowledge and behaviours that are required to plan, support, improve and deliver services in a culturally respectful and appropriate manner".

This journey starts with **cultural awareness**, which is based on recognising and respecting cultural differences and working towards a culturally safe work environment. Leaders and employees alike must develop attitudes and values that promote sensitivity to different cultures.

Cultural safety occurs when everyone understands bias and is working towards a truly inclusive and respectful workplace. Robust reporting systems can address racism and harassment, but employers must develop learning opportunities that support cultural capability.

Cultural capability training should be available for all employees, but it is especially important for executives, managers and HR employees. This helps to ensure practical strategies are put in place (Chamberlain et al., 2024).

This learning journey may include **cultural immersion**, which deepens understanding by encouraging active engagement with communities. This can be done through on-Country visits or partnerships with local communities, helping leaders gain insight into the experiences of First Nations Peoples.

Cultural load remains a challenge, with First Nations employees often expected to educate others about their culture. This can manifest as employers and colleagues expecting First Nations employees to act as representatives or educators on a broad range of First Nations matters. This can lead to stress and burnout. To overcome this, employers must be culturally responsive, embedding First Nations perspectives into their policies and supporting cultural safety.

CULTURAL CAPABILITY TRAINING

Unconscious bias is deeply rooted in personal attitudes and prior experiences. Improving organisational culture is a significant opportunity. Index 2025 shows that current cultural training provided to most employees has room for improvement. A First Nations employee said of their workplace:

"There's almost zero effort to educate staff on First Nations culture, which is disappointing"

– First Nations Employee

The survey results suggest that all participating organisations (100%) provide employees with opportunities to learn about First Nations cultures. However, First Nations cultural immersion and awareness training resources were critiqued for being too generic and delivered as one-off sessions:

*"We have induction slideshows and occasional cultural awareness sessions, but they don't go deep enough"*

– First Nations Employee

Importantly, the content needs to encompass both historical and contemporary experiences of First Nations Peoples, accompanied by tangible ways to embed new learnings:

"We do face-to-face and online training, but it's often seen as a one-time thing. More ongoing education is needed to make a real impact"

– First Nations Employee

Training that is targeted, localised, engaging and on Country is more effective, as it builds both cultural awareness and cultural safety. In light of the ongoing challenges of unconscious bias, institutional racism and microaggressions, it is crucial that such training ensures a clear understanding of cultural safety. It should focus on building a baseline understanding before moving to more nuanced educational and learning programs. Having skilled First Nations facilitators conduct training, engaging First Nations communities in design and delivery, and allowing for ongoing feedback, evaluation and improvement are all drivers of success.
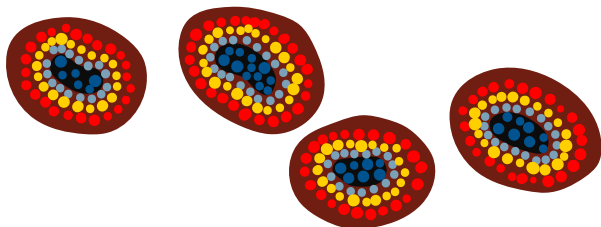
Over half (56%) of the organisations surveyed are either developing or considering a cultural learning needs analysis or framework, yet none have successfully implemented one. This presents an opportunity for organisations to take the lead by pioneering and fully integrating such frameworks. The process should be seen as a learning journey, guiding people in a way that is continually challenging but not overwhelming. An executive said:

> *"Cultural capability training needs to be flexible to meet learning needs of the learner where they are at in their reconciliation journey, delivered by a First Nations or highly culturally competent facilitator. Learning being, authentic not tokenistic, provision of culturally safe environment in which to learn [and] flexible delivery times to enable greater participation"*
>
> *– Executive*

Often, access to learning opportunities is restricted to some employees. Cultural immersions are offered to executive leaders (48%), senior leaders (35%), leaders of First Nations employees (35%), or line managers working with First Nations employees (22%). Facilitated learning experiences are offered to all employees, but just over half of the organisations

(57%) offered online learning to all employees. Eight out of 10 (79%) organisations tracked the completion of cultural learning activities. Over a third (37%) of organisations had tracked more than 75% of their employees completing cultural learning. However, only tracking completion rates does not measure the impact of training and contributes to the collection of rudimentary data. Training needs to be appropriate to the business remit, tracked for impact and include actionable next steps for participants.

Table 8

Is your organisation considering conducting a First Nations cultural learning needs analysis or developing a First Nations cultural learning needs framework?

13% Yes, currently under development

44% Yes, but not yet commenced

25% No

19% Not sure
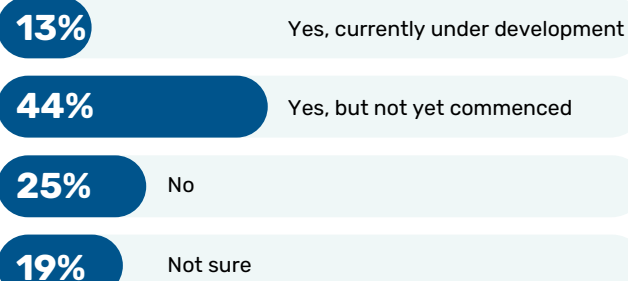
n=16
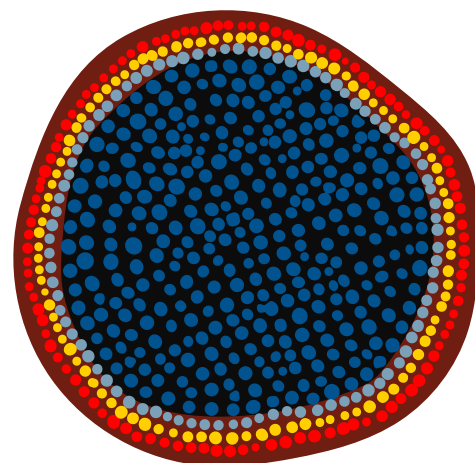
RACISM

The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth) makes it illegal to discriminate based on race, colour, descent, national origin, or ethnic background. Viewing racism as a human rights issue compels employers to address its impact on employees. Safe Work Australia's guidance highlights that poor psychosocial health at work can cause physical and mental harm (Safe Work Australia, n.d.). This means racism is also a workplace health and safety issue that Australian employers must do more to tackle.

