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Bruce Harvey and Janina Gawler

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Aboriginal Employment Diversity in Rio Tinto

Bruce Harvey and Janina Gawler

Abstract

Rio Tinto is a global mining corporation with some 70 operations in 20 different countries. In Australia, its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy states amongst other things that it will “will consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s issues”, and provide for “economic independence through direct employment, business development and training”.

Rio Tinto’s commitment to Indigenous workforce diversity is implicit in this Policy and through its subsidiaries it has steadily increased the level of Indigenous employment in its Australian operations since 1995. Indigenous employees now make up some 5% of the workforce, up from 0.5% in the mid 1990's. While this is more than double the representation of Indigenous people in the Australian population, the company’s targets are stretching for greater participation; seeking to match Group operation’s local demographic representation.

The issues associated with this ambitious Indigenous diversity programme are still emerging and, in many instances, are challenging for the people involved. The benefits are also still emerging and these are equally surprising and potentially far-reaching. Experiences, progress to date and associated issues are discussed.

Introduction

Rio Tinto was formed in 1995 by the merging, under a dual listed companies structure, of the Australian based CRA Limited and the United Kingdom based The RTZ Corporation plc. The Group’s headquarters are in London, there is a corporate office in Melbourne and operations in some 20 different countries. Some 45% of its assets are in Australia and New Zealand. It is predominantly engaged in the mining and smelting of minerals and metals and is a major producer of iron ore, coal, copper, diamonds, borax and aluminium. It also produces substantial volumes of gold, nickel, zinc, titanium oxide, uranium and industrial salt.

Rio Tinto’s operations in Australia are Hamersley Iron, Robe Iron, Argyle Diamond Mines, Three Springs Talc and Dampier Salt in Western Australia; Ranger Uranium and Merlin Diamonds in the Northern Territory; Coal & Allied, Northparkes Copper/Gold and Peak Gold in New South Wales; Pacific Coal and Comalco Aluminium in Queensland, plus Comalco’s smelter in Tasmania. The Company also conducts Australian and South Asian exploration from a base in Perth. The Group’s technical services division service operations worldwide from its base in Melbourne.

This paper is about Rio Tinto’s experience in fostering Indigenous employment opportunities in Australia. We will describe how this fits in an overall corporate business model and we will provide an overview of the processes, challenges, benefits and issues that confront all parties in the establishment of an ambitious Indigenous employment programme.

Let us also acknowledge that we are describing the joint learning’s of Rio Tinto’s Australian business units and the Indigenous communities with which they are associated. Enhancing Indigenous employment also receives strong commitment from

a range of other stakeholders including Commonwealth and State government agencies.

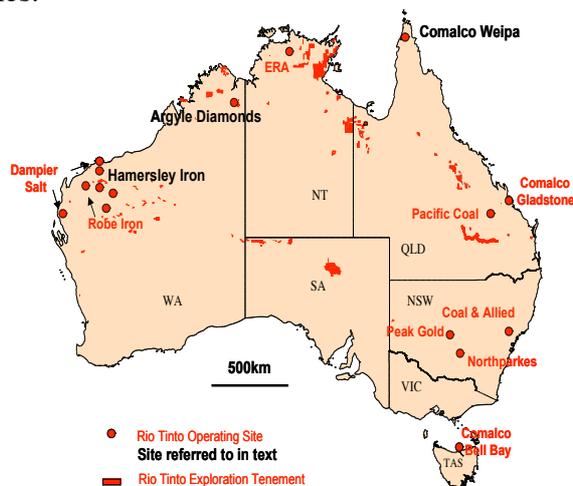


Figure 1 : Rio Tinto Operations Location Plan

Rio Tinto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands Policy

Rio Tinto's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands Policy, which guides the work being undertaken by its businesses, states:

Rio Tinto will engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands stakeholders and their representatives to find mutually advantageous outcomes where there are traditional or historical connections to particular land and waters. Economic independence through direct employment, business development and training are among the advantages that Rio Tinto will offer. We will give strong support to activities that are sustainable after Rio Tinto has left an area.

Additionally, Rio Tinto

- is committed to the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians,
- listens to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands people,
- recognises that it can make a positive contribution to economic independence for Indigenous people through direct employment, business development and training,
- will support activities that are sustainable after Rio Tinto has left an area;
- is striving to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands people at the local level to develop strategies for direct employment and business development;
- is committed to achieving a growth in employment for Indigenous Australians in areas where it has business operations;

- Rio Tinto's commitment to Indigenous employment diversity is implicit in this Policy.

