



Indigenous Employment

In the Australian Minerals Industry



THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA

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GOOD PRACTICE INDIGENOUS RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

Most of the participating sites in this study have recognised the limitations in using standard recruitment systems to recruit Indigenous employees. Their response has been to adapt existing practices and procedures to meet the needs of Indigenous employees. In this section we discuss the various ways in which operations have changed their practices, by adopting a 'pull' rather than a 'push' strategy.

Advertising the vacancy

The first stage of the recruitment process is normally to advertise the vacancy. Operations in this study that have been successful in attracting Indigenous applicants for job vacancies tend to adopt a more proactive approach to Indigenous recruitment. In particular, they recognise that different approaches may be needed for remote areas and rural or regional centres.

In remote areas, instead of assuming that suitable applicants will read newspaper advertisements or have access to company websites, company personnel visit local communities personally to spread the word that the local operation is looking for employees. Typically, staff members travel to the local community, hand out copies of the advertisement, post the notice on the local bulletin board and then talk to individuals or their families about the vacancy. This approach enables them to identify new recruits and also to maintain contact with people who may have applied unsuccessfully for jobs in the past, but are now ready to reapply, or who have previously worked for the company and may be interested in returning to the site.

While most operations use company staff members to visit communities to advertise job vacancies, one operation in this study uses the local Land Council to contact potential employees. In this case, the Land Council has a group of people working specifically on developing opportunities for Indigenous employment. Since the Land Council already has established relationships with the local Indigenous community, the company prefers to use their expertise to identify potential employees. This approach also enables the company to build its relationship with the Land Council.

In the case of small Indigenous communities in remote areas, word of mouth is the most popular method of advertising vacancies. Indigenous employees currently working at a site will put forward the names of people from their community that they know are looking for work. Other successful methods include the distribution of flyers and broadcasting on local Aboriginal radio stations to activate the local grapevine (Archer & Widdeson, 2002).

For rural and regional centres, job vacancies are usually advertised via mainstream methods; namely, newspaper and radio advertisements. Many regional centres have their own employment agencies with links into the local Indigenous communities. Typically, when operations are looking for new employees, they contact local service providers to ask them to spread the word about job vacancies through their Indigenous networks. Company employees in the HR and / or community teams who have good local knowledge and relationships with Indigenous people may also get in touch with potential recruits they know who may be interested in a position.

The application process

The next stage in the recruitment process is the application stage. The most important way an operation can increase the chances of Indigenous people making it through the application stage is to help them to improve the quality of their applications. This is best achieved by providing Indigenous applicants with assistance to complete the application forms and develop résumés.

In large remote regions the application stage is conducted at the same time as the advertisement stage or during a follow up visit. Company personnel provide potential recruits with assistance to complete the application forms and write résumés. Where an agent is used such as a Land Council, Land Council employees provide this assistance. In rural and regional centres, employment agencies provide any support required to complete applications and write résumés.

The selection process

The fourth stage of the recruitment process, the selection stage, is the one that differs most from standard recruitment practice. While the same screening checks are conducted, the way that the information is provided to Indigenous applicants is somewhat different. The actual process for all applicants involves:

- short listing the applicants
- psychometric testing
- drug and alcohol testing
- selection centre workshops
- selecting the right person
- making the offer of appointment.

Short listing the applicants

In some of the large remote regions a major part of this process is completed during the community visits described previously. Applicants who apply during community visits generally require some further scrutiny, so their applications and résumés are assessed and reference checks conducted in the usual manner by the employer. A common practice is to informally access local knowledge about applicants as a more useful way of gaining an accurate impression of the applicant's abilities than the standard telephone interview. This process of assessing application forms and résumés, conducting reference checks and conducting informal checks by talking to local people about the capabilities of the applicant is most generally adopted in rural and regional centres.

Psychometric testing

In conjunction with the interview process, sites routinely conduct a series of screening tests; psychometric tests, a medical check, alcohol and drug testing and, in some cases, a security check. These present a major hurdle for some Indigenous people and are one of the chief reasons for failing to make it through the selection process.

The issue of psychometric testing is a problematic one. Psychometric testing falls into three main types: ability testing, aptitude testing and personality questionnaires. Ability tests measure a person's potential, for instance to learn the skills needed for a new job or to cope with the demands of a training course. Aptitude tests are tests of attainment, designed to assess specifically what people have learned. Aptitude tests are usually job related; for example, they may test driving ability or typing skills. Personality tests are usually carried out to assess a person's ability to fit in with a given work environment.

Most minerals operations use some form of psychometric testing when recruiting. However, most of the operations in this study did not use them for Indigenous applicants because they found that many Indigenous applicants perform poorly in these tests. The problem with psychometric testing is that results are easily misinterpreted and subject to cultural bias. First, experienced professionals are needed to administer the tests and interpret the results. Second, psychometric questionnaires cannot be used in isolation – their output must be interpreted in the light of a number of factors such as the individual's past experience, skills and future goals. Third, and most importantly, factors other than the characteristic or ability being measured can influence the results; for example, cultural background, type of education or familiarity with testing procedures.

The issue of cultural bias is the reason why most of the sites in this study do not generally use psychometric testing for Indigenous employees. However, psychometric testing can be a useful tool in assessing the capabilities of potential employees and there is at least one test that would appear to be appropriate for

testing Indigenous applicants. This test, the Queensland Test, is the subject of our next case study because it is currently being trialled by an Australian mining operation. The advantages of establishing a testing regime like the Queensland Test, especially for companies that operate globally, is that it readily fits in with standard recruiting practices and provides them with a tool that can be used successfully at any operational location.

THE QUEENSLAND TEST

The Queensland Test, developed by two Australian psychologists (McElwain and Kearney 1970), was designed to address the issues of cultural specificity that led to bias in traditional psychometric test results. Based on extensive research conducted in Papua New Guinea, the tool was developed to enable cross-cultural testing programs.

Key features of the test

- the subtests are based on known test types with established validity
- speed of response is of little relevance to the test items
- tests are non-verbal, based on demonstration, unspoken instruction and mime
- scoring is based on three contact norms relevant to the degree of contact with technologically developed societies and education
- the unique feature of this test is that it can be administered by a trained psychologist or psychological test administrators from one cultural background to test participants from entirely different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, where the two have no common language or cultural similarity
- the test should only be administered by psychologists or trained psychological test administrators trained in the test.

Effectiveness

- the test is effective in identifying those applicants who have little difficulty with training programs and those who are unlikely to be successful in a training situation
- the test has been used successfully with Indigenous populations in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, the Philippines and India.

Applications

Freeport mine, West Papua, Indonesia

- Freeport use the test because it potentially draw its workforce from more than 250 different language groups and many applicants have not acquired literacy in Bahasa Indonesian, their traditional language, or any other language.

RTA Weipa, North Queensland

- RTCA has introduced the Q-test into its Indigenous assessment process to assist in the recruitment and selection of local indigenous people.

Energy Resources Australia (ERA) NT, Australia

- ERA is considering the potential applications of the test to meet its Indigenous assessment and selection needs.

Source: Professor G Kearney, c/- ValueEdge Management Consultants,
<http://www.valueedge.com.au/index.php>