

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice

Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

Background

Ironbark Employment is an Indigenous specialist member of Job Futures Australia. We assist clients in the Darwin region, secure long term and sustainable employment.

In February 2010, a representative of Centrelink NT's Indigenous Employment Unit approached the Manager of Ironbark Employment to propose collaboration on a pilot, Indigenous pre-recruitment program. The initiative was designed to assist Indigenous job-seekers to prepare for and succeed in application to Centrelink for Customer Service Officer (CSO) positions which were about to be nationally advertised.

This paper summarises the process followed during this pilot program, with particular focus on the journey of the Indigenous women participants who applied for the Centrelink CSO positions. It highlights the internal and external barriers which these and other Indigenous women face in seeking mainstream employment and offers suggestions for action to those committed to closing the gap between policy and practice: between rhetoric and results.

Unlike traditional, objective and theoretical, academic papers I have deliberately adopted a subjective, narrative approach, inviting you, the reader to begin to know these women, to learn something of their lives and their experience as anxious job seekers. For in knowing them and relating to them, you may find the determination to *walk with them* as they struggle to overcome the barriers to mainstream employment which also deny them access to the many benefits employment can bring to their lives and those of their families and communities.

The Pre- recruitment Pilot Program

The Centrelink Pre-recruitment Program was named "Ahead of the Game". An apt title for a program designed to equitably position the Indigenous participants competing for employment in the Public Service arena. As Training & Development Officer with Ironbark Employment I worked closely with Centrelink's Officer to prepare a five day program to provide:

- An overview of Centrelink's functions
- An understanding of the Australian Public Service/Centrelink code of conduct, values and privacy legislation
- Information on employment terms and conditions
- Assistance to update resumes
- Assistance to address selection criteria
- Interview skills and practice

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

Our Participants

An invitation to attend the *Ahead of the Game* program was extended to all Indigenous Ironbark clients who expressed interest in working within Centrelink. We were advised by the Centrelink Project Officer that Centrelink was keen to recruit those with good local knowledge of the issues confronting Indigenous people and keen to appoint to these advertised CSO positions those who could identify with, quickly establish rapport with, and build effective relationships with Centrelink's significant Indigenous client-base across northern Australia.

Ages

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) projects that by the end of June 2011 almost half (45%) of Indigenous females will be aged less than 20 years, compared with 25% of the total female population [2]; [5]. Burns et al (2010:2)

There are numerous Federal Government and Northern Territory Government initiatives to encourage and support employment of young Indigenous men and women and they were not excluded from this program. We did, however, strongly encourage participation from mature clients rich in life experience and knowledge which would be appropriate and valuable to the CSO position.

Numbers of program participants and position applicants

Eleven Indigenous men and women commenced the *Ahead of the Game* pre-recruitment training program. Seven were women ranging in age from 23 to 49 years. All women were mothers: three were single mothers. Four were living in local Indigenous communities (town camps), two in suburban homes. One woman had been forced to 'Long Grass' in a tent due to outstanding rental debts to Northern Territory Housing. These debts were incurred by her and her ex-partner who had later absconded all financial responsibility. She was paying fortnightly instalments to NT Housing which were deducted from her Centrelink income. During the program she was "couch surfing" (moving from one friend's home to another) until she secured employment, cleared her debts and could once again afford rental accommodation.

Nine of the eleven people who started the five day program completed. Two of the single women (both living in a town camp) withdrew from the program as neither felt at ease in a mixed-gender training room. Respecting this, we worked separately with each of them. One completed her employment application. The other, a young, bright, articulate yet shy woman decided she would not feel comfortable working in a large organisation such as Centrelink and would consider other employment options – preferably within her own community.

As program participants talked to family members and friends about the program, many others also wanted to attend or apply for positions within Centrelink.

All who expressed interest in preparing applications were offered assistance in doing so: addressing the selection criteria, updating their resumes, and practising interview skills.

A total of nineteen of our Indigenous clients applied for the CSO positions: thirteen were women.

Would they have applied for this position without the assistance of Ironbark Employment staff?

Answer: No.

Only one client declined our offer of assistance.

All others advised they would not have considered applying had we not encouraged and assisted them to do so.

So what did we do that was helpful?