Index 2022 found that experiences of racism in the workplace are significant, and there are low levels of understanding of racism and how to appropriately respond to it by non–First Nations employees. This continues to be a persistent theme in Index 2025. The context of the Voice to Parliament referendum and subsequent 'no' vote has created an environment where, disappointingly, racism continues to be felt by First Nations Peoples. As one First Nations employee said:

"They allowed people to start being quite racist and insensitive towards First Nations people because [employers] were being passive about the discussions on the Voice referendum"

– First Nations Employee

Index 2025 found that inadequate responses to workplace racism often resulted from vague cultural awareness programs. These programs failed to address the importance of truth-telling and the deeper issues tied to the acknowledgement of historical injustices. For example, many First Nations employees reported instances of racism that were not fully investigated, allowing harmful behaviours to persist unchecked.

"Racism often has subtle undertones and is not always addressed"

– First Nations Employee

A culturally unsafe workplace has a dual negative impact, as many First Nations employees then feel reluctant to report racism. This is due to concerns over employment security, potential social isolation in the workplace and retaliation. One employee said:

"I had an experience with harassment that wasn't resolved, so I wouldn't feel comfortable reporting racism"

– First Nations Employee

Covert racism continued to be highly apparent in workplaces. Covert racism is often unspoken and subtle, making it difficult to recognise and understand. This allows perpetrators to claim their racist behaviour was unintentional. A First Nations employee said:

"Racism is often covert and not addressed effectively, leading to a lack of cultural safety"

– First Nations Employee

An employer said:

"Continuous learning and improvement are integral to our First Nations Engagement strategy. We understand that there is always room for improvement, and we actively seek feedback from First Nations stakeholders. Through surveys, focus groups, and our First Nations Working Group, we gather valuable insights that help us make necessary adjustments and improvements. We are committed to creating an environment where everyone's voices are heard and valued"

– Executive
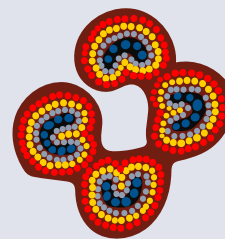
MIDDLE AND LINE MANAGEMENT

Middle and line managers play a vital role in workplace culture by modelling behaviours that reflect employer values and expectations. They act as the bridge between senior leadership and employees and can ensure cultural awareness initiatives are consistently demonstrated in their daily interactions. When middle and line managers actively support, promote and practice cultural awareness, it creates an environment where First Nations employees feel culturally safe and respected. If management does not model culturally capable behaviours, toxic traits can develop, fostering an environment where overt or covert racism is tolerated. First Nations employees said:

Investing in training for middle and line managers can significantly reduce racism and improve the overall safety of a workplace. Managers, as key influencers of organisational behaviour, often face challenges in addressing racism, particularly when it manifests in subtle or covert ways, rather than through explicit negative speech or actions. Covert racism can be difficult to tackle effectively, as it can be harder to identify and address.

Middle and line managers require the authority and resources, like time and funding, to influence and educate their teams. This is necessary to build a respectful and culturally competent workplace that supports the well-being of First Nations employees. Managers who are skilled in creating an open dialogue and are supported by strong policies can erase or reduce discrimination. Line managers said:

"There was a racist comment made in front of me and senior leadership, and it wasn't dealt with immediately. It was addressed later, but the situation shouldn't have occurred in the first place"

– First Nations Employee

"Racism and discrimination are present, and they are not always dealt with swiftly or with influence"

– First Nations Employee

"Racism does exist, and shifting attitudes requires continuous education and strong anti-discrimination policies"

– Line Manager

"Occasionally, there are questions about why Indigenous staff get ceremonial leave, education and [an] explanation can help address these biases"

– Line Manager

CULTURAL LOAD

Throughout the Index 2025 research, First Nations employees reported that cultural load remains an issue. This additional responsibility is frequently assigned without considering the emotional and mental toll it can impose. First Nations employees are regularly called upon to provide insights into cultural practices, history and community issues, which can create an unfair and overwhelming burden.

These expectations can detract from core job responsibilities, as First Nations employees are expected to educate non-First Nations colleagues on topics such as cultural capability and Indigenous affairs while managing their usual workload. These demands can lead to feelings of isolation, stress and burnout, particularly for those who are the only, or one of few, First Nations employees in a workplace. The 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum uncovered an additional load:
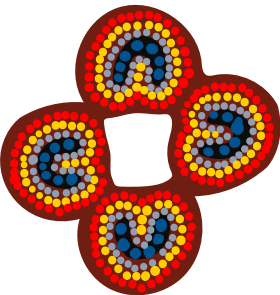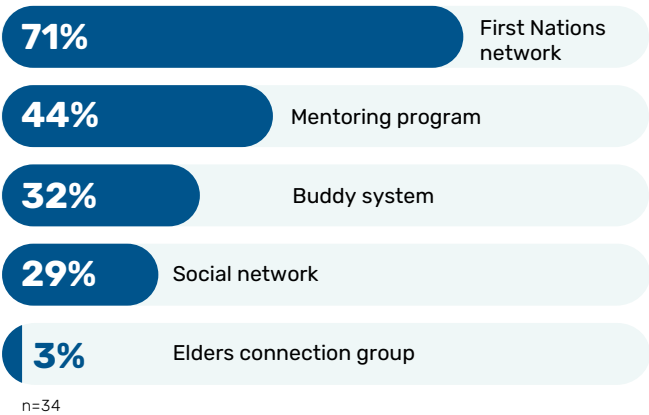
"The amount of people that came up to us and [asked] should I vote yes or no and I'm like, it's not my job to educate you"

- First Nations Employee

The impact of cultural load also emerged as a finding in Index 2022, so it continues to be an issue crucial to address. In Index 2025, organisations that considered the impacts of cultural load achieved higher maturity levels in Domains 1 and 2, and improvement in Domains 3, 4 and 5. Organisations must take proactive steps to share this responsibility more equitably by investing in comprehensive cultural training for all employees. As outlined by a First Nations employee, this is achievable in a workplace with strong leadership.

Table 9

Does your organisation have any of the following First Nations employee peer support opportunities?

