



THE
ALIGN
PLAYBOOK

Build a winning team, overcome the opposition & tackle the talent gap





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OUR BIGGEST PROBLEM & GREATEST OPPORTUNITY



People retire from jobs everyday. For most companies, this doesn't cause any major problems the typical hiring process can't cure. But what do you do when many people - like the baby boomer generation - retire all at once when your unemployment rate is low?

On the other end of the employment spectrum are high school students graduating and preparing for the next stage in their life. Are they fully educated about the variety of opportunities that are available to them, particularly those in the skilled trades?

This is where the biggest problem becomes a great opportunity.

This problem is not confined to one part of the nation or any one industry, though skilled trades often have the greatest talent gap. Reasons for this stem from lack of available applicants, experience, and technical competencies/hard skills.*

When opportunities like this arise, they can either be ignored and allowed to worsen **or** they can be embraced. The chance to engage with the incoming workforce in creative and unique ways has arrived. Are you ready?



THE LENAWEЕ EXPERIENCE

ALIGN BACKGROUND

In 2014, the economic development executives at Lenawee Now noticed a trend among local manufacturers. With increasing frequency, employers were struggling to find and retain skilled employees. This, in combination with the impending mass retirement of the baby boomer generation, indicated a growing talent gap.

The directors, Jim Van Doren and Tim Robinson, considered the existing education and technical programs across the county and investigated the strengths and weaknesses of each. Students were enrolled in the right programs, skilled trades teachers were nurturing employable students, and manufacturers were expanding their programs and offering better wages and benefits. Yet there were still not enough qualified employees to fill the available openings.

The Lenawee Now staff recognized that the issue would not resolve itself and would become a larger issue. As an organization with strong ties to both employers and educators in the county, Lenawee Now called a meeting of leaders from both sides to discuss the issue and gather support toward working on a solution.



Over 50 representatives from top management participated in the discussion and concluded that it was time to fix the problem and stop the blame cycle. They committed to ensuring all “players” received relevant information and would make the most of engaging with students. These leaders identified the largest hurdle to get over: the misconceptions that students and parents have about manufacturing. They also singled out a major goal: to inspire elementary and middle school students to explore manufacturing and other professional trades.

To keep the initiative moving forward, the following committees were formed: Finance, Student Experience, Employer Experience, Collaboration, and Marketing.

The marketing committee marched forward with audience analysis, market research, and branding efforts, but a roadblock soon became clear. The other committees were at an unproductive standstill: too much of the early work relied on marketing. It was at this point that the marketing committee went full speed ahead to give the other committees something to leverage.



ALIGN BRAND PLATFORM

The **ALIGN** brand had many checkpoints with its primary audience through development. In fact, over 50% of the school districts in the county participated in the market research by providing access to the students in the classroom. The familiar environment encouraged them to speak freely about their greatest hopes and concerns post-graduation.

The final product was based on listening sessions, research, multiple iterations, and A/B testing.

Below are the five components that make up the brand's platform.

OBJECTIVE

To create an exciting and inviting brand that promotes local careers to local students as an alternative to defaulting to traditional college courses.

APPROACH

Graduation from high school is a major milestone. It's often a time of taking on a lot more responsibility despite the next step. Some students are very certain of what is coming next and others have no idea.

Their decision making process can be daunting and they welcome direction on what to do with personal interests and how to turn them into viable careers.

They want to know how to get support in case of failure or change of course so it is less scary to start making decisions and trying things out. Lastly, their perception on careers in Lenawee County is negative and the value of living/working here needs to be better communicated.



PITCH

Setting the excitement of graduation aside, it brings a lot of questions to the surface: "What's next? Will I like it? What happens if I fail?" You may feel like your future is full of options; you may feel like you have none. You may be most concerned with where your choice will lead you or if you'll get the job of your dreams. You're in a lucky spot, though. With teams of educators and employers fighting for your success and happiness, you'll find that every path after graduation can be an awesome one if it is the right one for you. To top it off, it can all happen right here in Lenawee County. If there was ever a time to start living in the moment and knowing that life after graduation can all start making sense, it's now.

TAGLINE

Students. Employers. Educators.

LOGO



PRO TIP:

While you may want everyone to be involved in developing a logo, it's not ideal. There is truth to the cliché "A camel is a horse designed by committee." Work with your champions to collect input and represent the bigger group of employers, educators, parents, and students. Remember, simpler is better.



