

Expectations and Cultural Diversity

Jawun, March 2013

FAQ:

What sort of cultural experience should I expect from my secondment?

Answer:

Delivering Value

Jawun leverages the skills of corporate Australia to build capacity in Indigenous organisations in these regions, so that they may better deliver their services to their communities. Jawun assists Indigenous communities to "...choose a life they have reason to value."

Jawun's core business is delivering secondees to Indigenous regional organisations to assist building capabilities within those organisations. Corporate and governmental secondees apply to join a regional host organisation for a 6 week place based secondment in one of six regions Jawun operates: Cape York, the Goulburn Murray, The Kimberley, Sydney's Redfern and La Perouse, North East Arnhem Land, and the NSW Central Coast.

The secondment has one objective above all else: what is the secondee's contribution to their host Indigenous organisation going to be? The idea is to deliver value. However, it is nigh impossible to begin a secondment without the expectation of having a cultural experience.

Expectations are multifaceted

Going on secondment, or travel, or into a new work environment leads one to expect something of that situation, and how it might present itself. Such expectations are likely built on exposure to similar situations (for example, media, personal interactions, marketing of an organisation). For a secondee embarking on a secondment with an Aboriginal Organisation in an Aboriginal community, it is entirely reasonable for an expectation of a cultural experience. However, what that means is very different between secondees.

The secondee will have a cultural experience based on immersion in a different organisational culture, with different team members, in a different environment to that which the secondee is usually accustomed. However, narrowing the definition to specify Aboriginal Culture, some secondees have been disappointed when their expectations have not been met. The narrower definition builds the expectation of learning about and witnessing ancient practices. To be disappointed that one has not experienced such practices or at least learnt about them highlights how little is understood about the complex situation that exists. And it is not the secondee's fault to be disappointed. The commoditisation of Aboriginal culture has been used as a means to an end, such as to promote businesses, but such a practice actually builds naïve expectations. For example, immersing oneself in Aboriginal Culture does not require a trip into the Never Never to "go walkabout".

For an Aboriginal person, it can be more confronting and uncomfortable to discuss such ancient cultural practices as doing so can bring to the fore the losses incurred by the history of oppression and displacement. Contemporary Aboriginal Culture is an adaptation to the events of the last two centuries. The naivety and thus disappointment stems from little knowledge of the history of Aboriginal and colonial interactions, and ignorance of the temporal nature of culture. Culture must evolve. Secondees are therefore coming into a culture that is a contemporary temporal expression of a specific community. The culture is what it is in that community. It is still Aboriginal Culture, but it has adapted to its new surroundings.

It is perhaps counterintuitive to take the focus off having a cultural experience when applying for a secondment with an Aboriginal Organisation conducting activities in Aboriginal communities. However, it is done with the intention that it actually allows room for individual definitions of what constitutes a cultural experience to expand, promoting personal and professional growth, and it takes the pressure off communities to "be on show".