Barrier 1: Internal barriers, including self-belief

Some of the applicants had limited work experience in mainstream employment. Typically, they had worked in hospitality, cleaning or labouring having not been encouraged or supported to seek work outside of these areas. A significant component of the one week pre-recruitment program was to identify strengths, build self-esteem, and encourage participant confidence to imagine themselves in a role they were unfamiliar with yet well qualified to undertake.

Resilience is a quality frequently identified in the literature as characteristic of Indigenous Australians. Our group demonstrated this daily as they faced and overcame numerous obstacles and barriers to participation. Some common challenges our participants faced were:

- **Clothing**

Insufficient money to purchase 'suitable clothing' to wear during the training program and interview, or, when such clothes were obtained, they were not available when needed, a family member having borrowed them.

- **Transport**

Most participants relied on public transport. Some needed to walk kilometres to an infrequent feeder-service or main route.

- **Childcare**

Within Indigenous communities, it is common for women to have primary childcare responsibilities not only for their own children but also for those of their extended families. One of our strongest candidates needed to 'organise' seven children and several grandchildren before attending the program each day.

- **Accommodation, Sleep, and Study**

Many Indigenous people, including some of our participants, live in overcrowded accommodation with up to twenty others sharing a small home. It is often difficult to get a restful night's sleep, to be fresh for work or study in the morning, when many others, without those commitments, enjoy all night social activities at the house.

One of our participants had recently been homeless (Long Grass).

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

“The Larrakia Nation estimates that there are more than 2000 individuals on any one night in the greater Darwin area living in Darwin’s Long Grass, of which 75% identify as being Indigenous Australians”. [16] L.N.A.C (2010)

- **Peer and family pressure**

Within some Indigenous families and communities, engagement in mainstream employment or training is not common. There is often little support or encouragement for women who try to pursue either.

- **Financial pressure**

While an unemployed woman suffers economic disadvantage, some women have declared *humbugging* to be such a problem when they did gain employment that they would rather not work at all.

(*Humbugging* occurs when one person with money is continually asked by others for a share, either as a gift or a ‘loan’.)

Some facts about Indigenous people and finances

- Indigenous people suffer substantial disadvantage in: education, employment, income, housing, access to services, social networks, connection with land, racism, and incarceration. Burns et al. (2010:2)
- Workforce participation can significantly influence a woman's level of income... the dominant experience of Indigenous women is that of relative economic hardship, given their generally reduced participation in the mainstream workforce. Burns et al. (2010:3)
- Figures from the 2006 Australian census highlight the extent of the financial adversity encountered by Indigenous people [3] The mean equivalised gross income per week for Indigenous households in 2006 was \$521, compared with \$730 for non-Indigenous households [23]. Burns et al. (2010:3)
- The median gross weekly individual income for Indigenous females aged 15 years or older in 2006 was \$278, compared with \$367 for non-Indigenous females. This discrepancy was greatest in the NT. [23]. Burns et al. (2010:3)

Suggestions for closing the gap between policy and practice:

- Acknowledge the intensive support and encouragement possibly required to assist some Indigenous jobseekers to prepare and submit an application for employment
- Where possible, work closely with an Indigenous specialist employment agency – or an agency with expertise in working with Indigenous clients and is willing to assist clients in the application process
- Ensure position vacancies are advertised in a way which is truly accessible to Indigenous jobseekers. Advertisements should be worded in very plain English. Illustrations should demonstrate diversity (of race, age, and gender) in the workplace
- Ensure that those without access to computers or to the internet are not disadvantaged and that all information about the position is available to them by snail mail, or collection not just electronically
- Remember that word-of-mouth is often the most effective way to engage Indigenous jobseekers. Individuals and organisations in wide and frequent contact with Indigenous people should be kept up to date of employment opportunities so that they can spread the word about what’s available.

Barrier 2: the Resume

Many Ironbark clients have no resume when they register with us for assistance in gaining employment. Some have a resume previously created for them by another agency. Typically, such a resume includes a list of spasmodic, paid work in cleaning, housekeeping, or hospitality. Sometimes the chronological list is interspersed with a line saying 'homemaker' or 'carer'. Rarely do these resumes reflect the true skills, strengths or experience of the person.