71%	First Nations network
44%	Mentoring program
32%	Buddy system
29%	Social network
3%	Elders connection group

n=34

PERSONA

I stay with my current organisation because they see my potential and actively support my professional growth. My line manager has been instrumental in fostering a culturally safe and inclusive environment. My line manager has over 10 years' experience and openly admits he's learned more about First Nations Australia in the last two years than in his entire life. His leadership is rooted in compassion, trust and a real commitment to reconciliation.

Through cultural capability training and his commitment to learning outside of work, he's gained a deeper understanding of the unique strengths of First Nations employees. My manager creates an open space for us to discuss personal and professional challenges. He actively seeks advice from First Nations working groups, ensuring that his decisions are respectful and inclusive. His zero-tolerance policy on racism has made a real difference. At times, he's come to me for advice, but I appreciate that higher management has provided resources to ensure First Nations matters are addressed without overburdening me.

Personas are fictional characters created from the research in Index 2025 to highlight the effectiveness of the concepts discussed in each domain.

Domain 3
Employer Roadmap

The framework of listen, yarn and act offers suggested tangible approaches, but it is non-linear, allowing for repeated cycles between listening and yarning before action is taken.

LISTEN TO

First Nations employees;

First Nations training providers;

Middle and line managers;

First Nations cultural and business expertise, including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Land Councils and prescribed body corporates where they may intersect with the employer's operations; and

WHS representatives.

YARN PROMPTS

- Does our workforce have a good understanding of racism and how it manifests?

- Are we operating under the legislative requirements?

- Is our workplace safe for First Nations Peoples? How do we know this?

- What are our formal response systems for reporting racism?

- Are our WHS policies aligned with the current legislation and laws?

- How are we measuring the cultural understanding of all our employees?

- Do we have a common understanding of what cultural capability means in this organisation?

- How can cultural capability training be used to improve how we support internal and external First Nations stakeholders?

- Who should be required to complete the training (or prioritised)? E.g., the board, the management team?

> *Everybody deserves a workplace that encourages you to thrive, where you are genuinely valued for what you bring to work every day. For First Nations employees this means having a workplace that values the unique and diverse perspectives of First Nations employees. A culturally competent workplace that embraces First Nations cultural inclusion builds a stronger nation for all Australians.*

– Dr Craig Leon
Worimi
Managing Director, Conscious Solutions

ACT

- Implement a cultural learning needs analysis and framework to guide people in a way that is continually challenging but not overwhelming to support growth throughout the employment journey;

- Provide quality, current cultural capability training to all employees and consider the additional requirements of managers and executives;

- Focus training on communication, empathy and problem-solving techniques to ensure fair resolutions;

- Recognise and acknowledge the impact of historical trauma and provide ongoing support for affected employees;

- Actively address racism in the workplace:

  » Implement clear anti-discrimination policies and procedures as per legislative requirements;

  » Implement a free, confidential hotline or online platform to enable employees to report incidents of racism;

  » Equip managers to actively handle racism;

  » Ensure executives regularly report to the wider organisation on the incidence of racism, highlighting trends and progress in reducing incidents;

  » Increase First Nations representation in leadership positions to promote inclusivity;

  » Address challenges related to work-life balance to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for First Nations employees;

  » Create a culture where diversity is celebrated and everyone is treated with dignity and respect;

  » Build a cohesive team that fosters mutual respect and collaboration; and

  » Implement measures to recognise cultural load as an additional emotional burden, compensate or expand job descriptions and educate line managers to reduce the dependency on First Nations employees.
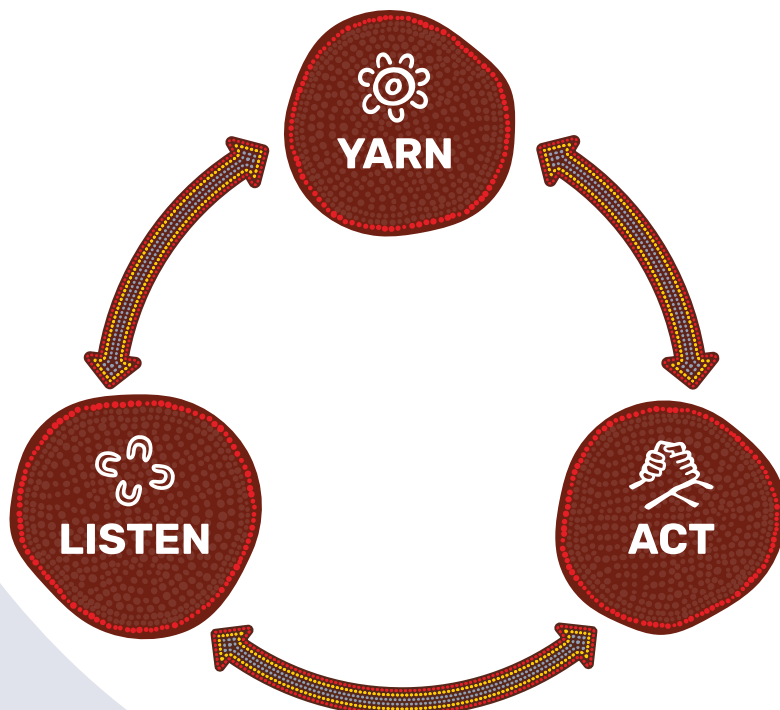
Domain 4

COMMITMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For policies to be effective for First Nations employees, key accountability mechanisms must be enforced, with actionable targets embedded in KPIs for both line managers and executives. Organisations must also take greater responsibility for delivering employment outcomes, both organisation-wide and within individual departments.

