



Supply Nation's 'story of change'

Developing a framework to measure the holistic impacts of
investing in Indigenous business

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Supply Nation

Supply Nation is the Australian leader in supplier diversity, and since 2009 has worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses along with procurement teams from government and corporate Australia to help shape today's rapidly evolving Indigenous business sector. Supply Nation's world-leading 5-step verification process provides peace of mind by ensuring that all businesses listed on Australia's largest national directory of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, Indigenous Business Direct, are not only Indigenous owned but are also regularly audited for changes in company structure and ownership. Supply Nation partners with its members from the government, corporate and not-for-profit sectors to include supplier diversity in procurement policies, and to develop and support supplier diversity practices, based on world's best practice that can enable the greater participation of the Indigenous business sector.

More recently, Supply Nation also established an internal research capacity to deliver evidence-based programs – providing a stronger platform to advocate for the needs and benefits of Indigenous business and Indigenous procurement. As custodian of Australia's largest and most respected database of Indigenous businesses, a focus of our research is understanding the contours, trends, and contributions the Indigenous business sector makes to the broader national economy, as well as its contribution to Indigenous well-being and self-determination.

Our research is the product of collaboration with a range of university centres, government, and independent research agencies on projects of relevance to Indigenous Australians and Indigenous business, and primarily disseminated through:

- Supply Nation Research Reports: Substantial and original pieces of research on topics of relevance to Supply Nation's mission and Indigenous business.
- Supply Nation Research and Policy Briefs: Concise papers that summarise key areas of research or policy of relevance to the Indigenous Business sector and key stakeholders.

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Foreword

This Supply Nation research report focuses on the important and complicated issue of understanding and articulating the social impact of Indigenous businesses. Supply Nation's previous **Sleeping Giant** report, which presented the Social Return on Investment (SROI) from investing in Supply Nation suppliers, has been a widely cited source on demonstrating the social impact of Indigenous business. The report calculated that every dollar of revenue for Indigenous businesses returned, on average, \$4.41 worth of economic and social value.

While SROI is useful, there are a range of other cultural and community benefits that arise from investing in Indigenous businesses that are not always well captured by existing SROI models. As a recent report from NSW Treasury showed, a strong and vibrant Indigenous business sector is necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to better participate and engage with the economy.¹ Indigenous businesses provide Indigenous people with jobs, financial security, and sustainable local economies. Indigenous businesses make significant contributions to their local communities, act as role models, and engender pride. Crucially, a strong Indigenous business sector improves the overall wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through providing employment opportunities that connect them to culture, Country, and community.

In 2022, Supply Nation commissioned The Interplay Project to develop a more culturally meaningful model to measure and monitor the broader holistic benefits of investing in Indigenous businesses than what is possible with standard analyses of Social Return on Investment (SROI).² Demonstrating the social impact of Indigenous businesses is not only of benefit to those businesses but provides a case for the importance of investing in such businesses. Demonstrating the impact, however, is challenging, especially as a unique feature of Indigenous businesses is their preparedness to go above and beyond to support their employees achieve better outcomes. Providing this support requires time, patience, risk, training, and most of all flexibility.

As the NSW Treasury report also highlighted, which is a key theme of this report, an important feature of Indigenous businesses is their 'connection to deeper cultural values. Employment, business growth and economic prosperity matter much more to First Nations people when the economic activity is connected to Country, culture and community.'³ Indeed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often prepared to forego higher pay to have jobs that allow them to have a connection to culture and Country. In addition, a sustainable Indigenous business sector can 'facilitate a self-determined opportunity to 'walk in two worlds' – both culturally connected and economically prosperous'.⁴

This report highlights the importance of themes such as: Indigenous values and worldviews; working for the community; culture through work; and empowerment through work, together with their respective indicators that comprise the Supply Nation impact framework. I look forward to the continued development of this framework that will assist in measuring the impacts Indigenous businesses have on critical aspects of Australian society.

Michelle Deshong

CEO

Supply Nation

¹ NSW Treasury, *The NSW First Nations Business Sector - A return to prosperity*, October 2022.

² Burton, R and Tomkinson, E. 2015. *The Sleeping Giant. A Social Return on Investment Report on Supply Nation Certified Suppliers*. Supply Nation, Sydney, Australia

³ NSW Treasury, *op.cit.*, p.33

⁴ *Ibid*, p.33.

Executive Summary

Measuring the holistic impacts of investing in Indigenous businesses is an essential part of establishing measurable impact pathways towards achieving Indigenous policy targets in areas including Indigenous procurement, economic development, workforce participation and health and wellbeing. It also offers a structure for business to meet social and environmental targets, offering value beyond the Indigenous business sector.

Supply Nation commissioned The Interplay Project (Interplay) to develop a culturally meaningful model to measure and monitor the broader holistic benefits of investing in Indigenous businesses than what is possible with standard analyses of Social Return on Investment (SROI). The aim of the current research is to develop a framework that can map, monitor, and measure these factors, to show the true value of investment in Indigenous businesses.

The overall project methodology involved a knowledge review, co-design interviews with a select number of Indigenous businesses registered and/or certified with Supply Nation, and the development of data collection tools. The domains and sub-themes that emerged from the knowledge review and co-design interviews were compared and combined to create Supply Nation's Impact Framework or 'story of change', Interplay's version of a traditional Theory of Change through an Indigenous lens. This 'story of change' framework can be used to identify and strengthen the key components and pathways to sustainable impact and provide insights into the personal, social, cultural, and environmental impacts of investing in Indigenous businesses. The 'story of change', developed in collaboration with Supply Nation and informed by the knowledge review and codesign interviews has a goal of 'sustainable Indigenous businesses' with inputs that are integrated through the 'ways to get there' and 'stepping stones'.

