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# Expanding Employer Engagement:

A Guide to Developing & Sustaining  
an Employer Resource Network®

**Social Policy Research Associates**

in collaboration with  
ERN USA & Michigan Works! Southwest

October 2018



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**ERN is a registered trademark of ERN USA. As such, any efforts to coordinate the development of an ERN in your state or local community should be done in consultation with ERN USA. This is a very important step, as it ensures fidelity to the ERN model and helps ERN USA staff to maintain a standard of excellence across all ERNs.**

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## FREQUENTLY USED ACRONYMS

BSP	Business Solutions Professional
BST	Business Services Team
DOL	U.S. Department of Labor
ERN	Employer Resource Network
ETA	Employment and Training Administration
HR	Human Resource
MDHHS	Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
MWSW	Michigan Works! Southwest
OJT	On the Job training
SPR	Social Policy Research Associates
SWMERN	Southwest Michigan Employer Resource Network
TANF	Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
Upjohn Institute	W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research
WIF	Workforce Innovation Fund
WIOA	Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

# THE GUIDE

## Who is this guide for?

This guide offers detailed guidance on the preparations necessary to develop and implement an Employer Resource Network® (ERN).<sup>1</sup> It is designed primarily for employers as a way to attract and retain their workforce, but also for public workforce professionals and other community members—local workforce development boards, economic development agencies, social service agencies and community organizations—interested in improving economic vitality in their communities through stronger business engagement and support for the workforce.

## How was this guide created?

In 2015, the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research (Upjohn Institute) hired Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to conduct an implementation and outcomes evaluation of their Southwest Michigan Employer Resource Network Expansion (SWMERN-E) project funded through a 2014 Workforce Innovation Fund (WIF) grant from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration. The SWMERN-E project was intended to build upon the existing ERN model by increasing employer engagement across a larger geographic area and expanding service delivery components for ERN members, their workforce, and individuals seeking employment with ERN companies. Under the expanded model, SWMERN staff hoped to increase and improve integration of the ERN’s service delivery components with the public workforce system. In Michigan, the local employment and training services are delivered through Michigan Works! service centers in coordination with contracted service providers, state agency staff, and community partners.<sup>2</sup> SPR’s evaluation of SWMERN activities spanned a three-year period, from March 2015 to September 2018. Information presented in this guide pertains to data collected about the model during the first three years of implementation.

### **Is this guide only for organizations in Michigan?**

No, this guide is meant to help anyone interested in starting an ERN. It is designed to help you understand the basics of the model and how to assess whether an ERN is a “good fit” for addressing the needs of your local business community and workforce. Since the development of this guide was funded as part of the Southwest Michigan ERN evaluation, the guide focuses content and examples on the experiences of the Upjohn Institute under its WIF grant.

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<sup>1</sup> Employer Resource Network is a registered trademark of ERN USA.

<sup>2</sup> The network of One-Stops offering employment training services and resources in Michigan is referred to as Michigan Works!. In Southwest Michigan, they are called Michigan Works! Southwest.





# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide details how to start, implement, and sustain an ERN, including new features of the model introduced by the SWMERN-E project under the WIF grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

This guide refers to tools and resources created by ERN USA (the creators of the ERN model) and to practices piloted by the SWMERN; the terminology used is specific to the language used by the SWMERN. One of the key features of the ERN model is its adaptability to local or regional contexts; the ERN in your local area may ultimately be called something different and may look somewhat different from other ERNs. Further, much of the terminology and framing language in this guide mirrors that used by the public workforce system in Southwest Michigan since the service arm of the Upjohn Institute that provides workforce programs and services was responsible for the expansion. When you engage employers, it is best to mirror that community's language, which likely focuses more on business efficiencies, worker productivity, and return on investment.

If you are talking with your employer community, be cognizant of framing the information in language that resonates with them—typically, language that speaks to efficient and productive management with long-term corporate vitality and growth in mind.

The table below highlights icons that are used throughout the manual that provide resources or examples that may be useful to your ERN planning and implementation efforts.

ICON	HOW USED IN MANUAL
	This icon represents specific examples of SWMERN practices.
	This icon represents available tools and resources for ERN planning and implementation.
	This icon represents a tip based on SWMERN implementation.
	This icon represents things you may want to consider or ask yourself as you move forward with ERN planning and implementation.

# INTRODUCTION

## The Employer Resource Network<sup>®</sup> Model

Employer Resource Networks, or ERNs, are private–public consortia whose goal is reduced absenteeism and improved workforce retention through employee support. Many communities operating ERNs use them as a regional social and talent development network strategy. ERNs create local networks of employers, public agencies, and local service providers that support employer members and their workforce through retention services. The primary vehicles of support are professional job and stabilization coaching and supportive services provided to members' entry-level workers to help them maintain and thrive in their employment.

As of July 2018, there were 33 ERNs supported by 11 lead organizations in Arizona, Indiana, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, Tennessee and Texas.<sup>3</sup> The ERN USA network currently consists of more than 70 strategic partners, 200 employers, and approximately 35 success coaches.

### Key Principles of the ERN Model

1. Business engagement through an employer member governance structure
2. Cross-sector collaboration among employers, human service organizations, and training providers
3. On-site, workplace-based employee coaching and referrals to additional community resources



<sup>3</sup> Telephone interview with James Vander Hulst, ERN USA on June 4, 2018.

## Why Create an ERN?

The challenges that low-skill jobseekers and workers face in securing and retaining employment and advancing into higher-paying positions are well-documented.<sup>4</sup> These challenges have existed for decades and have continued into the 21st century. Over the course of the Great Recession, for example, lower-skill workers lost a higher percentage of jobs than higher-skill workers did, and employment for those with less than a high school education fell by more than 10 percent.<sup>5</sup> The challenges that entry-level workers face finding employment opportunities with the potential for career advancement and higher wages carry into the current era as well. Even in a time of economic recovery, retention of low-skilled workers remains a challenge for many employers. ERNs can assist employers in addressing some of the challenges faced by their workforce by reducing absenteeism and increasing employee retention.

Of the extensive research on low-skill jobseekers and low-wage workers, the most substantial body of evidence focuses on recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The TANF program provides temporary financial assistance for children and families with one or more dependent children, including pregnant women. This financial assistance helps recipients pay for food, shelter, utilities, and expenses other than medical. The original ERN model envisioned public assistance recipients as the primary beneficiaries of the coaching services that are at the core of the model. While the model has expanded over time to include serving a broader range of employees, that early research is useful, and we review it briefly here.

Research on public assistance recipients and other low-skill jobseekers has demonstrated that, although many are successful in finding employment, job loss is common. For example, shortly before TANF's enactment, between 25 percent and 40 percent of public assistance recipients who found a job lost that job within one year.<sup>6</sup> Other research found that about one quarter of public assistance recipients left their jobs within three months, and nearly half did so within a year.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, former public assistance recipients very commonly had long spells of unemployment between jobs, with 40 percent of those who lost a job needing at least a year to

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Carole Clymer, Brandon Roberts, and Julie Strawn, *States of Change: Policies and Programs to Promote Low-Wage Workers' Steady Employment and Advancement* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2001); Pamela Loprest, Gregory Acs, Caroline Ratcliffe, and Katie Vinopal, *Who Are Low Wage Workers?* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009); Nan L. Maxwell, *The Working Life: The Labor Market for Workers in Low-Skilled Jobs* (Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2006); Anu Rangarajan and Tim Novak, *The Struggle to Sustain Employment: The Effectiveness of the Postemployment Services Demonstration* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 1999); Julie Strawn and Karin Martinson, *Steady Work and Better Jobs: How to Help Low-Income Parents Sustain Employment and Advance in the Workforce* (New York: MDRC, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Karin Martinson, *Partnering with Employers to Promote Job Advancement for Low-Skill Individuals* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Hershey and LaDonna Pavetti, "Turning Job Finders into Job Keepers," *Future of Children* 7, no. 1 (1997): 74–86.

<sup>7</sup> Strawn and Martinson, *Steady Work and Better Jobs*.

find work. The ERN model is an approach which aims to remedy these documented challenges with employment retention and advancement strategies.

## Common Characteristics of ERNs

- ERNs are employer-based, and business members make decisions as a group with the support of ERN USA staff and ERN-funded success coaches.
- Usually it takes five to 10 small- to medium-sized employers to create a solid economy of scale to fund the collective management and operation of the ERN, including funding “shares” (percentages of time for on-site success coaches).
- ERNs help leverage available resources in the community from government, nonprofit organizations, local education institutions, and other providers to offer education, training, and supportive services to ERN members’ incumbent workforce.
- Services are available to all workers within the ERN company, although special focus is on helping to retain and provide advancement opportunities to low-wage employees.
- ERN-funded success coaches work collaboratively with executives, Human Resource (HR) staff, supervisors, and managers to ensure workers know about available resources and can leverage these resources to overcome employment barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare, low skills, etc.).
- ERNs often are comprised of strategic partners involved in social service agencies, workforce development boards and their administrative entities, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, community colleges and technical education centers, adult basic education providers, and nonprofit organizations in helping to bring resources to the table to serve employers’ incumbent workers.

### Key Facts about ERNs and How They Work

<b>Who are the primary ERN stakeholders?</b>	ERN stakeholders include small to mid-sized companies; government agencies such as public human services and workforce development agencies; nonprofit organizations; credit unions and community banks; community colleges and vocational training institutions; and local, regional, and national philanthropic organizations.
<b>What is the typical size of ERN member companies?</b>	Small to mid-sized companies with 50 to 8,000 employees are the primary ERN participants. ERNs are of particular value to companies with 75 to 300 employees that have no or very small HR departments and employers who are predominantly in lower-skill, lower-wage positions whose workforce may need additional supports to retain employment.
<b>What is the ERN's administrative structure?</b>	ERNs are virtual organizations governed by an active board. These boards are composed of HR staff from investing employers as voting members, public and private human services professionals as strategic partners, and success coaches.
<b>What is the annual cost of operating an ERN?</b>	Depending on the number of ERN members and each member's anticipated utilization of an ERN success coach, employer membership fees range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 annually. Using Census data and industry estimates, Work Institute estimated that the cost of employee turnover is 33 percent of a worker's annual salary. <sup>8</sup> Using the median U.S. worker's salary of \$45,000, Work Institute found that the average cost of turnover per employee is \$15,000. So, an employer's contribution to join the ERN is less than one termination annually. Based on survey data from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the average cost per new hire is \$4,129, which suggests that many ERN members at least break even if they can retain one to two employees annually depending on the membership fee, which varies by ERN. <sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lindsey Sears, *2017 Retention Report: Trends, Reasons & Recommendations* (Franklin, TN: Work Institute, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/human-capital-benchmarking-report.aspx> accessed on July 15, 2018.

<p><b>How are ERN success coaches' salaries funded?</b></p>	<p>The first year of an ERN is typically seeded through a 50–50 match of employer contributions and philanthropic funds. The employer members cover between 75 percent and 100 percent of the cost after the initial first- (and sometimes second-) year start-up phase. After the start-up phase, success coach staffing costs are covered by ERN members. However, if an ERN is starting without any outside funding the employers who make up the ERN must be able to fund the costs of ERN administration and hiring the success coach(es). Again, the number of success coaches needed to serve ERN members varies depending on the size and number of businesses involved in the ERN.</p>
<p><b>What types of employees benefit from ERN services?</b></p>	<p>While early ERN efforts focused on low-wage workers receiving public assistance, all employees in ERN participating companies, regardless of income, now have access to success coaching and training. Employers market the ERN as an employee benefit, much like their traditional benefit programs.</p>
<p><b>What is the relationship between HR departments and staff and ERN success coaches?</b></p>	<p>Success coaching is fully integrated into HR protocols from recruitment and interviewing to termination. Issues such as employee lateness, absenteeism, or poor performance trigger HR managers or supervisors to make referrals to the ERN success coach. Employees are also able to contact the ERN-funded success coach directly, without being referred by HR staff. Success coaches are not company employees and they maintain a balance of appropriate communication with HR personnel; this helps ensure worker confidentiality.</p>
<p><b>How is an ERN different from a social service agency?</b></p>	<p>ERN success coaches are located on site at participating ERN company workplaces, they are not located at social service agencies. Their caseload is typically one-third that of a social service agency case worker, so they can proactively focus on employee retention. Success coach accessibility and availability are keys to ERN success; employees have immediate and direct access to counseling and referrals, and employers retain workers whose social issues might otherwise result in termination.</p>

**Source:** Adapted from SWMERN fact sheet (<http://ern-mi.com/blob/service-files.ashx?ID=57>).

## Elements of an Expanded ERN: The Story of the Southwest Michigan ERN

The ERN model is an example of a **place-based strategy** that focuses on investments in neighborhoods and communities to increase opportunities for businesses and workers. While place-based strategies take on a wide variety of forms, their common traits include: a focus on a specific geographic area; public-private partnerships intended to align programs, strategies, and resources; and community anchors—institutions, organizations, programs, and other major investments capable of attracting new partners, leveraging additional dollars, or inspiring community engagement more broadly.