Commitments and accountability domain			
Foundational	**Growth**	**Integration**	**Advocacy**
24%	50%	26%	0%

Table 10 – Maturity of the organisations against the commitments and accountability domain

FIRST NATIONS POLICIES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Index 2025 reveals that organisations are making strong commitments to First Nations Peoples, with 80% using Reconciliation Australia's RAP framework. This is encouraging, but organisation-wide accountability mechanisms for achieving outcomes are often insufficient. First Nations employees said:

"There's a RAP but it feels like a box-ticking exercise with little real accountability"

– First Nations Employee

"We have a RAP, but it feels like more of a symbolic gesture than a practical tool for reconciliation"
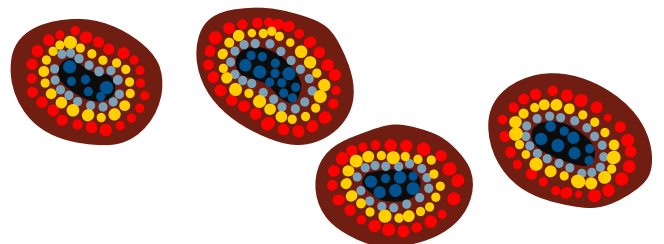
– First Nations Employee

"We want reconciliation to be core business, not just rely on a RAP"

– First Nations Employee

An executive said:

"We would set goals in line with our DEI goals. It is possible to activate and concentrate on First Nations employment with a strategy and goals rather than targets which can be tokenistic"

– Executive

These perspectives highlight that there can be a disconnect between having a RAP and solidifying it into the organisation's policies and practices. This means the opportunity for measurable and impactful change can be lost.

Even when RAPs are revised and updated to higher maturity levels, there can be scepticism regarding their effectiveness. The research highlights the need for more time allocation to embed RAPs into everyday practice. On this, First Nations employees said:

> *"Our new RAP was only released recently. It's a step in the right direction, but its impact remains to be seen"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

> *"We have a RAP and a working group but it's hard to see the tangible outcomes"*
>
> *– First Nations Employee*

Three-quarters (74%) of First Nations employment strategies or plans were led by First Nations Peoples. Most strategies had a sponsor at the executive level (68%), while some were sponsored by the CEO (10%) or other senior leaders (10%).

When employers are guided by the roadmap actions of 'listen, yarn and act', First Nations voices are central to the development of policies and procedures, as well as the decision-making process. This representation at the decision-making level is vital to the success of First Nations employees.

Index 2025 found that the key challenges to achieving outcomes from RAPs and other First Nations strategies included:

- Gaining the commitment needed to drive engagement across all levels of the business;
- Ineffective accountability mechanisms;
- Resistance to change;
- Operational issues; and
- Limited resources and support to deliver First Nations policy outcomes.

This is further exacerbated by external factors, such as the availability of First Nations talent in a competitive market. Employer's focus on global initiatives can also reduce the priority given to First Nations issues within the workplace.
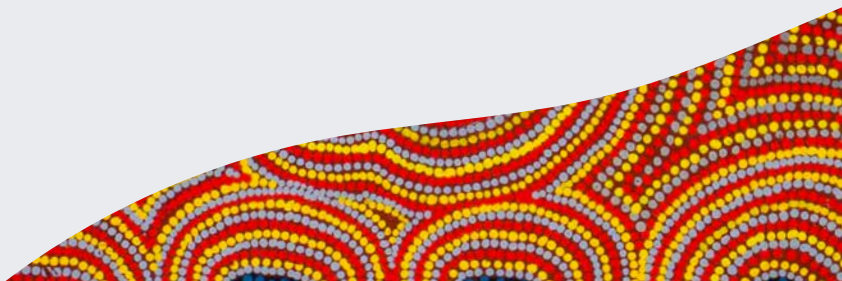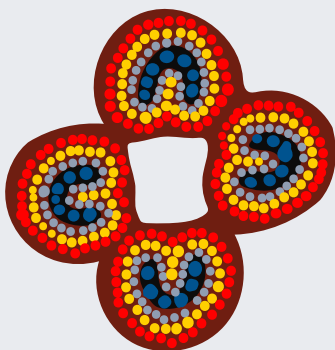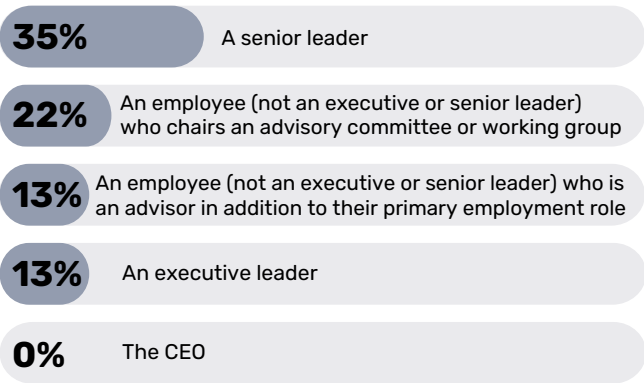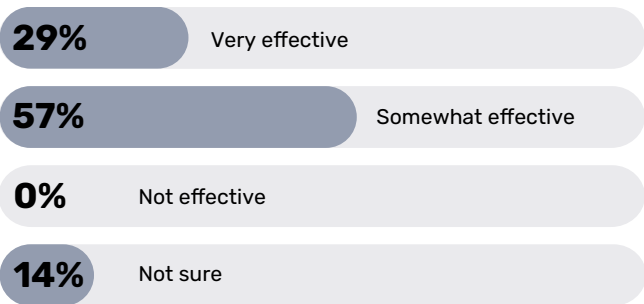
Table 11

At what level is the First Nations employee leading the First Nations employment strategy or plan?

35%	A senior leader
22%	An employee (not an executive or senior leader) who chairs an advisory committee or working group
13%	An employee (not an executive or senior leader) who is an advisor in addition to their primary employment role
13%	An executive leader
0%	The CEO

n=23

Table 12

How effective is your Reconciliation Action Plan for achieving First Nations employment outcomes?

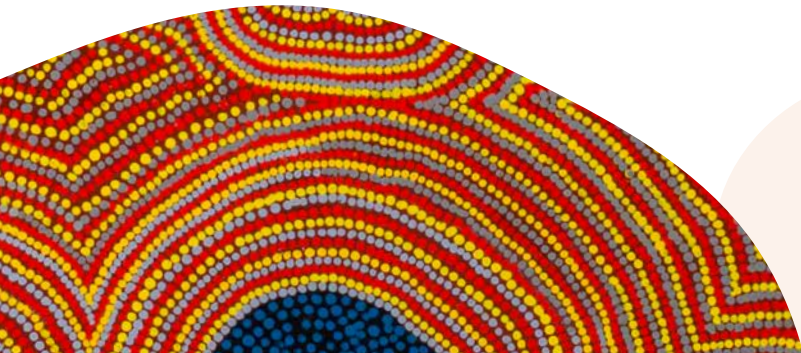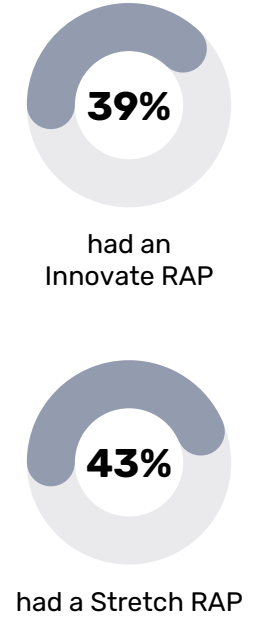| 29% | Very effective |
57%	Somewhat effective
0%	Not effective
14%	Not sure