The Mining Business Case for Diversity

It is worth recounting the recent history of natural resource developers and Aboriginal people in Australia. Although actual mining operations affect only a very small part of the Australian land mass, mining and mineral exploration were tarnished during the 1980s by being presented as an infringement of Aboriginal territory and an affront to Aboriginal cultural beliefs. In the long struggle for formal recognition of the importance of land to Aboriginal people it was commonly suggested that resource development was a growing threat to the cultural integrity and social cohesiveness of Aboriginal communities. Efforts to build stronger bonds between Rio Tinto mining operations and their Aboriginal neighbours were only partially successful. Greater progress could not be made so long as Australian Aborigines felt that the Australian legal system failed to grant equality of rights, recognition and opportunity.

That recognition arrived in 1992 after a decade of legal argument over Aboriginal connection to land in what became known as the Mabo case. This culminated in the statutory recognition of common law native title as a form of Aboriginal land tenure that existed prior to colonisation and remains in areas where not explicitly extinguished, a concept that Rio Tinto embraces and recognises in its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. In addition, Rio Tinto has come to appreciate that good relations with its neighbouring communities have to be built and sustained on trust. No written agreement or reliance on legal rights can guarantee an arrangement not built on trust. Only actions can do that. That is why the company has worked long and hard at developing a relationship-building programme. Relationship building between different social groupings, such as an industrial workforce on the one hand and Indigenous peoples on the other, must by definition be based on a mutual appreciation of diversity.

Rio Tinto's experience is that most Aboriginal communities do not oppose exploration and mining development in principle. Increasingly they want involvement in these efforts as a potential route away from welfare dependency (Pearson, 2001; Rio Tinto, 2001). Thus, we are finding that, as Aboriginal people gain greater control over their own destinies, they are more willing to work with us if there is benefit in doing so. We believe mineral resource development on Aboriginal land should serve to catalyse economic development that binds the developer, Governments, community people and their representative bodies to work together. Each party brings its own unique value to the development, and for Aboriginal people a large part of that value is their inherent knowledge as landowners and potential full participants in the mining activity. To quote from the Djakamirri Wangawu Forum Statement at the Garma Indigenous knowledge forum held in NE Arnhem Land in 2002; "The recent acquisition of the mine by Alcan brings a new approach to management of the bauxite operations. Yolngu leaders invite Alcan to join in the spirit of Garma to understand the history of the mining project and to collaborate with the Yolngu land owners to negotiate a new foundation for a future relationship based on mutual respect, partnership and equity" (Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Garma Forum 2002).

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Yolgnu clan leader and Chairman of the Northern Land Council, also announced at the forum a special initiative, inviting mining and

Indigenous leaders of Australia to a retreat on country to discuss environmental, cultural, social, economic and governance issues as part of the sustainability agenda.

Robust Regional Economy

After a decade of developing a position that acknowledges the legitimate place of Aboriginal people at the negotiating table to secure compensating benefits, Rio Tinto recognises that it now needs to move beyond this. We must progress to genuinely ‘working together’ to provide for full economic participation by Aboriginal people in regional development associated with Rio Tinto mines.

Our operations are in remote and rural parts of Australia and projected lives can span generations. This long-mine-life criterion is quite deliberate in the acquisition and development strategy of the Group. It enables the enormous capital costs associated with the development of major mines to be spread over a long period and the return on capital to be optimised. Long-run return is dependant on long-run security and Rio Tinto has come to realise that this cannot be based on a closed-system approach, but instead it needs to be based on sustainable development.

It is in the Group’s interest to catalyse and participate in long-run regional development that allows diverse and self-managed representation across economic, social, cultural and political activities. The financial market will place value in Rio Tinto’s ability to operate in a sustainable way in these diverse environments; environments that we might call ‘robust regional economies’.