The SWMERN was first established in early 2012 for two Michigan counties—Kalamazoo and Calhoun—and included 11 employer members. Administrative support for the early ERN model in Southwest Michigan was provided by a partner agency, West Michigan TEAM (now Michigan ERN in Michigan and ERN USA outside the state), which supports ERNs elsewhere in Michigan and around the country. Through the SWMERN, employer members jointly funded two success coaches who provided on-site retention services such as coaching, access to short-term loans, and referrals to additional sources of support. In addition, members met monthly to govern the SWMERN and to network around HR challenges and strategies for addressing those challenges. SWMERN membership also connected employers to a network of strong strategic partner organizations including social services agencies (such as the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS)), workforce development agencies (Michigan Works!), chambers of commerce, and community and technical colleges that could work collaboratively within their existing service networks to address employers' challenges and hiring needs. Through membership, SWMERN employers expected to experience lower turnover rates and hiring costs, and improved productivity due to reductions in tardiness and absenteeism.

Employers wishing to join the SWMERN are invited to join by existing members and through outreach conducted by SWMERN success coaches and Upjohn Institute Business Service Team (BST) professionals. Interested members attend a SWMERN meeting and existing members are asked to provide input on whether the business should be added to the network. If the employer candidate appeared to be a cultural fit with the other members' vision for employee skill building and was willing to pay the membership dues, the company is invited to become a member.

As noted in the overview section of this guide, in September 2014, Upjohn Institute, the One-Stop operator for the local workforce development area, received a \$3 million WIF grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to expand the ERN model in their community, and this became the SWMERN-E project.

*“This is not a community partner program we are selling to employers; the ERN model is focused on having employers buy into its ownership. Employers are the decision makers and govern ERN operations. Employers are creating opportunities for their employees and not contracting out to a for-profit or nonprofit for these services.”*

**James Vander Hulst, ERN-USA**

The WIF-funded innovation was meant to build on the existing SWMERN, expanding its reach and services in five key areas as follows:

- **Geographic expansion.** The original SWMERN encompassed Kalamazoo and Calhoun Counties, both counties are part of the local workforce area served by Michigan Works! Southwest (MWSW). The SWMERN-E was designed to add employer members in the local area’s two remaining counties --Branch and St. Joseph. The goal was to actively recruit new employers in these counties and to increase ERN membership by 25 new employers.
- **Recruitment of eligible jobseekers.** The SWMERN had not addressed the difficulty that ERN members experienced recruiting a pipeline of skilled workers. The expanded model aimed to help ERN members fill job vacancies by identifying and recruiting prospective employees. SWMERN staff did this through stronger linkages with the public workforce system and referrals from existing strategic partners.
- **Training for jobseekers.** Through contracts with local training providers—community colleges, technical education centers, and community partners—the SWMERN-E funded soft and technical skills training for job candidates recruited through the network. Before each training program was offered, MWSW and the ERN success coaches would discuss the training program with ERN members to ensure that the training met their needs and they had available job openings for students upon completion. Upon completion of the grant-funded training program, ERN members were invited to attend job fairs to meet and interview graduates of the training programs. In addition to cohort-based training programs offered to jobseekers, the WIF grant also supported on-the-job training (OJT) for jobseekers and incumbent workers. While the WIF grant helped to offset the cost of OJT, through the Michigan Works! program, the State of Michigan currently has a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) waiver that allows employers to be reimbursed for up to 90 percent of the cost of OJT services.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The typical OJT reimbursement level is 50 percent. WIOA defines “on-the-job training” (OJT) as training by an employer that is provided to a paid participant while engaged in productive work in a job that: (1) Provides knowledge or skills essential to the full and adequate performance of the job; (2) Provides reimbursement to the employer of up to 50 percent of the wage rate of the participant for the extraordinary costs of providing training and additional supervision related to training; and (3) Is limited in duration to the occupation for which the participant is being trained, taking into account the content of the training, the prior work experience of the participant, and the service strategy of the participant, as appropriate. So, if you do not have WIF funds to support OJT for employers, you may be able to utilize existing public workforce funds under your formula-funded programs.



### How important is the ERN model for engaging employers?

*“The SWMERN model has been a great tool for our business service professionals (BSPs) to talk with employers. We have seen so much more interest [in the model] from employers since BSPs started talking with employers about it. We also see more interest among city officials for supporting ERNs in their local communities.”*

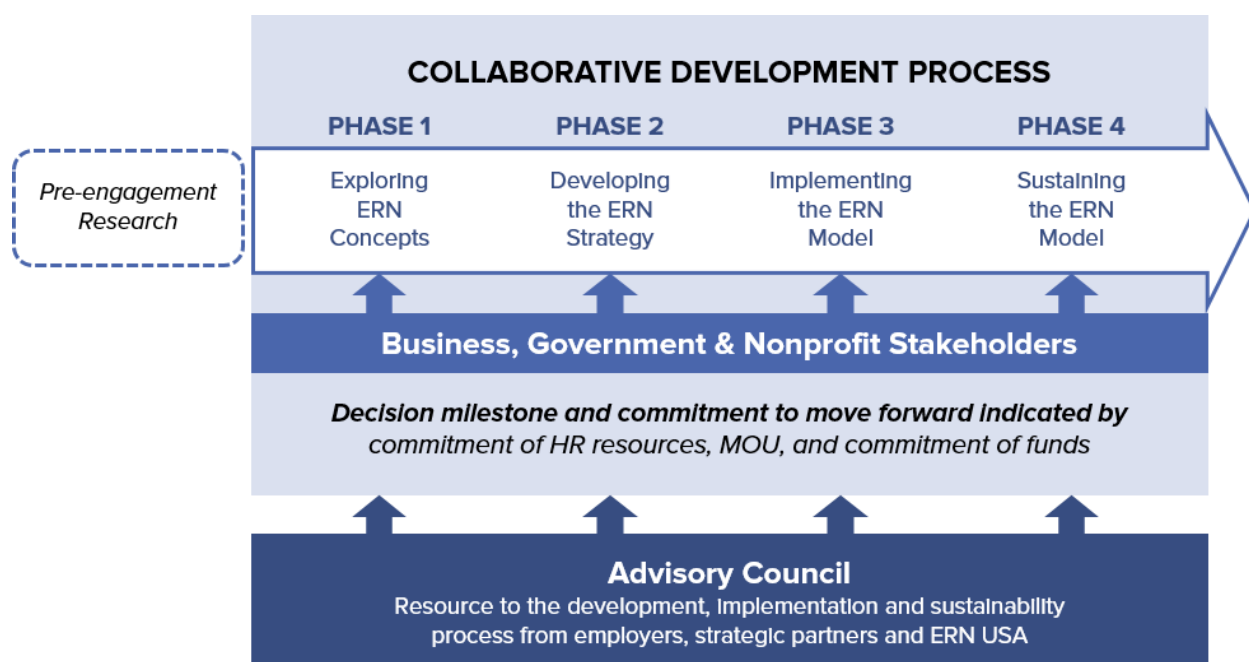
**Dallas Oberlee, Director of Program Operations**

- **Articulated career ladders.** The SWMERN-E aimed to enable ERN members to promote from within their own companies as well as hire unemployed workers from other companies within the ERN. First, staff and success coaches assisted employers in developing career ladders to facilitate employee advancement. The intent was for ERN members to develop career ladders where positions were compatible across industries. For example, an entry-level food service position within the healthcare industry could lead to a management position in food service in the hospitality industry. Second, through MWSW and its connection to state and federal grants, the SWMERN-E connected incumbent workers to additional training appropriate for specific career ladders.
- **Connection to the public workforce system.** To support the many employees who are also recipients of public assistance, several ERN success coaches were hired through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. To create a more direct link with the public workforce system, WIF expansion funds helped the SWMERN to hire two new success coaches from the Michigan Works! agency, which created a stronger connection between the ERN and the public workforce system in the community. The funds also allowed the SWMERN to build stronger linkages with the public workforce system by engaging with the MWSW Business Services Team (BST) in the local area to recruit jobseekers for positions with ERN members and by working with its One-Stops to identify training opportunities for member employees or prospective employees, all with the aim of providing better support for staffing, skill building, and career ladders.

SWMERN's experiences with their expanded service model may be useful for other communities interested in engaging the public workforce system in their ERNs. These innovations differentiate the SWMERN-E from most existing ERNs because SWMERN is more focused on integrating the public workforce system through the Michigan Works! service centers into their service delivery process.

## Process and Suggested Timeline

Developing an ERN in your local community or state involves a collaborative development process that occurs in phases, and the components of each phase may be revisited as new employers, industries, and resources are added in your community.



The process of establishing an ERN occurs in four primary phases:

**Phase I: Exploring ERN Concepts.** Familiarize yourself with the key components of the ERN model, identify a lead organization, and establish a leadership team that includes employer champions to promote the ERN within the business community. This phase also includes gathering information and conducting a feasibility assessment to help develop a plan to implement and launch the ERN.

**Phase II: Developing the ERN Strategy.** Prepare an implementation plan that includes the fee structure that will be used with ERN members and identify an employer of record for success coaches.

**Phase III: Implementing the ERN Model.** Organize and delegate work across the partner organizations to implement the ERN model strategies your team has chosen. This phase also includes developing ERN member and success coach communication, community referral, hiring, training, and other processes for ERN implementation.

**Phase IV: Sustaining the ERN Model.** Evaluate the effectiveness of the ERN, through internal performance monitoring and possibly an external evaluation, and share that information with public and private stakeholders in the community. This phase also includes assessing the professional development needs of ERN success coaches as well as building feedback loops designed to maintain a high-level of engagement with ERN members and to continuously

improve ERN effectiveness. As will be addressed later in the manual, Phase III may also include a sustainability assessment to ensure funding levels are sufficient to meet the ERN's needs.

Note that there is a lot of overlap between the phases of the project and the roles that can be played across and among organizations and stakeholder groups. It is important to identify roles and responsibilities up front so that key components of the model are not overlooked. How you use this guide depends on your particular role(s) and responsibilities during ERN implementation and ongoing operation. Throughout ERN development and implementation, the lead organization and the ERN's strategic partners play vital roles as follows:

- **Lead organization.** At least one lead organization and staff from within that organization should be responsible for maintaining oversight of the entire project and understanding the key elements of the model. Your lead organization should coordinate with a leadership team that includes representatives from strategic partners, employer champions and ERN USA. Periodically, the entire leadership team should come together to review the steps in this guide to ensure that they have identified which elements of the ERN model they want to implement and who is responsible for ensuring these components are implemented. The lead organization will serve as the conduit between the local community and ERN USA staff.
- **Strategic partners.** Other organizations and stakeholders will play a vital role in implementing the ERN model in your community, and we refer to these organizations and stakeholders as strategic partners. Strategic partners can include state and local government agencies responsible for workforce development, economic development, and health and human services; community- and faith-based organizations; training providers; financial institutions; and employer associations. It is important for these strategic partners to familiarize themselves with the ERN model and understand where they add value to its implementation. We recommend that the leadership team coordinate with strategic partners to keep them briefed on ERN implementation efforts and to see how programs and services can be coordinated between ERN success coaches and strategic partner organizations.

The table below shows the key activities and suggested timelines for each phase in the process of building an ERN. Keep in mind that many of the steps for these key activities are outlined in the remaining sections of the guide. For example, the implementation plan referenced below refers to a written document that outlines the key roles and responsibilities of strategic partners, activities and planned deadlines for completing activities and funding sources identified for ERN implementation. The table also notes the primary responsible party for each phase of the work.

## ERN Implementation Phases

Primary Responsible Party	Key Activities by Phase	Suggested Timeline
<b>Phase I: Exploring ERN Concepts</b>		
<b>ERN USA and Local Leadership Organization(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain familiarity with the ERN model</li> <li>• Identify lead organization and establish leadership team</li> <li>• Conduct a community readiness assessment</li> </ul>	1-2 months
<b>Phase II: Developing the ERN Strategy</b>		
<b>ERN USA and Local Leadership Organization(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare for implementation and launch of the ERN</li> <li>• Choose a fee structure and identify an employer of record for success coaches</li> <li>• Identify and select an employer of record for success coaches</li> <li>• Recruit ERN members and establish a governance structure and communication protocols</li> <li>• Recruit, hire and train success coaches</li> </ul>	2-3 months
<b>Phase III: Implementing the ERN Model</b>		
<b>ERN USA and Lead ERN Organization(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit and establish a referral process with strategic partners</li> <li>• Establish a data entry protocol</li> <li>• Coordinate employee loan and savings programs with financial institutions</li> <li>• Engage the public workforce system</li> <li>• Identify potential training providers for ERN members</li> </ul>	5–7 months (Ongoing)
<b>Phase IV: Sustaining the ERN Model</b>		
<b>Lead ERN Organization(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct continuous outreach and marketing to employers</li> <li>• Provide staff development opportunities for success coaches</li> <li>• Evaluate the need for additional success coaches</li> <li>• Document and broadly disseminate ERN successes</li> </ul>	4–5 months (Ongoing)

We see ERN model implementation as part of a larger systemic effort toward broad engagement across these systems (public workforce, economic development, education, business, etc.) and sectors (private, public, and nonprofit). As with any new initiative, support from stakeholders across all levels of each organization (executive, management, and line staff) is crucial to success.

