

Cultural Load

What is cultural load?

"Cultural load is the often invisible additional load borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at work, where they are the only Indigenous person, or one of a small group, and are expected to become representatives of the Indigenous experience."[i]

"This includes extra Indigenous-related work demands that non-Indigenous colleagues do not have, expectations to educate non-Indigenous colleagues about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and racism, and expectations to talk on behalf of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people."[ii]

The Gari Yala: Speak the Truth Report, by The Jumbunna Institute and Diversity Council Australia, found that nearly 40% of Indigenous employees said they had experienced cultural load at work.[iii] The report is the result of a survey completed by 1033 First Nations employees across Australia.

What does cultural load look like in practise?

- Being expected to be the Indigenous voice of your organisation
- Being expected to be the voice for your cultural group[iv]
- Indigenous-related work demands, like being expected to do extra work during NAIDOC Week and National Reconciliation Week
- Being expected to answer all employee questions about your culture and fill in knowledge gaps.[v]
- Assisting in creating programs and policies without remuneration.
- Being asked to educate the workforce on Indigenous history or systemic racism.

The Gari Yala Report found that Indigenous employees who experience cultural load are:[vi]

- Twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their job than those who don't
- Two times less likely to recommend their workplace to other Indigenous people
- Twice as likely to intend to leave their employer in the next year

Cultural load is found to have adverse impacts on the employee experience which reflects badly on the employer.



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A part of minimising cultural load is understanding the histories of First Nations peoples, including their trauma. For many First Nations peoples their connection to culture is interwoven with experiences of trauma. The expectation to be a cultural representative without recognition creates an inequitable work and mental load.

It is the employer's responsibility to be aware of the risk of cultural loading on Indigenous staff, and to put steps in place to mitigate that risk. Below are some simple actions organisations can adopt to minimise and prevent cultural loading. Each of these actions can be embedded into a RAP, to become standard practice for the organisation.

Steps organisations can take to minimise cultural load

1) Build the cultural competency of staff

Given the histories of intergenerational trauma, Indigenous peoples may not want to share their experiences, and this choice needs to be respected. [vii]

Instead of putting additional pressure on Indigenous employees, contract Indigenous-led organisations that operate to build cultural competency around Indigenous histories and cultures. There are many providers around Australia that can be found through Supply Nation. Cultural competency training should be a part of every organisation's professional development plan.

2) Cultural load should be recognised and remunerated

It is important to listen to the voices of First Nations staff in your workplace. Fear of cultural load should not stop you from seeking their voices, but there must be recognition that this can create an additional strain on staff.

To compensate for any additional strain, recognise and reward cultural load in job descriptions. *"This provides Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees with the opportunity to spend time on and be fairly compensated for this important aspect of their work."*[viii] It also gives First Nations employees the opportunity to decline the extra work responsibilities if they do not have the capacity to take them on.

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3) Self-identification needs to be a choice

Allow First Nations staff to make the choice to self-identify. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are understood and respected within an organisation, First Nations staff are far more likely to express their identity.

For some First Nations people, self-identifying within a workplace can have several adverse effects, these include:

- Identity strain
- Experiences of racism and prejudice
- Feeling the need to prove themselves
- The potential they will need to compromise their cultural identity in an environment dominated by white culture.[ix]

4) Put additional frameworks in place to support Indigenous employees

For example:

- Compensate Indigenous staff financially for cultural load
- Provide mental health support and counselling
- Provide the support and protocols required for employees to address feelings of strain and racism freely and easily.

Additional Resources on Cultural Loading



Gayatri Nair, “How employers can address cultural load in the workplace”, HRM, 7 July, 2021.

Diversity Council Australia, Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians at work.

“Gari Yala, which means ‘speak the truth’ in the Wiradjuri language, is based on a survey 1,033 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers across Australia and reveals some shocking realities about experiences of racism, the lack of cultural safety and identity strain experienced by Indigenous people across Australian workplaces.” Every workplace would benefit from reading this and being guided by their 10 recommendations to centre Indigenous voices in the workplace. **“Through listening to Indigenous people, employers can begin to tailor their employment programs to address what is needed.”**

Diversity Council Australia, “10 truths to centre Indigenous Australians’ voices to create workplace inclusion”.

Podcast: Social Work from an Aboriginal Perspective - Exploring Cultural Load - Ep. 48, hosts Lis Murphy & Mim Fox, The Social Work Stories Podcast.

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[i] Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, Gari Yala: **Speak the Truth, Synopsis Report, 17 Nov, 2020,**

https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_synopsisreport_web_0.pdf, 13

[ii] Diversity Council Australia, “10 truths to centre Indigenous Australians’ voices to create workplace inclusion”, July, 2021, **<https://www.dca.org.au/topics/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/leading-practice-principles>**

[iii] Gari Yala, 13.

[iv] Gayatari Nair, “How employers can address cultural load in the workplace”, HRM, 7 July, 2021, **<https://www.hrmonline.com.au/diversity-and-inclusion/addressing-cultural-load/>**

[v] Nair, “How employers can address cultural load in the workplace”.

[vi] Gari Yala, 13.

[vii] Nair, “How employers can address cultural load in the workplace”, n.p.

[viii] Diversity Council Australia, “10 truths to centre Indigenous Australians’ voices to create workplace inclusion”, July 2021, **<https://www.dca.org.au/topics/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/leading-practice-principles>**

[ix] Gari Yala, 12.