HIGH-IMPACT OUTCOMES

While the impact on the workforce is not easily measurable for some amount of time, there are plenty of high-impact outcomes that can be identified. In the case of Lenawee Now, the following has occurred as a result of this effort:

- › Local school districts and companies are engaged in continued collaboration on this matter.
- › A dedicated staff member at the intermediate school district facilitates the use of MI Bright Futures.
- › Local businesses are utilizing the MI Bright Futures platform to interact with students and promote their organizations.
- › A county manufacturing day was successfully launched and substantial financing has already been secured to expand the event to six other counties.
- › A major donation from Nexus/DTE will allow continued marketing of the skilled trades to Lenawee County students.
- › Small businesses were trained on communicating with potential employees.
- › This success story will be shared at:
 - › Michigan Career Education Conference
 - › Small Town and Rural Development Conference
 - › Michigan Economic Developers Association
 - › International Economic Development Council
 - › Mid-America Economic Development Council





NEXT STEPS



There is still so much work to be done - this is just the tip of the iceberg! While looking for additional funding to sustain efforts on this initiative, we are working on programs to continue moving forward.

They include but are not limited to:

- › Expanding local apprenticeship programs to include white collar jobs.
- › Taking a regional approach to manufacturing day and continued career exploration.
- › Providing ongoing small business support using the un-conference model.
- › Coordinating with schools to used a collective impact approach (through the **ALIGN** brand) to increase awareness of professional training and careers.





THE IDENTIFICATION PROCESS



IDENTIFY CHAMPIONS

Following the stakeholder meeting, a few attendees will stand out as champions of the effort. They will be helping keep the vision alive.

Ideally, your champions will represent education, business, and economic development. Champions should have qualities such as:

- › **Education:** able to garner the attention of superintendents, students, and parents; understands the educational programs in the area and as well as challenges and successes.
- › **Business:** influential in the business community and motivates others to implement change; understands the business climate and how to welcome a new generation of talent.
- › **Economic Workforce:** Supersede any conflicts that arise due to other participants' individual agendas by being a neutral entity; serves as a coordinator and catalyst to keep the initiative active and moving forward.



PRO TIP:

This initiative is more than just scheduling meetings to have meetings. The champions must be willing to get their hands dirty, commit for the long haul, and see it through.

While funding is needed, having the right people on your side is critical for success.

SUCCESS STORY

Lenawee Now has been identified as a model collaborator that knows how to bring stakeholders together and understands that talent development is the most important economic development challenge in the nation. As Lenawee Now has established itself as a collaborator and leader, stakeholders have been eager to come to the table to work together on developing a talented workforce.

IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS



Undoubtedly, there are multiple programs in your community working toward the same goal. Are they operating in a silo or are all parties aware of the activities taking place?

However you answer that question, it will benefit your effort to have all stakeholders come together at a single time and place to address the challenge at hand and get their buy-in and support.

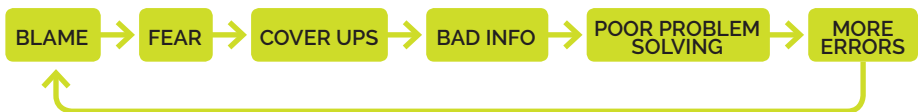
Who Are Your Stakeholders?

Stakeholders for each community will vary, but should fall into common categories. Economic Developers understand the long-term impact of the talent gap. School superintendents keep the pulse of their districts and can help distribute information effectively.

Key instructors might also be of interest, particularly those who work with student job placement. Lastly, who are the business leaders? Business leaders and engaged groups of C-level executives provide valuable employer insights. Instructors from county technical programs know where needs are for students in the skilled trades. Human resource professionals are integral for their unique hiring insights.

Setting an agenda for the first meeting should take a cooperative approach that addresses the talent gap issue without allowing any finger pointing or shrugging of responsibility. The focus should be on finding a positive solution.

The blame game may be tempting, but will not get the results you desire. Ensure that the meeting maintains a high level of respect and understand that those who don't want to agree to these conditions won't bring value to the project in the long term.





PRO TIP:

An agenda will help guide the meeting but the goal is to let conversation happen naturally so that together you can work toward the right solution. You may include:

- › Briefly introduce the leaders and stress the importance of not placing blame.
- › Review the national talent shortage issue and how it affects your region.
- › Review the types of support you are seeking (committee leaders, liaison, student opportunities, funding, etc.)
- › Ask attendees to submit their best contributions to the effort.
- › Summarize the next steps and meeting date.
- › **Success story:** The first stakeholder meeting with Lenawee Now drew 25 of the biggest companies in the county, superintendents of the 11 local school districts, leadership from 3 local colleges, workforce developers and more. The guiding principle of the meeting was avoiding the blame cycle. There were 3 outcomes:
- › We agreed that there was a problem.
- › We agreed to provide the required resources necessary to fix the problem.
- › We agreed to create solutions to the problem.