The table below shows the primary responsibilities of key stakeholder groups in each phase of implementing the ERN model. Keep in mind that leadership and stakeholder groups may vary widely, and the titles and roles of staff involved in carrying out the work may differ from ERN to ERN. Nevertheless, we have identified what we see as the most common roles and responsibilities across the various phases of ERN implementation, based on the experiences of ERN USA and the SWMERN.

### Overview of Primary Responsibilities of Key Stakeholders in Implementing the ERN Model

	Phase I: Exploring	Phase II: Development	Phase III: Implementation	Phase IV: Sustainability
<b>ERN USA/Lead Organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist with creation of ERN</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify employer of record for ERN success coaches</li> <li>Recommend fee structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit employers</li> <li>Train success coaches</li> <li>Maintain data management system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinate cross-ERN sharing</li> <li>Provide data on ERN services and outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Employers and Employer Organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess need for ERN success coaches</li> <li>Provide information on current context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommend fee structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Join ERN</li> <li>Identify on-site contact</li> <li>Identify training needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess value</li> <li>Share experiences with other employers</li> </ul>
<b>Public Workforce and/or Health and Human Service System(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify strategic partners</li> <li>Conduct readiness assessment</li> <li>Develop implementation plan</li> <li>Serve as lead organization (as long as some autonomy remains between board and ERN governance)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Serve as employer of record for ERN success coaches</li> <li>Prepare ERN implementation plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review and promote implementation plan</li> <li>Coordinate services with strategic partners</li> <li>Allocate staff and resources to serve as success coaches</li> <li>Provide services such as employment, benefits administration, and supportive services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrate services into ERN model</li> <li>Share ERN model with business community</li> <li>Coordinate and participate in sustainability planning</li> </ul>

	Phase I: Exploring	Phase II: Development	Phase III: Implementation	Phase IV: Sustainability
<b>Public and Private Nonprofits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serve as lead organization</li> <li>• Identify strategic partners</li> <li>• Conduct readiness assessment</li> <li>• Develop implementation plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serve as employer of record for ERN success coaches</li> <li>• Prepare ERN implementation plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and promote implementation plan</li> <li>• Coordinate services with strategic partners</li> <li>• Allocate staff to serve as success coaches and resources</li> <li>• Provide services such as employment, benefits administration, and supportive services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate services into ERN model</li> <li>• Share ERN model with business community</li> <li>• Coordinate and participate in sustainability planning</li> </ul>
<b>Community Colleges and Vocational Training Organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify strategic partners</li> <li>• Conduct readiness assessment</li> <li>• Develop implementation plan</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct skills assessments</li> <li>• Develop industry-specific training programs</li> <li>• Coordinate delivery of training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate services into ERN model</li> <li>• Share ERN model with business community</li> <li>• Coordinate and participate in sustainability planning</li> <li>• Provide data to lead organization</li> </ul>
<b>Local, Regional, and National Foundations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide seed funding for planning process</li> <li>• Serve as lead organization</li> <li>• Identify strategic partners</li> <li>• Facilitate implementation planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offset cost of ERN membership for first year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and promote implementation plan</li> <li>• Coordinate services with strategic partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote use of ERN model</li> <li>• Disseminate best practices</li> </ul>

# PHASE I:

## EXPLORING ERN CONCEPTS

Focused leadership is essential in exploring and planning for this type of social innovation. Establishing an ERN requires local leaders and organizations that are willing to work collaboratively to build private–public partnerships that focus on job retention and skill building for an employer’s existing workforce.

This section covers key activities that will help you decide if your local community is ready to initiate an ERN. Many of the key activities and steps can be undertaken simultaneously.

### Key Activities

- Gain familiarity with the ERN model
- Identify a lead organization and leadership team to initiate the process and conduct a preliminary scan of potential seed funding sources
- Conduct a readiness assessment to determine your community’s readiness for establishing an ERN

### Step I-1: Gain Familiarity with the ERN Model

Before embarking on establishing an ERN, you should familiarize yourself with the ERN model and conduct exploratory meetings to assess interest from your local business community. Your lead organization, discussed next in Step Two, should review the ERN USA website, contact ERN USA to set up an exploratory meeting, and consider asking for referrals to contacts at other ERNs to learn what is working well and to receive guidance on overcoming any start-up or implementation challenges. ERN USA has valuable resources and expertise in helping local communities to assess their readiness to implement an ERN as well as experience marketing the ERN model to employers and other stakeholders.

### Step I-2: Identify a Lead Organization and Leadership Team

Identifying a lead organization is critical to launching an ERN. The job of the lead organization is to involve a critical mass of interested employers. This buy-in is key, as the ERN model is based on employers governing the direction and growth of the ERN.

*“Most employers are concerned about an outside entity coming into their community and trying to run [a] program, but ERNs are governed by employers....At the end of the day, it is employers who are going to make or break it.”*

**James Vander Hulst, ERN-USA**

Funding for public and nonprofit social service programs is uncertain, once your ERN is up and running, employers will need to make a commitment to maintaining it. But it is your lead organization and team that will facilitate community partner engagement and ongoing employer recruitment, provide coaching staff, and manage ERN operations. Thus, it is also important that this lead organization has the capability to conduct a readiness assessment, identify sources of seed funding to launch the outreach and marketing to employers, and identify key stakeholders and strategic partners (e.g., social service organizations, community and faith-based organizations, public workforce system) that may be able to provide direct services to affected workers within the ERN members' workforce.

Your lead organization should also establish a leadership team. The roles and responsibilities of this team should be customized to the needs of your local community. The lead organization and leadership team should:

- Work with ERN USA staff to plan for implementation and launch of the ERN;
- Gather information to make an informed decision about how the ERN will be implemented (e.g., geographic focus, types of services offered, connection to public systems);
- Build consensus and buy-in from strategic partners at the state and local levels as well as service providers to whom ERN success coaches can connect employees;
- Appoint a communications lead for the leadership team;
- Create a timeline for ERN implementation; and
- Oversee ERN implementation and expansion.

Your leadership team does not have to be a newly formed group; you may already have a community group that is grappling with skills development and retention issues in the community. If an appropriate group already exists, use it for ERN planning and implementation. An ERN launch may have a stronger chance of success with an existing group that has identified roles and functioning communication structures already in place.

A key challenge in establishing an ERN is ensuring that the stakeholders involved in its implementation—employers and strategic partners—buy in to the model. Ideas or initiatives can sometimes be pushed through by a single organization or leader; however, support from *many* employers and *multiple* organizations is essential to establishing a successful ERN. Tying the development of the ERN to a larger strategic mission for the regional and local economy will allow everyone to see the value of implementing the model.



As you build support for the ERN, make it as visible as possible by speaking about it at public meetings, community events and internal, staff meetings. This will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to see how they might engage with the leadership team in planning for and implementing the ERN.

You should carefully consider what language you use as you market the ERN. You may want to highlight the success of other ERNs, or you may want to begin referring to your ERN by another name that ties it to a larger community vision for economic development, workforce development, and/or education. Most importantly, you will want to ensure that the planning for the ERN is tied directly to the needs of the different stakeholder groups, especially employers. For example, highlighting the value of the ERN to reducing employee absenteeism and improved productivity may resonate more with employers, whereas noting the ERN's potential to remove employment barriers may resonate more with workforce development professionals.



Based on the experiences of the SWMERN, your key leadership team members might include:

- The chamber of commerce;
- Economic development agencies;
- Employers (2–3 champions);
- Community partners such as United Way or a local church with strong community ties; and/or
- The local public workforce development organization.

## *Role of ERN USA*

As the use of ERNs expanded across the country, the originator of the ERN model, West Michigan TEAM, expanded to become ERN USA. Today, ERN USA partners with lead organizations across the country to assist in the start-up and development of new ERNs. These new ERN lead organizations are licensed members of ERN USA and can facilitate the creation of new ERNs in their respective states and regions. For example, in New York the lead organization is Schenectady Works, the workforce development division of the City Mission of Schenectady, whose director has the license from ERN USA to help develop new ERNs in the state with assistance from ERN USA. Schenectady Works, under the auspices of New York ERN, has the right to sublicense the use of the terms “New York ERN” and “ERN” after seeking approval and permission from ERN USA and adding an addendum to their licensing agreement with ERN USA.

ERN USA provides licensed lead organizations with the following services and benefits:

- An internet-based platform using Salesforce for data collection, reporting, and ERN communications;
- Availability as a thought partner on establishing new ERNs in the state;

- Outreach and marketing materials such as success coach business cards, Facebook page, posters, flyers, employee-targeted newsletters, brochures, and an ERN webpage;
- Participation in a national learning community made up of other ERN members and lead organizations including national conferences hosted around the country;
- Participation in sponsored quarterly, national peer coaching calls;
- Involvement in educating, building, and disseminating best practices with key personnel at the local, state, and federal levels (e.g., government agencies and elected officials); and
- Coordination of customizable ERN member customer satisfaction surveys.

The SWMERN, like other ERNs throughout the country, developed its own logo to use on marketing and outreach materials for its region. This has helped to differentiate it from other Michigan ERNs operating in the state.



## Step I-3: Conduct a Community Readiness Assessment

An important component of the planning process is conducting a community readiness assessment that analyzes your community's readiness to implement an ERN. ERN USA, in collaboration with Dr. Lynn Wooten from the University of Michigan, developed a Locator/Scaling Tool<sup>11</sup> that an ERN's lead organizations and stakeholders can use to assess the readiness of the community to establish an ERN. With this online tool (<http://www.ern-usa.com/blob/site-files.ashx?ID=4>), your local community can determine whether it is ready for ERN implementation using the following seven questions:

1. What would be the barriers to establishing an ERN in your community?
2. What are the assets your community would leverage to establish an ERN (e.g., public workforce funds, economic development funds, public welfare, other)?

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<sup>11</sup> Questions are taken from *The DISC Locator/Scaling Tool for Employer Resource Networks: Guidebook for Dialogue and Assessment* (<http://www.ern-usa.com/blob/site-files.ashx?ID=4>).

3. Would the ERN USA model be something your community—employers, social service agencies, and workforce development organizations—would support?
4. Where do issues around employer retention, employee absenteeism, and productivity “rate” in your community? Are they a priority? Does the community currently receive funding and support to address these areas?
5. Are these issues covered in local media and discussed in political and social arenas?
6. To what degree are personal and family challenges contributing to job turnover among low-wage and entry-level workers in your community?
7. Is employee retention an issue with small and medium-sized businesses in your community?

The **Locator Tool** was designed to help communities assess their capacity and readiness for an ERN; its use is a precursor to implementing an ERN.



The Locator/Scaling Tool is available at <http://www.ern-usa.com/blob/site-files.ashx?ID=4>.

## PHASE II:

# DEVELOPING THE ERN STRATEGY

Moving beyond exploration requires the lead organization(s), strategic partners and employers sign-on to developing, implementing and growing the ERN model locally. This phase includes identifying a strategy that works at the local-level to develop an ERN strategy that can be implemented at a regional community-level, which includes planning for ERN implementation and growth with a clear and cohesive implementation plan, choosing a fee structure for ERN membership, identifying an employer of record for ERN success coaches, recruiting ERN members and establishing a governance structure and recruiting, hiring and training success coaches.

This section covers key activities that will help you implement your ERN strategy locally and identifies components that must be in place prior to initiating wide-spread marketing and recruitment activities with employers in your community.

### Key Activities

- Plan for implementation and launch of the ERN by developing an implementation plan
- Choose a fee structure for ERN membership
- Identify and select an employer of record for your success coaches
- Recruit ERN members and establish governance structure and communication protocols
- Recruit, hire and train success coaches

### Step II-1. Plan for Implementation and Launch of the ERN

Planning for implementation and launch of the ERN by developing an implementation plan that clearly delineates roles and responsibilities of ERN USA staff, lead organizations, and local stakeholder organizations. The ERN implementation plan should clearly outline the following areas:

- **A schedule for key milestones.** This section should outline your schedule for ERN implementation with task deadlines and project timelines.
- **Allocation of resources and key contributors.** This section should address resources and key contributors for those resources including time, monetary contributions, and key personnel. In some instances, it may be necessary for the lead organization to secure additional planning grant funds to initiate the start of the ERN.
- **Lead organization and stakeholder responsibilities.** This section should address which organizations and individuals are responsible for various tasks. For example, which

organization(s) will market the model to local employers, financial institutions, and community service providers and garner support for the implementation of the ERN?