n=28

Figure 6
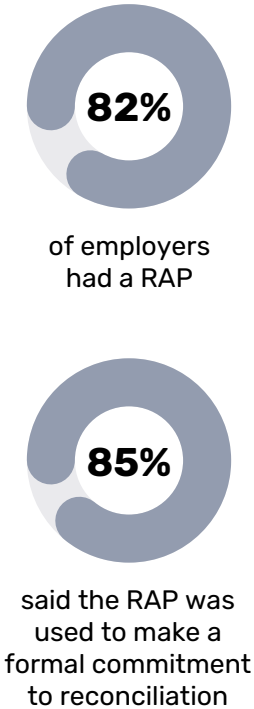
Most participating employers have a RAP

82%
of employers had a RAP

85%
said the RAP was used to make a formal commitment to reconciliation

39%
had an Innovate RAP

43%
had a Stretch RAP

COMMUNICATING OUTCOMES

Often, there is no clear internal communication about the progress of First Nations strategies. To build trust and engagement among employees, there is a need for explicit metrics, comprehensive data collection and clear and consistent reporting. Creating strong feedback loops that are accessible signals intent, competency and accountability. First Nations employees said:

"We need more transparency and clear communication about the RAP's progress"

- First Nations Employee

"There was no feedback on how we were tracking against the RAP targets in the past"

- First Nations Employee

"Transparency about RAP progress can improve employee engagement"

- First Nations Employee

All organisations indicated that their executive leadership communicates their commitment to reconciliation internally (100%). Index 2025 highlights that a majority (69%) of organisations also communicate their commitment to reconciliation at external events. For communication to be effective, it must go beyond general reporting and updates. Explicit communication on progress is crucial for ongoing, trust-based engagement with strategies.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Embedding First Nations employment KPIs into senior leadership performance criteria supports positive outcomes. When accountability is tied to performance metrics, leaders are incentivised to prioritise First Nations employees' experiences. More than a third (38%) of organisations had First Nations KPIs for executive leaders, but only a quarter had First Nations KPIs for senior leaders (28%). Even fewer had First Nations KPIs for mid-level managers (21%).
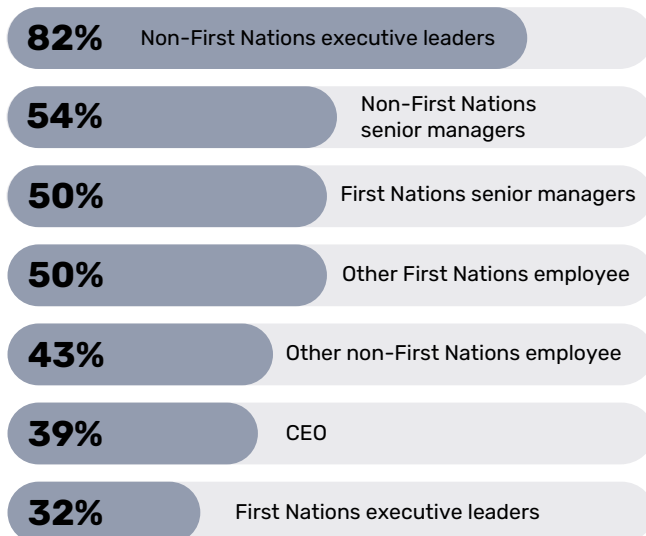
Accountability of executives and board members in meeting First Nations employment parity outcomes is essential. This not only drives systemic change but guarantees goals are pursued consistently across all levels of the organisation. It also ensures there is a sufficient budget for the operational elements of First Nations policies and plans. One executive gave insight into their process:

"We track RAP targets regularly and ensure accountability among senior management. Monthly reports are sent to senior management and operational teams to track progress"

- Executive

Table 13

Who leads your Reconciliation Action Plan or reconciliation strategy?*

82% Non-First Nations executive leaders

54% Non-First Nations senior managers

50% First Nations senior managers

50% Other First Nations employee

43% Other non-First Nations employee

39% CEO

32% First Nations executive leaders

n=28

This was a multiple-choice question where more than one selection was possible.

EMBEDDING FIRST NATIONS POLICIES INTO EMPLOYER-WIDE STRATEGIES

Many employers who showed success in achieving reconciliation outcomes incorporated RAP commitments into broader policies or strategies, such as employment, diversity, procurement and strategic partnerships. Embedding these actions within existing governance processes, such as HR diversity policies, resulted in greater accountability and more effective implementation. This integration ensured that reconciliation commitments were tied to ongoing and measurable policies rather than standing alone. An executive said:

"While RAPs are a valuable tool for leaders and teams to acknowledge this commitment, we recognise that there are instances where First Nations employment may not receive the prioritisation it deserves"

– Executive

When employer-wide strategies align with broader social goals, such as those outlined in Closing the Gap reports, a more holistic approach to reconciliation can be achieved. Involving First Nations employees in shaping these efforts through co-design and leadership ensures greater effectiveness and relevance. When RAPs and similar policies are the sole mechanisms for change, some actions may fall outside existing strategies, policies and governance frameworks. As one First Nations employee said:

"We have a RAP, but I feel it's just a piece of paper. A strategy with clear outcomes and broader engagement from staff would be more effective than the current RAP"

– First Nations Employee

Using complementary strategies to address RAP commitments ensures reconciliation becomes everyone's responsibility. This reinforces the need for sustained focus, measurability and accountability to ensure RAPs deliver outcomes and that targets are met.

PERSONA

As a manager for a First Nations employee in a large Australian organisation, I am committed to embedding reconciliation into our core operations. Driving progress for RAP outcomes is an important KPI in my position description.