This report presents a summary of the key themes or 'ways to get there' and sub-themes - 'stepping stones'- and indicators that make up the Supply Nation Impact framework bringing together the insights from the knowledge review together with the participant's perceptions, experience, and discussion points from the co-design interviews. The key themes - 'ways to get there' - that emerged from the research in terms of Indigenous business and broader social impact were the importance of:

- Indigenous values and worldviews
- working for the community
- culture through work
- empowerment through work

Development of this framework will benefit Supply Nation and the Indigenous business community by measuring the impacts Indigenous businesses have in the themes and domains identified. This data can then be used to report on business successes as well as to provide targets and feedback for improvements.

Overall, the themes of flexibility and cultural safety emerged as most salient from the combined research, and these two themes interacted with all the other themes. Flexibility is reflected as a fundamental way of working for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that may represent both an underlying characteristic of Indigenous ways of being and doing, but also a necessary adaptive skill to accommodate the need to 'work in two worlds'. Indigenous values and worldviews are the cultural lenses through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in the world. This can sometimes clash with the values and worldview of the dominant western paradigm within which entities such as business and government are established and operate. This means that Indigenous business owners and workers must develop additional skills in navigating differing cultural values and worldviews to practice business in the contemporary western world. The research suggests that flexibility is an important strategy and skill required to succeed in this cross-cultural workspace.

The theme of cultural safety was also of high importance, including prioritising culture, the people, Traditional Owners, and living between both worlds. Creating a culturally safe workplace is something that is intrinsically

practiced by Indigenous business owners. However, many broader societal employment structures and workplaces are not culturally safe for Indigenous people - as business partners, workers, or clients. Creating culturally safe workplaces can be implicit for Indigenous business owners but a mystery to non-Indigenous businesses. Defining and developing measures for culturally safe businesses is therefore beneficial not just for Indigenous businesses but for all businesses to understand and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

Interplay has developed a survey tool with indicators to help measure some of the themes and sub-themes in the Supply Nation impact framework. The next steps are likely to involve:

- conducting a more extensive pilot of the survey
- establishing an annual process to conduct the survey, data analysis and stories, review and presenting the findings
- improving the framework annually via collaboration and data feedback

The Supply Nation impact framework and survey will enable the impact of Indigenous businesses to be monitored over time, assist in the evaluation of policy, programs, and services, identify and drive priorities and track impacts, and contribute to a cultural standards framework for the Indigenous business sector and beyond.

Introduction

Measuring the holistic impacts of investing in Indigenous businesses is an essential part of establishing measurable impact pathways towards achieving Indigenous policy targets in areas including Indigenous procurement, economic development, workforce participation and health and wellbeing. It also offers a structure for businesses to meet social and environmental targets, offering value beyond the Indigenous business sector.

Under the Federal Government's Indigenous Procurement Policy, an Indigenous business in Australia is defined as a business with at least 50% Indigenous ownership. Supply Nation registers businesses that meet this definition and certifies businesses whose ownership is 51% or more. Over 4,000 Indigenous businesses are verified through Supply Nation from a range of industries including construction, food and hospitality, graphic design, information technology, sustainability and many more. Demonstrating the value of investing in Indigenous businesses beyond economic value is crucial to support the growth of Indigenous businesses and their broader wellbeing impacts for communities and societies.

In 2022, Supply Nation commissioned The Interplay Project to develop a more culturally meaningful model to measure and monitor the broader holistic benefits of investing in Indigenous businesses than what is possible with standard analyses of Social Return on Investment (SROI).⁵ This follows on from Supply Nation's **The Sleeping Giant** report in 2015, which presented the social return from investing in Supply Nation Certified Suppliers. While the report calculated that every dollar of revenue for Indigenous businesses returned, on average, \$4.41 worth of economic and social value, it also highlighted a range of other cultural and community benefits of investing in Indigenous businesses that are difficult to measure and do not lend themselves readily to existing SROI models.

A key finding was that Indigenous businesses "don't just create a little social value on top of the value of the goods and services they deliver: the creation of value is their whole approach to business".⁶ Every business owner interviewed "uses their business as a vehicle to drive change for their family and wider community". Business owners and employees spoke of "increased confidence, autonomy and aspirations", and that they were committed to making the business work for the wider community. The aim of the current research is to develop a framework that can map, monitor, and measure these factors, to show the true value of investment in Indigenous businesses.

The Interplay approach and method

The Interplay Project (Interplay) is a scientific social technology developed from the ground up in Indigenous communities nationally.⁷ Interplay is co-led by Aboriginal people and researchers with over 25 years of experience in Aboriginal wellbeing. It has three key features based on Indigenous holistic values and aimed at bridging worldviews to develop shared visions and measures of success.

1. A 'shared space' model of collaboration where all stakeholders including the community are collaborators in all phases.
2. Translating 'stories into numbers' to quantify cultural and community values, building an evidence base to create sustainable change.
3. Taking a 'holistic approach' to data analysis by applying structural equation modelling that identifies the strongest impact pathways.