- **Definitions of key metrics for success.** This section should identify what data or information is needed to ensure successful implementation as well as how the lead organization and strategic partners will determine if the ERN is successful. It is important to document how often your leadership team will evaluate key metrics. For example, you should document outreach and recruitment activities with both employers and service providers to ensure the staff's investment of time and resources is sufficient and will lead to positive outcomes. You should also work with employers to identify what kinds of data they collect on their existing workforce to inform what types of performance measures can be analyzed with some level of consistency across ERN members (e.g., absenteeism rates, number of days absent, turnover rates, etc.).

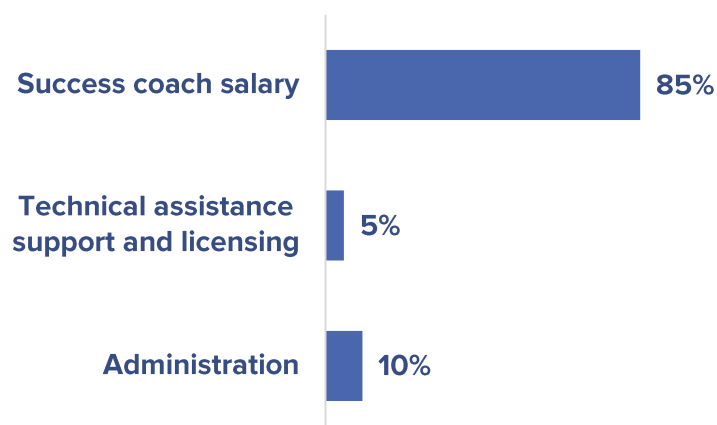
## Step II-2: Choose a Fee Structure and Identify an Employer of Record for Success Coaches

The structure and costs required to operate an ERN will be determined by your local context and needs. Thus, it is important that your local leadership team (employers, lead organizations, and strategic partners) discuss the most appropriate administrative and service model for your employer base.

### *Costs of Operating an ERN*

The main costs of operating an ERN are associated with success coaches' salaries. Therefore, the cost of operating the ERN are mainly dependent on the number of success coaches and their anticipated salaries and benefit levels. The typical operating budget for an ERN is approximately \$75,000 per year for 8-10 employers and one success coach who is paid an annual salary ranging from \$45,000 - \$50,000.<sup>12</sup> An example of the cost breakdown, using percentages, is as follows:

Approximately 85 percent of operating costs are in the success coach's (or coaches') salary and benefits. Roughly, 5 percent goes to ERN USA for licensing, technical assistance and data administration, and about 10 percent goes towards general administration for ERN meetings, ERN member dues and financial administration is normally



<sup>12</sup> Telephone interview with James Vander Hulst, ERN USA on June 4, 2018.

provided by a local ERN administrator, who normally serves as the employer of record for the success coach(es).

Local communities considering offsetting the cost of ERN membership in the first year, which was done with WIF grant funds in Southwest Michigan, must raise a certain percentage of the membership dues for employers. Normally, ERN administrators find funding to cover 50 percent of the total membership dues for the first year (see text box). Otherwise, employers who are ERN members must cover the entire annual operating budget for ERN operations. ERN USA recommends working with a local foundation or nonprofit organization to help offset the cost of ERN membership for employers in the first year. For example, in Midland, Michigan, the local United Way provided seed funding for the planning of the ERN and operating funds to cover 50 percent of the employer match in year one as well as the ERN USA costs (9 percent or \$10,000).



Your leadership team should seek funding from government grants, foundations, or private donors to help defray the initial cost of membership for local employers, as this provides an incentive for employers to join. For example, WIF funding allowed the SWMERN to reduce the cost of ERN membership for the first year by 50 percent for new members joining the ERN between 2014-2018.

Since the first year of ERN membership is usually subsidized by a government or foundation grant, it is important to be transparent about the long-term costs of joining the ERN as you recruit employer members. By providing 50 percent of the first-year membership costs, employers will have a chance to see the model in action, and success coaches and ERN USA staff have a chance to prove the model is worthwhile. After the first year, however, employers usually cover 100 percent of ERN membership, and they should know that going in so they are not blindsided in the second year of ERN operations.

The example below provides a representation of ERN operating budgets and how they are initially funded.

Year One of ERN Implementation		Remaining Years of ERN Operations	
<b>\$75,000</b>	Total Operating Budget	<b>\$75,000</b>	Total Operating Budget
<b>-\$37,500</b>	50% match from government or foundation grant	<b>-\$0</b>	Match from government or foundation grant
<b>\$37,500</b>	Remaining costs that ERN members must cover in first year	<b>\$75,000</b>	Costs that ERN members must cover in remaining years



In Southwest Michigan, the lead organization (Michigan ERN) and its strategic partners used a planning grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and United Way Battle Creek to offset the start-up costs of planning and implementing the ERN in Battle Creek back in 2010. Seed funding for expansion of the ERN in Kalamazoo County came from the Kalamazoo Community Foundation and funding to expand the ERN into Branch and St. Joseph Counties was secured from the DOL WIF grant. The WIF grant allowed the SWMERN administrative entity to cover 50 percent of membership costs for any new employer joining the ERN from October 2014 to September 2018 regardless of the four-county area, which led to a significant rise in the numbers of employers joining the SWMERN during that period of time.

## Selecting a Fee Structure

The costs of operating an ERN depend on several variables: the number and types of employers joining the ERN, the availability and amount of seed funding, the existing administrative infrastructure of the lead organization and its base operating costs, and the organization serving as the employer of record for success coaches. The fee structure and membership costs are negotiated with employer members as part of the start-up process. Options for the fee structure include:

- **Flat fee structure.** With a flat fee structure, every employer member pays the same amount for the purchase of each four-hour weekly “share” of a success coach’s time. For example, with a \$50,000 average salary for success coaches, a four-hour block of success coaching time averages \$7,000 per employer. (If grant funds can be secured to offset 50% of the costs for the first year, the initial annual cost would be just \$3,500 per employer.)

The average cost of a four-hour block of time varies depending on the cost of living for your local area and what type of organization serves as the employer of record. For example, success coaches are usually paid less in rural areas where the cost of living is lower than in urban areas where the cost of living is higher. In addition, ERN administrators reported that government agencies usually pay a higher wage based on government cost of living adjustments and benefit levels compared to most non-profit organizations in the same marketplace. A flat fee structure is most commonly used across ERNs in the ERN USA network because it is the easiest to administer.

- **Tiered or bracketed flat fee structure.** With a tiered flat fee structure, ERN members pay based on the success coach’s time on site, which is broken down into three distinct “tiers” as follows:
  - two to less than four hours;

- four to six hours; and
- over six hours.

This fee structure is most commonly used by ERNs made up of a blend of employer members with 25 or fewer employees, ERNs that use a nonprofit organization as the success coach employer of record, and/or ERNs in very rural areas because with fewer employers the success coach may not need to be on site as much, but would still be available by email, text and phone.

- **Utilization-rate fee structure.** ERN USA and state lead organizations use data from their Salesforce database, the ERN management information system (MIS), to determine utilization rates by individual employers and then charge accordingly:

$$\text{Total cost of operating ERN} \times \text{Utilization percentage} = \text{Annual membership rate} \\ \$75,000 \times .23 = \$17,250$$

This fee structure is primarily used with ERNs that have been operating for at least one year and have data on utilization rates across ERN members. This fee structure is more common among ERNs in larger metropolitan areas with several medium- and large-sized employers represented in the ERN.

You should work closely with ERN USA staff, your strategic partners, and your ERN employer members to determine the best fee structure for operating your local ERN. Keep in mind that the fee structure can be revisited as your ERN matures and more employers and success coaches are added to the network.

It is also important to identify what organization will serve as the “employer of record” for the ERN.

## Step II-3. Identify and Select an Employer of Record for Success Coaches

It is important to select an employer of record that has the capability to oversee staff administration (hire/fire staff, coordinate staff training, and offer professional development opportunities), engage with the employer community and facilitate employer meetings and handle budgeting, fiscal and reporting issues. As with much of the process of establishing and operating an ERN, determining what organization should be the employer of record is an adaptive process and is based on what makes the most sense for your local community. The most common employers of record for success coaches are:

- Community-based nonprofit organizations (e.g., United Way);
- Faith-based organization; and
- Government agencies (e.g., local workforce development board administrative entity).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Michigan is the only state where government agencies serve as the employee of record for success coaches, most other ERNs have a community or faith-based organization serving in this role.



### **Employer of Record**

In Southwest Michigan, the lead employer of record for ERN success coaches is Upjohn Institute. Michigan ERN serves as the lead organization assisting with ERN implementation and operations and coordination with ERN USA. When the Upjohn Institute was awarded the WIF grant, it already had a working relationship with Michigan ERN (then known as West Michigan TEAM). The team, including ERN members, decided that Upjohn Institute was an ideal employer of record, as the employer members were advocating for success coaches with more flexibility than those employed by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. As the employer of record, Upjohn Institute is responsible for recruiting, selecting, and training success coaches. Upjohn Institute also handles the administrative processes for success coaching staff such as payroll, benefits, onboarding, and performance appraisals. (This is discussed further in Phase II-2.)

### **Addition of Lead Success Coach**

One important lesson from the SWMERN expansion is that as the network of employers in the ERN grew, so did the need for more success coaches. Initially, the SWMERN only had two success coaches, but that has blossomed to five success coaches with the expansion and growth in membership. Greater coordination is required as you add success coaches, so the SWMERN hired a “lead success coach” to supervise the four coaches. The lead success coach also helps identify training and professional development needs of success coaches and problem-solve human resource and employer issues one-on-one and collectively with the other coaches. Since the lead success coach has more administrative and supervisory responsibilities, this coach has a smaller number of employers with whom they coordinate ERN services. This has increased the cost of membership slightly since the lead success coach’s time for supervisory and administrative work is shared collectively by all the members.

The employer of record is responsible for hiring, administering benefits and payroll, providing equipment and office space, conducting performance reviews, and so forth. These expectations are laid out in a contract or memorandum of understanding between the employer of record, ERN members, and ERN administrative staff.

## Step II-4: Recruit ERN Members and Establish a Governance Structure and Communication Protocols

### *Recruit ERN Members*

Identifying and recruiting employers that will benefit from ERN membership is an important step in the ERN develop process. ERN USA staff and/or state ERN organization staff (e.g., ERN Michigan, ERN New York) play a vital role in working with local communities to establish the ERN model and can help your leadership team recruit a founding group of business members. You should carefully consider which industries and employers to include based on the criteria listed on the right.

### *Types of Businesses to Recruit*

While consideration should be given to a wide range of businesses represented in your local economy, the experiences of other ERNs suggest that small and medium-sized businesses with predominantly lower-skilled workers are a good core to start the process. These companies benefit from ERN participation because their workforce typically needs the extra assistance that success coaches can offer to help lower-wage workers retain employment. Most of the ERNs operating throughout the country have found the most interest among employers in industries with skilled worker shortages, such as advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and food service industries. This may be because these industries routinely face skilled worker shortages, and the services offered by the ERN are focused on improving competitiveness through policies and procedures that increase employee retention.

Some industries and employers, especially those facing a worker or skill shortage, will be more amenable than others to investing in the skills of their workforce. Studies of current employer-driven initiatives recommend considering businesses facing skills shortages that the service model and training programs can address; selecting companies with a competitive advantage rather than those that are struggling; and seeking employers that will dedicate resources, particularly paid release time to work with a success coach.<sup>14</sup> Consider also “captive” employers



#### **Types of Businesses to Target for ERN Membership**

- Small and medium-sized businesses
- Businesses experiencing retention challenges
- Businesses with a range of pay levels and low-to-medium-skilled positions
- Businesses from goods-producing and service sectors (e.g., manufacturing, healthcare, food and beverage, etc.)
- Willing to work collaboratively with public and private entities
- Human service focus; invested in talent development

<sup>14</sup> Linda Dworak-Munoz, *Building Effective Employer Relations* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2004).

whose business is largely local and not easily moved. These employers are more reliant on the local labor force and may also be involved in civic improvement or community activities, thus having a secondary motivation for participating in stabilization and skill-building activities such as retaining workers in a specific industry or geographic area.