I take pride in tracking and reporting on RAP commitments, ensuring accountability through individual KPIs, third-party reviews and transparent reporting to external advisory boards. These measures keep me focused on meeting my recruitment and retention targets for First Nations employees, with data playing a crucial role in monitoring progress. I understand that reconciliation is not just a symbolic gesture but a vital part of creating lasting, meaningful change.

My goal is to embed our RAP into employer-wide strategies, ensuring that reconciliation becomes everyone's responsibility. I regularly communicate the importance of these actions to the broader workforce to foster a collective commitment to progress.

I recognise that while we are making gains, such as attracting and retaining First Nations talent, I'm also aware of the challenges. These include securing sufficient resources and overcoming resistance to change at various levels of the organisation.

Personas are fictional characters created from the research in Index 2025 to highlight the effectiveness of the concepts discussed in each domain.

Domain 4
Employer Roadmap

The framework of listen, yarn and act offers suggested tangible approaches, but it is non-linear, allowing for repeated cycles between listening and yarning before action is taken.
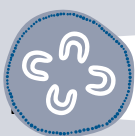
LISTEN TO

First Nations employees;

Line managers of employees;

First Nations cultural and business expertise, including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Land Councils and prescribed body corporates where they may intersect with the employer's operations;
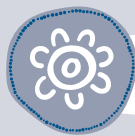
Reconciliation Australia;

Other similar companies;

First Nations peer groups;

RAP committees;

Influential and engaged executives; and

Managers with operational responsibilities.

YARN PROMPTS

- How effective has our First Nations policy been in creating meaningful outcomes for First Nations employees?

- Do we feel there is sufficient accountability for senior leadership in achieving First Nations employment targets? How does this impact our engagement with our RAP/other policies?

- Do we have a forum for First Nations stakeholders to provide honest feedback and input on important issues?

- Have we secured the right level of executive and board sponsorship for First Nations policies?

- How could communication about the progress of First Nations policies be improved to ensure transparency and trust?

- What mechanisms are in place to track progress against First Nations policy targets? How do we hold leaders and managers accountable?

- What improvements could be made to ensure First Nations employment policies achieve sustainable and impactful outcomes?

- What best practices have we implemented to ensure First Nations policies are viewed as actionable plans rather than symbolic gestures?

- Where do we need additional feedback loops?

- What are the employer-wide policy and process interdependencies? Such as:

  » Cultural safety and awareness policies;

  » DEI strategies;

  » Recruitment and retention programs;

  » Employment contracts;

  » Cultural leave and flexible working arrangements;

  » Data collection and privacy policies;

  » Workplace communication and leadership models

- What are the leverage points? Identify areas where small interventions can lead to larger systemic change.
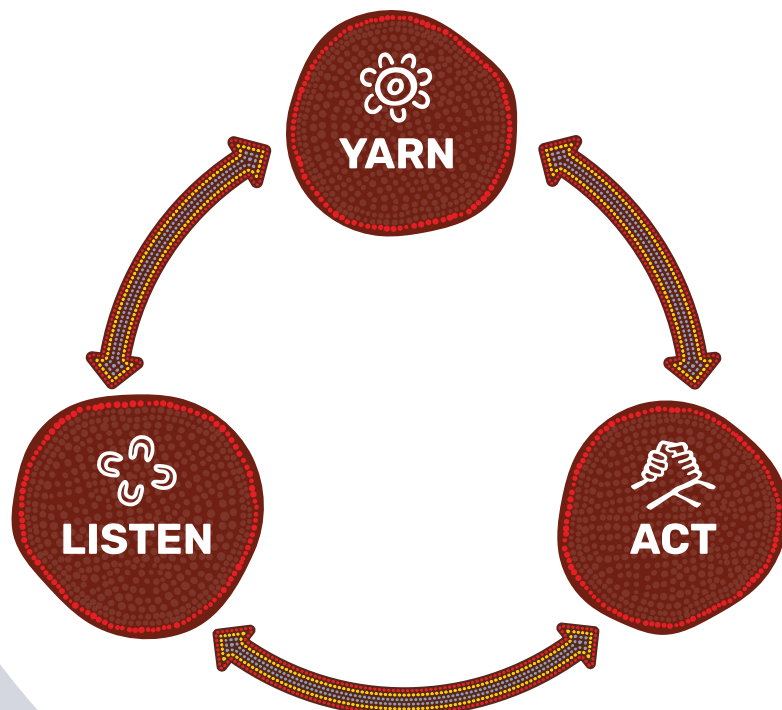
ACT

- Embed specific KPIs for First Nations employment and cultural safety at the executive and middle-management levels, with sufficient resources and strategic intent applied to achieve long-term goals;

- Establish First Nations advisory boards with genuine authority to hold executives accountable for RAPs or relevant First Nations strategy targets;

- Align and embed RAP actions with broader corporate strategies in areas like procurement and HR;

- Measure impacts through clear objectives, mandatory reporting and regular progress evaluations;

- Adopt a long-term strategic vision aligned with social goals like the Closing the Gap report;

- Ensure RAPs or relevant First Nations strategies are not just symbolic gestures but living documents integrated into broader organisational strategies;

- Improve First Nations employment data collection, reporting, measurement and evaluation;

- Drive transparent communication of RAP or relevant First Nations strategies to build trust and engagement across the organisation; and

- Promote First Nations leadership that goes beyond participation in working groups and is reflected at all levels.

> *"*
>
> *As advocates for First Nations employment outcomes, we recognise that commitment and accountability are critical for driving meaningful change. Without these essential components, employment strategies risk diminishing into mere rhetoric, devoid of the substance needed to achieve tangible results.*
> *"*
>
> **– Kylie Penehoe**
> Wonnarua and Wiradjuri
> CEO, The Alliance

Domain 5

FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Organisations have significant potential to build authentic, mutually beneficial relationships with First Nations communities. Community partnerships play a pivotal role in advancing reconciliation and improving First Nations employment outcomes.

First Nations community engagement domain			
Foundational	**Growth**	**Integration**	**Advocacy**
21%	59%	18%	3%

Table 14 – Maturity of the employers against the First Nations community engagement domain

AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS

Index 2025 shows that most partnerships between participating organisations and First Nations communities are transactional rather than strategic. This means they are not as effective at advancing reconciliation goals as they could be.