One of the first conversations I have with clients is about re-writing their resume. Rather than focussing on their history of paid work, I ask about how they spend their time most days. Formally, this would be described as adopting a narrative approach to career development. Informally it's: "Tell me your story. I'd really like to know." To adopt this approach demands time, relationship and respect. Even with these elements present, the client's 'story telling' may be guarded and therefore stilted.

But why *should* they trust me or anyone else in the recruitment world? Indeed, how many of us have asked to hear their story? And if so, how many listened in a non-judgemental let alone an encouraging way? Ask yourself: am I able to hear that this person has been in jail, or rehabilitation, or 'Long Grass', or a women's shelter without being overwhelmed by the possible barriers to her employment? Can I help her re-write her history in an empowering way by co-creating with her a resume that reflects her strengths, skills, and resilience?

During the pre-recruitment training for Centrelink employment, re-writing the resume was a significant event for most applicants.

All existing resumes were printed and distributed within the group. Some participants had never seen their resume. It was a mysterious document on an employment agency computer to which they had little if any access, a document for which they had no sense of ownership.

I asked the group whether anyone had a resume stating that they were Indigenous, listing the several languages they spoke, where their country was, who they were connected to, how many children they had, what they did in their communities or families, who they helped and how they helped, what cultural responsibilities they had, what they have done that they are proud of, what they were good at (skills), what problems they have had to deal with (strengths) and so on.

Not one had a resume that reflected these holistic and important elements of their lives.

As a group we began to discuss each of these aspects and they were recorded on butcher's paper. As each person was encouraged to use their own community language and to prompt and assist others, the stories began to unfold and the richness of their lives revealed. This process of storytelling, connecting and recording, took two full days. It was a process of trust and of overcoming the cultural resistance to speaking about oneself in this open way.

Many of our Indigenous clients hold a collective rather than individual worldview. For many, it is still considered 'a shame job' to boast, to declare individual achievements or merits.

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

We then sat with each applicant one-on-one to review the information recorded and to determine what to include on the resume and what to exclude as personal business. Resumes were transformed from half-page documents stating name, address and scant lines of work history, to vibrantly holistic documents illustrating remarkable bundles of transferable, valuable skills.

Some facts about Indigenous people and employment

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures released in June 2010 indicate the unemployment rate increased from 14 to 18 per cent over the 12 months between 2008 and 2009... Some 35,400 Indigenous people were out of work last year – up from 27,100 in 2008... At the time, the employment rate for those aged 15 to 64 fell from 50 to 48 per cent... The gap in unemployment rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians increased from 9.6 to 12.6 percentage points in the two year to 2009. The employment gap jumped from 23 to 24.4 percentage points. Drape (2010:1).

Suggestions for closing the gap between policy and practice:

Ask yourselves as recruiters or employers:

- Am I willing to employ an Indigenous woman without a resume?
- Is a resume the most useful way to determine suitability? Or is it simply more convenient and conventional?
- Would I consider a verbal resume or a verbal recommendation?
- Am I willing to act on the knowledge that many Indigenous women will not include in their resume many of the skills, experiences, strengths and talents she can bring to the role and employ her anyway?
- Will I accept a portfolio resume? Will I ask applicants to bring along examples of their work instead of a written document?
- Could I offer a few days paid-work trial to determine a jobseeker's suitability, rather than rely on a resume?
- Would I consider adopting the approach used by the Northern Territory Government Indigenous recruitment team? In this model group information sessions for all Indigenous people keen to work within the Northern Territory Government are held. All potential applicants are welcome and are invited to bring their resume with them to the forum. Informal one-on-one discussions are held at the close of the group process and the resume simply becomes one of many ways the recruiters *begin to know* the applicant.
- Will I work with an Indigenous-specialist employment agency with the time and expertise to assist in resume writing?

Barrier 3: Completing selection criteria

Ironbark Employment offered all applicants assistance in addressing the selection criteria. Only one felt confident to address criteria without our assistance.

To Centrelink's credit, the selection criteria were extensively simplified. However, language still posed a barrier to many of our applicants. For many, English is a second (or third, fourth or more) language. The CSO roles which Centrelink advertised, like many mainstream roles today, were largely computer-based and our applicants possessed the required literacy and IT skills to complete the requirements of the role. Nevertheless, Centrelink required application forms to be handwritten as evidence of communication skills.