## *Establish ERN Member Governance and Communication Structure*

One of the unique features of the ERN model is the commitment to creating a network of employers to work collectively to address and solve problems. This entails keeping employers engaged and informed about ERN and other community activities. A clear governance structure and regular meetings are important facilitators of this employer engagement.

As investors in the ERN, employers are voting members, and each business has a single vote on the ERN board. As they are not separate legal entities, ERNs do not have separate formal boards like most nonprofit organizations do. Annually, ERN members elect co-chairs from among the local businesses to serve as leaders, and monthly meetings serve as board meetings. As previously stated, ERNs contract the administrative function of operating the ERN to a strategic partner, like a local nonprofit or a private entity.

ERNs are self-governing, which requires members to coordinate meetings and events and to decide how decisions will be made (e.g., based on a majority vote). Most ERNs hold monthly meetings with their ERN members, but the ERN leadership team may meet on a more frequent basis to strategize on activities and address administrative issues. Note: in the first year of ERN implementation, more frequent meetings among ERN members may be necessary.

### **Monthly Meetings**

Generally, the format for the monthly meetings is in-person compared to virtual meetings. Based on interviews with ERN members in Southwest Michigan most prefer in-person because it provides the opportunity for staff to meet one another and grow their relationships with other local employers. The methods used to share information and gather input from employers remains a local decision, so it is best to address how often and what format works best for your ERN members.

At the ERN-member meetings, success coaches brief members about services they have provided to employees and outcomes they have observed. Strategic partners are also sometimes invited, especially if they have information to share with ERN members and can help address areas of interest to businesses such as transportation, childcare, and training needs. Given employers' limited time, it is important to minimize the burden of these meetings on members; for example, consider holding meetings during breakfast or lunch so as not to take away from key hours of business operation or if your ERN covers a large geographic area, consider holding smaller meetings in multiple areas to limit travel time.

## Newsletter

Most ERNs also distribute a monthly newsletter to their members. Newsletters address topics of interest to employers in the network and are normally prepared by ERN USA staff from stories and information shared by local ERN success coaches. ERN USA staff electronically distribute the newsletters to success coaches at the start of each month, and success coaches disseminate them to ERN members. This process is used so that success coaches can decide how best to share the newsletter information, simply forward the electronic version to HR staff or hold a meeting with their employer contact to discuss.

Some key questions to address in planning your communication and governance structure are:

- How often will your ERN meet?
- Will there be separate meetings held for ERN members by geography or industry?
- How will agenda items be identified?
- What ground rules will govern ERN meetings?
- Who is responsible for sharing meeting information and meeting notes??
- How will the group solve problems?



SWMERN members surveyed as part of the MI WIF evaluation reported on the value of their monthly meetings, saying that they developed closer working relationships with other local employers with labor forces facing similar issues. These meetings allowed employer representatives to bring greater awareness to their collective concerns and to brainstorm ways they could work collaboratively to address issues affecting employee retention. For example, SWMERN members identified a need for childcare providers to offer services outside of the traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. timeframe, during second and third shifts. This led to discussions between public and private childcare providers, ERN members, staff from Upjohn Institute and West Michigan TEAM, and ERN success coaches about the viability of offering child care during non-core business hours (i.e., outside of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.).

Based on these discussions two local childcare providers began offering second- and third-shift services. In addition to standard monthly meetings, SWMERN success coaches are encouraged to have individual, in-person monthly check-ins with their ERN members' primary points of contact (e.g., HR manager, supervisor) to encourage employer engagement and to ensure that services are being well-coordinated at the facility.

## Step II-5: Recruit, Hire and Train Success Coaches

The employer of record for your success coaches will be responsible for recruiting, hiring, and training success coaches to support ERN members and their employees. For newly formed ERNs normally the employers are on board before any success coaches are hired. However, as ERNs expand and the need for additional success coaches increased, some ERN members may also participate in the success coach hiring process because they are familiar with the benefits and skill set needs for the position. Success coaches are critical to the ERN model. They are the primary mechanism by which employees from member companies receive support to navigate challenges and maintain and advance in their employment.

### *Hire Success Coaches*

All hiring begins with a job description. The role of the success coach is somewhat standardized across most ERNs to ensure fidelity to the model. A typical job description should include:

- A description of what the ERN is;

- An overview of the role of the success coach in supporting employees of ERN members by helping them navigate barriers and maintain employment;
- More details about what that support will entail—for example, developing assistance plans, making referrals to government and community agencies, helping employees access in-kind resources such as bridge loans, transportation assistance, and childcare assistance;
- A description of other responsibilities, as applicable, such as marketing success coach services at assigned member companies, data entry on services provided to ERN members' workers, outreach to potential ERN members, and attendance at success coach team and ERN member meetings; and
- Expectations about education, experience with employment-related coaching, and the ability to travel between employer member locations every week.



Upjohn Institute included the following description of education and experience in its job postings:

Associate degree and at least one year of experience working within employment related field. Bachelor's degree and bilingual preferred. Experience in case management, file management, and employment placement is preferred. Excellent interpersonal and communication skills required. Demonstrated leadership skills and the ability to organize, manage time, prioritize, and maintain confidentiality. Must have reliable transportation, as daily travel between ERN employers is required.

ERN members are important sources of input when hiring success coaches. The success coaches are ultimately there to serve the needs of the ERN members and the members' workforce. As such, you should consult employers about what they envision and about what skills and capacities would be most useful to them. For example, do employer members want success coaches to be able to support employees in moving up an internal career ladder or is meeting basic needs more of a focus? In some cases, employers are willing and able to incorporate success coaches into their HR departments and to advertise success coach services; in other cases, employers may need success coaches to act more on their own behalf in marketing services to employees.

## *Train New Success Coaches*

Helping new success coaches adjust to the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to function effectively within the organization is vitally important to the onboarding process. Keep in mind that it is not only necessary to onboard success coaches to your employer of record's organizational culture, but also to ensure that they understand how they are accountable to your ERN and its ways of operating.

In most cases, new success coaches job shadow with an experienced success coach either within their network or from another state where ERNs exist for a few days to a week. It is also helpful to provide success coaches with training materials, guides, and/or handbooks that can be consulted at any time. These materials should include the following:

- An overview of the ERN and the central role of the success coaches in its operation
- Information about how to market success coach services
- Information about how to provide services to employees including:
  - guidance regarding the structure of initial and subsequent meetings
  - availability of tools to use when working with employees
  - information about where to find resources for employee needs
  - guidance on how and when to interface with HR staff
- Guidance on communications
  - with ERN employers
  - with ERN employees
  - with the success coach’s employer of record
  - with other success coaches and Michigan ERN/ERN USA
- Information on data tracking related to:
  - services to ERN employees
  - any data collection associated with quantifying the return on investment
- Information on support for success coaches such as:
  - team meetings
  - supervision
  - professional development
  - other information legally required to be provided to employees
  - information on the local public workforce system and how success coaches can connect to other federal and state service providers

Ongoing support and training to success coaches can also occur through weekly local success coach team meetings, monthly networkwide coach meetings, an informal “buddy system” in which success coaches mentor each other, or semi-annual regional, statewide, and/or national meetings of members of the ERN network, including employers, partnering agencies, and success coaches. In the case of SWMERN, some of these, such as the national meeting, are provided by ERN USA, while others—for example, setting up the weekly success coach team meeting—are instituted by local ERNs. SWMERN success coaches reported seeing each other as their greatest resource; thus creating a space for them to support each other is an excellent way to maintain and grow the vitality of the ERN’s success coach team.

### Organizational Best Practices in Onboarding New Success Coaches

- Design and implement a formal orientation program and ensure that the success coach has an opportunity to ask questions and actively participate.
- Create and use a written onboarding plan.
- Consistently implement onboarding for new success coaches.
- Monitor onboarding progress over time to ensure it is meeting the needs of staff.
- Utilize technology to facilitate the onboarding process (e.g., webinars to introduce staff to key organizational elements, self-guided video tours of the facility, etc.).
- Recognize that onboarding takes place over time, so build in milestones at 30, 60, 90, and 120 days on the job, up to one year post-organizational entry
- Engage key stakeholders—such as ERN members and community-based organizations to whom success coaches make referrals—in planning the onboarding.

**Source:** Tayla N. Bauer, *Onboarding New Employees: Maximizing Success* (Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management, 2011).



## Things to Consider During Phase II

- *Do you have a lead organization that can help provide seed funding and oversight to launch the ERN?*
- *Do you have the right strategic partners at the table to discuss ERN planning? Are the right people involved in the planning process? Do you have decision makers as well as line staff involved in the planning efforts? Is there transparency in developing the ERN?*
- *Are strong collaboration and communication strategies already being used across leadership team members and with outside stakeholder groups? Are there opportunities to improve communication and perceptions to build a strong engagement strategy with potential ERN members, service providers, and other stakeholder groups?*
- *Do you have a strong team leader? Who will be responsible for overseeing the management of leadership meetings, including establishing agendas, facilitating discussions, and sharing information? Is there administrative support for the effort to assist with meeting locations, contacting members of the leadership team, recording notes, etc.?*
- *How much support is needed from ERN USA to launch your ERN?*
- *What support does the ERN implementation team need to prepare for the launch of the ERN? For example:*
  - *Support for scheduling success coach meetings, support for scheduling ERN meetings, checklists of activities, paperwork for collecting information on ERN services, etc.*
  - *Training for success coaches on engaging employers, identifying employers' incumbent workforce training needs, identifying community resources and supports, delivering services on site, and working with incumbent workers*
  - *Opportunities to visit ERNs that have been successfully implemented elsewhere*
- *How will success coaches and other ERN staff share lessons learned and key findings with colleagues?*
- *How will the launch of the program be administered, and who is responsible for managing ERN payments?*
- *What agency(ies) or organization(s) will serve as the employer of record for success coaches?*

## PHASE III: IMPLEMENTING THE ERN MODEL

Social innovation is challenging. Focus and discipline are essential when moving into the ERN implementation phase; any good idea can get stalled by “what ifs” or clinging to the idea of a perfect process. Keep moving forward and be flexible as you engage employers and stakeholders who share a progressive vision for their workforce.

This section of the guide addresses key activities and action items related to ERN implementation.

### Key Activities

- Recruit and coordinate a referral process with strategic partners
- Establish a data entry protocol
- Coordinate employee loan and savings programs with financial institutions
- Engage the public workforce system
- Identify potential training providers for ERN members

### Step III-1: Recruit and Establish a Referral Process with Strategic Partners

Strategic partners—state and local organizations and institutions—play a vital role in implementing the ERN model. They can help to offset the cost of services and supports that are important in helping workers, especially low-income workers, overcome employment barriers and retain employment. Strategic partners can include governmental and human service providers, public and private nonprofit organizations, adult education providers, financial institutions, and foundations. The table below describes key strategic partners and the roles they might play with regard to the ERN.

**Types of Strategic Partners and Their Potential Roles**

Strategic Partners	Services
<b>Workforce Development Agencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct skills assessments</li> <li>• Provide resume assistance</li> <li>• Share labor market information</li> <li>• Assist in finding qualified employers for ERN membership</li> <li>• Provide supportive services</li> <li>• Access training funds</li> </ul>

Strategic Partners	Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make referrals to other sources of support</li> <li>• Potentially serve as lead ERN organization as long as they do not subjugate the ERN to the governance of the local workforce development board</li> </ul>
<b>Health and Human Services Agencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer TANF benefits</li> <li>• Provide emergency assistance and other family and child supportive services</li> <li>• Make referrals to partner programs</li> </ul>
<b>Nonprofit Organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serve as lead organizations</li> <li>• Identify other strategic partners</li> <li>• Provide supportive services and other program supports</li> </ul>
<b>Community Colleges and Vocational Training Organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop training programs for ERN members</li> <li>• Train ERN members' incumbent workforce</li> </ul>
<b>Local, Regional, and National Foundations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide seed funding for planning process</li> <li>• Serve as lead organizations</li> <li>• Identify other strategic partners</li> <li>• Assist with supportive services</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Institutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist with set-up and administration of loan and savings programs</li> <li>• Provide personal finance and financial management training</li> </ul>

In collaboration with community partners, ERN success coaches offer workers referrals to supportive service providers that can assist workers with obtaining subsidies for food, clothing, childcare, transportation, funds for car repairs, and housing. In coordination with strategic partners, success coaches may also offer access to other services and supports such as:

- Basic computer skills
- Computer applications
- Financial management and budgeting
- Credit repair and foreclosure prevention
- English as a Second Language classes
- Leadership and problem solving
- Math proficiency
- GED classes
- Tax preparation

## Step III-2: Establish a Data Entry Protocol

Another key element of ERN implementation is ensuring that information about services provided to employers and their employees by ERN success coaches and others (e.g., training providers) is collected in a timely and consistent manner. This information will provide your ERN members with valuable information to assess a return on their investment. As noted, each ERN member will pay for a portion of a success coach's time, so it is important to capture data that



demonstrate the value of this financial investment. For your ERN administrator, tracking services and outcomes will help with illustrating the value of the ERN to potential new members and allow for continuous improvement of the services it provides to its members.

