



Australian Government
Department of Employment and
Workplace Relations
Indigenous Business Australia



Jobs Careers Future

BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE

STORIES OF SUCCESSFUL INDIGENOUS
ENTERPRISES AND ENTREPRENEURS

This publication has been compiled on behalf of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) by a team assembled by Peter Kenyon, Director, Bank of I.D.E.A.S., Lyndsey Jackson, Vicki Neele, Margaret Darveniza, Justin Francis, Roger Green, Maria D'Souza, Peter Palmer, and hundreds of individuals and groups who have so generously shared or supplied stories of Indigenous success in business.

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OVERVIEW

During July and August 2005, an extensive national scoping exercise was undertaken by the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. on behalf of the Business and Policy Development Branch of Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR.) to identify successful Indigenous owned and operated enterprises. Over 500 businesses were identified. While this set of enterprises certainly does not comprise the total number of existing Indigenous entities, it illustrated the wide diversity of entrepreneurial activities and provided outstanding examples of Indigenous enterprises and entrepreneurs. It clearly demonstrated that Indigenous entrepreneurship is succeeding in all sectors of the Australian economy.

23 businesses were eventually selected for in depth case study research, utilising the following selection criteria –

- demonstrated business success e.g. turnover, growth rate, job creation, length of life, sustainability;
- at least 50 % Indigenous ownership and management;
- recognition by industry and community peers;
- diversity (geographic location, industry sector, size, start up motivations, ownership structures);
- a story with lessons, perspectives and experiences that could be replicated; and
- a willingness to share the story.

This publication captures those 23 stories, primarily through the actual words, thoughts and illustrations of the Indigenous entrepreneurs behind the business success. They are inspiring stories, with lessons and practical advice for other Indigenous people contemplating or attempting the enterprise option.

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Like any enterprise entering and growing within the marketplace, all these enterprises face the typical challenges of business life, including –

- business opportunity identification;
- gaining and keeping customers;
- adequate capital base;
- staff recruitment, motivation and development;
- financial management;
- regulatory compliance;
- supplier dependency and quality;
- marketing and promotion;
- planning and controlling growth;
- appropriate advice;
- business / family balance;
- professional development; and
- networking and business collaboration.

In addition, the historic and contemporary disadvantages and barriers experienced by Indigenous people has added additional challenges that are also part of many of the stories, including –

- lack of Indigenous role models;
- blatant racism, stereotyping and negative attitudes towards the ability of Indigenous people to own and operate a business;
- lack of relevant business skills and expertise;
- family pressures;
- disconnection from mainstream business networks; and
- access to capital.

All 23 stories are stories of vision and achievement. Each is a story worthy of promotion and profile. Individually and collectively, they provide a wealth of insights into business success. Each story is unique, yet there are some common themes and messages echoing through them. Ten success ingredients are worthy of highlight, namely –

- ***Passion, Belief And Determination***

Overwhelmingly, related attitudes and behaviours like personal passion, determination, persistence, belief in one's self and one's product, hard work, stickability and tenacity comprised the most common factor shared by the set of entrepreneurs. Simply that *"fire in the belly"* is what has made the improbable possible in business. The following are typical of the comments –

'Determination, "pig headiness" and belief to keep going when the situation got grim played the major role of the success of the business today,' (Robert Chewying of *Chewying's Lawn and Horticulture*)

'There are always going to be bad times. Persevere. There will be good times as well. Remember that time changes things. Business is hard in the beginning, but things improve as your knowledge increases and your capacity is strengthened'. (Melissa Fletcher-Toovey of *Fletcher International Exports*)

'Business is a long journey. It requires a lot of fuel and a lot of energy.' (Terri Janke of *Terri Janke and Company*)

'It is important not to let anyone tell you that you can't do it, just get in and try . . . be prepared to work your backside off . . . don't be frightened of failure'. (Kevin Wone of *Kevin Wone Accounting*)

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The set of stories contains a myriad of wonderful illustrations of personal commitment and the determination to succeed. For example, the Mantons of *Manton's Black Pearl Oysters*' persevering despite their entire breeding stock being wiped out by environmental changes on several occasions, Sid and Jenny Rusca of *S and J Earthmoving* carting a caravan behind a grader around the Northern Territory and the Slottjes of *Tyre Shield®* investing all and living under a tarpaulin while the business got established.