Ironbark's approach to assisting applicants to address selection criteria was to work again as a group. All applicants were encouraged to speak in their own language to assist each other to understand the process and the questions.

Firstly, we extracted the key words or phrases from the selection criteria statements. "What are they looking for in this one?" we'd ask. Once key terms (e.g.: 'team work', 'personal accomplishment', 'understanding of Indigenous issues') were identified, we wrote these on butcher's paper. Then began a process of brainstorming what each applicant could write to address that criterion. The candidates helped each other by reminding each other of accomplishments or by being reminded of their own experiences by what others had said. In the spirit of brainstorming, everything was listed and our purposeful inclusion of humour assisted applicants to feel less 'shame' about speaking about themselves in this way.

Once we had a number of points which could be included in each person's application we began the process of working one-on-one with applicants to personalise their document. Rather than expecting applicants to handwrite their answers directly onto the application form, we sat with them and transcribed what they told us directly onto the computer. We drew from what had already been revealed in the brainstorming and from the updating of resumes. Together, we created a statement addressing the selection criteria to the applicant's satisfaction, ran a spell-check, and then printed the document for the applicant to copy in their own handwriting. This process took over three full days to complete.

Some facts about Indigenous people and education

- Two of our female applicants had completed Year 12 education.
- In 2006, school completion to year 12, was much lower for Indigenous females than for their non-Indigenous counterparts. NT and ACT had the lowest retention to Year 12 rates. Burns et al. (2010:2)
- According to the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing, one-fifth (20%) of Indigenous females aged over 15 years had a post-school qualification compared with 37% of non-Indigenous females [3]. Burns et al. (2010:2)
- 60% of Aboriginal children are significantly behind non-Aboriginal children by the time they start Year One, Koori Mail (390:47)
- 21% of Indigenous people aged 15-64 had completed year 12 in 2008. Same figure in 2002: 18%; figure for non-Indigenous people in 2008: 54% 'Gains, but the gap is still wide, study finds', Koori Mail (463:9)

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice

Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

- The lack of post-school qualifications impacts particularly on the employment of Indigenous females: 16% of Indigenous females without any post-school qualifications were unemployed in 2006, compared with 5% of non-Indigenous females. [23] Burns et al. (2010:3)

Suggestions for closing the gap between policy and practice:

- Consider if a selection criteria is really required for this position. Are we simply following policy which in practice may not suit many applicants?
- If selection criteria are required, how can these be worded in clear and simple English?
- Can we note on the selection criteria that applicants are encouraged to seek assistance in completing this section of the application and provide contact details for assistance?
- Can the applicant address the selection criteria verbally, rather than in writing? Telephone interviews are reasonably common practice, perhaps a similar process could be adopted for selection criteria.
- If the applicant does not have access to the internet at home (and many do not), how else could an Application Pack be easily obtained?
- Will we work with an Indigenous specialist employment agency with the time and expertise to assist with addressing selection criteria?

Barrier 4: Interviews

One of the most highly regarded qualities within a workplace is the ability to work effectively as part of a team. Many of us have used the phrase “there is no ‘I’ in team”, yet it seems that in many workplaces there is still a strong expectation of an ‘I’ perspective to be evident in response to the selection criteria and during interviews.

As already discussed, many Indigenous women live in a collaborative community and one with a collectivist perspective. Successes are often group or community successes with no one woman wanting to put herself above the others when speaking of accomplishments.

During the pre-recruitment training, we discussed the common expectation by mainstream employers for candidates to use eye contact and ‘I’ language. It may be culturally disrespectful for some Indigenous men and women to make eye contact, so we advised the members of our training group to focus on the bridge of an interviewer’s nose rather looking directly into the interviewer’s eyes. Overcoming the ‘shame’ associated with using ‘I’ language was to prove more difficult for some.

Other factors which often adversely affect Indigenous applicants’ performance in interviews are: lack of confidence and little to no prior experience in formal interview processes.

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

We discussed these factors and arranged for mock interviews with management staff from the National Australia Bank (NAB). This provided NAB staff with important interviewer-skills practice and our candidates with a formal interview experience with people they did not know. NAB staff provided written feedback to our candidates and few escaped the comment “speak more confidently about yourself and your achievements!”

