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Where companies go wrong with Indigenous recruitment

Employers need to stop cherry picking Indigenous students from universities if they want to meet their Indigenous recruitment targets.

Sally Patten

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Amee Henningsen, a Wakka Wakka woman based in [Shepparton](#) in northern Victoria, didn't want to finish school even though she knew she wanted a career in business.

But thanks to her mother's insistence, Henningsen, 23, completed her VCE, became the first person in her family to undertake tertiary study and is now a legal assistant specialising in conveyancing at local law firm Dawes and Vary Riordan Lawyers.

Growing up, Henningsen had part-time jobs in banking and hospitality, including in the local pub where she came across partners of Dawes. While still in high school, she had a part-time job at Westpac. Those experiences opened her eyes to the opportunities in the world of work.

"I love conveyancing," Henningsen says. "This is something I never thought I could do and be good at."

She is luckier than most young Indigenous adults, many of whom have no idea of the kinds of roles on offer in the business world.

Anthony Cavanagh, CEO of Indigenous employment organisation Ganbina and a Taungurung man, says it is a weak spot for most Australian companies, even those that have [Reconciliation Action Plans](#) (RAP) and strive to employ First Nations peoples.



Amee Henningsen is the first person in her family to undertake tertiary education.

Most employers, says Cavanagh, hire First Nations people straight out of university, which does nothing to boost the pipeline of Indigenous kids who might later seek a career in business. It is no wonder, suggests Cavanagh, that many companies are missing their RAP targets when it comes to Indigenous staff numbers. Companies, he says, need to start building relationships with Indigenous students, as well as their elders, far earlier than at the point when they graduate with tertiary qualifications.

“The reason they’re not reaching these targets, or struggle to reach the targets, is because there’s no relationship with the Aboriginal community,” Cavanagh says.

“Employers understand a pathway [to hiring Indigenous people]. It is the shortest pathway and essentially that means employing Aboriginal kids who are at university. They are essentially cherry-picking them off at the end of the line.”

He argues that companies should start building relationships with Indigenous children at a young age and help inspire them to become the “next miner, doctor, banker, insurance clerk or IT person or media comms” person.

“Kids are building their aspirations for their careers a long time before they’ve even started years 11 and 12 at school,” he says.

“The Aboriginal kids coming through are not even considering working [in business] because there’s no relationship, and they probably wouldn’t even know [the companies and jobs] exist.

“[Building a relationship with the kids early] would help them stay at school because they could see something at the end of the rainbow. It might be three years away. It might be 10 or five years away, but they’ve got some hope.”

Throwing money at communities won’t cut it, Cavanagh says.

The other big problem with hiring Indigenous university graduates without having formed a relationship with their community is that employers are unlikely to be able to provide a supportive workplace and so are less likely to retain the graduates.

Culturally safe

Many young Indigenous adults, says Cavanagh, don't feel culturally safe, supported or well understood in the workplace.

The Ganbina boss suggests companies host events five or six times a year, including at celebratory times such as NAIDOC week and National Reconciliation Week in May.

Events could include breakfasts or other gatherings with the whole community, held either in the community or in CBD office towers, and company and industry tours. It is particularly important to include community elders in the discussions and activities because of their level of influence over younger generations.

“The elders are the ones within community that carry the most respect, and they're the ones who are really driving the change to get better opportunities for the kids and to get them to stay in school longer,” Cavanagh says. “They are the voices within community that are driving the higher aspirations within Aboriginal kids.”

He says placing Indigenous artefacts around the office will help First Nations employees to feel comfortable.

Henningsen, the eldest of five children, says she feels culturally safe at Dawes. The firm, she says, is multicultural, and she has fellow employees who understand what it feels like to come from a non-white Australian background.

“I am really dedicated to this firm,” she says.

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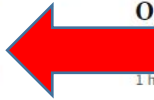


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