⁵ Burton, R and Tomkinson, E. 2015. *The Sleeping Giant. A Social Return on Investment Report on Supply Nation Certified Suppliers*. Supply Nation, Sydney, Australia

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ The Interplay Project. 2020. www.interplayproject.com [website accessed 6th September 2022]

Interplay's methodology⁸ involves engaging Indigenous businesses to collaboratively design an impact framework to measure:

- what they value
- what they bring to workplaces and communities
- the many ways they make a difference to themselves and broader societies and economies

This ensures the framework has real world integrity and collective ownership, and is therefore collaborative, meaningful, and has impact. The Interplay Project is collaboratively developing the framework and indicators to measure and understand the true value of investment in Indigenous business.

The overall project methodology involved a knowledge review, co-design interviews with a select number of Indigenous businesses registered and/or certified with Supply Nation (see Appendix 1), and the development of data collection tools. The domains and subthemes that emerged from the knowledge review and co-design interviews were compared and combined to create Supply Nation's Impact Framework or 'story of change', Interplay's version of a traditional Theory of Change through an Indigenous lens. This story of change framework can be used to identify and strengthen the key components and pathways to sustainable impact and provide insights into the personal, social, cultural, and environmental impacts of investing in Indigenous businesses. The 'story of change', developed in collaboration with Supply Nation and informed by the knowledge review and codesign interviews has a goal of 'sustainable Indigenous businesses' with inputs that are integrated through the 'ways to get there' and 'stepping stones'.

The 'ways to get there' - a summary

This report presents a summary of the key themes or 'ways to get there' and sub-themes - 'stepping stones' - and indicators that make up the Supply Nation impact framework bringing together the insights from the knowledge review together with the participant's perceptions, experience, and discussion points from the co-design interviews.⁹ The key themes ('ways to get there') that emerged from the research in terms of Indigenous business and broader social impact were the importance of:

- Indigenous values and worldviews
- working for the community
- culture through work
- empowerment through work

The development of this framework will benefit the Indigenous business community by measuring the impacts Indigenous businesses have in the themes and domains identified. This data can then be used to report on business successes as well as to provide targets and feedback for improvements.

Overall, the themes of flexibility and cultural safety emerged as most salient from the combined research and both of these key themes interacted with all the other themes. Flexibility is reflected as a fundamental way of working for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that may represent both an underlying characteristic of Indigenous ways of being and doing, but also a necessary adaptive skill to accommodate the need to 'work in two worlds', as described further below. Indigenous values and worldview are the cultural lens through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in the world. This lens can sometimes clash with the values and worldview of the dominant western paradigm, within which entities such as business and government are established and operate. This means that Indigenous business owners and workers must develop additional skills in navigating differing cultural values and worldviews to practice business in the contemporary western world.

⁸ ibid

⁹ A summary version of the Knowledge Review was also published as Shez Cairney and Jessica Yamaguchi, 'Measuring the holistic impacts of investing in Indigenous businesses: a knowledge review', Supply Nation Research & Policy Brief No.4, October 2022.

Our research suggests that flexibility is an important strategy and skill required to succeed in this cross-cultural workspace. Flexibility is therefore identified below as a separate theme but also an integrated component of most other themes identified.

The theme of cultural safety was also of high importance and is discussed further below due to its complexity and the differing ways of being culturally safe in different domains. Aspects within cultural safety include prioritising culture, the people, Traditional Owners, and living between both worlds. Creating a culturally safe workplace is something that is intrinsically practiced by Indigenous business owners - Indigenous people know implicitly how to create a safe cultural space because it is a natural way of living and working within one's culture. However, many broader societal employment structures and workplaces are not culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – as business partners, workers, or clients. Creating culturally safe workplaces can be implicit for Indigenous business owners but a mystery to non-Indigenous businesses. Defining and developing measures for culturally safe businesses is therefore beneficial not just for Indigenous businesses but for all businesses to understand and support Indigenous employees.

Theme 1 – Indigenous values and worldviews

“It’s just in our DNA because we’re Indigenous business and we just understand it.”

Indigenous values and worldviews lie at the core of Indigenous businesses, based upon holistic concepts of communality and interconnectedness.¹⁰ By contrast, global economic markets are based on concepts of individualism and capitalism. A growing body of research is exploring the cultural ‘clash’ of Indigenous values and capitalism and how it plays out for Indigenous businesses.¹¹ Altman defines a unique hybrid economy for Indigenous people who live within an inherited economy of customary service that they must balance with economic participation in mainstream private and public sector markets.¹² Values of communality and reciprocity are deeply embedded in Indigenous cultures through spiritual beliefs passed on through antiquity, creating an implicit commitment to community and caring for the natural world.¹³ These inherent values are essential seeds for cultural, social and environmental flourishing.

Holism and communality

All businesses interviewed work within a framework of Indigenous values and worldviews –through their language, culture, and perspectives, including creating holistic businesses with the underlying values of reciprocity, spirituality, caring for others through interconnectedness, which supports overcoming the individualism that can be apparent in mainstream businesses. Many of the social impacts of Indigenous businesses are implicit and stem from the flow-on community benefits that may arise from a business employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and, therefore, enabling them to participate socially and economically in their community.

¹⁰ Jarrett, D. 2021. What makes Indigenous business unique? How can understanding Indigenous cultural values improve Indigenous procurement? Supply Nation Research Report No. 4, Supply Nation, Sydney; Harvey J.L. 2016. Indigenous business has plenty to teach about values-led business, *The Guardian* [online] 29 November 2016; Collins, J., Morrison, M., Basu, P.K. and Krivokapic-Skoko, B., 2017. Indigenous culture and entrepreneurship in small businesses in Australia. *Small Enterprise Research*, 24(1): 36-48.

