



JOB FAIR CONNECTING BUSINESSES TO SCHOOL LEAVERS. SOURCE: SUPPLIED

THE RIGHT STUFF

ADD

## Authentic relationships can last decades: How to effectively engage with Indigenous communities

**AUTHORS**

ANTHONY CAVANAGH

**NETWORKING**

ARTICLE



4 MINUTE READ



This week is Reconciliation Week and as an Aboriginal man, who is also the chief executive of a [charity](#) that helps Aboriginal youth transition from education to employment, I meet a lot of business owners who want to engage with Indigenous communities.

The problem is — many of them don't know where to start and feel overwhelmed or intimidated by reaching out to community. However, with a foundation based on genuine interest, mutual respect and meaningful relationships, Australian businesses have a great opportunity to bridge the gap between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australia.

### Build relationships that are long-term and meaningful, over quick and transactional

Once you have an authentic relationship with an Aboriginal community, this relationship can last for decades. However creating these relationships requires a long-term approach, over one-off, transactional-style interactions.

You can't simply put on an event for NAIDOC week and expect the Indigenous community to show up if they don't know who you are. Likewise, celebrating Aboriginal culture without the input and knowledge of the local mob may result in unintentionally stepping your foot in it and offending an Aboriginal person who *does* show up.

For example, cheaper tourist shops flogging 'Australiana' merchandise tend to sell fake Aboriginal art created in China. These cheap imitations are considered offensive to the local community, who see these 'artefacts' as an insult to the artistry of Aboriginal people. But if you haven't engaged with community beforehand, you might not know this and accidentally cause offence, damaging the relationship before it's had a chance to begin.

So rather than starting big and deciding you'll do events for Reconciliation Week, start small by reaching out to the local Aboriginal Land Council in your area. Find out who the local Elders are and who is considered to have Cultural Authority in the community. Arrange to meet face-to-face, which builds a much more authentic relationship than phone or email. Invite them to a breakfast or a business lunch and ask them what the issues are in their community.

Similar to anyone else you work with in the business space, it's about respect and building meaningful connections.

### Understand the issues within your local Aboriginal community

There are hundreds of Aboriginal mobs and every community is different. Take the time to understand what the issues are relating to employment and business for the traditional land owners your business operates in. Many communities have issues with youth unemployment and need career pathways for their young people. Find out how your business can help a local community issue.

It's OK to start from not knowing anything. Businesses can be timid when engaging with Aboriginal culture because they're afraid of getting things wrong. But if you are genuinely interested and want to take the time to learn the local culture and understand the community, Aboriginal organisations will welcome you.

### Best of Everything from Everywhere

Why Amazon bought MGM, TikTok

Why Amazon bought MGM, TikTok replacing LinkedIn, and how to raise \$11m in your first company

Apple's China privacy woes, holding your equity, and a sticking point in the UK-Australia free trade deal

Musk refuses Bitcoin, expert calls for AI distrust, and how to make hybrid work models succeed



## Aboriginal Australia is not homogenous — prepare to meet Aboriginal people with red hair and freckles

Aboriginal culture is not a mono-culture, it consists of hundreds of cultures with unique languages, cultural customs and lore. In Australia, there are about 250 Aboriginal Countries, i.e. tribal groups. You can think of them as independent countries or states and recognising the individuality of these groups is very important.

If you're a national business or are expanding into another state with a franchise, you can't apply the same relationship and engagement rules from one mob to another. The basis may be similar, but there are cultural differences that must be respected.

Just as Aboriginal Countries are different and they're not all the same, not all Aboriginal people *look* the same. When you engage with your local Aboriginal Elder, don't be surprised if the person opening the door has red hair and freckles.

In Western culture, there is often a perception that nationality and ethnicity can die out or be diluted over time, you're 'half' Greek, or 'one quarter French' — there is no such concept in Indigenous Australia.

I inherited my fair complexion from my father's Irish heritage, but my mother's Aboriginality makes me white on the outside but very much black on the inside. I am *both* Irish and Aboriginal, but never half of either — you can't make me 10%

or 90% of who I am. Most Aboriginal people today walk more than one world.

As a people we are defined by three things — our Aboriginal heritage, our connection and practice of Aboriginal culture and acceptance within our communities, *not* by the colour of our skin.

That's why it's important to never comment on whether someone 'looks Aboriginal' even if it's well-intentioned, this can be very hurtful to Aboriginal people who don't like their identity being questioned. Regardless of what you think an Aboriginal person looks like, if they are accepted by the Aboriginal community then they *are* Aboriginal and must be treated as such.



CAREERS NIGHT, RUN BY GANBINA. SOURCE: SUPPLIED

## Remember Aboriginal people are your potential customers and suppliers

I'm an Aboriginal taxpayer — we are your customers, and can be your business customers and suppliers. As a culture we've been in the business of exchanging and trading for at least 60,000 years. There's a lot of knowledge and an opportunity to learn and share between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal businesses to create a positive story for Australia.

### Want to learn more about your local community first?



[AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia](#)



[Austlang Indigenous Australian languages database](#)



[How to create a Reconciliation Action Plan](#)



---

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Anthony Cavanagh

Anthony Cavanagh is an Aboriginal man who passionately believes that education is the key to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. He is the CEO of registered charity Ganbina, which runs the successful Aboriginal school-to-work transition program Jobs4U2.

---