We were notified by Centrelink that there were approximately eighty positions available and of its high priority to recruit Indigenous employees. Participants’ hopes were high, with many talking about the new bicycle they had promised their child, or the healthier diet of fresh fruit and vegetables that could be provided on a proper income. Each woman was excited about being better able to support her children and extended family. Candidates slowly began to speak to friends and family about the possibility of working at Centrelink. For the first time in weeks, heads were held high and people laughed, nurturing hope and possibility.

Eighteen applications had been submitted. Eleven applicants were women.

How many were successful in gaining an interview? All.

One applicant withdrew her application before interview without discussion with us. She had been on the waiting list for Government housing for many years and was very close to gaining approval. As a single mother her first responsibility, she told us later, was to make sure her children had somewhere safe to live. She worried that if she were successful in gaining employment; her salary might prohibit her from subsidised housing, condemning her to continued dependency on the insecure and expensive, private rental market. She would not take that risk.

The Centrelink interview room contained a panel of two plus a staff member to transcribe the interviewee’s responses directly onto computer. Undoubtedly, this procedure is efficient from the interviewer viewpoint. However, it *discouraged* best performance from our Indigenous interviewees.

Many of us find a formal, three person panel, interview process intimidating. Not surprisingly so did our nervous Indigenous candidates who reported feeling extremely uncomfortable. One said it was like a test. Another said that she ‘just froze.’ A third noted that “It was like being in a court room with that woman on the computer.”

Ironically, some Centrelink sections do not use panel interviews in the recruitment process.

Informal interviews or group discussion and problem solving activities would appear to be a much more effective way to conduct interviews with Indigenous candidates. Indeed, an employer who regularly works with Ironbark to recruit employees holds mutually satisfactory interviews sitting with jobseekers under the shade of a tree and drinking tea!

How many of our Indigenous applicants were successful in passing the interview stage?

One female and two males.

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

Fifteen people were devastated. There would be no extra money for school books, healthy food, better accommodation, health care, dental care and the myriad of other social, psychological and economic benefits which come from being employed.

The Centrelink Project Officer was also astounded. “How could applicants have got it so terribly wrong in the interview?”

“How could the interview process have let them down so badly?” I retorted.

Tragically, those who were not successful seemed to move from devastation to complacency unnervingly quickly. This was obviously just another example of being encouraged to dream of a brighter future only to be thrown back into the darkness of poverty, violence and the raft of other social conditions confronting Indigenous women each day.

Some facts about Indigenous people: policy and practice documents

- Many employers have moved away from formal panel interview techniques.
- Extensive literature and resources are easily available, proposing better models for interviews and culturally appropriate interview techniques. One example is the Northern Territory Government’s *Northern Territory Public Sector Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy 2010-2012* [24] which is one of many valuable guides for assisting employers to recruit more Indigenous employees.

Suggestions for closing the gap between policy and practice:

- Acknowledge that many Indigenous people live in homes far less comfortable than mainstream workplaces. For people with limited interview experience, the entire ‘formal’ interview process can be daunting, overwhelming, and confronting - particularly when held in the unfamiliar executive office environment
- Explore other processes which could be used for interviewing prospective employees and determining suitability for the position
- Invite an Indigenous woman onto your selection panel
- Consider implementing group interview or more in-formal interview practices rather than panels.

Creating alternative employment pathways

To his credit, the Centrelink Indigenous Unit Project Officer, negotiated for three of the unsuccessful candidates to commence a twelve week contract in another Centrelink position. The hope was that by working within the organisation they would gain more confidence and, in time, successfully apply for and win, permanent positions. Women who had attended the original pre-recruitment training were asked to accept these short-term contract positions. They would not be required to complete a medical examination at this stage; however a police clearance would be required.

Barrier 5: Police clearances

Our Centrelink applicants were encouraged to disclose any criminal history in their original application. They were advised that the majority of offences would not be a barrier to employment and by disclosing this information they were demonstrating their values of integrity and honesty. One of the women selected (based on her excellent skills and abilities) for a short-term contract position had disclosed previously a four month jail sentence, served in 2007, for assault. She commenced work and was happy, confident and excited about being a role model for her children and better able to support her family.

After three weeks of employment, and glowing reports from her manager, she was asked to stand down from the position due to her criminal history.