¹¹ Jarrett, 2021; Collins et al., 2017.

¹² Altman, J.C., 2004. Economic development and Indigenous Australia: contestations over property, institutions and ideology. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 48(3): 513-534

¹³ Jarrett, 2021; Harvey, 2016; Altman, 2004; Costello O (for IndigenousX). 2020. Our ancestors managed fire country for millennia. We yearn to burn once more. *The Guardian* [online] 28 Jan 2020; Costello O. 2022. The floods tell us the river is sick. We should listen to Indigenous knowledge to help Country heal. *The Guardian* [online] 18 Aug 2022; Zander, K.K., Dunnett, D.R., Brown, C., Campion, O. and Garnett, S.T., 2013. Rewards for providing environmental services—Where indigenous Australians' and western perspectives collide. *Ecological Economics*, 87: 145-154.

Living in two worlds

Indigenous businesses often live in two worlds (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), and at times between these worlds, which can be both a strength and a barrier to successful business. Bridging worlds is a two-way approach – which involves intuitively bringing together Indigenous and mainstream viewpoints and strengthening the focus on Indigenous perspectives within the business world.

Flexibility

As mentioned previously, flexibility was a theme that traversed all other themes and topics. Flexibility enables the ability to support employees and create unique business models that incorporate different needs, especially to navigate between the two worlds, including understanding barriers and perspectives, supporting the people (both at community level and employee level), and putting people and culture at the centre of the business approach.

Respecting individuality

Indigenous businesses place great importance on viewing each employee through the lens of a person-centred approach, seeing the employee as a person with unique needs, including cultural and life circumstances. Such an approach has resulted in many Indigenous employees securing long term employment, as it provides understanding of and support for flexible work arrangements that ensure work-life balance, financial stability, supporting their family, building capacity, and overall support to overcome barriers they have previously faced in maintaining employment.

Indigenous priorities

Indigenous businesses have a focus on prioritising and targeting Indigenous employment for their businesses – the aim is to “grow the black economy”, which enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have greater control and power over their lives, to ‘close the gap’ and achieve reconciliation through business. Having a strong moral and ethical compass is also seen as a strength; that doing the right thing and making a difference, is the most important thing in running a business.

Overcoming cultural biases

Throughout history, First Nations peoples have dealt with biases and stigma - it is part of their everyday lives and conducting business is no exception. This includes the political climate, government influences, history of Indigenous business and the impacts all of these have had on Traditional Owners and appropriate royalties. Indigenous businesses identified an unconscious bias that they must constantly face, namely, the assumption that an Indigenous business is not able or as capable as a mainstream business in providing goods or services. Such negative views and stereotypes were seen as pervasive and having a detrimental effect for the long-term success of Indigenous business.

Another problem is the often tokenistic nature of Indigenous procurement, with the minimum number of contracts being awarded to meet compliance requirements, often resulting in limited opportunities for new Indigenous businesses to break into industries. Many non-business-related barriers also exist for Indigenous businesses, including structural racism, working across different worldviews and intercultural spaces, which interrupt cultural synergies, adapting to different knowledge systems, and encompassing cultural and social networks.

Competing with NGOs

Other barriers for Indigenous businesses include the difficulty of recruiting employees in sectors such as mining, where larger non-Indigenous businesses can offer higher wages, and competing with larger more established non-Indigenous non-Government organisations (NGOs) that can use their size and resources to win contracts.

Table 1 summarises the main ‘stepping stones’ (sub-themes) and indicators for the Indigenous values and worldview theme.

Table 1 Indigenous values and worldviews

Ways to get there (themes) – Indigenous values and worldviews	
Stepping stones (sub-themes)	Indicators
Holism / communality	Holistic, communality, interconnectedness, spiritual basis, customary service, caring for the natural world (as a business purpose).
Living in two worlds	Working across worldviews and intercultural spaces, adapting to different knowledge systems, two-way approach, reciprocity, bringing Indigenous viewpoints into the business world, supporting others to work across two worlds, overcoming individualism in business, interrupting cultural synergies and cultural/social networks.
Flexibility	Resilience, agility, navigating two worlds, both ways approach, shifting barriers and perspectives, adaptive approaches, creative solutions, balancing business, and culture, being responsive to people and ways of working to enable success.
Respecting individuality	Person-centred approach, respecting workers and their unique worlds and needs, long-term employment, flow on benefits in life.
Indigenous priorities	Closing the gap, Indigenous employment, values-based, breaking cycles formed by colonisation.
Overcoming cultural biases	Overcoming biases and stigma from history and politics, unconscious bias, inadequate resources, structural racism, derogatory assumptions, competing with NGOs.

Theme 2 - Working for the community

“...because we (are a) collective, (a) whole system, not just our own business”

Consistent with the **Sleeping Giant** report, a primary motivation and desired impact for Indigenous business owners and employees is to ‘work for the community’.¹⁴ This was evident in the following ways.

Service to culture and community

Culture and the importance of nurturing and protecting cultural identity, knowledge and practices through business and its flow on effects to communities are prioritised.¹⁵ These include employment and skills development for Indigenous people and the strengthening of cultural and community assets.¹⁶ Strengthening culture and breaking the cycles created by colonisation and disempowerment is an aim of many Indigenous businesses, commonly enacted through the themes of respect and integrity.

