



What works in employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability

An Indigenous-led evidence synthesis summary

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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which Centre for Inclusive Employment is located, in Melbourne's east and outer-east, and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

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What works in employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability

Summary

This evidence review examined what helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability to access, participate in and sustain meaningful employment. The review found that poorer employment outcomes are not caused by a lack of ability or motivation. Instead, they are shaped by barriers in systems, services and workplaces, including racism, culturally unsafe services, inflexible rules, fragmented supports and employment models that do not reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Across the evidence, employment services and workplaces are more likely to support strong and sustained outcomes when they are Indigenous-led, culturally grounded, flexible and accountable to community. These approaches are effective because they are built on trust, relationships, cultural safety and local knowledge.

The review also shows that employment should be understood more broadly than paid work alone. Care for family, community responsibilities and responsibilities to Country are important forms of contribution. Services and workplaces should recognise and support these responsibilities, rather than treating them as barriers. Overall, employment services are more effective when they:

- are Indigenous-led or community-controlled
- build long-term trust and relationships
- provide culturally safe, trauma-informed and anti-racist practice
- are flexible and responsive to people's lives and community responsibilities
- involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in decision-making
- support culturally capable and stable workforces.

What we know about what works

The evidence is clear that employment services and supports are more effective when they are Indigenous-led, culturally safe, relationship-based and flexible. Indigenous-led and community-controlled organisations are important because they are grounded in local culture, community knowledge and accountability. They are more likely to understand family and community

responsibilities and contexts, build trust over time, and provide support that reflects people's lived realities.

Cultural safety is a starting point for engagement. People are more likely to use services and participate in workplaces when they feel respected, understood and safe from racism, judgement and discrimination. Trust is built through relationships, continuity of staff, respectful communication and time. Flexible services are also more accessible because they recognise transport, health, family responsibilities, cultural obligations and local community contexts.

Co-design and shared decision-making also matter. Programs are more relevant when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved in designing, delivering and improving services over time. Workforce capability is essential, with staff needing ongoing cultural learning, trauma-informed practice, supervision and organisational support. Addressing racism is part of effective employment support, not an optional extra.

What works

Employment pathways are strongest when services and workplaces are:

- Indigenous-led or community-controlled
- culturally safe, trauma-informed and anti-racist
- built on trust, relationships and long-term engagement
- flexible and responsive to people's lives and community responsibilities
- designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through co-design and shared decision-making
- respectful of kinship, culture and connection to Country
- locally responsive and accountable to community
- supported by culturally capable and stable workforces

The evidence does not point to a single program that can be replicated everywhere. Instead, what works is a set of connected conditions: Indigenous authority, cultural safety, strong relationships, flexibility, shared decision-making, workforce capability and active responses to racism.

What doesn't work

Mainstream employment approaches are often ineffective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability when they are:

- standardised and inflexible
- compliance-driven and focused on short-term outcomes
- culturally unsafe or disconnected from community realities
- built around rigid rules, timelines and appointment systems
- focused on administrative processes rather than relationships and trust
- shaped by high staff turnover and inconsistent support
- designed without genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in decision-making.

Racism, discrimination and deficit-based assumptions undermine trust and engagement. Services and workplaces that do not recognise cultural responsibilities, family obligations and community contexts are more likely to be experienced as unsafe, disrespectful or irrelevant.

What we don't know

The evidence base in this area is still limited and uneven. There is strong evidence about the barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability face, and about the conditions that support engagement. There is less evidence measuring long-term employment outcomes and what helps people remain in employment over time. Research is particularly limited on long-term job retention and career progression; how Indigenous-led employment models work across different communities; the role and impact of Indigenous disability leadership; how culturally grounded approaches influence long-term employment outcomes; and the impact of cultural load and unpaid cultural labour on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers with disability.

Much of the strongest evidence comes from Indigenous researchers, community-led studies and lived experience, rather than formal program evaluations. More Indigenous-led research and evaluation is needed, using methods that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and understandings of work, participation and wellbeing.

Implications for employment services

Improving employment outcomes requires system-level change, not simply more programs. Employment services should support Indigenous-led and community-controlled service delivery, embed cultural safety and anti-racism, prioritise long-term relationships, provide flexible and locally responsive support, involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in co-design and

decision-making, strengthen workforce capability, recognise Indigenous disability leadership, and improve coordination across disability, employment, education, training and community systems.

The evidence also highlights the need for funding and policy settings that support relational, culturally grounded and long-term approaches. Short-term, compliance-driven models do not provide the time, flexibility or accountability needed to build trust and sustain employment participation.