

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 share, such as expectations to educate non-Indigenous staff about First Nations cultures and racism, and speak on behalf of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[ii]

The Gari Yala 2: Speak the Truth Report found that: [iii]

- 64% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees experience high levels of cultural load
- Those who experience high cultural load are twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs and twice as likely to intend to leave their employer.
- 75% of Indigenous employees reported that their organisation does not formally recognise/ remunerate cultural load, or they were unaware of any existing policy.



Examples of Cultural Load

Being expected to be the Indigenous voice of your organisation.

Being expected to be the voice for your cultural group.

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.

Assisting in creating Indigenous programs and policies without remuneration.

Being asked to educate the workforce on Indigenous history or systemic racism.

[i] 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-principle>.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Centre for Indigenous People & Work (Young, N., Gilbert, J., Evans, O. and O’Leary, J.) Gari Yala 2 (Speak the Truth): Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians in 2025-2026, Sydney, CIPW.

Cultural Load

Membership Toolkit

The Role of Organisations

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, which can be embedded into a RAP.

Steps to Minimise Cultural Load

1. Build the Cultural Competency of Staff

- Indigenous employees should not be the default source of cultural education in the workplace. Given histories of intergenerational trauma, First Nations peoples may not want to share their experiences, and this must be respected.
- Instead, contract Indigenous-led organisations to deliver cultural competency training around Indigenous histories and cultures. Providers can be found through Supply Nation.
- Cultural competency training should be a part of every organisation's professional development plan.

2. Recognise and Remunerate Cultural Load

- Seek and listen to the voices of First Nations staff in your workplace. But acknowledge that this can create an additional strain.
- Where cultural load exists, it should be named in job descriptions and fairly compensated.
- This gives First Nations employees the opportunity to be recognised for this work- and the right to decline if they do not have the capacity to take them on.

3. Self-Identification as a Choice

- Allow First Nations staff to make the choice to self-identify. When cultures are genuinely 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 contribute to identity strain, experiences of racism, the need to prove oneself, or compromise their cultural identity in a non-Indigenous dominated workplace.

4. Additional Frameworks to Support Indigenous Employees

- Provide financial compensation for cultural load.
- Offer mental health support and provide access to counselling.
- Establish clear and accessible protocols for employees to raise experiences of racism and identity strain safely.