Indigenous businesses place high value on aligning with community goals and aspirations as well as being accountable back to the community through their business.¹⁷ In many cases, service to the community is the primary purpose of the business. The core focus of service to culture and community including local employment, for example, is outlined in the organisational mission statement of a Yolŋu social enterprise in Arnhem Land.¹⁸ These priorities align with corporate social responsibility strategies that aim to build the assets of communities through community development including supporting employment, education, and other drivers of cultural and social impacts.¹⁹

Giving back to community is seen as a priority for Indigenous businesses, with examples including providing free mental health first aid training in communities, providing skills to people who can then in turn support the business. Supporting the communities within which the businesses are embedded is seen as another way to ‘close the gap’, especially for people who have lived in both worlds. Products marketed and sold not only serve practical purposes but are seen to generate funds to re-invest in the community to achieve social impact. Indigenous business has a broader purpose and the social value and outcomes generated are integral to it. Some Indigenous businesses, for example, ensure that a percentage of profits fund local community projects such as a childcare programs and other community needs.

Relationships and networks

Building and strengthening relationships, connections and networks is highly valued and achieved through involvement in Indigenous business.²⁰ This includes strengthening relationships in one’s own community and culture as well as improving intercultural understandings and relationships, across cultures. Business enables people to build networks and resources outside one’s own culture and community as well as the capacity to bring together and create opportunities within the community.

¹⁴ Zander et.al., 2013.

¹⁵ Zander et.al., 2013; Brueckner, M., Spencer, R., Wise, G. and Marika, B., 2016. A third space social enterprise: closing the gap through cross-cultural learning. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2: 18-32; Scheyvens, R., Carr, A., Movono, A., Hughes, E., Higgins-Desbiolles, F. and Mika, J.P., 2021. Indigenous tourism and the sustainable development goals. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 90:103260.

¹⁶ Collins et.al., 2017; Brueckner et.al., 2016.

¹⁷ Zander et.al., 2013; Brueckner et.al., 2016; Scheyvens et.al., 2021; Fleming, A.E., 2015. Improving business investment confidence in culture-aligned Indigenous economies in remote Australian communities: a business support framework to better inform government programs. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 6(3): Article 5, pp. 1-36.

¹⁸ Brueckner et.al., 2016.

¹⁹ Fordham, A.E. and Robinson, G.M., 2018. Mapping meanings of corporate social responsibility—an Australian case study. *International Journal of Corporate Social Responsibility*, 3(1): 1-20.

²⁰ Jarrett, 2021; Fleming, 2015; Ceric, A., Small, F. and Morrison, M., 2022. What Indigenous employees value in a business training programme: implications for training design and government policies. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 74(2): 228-248.

Community is a strength for any population, especially so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and cultural identity - including knowledge and practices - is often exhibited through a focus on community-centred approaches that are adaptive and provide benefits to specific communities. Additionally, the Indigenous viewpoint supports gaining and maintaining, as well as giving and taking, which is needed to maintain a balance between running a business and partaking in culture.

Acknowledging and utilising community also includes support and knowledge in the path of building networks and relationships within the community to improve intercultural relationships (across cultures), and for wider accountability to the broader community.

Indigenous employment

Indigenous businesses have an employment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that is 60% higher than other businesses.²¹ In turn, many Indigenous employees find their employment creates safe spaces for families and culture, strengthens connection to culture, creates opportunities for healing and training, and relates to feelings of pride in the business.²² Indigenous employment rates vary across sectors, being higher in the not-for-profit sector particularly among community and social services, and in smaller businesses.²³ However, “even larger Indigenous businesses (revenue over \$10 million) have a proportional Indigenous employment rate at or above 30% - ten times the estimate of the Indigenous proportion of the population (3%) as a whole”.²⁴

The employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key priority for Indigenous businesses as well as creating job pathway opportunities, learning on the job, flexibility in training options, and considering personal factors in maintaining employment. Another priority is integrating Indigenous methods to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the mainstream and to influence through a two-way learning practice which is culturally safe. The strengths identified in employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people included:

- needing to be less concerned about racism
- understanding the role of culturally safe and appropriate workplaces
- the flow-on effects for families
- the strengthening of culture and overall wellbeing

Targeting Indigenous employment is seen as having a wider impact, such as providing positive role models for Indigenous youth, providing opportunities to upskill, build confidence, and personal growth. Some businesses explicitly focus on the health and wellbeing of their employees through offering breakfast options at work, supporting physical health, and providing transport options to the workplace. The flexible and supportive nature of many Indigenous workplaces improves employees’ quality of life, work-life balance, and job satisfaction.

When Indigenous businesses target the employment of Indigenous people, it not only increases the rate of employment among historically low socio-economic groups but also improves their financial situation and quality of life. Through providing consistent supportive employment, Indigenous businesses have seen many employees buy their own homes, send their children to private schools, support young families, and many other benefits. Indigenous businesses are adept at understanding the myriad interpersonal factors that may come into play when employing Indigenous people, which enables them to identify any barriers and challenges and provide appropriate support mechanisms to assist people maintain their employment. As highlighted previously, Indigenous businesses often employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have experienced difficult upbringings and intergenerational trauma. Acknowledging and supporting employees, irrespective of their

²¹ House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2021. *Report on Indigenous Participation in Employment and Business*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, Australia.