Staff within the recruitment team believed it important to follow policy directives from Canberra which prohibits employment of a person with a criminal record such as hers.

When a police criminal check is completed the *circumstances* of the crime are not described.

In this woman's case she had assaulted a drunken man who had 'interfered' with her teenage daughter.

One of our Indigenous male candidates - who had passed the interview test and medical test and had many previous years' professional employment and outstanding referee reports - also failed to pass the criminal history test. Clearly the mistakes of the past are not in the past when it comes to employment policy and practice. Punishment for a crime can continue well beyond the period of sentence.

Some facts about Indigenous people and the law

- 83% of the prison population in the NT is Indigenous. Aboriginal people constitute less than 30% of the total population of the NT. ABS figures show in the first half of 2008, there were 8,411 Indigenous people enrolled in tertiary education. At the same time there were 6,605 Indigenous people in prison ... nowhere else in the world would you see figures where the Indigenous population in jail almost matches the Indigenous population at University... The jailing rate of black males in South Africa at the end of the Apartheid era (1993) was 851 per 100,000 population. In Australia today we jail black males at a national rate of 4,364 per 100,000. That's over five times higher.... In the Northern Territory the rate is almost six times higher." Graham (2009)
- In the two-year period July 2004 to June 2006, for Indigenous females living in NSW, Vic, Qld, WA, SA and the NT, assault was responsible for 32% of Indigenous female admissions for injury [10]. The numbers of admissions for Indigenous females for assault were 35 times higher than non-Indigenous rates. Burns et al (2010:7)
- Over the period 2001-2005, Indigenous females died as a result of assault at rates between 6 and 23 times the equivalent age-specific rates for non-Indigenous females, accounting for 16% of all deaths due to external causes [8]. Burns et al (2010:7)
- In 2009, the overall rate of imprisonment for Indigenous females was 360 per 100,000 population compared with 18 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous females ... The proportion of the prison

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

population that was Indigenous varied greatly from over 80% in the NT to under 10% in Vic [6]. Burns et al (2010:18)

- Indigenous females represent one of the fastest growing sub-sections of the adult prison population, a fact of concern when considering Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system and the socio-cultural effects of female imprisonment on families and communities [21]. Burns et al (2010:18)
- The type of offences that Indigenous and non-Indigenous females are imprisoned for differs significantly. In 2009 Indigenous females were primarily imprisoned for 'Acts intended to cause injury' (31%) and 'Offences against justice procedures, government security and operations' (14%) while non-Indigenous females were imprisoned for 'Illicit drug offences' (22%) and 'Fraud, deception and related offences'(15%) [6]. Burns et al (2010:19)
- The number of Indigenous juveniles in detention in Australia increased by 65% between 2001 and 30 June 2007, while non-Indigenous juveniles in detention increased by only 1.3% in the same period. In 2007 Indigenous female juveniles were imprisoned at a rate of 24 times that of non-Indigenous female juveniles [23]. Burns et al (2010:19)
- Compared with non-Indigenous juvenile offenders, Indigenous juveniles are more likely to be younger when they commit their first offence and offend more regularly than their non-Indigenous counterparts. They are thus much more likely to have a history of detention and incarceration by the time they reach adulthood [23]. Burns et al (2010:19)
- The Northern Territory incarceration rate in 2005-06 was the fifth highest in the world, with 551 people per 100,000 Territorians in prison. Figures released in June 2009 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the March quarter show there are now 696 people in custody per 100,000 Territorians. The average incarceration rate for all of Australia is 166 people per 100,000 people....The March 2009 ABS data shows the Indigenous prison population in the Northern Territory has increased by 23 per cent in the last year - the largest jump of any state or territory....Aboriginal People are overrepresented in Australian jails. In 2006 (and still in 2008) 80% of the Northern Territory prison population was Indigenous. ANTaR (2009:1)

Suggestions for closing the gap between policy and practice

- Acknowledge that in the Northern Territory many Indigenous people *will have* a criminal history. Will you employ them anyway?
- What crime(s) constitute 'unsuitable for employment' in your organisation? Are you willing to consider the context and circumstance of the offence before making a policy ruling?
- Consider how long after someone has served their sentence must they be punished through lack of employment?
- In the NT, where there are more Indigenous people with a criminal record than a university degree, what would a responsible employer do to assist in closing the gap?
- Which policies relating to employment and criminal history checks could be modified to allow more Indigenous people access to employment – particularly in the NT?