Related to personal passion is that sense of belief in yourself and following one's dream. Suzanne Russell of *Classic Black Chauffeured Vehicles* advises '*do what you are and not what your mother wants you to do*', while the women behind *Kungka's Can Cook* echo a similar message – '*there is no use doing something to please other people – do it for yourself*'.

Retention of a positive mindset is another related attitude and behaviour highlighted. Angela Tranter of *Cakes For You*' advocates '*every business has its good days and not so good days. Always remember the good days*', while Jon Slottje remembers '*avoiding negative people and energy suckers*'. Positivism is basic.

The passion needs to extend also to staff. As Dot West of *Goolarri Media Enterprises* shares '*passion is essential – and you must employ people who can share that passion*'.

For many of the entrepreneurs, the blatant racist remarks and stereotyping they encountered became a source of motivation and determination. Mick Davis of *Warialda Engineering and Welding* relates the story of so many visiting customers and sales people falling '*arse over their head*' when they discover an Indigenous owner and manager. In his words – '*They assume I have received Government handouts. You have to be thick skinned. I am proud that the business can win awards over non-Indigenous businesses. It proves we are a force in the market*' . . . '*Starting from having nothing has made me dogged. Being Aboriginal, you get kicked in the teeth over things that aren't your fault. It has made me want to rise above it and shake the stigma that always puts you second best. I get a buzz from proving people wrong, from proving what I can do to myself.*'

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Geoff Stocker of *Pilbara Logistics* expresses his experience as *'Developing and maintaining a business [as] a continual process, it takes effort, resilience and sheer hard work. We have worked even harder to prove that Indigenous people can be more successful than non-Indigenous people - proving it takes effort, commitment and ambition.'*

Sid Rusca in his 10 years of building one of the biggest earthmoving companies in the Northern Territory has encountered his share of racist remarks and stereotyping – *'You should see the blood drain out of the face of a lot of white fellas when I turn up for business . . . I don't let it worry me. In fact, it motivates me, keeps me going.'*

Finally, belief in the ability of Indigenous people to not only achieve in a business sector, but to create outstanding examples of success. Many of the case study entrepreneurs simply believe that Indigenous people have natural competitive advantages within their specific industry sector. This is certainly the passionate belief for Brett Manton and aquaculture, Jamie Thomson and mustering and Jon Slottje and sales. In Jon's words – *'We hope to be able to maintain a very high profile as an Aboriginal business, dispelling myths that Aboriginal people are unable to run a business, or be involved in national economic growth . . .'*

▪ *Vision And Idealism*

The businesses summarised in this publication all began with a vision – a vision that included opportunity for personal / family gain and improvement, but also often the desire to follow a dream and destiny and build opportunities for their community and other Indigenous people. These stories illustrate that idealism can play a significant role in business motivation and achievement.

Terri Janke, Solicitor and Director of *Terri Janke and Company*, in creating and developing her successful business focused her skill, passion and education on improving the knowledge and rights of Indigenous artists. Terri has discovered the value of a stated set of values which stress the belief *'that people and processes are just as important as outcomes. That knowledge is as important as culture. That life is as important as place.'*

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In a similar way, Brett Leavy of *CyberDreaming* had a vision to provide all Indigenous people in all communities with access to innovative and exciting communication design services. His vision is elaborated in a Charter which has guided his business development.

Robert Chewying has evolved a very successful business model that is socially responsible. Building upon the experiences of his own disability, Robert has created a business model that not only provides employment for Indigenous people, welfare recipients, people with a disability, the aged and the long term unemployed, but also an opportunity to become business people in their own right.