Whereas Governments are responsible for providing universal national amenity, corporations can be expected to have a self-interested focus in developing robust regional economies in the hinterlands of their operations. There is great value in developing a diverse economy not linked to commodity cycles and the life of a mine. In robust economies, diversity is implicit and goes beyond purely financial or commercial activity. Not only is community economic activity frequently non-financial in nature and yet strongly livelihood contributing (Altman, 2001), there is great value given to non-livelihood facets of human transaction such as cultural, spiritual, political, social, sporting, educational and family interaction. In such an economy, as a natural consequence of pooled capacity and developed competencies, businesses get great benefits; including:

- A readily mobile pool of employees who can move between different businesses as demand or personal preferences dictate
- Abundant locally-based service and supply enterprises
- Competitive forces that lower costs of service and supply to the mine and the community
- Diverse local capacity for non-core business contracting.
- The inherent stability of local government by people ‘managing their own country’
- A stable mature workforce of locally-committed employees living ‘at home’
- The presence of institutions such as banking infrastructure and health facilities
- Social attractiveness in the form of the arts, ecology management, ceremony and living culture

While communities seek assistance to develop their local economy, and its interface with wider economy, they prefer to develop social and cultural aspirations themselves. Companies assume that their efforts to develop robust regional economies in rural and remote regions should be primarily directed at economic development, being the area where corporations have greater skills relative to local economic expertise and opportunity.

Economic development assumes the following aspirations:

- Material wealth creation and accumulation.
- Economic diversity, leading to a community's ability to be sustained through an economic cycle.
- Workforce opportunity and preparation.
- Development will be sustainable, beyond commodity cycle and life-of-mine.

Robust economic development opportunities will arise through diverse means:

- Direct employment
- Enterprise and small business development
- Industrial services and procurement
- Tourism and cultural activity
- Historic and heritage preservation
- Sports and recreation
- Agribusiness, possibly based on unique local traditional products
- Partnerships/Joint Ventures

Rio Tinto Employment Achievement

Rio Tinto believes that the first step in developing community engagement and robust economies around its mines is local employment provision. Hence Indigenous employment initiatives being undertaken by Rio Tinto in Australia are a response to this and the strong message from Aboriginal people that many want economic independence. This is also reflected in the Commonwealth Government's policy commitment to training, employment and business development to assist Indigenous people move away from welfare dependency.

To this end, Rio Tinto has signed three Memoranda of Understanding; one with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), one with the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), and one with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). These documents set out a framework for cooperation between Rio Tinto and each of the Departments at both national and regional level, covering direct employment, traineeships and apprenticeships, the development of joint ventures and the establishment of Indigenous small business operators contracting to Rio Tinto mines. Through the development of these relationships with government Rio Tinto aims to increase the employment and business development opportunities for Indigenous Australians within its operations.

Since 1995, Rio Tinto has steadily increased its level of Indigenous employment. Indigenous employees now make up 5% of the direct workforce at the Group's Australian operations. While this is twice the representation of Indigenous people in the Australian population, the company's targets are stretching for greater

participation; seeking to match Group operation's local demographic representation. Comalco Weipa, for example, currently at 11% Indigenous employment, has set a target of 35% by 2010. Hamersley Iron is at 9% aiming for 15% by 2004; and Argyle Diamond Mine is at 14%, targeting 25% by 2004. Energy Resources of Australia's Ranger Mine's workforce is currently 20% Indigenous. Thus, overall, Rio Tinto Australia has improved its Indigenous employment levels ten fold since 1995.

How was it done?

Background

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Rio Tinto Australia (then CRA) had some limited Indigenous employment programmes. All of these were outside mainstream functional areas in Rio Tinto's mines and only provided limited employment in gardening, maintenance and some road making. While training was provided, there was little scope for people on these programmes to become mainstream mining employees.

With the rise in Land Rights activism, and in particular the Mabo decision on Native Title in 1992, it became clear to the company that there needed to be a new approach. Rio Tinto needed to ensure robust economic relationships with traditional landowners around its long-life mines.

Conversely, as traditional owners of the country on which Rio Tinto mines, Aboriginal people wanted an opportunity to gain real employment in the mainstream economy from which they had been historically excluded. They also wanted accredited training and transferable skills as part of a package of benefits available to them and their families. Aboriginal negotiators started to include employment targets in land access agreements as a way of ensuring the company delivered on its commitments.

First Mover - Hamersley Iron's Aboriginal Training and Liaison Unit

Hamersley Iron's Aboriginal Training and Liaison (ATAL) unit was established in 1992. It was the first attempt by the company to develop a long-term equitable relationship with local traditional owners. Initially, the ATAL employment programme was stand-alone, operating independently of the main mining operations. As it developed, clear articulation into the main mine employment stream became a key feature.

