

Eight ways we can improve Indigenous employment

Written by The Conversation

The [latest ABS report](#) on Indigenous people in the workforce confirms an ongoing trend of low participation. Our research shows that non-standard recruitment agencies, more education and ongoing mentoring and support are key to improving these disappointing statistics.

While there was a narrowing of the employment gap between 1994 and 2008, since 2008 this appears to have [stalled](#). The ABS report shows that 58% of Indigenous Australians were participating in the labour force (that is, they were employed or unemployed).

Males were more likely than females to be participating in the labour force (65% compared with 52%), as were people in non-remote areas, compared with those in remote areas (61% and 49%, respectively). The report also found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over were significantly less likely than non-Indigenous people to be employed.

This employment gap results from barriers to Indigenous people obtaining and maintaining employment. On the demand side, the location of jobs, structural change in the labour market and employer [discrimination](#) impact on Indigenous peoples chance of finding employment. On the supply side health, education and training, work experience and [caring responsibilities](#) limit participation.

The report by the ABS is based on data from the recently released 2014 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). This data reveals a lot about the reasons for the gap in Indigenous participation in the workforce.

Education outcomes are a key determinant of employment. An Indigenous male or female with a degree has an employment probability of 85% or 74% respectively. For someone who has completed Year 12 only, this falls to 62% and 50%, whereas someone who has completed Year 9 or below it falls to 43% and 32%. Education alone [doesn't determine employment](#), but it is a big factor.

Current policies on Indigenous employment focus on education but are much quieter on discrimination. The NATSISS data shows that 33% of adult males and 37% of adult females

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reported experiencing some form of unfair treatment in the previous 12 months (excluding those who responded that they did not know). What is interesting, is that these percentages are higher for employed Indigenous Australians (35% for males and 38% for females) than those who are not employed (32% per cent and 36%).

At work or when applying for work was the second most common source of unfair treatment (after members of the public). It's not surprising that because of this some Indigenous Australians would be reluctant to engage with the labour market when this, and other [research](#), shows that discrimination and unfair treatment is a very real and very damaging aspect of the labour market for Indigenous Australians.

The 2014 NATSISS reveals there are also substantial gender and age differences. Like the population as a whole, employment rates are significantly higher for Indigenous males compared to females for those aged under 40. For those aged 40 and over, the difference by sex narrows substantially, and an Indigenous male aged 50-54 is actually slightly less likely to be employed than an Indigenous female of the same age. This puts older Indigenous men at the highest risk of unemployment.

[Our research](#) has identified some policies that have the potential to help Indigenous people get into jobs. These were:

- Increasing the skill levels of Indigenous Australians via formal education and training
- Pre-employment assessment and customised training in order to get Indigenous job seekers employment-ready
- Recruitment and workplace policies that facilitate an Indigenous-friendly working environment that ensure Indigenous people have an equal opportunity to win jobs (for example, providing cultural leave)
- Cross-cultural training for employers

Recruitment is not enough though. We [recently](#) noted a number of barriers to retention of Indigenous workers in the public service in particular including overly high expectations; discrimination and racism; and lack of recognition of skills and knowledge.

Some solutions for retention include:

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- Ongoing mentoring and support
- Flexible work arrangements to allow Indigenous employees to meet their work, family and/or community obligations
- Support for the families of Indigenous employees
- Dealing with racism in the workplace through initiatives that address the broader workplaces culture

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that what is happening in the broader labour market is the key determinant of Indigenous workforce participation and [employment](#). At the national level, the state of the economy is key. At the local and community level, changing government support and changing industry structure has a disproportionate impact on Indigenous Australians.

The reality though is that we don't have rigorous evidence about what specific interventions will have a significant, cost effective impact on Indigenous workforce participation. Nor have we listened to the [evidence](#) on what has been shown to work (and not work) in other contexts.

Not only has this problem been ignored, there is also a lack of engagement with what Indigenous peoples think themselves about [priorities or policy responses](#) through genuine self determination.

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