Barrier 6: Medical Tests

Before any Centrelink permanent appointment is confirmed, applicants must pass a medical. The following statistics highlight that successfully *passing* a medical is far from automatic for Indigenous female candidates.

An Indigenous woman's employment may also be adversely affected by the family and community health and wellbeing responsibilities commonly resting on her. For instance, one strong female candidate could not accept a short-term contract position with Centrelink because she was required to take care of two young grandsons as their mother was unwell. Her disappointment impacted on her emotional and social wellbeing. She continues to be despondent and suffers depression and stress-related illness. She has returned to her remote community.

Some facts about Indigenous people's health

- Death rates were higher in 2006-2008 for Indigenous females than for non-Indigenous females across all age groups... Rates and rate ratios were higher for Indigenous females living in WA, SA and the NT than for those living in NSW and Qld. Burns et al (2010:4)
- Cardiovascular disease was the leading cause of death for Indigenous females living in Qld, WA, SA and the NT in 2001-2005, with almost three times the number of deaths expected from the rate for non-Indigenous females (SMR: 2.7). The next most common causes of death for Indigenous females were neoplasms (mainly cancers) (SMR: 1.6), then external causes (SMR: 3.5), diabetes (SMR: 14.5), and respiratory diseases (SMR: 3.6). Burns et al (2010:7)
- Analysis of the 2004-2005 NATSIHS shows that more than 32% of Indigenous females reported having experienced a high or very high level of psychological distress in the previous 12 months, a level more than twice that of non-Indigenous females [11]". ... Specific stressors included "death of a family member or friend, serious illness of disability, not able to get a job, alcohol or drug related problem, overcrowding at home, family member sent to jail/in jail, and trouble with police [7]. Burns et al (2010:11)
- Importantly, deaths from intentional self-harm, were much higher for Indigenous females than for non-Indigenous females in 2003-2007 in NSW, Qld, WA, SA and the NT [7]. Suicide deaths rates for Indigenous females were between 6.7 and 17.1 per 100,000 compared with between 3.5 and 5.0 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous women particularly in the NT and SA. Burns et al (2010:12)
- The death rate from injury for Indigenous females living in Qld, WA, SA and the NT in 2002-2006 was 69 per 100,000, a rate 3.0 times that for non-Indigenous females [10]. Transport accidents and intentional self-harm were the leading causes of injury deaths for Indigenous females at rates 4.1 and 1.8 times higher than those for non-Indigenous females. Burns et al (2010:12)

Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

Suggestions for closing the gap between policy and practice

- There is a high probability that a prospective Indigenous employee's level of health will be greatly lesser than that of a prospective non-Indigenous employee.
Are you willing to employ her anyway?
- Are there recruitment policies in your organisation relating to health checks which could be modified to provide better access for Indigenous people?

SUMMARY

There were approximately eighty positions within Centrelink for which Indigenous people were strongly encouraged to apply.

Six men and thirteen female Indigenous clients from Ironbark Employment applied.

At June 30th 2010, some four months after the pilot pre-recruitment program, one Indigenous women and one Indigenous man were employed on a full-time, permanent basis. Two Indigenous women were employed on a twelve week contract basis. One of these women had completed the initial *Ahead of the Game* program.

How many of these people were born in the Northern Territory?

NONE.

If you are genuine about closing the gap between policy and practice; between rhetoric and results, particularly in the Northern Territory there is still much to be done – and can be done - to address the inequalities.

The invitation/challenge: What you can do:

Considering the internal and external barriers which candidates will need to overcome:

- Could your existing recruitment policies and practice be a barrier to Indigenous women being employed?
- Do your policies and practices encourage Indigenous employment?
- Are you willing to change some or all existing policies to better enable employment of Indigenous women?
- Which current employment processes could be modified?
- Is everyone in your organisation willing to support the changes in practice or is recruiting more Indigenous people only deemed a valuable objective by some Units or Departments?
- Are you willing to take action now to close the gap between policy and practice when employing Indigenous people?

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Closing the Gap between Policy & Practice
Employing Indigenous women in the Northern Territory

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