²² Burton and Tomkinson, 2018; Bodle K, Eva C, Foley D, Harris J, Hunter B. 2022. Indigenous employment in the Indigenous business sector. *Supply Nation Research and Policy Brief No. 3*, Supply Nation, Sydney, Australia.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ *ibid*

background, facilitates and sustains their employment and creates better outcomes for their families and communities as well as reducing risks of similar intergenerational patterns (e.g., recidivism) being perpetuated.

Establishing place

Caring for Country including land, sea, flora, fauna, and people is highly valued in all Indigenous cultures.²⁵ Being involved as an owner or employee of an Indigenous business enables Indigenous people to strengthen their connection with 'place' in several different ways ranging from improving housing security to improving land tenure arrangements and working towards and achieving environmental outcomes including protection, restoration and other components of caring for Country.²⁶ A study in West Arnhem Land interviewed 60 people of which 93% said that looking after Country was part of their cultural responsibility, and that natural resource management, "should be carried out communally, primarily under the direction of Elders and family".²⁷ The deep knowledge and commitment to caring for the land and sea carried by Indigenous people has created opportunities for culture-based economic development with cultural, social and environmental benefits.²⁸ One study reported Indigenous people have greater interest to participate in wildlife-based enterprises than other forms of workforce participation.²⁹ There were different priorities based on demographics within the study cohort, however, they all aligned with community and cultural practices and beliefs. Table 2 summarises the main 'stepping stones' (sub-themes) and indicators for the 'working for the community' theme.

²⁵ Zander et.al., 2013.

²⁶ Jarrett, 2021; Harvey, 2016; Costello, 2020, 2022; Burton and Tomkinson, 2018; Zander et.al., 2013; Fleming, 2015.

²⁷ Zander et.al.,2013.

²⁸ Greiner R, Stanley O. 2013. More than money for conservation: exploring social co-benefits from PES schemes. *Land use policy*, 31: 4-10.

²⁹ Zander, K.K., Austin, B.J. and Garnett, S.T., 2014. Indigenous peoples' interest in wildlife-based enterprises in the Northern Territory, Australia. *Human Ecology*, 42(1): 115-126.

Table 2 Working for the community

Ways to get there (theme) – Working for the community	
Stepping stones (sub-themes)	Indicators
Strengthening culture and community	Cultural identity, knowledge, and practices, strengthening culture with respect and integrity, strengthening cultural and community assets, business aligns with cultural/community values.
Community benefit	Community-centred approaches, giving back to community, community benefit projects, skills development.
Relationships and networks	Connections within community, intercultural relationships, external networks, opportunities through growing networks.
Indigenous employment	Cultural safety, Career pathway opportunities, learning on the job, flexibility in the workplace. Personal factors in maintaining employment, opportunities for healing & training, pride in the business, passion for job, belief in the business.
Establishing place	Caring for country, housing security, land tenure arrangements, environmental outcomes, culture-based economies, cultural responsibilities.

Theme 3 - Culture through work

The ways in which Indigenous businesses work within culture or bring ‘culture through work’ include integrating cultural knowledge and values into business, learning about, and strengthening culture through work, cultural leadership, culturally safe workplaces and culture-based products and services.³⁰

Cultural leadership

Cultural leadership builds and strengthens cultural identity for Indigenous business owners, employees, and the businesses themselves. This occurs predominantly through growing genuine systems of Indigenous governance and leadership and embedding knowledge and strategies for learning from Elders and Indigenous leaders in the business.³¹

Having Indigenous leadership and governance in place is seen as the ‘backbone’ of Indigenous business, and having Elders and leaders contribute to the business and being involved in decision making of utmost importance. Indigenous businesses exercise cultural leadership in the form of board members, advisors, mentors, community

³⁰ Jarrett, 2021; Collins et.al., 2017; Zander et.al., 2013; Brueckner et.al., 2016; Scheyvens et.al., 2021; Fleming, 2015; Fordham and Robinson, 2018; Ceric et.al., 2022; Evans, M.M., Robinson, J.A. and Williamson, I.O., 2021. The Effect of HRM Practices on Employment Outcomes in Indigenous Social Enterprises. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, pp. 1-24.

³¹ Collins et.al., 2017; Fleming, 2015.

input, and oversight. Having cultural knowledge experts is seen as a key aspect of Indigenous businesses' strengths and one of the factors that make their approach to business unique. Cultural leadership is central to the overarching business model, the wellbeing and support of employees, and ensuring a culturally safe, aware, and sustainable business. Knowledge of Indigenous cultural practices are also important for the formation and maintenance of relationships and networking in business, whether in an Indigenous or non-Indigenous context.

As previously noted, respect and flexibility in work-life balance with consideration and appreciation for culture is key to supporting Indigenous employment. Indigenous employees can then also act as positive role-models for younger people, helping to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage, and to pass down skills and knowledge through families, which is also seen as an important way to support people in starting up their own businesses.

