

# A call to Indigenise occupational wellbeing

Indigenous business is quietly becoming big business in Australia. Indigenous-owned and operated businesses are proliferating and prospering. Rising by 72% since 2006, there are now almost 14 000 Indigenous businesses, and these businesses employ 116 795 people, pay \$4.2 billion in annual wages and generate \$16 billion annually towards the Australian economy.<sup>1</sup> The rise of the Indigenous business sector holds much promise and hope, primarily as Indigenous businesses are more likely to employ Indigenous people.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, governments at all levels have introduced long term initiatives to support the continued growth of the sector, such as the Department of Industry, Science and Resources Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Business Support Roadmap<sup>3</sup> (2020) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program (2024).<sup>4</sup> Despite these positive signs and supports, Indigenous businesses remain plagued by persistent deficit perspectives and historical mistrust<sup>5</sup> that are amplified in the media<sup>6</sup> along with a notable absence of wellbeing models to support the resilience of Indigenous entrepreneurs and Indigenous employees to not only withstand these negative perspectives but sustain their Indigenous enterprises and enable them to reach their full potential.<sup>2</sup>

Self-employment and entrepreneurship are ways for Indigenous people to improve their wellbeing and that of their Indigenous staff, creating flow-on effects for community health and wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> Often faced with racism and marginalisation, Indigenous businesses and the Indigenous people employed by them typically operate in adverse environments.<sup>7</sup> Extending this line of thought to include Indigenous workers in predominantly non-Indigenous professions and organisations, there is a growing body of evidence about obstacles, assumptions and tensions experienced by Indigenous people in the workplace. For example, a study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in the Australian public service reported hostile, derogative and insulting experiences, such as Indigenous people and “Indigenous issues” being viewed through a deficit lens, not having concerns legitimised or valued in the workplace, being overlooked for career progression although adequately trained, hypersurveillant supervisory arrangements and working in environments where racism is experienced, yet there is a denial that racism exists.<sup>8</sup> It is increasingly apparent that now, more than ever, there is a need for nuanced occupational health and wellbeing frameworks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Connection to family, community and culture are not only strong predictors of Indigenous health and wellbeing, but they are now emerging as strong predictors of Indigenous business success and sustainability for enterprises in remote Australia, with the potential to counteract deficit discourses.<sup>9</sup> Aligning with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing model,<sup>10</sup> connection to

family maintains secure attachment, caring, sharing, obligation and reciprocity and is central to the functioning of Indigenous societies. Connection to community, being the collective spaces where identity is affirmed, cultural identity strengthened, and social cultural norms are maintained between participating family and kinship networks, fosters belonging and pride. Connection to culture maintains, reaffirms and restores a secure sense of cultural identity and values. With these early indications of an alignment between Indigenous business success factors and Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing, there is an opportunity to Indigenise relevant frameworks such as that of occupational wellbeing.

Occupational wellbeing refers to the overall quality of an individual’s work environment encompassing the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social wellbeing of workers with purposeful and satisfying work, reduced stress, safe conditions, fair wages and positive, respectful social interactions.<sup>11,12</sup> Occupational wellbeing and related terms, such as corporate wellbeing or workplace wellness, have been conceptualised and largely understood through a Western lens focusing on individuals’ personal productivity and fulfilment in non-Indigenous or otherwise racialised workplace environments from the position of non-Indigenous and otherwise non-racialised peoples. There is an emerging strand of occupational wellbeing work examining race and ethnicity with a small number of studies focusing on Indigenous peoples both in Australia and abroad.<sup>13,14</sup> This is encouraging and provides an initial platform to leverage future research and workplace practices.