ERN USA staff play a vital role in helping ERNs to document success coaching services, referrals to community partners, and employer and employee outcomes. ERN USA developed a customized MIS platform using the Salesforce system for data collection and reporting. This performance MIS contains key metrics and helps local ERNs to demonstrate both the impact of success coaches as they deliver services to ERN members' workforces and the return on investment for ERN members. The MIS includes optional applications such as a survey for assessing ERN member and their workforce's customer satisfaction levels. The system also has customized data dashboard that provide ERN members with information such as return on investment.<sup>15</sup>

Data collected by your ERN administrator typically can be organized into units of analysis based on employers and employees. Below is a list of common data items collected in Salesforce.

### Employers:

- Outreach to potential employer members
- Customer satisfaction among employers
- Employer training
- Absenteeism and retention for the firm as a whole

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<sup>15</sup> Upjohn Institute researchers created a ROI measure for USA-ERN that uses valid and reliable data for the calculation.

### Employees:

- Success coach services provided to employees
- Training provided to employees
- Customer satisfaction among employees
- Absenteeism and retention for employees accessing success coach services

As you decide what data to collect, you should involve both your leadership team (ERN USA and your state or local ERN administrator), your employer of record for success coaches, and your employer membership at large. ERN USA has standard data collection protocols for services provided by success coaches to employees, such as:

- Basic demographic information about each person served, including receipt of public assistance;
- A detailed breakdown of types of services provided, including referrals by type and direct assistance such as receipt of bridge loan;
- Pending and ongoing outcomes related to services provided;
- Number of distinct employees served;
- Frequency of multiple services provided to the same employee;
- Retention rates and other indications of job success, such as promotion or wage increase; and
- “Success stories”—anonymized narrative accounts of employees who have been helped by success coaches, often shared at member meetings.

SalesForce tracks each employee once in the system and then success coaches collect and document service types and dates. All that information can be used to understand the customer base, improve marketing and the services offered, and assess return on investment.

Your ERN members themselves may have specific data they would like collected to help them best understand their return on investment in business terms and the ERN’s SalesForce database can be customized to a certain extent to collect this information. Thus, you should conduct conversations early on about what data are important to your ERN members and what data ERN administrators consider useful. For example, some ERNs have found that employers—especially small to mid-size employers—do not have clear means, either internally or across the membership, of tracking retention and turnover. Yet the theory that ERN membership leads to lower turnover and higher retention is a primary “selling point” for ERN USA. Ideally, though it may take time to establish, your ERN will have a way to collect reliable data from ERN members about absenteeism, turnover, and retention to build the case that ERN membership leads to cost savings through positive employee retention.

## Step III-3: Coordinate Employee Loan and Savings Programs with Financial Institutions

Several ERNs have coordinated with local financial institutions—mainly credit unions and banks—to offer loan and savings programs for workers. The loans are sometimes referred to as “bridge loans” because they bridge an immediate need that workers have, which may impact their productivity or ability to maintain employment, to funds that can assist them in addressing the need (e.g., funds for fixing their car). In some places, the loans are referred to as “hardship loans” to emphasize their emergency nature. If offering short-term loan and savings programs is of interest to your ERN, the ERN administrators and success coaches should identify a local lending institution that is reputable and willing to coordinate with employers to offer loans to their workers.

The short-term loan and savings program allows the coach to connect workers to fair and reputable lending institutions, rather than rely on high-interest rate “payday loans.” Most loan and savings programs have a maximum loan amount, typically \$1,000 per individual. These loans are designed to help workers meet an emergency need such as an automobile repair, replacement of a broken household appliance, a security deposit on new housing, or a family emergency. It is offered as a last resort. The loan is made by a financial institution partner such as a credit union, and repayment begins with the first paycheck after the loan has been approved.

A unique feature of the short-term loan and savings program is its focus on helping workers save money for future emergencies. Whether a worker who seeks a loan has never had a savings account or simply struggles to save, accessing a loan through the ERN comes with a requirement to save. Typically, ERN loan and savings programs require an employee receiving a loan to deposit a minimum amount (such as \$10 per pay period) into a savings account that does not allow withdrawals until the loan is paid in full. The savings commitment is added to the loan repayment amount. At the end of the payment plan, the worker will have accumulated an amount equal to half of the original loan amount or more in savings, depending on the amount of the required savings contribution.

Upon pay-off of the original loan, the worker is encouraged to continue the habit of saving money in an account—a habit that is easier to maintain once the mechanism for saving (automatic deposit of a set amount or percentage into the savings account from the paycheck) is already set up. This combination financial loan and savings program provides the worker support for saving, but also reduces the financial risk for the bank or credit union. If an employee is terminated while



Usually, it is the smaller community banks and credit unions that are willing to have conversations about offering loan and savings programs to employed individuals. It is best to find a financial institution that has strong ties to the local community. Be patient—this process may take 12–18 months to come to fruition because it takes time to identify institutions willing to offer these types of services, establish the partnership, and establish policies and procedures for ERN members and success coaches to use.

in the repayment period, the savings account is released back to the lending institution to cover any unpaid portion of the loan.

The program includes a savings component, which requires a \$10 per week deposit into a savings account—a commitment that is added to the loan repayment amount. The maximum loan amount is \$1,000; by the end of the repayment plan, an individual can accumulate a savings of up to \$520 depending on the initial loan amount. Several employees participating in SWMERN services reported that the loan and savings program provided critical assistance during a difficult time in their life, such as when their car broke down. Without these funds, they would have been unable to get to work, which would have affected their job performance and retention.

SWMERN success coaches are essential in the loan and savings program process. They help identify ERN members' HR and payroll contacts to ensure employment verification and payroll deductions are coordinated and processed appropriately. They provide pre-application forms to workers interested in pursuing loan and savings programs and work with ERN members to collect documentation to show proof of employment, sometimes scanning documents and transmitting them to the credit union. As one success coach noted, however, at the end of the day, "it is the relationship between the worker and the financial institution that leads to application acceptance." Success coaches also work with ERN members to ensure that if an individual is terminated from employment, the termination process includes a review of whether he or she is part of the loan and savings program so that the financial institution can be updated.

Neither the SWMERN nor the ERN member accepts any of the liability or risk for the loan; it is a contractual agreement between the credit union and the employee. The employer simply provides employment verification and has the employee complete the paycheck withholdings and direct deposit form, which outlines how much will be withheld and sent to the credit union. The loan is offered as a last resort to employees facing financial emergencies, and success coaches are encouraged to exhaust all community resources before suggesting the loan as a possible solution. Workers understand that neither the SWMERN or success coach can guarantee the loan will be approved.



The SWMERN has several resources that may be beneficial as you create your ERN. These resources are available at <http://ern-mi.com/area-network.aspx?AreaID=7> and include:

- An employee engagement exercise form
- A success coach poster for employer sites
- A success coach tri-fold brochure
- The "Driven to Succeed" app and instructions

If you are interested in starting a short-term loan program, ERN-USA staff can provide forms and other guidance about setting one up in your local area.



Several employers in the SWMERN sought the assistance of community banks and credit unions to see whether an existing loan and savings program could be augmented to offer their employees alternatives to payday loan programs. ERN-USA staff, in collaboration with community partners such as United Way, identified Kalsee and Omni Credit Unions who modelled the development of their loan and savings programs off another local credit union. As of September 2018, the SWMERN coordinates with Kalsee Credit Union to offer loan and savings programs in Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Counties. For the SWMERN, it took approximately two years to identify a willing institution and launch the program with ERN members' employees.

The following procedures apply to the SWMERN loan and savings program, but they have been applied to other programs operated by ERNs in other states.

- **Eligibility.** An employee must work for an ERN member and have been employed there for at least one year. The worker must be in good standing with the employer at the time of loan application (i.e., not on corrective action, no recent write-ups, and not at risk of losing employment).
- **Affordability.** It is the success coach's responsibility to determine if the employee can afford to have the loan payments withdrawn from his or her paycheck. The SWMERN success coach works with the employee to conduct a financial assessment using a monthly cash flow worksheet—an itemized checklist that documents monthly expenditures and obligations—to determine an appropriate loan amount. To complete the worksheet, the success coach requests the worker's last two paystubs and uses this information to project monthly income. If the employee is married or has another source of income that can contribute to monthly expenditures, that information is also collected to determine a monthly budget. Generally, the debt ratio needs to be at 45 percent or lower for loan approval. If a worker meets this threshold, the success coach recommends they complete the credit union application.

If the employee meets the above criteria, and it is determined that the loan payments are affordable, the success coach and employee fill out initial paperwork. Once completed, the success coach confirms with the ERN members' HR point of contact to ensure the individuals is still employed and the employment. Once confirmed, the loan packet and employment information are ready for submission to the financial institution.

- **Loan Application.** The loan packet is then submitted to the financial institution for final review/approval. As part of the submission process, the success coach submits the following supporting documentation: the monthly cash flow worksheet, the Loan and Savings Plan Pre-Approval, the Partnership for Success Commitment, payment details, the

employee's two most recent paystubs, and a photocopy of the employee's valid ID and Social Security card.

- **Credit Explanation Letter.** Although the loan is based on an employee's work history and not a credit score, a credit check to ensure the individual is not in bankruptcy is normally performed by the financial institution. This ensures that the loan is issued responsibly and will not adversely affect an individual with too much existing debt. Oftentimes, the credit report will show collections that the employee was not aware of, and the employee is given the opportunity to rectify these debts before a final loan application decision is made. If the credit report comes back with negative reports, the financial institution will request that the loan applicant provide a brief explanation for why the debt was submitted to collections and how the employee will avoid such situations in the future.



Under the WIF grant, SWMERN leadership and success coaches were encouraged to find new opportunities to engage with the public workforce system, namely Michigan Works! service centers, which are part of the One-Stop network. To date, efforts to better integrate the ERN model with the public workforce system have led to several significant advancements in Southwest Michigan.

The experiences of the SWMERN demonstrate the value of coordinating with the public workforce system to not only assist incumbent workers in retaining their employment but also to help employers build successful businesses through incumbent worker retraining opportunities and referrals of qualified job applicants.

The visual below represents a flow diagram illustrating the linkages between the SWMERN success coaches and the public workforce system Business Services Team (BST) representatives. As depicted in the graphic, the two sets of staff have formal processes in place for coordinating outreach and service delivery with local employers that are ERN members. The staff work collaboratively to seek out opportunities to serve employers and workers in the local community and encourage ERN participation, where appropriate.

## Step III-4: Engage the Public Workforce System

Strong relationships with the public workforce system help to improve service delivery opportunities, including service integration and coordination, for ERN members' employees. So, it is important for ERN administrators to work closely with their public workforce partners, such as local workforce development boards, economic development entities and service providers to ensure that they are building meaningful relationships that lead to a skilled workforce for ERN

members and sustainable employment for workers. Efforts to engage the public workforce system have centered around key activities including sharing information, expertise, and resources as well as coordinating activities and services to businesses and jobseekers. Many of ERN members' incumbent workers have used the public workforce system for employment and training services such as unemployment insurance, career awareness and exploration, resume writing, and job referrals. ERNs are uniquely structured to assist these workers to retain their employment with post-placement supports coordinated by success coaches.

One of the early promising findings from the evaluation of the SWMERN is that creating a closer relationship between the ERN and the local public workforce agency has led to increased satisfaction on the part of employers. In particular, employers are able to look to Michigan Works! and Upjohn Institute for potential hires with training in the skills required for open positions. Several employer members commented that participation in the expanded SWMERN project allowed them to have a more open mind about hiring jobseekers with employment barriers—a primary focus of many of the training programs organized by Michigan Works! as part of the WIF grant—because so many successfully completed WIF-funded training programs and came highly recommended by community partners. One employer stated, “SWMERN has been a really great thing for us, too. [We are] trying to find these areas within the community that maybe we wouldn't have explored before, trying to find employees. And that's worked out really well for us, too. So, just kind of keeping our minds open to other possibilities.”

The graphic on the next page is used by SWMERN and SWMW staff to demonstrate the relationship between the SWMERN and the public workforce system. MWSW business solutions professionals (BSPs) conduct fact-finding meetings with local employers to understand their employment and hiring needs. If an employer identifies the need to address employee retention issues, the BSP will coordinate with the ERN administrative contact to set-up a meeting with the employer to see whether onsite support through an ERN success coach would be appropriate for the employer.

## Q: What is an Employer Resource Network®?

A demand-driven, private/public partnership designed to address common workforce needs of participating employers such as retention, training and advancement

### BUSINESS SOLUTIONS PROFESSIONALS (BSPs)

#### Fact Finding:

ERN interest identified, but is there a retention issue?