The programme operated on key principles that have come to advise Rio Tinto's broader Indigenous employment programme:

- All training is linked to real work.
- Transferable skills are integral; the training programme is fully accredited to Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) standards.
- There is a sliding scale of pay as trainees became more competent.
- All graduates had to compete for positions in the mainstream mining operations – selection on merit is recognised as essential.

Over the ten-year period to 2002, the programme has trained over 100 Indigenous employees, of whom 90% have found full-time employment within mainstream operations.

Critical Next Step - Contract with Government

In developing its overall Indigenous Employment strategy, Rio Tinto realised it needed partnerships with Aboriginal communities and government to address the national training deficit of Aboriginal people. It also realised that this would loudly signal the scale of the challenge and that a change in culture within and without the organisation was needed to gain significant improvement in the approach to Aboriginal employment. Since 1995, over forty exploration access and mine development agreements that contain provision for Aboriginal employment have been struck with Aboriginal community groups.

In May 1999, the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business instigated the Corporate Leaders for Indigenous Employment Programme. Rio Tinto was one of the first companies to take up a contract with government; a contract that required the company to meet milestones in the employment of Indigenous people and to assist in their placement, training and retention. In return for meeting the milestones, the government provided funding to help meet the additional costs incurred.

Rio Tinto contracted to recruit and retain an additional two hundred (200) Indigenous employees over a three-year period. This target was seen as ambitious, given that the company was aggressively trimming operational costs and that low-skilled employment in the industry as a whole was diminishing.

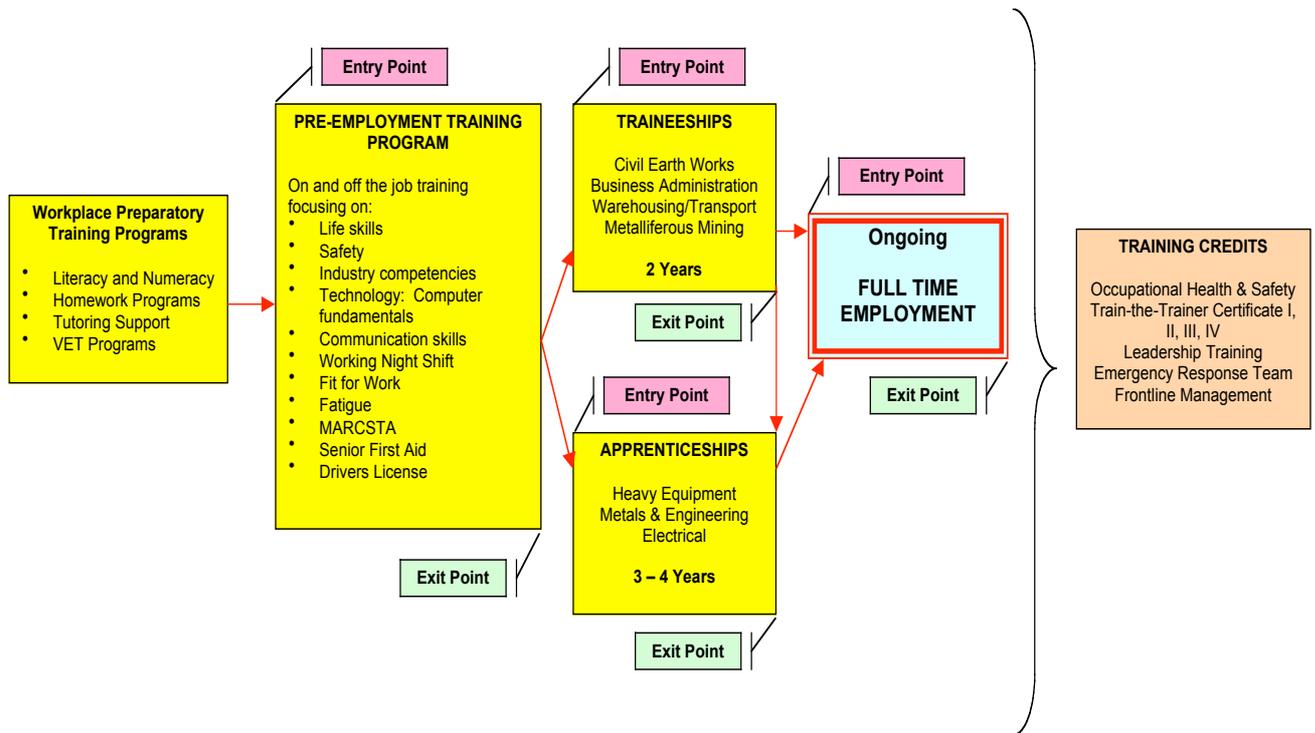
To meet the contract target and gain the full support of operations the Indigenous employment strategy needed to:

- Demonstrate success with Indigenous employees
- Ensure that Indigenous employees were skilled and competent employees
- Integrate training into mainstream operations, and meet production targets
- Maintain high productivity
- Adhere to all safety standards.