IDENTIFY FUNDING SOURCES

Initiating a collaborative effort to shrink the talent gap in your community starts with establishing a plan for financial feasibility and sustainability. If funding must be acquired through other sources, there may be alternatives.

First, contact organizations with a vested interest in developing local talent. Do they have programs or plans for new initiatives that could be rolled into a group effort?

The old sports adage is T.E.A.M. - together everyone achieves more. That couldn't be truer for this type of project. Funds might not be available immediately, but budgeted collaboration can provide added benefits, especially with grant funding. Grant applications submitted by committed partners are stronger and typically more favorable.

SUCCESS STORY

Lenawee Now worked with the USDA to secure funds for developing talent in a rural area. There were multiple check ins with the agency during the course of the project and a final presentation at the conclusion. These were not all required yet were done to keep the agency apprised of progress and how its funds were being used.

The USDA has been a vital partner to Lenawee in the past and going to such measures to keep them informed will hopefully result in continued work together.



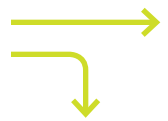
PRO TIP:

First time dealing with this? Here are some pointers to make your effort a success:

- › **Designation as a charitable organization.** If you aren't one, find a partner/stakeholder that is.
- › **Stay in your lane.** Funders want to match their support to genuine efforts within your mission or your work on behalf of a collaborative.
- › **Have a plan.** Sustainability is critical and metrics taken along the way must match the funders purpose.



MEET THE PLAYERS



Consider the five different types of players when creating your game plan: students, employers, educators, parents, and economic developers.

It is important that all of the players understand the issues and opportunities so they can work together towards a common goal.



STUDENTS

- › Students are key players in creating your program and are essentially the “quarterbacks” in this game.
- › People born after 2001 will be the largest generation since the baby boomers.
- › This generation wants instant gratification.
- › They are community oriented - not just locally, but globally.
- › Students typically don't understand the wide variety of career opportunities in the skilled trades.



EMPLOYERS

- › Employers are your "centers." Without the students, they would have no one to snap the ball.
- › Employers will be the most worried about retaining employees.
- › On average, employers spend \$1,208 per employee on employer training if the company has over 500 employees. For a company that has under 500 employees, the average price is \$1,888 per employee. With a big price for employer training, it's important for them to make sure they're hiring the right person.
- › In 2013 35% of 38,000 employers reported difficulty filling jobs due to lack of available talent.



EDUCATORS

- › Educators are the "coaches." Their advice and guidance helps students learn about the opportunities that are available after high school.
- › High schools average 24.2 students per classroom.
- › Nationally, the high school student to counselor ratio averages 500 to 1.
- › Recent budget cuts have led to a reduction in staffing and schools struggle to provide every student the attention they need.





PARENTS

- › A parents role is often the "kicker." Available when needed, but not playing the entire game.
- › The parents of this generation typically believe college is the only viable option for a successful career. Parents may be unaware or lack confidence in other options available to their children.
- › The mikeroweWORKS foundation is spreading the message that there are many options outside of a four year degree for today's graduates. The organization awards scholarships to students entering the skilled trades.
- › Parents knowledge of the career guidance tools and vocational training centers available to their children may be limited. It's important the parents are educated on these as well.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS

- › Last but not least, economic developers are the "cheerleaders". They can bring the team together for better collaboration and be the champion of local initiatives.
- › Economic developers must carefully craft their messages. Promoting an area with low unemployment rates to potential employers can be a tricky play.
- › Site selectors value regions with thriving talent education programs.





WEAR YOUR BRAND ON YOUR SLEEVE

BRANDING 101



"Branding is the expression of the essential truth or value of an organization, product, or service. It is communication of characteristics, values, and attributes that clarify what this particular brand is and is not. It should both precede and underlie any marketing effort. Most importantly, branding is not push, but pull. " - Tronvig Group

Branding helps an organization, product, or service make an emotional connection with the intended audience. A positive connection builds trust and creates desire in the audience to be a consumer and advocate. Over the long term, this turns into a relationship and builds a great brand.