Culturally safe workplaces

Feeling culturally safe in the workplace is a critical condition for successful Indigenous employment and a key reason that Indigenous employees will stay at or leave a job. Valuing and supporting culture in Indigenous business has wider reaching impact beyond the individual employee, extending to families and communities. Culturally safe workplaces are defined by these factors:

- respecting family and cultural responsibilities
- flexible, less formal working arrangements to balance work with cultural obligations and customary practice
- celebrating cultural events and practices
- cultural sensitivity in the workplace
- respecting and learning about other cultures
- strengthening intercultural relations and cross-cultural communication
- mentoring, learning on the job, training, and career development opportunities³²

Culturally safe workplaces are integral to Indigenous businesses and include the ability to respect the employee's family and cultural responsibilities through flexible arrangements that permit a better work-life balance. Acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people require flexibility to be prioritised and supported was seen as a necessary pre-condition in employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for example, in providing leave for family, sorry business, and other cultural responsibilities. Table 3 summarises the main 'stepping stones' (sub-themes) and indicators for the 'culture through work' theme.

³² Burton and Tomkinson, 2018; Collins et.al., 2017; Zander et.al., 2013; Brueckner et.al., 2016; Scheyvens et.al., 2021; Fleming, 2015; Fordham and Robinson, 2018; Ceric et.al., 2022; Zander et.al., 2014.

Table 3 Culture through work

Ways to get there (theme) – Culture through work	
Stepping stones (sub-themes)	Indicators
Cultural leadership	Indigenous governance & leadership, Elders & leaders contribute to the business, Cultural leaders (Traditional Owners/Elders) as board members, advisors, mentors
Growing through culture	Knowledge passed down through family, respecting people, flexibility to support work-life balance, role models, personal strengths in overcoming barriers, carving new success pathways.
Culturally safe workplaces	Safe for families, strengthen culture, respect family and cultural responsibilities, flexible and responsive, less formal working arrangements to balance work with cultural obligations and customary practice, celebrating cultural events and practices, cultural sensitivity in the workplace, respecting and learning about other cultures, strengthening intercultural relations and cross-cultural communication, supporting Traditional Owners, living between both worlds.
Indigenous strengths in relationships and social networks	Indigenous strengths in building relationships and social networks (skill sets unique to First Nation businesses that are less valued or utilised in mainstream businesses), being vouched for, understanding, and responding to the values and goals of other people and businesses.
Culture based products & services	Value cultural heritage, apply Indigenous knowledges (e.g., wildlife management), cultural ways of sharing knowledge and learning (artworks, stories)

Culture based products and services

Many Indigenous businesses grow cultural knowledge and awareness through delivering products and services that draw from cultural wisdoms, knowledge, and practices.³³ These culture-based products and services range from artworks and stories that value and promote Indigenous cultural heritage to nature-based enterprises that apply Indigenous knowledge to solve contemporary challenges such as land and wildlife management.

Theme 4 - Empowerment through work

Business offers Indigenous people and communities the opportunity to prosper and grow through cultural identity and Indigenous ways of working, with further growth achievable with support from mainstream economies and

³³ Burton and Tomkinson, 2018; Collins et.al., 2017; Brueckner et.al., 2016; Scheyvens et.al., 2021; Fleming, 2015; Greiner and Stanley, 2013; Spencer, R., Brueckner, M., Wise, G. and Marika, B., 2016. Australian indigenous social enterprise: measuring performance. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*.

wider networks.³⁴ Table 4 summarises the main ‘stepping stones’ (sub-themes) and indicators for the ‘empowerment through work’ theme.

Personal empowerment

The personal empowerment benefits for Indigenous business owners and employees include feeling proud, feeling good, being able to support family and community, strengthening culture, restoring personal and community pride, financial stability, building capabilities and capacity and gaining opportunities for career development.³⁵ One case study in a remote community in northern Australia highlights the close linkages between Indigenous social enterprises and capacity development for Indigenous people, particularly in the areas of environmental stewardship and cultural maintenance.³⁶

Capacity and capability building

The opportunity and benefit of developing business skills and other capabilities is an essential part of success for Indigenous businesses, particularly in areas of business management, business development, financial management, accounting, commercial literacy, research and development, business networking and English literacy and numeracy.³⁷ An important way this has been achieved is via mentoring from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses.

Support to overcome barriers

Indigenous business owners and employees often must overcome structural barriers when they participate in the economy including structural racism, working across worldviews and intercultural spaces, adapting to different knowledge systems, interrupting cultural synergies and the impacts that their participation in enterprise have in disrupting their own cultural and social networks.³⁸ Despite the barriers, there are many different pathways into Indigenous business, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe it is important to showcase the success stories – cases where Indigenous people began with little or no resources, to become successful businesses through hard work, dedication, determination, and motivation. Starting and maintaining a sustainable Indigenous business was seen as the end goal for all participants in our study, with one explaining “best thing when we see black fellas owning a business, telling the story”.

However, there are many barriers Indigenous businesses must overcome to achieve economic success, from prioritising employing mob, to the difficulty of managing cash and workflow (e.g., when there are cultural needs which require employees to take time off). This leaves Indigenous businesses at a disadvantage because they cannot compete with businesses that have 24/7 availability and do not need to pause for cultural matters. For one business owner, for example, employing people on a full-time basis was risky because of the uncertainty as to whether they would be able to consistently and reliably work, giving consideration to time off that might be required, as well as the time, effort and cost of continuing employment (e.g. supporting leave, explaining processes, socialising to policies and procedures).

³⁴ Fordham and Robinson, 2018.

³⁵ Brueckner et.al., 2016; Ceric et.al., 2022; Evans et.al., 2021.

³⁶ Spencer et.al., 2016.

³⁷ Brueckner et.al., 2016; Fordham and Robinson, 2018; Bodle, K., Brimble, M., Weaven, S., Frazer, L. and Blue, L., 2018. Critical success factors in managing sustainable indigenous businesses in Australia. *Pacific Accounting Review*, 30(1): 35-51.