**NO** **YES**

Refer to ongoing BSP Employer Engagement Process

Provide ERN Info to employers.

Do they want to learn more about ERN?

**NO** **YES**

Provide ERN Administrative Contact referral

### ERN ADMINISTRATIVE CONTACT

#### Meet with Employer:

Provide more in-depth ERN info

Employer considering joining the ERN?

**NO** **YES**

Refer to ongoing BSP Employer Engagement Process

Invite to Network Meeting

Provide Peer Contact (if desired)

Follow-up with Employer

Employer attends ERN Meeting?

**NO** **YES**

Will they join ERN?

**NO** **YES**

Employer signs MOU

Assign a Success Coach!

Send invoice to employer



## Q: How does it work?

A "neutral" administrator brings together 5 to 10 employers to discuss and address their workforce needs

The network embeds a "Success Coach" on-site at each employer to work w/employees and HR staff to quickly resolve challenges to retention and advancement

Businesses invest in "Shares" upfront and their investment is sustained based on their ROI

### An ERN focuses on solutions for employers and employees:

#### Employer Solutions:

- Increased productivity and retention
- Reduced absenteeism
- Reduced recruiting/training costs
- HR productivity Increase
- Outsourced social work
- Increased EAP usage
- Employer of choice

#### Employee Solutions for:

- Childcare
  - Transportation
  - Housing
  - Substance abuse
  - Public benefits
  - Stress management
- (financial pressures, aging parents, relationship conflicts, etc.)

## Q: But, does it work?

In 2016, Michigan ERNs averaged a **98%** retention rate and **350%** ROI!

## Sharing Information, Expertise, and Resources

ERNs have identified a variety of ways for sharing information, expertise, and resources with the local public workforce system. For example:

- **Embed ERN staff in the public workforce system to encourage stronger communication and coordination.** One way to encourage deeper coordination and collaboration between ERN staff and the public workforce system is to embed ERN staff within the administrative entity overseeing the coordination of local employment and training programs in the One-Stop(s).



Four out of six SWMERN staff are employed by the local WIOA administrative entity, Upjohn Institute. Embedding SWMERN staff into the existing public workforce system has provided an opportunity for local program staff from WIOA, Wagner-Peyser, Vocational Rehabilitation, TANF, Trade Adjustment Assistance, Veterans Employment and Training, and other programs to establish a relationship with SWMERN success coaches, which has led to a deeper understanding of each other's target groups, services, and program components.

- **Cross-train ERN and One-Stop staff about each other's programs to encourage referrals and service utilization.** Most One-Stops have specialized staff who coordinate services with the business community, often referred to as business service teams (BSTs) or Business Solutions Professionals. Business Solutions Professionals (BSPs) often spend a portion of their time meeting with and assisting local employers with employment- and training-related services, which means they are uniquely positioned to share information with employers about ERN services. For this reason, it is important to ensure that ERN and



BST staff in Southwest Michigan received training on SWMERN resources and how to market the model to employers during their business engagement activities. SWMERN success coaches noted a rise in employer referrals from Michigan Works! for BST members following the cross-training. In turn, BST staff conducted training for SWMERN success coaches about services that could be offered to employers, such as connecting them with the state's labor exchange system.

One-Stop staff are knowledgeable about one another's services and can make appropriate connections on behalf of local employers.

- **Share information across programs on employers' skills needs and available training providers.** The public workforce system has a wide array of experiences coordinating with community colleges, private postsecondary institutions, and other training providers to offer various forms of training and education. Working in collaboration with the public workforce system provides ERN members and staff with the opportunity to share information about the skills development employers need.



In Southwest Michigan, ERN staff—success coaches and the resource navigator—have worked closely with Michigan Works! Southwest staff to identify appropriate training providers for short-term SWMERN-funded training programs. This collaboration led to employers being able to identify incumbent workers and quickly place them into proven training programs.

- **Build strong career pathways programs that benefit jobseekers and employers.** The public workforce system has extensive expertise with career pathways design, especially as it relates to building training programs that lead to credential attainment and provide advancement opportunities. Through collaboration, One-Stop and ERN staff can work together to create proven career pathways programs that help jobseekers transition from training to employment. Under the SWMERN, success coaches are helping employers identify and build internal career pathways within their businesses.

## *Coordinating Activities and Services*

There is also a variety of ways that your ERN can coordinate activities and services with the local public workforce system. For example:

- **Coordinate referrals to improve employment opportunities for jobseekers.** Coordinating with the public workforce system includes finding opportunities for One-Stop staff and ERN success coaches to work collaboratively to identify jobseekers who have the requisite skills needed for employment with local ERN members. For individuals that do not possess the required skills for direct hire, ERN success coaches and One-Stop staff can help identify skills training (short- or long-term, for technical or soft skills) that can equip jobseekers for employment.



As noted earlier, in Southwest Michigan, ERN success coaches are using WIF funding to fund OJT and other short-term training programs to meet ERN members' needs for skilled labor. They are also coordinating with One-Stop staff to recruit unemployed and underemployed jobseekers for the training programs.

- **Coordinate employer outreach between One-Stop and ERN staff.** Many employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, report having limited time to engage with multiple entities on employment and training programs. One-Stop staff and ERN success coaches can coordinate outreach and recruitment activities to market the full array of programs and services available to employers.



In Southwest Michigan, members of the One-Stop BST and ERN success coaches have jointly developed a pamphlet that identifies business services and programs and can be used by both parties to market workforce development services and resources to employers.

## Step III-5: Identify Potential Training Providers for ERN Members

One of the things your ERN can offer employer members is access to training programs and training providers. Given that ERN administrators and success coaches are in constant communication with ERN members through meetings and on-site service delivery, they are uniquely positioned to understand their employment and training needs. As such, your administrators and success coaches can help to connect ERN members to quality training programs and providers in the local community, as well as public training funds to offset the costs of training (e.g., federal and state sponsored OJT, customized training, apprenticeships). Training can take different forms such as training for existing employees to increase knowledge, skills, and competencies; training for jobseekers to meet employers' available job openings; and training for employers on career ladders and employee advancement programs.

### *Training for Incumbent Employees*

One reason to engage training providers in training incumbent workers for ERN members is that promoting from within a company can be more cost-efficient than hiring from outside.<sup>16</sup> However, employers may lack internal infrastructure for increasing the skill level of lower-level staff to promote career advancement within the organization. Another issue that ERN members report struggling with is a lack of soft skills or “executive skills,” especially among employees in lower-wage positions. The ERN administrator, especially if it is a workforce agency or nonprofit providing employment and training services, is likely to have connections to local educational providers such as community colleges, career and technical education centers, and private training vendors. Also, offering job training for incumbent employees through the ERN spreads costs among employers with similar needs and allows the ERN lead organization to manage the administrative end of training programs (e.g., contracting with the training provider and organizing the training schedule on behalf of ERN employer members).



In the SWMERN, WIF funding provided financial resources that were needed to offer ERN members' incumbent workforce training opportunities. Also, Upjohn Institute had experience putting together OJT contracts and has found ERN members to sponsor qualified jobseekers using the OJT model. Further, through its network of relationships, Upjohn Institute was able to identify a training provider that could offer leadership training, which increased the professional skills of individuals who were already doing a good job on the technical side, but who needed additional training to career ladder into supervisory roles.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Bidwell, “Paying More to Get Less: The Effects of External Hiring versus Internal Mobility,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2011): 369–407.

## *Training for Jobseekers*

One of the reasons the ERN model was created is that many employers struggle to recruit, hire, and retain qualified workers. The primary focus of ERNs is on supporting incumbent employees through access to the stabilization services provided by success coaches. But a growing number of ERN administrators have “experimented” with supporting ERN member companies by coordinating with the public workforce system to provide qualified jobseekers with needed training that supports ERN members’ talent pipeline needs. This is an “add-on” service and is not considered part of the original ERN model, which is primarily focused on providing on-site support to ERN members’ incumbent workers through success coach services and referrals. The ability of ERN administrators, in collaboration with existing community service providers, to offer this service has become especially important in labor markets with low unemployment rates where there may be more competition for skilled labor and where employees may be willing to leave low-wage jobs for minimal wage increases.

The idea behind jobseeker training is that the ERN seeks to support the existing public workforce system of public, private and nonprofit organizations providing soft and technical skills training to job candidates. This eases the burden on ERN members and increases placement of qualified workers, who then have access to a success coach after placement if issues should arise. In some cases, ERN members have in mind applicants they want to hire who are not quite skilled enough. In theory, candidates who go through an ERN-organized training would be prescreened by the employers, who pledge to hire them upon successful completion of the training. This approach is like the one used by the public workforce system in offering OJT, where an employer identifies a job candidate and makes a commitment to hire once training is completed, and the workforce system compensates the employer for a percentage of the cost of employee wages during the training. Another way the training program can work is that, at its completion, ERN employers are invited to a job fair where they can interview trainees who have completed the training and hire on the spot if they find a good match.

There are different ways to support and pay for training for jobseekers. In the SWMERN, WIF grant funds paid for training for workers (see below text box for a more detailed account).

ERNs can also seek partners willing to fundraise or write grants for training funds or pay for it themselves with the agreement that the ERN administrator and/or strategic partners organize it. Training providers can themselves become partners of the ERN, solicit feedback on training programs relevant to the employer members, make curricular adjustments as necessary, and become reliable placement sources for employers struggling to hire enough skilled workers. Further, ERNs can choose to partner with the local public workforce system to identify jobseekers that meet ERN members’ skills needs. While the ERN serves its members, these members may provide insights or requirements for curriculum design to local educational institutions or provide information to One-Stop center staff about their hiring needs.



Funding provided under the WIF grant provided the SWMERN with an opportunity to expand its service delivery components with its ERN members. Under the expanded model, SWMERN staff identified ERN members with workforce shortages and linked these employers with jobseekers who had recently completed short-term training programs in high-demand occupations (e.g., manufacturing, healthcare, culinary arts and food processing). As the expansion was implemented, Upjohn Institute drew on community-based organizations that provided soft skills and professionalization training to under-employed and low-income individuals and community colleges that provided technical skills training. As the grant went on, Upjohn Institute continued to use its role as a workforce agency to identify other training providers to meet SWMERN employer member needs and used its local workforce development system to identify jobseekers in need of employment. For example, several members in the hospitality industry expressed a need for employees trained in the culinary arts. Upjohn Institute found a training provider at a local community college and sponsored several jobseekers to attend a Culinary Arts Academy, adding that to Production Technician, CNC Operator, and Certified Nursing Assistant training programs that it had already put jobseekers through using WIF funds. While not a direct pipeline—that is, not all individuals who go through an ERN-sponsored training will be hired by ERN members—employers in Southwest Michigan have expressed an interest in hiring from a pool of graduates trained in a curriculum that they have reviewed and approved because they know graduates from the training programs will meet their needs.

## *Training for Employers*

Finally, employers themselves may benefit from training that your ERN administrator can organize and share. Depending on the issues identified by the employer members in your local area, employer training can address career pathways development, effective support and management of lower-skilled staff to encourage workplace stability, and how to effectively work with the public system to access or advocate for resources for its labor force. Again, this is an “add-on” service that can be made available to ERN members, but it is not part of the existing ERN model created by ERN USA staff.

In the SWMERN, Upjohn Institute has been organizing career pathways training for employers, bringing in consultants and working with the leadership team (which includes employers) to explore how best to support employers in building and supporting career pathways within their own companies. This approach is referred to as “Grow Your Own Talent,” and has ERN members that have coordinated with the SWMERN-E project have used funding from the WIF grant

The key principle when seeking to establish short-term training options for incumbent employees, jobseekers, or employers themselves, is to consult with employers to find out what they want and need. Ideally, seed funding can support testing the training to provide proof of concept to employers, as in the SWMERN.



## Things to Consider During Phase III

- *Do you have any local financial institutions to approach about starting loan and savings programs?*
- *Which strategic partners will serve as appropriate referral sources?*
  - *Can these strategic partners assist incumbent workers with transportation, child care, housing assistance and other supports?*
  - *How will the ERN track referrals?*
- *Will the public workforce system in your community serve as a strategic partner?*
  - *Are existing employers coordinating with One-Stop staff for business services?*
  - *Does your public workforce system have an active and engaged business service team that success coaches can coordinate with to provide ERN member services?*
- *Is local funding available to support ERN member incumbent worker training? Do ERN members need assistance in identifying and providing training to their incumbent workforce?*
  - *Is state funding available to support incumbent worker training?*

## PHASE IV: SUSTAINING THE ERN MODEL

Successful social innovation programs like ERNs require organizers to develop strategic long-term partnerships with employers and community organizations. To sustain and grow an ERN in your community, you should incorporate continuous feedback loops into the model. This will ensure that staff responsible for delivering services are well-trained and able to accommodate the needs of the employers with whom they work.