Determine your objective with the brand. Then work on developing an approach, pitch, logo, and tagline.





LOCALIZED MARKET RESEARCH

For marketing to be effective, the audience needs to have an emotional connection and what better way for that to start than by making them feel heard?

Leveraging your local community in the market research and hearing their raw feedback on the talent gap provides valuable information that can be used to develop the right messaging for your intended audience. It can also reveal opportunities you may have otherwise missed and promote grassroots support.



SUCCESS STORY

Shortly after the brand was settled and before the technical work on distributing the messages began, the marketing committee learned of a tool in development in southeast Michigan named MI Bright Futures. Driven by the Workforce Intelligence Network, the tool was built into a career guidance platform that already existed throughout the state. It offered sustainability that was not available through a purely local solution.

ALIGN will support the rollout of MI Bright Futures in Lenawee County through further education on building important job skills and available career options. **ALIGN** will also provide further training to employers who want to connect with local students and potential employees.



GO FORTH & TELL THE WORLD

EDUCATE STAKEHOLDERS

Your stakeholders are in the game to win it. Regardless of their enthusiasm, they are coming together with completely different sets of needs, constraints, and opportunities. What might start with a blanket statement needs to quickly evolve into a crafted coaching session to optimize their respective situations. That doesn't mean it needs to be done in a silo though!



These stakeholders will be able to learn from each other and possibly build new relationships based on shared conversations. Be open to the approach that you use and don't assume that calling a large meeting to "tell them how it is" is going to take care of this education component. Do it right the first time, as this is the point in the program where the things can really move forward or fall apart.



ROLL OUT THE MARKETING



Your research is done. The stakeholders understand the game plan. Your brand is developed. Now you are ready to go!

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Whenever possible, touch base with your audience and stakeholders to make sure that they are receiving your message in the most effective way. What works best at the beginning may not work as well as the strategy evolves.

DIGITAL MARKETING

Your primary source for online information should be easy to find, relevant, and visually appealing. It will be, in many cases, the first impression someone has of your program. You can support your marketing by keeping the information current online and social media pages updated.

SUCCESS STORIES

Make sure everyone knows what is working with your program. If you know something isn't working, don't bury it. Own it, and let people know what you are doing to improve.



SUCCESS STORY

Although MI Bright Futures will provide a specific type of service to students, employers, and parents, The **ALIGN** program through Lenawee Now can provide additional resources. Building important relationships between various stakeholders and employer education are important **ALIGN** initiatives that will continue to support MI Bright Futures.

ALIGN's contributions to building a talented workforce include:

- › **Connecting students and educators with employers who are willing to participate in presentations and tours. The personal connection can be supported and grown by the MI Bright Futures platform.**
- › **Creating marketing materials for educators to use with their students that showcase the benefits of local skilled trades careers and providing students tips for succeeding in the workplace.**
- › **Bringing together businesses to share best practices in obtaining and training new talent.**

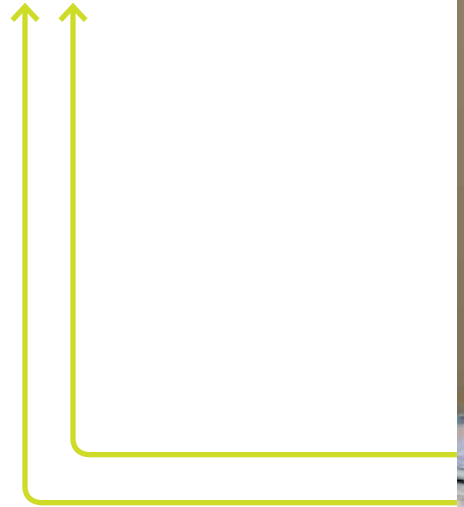
MEASURE, ASSESS & ADJUST

Use analytics to your benefit and make sure you're making the impact that you had intended.

Depending on the tactics and tools in place, you should be able to use data to continue driving your next steps. For instance, a website can provide statistics that tells you how many visitors you have, what pages they are visiting, how long they stay on your site and more. If visitors are not paying attention to important areas, analytics provide the ability to make adjustments.

On social media, metrics can reveal how many people are seeing the messages, the best times to post information, and how much visitors are sharing, commenting, and liking certain posts.

If you need to make changes, consider how design and messaging are affecting your efforts and make adjustments as needed.







CONTACT LENAWEE NOW

If you are working on a similar project,
we would love to hear from you.

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