Establishing a Comprehensive Programme

A comprehensive model for Indigenous recruitment and development is now established (Fig.2). Various elements of it are described in the following section.

Figure 2 - Rio Tinto Australia's Indigenous Employment Model



Traineeship and Apprenticeship Programme: Vocational skills development was pivotal in changing the internal approach to Indigenous employment. Since the mid 1990s there has been a skilled labour shortage in Northern Australia, while at the same time the resource industry has been expanding. The opportunity to combine a skilled employment programme with increasing Indigenous participation was supported by Business Units that were experiencing high staff turnover and difficulty re-locating employees from southern and eastern Australia.

Rio Tinto developed its own accredited apprenticeships and traineeships in Metalliferous Mining, Warehousing, Office Administration, Civil Earthworks, Electrical Engineering and Heavy Equipment. Hamersley Iron, being the early mover, gained credentials as a nationally accredited training provider and in this capacity has assisted other Rio Tinto Business Units. Internal control on training standards was important in gaining senior and middle management support for the programme and allayed their concerns that the introduction of new Indigenous employees should not compromise productivity or safety.

Family support programmes: To assist Aboriginal employees and their families to become settled within the workforce and remote mining towns associated with the company's operations, a number of initiatives were developed to support Indigenous employees families. These included provision of family mentoring by older respected members of the community and advice on family budgeting.

Cross-cultural education: All employees and contractors at Rio Tinto mine sites are required to undertake cross cultural education to ensure that the entire workforce understands the history of Aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in the region of the mine. These programmes also provide an introduction to the local culture and traditions and are usually run "on country" by local traditional owners.

Pre-employment programmes: These provide potential candidates with information about the mine site, safety induction, health screening and the site's drug and alcohol policy. Pre-employment can be used as a form of employee selection when run over a 1-2 week period involving assessment of literacy needs and training aptitude.

Mentor programme: Each Indigenous employee is provided with a mentor, often an experienced Aboriginal employee, who provides advice and support during the critical first year of employment.

Career development: Every effort is made to ensure that new Indigenous employees see a long-term future in mining and that all are provided with accredited training. There are also opportunities to take on roles as team leaders, superintendents and/or enter the technical and professional streams of career development through the company's cadetship scheme.

For instance, Rio Tinto was one of the first private sector organisations to participate in the Australian National Indigenous Cadetship Programme. Since 1999, twenty students have been supported by Rio Tinto. Currently, sixteen students are supported in various stages of their tertiary studies across a range of disciplines including commerce/ accounting, environmental science, public affairs, science/engineering, commerce/information technology, engineering/ surveying, civil engineering and commerce/ medicine. Two participants have graduated, one in an accounting role and the other as an engineer. Four more cadets will graduate at the end of 2003.□

These career development programmes are critical for a mining industry that will increasingly require professionally qualified people.

Mainstreaming HR Policies and Recruitment

To ensure all job applicants understand that Indigenous people have access to employment opportunities the company specifies in its recruitment advertisements its support for local Indigenous people. Candidate selection teams from human resources and the operations sections are provided with cross-cultural training prior to interviewing Indigenous candidates, to ensure that the recruitment process is appropriate to the candidate's socio-economic circumstance, values and social attributes.

For example, a particularly significant change in human resource practices has been developed at the Argyle Diamond mine in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. Instead of being confronted with overbearing psychometric testing, questionnaires and formal panel interviews, candidates attend a workshop at the mine site for a week where they engage in a series of training and problem-solving activities. The line supervisors who will be directly engaging the employees work alongside the candidates, providing plenty of opportunity for informal 'hands-on' discussion and assessment. The approach has been highly successful in achieving internal change. Argyle has lifted its ratio of Indigenous employees from 4.5% to 14% of its workforce in two years. A particular mark of success is that all people recruited through the programme to date remain employed. In recognition, Argyle was awarded first prize in the WA Equal Opportunity CEO Diversity Forum in 2001.