³⁸ Bodle et.al., 2018; Gorman, J.T., Bentivoglio, M., Brady, C., Wurm, P., Vemuri, S. and Sultanbawa, Y., 2020. Complexities in developing Australian Aboriginal enterprises based on natural resources. *The Rangeland Journal*, 42(2): 113-128.

Table 4 Empowerment through work

Ways to get there (themes) – Empowerment through work	
Stepping stones (sub-themes)	Indicators
Work-life empowerment	Pride, feeling good, identity, work-life balance, supporting family & community, strengthening culture, restoring personal and community pride, financial stability, work Indigenous ways, connect with mainstream economies and wider networks. Motivations for working (working for the community, financial stability, career progression, opportunity to learn, support family and community, strengthen culture).
Stories of success	Starting with nothing, hard work, dedication, determination, motivation, overcoming barriers.
Building capacity & capabilities	Work based education and training, reskilling for new roles, on the job learning, genuine opportunities for education and career development that meet people where they're at, getting the 'right people'.
Business skills	Support with business skills early on, business management, business development, financial literacy and management, accounting, understanding cash flow, commercial literacy, research and development, business networking, English literacy & numeracy.
Mentors and role models	Mentoring (formal and informal), learning on the job, advisory networks, role-modelling.

The Supply Nation 'story of change'

The themes and sub-themes discussed above form part of Supply Nation's broader 'story of change', Interplay's version of a traditional Theory of Change seen through an Indigenous lens. This is shown graphically in Figure 1 and was developed in collaboration with Supply Nation and informed by the knowledge review and co-design interviews. It shows the goal as 'sustainable Indigenous businesses' with inputs that are integrated through the 'ways to get there' and 'stepping stones' summarised above.

Figure 1 Supply Nation's 'story of change' impact framework



Another way of presenting the framework in Figure 1 is in Table 5, focusing on the ‘ways to get there’ and ‘stepping stones’, the activities, outcomes and impacts in traditional Theory of Change evaluation frameworks.

Table 5 Supply Nation's ‘story of change’ impact framework

GOAL: Sustainable Indigenous businesses	
Ways to get there (themes)	Stepping stones (sub-themes)
Indigenous values and worldviews	Holism, communality
	Living in two worlds
	Flexibility
	Respecting Individuality
	Indigenous priorities
	Overcoming cultural biases
Working for the community	Strengthening culture and community
	Community benefit
	Relationships and networks
	Indigenous employment
	Establishing place
Culture through work	Cultural leadership
	Growing through culture
	Culturally safe workplaces
	Indigenous strengths in relationships and social networks
	Culture based products & services
Empowerment through work	Work-life empowerment
	Stories of success
	Building capacity & capabilities
	Business skills
	Mentors and role models
INPUTS:	People and communities, Indigenous businesses, Supply Nation, buyers and suppliers, policy (procurement policies)
IMPACTS:	Health and wellbeing, social, financial

Next steps

Interplay has developed a survey tool with indicators to help measure some of the themes and sub-themes in the Supply Nation impact framework.³⁹ The next steps are likely to involve:

- Conducting a more extensive pilot of the survey
- Establishing an annual process to conduct the survey, data analysis and stories, review and presenting the findings
- Improving the framework annually via collaboration and data feedback

Following the initial data collection from Indigenous businesses using the survey that has been developed, data can be analysed using 'Interplay mapping' – a systems approach to data analysis that identifies key statistically strong pathways that lead to Supply Nation's goal of developing sustainable Indigenous businesses.

The Supply Nation impact framework and survey will enable the impact of Indigenous businesses to be monitored over time, assist in the evaluation of policy, programs and services, identify and drive priorities, track impacts, and contribute to a cultural standards framework for the Indigenous business sector and beyond.

³⁹ The survey uses Interplay's established and validated approach that has been published in over 20 academic journals.

Appendix 1

Co-design interviews to inform the development of the framework to measure the holistic impacts of investing in Indigenous businesses were conducted with a small number of Indigenous businesses from the construction and professional services industries. While businesses from across Australia (in a range of urban and remote areas) were invited to participate, those that agreed to be interviewed were primarily from NSW. Seven interviews were conducted with a total of eight participants (see Table A1).

Table A1 Indigenous businesses that participated in the codesign interviews

Business type	Location
Workforce services to the construction and mining industries	NSW
Management consultation and community services	ACT
Creator, supplier, and distributor of a product	NSW
Construction, maintenance, and cleaning	NSW
Research, consultancy, and business support	SA
Creator, supplier, and distributor of a product	NSW
Construction	NSW

Interviews were conducted over video conferencing, for approximately 30 – 60 minutes each. Interviews were recorded and comprehensive notes were also taken by the researcher during the interview. A semi-structured interview style was adopted, which allowed for a narrative response with the interviewee able to discuss freely areas they felt relevant to the interview question. The interview protocol included questions related to:

- What makes their business unique
- What works best
- What are the barriers
- What supports are needed? What supports have been used in the past?
- How their Indigenous business creates value and how the following themes identified through the knowledge review played out in their businesses:
 - Indigenous values and worldviews
 - working for the Community
 - culture through work
 - empowerment through work
- What are some of the success factors of their business, and how are they measured and/or reported
- What broader impacts of their business would they like to find better ways to measure or report on

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