Many partnerships lack a long-term vision, which is crucial for sustainable collaboration. Only one employer sits at the 'advocacy' level for First Nations community engagement strategy and partnerships. The majority (59%) of employers sit at the 'growth' maturity level, with others at 'foundational' (21%) and 'integration' (18%). It should also be acknowledged that some employers may have mistakenly self-classified transactional partnerships as authentic partnerships, which do not offer the same mutual benefits.

DEFINING AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS

Many employers were not able to define a mutually beneficial partnership with First Nations communities. The most common partnerships mentioned in the research were Supply Nation (85%), Reconciliation Australia (79%) and Career Trackers (56%). While most other partnerships were strategic in intent, they were often ad hoc and lacked cohesive planning, measurement and accountability. A line manager said:

"Improving partnerships requires deeper community engagement and more localised, culturally specific programs"

– Line Manager

This was also noted by a First Nations employee:

"There's potential for positive change but it requires more consistent and genuine effort"

– First Nations Employee

SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Measuring the success of partnerships can be challenging due to a lack of definitions and clear metrics. Many employers inherited partnerships from previous First Nations governance policies, indicating a continuation of existing practices. Reporting on these partnerships – and ensuring they are constantly evolving – is imperative to guarantee long-term and sustainable impact.

The Australian Council of Superannuation Investors 2021 report (ACSI, 2021) found that corporate partnerships with First Nations communities often failed due to:

1. Power imbalances – employers often have more resources and negotiating power, leading to uneven agreements that may not adequately reflect the needs or perspectives of First Nations communities;

2. Lack of genuine engagement – partnerships may lack ongoing consultation or culturally appropriate engagement, resulting in initiatives that are disconnected from the community's priorities; and

3. Unclear accountability – ambiguities in governance frameworks and poor implementation of agreed-upon actions can weaken partnerships.

Meaningful, authentic partnerships with First Nations communities take time and effort to develop. Where relationships are built on trust and reciprocal respect, First Nations voices are central. First Nations communities across Australia are unique and diverse – a one-size-fits-all approach to partnerships is not effective. Employers must prioritise consultation, communication and collaboration wherever possible, recognising that each partnership should be tailored to its specific local context.

Successful partnerships have the following key attributes:

- A clear understanding of partnership;

- A collaboratively developed and principled approach;

- A shared vision, with consideration of individual and community interests;

- Be co-created, with shared risks and benefits;

- Equitable resource contributions;

- Shared decision-making and leadership;

- Mutual accountability; and

- A focus on both the process and outcomes.

When partnerships are authentic, they can foster a deeper understanding of First Nations cultures and play a vital role in breaking down negative stereotypes.
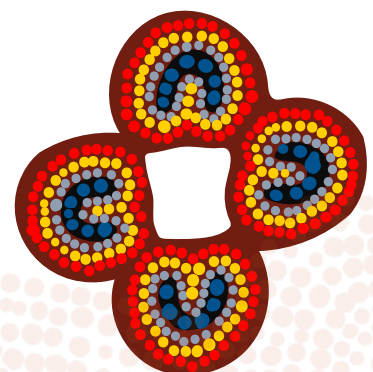
PROCUREMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

A common misconception Index 2025 reveals is equating procurement with partnership. Merely engaging First Nations suppliers does not necessarily constitute a genuine partnership. Such transactional relationships are often mischaracterised as partnerships, missing the deeper engagement and mutual benefit of true partnerships. One line manager acknowledged an expectation to form partnerships with First Nations communities, but could not articulate why this is important:

> *"Our procurement policy ... says that we should be supporting First Nations organisations"*
>
> *– Line Manager*

Australian organisations can enhance their procurement partnerships by refining policies and procedures to better align with the realities faced by First Nations suppliers and communities. Reducing bureaucracy and tailoring compliance requirements are essential steps to ensure more accessible and equitable opportunities for First Nations businesses.

Organisations reported using the following selection criteria when undertaking procurement activities, such as releasing tenders, subcontracting or engaging suppliers:

- Bidders' diversity and inclusion strategy (76%)

- First Nations employment strategy or plan (68%)

- First Nations-owned (88%).

Streamlining processes will not only ensure trust but also enable First Nations suppliers to engage more effectively in procurement processes. By removing unnecessary barriers, organisations can cultivate long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships with First Nations suppliers. This contributes to economic empowerment while building supply chains organisations can be proud of.

UNMATCHED SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

Large Australian employers – due to their substantial size, geographical reach and significant spheres of influence – hold considerable potential to form strategic partnerships with First Nations communities that deliver measurable benefits. However, many current partnerships are not fully capitalised on, with a lack of clear documentation, promotion or measurable outcomes. Executives gave insight into their partnership processes:

> *"We workshopped with the suppliers [and] there were three key strategies that we've taken away to take this [partnership] to the next level and the suppliers were part of that process"*
>
> *– Executive*

> *"We hold regular meetings, and we don't force initiatives [to enable] our relationships [to] remain healthy"*
>
> *– Executive*

PERSONA

As an executive at a large employer, I place a high value on building effective partnerships with First Nations communities grounded in mutual respect and shared goals.

I approach each relationship with a tailored strategy, recognising that unique engagement is key to long-term success. I envision creating sustainable collaborations, focusing on reducing bureaucratic barriers, especially with our First Nations suppliers, ensuring that compliance is straightforward and effective. I acknowledge the importance of learning from past mistakes, as they provide valuable insights for delivering long-term, impactful outcomes.

My organisation recognises the vast influence we hold and the responsibility that comes with it. We invest in nurturing partnerships that align with our public values and long-term vision. Good governance is central to our approach, allowing us to document, measure and promote the value of these partnerships. Prioritising meaningful engagement with partners is not just a business decision but a reflection of our commitment to ethical collaboration.

I believe partnerships foster cultural competence within our workforce and help to dismantle stereotypes. However, I acknowledge the challenges posed by time pressures, capacity issues and occasional lack of support from leadership. Despite these pains, I remain bold in my approach, ensuring that we align our actions with our RAP and continuously strive to improve.

Personas are fictional characters created from the research in Index 2025 to highlight the effectiveness of the concepts discussed in each domain.