Challenges, Issues and Benefits

Some specific issues arising, challenges that need to be overcome and examples of benefits derived from Rio Tinto's Indigenous employment programme are discussed below.

Challenges

Internal cultural change: While there is high level Rio Tinto Board and Executive support for Indigenous employment, it is only one of the many performance requirements that operational sites have to meet, including raising productivity and reducing costs. Under these circumstances, there was relatively little initial enthusiasm for the employment programme at sites, hence a strong business case had to be developed to attract the support of operations managers and their teams.

Many people had low expectations of the programme and thought that it would be too difficult to employ large numbers of Indigenous people. However, this perception was contrary to the experiences of Rio Tinto elsewhere in the world and it was clear that entrenched attitudes in Australia needed to be addressed. Demonstrating that Aboriginal people not only wanted to work in mining operations, but that they also could contribute to the overall productivity of the operation was a key challenge. In this regard, the positive experiences at Hamersley Iron in the mid 1990s became critical as a reference point to show that the programme could work.

Also, once non-Indigenous employees understood the importance of having good relationships with local traditional owners and had participated in a cross-cultural programme the attitudinal shift was significant. A number of site General Managers became personally committed to the Indigenous employment programme and actively sought to find opportunities to recruit and train local Indigenous people.

Agreements and Targets: Indigenous negotiators and their representatives are increasingly seeking employment commitments in land access agreements. The Comalco Western Cape Communities Coexistence Agreement (WCCCA) is a recent example. At the time the agreement was signed in early 2001, less than 5% of Comalco's Weipa workforce was locally Indigenous. The Agreement requires Comalco Weipa to reach 35% local Indigenous employment within 10 years. If the recruitment rate falls off this trajectory the company is obliged to increase its spending on its pre-employment programme to bring it back on trajectory. Significantly, under a mutual obligation commitment, the company is relieved from this obligation if the local Indigenous graduation rate at high school fails to maintain the same trajectory. Recently, Comalco has gone beyond its contracted obligation by announcing that every Year-10 graduate from the local high school is guaranteed a place on the employment programme, if they want it. As part of this commitment, Comalco has taken on 25 apprentices and trainees in the past year

Thus, the WCCCA required a wholesale internal cultural change and a significant investment in setting up a structured training and development programme. Elsewhere, agreements that have not included targeted commitments to local Indigenous employment, instead relying on 'best endeavours' clauses, have frequently failed to deliver.

Issues

Local Community Concerns: In remote and rural Australia most Aboriginal communities have limited access to employment. Frequently the only option is the Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP), an Indigenous-specific work scheme in which employees voluntarily surrender unemployment benefits to take up low-paid work in community services.

The Rio Tinto Indigenous employment programme provides an opportunity for Aboriginal people to engage in the real economy – to build their skills and contribute to their own economic future. For the first time people in many of these communities are getting a chance to choose and earn real wages. Notwithstanding this long overdue opportunity, there are often “nay sayers” in community organisations keen to maintain the status quo, whether passive welfare or a subsidised economy (Pearson, 2001).

Part of their concern is that operations will “cherry pick” the most capable community members and CDEP employees, taking them to work at the mine sites. While there is a danger that this might happen indiscriminately, Rio Tinto believes that the provision of a managed pathway into full time employment is exactly what CDEP was set up to achieve. Recruitment into private sector jobs opens up avenues for greater numbers of people to participate in CDEP and use it as the stepping-stone to full time real employment it was envisaged to be (Langton, 2002; Morphy and Sanders, 2002).

Benefits

Relationships: In demonstrating a commitment to real employment Rio Tinto’s operations have greatly improved relationships with local Indigenous people. They see Rio Tinto mines as willing to make a difference for them and their families. Finally, after many years of being excluded from employment, they see that the opportunities are now flowing to local people and not to people from elsewhere.

Bottom Line performance: For all of Rio Tinto’s sites in northern Australia there are significant costs in relocating employees and often their families from the E and SW parts of the country. The development of local skilled people who can compete and win jobs against those from elsewhere will benefit the bottom line of the operation. The local employment experience at Argyle Diamond Mine is demonstrating these benefits. For the past 20 years most of the 500-strong workforce has resided in Perth and commuted to site. These Fly-in Fly-out (FIFO) employees participate on a two-weekly or weekly commute by commercial jet to the mine, some 1,500 km away. They receive a site allowance that approximates to a 25% wage loading to compensate for being away from their families for long periods of time, and live a virtual “bubble existence” completely divorced from the local people on whose country they operate. This impacts negatively on the site’s local community relationship and places a significant financial impost on the operations. Moving to progressively higher levels of local (Indigenous) employment will greatly improve the mine’s community interface and reduce its FIFO operational costs.