Businesses like *Narana Creations*, *Rumbalara Health Service* and *Goolarri Media* are social enterprises that evolved from the vision of the founders. That vision is still a continual source of inspiration and motivation for the business today. For example, Dot West of *Goolarri Media* captures well their founders' vision – '*they simply wanted Indigenous people to be seen and heard*', a place for creative expansion where Indigenous people are able to tell their own story. All three enterprises have built upon their vision, and evolved into elaborate and diverse operations.

▪ *Opportunity Obsession*

Each of the case studies represent wonderful stories of entrepreneurs pursuing their vision, dream and destiny, displaying opportunity obsession. They have an ability to identify points of opportunity and translate these insights into a business return. The stories captured in the following chapters of Suzanne Russell and the racism she encountered as a taxi passenger, the Ngukurr people and their transport difficulties, the Tranters and their baking and decorating skills, Mick Davis and his *Davis Starlifter* invention, Jon Slottje and his jackaroo experiences, Terri Janke and her passion for the rights of Indigenous artists and the Horton's commitment to linking young people at risk with their culture are all great illustrations of building a business upon personal passions, experiences and skills.

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Goolarri Media is a great example of an entrepreneurial organisation that has maintained a continuous attitude of opportunity obsession, always ready to claim new opportunities that are regularly presented. Their extensive range of services and large workforce is a result of such an attitude.

Flexibility is an aspect of opportunity obsession. Terri Janke states – *‘Remember the path you are on can change. Be ready to move with opportunities as they present themselves to you’*. Gina Smith of *Kungkas Can Cook* also stresses that need for flexibility and adaptability – *‘As with life, business is not a project formula for everything that is going to happen – you have to take it and roll with it’*.

Brett Leavy of *CyberDreaming* uses the word “malleability”. He explains – *‘Malleable means moulding and changing the shape of something. Malleability as a success factor means “being able to adjust and change the business according to its direction and opportunities”. My business changes continuously. You must always be assessing the direction you are headed in, the outcomes that are practical for the business to achieve and what your personal goals are’*.

▪ ***Outstanding Customer Service***

Each of the case study businesses have remembered well the old adage *‘The purpose of a business is simply to find and keep customers’*.

The operators of the *Crown Hotel* in Launceston, the Mansell family, have ensured their staff have been trained and coached to offer quality service and always be attentive to the customer’s needs. *Warialda Engineering and Welding* promotes its 100% customer service, and judges its performance against the level of repeat customers. For *Narana Creations*, customer service standards are monitored on a daily basis. *Chewing’s Lawn and Horticulture* employs the services of a qualified horticulturist to review each work job and make recommendations for improvement. *Rumbalara Health Services’* programs are planned to ensure optimum customer service. They have ensured a customer orientated environment, one that is also culturally appropriate. The provision of customer transport, a

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child's play room and bulk billing are illustrations of this focus. *Air Ngukurr's* positive reputation in the Northern Territory as an airline relates very much to their high delivery standards and reliability.

Narana Creations prides itself on its “*people first and profit second*” philosophy. An excellent illustration of this is their policy of purchasing all Aboriginal art products outright, rather than the usual industry habit of consignment. This ensures immediate cash flow for Indigenous artists and has encouraged many Indigenous artists to use *Narana Creations* as their primary outlet.

Suzanne Russell of *Classic Black Chauffeured Vehicles* has developed a business on the philosophy to “*go that extra mile*”. Her five point stated code of service ethics clearly captures her commitment to the highest service standard. Similarly, Terri Janke's articulated set of business values commits the business to a quality service standard.

▪ *Points Of Difference*

Each story has its points of difference and niche as a key market ingredient. *Warialda Engineering and Welding* and *Tyre Shield®* proudly promote on the uniqueness of their key inventions. *Cakes For You* quickly recognised the need to continually differentiate the business from possible competitors. Simple actions like use of quality fruit and fresh pure cream, provision of a home delivery service and maintenance of an up to date photographic portfolio of products ensured ongoing customer support. *Cakes For You* are also constantly exploring new opportunities for product development. Recently they have introduced diabetic muffins as a response to the diabetic health problems with Indigenous communities, and a bush food muffin, now very popular with tourists.