Domain 5
Employer Roadmap

The framework of listen, yarn and act offers suggested tangible approaches, but it is non-linear, allowing for repeated cycles between listening and yarning before action is taken.

LISTEN TO

Communities and Elders;

First Nations cultural and business expertise, including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Councils and prescribed body corporates where they may intersect with the employer's operations;

Similar employers that have strategic partnerships;

Peak bodies that oversee key partnerships with First Nations organisations; and

Internal procurement and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs departments.

> "
> *The liberation of our people is predicated on relationship, the lifeblood of any relationship is community engagement... doing it with us and not to us. It walks to the heartbeat of the mob. Community engagement is the bridge to the future.* "
>
> **– Professor Uncle Mark Rose**
> Gunditjmara
> Pro Vice Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Innovation, Deakin University

YARN PROMPTS

- How do we define an authentic partnership with First Nations communities? How does it differ from transactional relationships?

- What long-term goals should we prioritise in our partnerships to ensure sustainability and mutual benefit with First Nations communities?

- How can we improve our consultation process with First Nations communities to ensure their voices are heard, and their needs are reflected in our partnership strategies?

- What specific actions could we take to reduce red tape and tailor compliance for First Nations suppliers?

- What metrics do we use to measure the success of our partnerships?

- Are we relying on legacy projects? Do these existing partnerships still create the greatest impact?

- How can we ensure our partnerships are driven by structured, strategic efforts rather than ad hoc initiatives?

- In what ways can we foster co-leadership and shared decision-making with First Nations communities?

- What steps can we take to build trust and improve long-term engagement with First Nations suppliers and communities?

- How can we better leverage our sphere of influence to promote and support meaningful partnerships with First Nations communities?

- Do we understand what it takes to develop authentic relations and have organisational guiding principles?

- Can we tailor our procurement onboarding processes?

ACT

The following recommendations outline key strategies for Australian businesses to strengthen their partnerships with First Nations communities, ensuring they are authentic, aligned with corporate strategy, and accessible for First Nations suppliers.

- Define and elevate authentic partnerships – organisations should prioritise consultation, communication and collaboration to build authentic partnerships with First Nations communities. Organisations should move beyond transactional relationships and develop strategic, long-term partnerships. These partnerships should be co-created with shared risks, benefits and leadership responsibilities;

- Align partnerships to corporate strategy – organisations should align partnerships with their strategic goals to create sustainable, impactful relationships with First Nations communities. By incorporating strategic frameworks, public value statements and signed agreements, organisations can enhance accountability and drive long-term outcomes, ensuring partnerships are beneficial for all involved;

- Improve procurement partnerships – organisations should tailor compliance requirements for First Nations suppliers. Streamlining these processes will make procurement more accessible, building trust and empowering First Nations businesses. These efforts contribute to economic empowerment and improve corporate supply chains;

- Enhance community engagement – organisations should prioritise deeper, localised community engagement and culturally specific programs to ensure partnerships address the real needs of First Nations communities;

- Build mutual trust and collaboration – organisations should cultivate partnerships based on trust by actively involving First Nations communities and suppliers in decision-making processes and strategic workshops; and

- Improve documentation and promotion – organisations should focus on properly documenting, promoting and celebrating successful partnerships to encourage continued growth and learning within the organisation and the broader community.
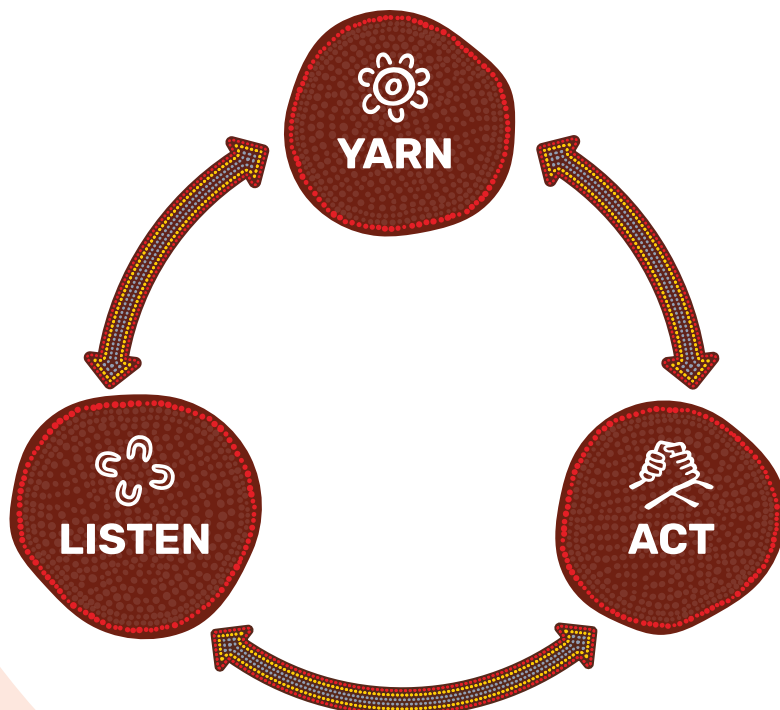
Where to From Here?

Much more must be done to create safer, more inclusive workplaces that offer meaningful work for First Nations Peoples.

To move forward, it is essential to translate policy commitments into actionable practices and make them measurable and accountable. While challenges such as limited resources, capacity constraints and competing business objectives will persist, directing focus to commitment and action must come from leadership teams to drive meaningful progress. Using the methodology of 'listen, yarn and act' will support culturally appropriate approaches and positive change, with First Nations voices at the forefront.

It is time for leaders at all levels to champion this transformation, making cultural safety and inclusion not just a policy, but a lived reality for all employees.

This is our responsibility and our opportunity to take.

What impact will <u>you</u> make?

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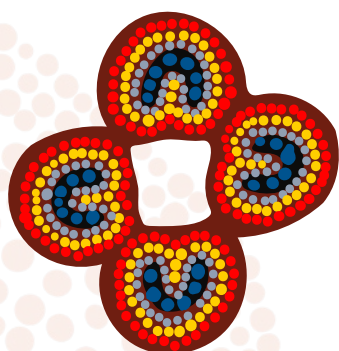Productivity Commission. (n.d.). *Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities*. https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area8

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