Developing skilled local people: Rio Tinto recognises that the people most affected by a mining operation are those that should receive the most benefits and that local economies need to be robust beyond the life of its mines. This is one of the policies of Rio Tinto as outlined in “The way we work”, the company’s published values manifesto. The development of local employees in a range of employment options provides people with transferable skills. The critical test is the transition beyond mine

life, recognising that training and employment programmes contribute to wider community capacity building. To this end, Rio Tinto business units also assist in establishing joint venture businesses, initially contracted to its operations but also encouraged to become independent sustainable businesses. Rio Tinto operations are also involved in education development programmes to ensure that young Indigenous people can access employment opportunity, both on the mine sites and in the wider region, a good example being the Gumala Mirnuwarni Education Enrichment Programme involving thirty students a year in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

External Recognition: Within Rio Tinto Indigenous employment is now recognised as very much part of the “business of the business”. The Group’s achievements, such as employing an additional 181 Indigenous employees since 1999 with greater than 75% retention over 18 months, were recently recognised by the Australian Commonwealth Government. In late 2002, Rio Tinto received the Prime Minister’s Inaugural Corporate Leaders Award for Indigenous Employment.

Aboriginal Perspectives on Employment Diversity

No discussion about contemporary employment provision would be complete without presenting an alternative perspective.

There is a whole collection of reasons for the present disadvantage of many Aboriginal communities. Many have to do with the well-documented history of dispossession and injustices, including the introduction of the church, removal of children, creation of missions, expropriation of lands and removal of people and, in some cases, Government policy regarding lack of recognition and/or assimilation of Aboriginal peoples.

Remote Aboriginal communities, from an outsider's perspective, may appear highly disadvantaged when compared with much of non-Aboriginal Australia. However, while this is undoubtedly often the case it is not true to characterise them solely in terms of their apparent material disadvantage; many people in these communities still enjoy a rich ceremonial life, have vibrant social lives with a huge emphasis on connection to kin, and enjoy living off the land, balancing elements of a more traditional livelihood with some contemporary conveniences (Altman, 2001).

Aboriginal societies have undergone significant changes over the past two centuries. Nonetheless, most particularly in many remote regions, Aboriginal people have maintained significant elements of the complex and distinctive religious relationships between themselves, their families and their land.

The early miners and their successors the mining companies, the pastoral influx, and successive government policies under which Aboriginal people were relocated from their traditional lands, sometimes forcibly, posed an enormous challenge to these intimate connections between people and country and their management of it. The new system brought by the settler peoples treated land as a commodity and everything on it or under it could be removed and sold. However, for many Aboriginal people, their identities continue to be bound up with their connections to traditional country and kin and they feel that they have lost control over how this country should be managed.

However, each Aboriginal group and community is different; in terms of its cultural and political values, its history of engagement with non-Indigenous society, its economy, and its contemporary administrative and political structures. Outsiders should be extremely cautious about making assumptions about Aboriginal groups and

communities and about their values and aspirations without first developing a good dialogue and attempting to understand the complexities and diversity of views that will always be present. The assumptions, knowledge and aspirations which underlie the approaches by resource companies or governments, even if well-meaning, may be quite different from those of the Aboriginal people with whom they are dealing. Groups and communities may not have the political and governance institutions that allow for broad agreement to be reached about, for example, a resource development.

Clearly, Rio Tinto's efforts in Indigenous training, employment and business development can from its perspective provide benefits to Aboriginal communities and individuals. However, we must also recognise that there will always be divergent views amongst Indigenous people, and that some Aboriginal people will reject involvement with resource developers as being contrary to Aboriginal lifestyles and responsibilities to country. We reject, however, any portrayal of what we are doing as 'assimilation'; the now discredited policy under which Aboriginal people were essentially coerced into adopting the lifestyles and values of mainstream Australia. Rio Tinto's Indigenous employment programme is not about assimilation, but rather about choice, and about diversity.