Several businesses promoted their Aboriginality as their point of difference. For Suzanne Russell, the name *Classic Black Chauffeured Vehicles* is a reflection on her as a “*classic black woman*” and the elegance and class of her company. According to Brett Manton, their company name – ‘*Manton's Black Pearl Oysters*’ suggests – ‘*a very special product,*

produced by special people'. As Brett elaborates 'an Indigenous product grown for Australia by Indigenous people has a nice ring to it, hasn't it?'

Terri Janke and Company have developed an enviable position within the legal industry through their focus and commitment to specialise in the Indigenous intellectual property and law, arts and culture copyright issues.

Mick Davis summarises this issue well – *'You have to find "that something" that makes your business idea so unique, something that will give you a competitive edge in the market'.*

- ***Staff Commitment, Involvement And Development***

The importance of staff, their sense of pride, commitment, development and personal achievement are common themes throughout the case studies.

Chewing's Lawn and Horticulture is a wonderful illustration of a viable and highly competitive business, but one that has also demonstrated the importance of focusing on the needs and development of its employees. Robert and Melinda Chewing have created an environment for their staff to flourish and discover their own future.

Treating staff with dignity and respect has been a fundamental operating principle of the *Crown Hotel*, leading to a very stable and happy workforce.

Melissa Fletcher-Toovey of *Fletcher International Exports* has the innate ability to identify her staff's talent and ability. She has focused strongly on their skill development, ensuring all divisions of the operation are multi skilled. She has campaigned to eliminate hierarchy within the business, and maintained her passion for teamwork.

Goolarri Media Enterprises prides itself as a place that *"attracts and generates passion"*. Its Managing Director, Kevin Fong, believes the organisation is – *'essentially about giving our young people and participants the wings to fly and a place where they can come back to'.*

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For *Ngarda Civil and Mining*, a stable workforce where Indigenous employees represent 85% of employees is a result of their strong affirmative employment recruitment policy. This has provided a sense of “*safety in numbers*” and a huge sense of personal comfort for Indigenous staff, resulting in high staff retention rates and low absenteeism.

Employees are the key ‘*link in the business chain*’ for Geoff Stocker of *Pilbara Logistics*, and he attributes the contribution of his staff and their commitment to success for the company’s continual growth.

Finally, a major priority of *Rumbalara Health Services* is the employment of local Indigenous staff and the provision of accredited training. This is acknowledged as a critical success factor of the organisation.

▪ ***Family Support And Orientation***

A significant number of the included case studies refer to the importance of family support and involvement. The importance of the marital partnership has been specifically identified by many of the entrepreneurs, as has the importance of achieving work / life balance. Terri Janke advises ‘*build your business around your life and not the other way around. Set*

priorities in your life and try to maintain a balance – this means making choices. Life can become overwhelming, so set boundaries which will help to reduce burn out.’

The Mantons strongly credit their family owned business arrangement and kinship loyalty as being a critical factor in the success of their aquaculture business, and its ability to rebuild after the loss of most of their stock. Brett Manton believes ‘*Aboriginal people are not community orientated, they are family orientated. The community approach to setting up and supporting Indigenous businesses and enterprises is not working – it is*

KEY THEMES

- Passion, Belief and Determination
- Vision and Idealism
- Opportunity Obsession
- Outstanding Customer Service
- Point of Difference
- Staff Commitment, Involvement and Development
- Family Support and Orientation
- Outstanding Advice and Mentoring
- Networking and Collaboration
- Continuous Learning and Improvement

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dysfunctional. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on supporting family businesses. These are the one's that succeed. When it comes to the crunch, Aboriginal people don't trust anyone outside of their own family, but then who really does?' Brett believes that kinship loyalty is 'a critical factor in respect to more successful participation of Indigenous people in the workshop. Kinship loyalties to "family" and "clan" must be the most untapped potential for Aboriginal development and motivation'. It is a goal of Manton's Black Pearl Oysters to employ at least six local Indigenous family members in the business.