This section of the guide addresses some of the key activities and steps in sustaining and improving your ERN operations to meet the needs of employers, workers, and jobseekers.

### Key Activities

- Conduct continuous outreach and marketing to the employer community as well as to any business intermediaries (e.g., economic development, chambers of commerce, industry associations)
- Provide staff development opportunities for success coaches
- Assess success coach caseloads and re-evaluate the need for additional success coaches
- Evaluate and broadly disseminate ERN successes

### Step IV-1: Conduct Continuous Outreach and Marketing to Employers

One of the key components to sustaining your ERN is bringing new employers on board. As in any membership program, there will be some employers that decide not to maintain their membership. To minimize the impact of these changes, you should continuously market ERN



Success coaches and ERN organizers in Southwest Michigan note that the ERN model requires continuous engagement of existing ERN members, as well as ongoing outreach and recruitment of new employers through engagement with business intermediaries such as chambers of commerce and industry organizations. Engaging employers, existing and new, allows the ERN to grow and respond to the competitive environment in which businesses operate. It also helps to keep employers engaged and invested in their labor force.

services to employers, which will help maintain a robust business network and support for administering ERN services. Based on research conducted by Upjohn Institute early in the life of the ERN movement, the optimal size of most ERNs ranges from a minimum of five employers to a maximum of 17.<sup>17</sup> Maintaining a certain number of ERN members ensures a robust network as well as the cost-effectiveness of the success coaches.

In addition to the importance of maintaining relationships with employers, it is also important to maintain relationships within each member company. HR managers typically serve as primary points of contact for ERN success coaches, but due to fluidity in the market, these staff, like their entry-level counterparts, may leave their positions. Thus, your success coaches should maintain contact with multiple levels of leadership within an organization, including managers, senior leadership, and HR staff. This means working with ERN member businesses in a variety of activities to build trust and rapport within the organization. Based on SPR's research, the most successful ERNs support these relationships by allowing success coaches to devote time not only to engaging workers but also to engaging with company leadership to identify other opportunities such as building career ladders for the employer and identifying opportunities to build skills upgrading programs.

To establish and sustain employer relationships, your ERN administrators should do the following:

- **Use existing ERN member businesses to help with recruitment of new ERN members.** Most ERN members have a human-centered approach to their workforce and are familiar with other employers in the area that operate from the same premise. So, involving your existing ERN members in outreach and marketing efforts to sustain and grow the local ERN network can be beneficial, since most will be involved in local chambers of commerce, industry associations, and vendor networks. As a workforce intermediary, ERN success coaches are in a unique position to reach out to employers and share information about available programs and services in the community.
- **Continuously assess the value of the ERN for the employer community.** Conduct interviews with your existing ERN members, including individuals at multiple levels within the organization, to ensure the model is addressing their needs and to determine whether any of your employer members could benefit from other programs and services. These might include incumbent worker training programs, state-funded equipment subsidies, worker incentive programs, and/or career ladder development.
- **Share information gathered from employers with workforce development and community nonprofit partners to coordinate service delivery.** Identify the primary needs of your ERN members and share this information with your workforce development and community nonprofit partners—such as local One-Stops, local workforce development board(s), local service providers, and economic development agencies—to identify resources available to address employers' challenges.

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<sup>17</sup> Bridget Timmeney and Kevin Hollenbeck, "What Works in Forming a Successful Employer Resource Network?" *Employment Research* 19, no. 3 (2012): 5–7.

## Step IV-2: Provide Staff Development Opportunities for Success Coaches

Your ERN managers and success coaches can improve their competencies and skills with training and staff development opportunities. There are a variety of staff development opportunities available to success coaches, including internal development through monthly calls and peer learning events and external development opportunities through seminars, workshops, and conferences. Offering ERN success coaches and staff the opportunity to attend activities can help increase their knowledge, skills, and competencies to perform their job duties.

To be successful, organizational support from your employer of record for success coaches should include training and staff development opportunities. For this reason, it is vitally important that the employer of record be an organization that values lifelong learning and encourages professional development among its staff. The employer of record should set aside a certain amount of funding and time for the development of the success coaching staff including, but not limited to, a certain amount of paid time, reimbursement for registration, travel time, and expenses, and possible payment of training costs or membership dues.



There is no set standard across ERNs for the type and quantity of professional development that should be provided to success coaches. Thus, ERN employer members and the employer of record will need to decide how much time and funding should be allocated for professional development, which may affect the cost of ERN membership.

### *Monthly Learning ERN Success Coach Calls*

It is important to provide success coaches with the opportunity to share information with each other, especially at the state level. State ERN networks (e.g., ERN Michigan, ERN New York) coordinate monthly conference calls between success coaches representing different geographic areas in their state. These monthly calls provide an opportunity for success coaches from across area ERNs to discuss program successes and challenges as well as ideas for future trainings and service interventions. Because the ERN is an adaptive model that responds to the unique needs of its members, some ERNs may provide different types of interventions to their members' workforces. Thus, these monthly calls provide a forum for seasoned and new success coaches to share ideas with one another in a supportive environment.



W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, as the employer of record for the four success coaches in the SWMERN, provides professional development opportunities—including training sessions and peer learning exchanges—as part of its ongoing efforts to maintain a qualified workforce. Staff from across the local workforce development system who operate federal and state programs jointly attend training sessions with ERN success coaches. Recent topics have included career pathways development, business engagement and service delivery, workplace stability, and leadership development. The training program on leadership development was provided to a few success coaches under a train-the-trainer approach, so that staff could facilitate training for other success coaches and One-Stop staff in Southwest Michigan. In addition, Upjohn Institute has supported active shooter and racial equity trainings for its staff.

## *Peer Learning Opportunities*

You should ensure that your success coaches have the chance to tap into the range of learning opportunities at the national level as well. ERN USA helps to support ongoing staff development among success coaches by supporting a peer learning community. ERNs across the country network with one another to share best practices and ideas. ERN USA staff help to coordinate facilitated discussions across ERNs and host quarterly peer learning meetings and an annual ERN conference. During peer learning events, ERN USA staff share policy updates and data on ERN usage with staff from across the ERNs. ERN USA staff and the network of ERNs across the country use peer engagement to identify opportunities for adapting and scaling effective practices. For example, SWMERN's public workforce system engagement model (see page 40) has been shared and adapted for use by other ERNs across the country.



Members of the SWMERN and its administrative entity recently decided that it is beneficial for all success coaches to meet in person on a quarterly basis. Thus, in January 2018, the SWMERN hosted its first quarterly meeting among ERN members across three counties in Southwest Michigan—Branch, Calhoun, and Kalamazoo. The discussion primarily focused on how to address transportation and childcare issues for ERN members' workers.

## Step IV-3: Evaluate the Need for Additional Success Coaches

At least annually, ERN members and administrators should evaluate the existing utilization rates and workloads of success coaches—that is, take stock of the number of ERN members and the actual number of workers that each success coach serves, by employer. Where possible, this should include assessing the complexity of cases. Administrative requirements for each service provided should also be factored into this analysis, since success coaches must not only provide direct services to workers but also document the provision of these services in a data management system.

ERN USA has found that, on average, 15 percent of a member company's workforce utilizes ERN success coaching services. So, if an employer has over 1,000 employees at a facility, approximately 150 employees utilize ERN services. A typical roster of employers assigned to a single success coach will include one large, several medium, and several small employers. However, that number can and should vary depending on the size of the employers and a regular assessment of individual services being provided at each one. Continuously evaluating your success coaches' workloads will ensure that they have enough time to provide the resources and services valued by ERN members and their workers.



Usually, a success coach will work with eight or fewer employers at a time, but this depends on the size of each employer's workforce. On average, 15 percent of an ERN employer member's workforce utilizes success coaching services.

If you have several large employers in your ERN, you may need an ERN member to purchase additional shares of a success coach and/or you may need to hire additional success coaches to manage the ERN members' workload.

There are three factors that the ERN USA staff use to assess whether a recommendation should be made to ERN members to purchase additional shares of a success coach's time or add a new success coach. These factors all revolve around changes to ERN member composition and include:

1. The total number of companies in the ERN;
2. The size of an individual ERN member's workforce; and
3. The utilization rate of success coaching services by ERN members (available after the first few months of operation).

Because success coaches are providing needed resources to workers at a single point in time, mainly referrals to existing service providers and are not necessarily case managing workers on a continuous basis, ERNs should consider a workload of 50–60 services per month—or 500 people per year—as the maximum amount a single success coach can handle. The ERN model is designed for targeted interventions—that is, interventions that do not require additional follow-up or intensive case management. So, if a higher percentage of the ERN members' workforce is using the bridge loan program or other high-intensity services that require a lot of time from the success coach, the ERN administrator may recommend that an employer buy an additional success coach share.

Some other factors to take into consideration when assessing caseloads include:

- **Distance.** How far must success coaches travel to provide services to ERN members' employees (assess mileage and travel time daily, weekly, monthly)? If a success coach must travel multiple (i.e., more than one employer location per day) or long distances to provide on-site services to ERN members, that should be factored into decisions about assignments and whether additional coaches or shares are needed.
- **Case complexity.** What is the employee base of the ERN member, and will the existing workforce need a higher level of success coaching time and resources to address more complex issues? Some individuals and their families require more intensive interventions, which further adds to a success coach's workload. For example, an ERN member with a higher percentage of low-income, low-educational-attainment employees may have more employees seeking services compared to an employer with a wide range of income and education levels among employees.
- **Lack of other resources.** Does the employer offer other types of employee-benefit assistance in terms of specialized HR staff or employee assistance programs? If these services are available, the success coach may require less time to assist the ERN members' workforce because other resources are available to address complex personal and family issues.

In most instances, success coaches are providing service interventions, which can make a real difference in their ability to engage workers, deliver quality services, maintain employment with the ERN, and achieve positive outcomes for workers and their families. Therefore, understanding the factors that influence a success coach's workload—such as the size of the ERN employer member, the types of individuals employed, the number of individuals served during a given period (usually assessed monthly, every six months, and annually), the types of service interventions provided, and the geographic distance of the employer—will help ERN members, ERN administrators, and the employer of record to evaluate the need for additional success coaches.



As the SWMERN grew during its expansion under the WIF grant between 2014 through 2018, they had to add additional success coaches to meet employer demand. From the start of the WIF grant in October 2014 to January 2018, the SWMERN grew from 10 to 37 members. During this time, SWMERN hired two new success coaches and a resource navigator who served in a coordinating position, linking the work of the success coaches across the four-county region with the public workforce system and community partner activities and programs. At least annually, SWMERN members meet to re-assess whether staffing adjustments are needed.

## Step IV-4: Document and Broadly Disseminate ERN Successes

As with any social innovation, it is important to collect data to support program improvement and provide evidence of your ERN's outcomes when seeking future funding opportunities. This may include conducting an independent evaluation through a third-party evaluator to assess ERN implementation, including successes, challenge and opportunities, or using informal practices such as documenting participant and employer success stories.

Sharing the story and successes of ERNs with public and external stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels can also support replication of the ERN model. As you begin the process of identifying what information to disseminate about your ERN, you should consider the following questions:

- Who is the intended target audience (e.g., future ERN members, funders, state and local government officials)?
- What does your audience need to know (e.g., outcomes data, ERN members' perspectives, customer satisfaction)?<sup>18</sup>
- What do you hope to gain from disseminating information about your ERN (e.g., additional funding)?
- How often will you communicate information about the ERN (e.g., monthly, quarterly, annually), and will the timing vary depending on the audience?
- How will you communicate with internal and external partners (e.g., briefings, progress reports, in-person presentations, online)?

Regardless of the method used to disseminate information about your ERN, it is important to consider the following in preparing any written or verbal communication materials:

- Keep information short and direct.
- Use clear, non-technical language to communicate your information (leave the acronyms out).
- Highlight key points of interest for your audience.
- Make information visually compelling with the use of graphics and an easy-to-read font.
- Make conclusions and provide suggestions for your audience on how to use findings.

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<sup>18</sup> Only disseminate aggregate-level data on outcomes to protect employee and employer confidentiality and ensure that you use employers' names with their permission, usually with signed written consent.

# CONCLUSION

We hope this guide has presented you with valuable information about how to assess your local community's readiness to start an ERN and with useful strategies for implementing your ERN. ERN USA and the statewide networks of ERN administrators are available to assist you in your efforts to join the growing network of communities that are engaging local businesses to provide employment supports that bolster the strength and reliability of their workforces.

## Access to Resources

The ERN USA staff can assist in the planning and implementation of your local ERN model. Please visit the following websites for additional ERN information and resources:

- <http://ern-usa.com>
- <http://ern-mi.com>



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