Within this theatre of choice, questions to consider are:

- Will trained and 'employable' Aboriginal people leave the community once the wider world beckons?
- Are communities developing new opportunities on their own, not dependent on Rio Tinto, to keep educated family members in the community itself?
- Is Rio Tinto more than 'one spoke in the wheel' of community development, or perhaps worse, is it the hub?
- Is there a good balance between Rio Tinto complementing and strengthening Aboriginal people's own goals and aspirations on the one hand, and being a 'promoter' of personal and cultural change on the other?
- Is Rio Tinto's involvement in community development a "Band Aid" solution, or genuinely empowering?
- Can and should Aboriginal people and their institutions be the drivers of change, or should change be negotiated and implemented through genuine partnerships between Aboriginal people, governments, and resource developers?

Recognising that these are genuine concerns and that understanding diverse and traditional aspiration is difficult, Rio Tinto is committed to understanding the issues that confront Aboriginal people in the regions where it operates. To this end it supports a variety of on-going socio-economic research projects. The most current being a three-year Australian Research Council linkage project 'Indigenous Community Organisations and Miners: Partnering Sustainable Regional Development'. The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at Australian National University is undertaking the work, with Industry Partners Rio Tinto and the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia (CEDA).

The research project seeks to assess Rio Tinto's existing agreements with Aboriginal people and its community development programs, its success or failure in Indigenous capacity building and the incorporation or otherwise of socio-economic considerations in the closure plans for mines. It also seeks to propose means to improve communications between mining companies and community organisations,

improvements that are essential to facilitate mutual understandings (for instance of Indigenous prerogatives and commercial realities). Research will be largely based on a series of case studies, seeking to identify community relations 'good practice' that can be used both by companies and Indigenous community organisations. Factors being examined include education, health, income distribution, youth-at-risk, training and employment.

Studies such as these exemplify the whole-of-community approach Rio Tinto is pursuing to expand employment opportunity and economic development around its operations. Guided by the Aboriginal people through reference committees and informed consent protocols, the company wants to hear the desires and aspirations of Aboriginal people. Not only will this work guide Rio Tinto policy, it can provide a wealth of information that communities can use for their own purposes and to help guide Government policy.

The Challenge of Genuine Diversity

A mine site is an industrial site and an industrial ethos must prevail in order for the health and safety of all employees to be protected and in order for world-class management of resources to occur. This concept of the site being a 'bubble' of industrial culture is well understood and accepted as necessary by most Aboriginal people. Whatever rich cultural life Aboriginal employees may lead off the site, they are industrial employees whilst on site. In Rio Tinto's experience, old mythologies about Aborigines' inability to work in a 'western way' are simply not true. Going 'walkabout' for instance (which was in fact a rigorous traditional regime of visits to maintain country and family commitments) is accommodated under normal leave arrangements available at mine sites. Very rarely does any special accommodation for Indigenous employees need to be made.

In contrast to this accommodation, we sometimes find a lack of flexibility in the benchmark criteria for Aboriginal employee selection. For instance, HR employment standards can require that potential employees have certain levels of wellness, literacy and numeracy. As desirable as wellness assessments and literacy and numeracy targets are for all Australians, they impose a high hurdle for many Indigenous candidates. If the same standards were imposed on long-standing non-Indigenous employees, many would fail to make the grade. The sad fact is that high numbers of Australians on many work sites are over weight and functionally illiterate. We have to be careful that rigorously applied standards do not become expressions of unrecognised racism.

Normal human resource standards may also require that applicants at security conscious sites such as gold or diamond mines do not have a police record. Unfortunately, many young Aboriginal men in remote parts of Australia do have a police record, often exacerbated by mandatory sentencing regimes. Contact with the social justice system can be for any number of reasons, frequently not criminal offences, nevertheless it attracts a police record and can currently exclude candidates from the opportunity for employment.

Conclusion

Robust institutions, whether they are corporations, economies or communities, have their foundation in diversity.

The examples provided show how embracing Indigenous employment diversity is not an easy exercise. It is genuinely confronting and it can be deeply challenging, particularly for corporations and people who have had long experience with systemic western industrial culture. The challenges are not insurmountable and people come to realise there are real benefits to be gained from embracing diversity.

The potential reward for companies courageous enough to take it on is that they create an environment where diverse, creative solutions to problems can emerge from different bodies of cultural experience. The solutions may come from Indigenous or non-Indigenous employees, but what is inescapable is that the acceptance and celebration of diversity opens up a way of creative thinking that looks for solutions and relationships beyond historical convention. In this way, Rio Tinto and the communities in which it operates will achieve negotiated inclusive relationships based on mutual respect that make for better futures.

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