Occupational wellbeing includes a range of organisational activities and programs, such as flexible work, career development opportunities, positive workplace culture, job satisfaction initiatives and subsidised fitness programs to support health and wellbeing in the workplace and improve overall quality of life.<sup>15</sup> The whitewashing of work, business, wellbeing and wellness is well documented by scholars and has drawn the attention of practitioners and the public.<sup>16,17,18</sup> Such whitewashing privileges Western understandings of success, careers, labour and work practices; under-represents diverse voices; and emphasises individual productivity with market-driven wellbeing models that undervalue culture and that are insensitive to systemic issues that affect marginalised groups.<sup>19</sup> The argument and momentum for Indigenising occupational wellbeing is now reaching a critical point and this article serves an important purpose as a call to action for the widespread operationalisation of this agenda in earnest. The expansion of occupational wellbeing to incorporate cultural aspects is emerging in Australia and can be seen in, for example, the recognition of cultural celebrations such as NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) Week or the rise in discourse relating

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## How to move forward

### Key takeaway messages:

- Indigenous businesses and employment are flourishing in Australia, yet continue to operate in largely adverse environments with occupational wellbeing frameworks overlooking Indigenous worldviews.
- We need to Indigenise occupational wellbeing frameworks to include cultural, relational and regenerative dimensions of Indigenous worldviews such as connection to family, culture and community that support survivance and thrivance.
- Indigenised occupational wellbeing will improve Indigenous health outcomes by strengthening social inclusion and economic stability, providing opportunities for self-determined, purposeful and satisfying work in culturally nourishing workplaces where positive Indigenous identities are proudly normalised.

### Recommended outcome to strive for:

- A holistic, self-determined, strengths-based framework for Indigenous occupational wellbeing that centres Indigenous definitions of success and wellbeing at work.

### Recommended research question to address:

- How can occupational wellbeing better support Indigenous survivance and thrivance in Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations?

### Recommended specific workplace actions:

- formal recognition and valuing of Indigenous cultural load;
- co-designed and nuanced career pathway and development plans;
- co-designed workplace metrics that recognise collective decision making and reward collective performance, as well as the generation of benefits for community, culture and Country;
- enabling on-Country and in-community work opportunities;
- advocating for cultural appreciation by all staff;
- formalising and upholding cultural safety protocols; and
- regular occupational wellbeing check-ins with accountable follow-up activity.

positive Indigenous identities proudly normalised.<sup>26</sup> Key takeaway messages and recommendations of how to progress this agenda are detailed in the **Box**.

In summary, it is both necessary and timely to Indigenise occupational wellbeing to support the flourishing Indigenous business sector and growing Indigenous workforce. Framed by the sister notions of Indigenous survivance and thrivance, this call to action suggests, as a first step, embracing the cultural, relational and regenerative dimensions that underpin Indigenous peoples' worldview to widen and evolve occupational wellbeing so that it is culturally enriching and affirming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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to anti-racism.<sup>20,21</sup> However, the cultural nuances of occupational wellbeing are yet to be fully realised.

The following is offered as initial guidance for the next steps in Indigenising occupational wellbeing. Current understandings of occupational wellbeing overlook cultural, collectivist, relational and regenerative dimensions that underpin Indigenous peoples' worldview.<sup>22,23</sup> As previously noted, wellbeing for Indigenous Australians, their work and businesses is linked to connection to family, community and culture, with a focus on the generation of collective benefits.<sup>9</sup> Connections not only provide a sense of belonging but hold space for being self as part of human and non-human kinship structures, the motivation for doing activities and supporting the becoming of people throughout their life transitions, including the cultivation of self-determination.<sup>24</sup>

Current understandings of occupational wellbeing ignore the critical, sister notions of Indigenous survivance and thrivance. Survivance refers to an active presence of Indigenous peoples who revitalise, regenerate and refashion their/our culture in the postmodern age.<sup>25</sup> Survivance encompasses resistance, endurance and a rejection of cultural dominance and narratives of nihilism such as that of tragedy, despair, absence and victimhood.<sup>25</sup> The sister notion of thrivance moves beyond withstanding the impacts of colonisation, emphasising the flourishing and thriving of Indigenous peoples and practices in vibrant, culturally nourishing communities with Indigenous excellence celebrated and

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