Providing an alternative perspective, Kevin Wone warns of one downside of family connections –the issue of *"obligatory sharing"* which he believes works counter to entrepreneurship. He claims it is the greatest barrier to successful Indigenous businesses today and is one he continues to struggle with both personally and on behalf of his accounting clients. Gina and Raylene of *'Kungkas Can Cook'* also believe strongly in staying immune to the demands of the extended family.

Organisations like *Ngarda Civil and Mining* and *Goolarri Media Enterprises* stress the importance of governance procedures that ensure business expertise rather than politics and family connections determine leadership and day to day operations.

▪ ***Outside Advice And Mentoring***

The value of professional and appropriate advice has been critical to all the businesses. Typical is Geoff Stocker who attributes the success of *Pilbara Logistics* to the outside support and advice he received. Discovering such support and possible mentoring as early as possible is strongly advocated. All three businesses from Central Australia strongly endorse the role of Roger Green from the Adelaide Business Centre. Angela Tranter from *Cakes For You* summarized their opinion – *'In a nutshell, get great mentoring advice, and find someone like Roger Green who you can feel comfortable with, who will help you crunch the figures honestly, to make sure your projections and costings are realistic. There is absolutely no replacement for good, honest and sound advice.'*

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A key phrase echoed by many entrepreneurs was *“appropriate advice”*, and the warning to select well. In Jon Slottje’s words – *‘In our experience there are many professionals who do not provide a competent service. Aboriginal business creates an industry of opportunistic professionals who only see a bucket of money at the end of the ‘Aboriginal rainbow’, and do not respect, but rather patronise the enterprise for their own gain.’*

▪ ***Networking And Collaboration***

Many of the case study entrepreneurs recognise the importance of *“collaborate or die”* and actively network, collaborate and cross promote within their community and industry sector.

Narana Creations is a wonderful example of an organisational enterprise that has benefited from what their CEO, Vince Ross, refers to as *“creative partnerships”*. *Narana Creations* has, in its nine year existence, sought to build relationships with a cross section of community and tourism enterprises. Their connection to the Uniting Church has enabled access to a wide range of professional business contacts and advisors.

Kaltjiti Arts is a wonderful illustration of how an enterprise can achieve international collaboration, namely product development between Indigenous people in Fregon, Central Australia and Srinagar, India.

Jahadi Indigenous Enterprises is a great illustration of the commitment to networking. As a tourism business, they have participated at all levels of the industry from local to national, and have actively engaged in cross promotion activities with a wide range of accommodation, restaurant, self drive and bus touring operations. Noel Bleakley, CEO of *Air Ngukurr*, however advocates wisdom in the choice of collaborators – *‘Be wise in the choice of people you seek to partner with – there are so many stories of Indigenous business failing due to exploitation by non -Indigenous people simply seeking an opportunity for exploitation and a fast buck.’*

- *Continuous Learning And Improvement*

Successful entrepreneurs recognise the importance of being a continuous learner and idea obsessive. Melissa Fletcher-Toovey believes *'as soon as you stand still, you might as well die'*. She is constantly challenging her own knowledge and has never forgotten her father's advice - *'Always look to improve and don't accept that if a thing is going well, it's right. You've always got to get that one step better'*.

Having a *"thirst for knowledge"* is a vital ingredient in business success for Kevin Wone. Terri Janke strongly advocates - *'Don't set up in business thinking that you have to know everything - you don't. Seek advice from other people in the business and learn from them. Continually educate yourself on ways to improve your knowledge and capacity'*.

The wealth of experiences and perspectives contained in the following set of stories are invaluable. They simply capture the spirit of entrepreneurial success. More importantly, they reinforce, using Jamie Thomson's words, *'it is a bloody hard option to follow but, be proud, hold your heads up high. Remember Aboriginal people have a unique advantage in business when promoted with pride and integrity.'*